

A TEI Project

Interview of Zelma Wilson

Contents

1. Transcript

- 1.1. TAPE NUMBER: I, Side One (November 9, 1988)
- 1.2. TAPE NUMBER: I, Side Two (November 9, 1988)
- 1.3. TAPE NUMBER: II, Side One (November 30, 1988)
- 1.4. TAPE NUMBER: III, Side One (February 11, 1989)
- 1.5. TAPE NUMBER: III, Side Two (February 11, 1989)
- 1.6. TAPE NUMBER: IV, Side One (February 11, 1989)
- 1.7. TAPE NUMBER: V, Side One (March 4, 1989)
- 1.8. TAPE NUMBER: V, Side Two (March 4, 1989)
- 1.9. TAPE NUMBER: VI, Side One (April 2, 1989)
- 1.10. TAPE NUMBER: VI, Side Two (April 2, 1989)
- 1.11. TAPE NUMBER: VII, Side One (April 2, 1989)
- 1.12. TAPE NUMBER: VII, Side Two (April 22, 1989)
- 1.13. TAPE NUMBER: VIII, Side One (April 22, 1989)
- 1.14. TAPE NUMBER: VIII, Side Two (April 22, 1989)
- 1.15. TAPE NUMBER: IX, Side One (April 22, 1989)
- 1.16. TAPE NUMBER: X, Side One (April 22, 1989)
- 1.17. TAPE NUMBER: X, Side Two (April 22, 1989)
- 1.18. TAPE NUMBER: XI, Side One (April 22, 1989)

1. Transcript

1.1. TAPE NUMBER: I, Side One (November 9, 1988)

LASKEY:

Mrs. Wilson, although you have spent much of your life in California, and particularly here in Southern California, you were not actually born here, is that right?

WILSON:

That's correct. I was born in New York, as were my sister [Sylvia Gussin Jarrico] and my brother [Jesse Gussin]. My brother is deceased. When he was a child he was killed. My mother [Rose Rachkovsky Gussin] and father [William Gussin] were both immigrants. My mother was born in Lithuania and my father in Shklov, in Belorussia. My father was sixteen when he emigrated. My mother

came to the United States in steerage when she was twelve years old, all by herself with a knapsack on her back. She went across Europe in a train and then on a boat across the channel and then into the gigantic steerage ships that took the first-class passengers above and all the hull down below was loaded with people in steerage. There have been lots of stories told about that. There's no point in my going into it, the hardships of crossing—you know, dying and diseases and epidemics.

LASKEY:

When was this? When did she come to this country?

WILSON:

That was in what? Let's see, she was born 1892. And so, let's see, twelve—I guess that was about 1904, 1905 that she came over.

LASKEY:

Right in the mass of migrations.

WILSON:

The mass of migration. The migrations which took place at that time, especially from Eastern Europe, were as a result of the new industrialization, particularly in the garment industry in New York, sending out these leaflets in all these different Eastern Bloc nations, you know.

LASKEY:

The manufacturers sent out leaflets to these countries?

WILSON:

Yes. They were sent out and posted at the village, saying that they have high wages and wonderful working conditions in the land of the free. Lots of things about the United States which weren't true, that there were great living conditions—so the eastern Europeans were very impressed with this because their own conditions were so miserable.

LASKEY:

Now, your mother's name was—

WILSON:

Rachkovsky. [laughter] Just take a flier at it. R-A-C-H-K-O-V-S-K-Y.

LASKEY:

Okay, what was her first name?

WILSON:

Her name was Rachel. But there is an interesting thing about the name, because when she finally did arrive in the United States, she was picked up by members of Tante Sloveh's family. She was the first of her sisters to come over. She was picked up by those family members who had purchased a candy store in Brooklyn named Miller's Candy Store, and everybody called the father Mr. Miller. As they couldn't spell my mother's name—let alone pronounce it—at Ellis Island, she took the name of Miller. They anglicized her first name to

Rose, so she was Rose Miller. Then every sister and relative who came over thereafter took the name of Miller.

LASKEY:

That's a wonderful story.

WILSON:

Isn't that a nice story?

LASKEY:

Yes. How did she come by herself, though? How did it happen that a twelve year old would do this?

WILSON:

Her father [Josel Rachkovsky] had—every answer doesn't come very simply. I wish I knew how to simplify them. Her father had come over to the United States because he had been told by the rabbi that he had put a curse on the family because all the children were dying. My grandmother had eleven children, and only four survived. Most of the eleven were born before he left. My grandfather came to the United States way back in 1870. He worked up and down the Mississippi as a peddler. He stayed in the United States for about fifteen years, when he came back to Lithuania. My mother was born and then the middle daughter, Molly [Rachkovsky], followed by the youngest daughter, Chirka [Rachkovsky] was born. So there's a vast difference between my mother and her oldest sister, who's—well, they're all dead now, but who was twenty, twenty-five years older than she because my grandfather was gone for such a long time. When he got back to Lithuania, he wanted the whole family to come to the United States, which he said was not heaven, but it was much better than the circumstances in which they were living over there. My mother lived in a little village, and there was the Jewish ghetto where we lived—where we lived!—where the family lived later. Both of her parents had died, and she was living with her married sister Tobi [Rachkovsky]. She was the most adventurous of the sisters. Just a very adventurous young girl, full of curiosity and willingness to take chances. Her oldest sister, Tobi, was married at that time and already had children. My mother was the first one to go to America. Eventually everybody came. She went to work in the sweatshops, where child labor was permitted. She was making hats and umbrellas and one thing and another.

LASKEY:

This is in New York City?

WILSON:

She worked in those sweatshops where they employed children and went to night school and learned English. Then she got together with my father, whom she had met before she left.

LASKEY:

She had met him in Russia?

WILSON:

She had met him in her village, because he was a friend of a relative. They had a cousin who came to visit them and brought the young man who would later become her husband, Velvel—William—Gussin, who was a draft dodger.

[laughter] He wanted to get out of serving in the czar's army.

LASKEY:

Now, this was your father?

WILSON:

Yes, yes.

LASKEY:

So he had gone to Lithuania from Belorussia.

WILSON:

From Belorussia to visit with them. In [his] passing through, my mother claims that she fell madly in love with him. Now, how much influence that had on her coming to the United States, I don't know. But even for a twelve-year-old to have made this excursion, it had to be more than just love. [laughter] At that age.

LASKEY:

It's an amazing journey—and alone.

WILSON:

Yes. My father at sixteen years old actually had come over earlier than she had. He and his cousin had come over. I don't know too much about his experiences because he died when I was only twelve. I know more about my mother's, because my sister and I used to interrogate her about the family, and I'm very glad that we did. And there were other historical chroniclers in our family who we used to ask a lot of questions of. Do you know my sister, Sylvia Jarrico?

LASKEY:

No, I don't. I know her name, but I don't know her.

WILSON:

She has some of this written down in story form, because the stories are just incredible, some of the beautiful stories that she has written about my mother and father and how they got together and the voyage and the immigrant experience. Anyway, my father was an anarcho-syndicalist and had been a part of the socialist movement in Russia before he left. My mother was not all that political, but my father was.

LASKEY:

Russia was still czarist at the time, right?

WILSON:

Still czarist at the time, yes. And he claims to have been a part of the march on the Winter Palace of the Czar, but he was not killed because he said that

everybody—this is a story, you know. Legend becomes truth in the family and one doesn't know. Maybe it is true.

LASKEY:

Right.

WILSON:

But when they marched on the Winter Palace—which was where? In Leningrad? Where was it? I don't know how he got up there.

LASKEY:

Leningrad, isn't it? Yeah.

WILSON:

I don't know how he got up there all the way from Belorussia, but he did. According to him. When the peasants and the workers marched on the Winter Palace, asking for peace and bread—that was the slogan. It was as benign as that. [They were] unarmed, and the Czar had his guards shoot them down. So the first rows were all shot down, and my father said everybody was falling down, so he fell down too, flat, and they were shooting over his head. Anyway, that's his story.

LASKEY:

When was this?

WILSON:

Whenever that occurred, in the beginning of the twentieth century [January 1, 1905]. It was one of the revolutions that was taking place over a long, long period, you know, which culminated in the great revolution of 1917. By that time, my mother and father were married and living in New York and hating New York. They had had my sister, who is three years older than I am, and then—oh, excuse me. Their first child was the boy, Jesse. I guess he was about a year and a half or two years older than my sister. So they had a boy and a girl, and that was going to be the family. My father took my brother—when he was five years old—to a playground, and he fell off the top of a slide and he was killed almost instantly. I was conceived shortly afterward because my parents were in such despair about it.

LASKEY:

What was your brother's name?

WILSON:

Jesse. Anyway, following that, very shortly after I was born, maybe a year and a half or so, they decided they wanted to move out of New York and move into a more rural atmosphere because they both—inasmuch as it had been forbidden for Jews to own land in Russia, they had a great desire to own something in a rural atmosphere. So first we moved to Arizona and we stayed there for a while, then we got into my father's old car and we drove across into California, drove across the Mojave Desert, which was a great disappointment to them,

[laughter] compared to what California was reported to be. Then they came into the citrus groves in Southern California, and my father went crazy about the citrus groves. He thought he had reached heaven when he reached Santa Paula. This was it. That is where they decided to land.

LASKEY:

Had he had any farming experience in Russia?

WILSON:

No, not at all. He was not a farmer at all. My father was kind of an uneducated intellectual. He was a very avid reader, and he wrote poetry. If he had been an educated man, I'm sure he would have been a writer. But he was not. Neither my father nor mother ever even finished elementary school.

LASKEY:

But they both learned English.

WILSON:

They both learned English, and they both were extremely bright. As I say, my father, as soon as he started to learn English, started to write in English, when he was reading [Robert G.] Ingersoll and Emerson and Thoreau and many of the great early American intellectuals.

LASKEY:

Which most of us have not read. So what did he do in Santa Paula?

WILSON:

Well, he became a—my mother had a real touch for business. I don't know where that came from, because her parents were not business people either. She was a very humanistic person, so her touch was a very personal one. They borrowed some money, and she opened up a little dry goods store in Santa Paula. You're too young to know what a dry goods store is, probably.

LASKEY:

Oh, no. My father was a dry goods salesman when I was growing up.

WILSON:

Really? For a while, they both worked together, with my mother taking the lead because she knew how to sew. She had learned how to sew in New York. Well, she had learned how to sew when she was a child. She was a very good seamstress, something which she did not pass on to her daughters. [laughter] She learned how to speak Spanish almost as well as she knew how to speak English, both with an accent.

LASKEY:

A Lithuanian accent.

WILSON:

That's right. Because Santa Paula was 50 percent Mexican-American. They were field workers, citrus workers. Then, when they weren't working the citrus, they were working in sugar beets. You know, the great Oxnard plain is the

great agricultural plain, and the Santa Clara Valley and San Joaquin Valley are the two great year-round growing areas. The Oxnard plain is famous for its vegetables and berries. There was always someplace for them to work in Oxnard, so when they came to California it was great. There were other immigrants there. We lived in the Mexican part of town when we first moved there.

LASKEY:

That's amazing. Santa Paula is not, I mean even today, what you would consider one of the major areas in Southern California. And I'm sure in 1920—but for your family to have searched it out and settled there—

WILSON:

Well, I think it was somewhat serendipitous in the sense that when my family reached Santa Paula they saw all these beautiful orange orchards and citrus growing around them. It is lovely. The town is not beautiful, but it's a nice little town—it was very small at that time. We moved into the Mexican ghetto, and that's where we lived. We always lived in "ghettos" in New York City and Santa Paula until we got a little more money.

LASKEY:

One kind or another.

WILSON:

Couldn't get out of the ghetto. [laughter] But I wasn't aware. You know, I've always told my children that I had never been particularly aware that we were—I had never had a sense of poverty when I was growing up. We lived there; it seemed fine. A lot of kids lived in the neighborhood, and we played with all those kids. I had a couple of dresses, which my mother washed every day, and I always had dirty knees and scabs. [laughter].

LASKEY:

Very normal.

WILSON:

A very dirty neck, my mother would always say.

LASKEY:

How about Sylvia, was she the same?

WILSON:

And nose, you know, I was a mess. [laughter]

LASKEY:

You were a tomboy.

WILSON:

Right. Sylvia was older, but she has the same feeling that I have, that, for some reason, my mother and father—we never felt that we were being deprived. I only became aware, really, of any kind of ostracism when I got into high school—of being isolated in any way.

LASKEY:

Did you go to high school in Santa Paula?

WILSON:

Yes.

LASKEY:

What was the nature of the ostracism?

WILSON:

Jewish, anti-Semitism.

LASKEY:

What form did it take?

WILSON:

Well, it was social, in the sense that I was isolated from the social activities of the young people there. I didn't get invited to parties, and I didn't get invited to the proms and that sort of thing. Even though—you know, I was an athlete, I was on the girls' tennis team. I played in Ojai, at the Ojai tennis tournament. I never did very well, but I always played up here anyway because I was on the girls' tennis team at that time. They had their high school division. I did sports, and I was a very good student, probably because I had more time to study because I had less social activities. That doesn't mean I didn't have any friends. I had a few friends. There were people who came from liberal families who didn't snub me, but I was not—

LASKEY:

Was this an overt kind of anti-Semitism, or was it something more subtle?

WILSON:

Only occasionally somebody would say something anti-Semitic to me. I remember I was on the girls' baseball team, and one of the girls threw a bat down at my foot and said, "I'm not going to play on a team with a kike." That kind of thing.

LASKEY:

How old were you? Thirteen, fourteen?

WILSON:

Yeah, something like that.

LASKEY:

Did you understand?

WILSON:

Of course. The funny thing is that I'm not as aware of having been discriminated against that much when I was a little snotty-nosed girl, when I thought everything was fine. Maybe kids are not sophisticated enough to be that anti-Semitic when they're that young. So at elementary school I don't think—I don't know. We had a little gang of kids we played with around the

house. We moved to L.A. for a while because my father got cancer, which he eventually died of. I was only twelve years old when he died—thirteen.

LASKEY:

Were you in Los Angeles?

WILSON:

He died in Los Angeles. My mother had moved to Los Angeles so he could get better care.

LASKEY:

Where did you live in Los Angeles? Do you know?

WILSON:

We lived in the Wilshire district, not very far from the Wiltern Theatre now. We rented a house there. My father spent a lot of time in hospitals. We also lived in the Melrose/West Hollywood district too, in one of the little ticky-tacky Spanish-imitation houses.

LASKEY:

Little Spanish bungalows.

WILSON:

You know that area, don't you?

LASKEY:

Oh, yes. It still remains pretty much intact.

WILSON:

It's very much the same and looks very much the same. I was there recently. Except those houses are occupied primarily by gays now.

LASKEY:

In West Hollywood.

WILSON:

Or by retired people.

LASKEY:

And Melrose, itself, of course, is a whole different world, but the neighborhoods remain surprisingly the same.

WILSON:

Amazingly the same, yeah. They haven't taken down many of those houses. As a matter of fact, when I got into—if I can divert a little bit—it was a little bit of a sentimental journey. Not only because we had lived there before we moved to the Wilshire district, but because later, when I got into college, and every summer I would go to work for an architect, for no salary usually, just to get the experience. I was very, very selective about the architects I went to work for. One of them was Rudolph [M.] Schindler. He lived on Kings Road, which was only a few blocks from where I had used to live.

LASKEY:

You worked in the house?

WILSON:

I worked in the Schindler house. It is still there. They are renovating it at this moment. My daughter and I went to visit it. It was shocking to see it in that condition, because they had let it go so. But it was a marvelous experience for me to have worked for him during that period, because he was so brilliant. He was a real hands-on architect. You know, whatever he designed, he went out and built and saw to it that it was built properly.

LASKEY:

Yeah. We're lucky. The city is lucky that the Schindler House has been maintained, because obviously the Dodge House across the street is gone. You can tell most of that neighborhood is gone. So we are grateful to at least have the Schindler House still.

WILSON:

Right. So going back to—what?

LASKEY:

While you were in Los Angeles, your father—was your father in the general hospital?

WILSON:

He was in and out of many hospitals. In general, he just died at home because there was really nothing—he had cancer of the esophagus, which he blamed on cigarette smoking, and he may have been absolutely right about that. Who knows? But he had been smoking since he was a child. The Russians are still smoking like crazy people.

LASKEY:

I think Eastern Europeans tend to smoke.

WILSON:

Oh, it's unbelievable.

LASKEY:

I understand Turkish children start when they're eight- or nine-years-old and cigarettes are a way of life.

WILSON:

Well, you see, it didn't affect his larynx or his bronchials. It affected his stomach, well, the esophagus. Anyway, there was nothing, apparently, that they knew to do at that time. There was no radiation or any of the other chemical treatments that they do now. So anyway, he died a very, very, slow, miserable death. So the last years—I didn't get to know him that well, although I was crazy about him, because he was—when I became conscious of death and all the other great moments of life and death, it was just about the time that he was dying. And I was kind of a hyperactive kid.

LASKEY:

Well, if you were twelve or thirteen at the time—

WILSON:

I was full of energy.

LASKEY:

Yeah, that's when you're so incredibly impressionable.

WILSON:

Yes, you are. Anyway, he wanted to pass on his knowledge and his love of learning to someone. So he would cloister himself with my sister, who was fifteen at the time, fourteen or fifteen, who was much more sensible. He really felt he could have a relationship with her. With me, it was just a matter of my getting into his room and jumping on his bed, which he did not like. [laughter] Just to attract attention. Poor guy. So I was kept away from him, just to protect his sanity. Anyway, my mother continued to work and make the living for the family. But then she always did, even when he was well. She was the breadwinner of the family. I think this put quite a strain on their relationship. He wouldn't even know how to make a living. We would go out—he went out and he would buy rabbit furs and bring them back and sell them to the furriers. He'd buy them from the trappers and sell them to the furriers. For vacation, we went with him once, and my sister and I came back with what they used to call the seven-year itch from sitting with all those furs in the backseat of our car. [laughter] Actually it wasn't seven years, but we used to call it that. So many folktales we used to hear. She would wash us off with some foul-smelling stuff in the bathtub every day until it finally went away. We really were a mess. Sores all over us.

LASKEY:

And all this time, your mother was either in a dry goods store or—?

WILSON:

By that time, she had graduated from dry goods, where she used to, by the way, have classes for the Mexican women. You know, showing them the most efficient way to use bolts of cloth, and cutting properly from patterns that were in English. Not that the Mexican women didn't know how to sew, but they were not accustomed to using those pattern books the way we were at that time. My mother used to bring them home, and we used to color them in with Crayolas. Anyway, she had classes for the Mexican-American women, and that's when she learned to speak Spanish.

LASKEY:

That's amazing.

WILSON:

She was incredible. Then she graduated from that and started selling. Ready-to-wear really wasn't that big at that time but became a very important part of American manufacturing. Ready-to-wear clothing.

LASKEY:

Now, was that here in Santa Paula or—?

WILSON:

It was in Santa Paula that she had the shop, and then she had a shop where she sold ready-to-wear clothing, and then she got a better shop. Then, as time went on and she got more successful during the war—I'm leaping ahead now— she had two or three shops: Santa Paula, Ventura, and one in Oxnard, I think. She was very successful, I mean for a woman who was an immigrant woman, uneducated. She was on the state committee of the Democratic Party, and she wasn't even a citizen. It was flukey, because my father became a citizen in 1923. Previous to that, up to 1922—they didn't know this—there had been a law that if the husband became a citizen the wife didn't have to. In 1923 they changed the law, but my mother was not aware of it and she just assumed she was a citizen. She registered to vote and they accepted her registration and she just went on voting all of her life and had all of the joys of being an American citizen, including being on the state central committee of the Democratic Party and taking an active role. So we always kidded her about it.

LASKEY:

When did she find out?

WILSON:

I think she had a lawyer, named Bob Agins, who later married a niece of hers, and she just mentioned it one time about having become a citizen when her husband became a citizen. So he looked up the law for some reason, just for fun, and he found out that she had never been a citizen by law. It became a kind of family joke.

LASKEY:

That's wonderful. Did she then go through the whole citizenship process or did she just let it go?

WILSON:

No, she just let it go. They assumed she was a citizen.

LASKEY:

They let her vote?

WILSON:

Of course. You know, she voted, her vote was counted. [laughter]

LASKEY:

That's wonderful. So, in the meantime, what was happening to you and your sister?

WILSON:

We went to school in Santa Paula and part way through grammar school—my sister was finishing up grammar school when we moved to Los Angeles. She went into Los Angeles High School, and I think I was finishing up grammar school. Then I went to John Burroughs Junior High School. My father was

terribly ill and my mother had opened up a shop across the street from the Wiltern Theatre—the Rose Gussin Shop—and sold all of her holdings in Santa Paula. My father died, and we moved back to Santa Paula. Previous to that, we had—let's see, I'm trying to think of the dates now. Let's see, if he died when I was twelve and I was born in 1918—so it was 1930. I'm trying to remember when the Saint Francis [San Francisquito] Dam broke. [March 12, 1928] We went through a flood in Santa Paula.

LASKEY:

I should know that.

WILSON:

I think my father was dead by then.

LASKEY:

I can check it out.

WILSON:

We lived in a little house. By that time we had moved up in the world. We were living in a little bungalow in the white neighborhood. My mother maintained her relationships in the Mexican community and was still friends with many of them. At her death, at her funeral, I couldn't believe it. I mean, there were like a hundred Mexicans [that] showed up at her funeral, because she was so beloved by them. She was a very kindly, charming woman.

LASKEY:

So the anti-Semitism that you were feeling didn't come, necessarily, from the Mexican community.

WILSON:

Not at all. No, they felt that we were an oppressed people and they were too, so there was a kind of a solidarity there. Except by the time I got into high school, I was already a snob. As a matter of fact, my mother and father were worried about both of us. They thought that we were developing certain anti-Semitic qualities when we were kids. When we came home, we were singing the jingle of, [sings] "And the dance they do is enough to kill a Jew." [laughter] My father almost died. We were going home and saying anti-Semitic things in the family. My father decided it was time to get out of Santa Paula, and we briefly moved to Lake Elsinore. [laughter]

LASKEY:

Did you have any religious upbringing? I mean, did you attend services or anything that would link you emotionally to Judaism?

WILSON:

No. On high holidays my aunt Tobi would have a seder at Passover. Then we would have—my father and mother belonged to the Los Angeles—I forget what it was called—Yiddish [Kultur] Club or something. We would go there

occasionally. So we had a Los Angeles group of Jews that we saw from time to time.

LASKEY:

Were these relatives or other such distant—?

WILSON:

No, it was just a club. They would have club affairs, but they were—it was not a particularly religious club, but they would celebrate the high holidays. There was not a rabbi there. I think they were primarily Jewish socialists and other kinds of expatriates, like my father, who had left the old country and come to the United States. They were just part of the whole immigrant scene, but they were not the religious immigrants, as far as I know. I don't remember a religious ceremony, but I do remember there were a lot of historical lectures and discussions about Jews and what the Jews had gone through. But I was busy playing with the children. We were playing our games. I was not profoundly influenced in my life with the Jewish religion. I don't mean not personally impressed, because I was neither impressed nor not impressed. There just was not—

LASKEY:

Right, right. It was just not part of your life.

WILSON:

I would say if— My father was probably an atheist. My mother, I don't know. She was more agnostic, I guess.

LASKEY:

How did your father become so politicized in Russia? Do you know?

WILSON:

That's a very good question. I'm not sure I know the answer to it, except that he got in with a—his mother and father were the intellectuals of the village. My grandfather on my father's side was a scribe. He wrote the Torah on scrolls of parchment. My father's mother was a teacher.

LASKEY:

So she was educated.

WILSON:

Yes, she was educated. It was unusual for a woman to be educated. We had a picture of my father's mother, who I resemble. It was on the wall for many, many years. You know, high cheekbones, but the square, peasant face.
[laughter]

LASKEY:

Had they been involved in any of the pogroms?

WILSON:

They were always involved in the pogroms because you couldn't avoid it. During Christmas, for example, the Cossacks that happened to be in that area,

in White Russia, are in a kind of storm-trooper mentality. [They] would get extremely drunk during Christmas and go beat up on a few Jews just for the hell of it, because they killed Christ. [laughter]

LASKEY:

It is hard to imagine, I mean the reality of it although, of course, it was extremely real.

WILSON:

Yeah, it was very real. I saw the film *Yentl*, which I thought was a lovely film, but you didn't get the same feeling from; I mean, you didn't get the feeling that there was any anti-Semitism anywhere in Europe at that time from the film. Do you remember seeing the film?

LASKEY:

I remember seeing it. I'm trying to remember. I think what you felt more was that there was just discrimination against women. And essentially this is what she was dealing with.

WILSON:

That's right, yeah. She didn't deal in this film—well, it was a story of Shalom Aleichem. Yeah, it was Shalom Aleichem or Isaac Bashevis Singer, I don't remember, but anyway, maybe he didn't deal with it in his short story. But there was tremendous anti-Semitism. My grandfather, when he got back from the United States after being in the Mississippi, had enough money for them to buy a little farm, which they bought under somebody else's name. He wanted to be the owner of this farm. They visited the farm on weekends.

LASKEY:

This was in Russia?

WILSON:

This was in Simna, in Lithuania, because that's on my mother's side.

LASKEY:

Well, now, at the time, that's when—

WILSON:

My mother developed her love of the rural life. She grew up in a little tiny community. But they privately were the owners of this land.

LASKEY:

Lithuania—it went through so many stages, but probably in the 1890s was a Russian satellite, wasn't it?

WILSON:

No, it was an independent country. As a matter of fact, they are still very independent. The Soviets are having a lot of trouble with the Lithuanians, and the Litvaks and the one other country that's involved—it's Latvia. They are having a lot of trouble in those countries now because they have an extremely independent spirit—very—and do not want to be a part of Russia. They don't

like the Russians. I'm not just talking about the Jews, I'm just talking about the Lithuanians in general.

LASKEY:

Right, exactly. Apparently they have their own language—

WILSON:

Yes, they do.

LASKEY:

And that it is one of the older lifestyles.

WILSON:

By the way, my uncle [Sam Flier], which I referred to just generally, my uncle Sam, went back to Russia for a visit when we were living in France. He came back. He had tried to find the members of the family on both sides, and apparently he was unable to find any relatives there. So you know that they were some of the ones who were gathered up and were part of the Holocaust. So whether or not I have any relatives there is questionable, nor in Belorussia. My father had about eight brothers and sisters, and they had lots of children. How thorough my uncle did the research, I don't know. I've never been there myself. It's about time for me to go back to my mother's village. I've never done that.

LASKEY:

That would be a wonderful trip.

WILSON:

It would be a wonderful trip. My sister and I keep threatening to do that, and I think we'll do it one of these days.

LASKEY:

Do it, do it. I did read that in the German occupation of Lithuania in the forties that they pretty well eliminated the whole Jewish community, which is very devastating and probably is what your uncle ran into.

WILSON:

He probably did. Then he looked up my father's family, as well as his own, and couldn't find any relatives in Moscow or Leningrad. I had a cousin, who is supposed to be an engineer—woman engineer—and [he] couldn't find her either. I don't know what's happened there. She was about my age.

1.2. TAPE NUMBER: I, Side Two (November 9, 1988)

LASKEY:

How many of your relatives or your family's relatives, your mother and father's relatives, came to America from Russia or Lithuania?

WILSON:

Well, she sent for her three sisters when she got here. She saved her money even from the sweatshops to be able to send for them. So all three of her sisters came over, and that constituted the entire family. All the other children had died. Meanwhile, her father and mother had died. Only one of my father's sisters [Sarah Gussin] and none of his brothers came over. So the family was primarily made up of my mother's sisters and their children and their grandchildren and Sarah and her children.

LASKEY:

Did they all live in Santa Paula? Did they migrate with you?

WILSON:

No, the only one who came to Santa Paula was the youngest. We called her Chirka [Sarah] which means little bird—she's the small member of the family. That wasn't her name. I've forgotten her name right now, because everybody called her Chirka. She married a man named [Abraham] Singer. They had three sons and four or five grandchildren. One of their children [Robert Singer] is one of the biggest cartoonists for Hanna-Barbera Studios. I think he recently left them and is opening up his own company for animated cartoons or animated commercials.

LASKEY:

What's his name?

WILSON:

His name is Robert Singer. And Raymond Singer is a designer. He is married to a painter. The third, Johnny [John] Singer, is in the meat-packing industry. I don't know what he does—something financial. Then my oldest aunt was Tobe [Lipnick]. She is dead now, and her husband is dead. My mother took care of everybody financially, because she was the most successful one. Except that my aunt Molly [Flier], who is the next to the youngest and considered the most beautiful in the family, although I thought my mother was—my mother had a more peasant look to her, but Molly had a more sophisticated, dark—probably some Sephardic came out in her. Who knows the history of the Jews? It is so complex. They have wandered all over the world. She married Sam Flier, who was a very close friend of my father—the one I was telling you about. Sam Flier came to this country at the same time my father did. They may have even traveled together. They were very, very close. That probably was the closest part of our family. He became a fur designer, and now they own a place on Wilshire—which his son now operates—called Flier Furs. It's right near La Cienega [Boulevard]. They own that building. Probably, eventually, that building will be torn down, and they'll put up a skyscraper, because it's a little tiny building getting surrounded by high-rises.

LASKEY:

Yeah, it's near the theater.

WILSON:

Yeah, that's right. Whatever that theater is called.

LASKEY:

That's an S. Charles Lee theater. The [Fox] Wilshire [Theatre].

WILSON:

The Wilshire, that's right. It was a very special style, theater Gothic. It didn't exist very many places. It was an extraordinary amount of money they put into these places. Did you do either [Grauman's] Chinese Theatre or Egyptian Theatre?

LASKEY:

No, no.

WILSON:

Because those I always thought were fantastic places.

LASKEY:

In fact, those were done by two different firms. Both theaters were done by different firms and I—

WILSON:

The Pantages [Theatre]. Now, that could have been done by him, was it?

LASKEY:

No.

WILSON:

Oh, okay, well, so where were we?

LASKEY:

That's a fabulous building, the entire theater. Okay, if you were just—

WILSON:

Then Molly had a son Jack [Flier], Molly Flier and Sam Flier, who were married. So they had a son and a daughter [Sylvia Agins], who are now in their seventies or eighties—I don't know. Very, very handsome family. My uncle Sam was a great, tall blond. He looked very Russian. And my aunt Molly was a little, dark woman—very beautiful, little dark woman. So their children were very beautiful children, both very handsome.

LASKEY:

Did you speak Russian?

WILSON:

No, I didn't. They all had children. You don't need to know more than that, do you? That's about all. That constitutes my family.

LASKEY:

But they were here, and they were the ones who were here in this area.

WILSON:

That's right.

LASKEY:

They're part of who you grew up with.

WILSON:

Yes. Jack Flier, the son of Sam Flier, came to Santa Paula and lived with us for a while. As a matter of fact, many of my cousins moved in with us while we lived in Santa Paula and would stay with us for a while. My mother had a very protective feeling towards them, so my cousins would just come and stay for a year or two years.

LASKEY:

What kind of a house did you have that accommodated this coming and going of people?

WILSON:

Well, you know, we were going up in the world, so to speak, financially. We never really got rich, but each house we bought was a little bit bigger than the previous one. And there were always four or five little bedrooms around there. If there weren't enough bedrooms, my cousins would stay together or they'd sleep in the room with Sylvia or we shared a room. I don't even remember ever having a room to myself until my sister went off to college. Oh, I want to tell you one experience that was kind of a wonderful experience. It probably set me off toward wanting to be an architect. This was when I was about thirteen or fourteen. My father was dead by then, and my mother was alone and not remarried as yet. She was a businesswoman and a relatively successful businesswoman at Santa Paula, and she decided to build a house. So instead of buying a house, she wanted to build a house. She bought a piece of property up on the hills with a view of the little Santa Clara Valley. The same area that we had evacuated to when the flood came through, you know, where we sat at the side of the mountain while the terrible devastation took place in Santa Paula. The Saint Francis Dam flood which was in 1928.

LASKEY:

I could check that.

WILSON:

In 1930? I don't remember when it was. Anyway—

LASKEY:

[William] Mulholland.

WILSON:

Mulholland was the builder of the dam. That whole drama where the engineer committed suicide.

LASKEY:

And you were involved.

WILSON:

You remember that whole—

LASKEY:

Oh, yes, yes.

WILSON:

They talked a little bit about it in that film *Chinatown*.

LASKEY:

But just sort of alluded to it. It was a critical period for it, for Mulholland.

WILSON:

So anyway, there was my sister, who was still in high school, and I was in junior high, and my mother decided to build a house. I still to this day when I think about it—at the time, I didn't think about it. She went to the local architect. She didn't go to a contractor. She didn't go to a drafting service. She went to an architect. She spoke to him. His name was Roy Wilson, oddly enough. He was doing a lot of the packinghouses and schools. He liked my mother, Rose, like everybody did, and he said, "Well, Rose, do you know how much you want to spend on this house?" She said, "A few thousand dollars." [laughter] He said, "Okay, I'll tell you. I'm going to give you a book. It's a book of house plans. It shows a little bit about how the house looks." So I remember us pouring over this book. It had hundreds of house plans and pictures of the houses. Underneath it would say \$3,500, \$5,500. A very fancy house at \$6,000. It showed the floor plan and one little rendering of the front of the house, what it looked like.

LASKEY:

Little pattern books.

WILSON:

Absolutely. My mother and I and my sister, we poured through those books for weeks trying to make up our minds. We finally picked out a house that looked a little bit—it looked sort of what we thought of as modern, but actually it was more New Mexico style. [laughter] It was just walls with a flat roof and parapets and then outside of it the little pieces of logs were sticking out to make it look—and we thought that was absolutely the cat's pajamas, with a little patio out in front. The price was \$4,000.

LASKEY:

Amazing, amazing.

WILSON:

A couple hundred dollars probably went to the architect, and the house was built for \$4,000.

LASKEY:

Did that fulfill your dreams?

WILSON:

Oh, wow. I was up there every single day. I'm absolutely certain, as I look back on that, this is the greatest influence in my life that made me decide—because I decided very young—to be an architect. I mean, I was like fourteen years old,

so it must have been this experience of watching this house go up that inspired me.

LASKEY:

Actually, my next question is where in this sort of lovely, almost bucolic lifestyle, close-knit family, and the tomboy Zelma did you decide to become an architect? Unless where it came from is this—

WILSON:

That's one of them. That's one of the reasons, but there are other reasons too. This is in retrospect. There are several things that happened at one time. One is that my mother—my sister and I used to play a game where we used to see faces in houses.

LASKEY:

Faces in houses?

WILSON:

Faces, yeah. The eyes were like this, the eyebrows were like that [makes a face]. We had more fun with this, and we'd imitate. So this is the house up on the—I'd say, "Where is this house?" She would say, "It's that one." I'd say, "No, don't you see this, there's a porch here where my lip sticks out." [laughter]

LASKEY:

That's wonderful.

WILSON:

We had a marvelous time doing that. Especially when we were driving in the car. But I don't think that's the main reason. One of the main reasons is that my mother knew that because she was so uneducated—except [for] her own self-education—that her children were going to go to college and that they were going to be educated. And they weren't just going to be educated, they were going to be somebody. Something that ended in -ologist. [laughter]

LASKEY:

You would be important.

WILSON:

Or doctor or dentist or something like that. My sister had already decided that she was going to be a psychologist, so she was a psychology major. When I finally decided I was going to be an architect, it was very thrilling to my mother, because, obviously, she'd had this contact with an architect and thought it would be wonderful. She asked if any girls were ever architects, and I said, "I don't have any idea. I don't know whether any girls are architects, but I want to be one." The only aspect of that was, as I told you before, there was a sense of rejection of me when I was in high school, a feeling that I was not really a desirable young person, especially to boys, in the social circles. I felt that isolation, so I always tried to excel in whatever I did to prove to people that I was a worthwhile person. Nothing short of super excellence would have been

adequate for me. So I was a straight-A student and all that stuff. I wanted to prove to those people that I could go out and do more than any of them ever had anticipated. I look back on it now—it really doesn't matter, anymore, what my motivations were, because when I went to my fortieth or forty-fifth class reunion and people were alcoholics and people were killed in wars. Very few people had any success. One guy became the vice president of a bank. Some of the women who were such duds in high school turned out to be the highest achievers of the high school. One was a principal and many, many people went into teaching. By that time I had already become a fellow in the American Institute of Architects, which was extraordinary for a woman—so rare for a woman. Not only to be an architect but to be a fellow in the American Institute of Architects was like you were practically a freak, not just rare. To be in the college of fellows. To be one of, say, twenty or thirty women in the whole United States. I was very proud of that, I was very proud of that. They had a prize for the person who had achieved the most in their lifetime. It went to the man who was the vice president of one of the local banks.

LASKEY:

How did you feel about that?

WILSON:

Well, you know, you would think that I would have been more offended than I was, but I thought, "Well, what do you expect? What do you expect? One, it had to be a man, and secondly, in a money-oriented world, it would have to be that. And do they know what I had done to achieve that?" They looked at me like I was just somebody strange and weird. They'd come up to me at the class reunion and ask me, "Whatever happened to Charna?" Charna [Lieberman] was the one other Jewish girl who was in school. I haven't seen her naturally since I graduated from high school. But every time I go to a high school reunion, somebody will ask me, "Whatever happened to Charna?"

LASKEY:

So you were sort of forever lumped together in their minds, in that pigeonhole.

WILSON:

Absolutely, absolutely. So there never, never has been a time that I've gone to one of these reunions when somebody hasn't reminded me that I'm Jewish.

LASKEY:

How do you deal with it?

WILSON:

Well, as far as the question about Charna, I will say that I regret to say, because I was very fond of her, that I haven't had a chance to see her since she graduated from high school. Which has been some 175 years ago! [laughter] I hope she is doing well, wherever she is. I pass it off. What can I do? There's no hope in getting mad, is there?

LASKEY:

I don't know. Is it possible not to get mad?

WILSON:

It does make me mad, but I've never said to one of them, "Do you lump us together because we are both Jewish?" It never would occur to me to say that because it would embarrass them and they would say, "Oh, no, we thought you were good friends" or they would have some cover-up. As a matter of fact, I remember one high school reunion, an earlier one, where I was sitting across from a Mexican-American family who had done fairly well. Even though about half of my class was Mexican, this particular Mexican who came to the reunions was more successful than the others. We were at a table together—a group of us. I sat across from him and asked him if he had been affected by prejudice the way I felt I had been affected by it. We were sitting down at the end of the table. He was absolutely beside himself with anguish that I had asked such a question of him. So I dropped it really fast. I just couldn't have said anything worse to him.

LASKEY:

In what way?

WILSON:

I don't know. I just think the idea that—I don't know. He said, "Oh, I don't think it was that bad. I don't think I was that affected." Or something like that. And I remember him, well, being ostracized if not more ostracized. At least I had so-called white skin, and he didn't. And I was a high-achiever on the California Scholarship Federation and the tennis team. At least I tried to make some adaptation to be as Gentile as the next person. Not that I ever denied being Jewish.

LASKEY:

No, it sounds like he did perhaps.

WILSON:

That he denied it.

LASKEY:

Yeah. He denied the reality.

WILSON:

And furthermore, I did have a few friends. There was an Italian girl, Caroline Giacomazzi, who was my friend. She was also on the Scholarship Federation. Her parents were sort of intellectuals, and we were good friends. And the Jameson girls—so there were people there. I'm not saying that they were all red-neck anti-Semites, because they weren't.

LASKEY:

But it doesn't have to take all of them to make your life feel miserable.

WILSON:

That's right. And make you feel isolated.

LASKEY:

How was your family? Your mother and father and Sylvia? Did they—?

WILSON:

My sister had the very fortunate situation of my cousin, Jack Flier, living with us at the time that she was in high school. I told you about he how lived with us for a while. He graduated from Santa Paula Union High School. She had his protection, in a sense, because he was a great big, absolutely gorgeous guy nobody could possibly be prejudiced against. He was on the football team and he was on the basketball team and he was this and he was that. He was blond and the best-looking guy in school. He was able to overcome his Jewishness by his confidence. He had moved from New York, where he went to schools where most of the kids were Jewish anyway, and he never felt put down. So she had—I'm not saying that she didn't feel it, but I don't think she felt it as much as I did. Maybe that's her personality, too. She has a very outgoing, very positive sort of a personality.

LASKEY:

Did she go on to [University of California] Berkeley then, too?

WILSON:

Yes, she went to Berkeley. She eventually graduated, but she did the same kind of college hopping I did. She started at UCLA, and she and Paul Jarrico got married—or were living together I guess—and they moved to Berkeley. Then I started at UCLA.

LASKEY:

Oh, you went to UCLA? I didn't know that.

WILSON:

Yes, as an art major, just for about a year.

LASKEY:

When was this now? We're talking late thirties—?

WILSON:

In '35, late '35.

LASKEY:

Just to backtrack a little bit, at this point then we were sort of at the peak of the Depression—

WILSON:

That's right.

LASKEY:

How—?

WILSON:

How did my mother manage to get us—?

LASKEY:

Yeah.

WILSON:

It was very cheap to go to college at that time. For a while I was staying with my sister and Paul in their little apartment while I was going to UCLA. Then when they left, they moved me into a dormitory, and it was not expensive to go to school at that time. Like now, it's—what is it?

LASKEY:

Oh, it's astronomical even for UCLA.

WILSON:

It's astronomically expensive. But then it was a state university. I can't remember. I think it cost six dollars a unit per semester or something ridiculous like that to enroll. The big dormitories where I stayed for a while weren't that expensive.

LASKEY:

Your mother's business managed to maintain itself, then, through the Depression?

WILSON:

Yes. I think the worst part of her time was when she had to pay all those hospital costs, plus run her stores. I'm sounding very stupid at this point, because I was not aware that anything was a terrible struggle for my mother. I am not aware of that.

LASKEY:

Well, you were very young.

WILSON:

I was very young, but I wasn't that young that I could be that stupid. Meanwhile, she had met a young man [Edward Kraus] who was about ten years her junior, who had never been able to make it. He was Paul Jarrico's half-brother. He's one of those ragamuffins who she used to take in all the time. As a matter of fact, I shared a bedroom with him for a while—very resentfully. Because I had finally gotten a bedroom to myself of my own because my sister was off in college, and here comes this young man who I had to share—we had twin beds. Finally, I think he moved into my mother's bed and that was okay.

LASKEY:

That didn't bother you?

WILSON:

Oh, it bothered me horribly. I mean, I was a teenager. I had my own room back, but here I'd been looking forward to having my mother to myself and instead this youngish man comes into her life.

LASKEY:

Just at the time that she was available for you.

WILSON:

Yeah. I'm sounding like it's a terribly depressing story. It isn't that depressing. What I mean is, I don't feel that I had a terrible childhood. Does it sound this way?

LASKEY:

No.

WILSON:

Okay. [laughter]

LASKEY:

No, just that you've had, you know, with the good times there were disappointments, and this is one of those disappointments.

WILSON:

Yes, I came home one day and there—I came home from a date with—I used to go out with guys, but always from another town. Not in my hometown. Nor would they take me to their hometown.

LASKEY:

That's terrible.

WILSON:

So they had to sneak around. If a guy from a hometown would take me out, he would take me elsewhere so that we wouldn't be seen together.

LASKEY:

Because you were Jewish?

WILSON:

Yes.

LASKEY:

Wow. What was the reigning religion here at that time? Or in Santa Paula?

WILSON:

It was a fundamentalist kind of religion, I think Methodist and Baptist. Of course, the Mexicans were Catholics. Well, the town had become very midwesternized. When there was a strike—the Mexicans went on a strike because they had this horrible company housing and lived in these feudal environments. They had gone on strike in the citrus areas, not dissimilar to the situation in *Salt of the Earth*. Did you see *Salt of the Earth*?

LASKEY:

I've only read about it, I've never seen it.

WILSON:

You should see it, it's a very good film. Anyway, they brought in—this was during the big migration of people from Arkansas and Oklahoma and Kansas, where they were having these terrible dust storms. They brought them in to break the strike. So they did break the strike with these midwesterners who were not nearly as good workers, but they worked for very, very cheap. They

were able to break the strike, and they were able to evict the Mexicans from the little houses they were living in—tiny little houses, the company houses.

LASKEY:

Now, this is the point at which you also have your problems. These are the people with whom you're having the conflict.

WILSON:

Yes. So I'm saying this is something which had happened previously. My high school had a lot of mid- westerners, with all their fundamentalist religions, along with the Mexican-American population who remained there and went into other occupations—the building trades. Finally, when the strike was over, they rehired them at lower prices. They also went to work in a place where they made sugar in Oxnard. A lot of them went to work there. When things settled out, the Mexicans still—it still has a very, very big—it may have a larger Mexican-American population than ever.

LASKEY:

Yeah, I tend to think of Santa Paula as a Mexican-American community, farmworkers—

WILSON:

That's right. A lot of them are businessmen now, doing one thing and another.

LASKEY:

It's a pretty little community.

WILSON:

It's a residential community. It hasn't changed all that much. So where are we?

What year are we at the moment? [laughter] I'm lost. I'm waddling about.

LASKEY:

We were discussing the Depression and the fact that you went—

WILSON:

I can't understand why I'm not more aware of it, except I'm just giving you some of the manifestations of the Depression, in retrospect. Because at the time I was aware that it was the Depression, but I wasn't aware that we were all that profoundly affected.

LASKEY:

Possibly you weren't.

WILSON:

Maybe it's because I was just generally unconscious. I don't know. Like I say, I didn't know I was living in a Mexican-American ghetto when we first moved to Santa Paula. It seemed fine to me. I had a wonderful time playing with the children and being dirty all the time. [laughter] Later, when my mother had to go to work and had her store, we always had Mexican help in the house who did all the housekeeping. But my mother continued to do all the cooking. I was a latchkey kid. We didn't call it that. My sister and I would come home from

school, and there would be the Mexican lady. We would just go out and play and do our games—hopscotch or catch or whatever else. Now, by that time, we had moved to a white neighborhood—when we were able to get household help. It wasn't any great shakes as a neighborhood, but it was right across the street from the elementary school.

LASKEY:

It was probably a safe community, too.

WILSON:

A very safe community.

LASKEY:

Just generally, so you and your sister were protected.

WILSON:

We were.

LASKEY:

So your sister went on to UCLA—

WILSON:

My sister went on to UCLA in the Psychology Department, and then she went to Berkeley.

LASKEY:

Now, you went to UCLA as an art major. Why an art major rather than in architecture?

WILSON:

I don't think I had the courage at that time to move completely away from the family. In the first place, I graduated from high school when I was fifteen-years-old. Going back and forth from Los Angeles to Santa Paula, back to Los Angeles, back to Santa Paula, I skipped a couple of grades.

LASKEY:

So you were very young.

WILSON:

I was a bright student, but I was really too young. As I say, fifteen. Then I turned sixteen in the following few months. When I went into college, I was sixteen years old. It really is very young to leave your family.

LASKEY:

That's very young.

WILSON:

Now, my mother got off steerage when she was twelve years old, but at sixteen I didn't want to go further than sixty miles from home! [laughter] So when my sister and Paul made the offer of my staying with them while I started college—and when I was seventeen years old, I met a man in one of my classes who became my husband, my first husband.

LASKEY:

I didn't know you had a first husband.

WILSON:

Yes. His name was Howard Finn. He later was a city councilman of Los Angeles for many, many years. Howard Finn just died last year, I think, or two years ago.

LASKEY:

That's a familiar name.

WILSON:

Yes. He went on the planning commission.

LASKEY:

That's where I know the name from.

WILSON:

Yes. Then he later became a councilman and—

LASKEY:

How interesting. And you met him at UCLA?

WILSON:

Yes. He was in my math class. I was doing kind of a pre-architectural course with the anticipation that I would go, later, to Berkeley, to their School of Architecture. I also had some mediocre talent as an artist. I still do sculpting.

LASKEY:

I know, I was reading in your resume that you had done a sculpture at the École [des Beaux-Arts] when you were there.

WILSON:

Yes.

LASKEY:

Were you doing sculpture at UCLA or were you in fine arts?

WILSON:

No, I wasn't, no. I was just in the Fine Arts Department. I was taking a fine arts major, but I also took some pre-architectural type of courses, just to prepare myself. So I knew that eventually I would transfer.

LASKEY:

Well, did you get married then while—?

WILSON:

I got married just before I left UCLA and went to Berkeley. We were married for about a year and a half. I leapt at the first guy that came along and said, "I love you."

LASKEY:

That's not unusual, especially in the thirties.

WILSON:

Maybe so, maybe so.

LASKEY:

So did you live with Howard in Los Angeles?

WILSON:

Yeah, I lived with Howard—not in Los Angeles, no. We moved immediately to Berkeley.

LASKEY:

Oh, he moved with you.

WILSON:

Yes. He transferred from UCLA, too, and I convinced him that I wanted to go to Berkeley to start in the Architecture Department there. I didn't totally lose that first year and a half, but I lost some of it because they start you immediately on first-year design courses. They had the old—I told you, for the first couple of years they had the old beaux-arts system, which I don't regret at all, now that I look back on it. I was very glad that I was able to start in the beaux-arts system of architectural education and move from that to the modern, contemporary period of architectural education.

LASKEY:

Was that their program, the combination of the two? Or did you just happen to be there when the architecture school was changing over from the classical to the modern?

WILSON:

I was—so I was there for two years, two and a half years, I guess. During the last year, or the last half a year I was there, was when they started to change over from the beaux-arts system. All the schools of architecture in all of the state university system changed over to a modern system, which meant that—well, it's complicated. We used to use as our model the Greek temples, to learn about proportion, and the golden mean, and entasis, and the beauty of the columns, and which Greek architects used which columns, and which architects introduced it, and the entablatures, and all these beautiful—

LASKEY:

Vitruvius.

WILSON:

That's right. Anyway, we had to learn how to draw those and make them look round. You know, we used pen-and-ink washes. We learned how to use ink washes. Nobody has to learn that anymore. We learned how to stretch paper with water for our canvas, so to speak. It's a very heavy paper that we had to stretch. On the stretched paper, we made these beautiful ink-wash drawings using the Greek architecture as our base. One of the other wonderful things about it is that I took a course in sculpture in which they used Greek elements, like the hand of David. We did the hand of David; we copied the hand of David. This was a great Michelangelo statue. And the head of, I don't know, somebody else—Leonardo da Vinci and—

LASKEY:

What medium were you sculpting in?

WILSON:

Just clay at that time.

LASKEY:

Just clay. So you took this with your basic architectural program.

WILSON:

That's right. Yes. But I was also taking mathematics and calculus and engineering and physics and all the other stuff at the same time.

LASKEY:

Well, I guess the main question is, how did they treat you as a woman in this man's fortress?

WILSON:

They were patronizing. They were okay. A woman was treated either as—if you were very beautiful, you were treated as kind of the pet of the class or you were patronized, one or the other. Or they put you down a lot, whichever. I was treated variously, under different circumstances.

LASKEY:

Did you ever regret or think that this might not be an area—?

WILSON:

Never.

LASKEY:

Oh, really?

WILSON:

Never. I never regretted it.

LASKEY:

Were you ever actively discouraged from pursuing your degree in the architecture?

WILSON:

Occasionally I would get a professor who was very opposed to having women in architecture, and he would let you know that you probably were not going to make it, you probably were not going to graduate, and you would probably get out and you would get pregnant or something. You were a distraction to the other men in the department and they needed to work hard. Because architecture is a very, very hard education. You work all day—you have classes—and then you work all night preparing for submissions.

LASKEY:

And it was assumed that women would not be strong enough to—

WILSON:

That's right. Assumed that your work would not be good, because women do not have three-dimensional perception. That was the general assumption. A lot

of the older students would help the younger students, and the younger students would help the older students. I'm still speaking about Berkeley. It was a very nice atmosphere at the old school of architecture before they built that great big monstrosity up there, the School of Architecture and Environmental Design. The old building was called The Arch. It's a little wooden building that was designed by William Wurster, who was a very fine, who was a kind of a Berkeley personage. I think he was the first dean of the School of Architecture when they finally got into the modern, contemporary period of education. He designed the building. Either he designed it or Julia Morgan. She might have designed it, now that I think about it.

LASKEY:

She did some of the buildings up there.

WILSON:

Oh, she did many buildings up there at Berkeley. She worked for Phoebe Apperson Hearst. She was doing the more magnificent buildings like the Letters and Science and Sather Tower. The Campanile.

LASKEY:

She did the Greek Theatre, didn't she?

WILSON:

Yes, she did.

LASKEY:

And the Women's Gym.

WILSON:

Yeah, the Women's Gym.

LASKEY:

Well, she actually had sort of set the groundwork for you years before, although there was no architecture school at the time that she was there.

WILSON:

Right.

LASKEY:

But she had to go through the engineering school to a lot of harassment, apparently, from her fellow students. Did you have any support? Professors who were particularly supportive of you?

WILSON:

Yeah, there were a few. There were a couple that were very supportive. But I didn't have a mentor. Many of the young students had mentors. Actually, I didn't get a mentor until I got down to USC [University of Southern California]. That was some years later, because in between there was a world war.

LASKEY:

Yes, there was, and other things. What happened to—?

WILSON:

Howard Finn?

LASKEY:

Howard Finn—just catching up on this.

WILSON:

Okay, Howard—when I got to Berkeley, I sort of started to blossom as a woman and found out that I was not- just an unattractive dog like I had thought I was. [laughter] And undesirable. One of the untouchables or whatever it was that I used to feel about myself.

LASKEY:

Oh, how terrible.

WILSON:

It's terrible how you carry this baggage around with you all these years, isn't it? It's just so awful. I had gone up there and, my gosh, I had all these boys after me and wanting me to climb into the sack with them or just do it out there on the lawn.

LASKEY:

[laughter] That's Berkeley.

WILSON:

Right. It was very Berkeleyesque. Strawberry Creek and all that romantic—the sycamore grove. My gosh, it was just so romantic it was unendurable.

LASKEY:

It is beautiful.

WILSON:

An unendurably romantic place.

LASKEY:

It really is.

WILSON:

So I just wanted to be free. That wasn't very nice, but I wanted to be free to go on to these experiences. Howard was very dedicated to me, and I hurt his feelings a lot. I didn't want to do it. He went to pieces, followed me around when I asked for a separation, wrote horrible letters to my mother, telling that I had become promiscuous. She sent Sylvia up there to see what was wrong with me. Then she came. I got pregnant after that. Somebody else. Because the stories that he was telling my mother were grossly exaggerated. They were partially true, but grossly exaggerated.

LASKEY:

I'm sure

WILSON:

At the time we were separated, I was already pregnant and didn't know it. So my mother arranged for me to have an abortion.

LASKEY:

You were how old now, only about seventeen, eighteen?

WILSON:

No, by that time I was nineteen years old.

LASKEY:

Nineteen. That's still pretty young. That must have been incredibly difficult for you.

WILSON:

It was tough. My mother had to take me to Santa Barbara. I came back home when I found out. She made all the arrangements. She found out who would do it and who would do the best job, the most careful job. She had to put the money up front. It cost sixty dollars to have an abortion. [laughter]

LASKEY:

Yeah, but we're talking—

WILSON:

I mean, you're talking sixty dollars.

LASKEY:

You're talking late thirties.

WILSON:

Up front, up front. You pay it before they do it. They gave me a local anesthetic and sent me on my way as quickly as possible.

LASKEY:

Oh. But, you know, ultimately, how wonderful that your mother was the one who helped you through it.

WILSON:

She was an incredible lady, really incredible. She was a fortress. A little woman, she was five feet two.

1.3. TAPE NUMBER: II, Side One (November 30, 1988)

LASKEY

Mrs. Wilson, when we last talked, you made a couple of references to the Saint Francis Dam disaster. I wonder if you could go into a little more detail about your personal recollections of that catastrophe?

WILSON

We were awakened in the middle of the night—to the best of my recollection, it was around three to four o'clock in the morning—by the police with what are those things called? Not foghorns, but—

LASKEY

Megaphones?

WILSON

Megaphones. They didn't have foghorns or things like that at that time. [laughter] They were calling on everyone to get dressed as quickly as possible and go north to the hills because there was a flood coming through Santa Paula. They didn't know the size or nature of the disaster, but we should hurry. It's just simply that they had word that nearby towns had been flooded. So we dressed as quickly as possible. As a matter of fact, I don't think we even dressed. We just kept our nightgowns on and put on our slippers and bathrobe and blankets. My mother [Rose Gussin] and sister [Sylvia Gussin]—I don't remember my father [William Gussin] being there—and rushed up to the hills. I remember being terrified, excited, thrilled, and all of the things that children are. I was around nine- or ten-years-old. My sister was twelve. It was a great experience, one of the most exciting things that ever happened to us. At the same time, we were terribly frightened because we didn't know where the water was, where it was coming from or anything about it. We were all in the dark about it. So we went up to the hills. We went as high as we could until we came to many groups of people who were sitting on the side of the hill. We sat amongst them. There was lots of excitement, and the kids were screaming and hollering and were looking for the water. Nobody could see anything because it was still dark.

LASKEY

Did you ever hear anything? Apparently, it was an incredible noise.

WILSON

Yes, we heard a roaring, but it was something that you couldn't identify as being a flood. It was just a terrible roaring sound, and it wasn't that close to us. It was about a mile away. We stayed on the side of the hill, and the children were playing games or huddled around their mothers. Finally, the police came and said that there had been a flood in the south end of town in the riverbed, covering about half a mile to a mile swath through Santa Clara Valley, and that we were all safe. That happened probably in late morning. We were finally able to come back to our houses. Then little by little, as time developed, I found that my school had been flooded out—my elementary school—and the school would be closed. And that many people had been killed, and cattle had been killed—hundreds of people and hundreds of livestock, chickens, hogs, cattle. The schools in the town were closed down. Then there was an outbreak of typhoid. Many of the people in town were Mexican-Americans and were the ones who were killed because they were the poorest people in town and lived in riverbeds. Many cars were washed down. From Santa Paula to the mouth of the river, where it hits the ocean in Ventura, it was only about fifteen miles away. The water was pretty spread out by the time it hit the ocean.

LASKEY

It had come quite a ways before it had come to Santa Paula.

WILSON

Oh, yes. It came from Castaic Junction, which is where Valencia is now. So it had come at least thirty, thirty-five miles, I think, before it hit. Maybe forty miles before it hit Santa Paula. So the force of it had been somewhat dissipated by the time it got to Santa Paula. But still it had taken a wider course of land. It was fairly flat around there. The effects were felt for years and years afterwards. There were some small villages that were totally wiped out. I guess the towns that were hit the hardest were Fillmore and Santa Paula, Piru, Saticoy.

LASKEY

Horrendous event.

WILSON

Yeah, it was a horrendous event.

LASKEY

It really was.

WILSON

Also, there was so much scandal that I didn't know until much later, around the bringing of water from the Colorado River. Emptying out of the—what's the name of that county that lost all of its water as a result of this?

LASKEY

Kern?

WILSON

No. Omo or Amo? Or something, something with Os in it.

LASKEY:

Where Mono Lake is?

WILSON

Mono Lake.

LASKEY

Mono County. Yeah, of course.

WILSON:

Yeah, Mono Lake is completely dry.

LASKEY

That was the first aqueduct.

WILSON:

Because the water was stolen by the real estate developers, of whom Raymond Chandler was one of—the owners of the newspaper.

LASKEY

Harry. Harry Chandler.

WILSON

Harry Chandler.

LASKEY

Raymond Chandler wishes he were one of them.

WILSON

Actually, I think Raymond Chandler probably wrote about that. The film *Chinatown* reflected a lot of what had happened around the issue of water, how it was brought in by the very wealthy. The whole city of Los Angeles voted to have the water come in, and voted to steal the water, so to speak, though it was engineered by the *Los Angeles Times*. Then, because Chandler owned enormous real estate holdings in the San Fernando Valley—

LASKEY

Right, well, along the railroad line, wasn't it? I think it had also a lot to do with the Southern Pacific [Railroad Company].

WILSON

Right. Southern Pacific probably was involved. I don't know.

LASKEY

I think they're still arguing about it.

WILSON

They're still arguing about it and probably will continue to do so. The engineer who designed the dam—and he had to build it up in a hurry. It's the abutments that were not stable, apparently, because it gave out at one abutment. You know, where the bulkhead of the dam went into the sides of the mountain. Those were the ones that were stable. My understanding is it didn't bust in the middle; it busted out at the sides. It wasn't properly secured to the sides. That was my understanding. That may be wrong about that, but anyway the engineer later committed suicide. And you said it might have been [William] Mulholland.

LASKEY

Well, Mulholland was in charge of the construction of the dam.

WILSON

But I'm not sure he was the engineer.

LASKEY

I don't think he was the actual engineer who worked on the dam, but I know that he had checked it just a day or two before it broke because there was fear that it was going to break. He checked it. The problem was in the stability of the soil.

WILSON

You mean there was prior knowledge?

LASKEY

Yeah. He checked it and said it was okay.

WILSON

So he did do something?

LASKEY

And then it broke after that. He claimed full responsibility for it. I don't know that Mulholland committed suicide. I do know that it destroyed his life. He never recovered from it. He was the one who had masterminded the original aqueduct that came down from Mono Lake, the Owens River Aqueduct, and then the Saint Francis Dam was built after that. He accepted complete responsibility for it. But it was a horrendous, horrendous disaster. As you say, hundreds of people killed, and it was apparently preventable. At least Mulholland felt that it was something that he should have attended to and didn't.

WILSON

Yes, it was. It was preventable and also the fact that it was a political tool for the real estate developers of that area.

1.4. TAPE NUMBER: III, Side One (February 11, 1989)

LASKEY

I think we'll start where we left off, which was 1938. You were at the University of California at Berkeley. You were entering the architecture school. Now, a woman in architecture school in Berkeley in 1938 was pretty unique. What were your experiences like?

WILSON

I think that in my class there was one other woman, and one of the upper-classmen there was a woman. I was not particularly close to them. I mean, it isn't that we weren't supportive. It's just that we were not close friends. I'm trying to remember why. I don't know why. When I first started to school they were under the beaux-arts system. There were two kinds of—I think you've heard of it before. The beaux-arts system of teaching architecture and the modern school of Bauhaus architectural education.

LASKEY

Actually, I was going to ask you about that, because you were in school just at the time when the change was taking place.

WILSON

At the changing point. My first three years at Berkeley, I went through the beaux-arts system. Then, the last two and a half years, when I was at USC [University of Southern California], they had abandoned the beaux-arts system at that time. So in a way I kind of cherished the fact that I had the tail end of the beaux-arts system and then the other part, getting the Bauhaus method of education. I'm glad that I had both, because I think it gave me a more rounded education.

LASKEY

Did you have to throw out a lot of what you had learned?

WILSON

No. I didn't throw out any of it. I maintained the treasure of having had it. For example, we took courses in sculpting, and it's there I learned that I could do some sculpting. I have some pieces around which I'll show you. When I went to Paris, I did quite a bit of sculpting there. We had courses where we drew the Parthenon or the Erechtheum or the caryatids. We drew them in ink washes. This was part of the experience in learning how to draw and learning the Greek classicism, the Greek delicacy of the way in which they designed their temples. The fact that because the columns were so tall, they had a thing called an entasis. You know, by entasis, the columns are slightly bulging in the middle so they don't look like they're concave in the middle. It was a visual thing that they had invented that made you start to think, if you didn't already, about how exciting it was to be so perceptive that you would take into consideration the distortions—

LASKEY

And how long ago they figured that out.

WILSON

That's right. Of course, the Greeks were great mathematicians, and that was part of it. The Romans also adapted that, and when the Romans came in, of course, there was a lot more decoration and baroque—I shouldn't use that word, because it's the wrong word. Of decorative—they invented the Corinthian columns, which were very different than the Ionic and Doric, which were so beautiful and simple. But anyway, we learned how to draw those. We did them in ink washes on stretched paper. We wet down a certain kind of a linen paper, and we fastened it down to the board. It was all wet and then you leave it alone and the next day you come back and it's all stretched. There isn't a wrinkle in it. Or sometimes there is a screw-up and there's a horrible wrinkle in it. [laughter]

LASKEY

But the object is, no wrinkles.

WILSON

Anyway, teaching architecture from the classic point of view, and with a great deal of respect for historical tradition—the big difference between the beaux-arts system and the Bauhaus system—they didn't really call it the Bauhaus system, it was the International school—was that there was less respect for and less attention to the historical architecture. As a matter of fact, history was just a course that was thrown in so that when you took your exam you could pass it.

LASKEY

When you were at Berkeley, you had ongoing classes in architectural history.

WILSON

Oh, yes.

LASKEY

As part of the—?

WILSON

It's not that I ever became an expert in it, but I learned a lot more about it than, say, my colleagues did. The ones who I finally graduated with, who had never had the beaux-arts, they never had the advantage of that kind of teaching. All the method of grading the drawings and the schools all derive from École des Beaux-Arts in France.

LASKEY

When you went into architecture school, did you understand that's what you were going to be getting into? What was your perception of an architect? What was your perception of yourself as an architect?

WILSON

Oh, well, the perception that I had when I went into college was that architecture was a social art. I didn't think of it—it was social and political. It had social and political meaning for me, perhaps in a way that it didn't for other students. Because I looked at it as a means of solving the great housing crisis and finding ways to build good, low-cost housing. I was going to solve a lot of social ills. So much for that nonsense, [laughter] I didn't solve anything.

LASKEY

But it was a time, I think, when public housing reform and reform in housing was very much a part of what was happening in architecture. Did you have any particular heroes in that line?

WILSON

Well, yes. I guess that Louis [I.] Kahn was a hero of mine. Louis Kahn I think is probably one of the finest architects who ever was on earth. And of course we were all crazy about Frank Lloyd Wright because he was the most original, creative American architect who had come along. But there was a grand tradition in the United States—Henry H. Richardson, Louis Sullivan, Frank Lloyd Wright, and the Chicago school of architecture, which had a tremendous influence on all of us, too. But I felt that architecture was my means of solving a lot of social ills, and this was going to be the way in which I expressed and fulfilled my aspirations.

LASKEY

Were you encouraged in that?

WILSON

But I never really did that. I had a terrible experience when I got out of school, which I never told you about it, which I will tell you. It didn't make a total cynic out of me but helped it a lot. That was much later, after I graduated. That was the time when I discovered Marxism and—not that I discovered it, because it had already been discovered by a few other people before I came along.

When I was trying to apply my view of the world to what I wanted to do, that's how I did it—through this work. Many other people were doing it other ways.

LASKEY

How did you discover Marxism?

WILSON

Well, my father [William Gussin] an agnostic, radical syndicalist. I think I told you about that at some point. He had some connections to the Wobblies [Industrial Workers of the World]. Anarcho-syndicalist. That's what it was, but he was flip-flopping a lot, too. Wobbling.

LASKEY

A true Wobbly!

WILSON

That was also part of the whole immigrant ideology, certain things that they were bringing in from their youth. Many of the young Germans who were over here—that also was a time, you know, when a lot of the refugees from Germany were here. [Walter] Gropius was an immigrant, as you know. He started to teach at Harvard [University]. I think it was '38. One of those years is when they tore down the Bauhaus and burned it down or whatever they did to it.

LASKEY

Yeah, I'll check that. It was sometime between '34 and '38. Well, it's very interesting to hear you put your time in school in the context of the time itself, because '38 was almost a pivotal kind of year or time in this country. With the Depression still on, it seems to be reasonable that you would be thinking about public housing or—

WILSON

Whenever I had some kind of an opportunity, I usually was working on large planning projects for housing the poor. Oh, the big exponent of housing the poor was Le Corbusier. I look at Le Corbusier much differently now than I used to. At that time, he was influenced by the City of Light [Ebenezer Howard]. Oh, there was the garden city movement from England. He had this whole garden city socialist little enclave of the factories and beautiful little houses with gardens in between. When I look back on it, it sort of has this little feudal quality to it.

LASKEY

That's where Robert [E.] Alexander, who you worked with, later came up with the idea of Baldwin Park Village.

WILSON

Baldwin Hills.

LASKEY

Even Park La Brea came out of this garden city concept.

WILSON

Well, these were the big, old, socialist thinkers who affected my thinking, too, at that time. And then it fit in with some of the people I was meeting up in Berkeley. The entire Physics Department was socialist. [J.] Robert Oppenheimer was there.

LASKEY

At the same time you were there?

WILSON

Oh, yes. Philip—oh, gosh, you see him on TV all the time because he was a friend of Oppenheimer's. My memory for names is not very good today—or ever. I got to know a guy named Stanley Moore who was in the philosophy department with my husband [Michael Wilson], and they were all—all these people were very attracted to Marxist thinking. Phil Morrison, who was the professor at Yale [University]—you've probably heard that name somewhere.

LASKEY

No, that's a name I don't know.

WILSON

He was a professor at one of the Ivy League colleges. After he left Berkeley, he and Oppenheimer worked together in Berkeley in the atom-smashing lab. Later, he worked at Los Alamos [National Laboratory], with Oppenheimer also, and they split with [Edward] Teller and that group. Well, of course, that came much later, but when the atom bomb was actually developed and they were working—and [Albert] Einstein—so there were a lot of very heady people. I don't mean that I knew Einstein, but I had met Oppenheimer, and I knew Phil Morrison. Many of them I had met through Mike. The university was an absolute ferment of intellectual activity. There were demonstrations. There were antiwar demonstrations, anti-ROTC demonstrations.

LASKEY

In the thirties?

WILSON

Yeah, the late thirties. It was Berkeley. Sather Gate. Before Sather Gate was incorporated into the campus, there used to be demonstrations. There was a lot of ferment within the Left, too. The Left was all splintered off into different groups, but you probably know more about that than I do. Once you get into the architecture department, you have to be totally absorbed in it or you're going to flunk out. When I was falling in love—in and out of love, or one thing and another—I often did get incompletes. To be an architect, you have to be totally dedicated to the work—morning, noon, and night—because the work is so demanding.

LASKEY

That was a question I had to ask you. My understanding is that architecture school is an incredible discipline.

WILSON

Oh, yes. It was an endurance contest.

LASKEY

The demands that they make—you were also involved in politics.

WILSON

I was.

LASKEY

You were also involved in a relationship with Michael. How did you hold it all together?

WILSON

I don't know. [laughter] I look back on it and say—I don't know. I guess I'm a very high-energy person. I don't know how I managed to do it, but I did it. It was just like there wasn't enough time in the day to do all the things that you had to do.

LASKEY

Right. That would be just doing the work in architecture school, when in addition to being involved—

WILSON

One wonderful thing about the School of Architecture I have enormous affection for in that period of my life in architecture school—I'm not talking about the other things, although I have affection for that, too, but—there was a very nice attitude toward the students helping each other that was totally lost when it left the beaux-arts system and went into the international school system of teaching. There was the atelier concept. In the atelier, there's the older architects or, in this case, it was the upper-classmen who took under their wings the freshmen and sophomores. And they helped—there was a symbiotic relationship there. So the upper-classmen who were doing these very, very complex projects of—I never got that far at Berkeley. Of course, that's because I was only there three years. It was a five-year course. The last two years—actually, I went two and a half years to USC [University of Southern California]. But the first three years that I was there you had a mentor, or several mentors, in the upper classes who doing what they called esquisse—the esquisse period was when the problem was due and you were trying to finish it. In order to get it finished, you got the undergraduate young people to come in and help you finish your project. You were what they called en charette. A charette is a wagon. The reason being in France, when the young people had a deadline and the students were finishing up their projects, a horse-drawn wagon would go around called a charette, a little one, and you would put your project on it at the very last minute. Everybody waited until the last minute to get it

done, of course. So we picked up that concept here and used the same word, charette. So when you're en charette, it means that you're in the last stages of finishing a project. And the lights were burning in the labs and ateliers until four o'clock in the morning, with the younger kids there—I was one of the younger kids—helping our elders, the upper-classmen.

LASKEY

Weren't they also timed, frequently? The charettes? Given a short period of time?

WILSON

Well, that's an esquisse. With an esquisse, you're given—we did the same thing on the esquisses, too. Esquisse, which means a sketch. You were given, say, eight hours to complete the design and the execution of a design up to a certain point. Then you were finished. We were also called in, too, to work on it. Later, they started calling the younger kids "niggers," which I resented profoundly, but that came in later in Berkeley.

LASKEY

I'm rather surprised, though, that that came in at Berkeley.

WILSON

Yeah.

LASKEY

At that time, UCLA, I think, was considered almost a more radical school than Berkeley. Is that your remembrance?

WILSON

Oh, no. Oh, you mean politically?

LASKEY

Yeah. That there was—

WILSON

No, there was always more political ferment in Berkeley, but there was some at UCLA. There was no architecture school at UCLA or I would have gone to it. Because I think I told you, I started at UCLA as an art major.

LASKEY

Did any of the university people try to discourage you from going into architecture?

WILSON

I'm finding that hard to answer, because if they did try to discourage me it was in subtle ways. Like being a little bit harder on me than they might have been if I was a young man. But nobody ever said to me, "What the hell do you think you're doing trying to be an architect?"

LASKEY

So it wasn't overt, if it was at all. How about your instructors?

WILSON

Some of the instructors were very imperious in their attitude, and I think they were more male chauvinist than I was even aware at that time. But there weren't that many women who were aware of the liberation movement at that time. There were a lot of things that we accepted as women or as girls—females.

LASKEY

I don't think that, at that time, there was essentially a liberation movement.

WILSON

No, the only liberation movement was within the Left, and we didn't call it women's liberation. We called it the "woman question." The "woman question" is what we discussed in the Left. We were discussing it for a long time before anybody else was discussing it, the same issues that the women libbers were discussing much later, many, many years later. We were saying that women were the slaves of men, they were slaves to the kitchen, slaves to the children and their bosses. Everybody dominated—nobody could be lower than a woman. We were discussing this when nobody else was talking about it. So there were a lot of subtle things that had happened, even to someone like myself, in school. When you asked that question, I was stumped for a minute because I couldn't ever remember anybody saying to me, "What the hell do you think you're doing trying to be architect?" They never said that. But in school they either were patronizing or they were very rigid with you, also dependent upon your sexuality. I think, if you were a good-looking girl, they treated you differently than if you were an unattractive girl. An attractive girl got much more attention, but they also treated you like a pet of the class, too. I was sort of in between, neither beautiful nor ugly. [laughter]

LASKEY

Well, I think you were also fighting a trend in that there was almost a concerted national effort to keep women out of the workplace at this time. Again, late Depression, jobs were still scarce. Did you feel any pressure? Again, you were very young. We're talking about a very young—

WILSON

Yeah, you see, I was not as aware of that, because I used to work every summer for an architect. I mean, I wasn't fiddling around sitting around on the beach or something. After I got to Berkeley, I worked every summer, not when I was at UCLA. Then I would come back home for the summer. I would go work with some local architect, but I never was paid for what I did. Well, once in a while I was paid, not very often. If I did, I was paid a pittance.

LASKEY

I think that's the nature of the thing, an intern.

WILSON

So I was not aware of being—I was not aware, as I recall, except through reading the news, that women had a problem in the workforce, being underpaid or not. My mother was a businesswoman and a very good one. I just knew that eventually that I would be a part of the workforce. I just knew that I was going to be an architect and probably a successful one. I thought right from the beginning that I was going to be good. [laughter]

LASKEY

That's wonderful.

WILSON

Oh, I did show some capability, and I was a pretty good artist. I showed some capability. There were areas of weakness which I guess I never quite recovered from. Like I never have had a very good concept of mechanical engineering, about heating systems, and some of the mechanical problems of houses. I don't mean of their structure, but—

LASKEY

The engineering.

WILSON

I had a resistance to that. Plumbing problems—

LASKEY

Well, Frank Lloyd Wright had those problems, too.

WILSON

I just get my consultants to resolve my problems. [laughter]

LASKEY

Good idea. Well, for my own curiosity, I'll go back to something you said at the beginning. The idea of working for low-cost housing, major housing programs for the poor. Weren't you encouraged in any way through the university? Was this sort of consciousness part of the consciousness of the department, or do you remember?

WILSON

No, but I was not the only one in my classes. I didn't have an original idea that I was going to go out and cure the world by bringing socialism single-handed to architecture. There were other young men, young boys in the school, that felt the same way I did. As a matter of fact, I remember later, when I was at a design conference, listening to a very, very fine architect named Robert Marquis. He has an office in San Francisco, Marquis and Associates. He still has it. I think he's maybe just a few years older than I am, but he still functions. He was giving a lecture at Cal Poly [California Polytechnic State University], when I was down at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo. I was teaching there, too. He said that he was a Ferrari-driving socialist when somebody asked him what his politics were. I didn't have a Ferrari or anything like that, but I suppose that the image of myself as an architect was that I would be successful and probably

would be fairly successful financially, although that was not one of my goals. But I felt that I would always be comfortable financially, and that was built out of absolutely nothing. That is, I haven't the foggiest idea of why I felt that way, but I did. But at the same time, I would be this magnanimous person making the world better for everybody else.

LASKEY

I'm trying to remember and I should know, but hadn't [Ayn Rand's] *Fountainhead* come out yet or was this a—?

WILSON

The Fountainhead came out while I was at school.

LASKEY

Did this influence your perceptions of yourself at all?

WILSON

I hated the book even when I was a kid. I know that everybody else was just so thrilled with it. As a matter of fact, those of us in architecture who were realistic about it and who had a very down-to-earth attitude toward architecture as a means of shelter, not just an art form—we all were interested in aesthetics, obviously, and that's pounded into your head, but we all felt that architecture had a point of view which is to fulfill a basic human need, human need being shelter. So the idea of a guy, because he doesn't like the design or the fact they've changed his design, going out in the middle of the night and blowing up this low-cost housing thing because he didn't like what they had done to his design was absolutely abominable to us. Even if the building isn't beautiful, at least it's housing some poor people. So this kind of elitism was extremely offensive to some of us. Maybe Ayn Rand thought she was reflecting Frank Lloyd Wright, but I don't know what his attitude was toward anything. He probably thought she was a jerk. She is a very reactionary woman—Ayn Rand—very conservative politically.

LASKEY

A friend of somebody once described her: she not only doesn't help her brother when he's down, she kicks him! I just loved that as a definition of Ayn Rand.

WILSON

Even her romantic view of sexual relations was so ridiculous. He's biting her tongue and blood was running down her face. All the things that most of us women abhor. Brutality and that kind of thing was—you don't remember that? Well, all of us women were very offended by the sexual scenes because they were like rape scenes. So I was doubly offended by the book. Although gosh, you know, it's fascinating. I was totally absorbed. When you sit down you read it line by line, because you're talking about my love—architecture.

LASKEY

Right, and a perception of it that I think has probably permeated the public's perception of architecture.

WILSON

Oh, I think it's been tremendously—it was tremendously influential. The architecture/egoist really came from that book and also from Frank Lloyd Wright, from life itself.

LASKEY

Well, I think possibly that's why he was such an easy target.

WILSON

He was an easy target. But you don't think—he didn't invent it either, because if you go back to Michelangelo, Leonardo—these were guys who gave up their whole lives for their art, for their art and architecture. Bernini was the architect of the Vatican. But this was back in the great master-builder period. These guys were really architects in the largest and most basic sense of being an architect. The architect now is further and further away from the finished project. Then these guys were climbing all over the building, and they were helping to build the great domes and placing the sculpture in place. The wedding of art and architecture was absolutely the total bonding at that time. Their drawings were minimum-like plans and elevations, a few sections. Not like the drawings today. I put out drawings—I mean, for a large house, my drawings can be forty pages of drawings. These great monuments—I don't know how we got off on this subject but—I'm talking about the master builders. You think of those—there were only a few of those that were left by the time I was growing up. Like [Rudolph M.] Schindler. Schindler went out and was climbing all over his buildings, and his drawings were indecipherable from most contractors' point of view. So he had to go out there and be on the job every minute of the day, when a job was under construction. Now the architects are so separated from it that there's—if you're from a big office, somebody in the office will go out there once a week and see what's going on and sign some change orders or answer a few questions and go back to his office. The rest is done by telephone, but you never touch a stick of wood. So there is a real separation, which to me is painful. I don't mean that I should be out there pounding nails. But the way I'd like to be, the way I think an architect should function on a job, is to be on the job every single day and be out there while they're working on it and resolve problems as they come up.

LASKEY

That's very interesting.

WILSON

And really put the building together, you know? And not have something stand between you. The drawings become a barrier if the drawings are too detailed, which the drawings are. They have to be detailed and all, because they have to

get in competitive bids. So you have to get the drawings to absolutely the last detail so contractors know exactly what they're bidding on. They're all bidding on the same thing. Are you following me on this?

LASKEY

Oh, yes.

WILSON

I'm getting a little technical.

LASKEY

No, no. I think that's a fascinating point, and as firms get bigger and bigger, which of course is happening, then they're getting further and further removed from the product that they're designing.

WILSON

Oh, yes. Right. Some of the architects are going back to that. They're getting into what they call "design-build." Well, they have been into design-build for a long time. I'd say from all the architects in California, about 40 or 50 percent of them are one-man offices or two-man offices. An architect and a secretary or an architect and a draftsman. They are more involved in construction, say, than the big offices. As soon as you get to more than four or five people—ten people—in your office, then you start to lose contact with the entire process.

LASKEY

When you're involved in the process, do you keep a very close eye on it, do you go out to the site regularly?

WILSON

Yes, but from time to time, especially in residential work, your client will fire you off of the construction part of it. They have the right to do that, but there are reasons for that, too. I'm talking negatively. Positively, most of the buildings I've done I've been out on the job. I always go out there about three times as much as I have to or I'm paid to go out there because I'm so interested in the building process. The only thing that's really fun is the designing of the building and then seeing it realized. That's what the real fun is. In between, there's a lot of drawing that's done. In its own way, it's fun to resolve all the problems, but the most intense pleasure is the pleasure of designing it and the pleasure of seeing it go up according to your design. That really is a tremendous pleasure. It's the orgasm of the architect to see it built, to see it go up.

1.5. TAPE NUMBER: III, Side Two (February 11, 1989)

LASKEY

Okay, you were talking about the relationship of an architect—

WILSON

The architect to the finished product. There are some architects like Frank Lloyd Wright who would not take a project unless he was guaranteed that he would be taken all the way through, because the contracts that you have to deal with, the legal contract that you have with a client, allows the client to terminate the contract at any point. One of the points at which they're probably more likely to terminate you is just when construction starts, which for the architect is just—for me, anyway, it's a very emotional experience to be cut off at that point because that's the point which is the most joyful part of the experience. I don't mean that you don't have problems. Sometimes you get into horrible problems when the job is under construction. Something horrible goes wrong and you're constantly resolving problems. Something goes wrong there. Whether a contractor builds something wrong and he has to tear it out—nevertheless, this is seeing your work come to fruition, and when you cut off an architect at that point—it's like writing a book and never having it go to publication. It's like writing a screenplay and they never make a film out of it. It's like—

LASKEY

Or somebody else gets credit.

WILSON

Or someone else gets credit. That's right. [laughter] Which is even worse.

LASKEY

Something you know something about.

WILSON

Anyway, sometimes on my residential work And that is terribly interesting because you get extremely close—I do, and I think most architects do, but I particularly do—you get very, very close to your clients. Because by the time you've designed a house for them, you know their whole life story. You know their children and you know their relationship with their children. Are they close to the children? Not close to the children? Do they do their own cooking? Does the maid clean up? Are they both professionals? Do they entertain? What side of the bed do they get out of? Who has diarrhea in the middle of the night? The whole thing. Do the husband and the wife have separate bedrooms or do they sleep together? Do they sleep in one big bed or two beds? You know so much about them. The only people who could know any more about them is their psychiatrist. The architect knows when they're designing a house—or at least when I design a house, I know a lot about my clients. You're reflecting. You know about your clients and the way they live. You also know what they aspire for, which is another—it's not always the same thing. Or what they're looking for in a relationship. [Richard] Neutra made a very good remark once. He said that he could guarantee—if he wanted to—a divorce within one year, depending on how he designed a house.

LASKEY

Really.

WILSON

Oh, well, I think he was kidding.

LASKEY

You would think he was.

WILSON

But there is some validity to it. Sometimes when people get a divorce, after living in one of your houses, you do have kind of a personal sense of, "What did I do wrong?" [laughter]

LASKEY

If only I had put the hallway over here!

WILSON

Now, to go back, then, to why sometimes you don't get to do supervision on a residence more than any other kind—that is, no matter how close you are to the people, you get to a certain point and they want their house back. You see what I mean? They want it back from you. You've had this intense personal thing. You've drawn up everything they want, and they're there and you're drawing it up. You go over it. "Do we want to go this way? Do you want your closet there? Do you want to walk into your closet? Where do you keep your medicines?" All that stuff. At some point, they want to get their house back from you. You see, they've given you this, and they want it back again. They're afraid that if you get on the job while the house was going up—for one thing, it's their house. They designed it. They just put their bodies or their spirit into your hand. They just made your hand move around, you see, and draw their house. [laughter] So they're retrieving their souls, and they take the house away from you. They want to be able, then, to develop a similar personal thing with the contractor to make sure that the contractor then starts to reflect their needs. And they can go in and they can make changes. They don't have to deal with you because they can go in and say, "We've changed our mind. We want to put this over there." When you put together a house, it's like a Swiss watch. Everything really has to work. The walls have to come to a corner and meet there someplace.

LASKEY

And stay there!

WILSON

In a literal way and in an aesthetic way and in a spiritual way, too. The house has to go together right. You start to fiddle around with it, move things from place to place, and they just don't work in the same way. See, because what we're concerned with is how you get from one space to another without impinging on other people's privacy. What Neutra said—and it was half a

joke—was you can design a house in such a way that you can guarantee the people will get a divorce. There's no place where somebody can just go away and say, "I want to be alone for a while." You can't go through my room to get to any other room. Sometimes clients act as if they want their house back, and they don't want you to feel that it was your house. They want to take the house back, and I've come to understand that. I was once terribly disappointed about a house that I'd just gone all through this with them. It happened to me recently again. I had forgotten what a painful experience it was. I had a very, very good friend, who is an architect emeritus. He was a retired architect. He was living here with his wife. His wife was quite ill. He had moved here from the Chicago area. You know that wonderful photograph of the bridge in my office, that I had enlarged—super enlargement. He took that photograph for me. He was a wonderful photographer, and he had been a pretty good architect. He showed me some of his work in pictures in Chicago. He had kind of a crush on me, I think. Nothing ever happened between us, but he used to hang around the office a lot because he wanted to have a toe back in architecture. He used to go out and do a photograph of my work sometimes. It was a lot of fun. I was complaining about my clients taking credit for my design, and he said, "Zelma, that's a compliment, when they take credit for your work." Because a residential client, when the house is finished, might have a housewarming. Generally, the architect is not invited, because they do not want to share credit. You know, they want to say, "This is our house, and this is something that we've designed."

LASKEY

This is our house.

WILSON

"It's our house. This is where we wanted everything." You see? And so he said, "You mustn't get your feelings hurt about that. It's a compliment. Because they feel so close to it that they feel it's theirs."

LASKEY

It may be a compliment, but it's still—what you do is design this project so you can see it built, and to have it taken away from you at that point—

WILSON

Well, it's still your house. I have a lot of houses that I've done around here, and I'd go back to them, several of them. About 50 percent of them I did not do the construction and observation on. So. Anyway, you wanted to talk about 1938 again. [laughter]

LASKEY

We're talking about what was going on in 1938, because there was so much going on in your life. Now, politically, you talked about Gropius coming over to the United States, the rise of the Bauhaus. Especially since you were

involved in left-wing political movements, how intensely did you feel what was happening? In Asia, too, for that matter?

WILSON

Well, the big thing at that time was the Spanish Civil War, but of course that was over in '36. That was a little bit earlier than that, maybe it was over in '37, I think. That was a terrible, terrible emotional wrench for many of us, because I had young male friends who went to Spain and part of the American group who became the Abraham Lincoln Brigade.

LASKEY

Oh, you had friends in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade?

WILSON

My husband [Michael Wilson], who was not my husband at that time, had been in Europe in 1937. He went on a European tour. I didn't know him at that time. He almost went to Spain and he never really forgave himself for not going to Spain because he was in Europe at that time. Except that the war was winding down and the Loyalists were losing. There were a lot of executions. He was very, very guilty about that, because he felt that he should have gone anyway. He said he was a coward for not going down there. As I say, the war was almost over at that time. The strange thing that was happening, as I look back on it now, I can hardly believe it was true. And yet it was true. It also was the beginning of the Holocaust. We were not even aware of it in the left. If we were aware of it, we heard of it as something [William Randolph] Hearst was printing and nobody would believe. It was like something you would print in the *National Enquirer*, which [the paper] didn't exist at that time, that the Jews were being slaughtered.

LASKEY

Right, but that type of journalism.

WILSON

Or what would be on the twenty-seventh page, or the third section of the newspapers: "It is reported that Hitler is putting all Jews into concentration camps. Some Jews, who have escaped, reported that many Jews were being put to death or in slave work camps." Nobody believed it. We didn't believe it either, we in the left! We should have believed. Nobody could believe that this was happening. It just seemed so ridiculous and atrocious. It was unbelievable. What can I say? It was incomprehensible that this was happening, so nobody did anything about it. I don't remember any activity in which I was involved, in which I ever made a public protest about the Holocaust. I look back at this now and I can't believe it—that we were all so blind and didn't really believe that it was happening. For that matter, we didn't believe it later when Stalin was also carrying on with his mass murders. None of us believed that.

LASKEY

So the rise of fascism—

WILSON

The rise of fascism we were very aware of.

LASKEY

But you didn't equate the rise of fascism with the atrocities?

WILSON

I didn't. There may have been some people in the left who were aware of it. But, you know, there was a honeymoon period between Germany and Russia with the anti-aggression—you were too young, but maybe remember historically reading about it, when Stalin and Hitler made the [Nazi-Soviet] Nonaggression Pact because the western Europeans, especially the British, were trying to push Hitler in the direction of Russia, hoping to get Russia and Germany into a fight where they would just fight with each other and they could stay out of it. Then Hitler wouldn't turn his interest toward the west. So Stalin saw that coming and he made this Nonaggression Pact with Hitler, which didn't hold up, as you know. Historically, Hitler went into Russia anyway. But it was during this period. And all the information that we were getting—the press was either suppressing it or they didn't know about it. The only information that we were getting, save from the left press—if they knew about it, they weren't telling us. To this day, now that I'm a somewhat disenchanted leftist—not totally—I still have the ideals—but I don't trust in human beings as much, or people who get into power as much. I see where power corrupts and corrupts absolutely. I believe that.

LASKEY

It seems to be pointed out again and again.

WILSON

I cannot believe that we were so naive. Anyway, this is just a little amusing now.

LASKEY

At this point then—this is when you met Michael?

WILSON

Yes. Michael had been to Europe, and he came back. Then he had gone up to—he was getting his master's degree, but he also had gone up to Alaska. I think I talked to you about that, didn't I?

LASKEY

We haven't talked about Michael at all.

WILSON

Oh, I see. Or how I met him or anything of that stuff?

LASKEY

No.

WILSON

Well, as you know, I separated from my first husband. I got married rather precipitously. I married the first guy that seemed to fall in love with me. But he was a very, very nice person. I think I told you, he later became city councilman. Howard Finn. He was extremely bright. As a matter of fact, he was brilliant. I was taking mathematics at UCLA in preparation for transferring up to Berkeley, because I didn't have to take mathematics to be an art major.

LASKEY

No. [laughter] Or you would be one of the few who did.

WILSON

He was in my math class, because he was planning to be a biochemist. When I got up to Berkeley and got active in the Left—well, politically, he was not as left as I was. He was not unsympathetic either or I guess we wouldn't have fallen in love. But I just grew away from him because I became very active in the left wing, and then there were all these men up there who were trying to get into the sack. That sort of made me feel that I was not necessarily stuck with one fellow.

LASKEY

And you were also only eighteen, nineteen.

WILSON

That's right. There were many male chauvinists in the Left, and not only male chauvinists but men who were at the height of their sexuality and were very interested in the young left girls. There was a lot of hanky-panky. So I thought that I just couldn't be a married woman and carry on like that. I wanted to be free. So that's when I asked my husband for a divorce, and also I became pregnant at the same time with him. My mother helped me get an abortion.

LASKEY

I repeat, how did you hold it all together? How did you survive all this?

WILSON

You mean trying to be in architecture, being in love—?

LASKEY

Being divorced. Having an abortion.

WILSON

And being a girl-about-campus? Not too well, probably. Actually, the only time I started to get straight As in all my classes was after I transferred to USC. By that time, I was married, and I had put things into perspective. I was terribly scattered when I was up at Berkeley.

LASKEY

Yeah, well, you were a little bit older by the time you got down to USC, too. So in the midst of all this trauma and emotional upheaval, you meet Michael.

WILSON

Yes. I had separated from my husband. He was terribly crushed by this, and he followed me around campus all the time. He married eventually. After about six months, he found a young woman who was actually older than he and started to live with her. His problem was resolved. I was going around with a lot of different guys at that time and being a little bit promiscuous. But then I met Mike. Mike was Mr. Perfect. Mr. Golden Boy. [laughter] He was everything that I could possibly aspire to in my entire life. Just to have him look at me was a great honor. I had gone to class. I was in the ASA, American Student Association, or something, which was kind of a left front group. He was teaching a class in Marxism. It was not a part of his schoolwork. He was just teaching, but he was a big shot on campus. He was a graduate student at this time, in the Philosophy Department, but he had been Phi Beta Kappa. He was on the track team, and he was the editor of the literary magazine on campus. He was writing for it. He had about ten short stories published, not just there but in *Esquire* and a story magazine. When he went to France—I mean, when he went to Europe the first time in 1937, I think for a while he was working for *Look* magazine. I don't know if you remember the existence of it.

LASKEY

Oh, yes. Yes. I grew up with *Look* magazine.

WILSON

So anyway, here comes this guy. I saw him as a teacher in a class. He was absolutely incredible. It was just an explosive experience for me to see a guy like this. He was wearing blue jeans, which wasn't at all big at the time, and had on a blue shirt. I thought he was some sort of a working-class guy. Here he is sitting there, slouching in his chair, and he's smoking a cigarette and great clouds of smoke were coming out him. Here's this guy with this very black hair and these blue eyes that I could see even from the back of the room. He was a positively gorgeous-looking guy, and all these wonderful ideas were coming out of him. He was explaining the ILWU, the International Longshoremen's [and Warehousemen's] Union. He was talking about Marxism and the labor movement, or something like that. This was an invitational thing. The student body president was there, and the student council members were there. It was really quite an amazing thing that the left had so much influence on the campus at that time, they could get all those people to come. I was going around with one of the campus big shots at that time—it was between my marriages—and he took me to this lecture. There's a working-class hero down there, sort of a poetic, articulate working-class hero down there, an intellectual, explaining to us what the world was really all about. Well, anyway, that's the first time I ever saw Mike. Then, I didn't see him again for about six months. The next time I saw him, it was the beginning of the school year. It was in the fall. I was sitting

on the lawn outside of Boalt Hall. You probably don't know the campus, do you? A little bit?

LASKEY

A little bit.

WILSON

It's changed a lot. It was very different at that time. It was a much smaller university at that time. I was sitting on the lawn with several friends. He and another guy came walking by. They had just come back from Alaska. He and his friend Julian Hicks, who really was a working-class intellectual. My husband, it turned out, came from a very middle-class family. They had been working for the ILWU, for Harry Bridges, and had gone up to Alaska. My husband had been a tallyman and Julian was—I don't know what he was. He was a fisherman or something, pulling in the nets, and it was all very romantic. They came over and sat with us. Then it was time for lunch so somebody said, "Let's go to lunch." This other guy that I had been sitting with had to do something so he went off someplace. So I went ahead and had lunch with Julian and Michael. They hardly said a word to me. I was just this sophomore in college, see.

LASKEY

And a woman.

WILSON

I was just a woman, and they just talked to each other about their experiences in Alaska. I had a wonderful time and had beer—we went to Donovan's. Donovan's was a very "in" place for the campus drinkers to go to.

LASKEY

Where was this?

WILSON

What the hell's the name of that road? It's the road that goes right straight into the campus. It's the main road. It was between Berkeley—it was just at the mile limit. Do you remember? There was a mile limit where they would not serve alcoholic beverages. It was just beyond that.

LASKEY

It wasn't Telegraph [Avenue], was it?

WILSON

Maybe it was Telegraph. It was called Donovan's. They made marvelous corned beef sandwiches, although it was not a Jewish delicatessen. But they made wonderful big sandwiches with this big homemade bread. They're well-known for that. Donovan was the bartender. So anyway, we had drinks there, and they only talked to each other. They didn't say anything to me at all. [laughter] They didn't know who I was, what department I was in—they just

wanted a girl there, and preferably a good-looking girl that they didn't have to talk to.

LASKEY

Who would be quiet and listen.

WILSON

Yes, and shut up, like women were supposed to. [laughter] I really didn't know which one of these guys—because both were equally incredible. I was absolutely stunned to be in their company. They're both very handsome and very bright and very funny. They were making me laugh a lot. I think they worked it out between them, because Julian, who also was a fabulous guy—I had further experiences with Julian, but I won't go into that right now. But apparently it was Michael who got me, so to speak. They had had some agreement. Michael asked me if I'd like to go to the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union dance in San Francisco. So he came to pick me up. Here I was thinking about these working-class heroes that were so thrilling for me, and he came to pick me up in a convertible about a half a block long! It was his father's! [laughter] It was a white Buick convertible! Then he comes in, and he's all dressed up! It was so fun! He was very extraordinary. To see him looking like that. It was so different from what I had anticipated.

LASKEY

What was the Longshoremen's dance like?

WILSON

The longshoremen was a very complicated organization. They had their goons, and they had their—it was a very, very powerful union at that time. They used to have their May Day parades. There would be tens of thousands of them out there near the waterfront, in San Francisco. It was huge. It was a very important waterfront. I don't know whether commercially it is still as important as it used to be. I think it has gotten more touristy.

LASKEY

I think it has probably less—Los Angeles has probably become more important, I think.

WILSON

I see. At that time, though, it was a totally commercial thing.

LASKEY

Did you ever meet Harry Bridges?

WILSON

Oh, yes. He came to Paris to visit us when we were staying there. He visited us in Paris. Simone Signoret was there one night. He and Simone, who was an absolutely brilliant, articulate woman, with a great sense of humor, and very, very sophisticated—she and Harry got into a marvelous argument, because he

was on his way to the Soviet Union to confer with some of the labor leaders there, and she started to attack the Soviet Union because she had been there. This was a long time ago.

LASKEY

I was going to say, this would have been when? In the early sixties, perhaps.

WILSON

Let's see, this was the early—well, no. It was the late sixties. She and Yves Montand, her husband, who was also friendly—we all were friends. They had been there together, and they were very disappointed in the Soviet Union at that time. Anyway, she and Harry got into a marvelous argument, but they were obviously attracted to each other, so it was kind of fun to watch them.

LASKEY

How exciting.

WILSON

And then there were other times—Harry Bridges was at this party that Mike and I went to. What was a longshoremen party like? It seems to me there must have been a thousand people there. The dance floor was full. It was full of lots of workers and lots of pie cards, they used to call them, people who were the big shots in the union. Plus the goons, you know, the guys who were bodyguards to—because these guys really were in danger a lot of the time. There's no question about it that they had their bodyguards and their people around them.

LASKEY

Oh, the ranking officials of the union?

WILSON

Of the union. They had bodyguards, because they were subject to being assassinated or beat up all the time. So they had their—I'm not trying to excuse them, but I think some of them were—and they might have had their mafia connections. I really didn't know. I was too naive to know anything about it at that time. So I went there, and there was a tremendous amount of drinking. I think almost everybody I saw was an alcoholic, [laughter] Mike was definitely an alcoholic, even at that time when he was so young. He was a very heavy drinker.

LASKEY

I was going to say, he was only a graduate student.

WILSON

He was a graduate student, but I would say that his leisure hours when he was—I don't mean when he was studying or teaching or whatever he was doing. He was a teaching assistant in the Philosophy Department, where he was getting his master's degree. But I would say all of our leisure time that we spent together, we were always going to some place where he was drinking. But I

never saw him really drunk. Mike was not that kind of a drinker. He was not a lost-weekend drinker. He was a steady drinker. He just kind of sipped on a drink, and I would say he had a sort of a buzz on most of the time. When he was writing and working, he drank less. So anyway, it was just a big, rowdy party. I don't mean people were beating each other up or anything. It was just like any normal party that you'd go to for any organization. If it were the Odd Fellows, they'd be having a convention. They'd be having their dances. There was a lot of extracurricular flirting going on. There were speeches. Harry Bridges made a speech, and some of the other pie cards made a speech. Anyway, that was my first experience with Mike. We were stopped by the police on the way home. Mike had to get out and walk a straight line. They were not as smart about things as they are now, finding out whether or not you had too much alcohol in your blood. Mike was very disciplined about it. He walked a straight line, so they let us go. After that, we started to date rather regularly. We became lovers. At that time, I had a roommate. Mike stayed overnight one night. So we were turned over to the Dean of Women.

LASKEY

This was university housing?

WILSON

Well, no. We just had an apartment. It wasn't university housing.

LASKEY

And the Dean of Women still had some sort of control over your personal life?

WILSON

Oh, yeah. Of the morality of the women. Of the girls.

LASKEY

Really? Really? Times have changed, haven't they?

WILSON

Yes. Well, she had not just the—I guess she was to control the morality of the boys too. Maybe the boys went to the dean of men. I don't know. I don't even think they have a dean of women anymore or dean of men. It sounds so archaic to me now that I say it. I don't think they have that anymore, it doesn't make sense. They have deans of departments or if it's a professional school. The School of Dentistry, or the dean of the school of something or other, but I don't think they have a dean of men and women. Well, anyway, I was turned in by the landlord. First they asked us to move, then we were turned into the Dean. I told the Dean that, "Yes, he did stay overnight." She was quite wonderful about it. She said, "Well, the people that you're living with—I don't know whether you know this or not. Your landlord is a former sheriff of Berkeley. He feels that he has some responsibility for the morals of the students who live in his place. He wants people of high moral character and girls that do not have boys stay over."

LASKEY

So that was it for you?

WILSON

Yeah. That was it for me in that apartment. [laughter] Anyway, so the dean said something like, "If you can't be good, be careful." She was pretty good about it. She didn't give me a lecture about morality. She thought it was kind of dumb for him to have turned us in.

LASKEY

Amazing.

WILSON

Anyway, so as far as the course of our love affair, well, it went roughly.

LASKEY

Did it really?

WILSON

Sometimes we were wonderful lovers and friends, and sometimes I thought he was very male chauvinist. I didn't want to—and I would get mad at him if he didn't treat me—I would say that Mike had a great education in the women's place in society. By the time he wrote *Salt of the Earth*, he was a great champion of women's rights. Nobody could have written *Salt of the Earth* who didn't have enormous sensitivity to women and the problems that they had. So I would say that I had quite an influence on him in that direction, but not just me. There were other women amongst our friends that also talked to him about women's issues. And he did his own reading. I'd say that he was very, very advanced compared to most [males], but even he was a male chauvinist in his own way.

LASKEY

Well, coming out of the period that we are talking about, the late thirties, again, there hadn't been for a long time a concerted effort to educate people about the woman's place and you were stuck with all the cliches and all the bugaboos.

WILSON

That's right. The fact that I had chosen a traditionally male profession, already Mike was impressed with that. We shared ideology, although he was much more sophisticated than I by far, as far as ideology was concerned.

LASKEY

There were obviously a couple of gaps in his ideology, too.

WILSON

Oh, yes. All of us had the same misinformation, too, from what was given to us by our international connections. [laughter] We were all very romantic and idealistic. Being a friend to our fellow man, and we were helping the needy and the poor and the blacks—well, we called them Negroes at the time. It's very

interesting. They are going back to calling themselves African-Americans?
This is what Jesse Jackson wants to be called. It's very interesting, isn't it?

LASKEY

It is.

WILSON

It isn't that I was on his back a lot—either when we were lovers or when we were married—about being a male chauvinist. But I would point out to him when I thought he was being a male chauvinist. We were young and married. He was trying to write a book, and I had gone into USC. That was when we moved to L.A. He helped with the dishes, and he did some of the shopping. There was a certain equality in the household, probably a lot more than a lot of other men.

LASKEY

But often it's a matter of something almost intangible—an attitude that comes through. Before you said "patronizing." I think patronizing is sometimes a good word.

WILSON

Yes, it was patronizing. The household was organized around Mike. I was being an architect, but the most important person in the household was my husband. He was the man of the house. But you see, you can't take a guy who grew up in a chauvinistic atmosphere, whose father [Frank Wilson] was a male chauvinist, extremely chauvinistic. His father was a worse alcoholic than anybody and a very successful man. Alcoholism doesn't keep you from being a success, unless it's taken over your life. It didn't really take over Mike's life. Mike could never have been the kind of writer he was, or the disciplined writer that he was, and have an alcoholic brain. My sister said once, "He's a man with sixteen cylinders who's running on eight or ten."

LASKEY

His father also had a drinking problem?

WILSON

Alcohol killed him. He was an Irishman. A big, robust, jovial—he wasn't all that jovial, but he seemed to be on the outside. An Irishman, totally uneducated, but extremely intelligent. Probably, if he had been an educated man, he would have been somebody. He would have been on Wall Street. But anyway, I was very, very much in love with Mike. I was terribly in love with him. He was encouraged by my brother-in-law, Paul Jarrico, to come down to L.A. and try his hand at screenwriting, because he really wanted to make a good living there.

1.6. TAPE NUMBER: IV, Side One (February 11, 1989)

LASKEY:

Let's pick up and continue where we were. You had mentioned Paul Jarrico.

WILSON:

Yes, Paul and Sylvia [Gussin] were living together in Berkeley. They had also left UCLA and gone up to Berkeley. But I went up before they did. Paul and Sylvia came up later, my sister Sylvia, and got an apartment and were living there. They met Mike [Michael Wilson], and Mike and Paul immediately hit it off.

LASKEY:

Was Paul in school? Were Paul and/or Sylvia also going to [University of California] Berkeley or had they just moved up there?

WILSON:

I think they were getting some graduate work done up there.

LASKEY:

Paul was a writer, right?

WILSON:

Yes, Paul was a writer at that time. Well, I don't know what he got his—you know, I think he finished at USC [University of Southern California] also. He might have finished in their film school, I'm not sure. Anyway, that's not important. I think he was an English major, or something. My sister was in the Psychology Department. I had only recently been starting to go with Michael and Michael had had ten short stories published. I think he already had shown remarkable success out of the—he only wrote about fifteen short stories in his lifetime, but out of those fifteen or twenty about 75 percent were published. He had much more success than most people had who have stuff sent to magazines. He was in an O. Henry collection, and he was in the "Best Short Stories of 1954," something like that. He got an O. Henry award for one of his short stories. For prose writing—he had many short stories published, because he wrote two novels that were not published. Anyway, at that time, Michael's father, Frank Wilson, told him, "Start being a man and stop asking us for money. We're not going to support you anymore. You're in graduate school." He had become a teaching assistant, and it was helping him. He came to a point where he just felt he had to make some money as a writer, because this was going to be how he could spend his life. So Paul said, "Come on down to L.A." Maybe they had only come up there for a visit. Maybe that was it. I think maybe they had just come up for a visit. They weren't going to school at that time at Berkeley, but they had been to Berkeley. They had come up to visit and see friends and see me. So Mike made a visit down to L.A. He came down to L.A., and Paul introduced him to a few agents. He hadn't written any screenplays, but he had his short stories that he could show as examples of his

writing ability. He got a job working on—I think the first thing that he started to work on was *It's a Wonderful Life*. Did I tell you that?

LASKEY:

No. He worked on the screenplay for *It's a Wonderful Life*?

WILSON:

Oh, yes. There were about seven screenplays of *It's a Wonderful Life*. He worked on one of the final screenplays. Frank Capra went through all these screenplays and picked out the scenes that he liked and kind of patched it together. When the final credits were developed—they had a heck of a time on the credits on that, but Mike did not ask for arbitration. I don't understand why except that he was very young at that time. He was in his mid-twenties. It didn't occur to him to be a part of the arbitration. When he saw the picture, he couldn't believe how it was so much like his final screenplay. Isn't that funny? So Mike got what's called an "Academy [of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences] Credit." You know about the Academy and their Academy Credits? I don't know whether they still have them or not.

LASKEY:

They don't have them anymore. I don't know exactly when they discontinued them, but I know what you are talking about. The certificates—

WILSON:

It was not enough contribution to put him on the screen. He didn't go through arbitration, anyway, but it was enough of a contribution that his name was listed by the academy as being one of the writers of *It's a Wonderful Life*

LASKEY:

I never knew that.

WILSON:

He never talked about that very much, because he didn't think it was a very good picture. Little did he know it was going to become one of the great classics of all time. He thought that it was such a sentimentalized Frank Capra-ish view of the world that it was not his view of the world, you see. [laughter]

LASKEY:

Well, Frank Capra apparently didn't think much was ever going to happen with it either, because he never renewed the copyright on it. So it is in public domain.

WILSON:

Is it really? Isn't that extraordinary.

LASKEY:

Yes, one of those amazing things that just fell through the cracks.

WILSON:

I see where they've made some sort of a copy of *Friendly Persuasion*, an up-to-date version of it. I was so shocked to see it one night on television, I couldn't

tell you. So maybe it's in the public domain, too. I have no idea how they were able to do it. It was taken from the stories of Jessamyn West. Well, anyway. So then he worked—do you want me to talk about Mike for a while now? About how he got started in films? I don't mind talking about him if that's what you want to talk about.

LASKEY:

Well, as it relates to you.

WILSON:

Well, I hadn't come down to L.A. then. I was still in Berkeley then. But I followed him down there shortly. I think he started—?

LASKEY:

What was your relationship?

WILSON:

Well, I came down. We visited each other. We visited each other and had one week or two that we spent in Carmel. Then finally, I was the one who decided that I wanted to come down and move in with him. He was not opposed to that.

LASKEY:

This meant giving up graduate school? This meant giving up architecture school, then? Right?

WILSON:

Giving up architecture school in Berkeley. That's when I transferred to USC. We got an apartment where the Roosevelt Hotel is now.

LASKEY:

According to the oral history ["I Am the Sum of My Actions," interviewed by Joel Gardner, 1975] that Michael did for UCLA a few years ago, he said that you figured it was actually at the bottom of the Hollywood Roosevelt pool.

WILSON:

That's right. [laughter] It is. We got a little house, a cottage. We lived in somebody's guest house in the back of the house. It was on the next street down Selma [Avenue], or one of those streets down there, which is now all owned by the Roosevelt Hotel and built over. That's where we lived. We lived there for, I guess, about two years. Then we moved, and I finished school. No, wait a minute. I didn't finish my studies there, because World War II interjected its head. Boy, did I leap ahead! Yes, that's why it took me two and a half years instead of two years. So I think I went there to USC for about a year and a half. Then Mike started to be more successful financially.

LASKEY:

You left Berkeley about 1940. You moved down to Los Angeles.

WILSON:

Then in 1941 we got married.

LASKEY:

Now, before—now, you hadn't—you were not enrolled at USC at that time.
Were you or weren't you?

WILSON:

No, I think there was a gap there when I was getting married and getting settled in. Then I enrolled at USC. So I was at USC from 1941 to 1943.

LASKEY:

I thought you had gone, maybe a little later, to USC in the late—

WILSON:

Wait a minute now. No, I was still in school in 1941. I went back to USC in '41, and I stayed there until Mike went off to the Marine Corps. Mike went off to fight in World War II.

LASKEY:

Why did he join the marines?

WILSON:

He wanted to be in the most aggressive, dangerous aspect of the war. He wanted that.

LASKEY:

Why?

WILSON:

Because he felt—I am going to conjecture some, because I'm not totally sure about this. Thinking back to the experience I told you about Spain—that he always felt that he should have gone to Spain and didn't go—I think Mike felt that he had something to prove. It's this macho-man thing, the male thing that men have.

LASKEY:

I was going to say, what about you? He left there a young bride.

WILSON:

He didn't get into the service until, what, 1942? It was 1943 when he went overseas. In the first place, we were living together before the war. We started living together as soon as I came down from Berkeley, which is the early forties. So we were together until 1943. We actually were living together for three years or three and a half years before he went into the service.

LASKEY:

Well, how did you feel about his going into the service?

WILSON:

I thought it was absolutely revolting, [laughter] He volunteered. He was not drafted, and he wanted to be in the Marine Corps. He knew he was going to be drafted anyway. I didn't have any children, and he was "draftable." He was "draft age." They were starting to draft married men, and he thought why wait around for them to draft him? Why can't he just pick and choose what he wants to do? So he went into officer's [candidate] school. After all, he was a college

graduate and had his master's degree. He already had experience as a writer. He had been writing all these Hopalong Cassidy movies after he wrote *It's a Wonderful Life*. He also wrote a picture called *The Men in her Life* with Loretta Young.

LASKEY:

According to his oral history, he considers that his first screenplay.

WILSON:

Yes. To tell the truth, I don't know whether he wrote that first or he wrote *It's a Wonderful Life* first. I don't remember. In between, he was writing Hopalong Cassidys. He wrote about six of them. He interjected a lot of so-called subversive ideas.

LASKEY:

That's amazing. I don't think of Hopalong Cassidy as a hotbed—

WILSON:

Nobody did. In all of Mike's films, he was always on the side of the poor people, or the Mexicans. He wrote one called *The Border Patrol* in which the Mexicans were trying to get over the border into the United States. Hopalong Cassidy came down there to work for the immigration service. He got very sympathetic to the poor Mexicans who were trying to get across the border to come into the United States. He was always on the side of the poor farmers against the railroad people. You know the Union Pacific Railroad was coming in, and there was a lot of hanky-panky going on there and taking away people's homesteads to get the railroad through. He was always on the side of the Indians rather than the cowboys, [laughter] Hopalong Cassidy was a real revolutionary-type of fellow. Well, while Mike was writing. I'm exaggerating, but he did the best he could to make him into a decent person who was on the side of the downtrodden, against the powers that be. He didn't write them all. I mean, there must have been dozens and dozens of—I don't know how many Hopalong Cassidys were made, but Mike wrote six of them before he got into the "bigger" time.

LASKEY:

That's amazing. This is when you were married or at least when you were living down here?

WILSON:

Yes. Anyway, that was kind of a fun time, because he and his brother [John Wilson] were living—his brother was a—you know, don't you, that Mike was brought up a Catholic?

LASKEY:

We haven't talked about it on the tape.

WILSON:

I'm going backward again because I forgot to tell you about this. His father [Frank Wilson], who was brought up a Catholic—his mother [Nell Wilson] was a converted Catholic. The idea that he was marrying outside the Church was bad enough, but the fact that he was marrying a Jewish woman was absolutely abhorrent to him. His father did not come to our wedding. His mother did come. It wasn't until I had children that really and truly he started to accept me into the family.

LASKEY:

Really? Now, Michael was not a practicing Catholic?

WILSON:

Oh, no. Mike had left the Church when he left high school, when he was about sixteen. Actually, he started to have very profound questions of ideology and to question his faith when he was a young boy. When he was fourteen, fifteen years old, he started to question Catholicism. He became a real thorn in the side of his parents, especially his father. He was going to parochial schools, and he insisted on going to a normal high school, to just a public school. So he went into public high school and excelled in everything he did, everything. He was the president of the student body. He was the captain of the football team. He was on the track team. And the vice president of the students was a beautiful young girl that was his girlfriend. His parents were crazy about her—I only met her once—and they were supposed to get married. He broke up with her just before he went to Europe. Then she went off to marry Edwin Pauley, of Pauley Stadium—

LASKEY:

Oh.

WILSON:

Pauley was a big oilman in the Democratic Party, part of the Democratic bigwigs, politicians, mafia—extremely wealthy man. She married him. He continued to receive letters from her for years. She wrote a very nice letter to me when he died.

LASKEY:

Oh, that was nice.

WILSON:

A beautiful woman. She could have been a movie actress. She's a gorgeous woman. I wonder if she is still alive? Probably. Who knows? Anyway, the reason I was reminded is that Mike's brother was living with us at the time that he came down—he had left parochial school. They wanted him to go to a Catholic college, and he had refused to go. There was a big fight in the family. So he came down to Los Angeles and moved in with us. Frank, the father, felt that it was my fault that Mike had become a left-winger. When the blacklist started and Mike was called before the [House] Committee [on Un-American

Activities], he came down and said, "Why don't you just go in there and answer their questions?" He said, "If you refuse to testify, it will break your mother's heart." So Mike said, "Well, it's a question of principles. It's a question of integrity. I can't do that. I'm not going to testify. I'm not going to tell them anything. I'm going to write a statement—if they let me read it, fine, which will give you my political point of view. But I'm not going to let them ask me who is a communist and who isn't."

LASKEY:

He's not going to rat on his friends and associates.

WILSON:

No. So his father made this visit down to Los Angeles to tell Mike that he should testify. Mike was absolutely in tears about it. He always felt that he was a disappointment to his father. The fact that he was a screenwriter—he felt that he was a disappointment to his father because his father said, "If you're going to become a writer, go be a real writer. Write books. This is a trashy way to write, to write screenplays." So Mike always felt that what he was doing was second-rate.

LASKEY:

How devastating.

WILSON:

Oh, it was terrible. He always felt that he was second-rate, that he was a disappointment to his father in so many ways. Yet he was rebellious at the same time. He felt that he was just so—when he married me, it was a symbol of—I'm not saying he didn't love me. Marrying me also became a symbolic act for him. He says himself that I was a different culture. I was a very different kind of a person. I had a different kind of upbringing. I was not an uptight, genteel, well-brought up little girl. I don't mean that I was rude or vulgar or ill-mannered. I was just not like the women that he had grown up with, whatever way in which they are different—sorority girls.

LASKEY:

You were not a Midwesterner, either.

WILSON:

So when you asked me the question—"Why did he go into the Marine Corps?"—I'm giving you the long-way-around answer. So I do remember your question, even though it seems that I've made a roundabout statement. What I'm getting at is that I think that he wanted to go into the Marine Corps because he wanted to be in the most dangerous part of the war. He wanted to prove something to himself about whether or not he was courageous. He had this whole Ernest Hemingway kind of thing: man has to prove something about his manhood at all times, like Ernest Hemingway was. So I was really pissed at him for it. [laughter]

LASKEY:

I should hope.

WILSON:

You know if he had to go into the service I understand that. It was a war that I would support—the war against fascism. And he wanted to go to Europe. The Marines had almost nothing to do with the European—he thought that being in the Marine Corps he was going to be on the first line of the invasion of France because the marines were always in there first before anybody, like they were in the Pacific. Instead, they sent him to the Pacific. When he finally finished officer's training, he went to the Pacific. It was the first big disappointment. Then, he was supposed to be a platoon leader, but as soon as they found out—finally, they got around to figuring out that they've got a brilliant one on their hands, so they put him into intelligence. From then on, until the end of the war, he was in intelligence. They got the news that he was somewhat of a radical finally, near the end of the war. So when he wanted to go into Japan and experience the victory while they were signing the peace treaty, they had already gotten the word that this guy had somewhat a subversive background. Because he was all set to go, and they suddenly, at the last minute, mustered him out and sent him back home.

LASKEY:

Well, subversives in the Marine Corps, radicals in the Marine Corps, are probably pretty few in number.

WILSON:

Yeah.

LASKEY:

In his oral history, he talked about the fact that you had a baby at this time.

WILSON:

While he was in the service.

LASKEY:

That must have been devastating. You were all alone.

WILSON:

Yes, I was all alone. Just before he left, I became pregnant. I mean, he came back for a trip to California. I was living with my sister, Sylvia, because Paul her husband was in the Merchant Marine. So she and I were living alone. She already had a son then. And then I became pregnant. Oh, I didn't know that I was pregnant at the time that Mike left to go to Camp Catlan, which was on Oahu [Hawaii]. No, it's on Hawaii. That's where Pearl Harbor—Pearl Harbor was not far from them. Mostly the people who were killed at Pearl Harbor were Marines, because they had a big marine base there. Well, there were a lot of people in the Army there, too, but the Marines have an extraordinary military history in the Pacific. They always were the first ones to go in. There were

more Marines proportionately who were killed than anybody else in the Pacific. Most of the time, I didn't know where he was. Anyway, I had gone to work at Lockheed [Aircraft Corporation]. Did you know about that? I didn't tell you about the "Rosie the Riveter" period? My "Rosie the Riveter" period. That's when I stopped school. I dropped out of school at that time.

LASKEY:

You came down. You went back to school, but the war came. Michael went down to the Marines, and you dropped out of school.

WILSON:

I went to work at Lockheed Aircraft/Vega Aircraft, which was out in Burbank, where the airport is now. Well, Lockheed is still there.

LASKEY:

Now, were you conscripted or did you just decide—?

WILSON:

Oh, no. I decided if my husband was in the war, I wanted to be in the war too. I wanted to do my part. So I went out to build airplanes, not knowing a damn thing about it. [laughter]

LASKEY:

So you went on an assembly-line job, or that was your intention.

WILSON:

It was my intention to be on the assembly line, but it didn't take them very long to find out that I also was an educated person. I went into the engineering department. So I was doing drawing—aircraft, aeronautical, engineering drawings.

LASKEY:

This may seem like a silly question, but how much engineering did you have from your architecture school?

WILSON:

I had quite a bit. It wasn't sheet-metal engineering. I had very little of that when I had been in school. It's just that I knew how to draw. They needed people who were educated to be in their engineering department because the males had been drafted. So that was the great liberation. That's when the real liberation of women took place. It was when women were liberated from the kitchen and went to work in the aircraft plants. It was an incredible period of time. You must have had your mother or your aunt or somebody who was "Rosie the Riveter" too, didn't you?

LASKEY:

Well—

WILSON:

You were too young.

LASKEY:

I was in Michigan at the time, but women were definitely going to work. This is what it did in all areas. Suddenly, it was okay for women to work in whatever field.

WILSON:

Right. I think that those of us who went in when men were off to war and took over their jobs, we had a big impact. While there was a setback after that and women were kicked back out of their field back into their kitchens, I don't think that culturally—the women who did that passed that experience on to their children who really and truly—my daughters [Rebecca and Rosanna Wilson], for example, were in the forefront of the women's liberation movement. They had the background of a mother who had worked at aircraft plants and produced airplanes. Of course, the fact that I was a professional in a man's field helped. Other girls didn't have that. But these were all the children of those women, who I think were part of the leadership of the women's liberation.

LASKEY:

You had another interesting experience at Caltech [California Institute of Technology].

WILSON:

At Caltech, yes. Oh, then, of course, my baby did die. You know about that. That was very hard on Mike, being so far away, and it was very hard on me.

LASKEY:

He was in the South Pacific when you had the baby. The baby lived those four days.

WILSON:

Yes, that's right.

LASKEY:

How did you cope? Another crisis for a very young person.

WILSON:

That was very traumatic for me to have a child who died. The only thing that I could say is I am sick about women whose children die when they are already formed as children. My child lived only three days. Still, you carried it all the way through, and it was a very traumatic thing to happen to carry your child through for almost—it was a little bit premature—and expect to get a baby out of it. I worked all the way through that period. I was working at the time when my water sac broke. I was on my way home from work or something.

LASKEY:

Was Sylvia there to help you?

WILSON:

Sylvia helped me. Neither Mike's father nor mother came down. My feelings were really hurt because I felt they—if I had gotten a baby out of it, naturally they would have come down, which they did later when I had babies who lived.

But they didn't come down because the baby had died, so there was no point in coming down to see me, I guess.

LASKEY:

Oh, dear. How devastating.

WILSON:

It was. It hurt my feelings a lot.

LASKEY:

Boy, you must have been feeling extraordinarily vulnerable at that point, anyway.

WILSON:

Oh, yes.

LASKEY:

It was such a lonely thing to go through.

WILSON:

Well, I don't feel sorry for myself that much.

LASKEY:

That's very sad.

WILSON:

I don't know. A lot of people have had worse things happen.

LASKEY:

Well, Michael wrote, "Zelma went right back to work in the aircraft plant soon afterward, which was the best thing she could have done."

WILSON:

Yes. I think I was only out for about three weeks, then I went back to work.

LASKEY:

That must have frustrated him equally, though, because of what you've been talking about, with the problems that Michael was facing, about not being adequate to so many things. Here was something else. It was out of his control, of course.

WILSON:

It was out of his control.

LASKEY:

That doesn't mean anything. I mean, there's one more point where he should have been there with you and he couldn't have been. That must have been equally devastating for him.

WILSON:

They were preparing for some big operation. He wasn't there during Iwo Jima, but it was most of the battles took place after, in Saipan, and Tinian, and Guam, that he was involved in. I don't know which one of these great battles were going on at the time. I never knew where he was and what part of the South Pacific he was in. Most of the letters I would get from him were from Camp

Catlan in Hawaii. Michael also got involved with a woman who ran a bookstore, I think, in Hawaii, in the city of Honolulu, but I don't think he was involved with her at the time. It was later, but I didn't know about that.

LASKEY:

When did you find out about that?

WILSON:

When he came home.

LASKEY:

He told you?

WILSON:

Well, a letter came to the house addressed to him. He left it out. Maybe he wanted me to read it. I don't know. He just felt that was his way of letting me know. She apparently expected him to tell me about it and to leave me and to come to her. But when he got back to me, he didn't want to do that. I don't think he ever intended to anyway. I think it's just one of the stories that men tell women.

LASKEY:

How did you feel about that?

WILSON:

I felt terrible.

LASKEY:

How did you resolve it?

WILSON:

[Pause] There was so much separation of men and women during World War II. Women are at the prime of their sexual lives, and the men are too, and to expect them to be totally faithful when there are opportunities not to be—not all men had the opportunity to find them, but we're all sexual beings. I think I just eventually accepted it. I wanted him back. I didn't want to lose him. But it was humiliating, and I was—Mike and I developed a kind of marriage where we knew we were family and we cared about each other as a family, but there were certain—when there were problems like that which came up from time to time during our marriage, which I think most people have, somehow or other we decided that it was not worth it to break up the family. But we didn't—and so Mike had—I started to tell you before that we had a lot of friends in the motion picture industry. He had a lot of friends, and they were our joint friends. But my friends in architecture were just my friends. I think that's a part of the general mores of our society, that the husband's friends are the friends. Now, I think, women are breaking out of the mold and have a lot of their own friends outside of the marriage. I mean, women friends especially. Women have developed good relations and new ways of being together, which I have a lot of

respect for. Women know how to be friends. I think women have always known how to be friends better than men do, contrary to the stereotype.

LASKEY:

Well, I think women are generally much freer with their feelings and much more capable of expressing their feelings too. They don't hold it up quite so tightly inside.

WILSON:

Anyway, I immediately went to work. That's when they sent me to Caltech. They had a whole bunch of IQ tests that they were giving. I really didn't know what they were doing, except they picked out some women and gave them all kinds of tests. I thought it was just part of their testing system, part of the bureaucracy. But they weren't doing that. They picked out eight women at Lockheed/Vega out of hundreds and hundreds of women, and they sent us to Caltech to become real aeronautical engineers, "ninety-day wonders." So I was one of those women.

LASKEY:

Today, going to Caltech doesn't sound that extraordinary.

WILSON:

No, but there were no women at that time there.

LASKEY:

Women were not allowed at Caltech, so you must have been one of the first women ever to go to Caltech.

WILSON:

Oh, we eight women were the first women ever to be in Caltech.

LASKEY:

How did they treat you?

WILSON:

They were great. Very nice, yeah. We went to the classes. The school had been very thinned out by the war, as you can well imagine. There was a very important scientist named Robert [A.] Millikan. I met him, and I met his son [Clark B. Millikan]. They were both teaching at Caltech. I took integral calculus, flutter, and vibrations. These courses sound funny, but they were—we worked on the design of a helicopter, because that was one of the newest things to come out at that time. We had a man teaching those courses. The women were terrific women, that they had picked out. They were all very bright. Some of them weren't necessarily college-educated. They were just women who had been given a lot of tests and had been shown to be extremely bright, and they sent them off to Caltech. So I was at Caltech for—how long—at least a year.

LASKEY:

This was about 1943?

WILSON:

Yes. I was living with my sister. She lived in Bel Air, and I was driving to Caltech every day.

LASKEY:

That is a long way, and there were no freeways.

WILSON:

No. I'm really sorry that I didn't keep in touch with some of those women, because it was kind of a fascinating experience to be there. We went out together all the time. We had a very rigid course. We went to school eight hours a day. We had homework to do when I got home. I did my homework. We were paid for this.

LASKEY:

You were paid for it.

WILSON:

By Lockheed. Lockheed was paying for our education.

LASKEY:

Did you get any kind of a certificate?

WILSON:

Yeah, I got a certificate. I don't know whatever happened to it, but I did get a certificate of some sort for having completed a course in aerodynamics from California Institute of Technology. I got straight As in all my classes. It was really a wonderful kind of experience. As I say, I regret that I haven't kept in close touch with [those women]. I have a photograph somewhere around here of all of us women at our graduation party.

LASKEY:

Myron Hunt was the chief architect, wasn't he for Caltech? Were you in the grand old buildings?

WILSON:

Yes, the old buildings. I don't know what it looks like now. I haven't got the foggiest idea.

LASKEY:

Some of the buildings are still there, like the Athenaeum and a couple of the old buildings. One or two have been torn down.

WILSON:

Everything was so special during World War II that seeing women around the campus didn't seem to bother any of the men. We women had our own classes. There were no men involved except for the teachers.

LASKEY:

Oh, really? These were just special classes set up for this core of eight women from Lockheed.

WILSON:

That's right. Then, when my classes were over, I got back to Lockheed. I went to work in the engineering department. I had been working in engineering before that, anyway. This was about six months later, in 1944. I was called in and fired for being a subversive. That was after my baby was born who died.

LASKEY:

What was the reason? What triggered it, you know?

WILSON:

Nothing. I hadn't done anything out there. Nobody could have accused me of being anything but the most dedicated worker there. But the fact that I had been active in left-wing organizations previous to coming to work just finally came to their attention. Well, they had to get their clearances, and I guess they'd been a little careless in hiring women, hiring people wholesale there for a while.

LASKEY:

That's extraordinary.

WILSON:

They felt terrible about it, because I was one of their prize people. They had sent me to Caltech and all that stuff, and here I was doing very important drafting on one of their new airplanes there. I don't know what it's called, the P-38 or something, I forget, it was one of those double-fuselage airplanes that they had just come out with. I was working on that. I don't mean I designed it. I wasn't an aeronautical designer. I was just a semi-skilled flash in the pan.

[laughter]

LASKEY:

They had no other reason except that you had belonged to left-wing organizations?

WILSON:

Oh, yeah. They had the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation], and they had their informers who were in the left-wing organizations. The left-wing organizations that I had been active in were laced with informers. It probably had as many informers as they had members. [laughter] If they got rid of all the informers, the whole organization would have fallen apart.

LASKEY:

This is 1943.

WILSON:

In '43 or '44. My child was born in '44, so this was in '44 or '45. Michael came home from the service in '45. Let's see, the war was over in September of '45, I believe, wasn't it? June 1945?

LASKEY:

August 1945 was the end of the war with Japan.

WILSON:

When did [Franklin D.] Roosevelt die? Was that in 1945 also? I believe he didn't get to see the end of the war. I remember that. He didn't get to see the victory. [Harry S.] Truman was president.

LASKEY:

He died in April 12, 1945. I remember clearly the day he died.

WILSON:

Yeah, me too. Mike came back, and then I—by that time, I had been fired from Lockheed and gone to work—this is what was so crazy about the FBI, or who knows what group was spying on whom, because there were so many groups that were spying on each other. God only knows. It was the period when there was a decision. They opened up the second front in—the invasion of France was in 1944, I think. By that time, the Russians were already in Germany, and the Americans were getting very, very nervous that the Russians were going to get to Berlin before they did. So they hurried up to get in there on the second front, because they had been delaying, delaying, and delaying. It was during that period when they got nervous about the Russians again. The Cold War had already started and the "hot" war was still going on. Anyway, they got to Mike at the end of the war. I told you that they wouldn't let him go to Japan. He was getting ready to step on the airplane to go to Tokyo and they stopped him. They sent him back home. He was in a state of shock. I was fired from Lockheed, and I was hired one week later by North American Aviation, after I was fired for being a subversive at Lockheed.

LASKEY:

How could they do that?

WILSON:

Because they're—Lockheed had their informants, and North American Aviation had their informants. Who knows?

LASKEY:

But North American didn't call Lockheed?

WILSON:

Apparently! Besides, they put me in an insensitive situation. I came there. Because I'd had all this experience, I didn't have to go through their orientation class. They decided that they would make me assistant to the head of the orientation. They had drafting classes where they took in all these people who didn't know very much about drafting and put them through a six-week course in aeronautical drafting. Because I had so much experience, they put me in as assistant to the head of the school. So I never really worked in the production department of North American. They put me in a safe spot. Then I went back to college.

LASKEY:

You didn't have any difficulty getting back to school because you were a subversive?

WILSON:

No, no, no.

1.7. TAPE NUMBER: V, Side One (March 4, 1989)

LASKEY:

We left off in 1945. You were working for North American [Aviation]. Michael [Wilson] had just been reassigned to the United States instead of going to Japan.

WILSON:

That's right. I don't think that Mike was back yet. I think he came back in September of '45, at that time, because I was still working at North American and there were great demonstrations on Hollywood Boulevard and people out in the streets. It was a time of enormous turmoil. Perhaps you remember that too? From when—

LASKEY:

No, I wasn't out here until 1957.

WILSON:

Oh, I see. Anyway, when Michael returned in 1945—I believe it was in September—there was a period of adjustment that seemed very difficult for him. His nerves were really shot. He had been in several battles. I quit my job.

LASKEY:

At North American?

WILSON:

Yes, because my husband was back and I wanted to be with him. I knew that I had to go back to school. I was pretty sure that I was going to go back to school and finish and get my degree. So Mike and I went up to San Francisco to see some friends and also to see his family. He had a kind of a nervous collapse when we were in the hotel. Sylvia [Gussin Jarrico] was there, for reasons which I can't remember, unless she went with us. We were in the Palace Hotel, and Mike started to shake pretty badly. It was like a postwar trauma, the transition from coming—he had been in the Philippines and had gone through all these wars. Then, he was refused the opportunity to go into Japan to see the results of the atomic blast and to be there at that particular time. Whatever the reason was, it was very, very traumatic for him. He just had a nervous collapse. My sister and I were working with him to try to get him to calm down.

LASKEY:

Did this just develop in San Francisco or—?

WILSON:

It developed there. It really didn't last that long. What I mean is, he seemed to have like a personal crisis which affected him physically. Other than that, you know—although I think that, obviously, he was affected by his war experiences. He had not been that involved in combat. He would come in after combat during the mopping-up operations. He came in as an intelligence officer, but he saw all the devastation and all the dead Japanese soldiers and interviewed prisoners of war. He was working very closely with a man named Dave [David] Sarvis, who spoke Japanese and was born in—I think he was born in Japan, I don't know. He came from a very cultured family. He was an American, but he was born in Japan. I don't know too much about him, so there's no point in my discussing him, except that my husband had a very, very close relationship with him. So Mike was rather tense with his parents [Frank and Nell Wilson], I think they met us at the hotel in San Francisco. His father, I think I told you—did I tell you about his father and his mother? Anything about them?

LASKEY:

A little bit. That he was a very dynamic man.

WILSON:

An uneducated man, yes. An alcoholic, but it didn't seem to affect his capability as a businessman. He was a businessman. He had been very active in the financial centers in San Francisco until he bought his own canning company in Stockton. I think it was just about that time when they purchased a home in Stockton. I think we had gone there. Although I also believe that they had met us in San Francisco. I'm a little fuzzy on that situation.

LASKEY:

Had they come to terms with you yet?

WILSON:

Oh, yes.

LASKEY:

You'd had difficulty with the father, originally.

WILSON:

Yes, I had. However, we became close after the children [Rebecca and Rosanna Wilson] were born, especially after the little one was born. The first one. That was in 1948. Rebecca was born.

LASKEY:

This period when Michael had come out of the service and you had met them in San Francisco, this was before Rebecca was born?

WILSON:

Yes. That was a very traumatic period. Then, I think that Mike and I decided to have a vacation. We took a—no, wait. I'm skipping over a period here. We moved out—I had been living with Sylvia and Paul [Jarrico], especially with

Sylvia and her son, in Bel Air in Ida Lupino's house. And so we found a house over in the Hollywood area right off of Melrose [Avenue], close to Paramount Studios.

LASKEY:

Around Larchmont [Boulevard]?

WILSON:

That's right. I registered to go back to school. I say we took a vacation, but our vacation was later, because it was on this vacation that I became impregnated with Rebecca. She wasn't born until '48, so that was in '47 sometime. So that was two years later.

LASKEY:

You graduated in 1947?

WILSON:

In 1947. That's right. So it must have been some sort of vacation relative to that. Mike then went to work for Liberty Productions.

LASKEY:

With Frank Capra?

WILSON:

It was Capra, [William] Wyler, and George Stevens, Jr. That was Liberty Productions. And the first screenplay he started to work on—I hope I'm right about this. When he got back from the war, the Hollywood community seemed very, very happy to see him. I don't mean the left community, I mean the industry. He got this fantastic job working for these giants of the motion picture industry, three of them. They had plans to do the best possible films that were—some of them turned out to be, indeed, the best films that were put out, because at that time Mike wrote *Look Homeward, Angel*. That was Thomas Wolfe's book which later got hung up in some sort of probate that made it impossible for them to make it into a film. I'll finish this string of the story because it has an interesting end to it about what happened to *Look Homeward, Angel*. It was to be directed, I believe, by Wyler, and Mike wrote an absolutely spectacular screenplay, one of the best. That actually got him a lot of other work, but it was never produced as a screenplay. However, later, when he was working for Paramount [Pictures], for Twentieth-Century Fox [Film Corporation], he was—they were still trying to make *Look Homeward, Angel*. Mike was next door to Ketti Frings at the Twentieth-Century Studio. You know, Frings and her husband? I don't know what his name is. [Kurt Frings] Well, while we were in Europe later, the Frings did a play of *Look Homeward, Angel*. Something about Wolfe's will made it possible for them to do a play but not a film. I really don't know. Maybe he was very anti-Hollywood, Thomas Wolfe. I just don't know why that was part of his [will]. But in any case, they did write a play, which was a big Broadway success, not a stupendous success,

but very successful. We didn't know about it. We were living in Europe at the time. So our friend Ring Lardner, Jr., and his whole family came to visit us when we were living outside the country—outside of Paris. [He] said to Mike—because he had read Mike's script "You know they had done your script. The Frings took your script. Changing the form from a scenario into a play, they used your material and made a play out of it. We think you ought to sue them." Well, you know, Mike was not a suing kind. Mike hated lawyers, and he hated lawsuits. There were so many things that happened over the course of time. Plagiarism is awfully hard to prove, especially when it comes from another original material. That is why this Lawrence of Arabia situation is so sticky. The same thing was true. Mike had put the structure together that made it possible for them to do a play. Using characters, again, that Mike had invented, scenes that never appeared in any of these books. Because if you remember, *Look Homeward, Angel* was a great amorphous novel which even the editor had a hell of a time [with]. It was delivered in a truck when they delivered it to him.

LASKEY:

Apparently, the editor of Wolfe's material was actually as important, at least from what I've read, as Wolfe himself. It was the editor who made it readable.

WILSON:

That's right.

LASKEY:

He put it together.

WILSON:

Was that [Maxwell E.] Perkins?

LASKEY:

I think so.

WILSON:

Yes. Wolfe later had a love affair with another woman editor, and he wrote *You Can't Go Home Again*. I think it was Max Perkins.

LASKEY:

Right. I think you're right.

WILSON:

He put that much stuff together. Then Mike took the stuff that Perkins had put together and made it into an extraordinarily good screenplay, really beautiful. Then they used that material.

LASKEY:

I just want to stop you for a minute, because you made a reference to *Lawrence of Arabia*. Now, we had been talking about that a few minutes ago, but unfortunately we weren't on tape at the time. Just to make the relationship with what you were talking about with *Look Homeward, Angel*. Now, essentially

this is the same thing that you were telling me had happened with *Lawrence of Arabia*.

WILSON:

It's not all that different, except that Mike didn't know that there was going to be a re-release of *Lawrence of Arabia* and that there would be an opportunity for him to have his name on it and they still wouldn't put his name on it. But the relationship is that somebody else takes the structure of what somebody has done—what another writer has done—and rewrites it in such a way to make it his own. That's still plagiarism. There is no way of getting around it. Mike was aware of both of these situations while he was still alive. His friends were standing around hollering at him, "Sue him. Sue him. Sue him." And he wouldn't do it.

LASKEY:

He didn't sue on *Look Homeward, Angel*?

WILSON:

And he didn't sue when they didn't put his name on *Lawrence of Arabia*. He hated lawsuits. He had been the prime—I'm sorry. I'm speaking in so many different branches of this story. But they all relate to each other.

LASKEY:

No, that's all right, because they are all related.

WILSON:

He had been the prime "Wilson et al.," of the conspiracy suit against the producers on the blacklist, which was finally rejected by the next court to the Supreme Court. I forget. What is it? The court of appeals? Whatever. He had given so much testimony and so much legal information. He did not like that kind of dissipation of his energy.

LASKEY:

Well, it also had been—well, how long did that appeal go on? The blacklist?

WILSON:

Oh, blacklisting went on for years and years and years. He did not want to get involved in a lawsuit against a—he did not like the sour-grapes attitude—he was a very proud man. He didn't want to feel that he was whining because somebody had a success that he didn't have.

LASKEY:

How did you feel about it?

WILSON:

Well, I was—I probably—verbally, at least, I was more willing for him to make an issue of the *Look Homeward, Angel* issue, but whether or not I would be willing myself to go through that or not, I don't know. Because a lawsuit is very, very expensive. It's taxing, and it's dissipating of your energy. It really is. I'm going through one right now and I know about that. I mean, I'm not suing

anybody. Somebody's suing me for something where I'm totally innocent. It has something to do with my architecture. I think that Mike just didn't want to do that. He didn't want to do anything where he appeared to be a pain in the neck to anybody. I don't know. [laughter] He was really, in many ways, a very unusual person. He was too proud to sue them. He should have been given this credit without having to sue for it, you see?

LASKEY:

You were in France at the time, just having fought many years for what appeared at the time, anyway, to have been unsuccessful, as far as the blacklist was concerned. Could he simply have been tired?

WILSON:

He was.

LASKEY:

And just felt that it probably wouldn't work anyway? Was there an element of that? You were in France. It would have been very difficult.

WILSON:

He wanted to concentrate on what he was doing. He didn't want to go back and fight over something he had done five years ago or three years ago. He wanted to do what he was doing. He didn't want to pursue it for questionable results. I think now, on this current issue of *Lawrence of Arabia*, he would be very angry. He would want to do something about it. It's just a guess of mine, but who knows?

LASKEY:

But you're working with the Screenwriters Guild now to attempt to do something about it?

WILSON:

I am with Paul Jarrico, who is trying to do something about it. So anyway, to go back—

LASKEY:

When he started *Look Homeward, Angel*—

WILSON:

He started *Look Homeward, Angel*, and he worked on it for a very long, long time. Mike was a slow writer. He worked on *Look Homeward, Angel* probably for about ninemonths to a year for Liberty Productions.

LASKEY:

I want to make sure this is right. This would be about 1946, right after he came back from the South Pacific. You were in school, or had you—?

WILSON:

I went to school. I enrolled in the architecture department at USC. There were many happy things that were going on relative to some of the legacy that had been left by [Franklin D.] Roosevelt relative to public housing, housing for the

needy. There was a kind of a sunny, optimistic view of the future. That was before the House Committee on Un-American Activities [HUAC] even started the inquiries which came before the Hollywood Ten so that—the Hollywood Ten events I think culminated in 1947—I think all those hearings started, didn't they?

LASKEY:

The HUAC hearings actually started in '47, and then went on again from 1951 to 1953.

WILSON:

Right. So when did the blacklisted guys, the ten, go to jail?

LASKEY:

I think it was in 1951 to 1953. I'll double-check that for you. I have it in my notes here.

WILSON:

Because I'm trying to recall all these sequences myself.

LASKEY:

I think it was later. It was in the hysteria of the fifties. But I'll double-check it. The loyalty oath came in—

WILSON:

No, I'm pretty sure that the—the Hollywood Ten came first. I mean, those hearings—those may have been the Senate hearings and not HUAC. Was it HUAC?

LASKEY:

Well, there were a series of hearings. The [Martin] Dies Committee came out here early, and that was in the late thirties. Then, there were the Californians, the [Jack B.] Tenney Committee [California State Legislature Joint Fact-Finding Committee on Un-American Activities]. He was another gadfly. Then HUAC. They sort of followed each other. The first ones, I know, were in '47. I had thought the Hollywood Ten was part of that '51 to '53, but I—

WILSON:

I don't think so. I think the Hollywood Ten were in jail by—they started the hearings in '47 or '48.

LASKEY:

Anyway, there was sort of a massive series of assaults.

WILSON:

Yes, on all the intellectuals of the country.

LASKEY:

Just a second. [tape recorder off] Okay, so it was the HUAC hearings in 1947 that triggered the Hollywood Ten. They actually went to prison in 1950. So it took three years from the hearings through all the reviews and appeals.

WILSON:

Right. I guess that was the fear period that we had gone through, because we were expecting—Mike was a relative newcomer and had been away to the wars. I don't think any of the Ten had been in the service. So he had been away from Hollywood for all this time. Maybe they had been in the service. I can't remember. It doesn't seem to me that any of the Hollywood Ten had been in the service. They were probably all too old.

LASKEY:

It doesn't say here. I know a couple of the blacklisted writers, I remember reading, had been in the service.

WILSON:

Oh, yeah. There were several of the people who came afterwards.

LASKEY:

But as far as the actual ten, I don't know.

WILSON:

Well, anyway, I was just saying that Mike had not been in Hollywood during the war, when some of these so-called subversive activities were going on. When he came back, he became active when the Korean War broke out. He became active in an organization that was opposed to the Korean War, which was the Asian-American anti-war committee, or something. I don't remember the name of the organization, exactly. He worked in that one with Dave Sarvis. Dave Sarvis had come back and had moved in with us in our house near Paramount Studios, near Melrose. He and Mike were very active in that. Sarvis was an actor and a writer, a very talented guy. He also was a draftsman. I was back in school. I think he did renderings for me for one of my jobs. [tape recorder off] Mike met [Sarvis] during [the war]. When Mike was working in intelligence, Sarvis was an interpreter. Sarvis was a great, tall, prematurely gray, very, very handsome man, with quite an interesting cultural background. His mother had been an actress and his father was some sort of an intellectual-savant. I don't know what he was. Anyway, when Mike came back from the service, he wanted to help Sarvis get into the motion picture industry. So he moved into one of our rooms that we had in our house that we rented. As a matter of fact, he lived in two houses. We rented a house there, and later we moved to another house above Franklin. He lived with us in both of those places. His girlfriend came over from Hawaii to stay with him for a while. He and Mike had a very close relationship. I resented their relationship very profoundly because I was trying to reestablish my relationship with my husband after all those war years. And they had—it was like a continuation of a relationship which they had developed throughout the war. They worked so closely together. It was hard for me to reestablish my relationship because I was going off to school every day and Mike was trying to get started as a writer. So I didn't have that much—then, I would come home, and we'd go out

or we'd eat together or something. Usually, Sarvis was with us. I really needed that time to be with my husband. I didn't have that much privacy with him. So that was a somewhat painful time for me, that time after World War II.

LASKEY:

Were you able to talk to Michael about it, or was it something that got submerged?

WILSON:

I talked to him to some degree, but he didn't want to talk about it very much with me. I don't think Mike was a man who was that capable of dealing with himself emotionally. So it was a very difficult situation, because I was somewhat intimidated by my husband, too. I was very young at that time. He had an intimidating quality. He was a very brilliant man and with a great deal of—he was very self-demanding and also demanding on other people around him.

LASKEY:

In the way of attention?

WILSON:

Yeah. So his homecoming—while the first part was very sweet and wonderful, except for the nervousness which he brought back with him, when Sarvis joined us, to me, that was the painful part. Sarvis has gone on to do a lot of things. He has produced plays, mostly in San Francisco. He lived in San Francisco. He married a dancer. He directed plays up there, and he was in *Salt of the Earth*. He played the mine owner or the mine owner's representative in *Salt of the Earth*. Very beautiful, tall, white-haired man was David Sarvis. Maybe if you have seen it, you might remember him. He played the bad guy. [laughter]

LASKEY:

That's very interesting. That's why the name sounded familiar.

WILSON:

So anyway, he and Mike maintained their friendship. As I say, they were very active together in this committee against the Korean War. They'd served in the Pacific, and they didn't want to—Mike didn't see any reason for us to interfere with a civil war that was going on in Korea.

LASKEY:

They were also in the Pacific when the atom bomb got dropped. Being so close to the time that it was dropped, was there any of the anti-atomic feeling that we know, the anti-nuclear feelings that the country now has—? How should I say this? How did the dropping of the atomic bomb affect Michael?

WILSON:

Mike felt it was totally unnecessary. Mike said that the war was almost over at the time they dropped the bomb. He said that they were practically on the verge

of surrender when the time came to drop the bomb. He said it was primarily, as far as he was concerned, an anti-Soviet move to prevent the Soviet Union from coming in with their armies into Japan on that front. For our troops to arrive and be the first to make the Japanese surrender. So I think that was the purpose of it, to get the war over in a real, real big hurry, before the Russians had a chance to get there. That was his belief. At the time, none of us knew very much about the overall effects of radiation. None of us really understood the implication of the atomic bomb.

LASKEY:

But his feelings about Korea and an involvement in the war against Korea were based more on the politics of the situation than on the military—

WILSON:

Humanistic attitude?

LASKEY:

Yeah.

WILSON:

Oh, it was both. They felt that it was—we felt that our involvement in the Korean War was simply—what eventually happened in Vietnam—that it was an anti-communist war rather than a moral war. It really had nothing to do with us politically or militarily. We weren't protecting ourselves militarily. It was to prevent China from getting into Korea—oh, not to prevent the spread of communism, because at that time, in Korea—the North Koreans—there was a civil war going on between North and South Korea in which we were supplying arms and support to South Korea to prevent the incursion of North Korean troops who were supported probably by the Chinese. I don't know. Presumably, they were. So it was a political war, just like all the wars are political. It was just a precursor to the Vietnam War. It was the same kind of war. It was a war that we couldn't win. There was nothing to win except death of a lot of fine young men, and death to a lot of civilians. You can't fight a war on somebody else's land like that and intend to win, any more than Hitler could. Well, anyway. So he was very active in that. When he made his statement for the Un-American Activities Committee, that was a part of his statement, his activity in the organization.

LASKEY:

When did he first get called before the House Committee on Un-American Activities Committee?

WILSON:

Let's see. I guess that was about 1951 or 1952 that he was called. In 1951, I guess, because it was after he was blacklisted that they made *Salt of the Earth*, which was made, I guess, in '52 and '53. I graduated in 1947, and I got pregnant right away. Not right away, almost right away. Mike and I went on this

vacation that I started to tell you about before. Then Rebecca was born in March of 1948. She'll have a birthday next week. She will be forty-one. So I was moved out. Oh, my brother-in-law [John Wilson] lived with us too.

LASKEY:

It must have been quite a busy household.

WILSON:

It was a fantastic house. It was like a commune. It was incredible. There were things going on all the time in our house.

LASKEY:

And you were in school?

WILSON:

I was just finishing up school at that time. That was in 1947. We had moved up to above Franklin [Avenue]. See, Mike had written *Look Homeward, Angel*. He wrote *Friendly Persuasion*. What was the third thing he wrote? Another third thing he wrote for them? *Place in the Sun*.

LASKEY:

I was going to say, it was the time of *Place in the Sun*.

WILSON:

That's right. *Place in the Sun* actually he wrote before he wrote *Friendly Persuasion*. It was a time when he had an enormous richness of opportunity, and it also was the time of the beginning of the end as far as his working in Hollywood was concerned, until he came back, [when] we returned from Europe.

LASKEY:

Were you aware of what was going on in Hollywood?

WILSON:

Oh, sure. I was aware of it. But I was politically active in my own way. I was more toward working with people in public housing, on environmental issues, segregation, and issues around the University, although I was not very active in student affairs. I was working terribly, terribly hard to get my degree, and I was determined to get it. I knew a lot of people who were in the public housing issue like Frank Wilkinson. Do you know Frank Wilkinson?

LASKEY:

I know who he is.

WILSON:

He worked during the Roosevelt Administration for the National Housing Authority, or I think it's NHA or something it's called. I got to know him at that time. We worked together on certain housing issues. School was extremely preoccupying to me, because I was determined to finish it. I was in my fifth year. Architecture school was a five-year course at that time. And then,

summers, I would work for various architects. Did I tell you about that before?
I don't remember.

LASKEY:

No, we haven't.

WILSON:

I worked for many famous architects because I had picked out the architects I wanted to work for in the summertime. They were all architects of the famous International school during the rise of Hitler. The Bauhaus school became the—you've heard of the Bauhaus school, haven't you?

LASKEY:

Right. Yes.

WILSON:

It was a school designed in Germany. I don't know whether it was in Berlin, I think it was in Berlin. Munich, maybe.

LASKEY:

It was in two places. It was closed once. Then, [Walter] Gropius opened it. My mind is just—it wasn't Berlin though. [Bauhaus was in Weimar from 1919-25 and Dessau from 1925-33.]

WILSON:

The architects that I chose to work for, many of whom or several of whom were people who were very much involved in the International movement stemming from the Bauhaus school, which was the anti-romantic school of architecture—International school. I worked for Raphael Soriano, and I worked for Rudolph [M.] Schindler.

LASKEY:

You worked for Schindler and Soriano while you were still in school?

WILSON:

Yes, in the summers. I had summers off.

LASKEY:

What was that like, in both cases?

WILSON:

They were both very thrilling experiences to me, because they were both extraordinary architects, especially Schindler. Schindler was one of the greats and remains one of the greats. Soriano was not quite as famous as Schindler. He just died recently, a few months ago. Yeah, he died in January, I think. Schindler I worked with at his house on Kings Road, which is now becoming a museum, as I understand it.

LASKEY:

It is. How did it function, the house?

WILSON:

Schindler was one of the last of the master-builders. [tape recorder off] I actually didn't see very much of Schindler, because he was primarily—

LASKEY:

No, the house. You worked in the house.

WILSON:

Yes, it was in his house. It was his drafting room.

LASKEY:

What was it like to actually work? Did the house function well as a studio?

WILSON:

He had his house, and then he had his studio. He had just separated recently, or within the year, from his wife, but he was still living in the house because his studio was there. She was living on the other side in the house, in the residential part. So I didn't see very much of that. I saw mostly his studio. Only later did I see his house.

LASKEY:

Did he function as a teacher for you while you were working for him or were you really just supposed to come in and do a job?

WILSON:

Usually, he would just give me jobs to do, and then occasionally he would have time to talk to me, but not that much. I was just somebody in the office.

LASKEY:

Was it valuable to you?

WILSON:

Oh, tremendous. Because I got to—for one thing, he would say, "Here's the floor plans. Here are the elevations. I haven't gotten the roof worked out. Work on the roof details on this job." He didn't even know how it was going to work because the buildings were so complex that he really didn't know how the roof was going to work until they started to build it. Then he would get up there and he would say, "Oh." [laughter] I'm kidding. When I say he was a real master-builder, I mean he was like—that's what architect means. It means a master-builder. You're not just involved in drawing pictures. You get up there and you build a house or build the buildings along with the other craftsmen. You resolve problems right there.

LASKEY:

He oversaw the construction of all his buildings.

WILSON:

Well, yes. He worked on them, too. He was a very theatrical, dashing sort of a character. He wore his hair a little bit long. He wore very loose clothing and white pants. His bedroom was on a loft. And he had a mistress. I would see the two of them going in and out. She had long blond hair. His wife was hollering at him through the wall. [laughter]

LASKEY:

Really?

WILSON:

Yes, through the wall because they had a common telephone. There was a little place where the telephone used to sit. She would stick her head in through this thing, because it was at a level where you would pick it up. She would stick her head in there and holler and say, "Where's that bastard now?" I would say, "Mr. Schindler isn't in right now." [laughter] Sometimes, if he were home, they'd have a terrible fight through this little hole. He was staying on the loft, sleeping there. I was trying to get my work done. It was a marvelous, interesting—personal as well as professional—experience.

LASKEY:

It must have been an interesting time to live in Los Angeles, anyway.

WILSON:

It was. It was.

LASKEY:

I think there was a lot going on.

WILSON:

Oh, a tremendous amount, yes. The whole school systems were changing at that time, because I came in just about the time—the first part of my architectural life I was taught in the beaux-arts method.

1.8. TAPE NUMBER: V, Side Two (March 4, 1989)

WILSON:

Anyway, the first part of my architectural education was UC [University of California] Berkeley. I've talked to you about that, I think.

LASKEY:

You started out with the beaux-arts system.

WILSON:

I started out with the beaux-arts system. I think I mentioned that to you. When I went back to school then after the war, many of the people who came here from the Bauhaus school were refugees from Germany. They were either leftists or they were Jews. Whatever they were, the Bauhaus school was shut down by Hitler. I think way back someplace in 1940 or 1937. I don't know when it was shut down. [1933]

LASKEY:

Earlier than that. It was really in the thirties.

WILSON:

So Gropius came over and became very big here. And Schindler was an immigrant. Soriano was from Italy and also an exponent of the International

school. [Richard] Neutra I worked for after I had graduated. So I sort of made the rounds of the big International rebels. I think they helped to form much of my thinking in architecture. I don't design in the International school anymore, but the whole concept of the way in which you design buildings, where the surfaces are defined and the forms are defined—the forms are three-dimensional and not decorated. It was just this whole economy kind of architecture that they were trying to establish there which was anti-romantic. At the same time, it had to do with the world depression.

LASKEY:

Wasn't Richard Neutra in the late forties involved in public housing?

WILSON:

Yes, he did a big public housing project in San Francisco, and he did one down near the airport someplace, between Pico [Boulevard] and the airport. Then, he and Bob [Robert E.] Alexander together— oh, excuse me. He was not involved in that. Bob Alexander was involved in the Baldwin Hills [Village] project. It was one of the first of the garden-city type of projects. That was a prototype for many of us young students coming out of school. When I went to work for Neutra, Alexander was his partner. They had come together. He was a brilliant architect also.

LASKEY:

Yeah, I think that was after Baldwin Hills. I know that Neutra did the Channel [Heights] Housing Project. But there was also public housing—what we now think of as project housing—downtown in central Los Angeles.

WILSON:

That may be, but I'm not familiar with that.

LASKEY:

I think that Neutra was involved in at least one of those developments.

WILSON:

He could have been.

LASKEY:

Because the mid-forties, late forties was a period of renewed interest. That would have been when you were in school and right after you came out.

WILSON:

Yes, that would be my time, right. He did some schools, too. I think he did the University Elementary School or the University High School. One of those.

LASKEY:

Robert Alexander did the University Elementary.

WILSON:

Oh, he did.

LASKEY:

Yeah.

WILSON:

Okay.

LASKEY:

Then they worked on it together, an addition to it at about that time. Just to backtrack a little bit, when you were working for Soriano and Schindler, did you work on any of their projects that we would know?

WILSON:

I worked on the Orange Coast College Library and Stadium, for Neutra. At that time, both of them were working on residences and I think that they weren't working on one of their more well-known projects. If they were, I was not made privy to that. Soriano just talked my ear off all the time. He explained the relationship between the music of Bach, which he played exclusively on his stereo at 2000 decibels, and architecture. He was a womanizer, you know. He was trying to be a good boy, and he succeeded. I was a married woman and all that stuff, so being a little bit standoffish. I didn't have trouble with Schindler at all because he had his beautiful young lady. He was a different kind of a person, a more professional person in my opinion—Schindler was. I'm sorry to say that I don't know—I said that both of them were working on residential work at the time that I was working for them.

LASKEY:

Now, you were again—this reads a lot like when you went to Berkeley. All of the pressures that were on you in addition to going to school. You're in the final year in school. You've got two or three extraneous people living in your house. Your husband has just come back from the war, and you're trying to get through a very difficult curriculum and graduate.

WILSON:

Yeah. That's right. There were lots of pressures on me at that time, when I look back on it. I don't look back on it as an unhappy time. It was a very exciting time, professionally, educationally, and politically. It was all very exciting.

LASKEY:

Were you involved politically? When did you have time?

WILSON:

Yeah. I didn't have very much time, because I was also trying to be a wife and cook my husband's dinner so—[laughter] there was a lot of group cooking at that time, because Sarvis was living with his girlfriend in a room over the garage.

LASKEY:

Oh, the girlfriend was living there, too?

WILSON:

Yes, that took a little bit of pressure off of the Sarvis relationship with my husband. Because that was painful to me. When she came—actually, they

broke up while they were still living there. She was a little woman, a little tiny woman. Sarvis had really outgrown her. She was a wartime girl that he had brought over from Hawaii. So that never worked out, really. The interesting thing about "Jake" [John Wilson], my husband's brother, a wonderful person, is that he also had the struggle between his Catholic parents, having been brought up a Catholic and breaking with the Catholic Church. He is about nine years younger than my husband. There was a big age difference, but he was a tremendous admirer of his.

LASKEY:

He had lived with you before, had he not? I'm trying to remember earlier in the conversation.

WILSON:

Yes, he lived with us twice. He lived with us when we lived in the Franklin Avenue house. It wasn't Franklin Avenue, but it was near Franklin. It is not far from what is now the [American] Film Institute. It was in that area.

LASKEY:

In Los Feliz?

WILSON:

That area, right. My husband was very sports oriented. He was a jock in college, as well as an intellectual, and a leader of men and women. He was a remarkably charismatic guy.

LASKEY:

Did that bother you? Did that get in the way of your marriage?

WILSON:

No! No, I was very proud of him. No. I think the greatest weaknesses in our relationship, as far as I am concerned, were his alcoholism and my inability to stand up to him—to be assertive with him. Because even though he claims to have learned about the women's liberation from me and other friends of his, I was quite intimidated by him. He would look at you kind of squarely with those incredible blue eyes, and you wanted to crawl away someplace. It fascinated you, because he looked so fierce, but he was also such a beautiful person. He was so articulate. Anyway. So where was I? I was working for all these people, and I had all these things going on.

LASKEY:

You're still in school.

WILSON:

Oh, yes. My brother-in-law Jake—my brother-in-law John, but we called him Jake—was going around with one girl, but he landed on a beautiful Jewish woman and eventually married her. So the same thing went on: the Gentile-Jewish thing that was so painful to his parents. He did the same thing that his brother had done. His parents blamed me, blamed him, and all that stuff was

going on with the in-laws, because he had left Saint Mary's College, which was a Catholic college. It was almost like he was running away from home. He was living in a dorm and he was going to a Catholic college up south of San Francisco someplace. I think it was Saint Mary's, I'm not sure. In any case, he just said, "Hell with it. I'm not going to school there. I'm going to go to UCLA." So he came down, moved in with us, and enrolled himself to UCLA, and we helped him financially. It was his declaration of independence when he came down. Then I started to talk about my husband in athletics—I've been kind of jumping around here—because there was a very athletic atmosphere in our house when we were all living together. There was Sarvis and John—or Jake—and myself and my sister and Paul Jarrico and—

LASKEY:

They were living with you too?

WILSON:

No, no, no. But we were all very close. There'd be Sunday picnics and baseball games out in Griffith Park, which wasn't very far from our house.

LASKEY:

Were you athletic?

WILSON:

I've always been athletic in the sense that I'm well-coordinated. But I'm not very fast on my feet and didn't have all it takes to be a good athlete. I just have a sense of how to use my body. That's drifting away, too. [laughter]

LASKEY:

Well, just a minor digression or catching up. You've talked about—

WILSON:

Oh, I was a tennis player in high school. I was on the tennis team. That's how we found Ojai, because I used to play in the tennis tournaments up here.

LASKEY:

When you say you found Ojai, your mother [Rose Rachkovsky Gussin]—when you were young—?

WILSON:

No.

LASKEY:

Or when you came back?

WILSON:

When we came back from Europe, yes. I introduced Mike to Ojai.

LASKEY:

But you had lived in Ojai before.

WILSON:

No. I used to come up here to play in the tennis tournaments.

LASKEY:

Your family was still living in Santa Paula when you went up to Berkeley.

WILSON:

Well, no. My father [William Gussin] died.

LASKEY:

Your father died. I'm sorry. I had thought your mother had moved to Ojai.

WILSON:

No.

LASKEY:

She was still living in Santa Paula. Okay.

WILSON:

Not when we moved to Ojai. She was dead by then. She also died in the early fifties. So there was a lot more happening, too, my mother's death.

LASKEY:

That was the thing I was going to ask you about. You had had difficulty with Michael's family. Apparently, there was an enormous closeness between Michael and your family.

WILSON:

Oh, yes. Very close.

LASKEY:

Your sister, your brother-in-law, your mother—

WILSON:

Yes, very close. We absorbed him into the family. My mother was just crazy about Mike. She said he looked just like my father when my father was young. She just loved him. They just hit it off. He was crazy about my mother and vice versa. He was very fond of Sylvia. They had a lot of fun together. And Paul was extremely supportive and just an old closeness.

LASKEY:

That apparently. survived.

WILSON:

That apparently survived to the point when the Jarricos followed us to Europe and lived in Paris just a few months after we had moved there.

LASKEY:

That couldn't have set too well with your in-laws

WILSON:

I don't know. I never thought about that. They were not very courteous to my mother and a little cool to Sylvia and Paul too. But not rude, just kind of cool.

LASKEY:

Did it have anything to do with politics?

WILSON:

Oh, yes. Politics and the Jewish factor. The anti-Semitism. But Frank, Mike's father, was crazy about his granddaughter Rebecca. So that kind of brought the

family closer together when we started having children, which was in 1948. Rebecca was premature by six weeks. I smoked all during my pregnancy. So not only was it that she was premature, but I didn't have any milk for her. I came home from the hospital without her. She stayed in the hospital. She weighed three pounds, eleven ounces when she was born. She lost a few ounces, and of course she almost died, because they didn't know that much about taking care of—she stayed in the incubator for five weeks. I was trying to pump milk out of my breasts, not with very much success, so that Mike could rush over to the hospital every day with what little milk I could get for her. We were buying milk from other mothers. What do you call that? A wet nurse?

LASKEY:

A wet nurse.

WILSON:

Anyway, she's always been a small person. I don't think you've met her. Have you?

LASKEY:

No, I haven't.

WILSON:

Rebecca, the one who worked at KCET [Community Television of Southern California]?

LASKEY:

No.

WILSON:

She's had some physical problems that may or may not be related to having been premature. I'll tell you something bizarre now. She was born on March 13, 1948. My sac broke six weeks or so before she was delivered. Let's go back now. I had a child during the war. I told you about that, didn't I?

LASKEY:

Yes, it died after four days.

WILSON:

Yes, it died. My child born during the war who was a male infant, was born in exactly the same circumstances. My sac broke six weeks before the delivery date. And that baby was also born on March 13—March 13, 1944. Except that he didn't live. I'm not a spiritual or particularly superstitious person, and I don't believe in the spiritual world, particularly. I certainly think that there's a lot of unanswered questions, but I'm not a particularly religious person, nor do I believe in the spiritual world, particularly, but I do believe that there are a lot of unanswered things. Not that that's necessarily one of them. I think that it's just a coincidence.

LASKEY:

You have to keep your options open.

WILSON:

Keep open your options, that's right. [laughter]

LASKEY:

So this is 1948, and things were really rather good. Michael was writing. You were out of school. And you had had a baby that was going to make it—

WILSON:

Michael was writing. I was out of school, and I worked. I had graduated from college in 1947 and got pregnant. I went to work for the—I got two offers of jobs by different professors who had outside offices. One was Harwell Hamilton Harris, who was an absolutely brilliant architect and had been a student of Frank Lloyd Wright. You probably have heard of him.

LASKEY:

Oh, yes. In fact, I've seen some of his work. I wonder if, in some ways, you were influenced by him.

WILSON:

Oh, very influenced.

LASKEY:

Because I see in some of your work a lot of Harwell Hamilton Harris.

WILSON:

I would say that he was more influential on me probably than Neutra or Schindler. Harris's work I found beautiful in its marvelous complexity and its use of massing. It was really marvelous. It was much more brilliant than Neutra, by far, in my opinion. Harris combined a kind of warmth in his architecture that he picked up—picked up!— that he learned, I think, through being influenced by Frank Lloyd Wright. He was one of my fifth-year professors. They brought in active practitioners into the university for the fourth- and fifth-year students, mostly fifth-year students. Harris saw in me a talent that I didn't know I had. He also had a crush on me, or seemed to.

LASKEY:

He is, by reputation, an extremely nice man.

WILSON:

Oh, he was so sweet. He was so darling. I really had a crush on him, too, but I didn't make any moves on him. Anyway, he took me up to Barnsdall Park [Frank Lloyd Wright's Hollyhock House] before it was a museum, and we went through it. He talked about Barnsdall to me. It was a special field trip that he and I had together.

LASKEY:

So you were able to tour the Frank Lloyd Wright house.

WILSON:

With Harris, who had been his student.

LASKEY:

What a treat.

WILSON:

We went through the house, and he showed me and explained the whole complexity of this hillside, before it was commercial down below, when it still had signs on it saying, "Up with socialism" or something. I don't remember what. Mrs. Barnsdall was a great—

LASKEY:

Yes, she was a socialist.

WILSON:

We went through it like we were walking through a symphony. He said, "This is the introduction to the theme." As we walked up further, he said, "This is the development of the theme and the first movement. This is the allegro. This is the climactic—" Whatever it is at the end of the second movement. Then he said, "This is the variations on the theme as it starts to wind down." We walked down the hill together. I had goose flesh from that experience.

LASKEY:

I can understand that. It was such a beautiful house anyway.

WILSON:

Oh, the house was absolutely glorious. So he offered me a job working for him. I went up to his place after I had graduated. I was the only girl in my graduation class. I went to his place, which was in Elysian Park, I guess, some part of Elysian Park in the hillside there. His wife met me and took me down to his office. We talked a little bit about what jobs he was working on at that time and what he would want me to do. Then he called up later and said that his wife didn't think that it was wise for me to come work there. So whatever that was.

LASKEY:

Really?

WILSON:

Yes.

LASKEY:

Well, that's too bad.

WILSON:

Yes, I felt real bad about that. The sexual thing which I was so trying to conquer and weave through that aspect of being a woman architect. I've been more or less successful at it, mostly successful, but sometimes not. Sometimes it rears its head.

LASKEY:

Is this a problem that women architects have?

WILSON:

It is one of their problems. The main problem is being given the opportunity to really learn their field. It was at that time. I think the problem has eased up

some now. Women have never been fully accepted into the architecture world. Among the professionals, there's fewer women who were architects than probably any other professionals. Many more doctors percentagewise, many more lawyers percentagewise, and almost everything else, probably more engineers than there are women architects. It is so traditionally a macho profession.

LASKEY:

I don't know what the current figures are, but I know that as of 1970 women were only 3 percent of the total number of architects.

WILSON:

That's right. Now it has increased some.

LASKEY:

That was in 1970.

WILSON:

I think it's up to about 5 or 6 percent now. I think in the medical profession and the legal profession it must be 20 or 25 percent, maybe more. You know that this is the only country of the western developed nations where it's true. My gosh, in the communist countries 50 percent of the architects are women. In China, it was 35 percent. I was in China. It was 35 percent of the architects were women.

LASKEY:

It really is amazing.

WILSON:

In France, it is probably 15 or 20 percent. In Germany, Italy, and every country except the United States. We're a country that is very shallow culturally, I think. [laughter] We don't have that much background. So the men are more afraid of us—afraid of the women.

LASKEY:

Did you notice any difference toward your treatment while you were in USC than how you had been treated while you were up at Berkeley, as far as being a student in architecture?

WILSON:

That's a good question. I never had to think about that one. It probably eased up a little bit by the time I was at USC. But you understand, don't you, that the opening up of women in the labor movement as anything except the most menial, or secretarial jobs, which took place during World War II. I told you about that. The women taking the place of men in the aircraft plants and other big industries. That was like a big step forward. And then, after the war, it was like two steps back. All the magazines and the media and whatever it is said to women: "Go back to your places and start wearing more makeup and more

lingerie. Be more appealing to men. Your men are back from the war. Go be a wife again."

LASKEY:

Now, this is just at the time when you're about to start your career, too, after the war.

WILSON:

That's right, postwar.

LASKEY:

When this anti-women-in-the-workplace campaign begins.

WILSON:

Right. See, I had—when I didn't go to work for Harris, I went to work for another one of my fifth-year professors, who was Simon Eisner.

LASKEY:

Oh, really?

WILSON:

He offered me a job working for the city of Los Angeles. So I came to work as a civil servant, but I don't remember even taking any civil service examinations because I had a personal recommendation from the head of the Planning Department of the City of Los Angeles. That was in 1947. I became pregnant at the time that I was working for the city. By the way, that is an area where women are still not discriminated against. Many, many women worked in the planning departments, Building and Safety [Department], and things like that. More women become planners. There is probably a higher percentage of women who are planners [than] who are architects.

LASKEY:

In working for the city?

WILSON:

In working for government agencies.

LASKEY:

Did you go back to the city after Rebecca was born?

WILSON:

No. And I really—oh, that's another interesting story. I must tell you this story quickly. When I came to work for Eisner, we were doing some studies on Chavez Ravine. You know about Chavez Ravine?

LASKEY:

No. Well, Neutra and Alexander were working on a project to redo Chavez Ravine. This was before the ballpark went in.

WILSON:

Yes, Dodger Stadium. So we were doing all those studies. I didn't know about Neutra and Alexander doing that. We were doing all these studies to help the housing authority determine locations. One of them was land, for housing. One

of them was Chavez Ravine, where many Mexican-Americans were living in these little houses. It was absolutely heavenly up there. They had these little tiny houses. They had no sewage, no water. They had little outhouses. But the front yards—they had little fenced front yards. They had hollyhocks and vegetables. It was like a little town in itself. So we were going to come in there and take all of those houses out. These people that we took out were supposed to have first choice for the big housing that was to move back in. So all of them were cleared out. We were making these maps, studies, overlays. Oh, gosh, it was just so much activity. I felt like I was a real part of history doing all these things. I was acting out in real life my aspiration of why I became an architect: I was going to help to solve everybody's housing problems and help to solve all the racial problems and the problems of the world. So I go right into it with an enormous enthusiasm. Meanwhile, I'm getting more and more pregnant. We finally finished all these studies. We got all these people to move out of Chavez Ravine, and boom, it was sold to Walter F. O'Malley. Now, if ever there was some sort of shenanigans going on—there's got to have been. To get these people out of there so they could put in Dodger Stadium. And it was done through the housing authority. How it was done, I don't know. Who was responsible for it? Which councilman was bought out by O'Malley, who knows. But you know it's got to have been some sort of a scam.

LASKEY:

It was about, I think, that time that I moved to Los Angeles, or a little after that. And I do remember that it was a major source of controversy. In fact, I think it still is. People still talk about it. How did they do it?

WILSON:

How did they do it? The Mexican-Americans who were forcibly ejected—or rejected? Oh, what is it—? Evicted, excuse me, from this area. They knew [that they] had the first choice of the housing units that were being designed apparently by Neutra and Alexander. And Eisner was involved, yes. Eisner was very, very excited about the project, the fact that he was participating in redesigning that area so that we could put up all this beautiful housing. I'm not such a big fan of public housing now as I used to be because of certain experiences, especially in the East, of public housing that practically had to be torn down because the inhabitants absolutely destroyed them.

LASKEY:

Well, there's the famous example. I think it's in Saint Louis that the I.M. Pei building had to be blown up. The building's collapsing. I'm sure you've seen the photographs, a massive Corbusier-like structure. I'm sure it was Saint Louis. There are very famous photographs of the buildings collapsing after they've been dynamited. That was the reason. They were public housing, but they turned out to be really uninhabitable, unlivable.

WILSON:

How can anybody raise a family with six children on the fourteenth floor? I can't imagine it. Or on the eighteenth or thirtieth floor? Corbusier's concepts, I think, in public housing were very poor. They worked out pretty well in the Cite Radieuse in Marseilles, which I went down to visit, but his concept of the great high rise so that you'd have more empty space around for outdoor living was a total disaster. All it did was create vast wasteland in between for gangs. And they were never finished. They never had enough money to put in the proper playgrounds and proper childcare centers. Community centers were supposed to be in there. Or they functioned as parks. They never had the money to do that. Besides, the buildings were too far apart, so the sense of community that was in, say, Chavez Ravine, where these people were in little barrios, was totally lost. What did it matter that they had to go outside to go to the toilet? They had a sense of community. So it isolated everybody.

LASKEY:

Do you have any idea what happened to the people who got thrown out of Chavez Ravine?

WILSON:

No, I don't.

LASKEY:

Were they ever taken care of?

WILSON:

They relocated into some areas, I don't know, east of Boyle Heights. I think this was just previous to the area—Boyle Heights, which used to be Jewish, which became Chicano. They may have been moved to those areas. I don't know. This is really fascinating. I had forgotten—well, not forgotten. It's just that I don't think about it very much. I was part of that historical era.

LASKEY:

Some of the areas today where they are having a lot of gang problems, the projects, as they refer to them, the public housing programs—I think the ones in East L.A., the ones near downtown—were developed in the late 1940s under [Harry S.] Truman. And Lloyd Wright and Donald Parkinson and all the "important" architects worked on these programs for public housing. So it's possible those people, at least some of them, were put into these areas.

WILSON:

That could be. But still, it does not fit into the American dream, this kind of housing, especially for California. You expect to live in an apartment in New York. Stuyvesant Town, isn't that the one that was finally so totally destroyed by vandalism?

LASKEY:

Oh, there was the Bedford-Stuyvesant?

WILSON:

Yes, wasn't that the one that was put up under Robert Moses, the great housing administrator of New York?

LASKEY:

Quote, unquote.

WILSON:

Yeah. There's a lot of controversy around Moses.

LASKEY:

Yeah, around him too, I think so. I know that the Bedford-Stuyvesant was considered a battleground, a no-man's land.

WILSON:

Eventually I think it was torn down.

LASKEY:

It was probably closed. Or parts of it were closed, parts of it were burned down. Apparently it looked just just like an inferno.

WILSON:

You know, you can't totally blame the architects, but I think that the concept was wrong. It was during this period also that Jane Jacobs came out with her famous book—what was it called?—in which she went on an attack on the planners and the Corbusier concept [The Death and Life of Great American Cities]. Gosh, she made such a splash at the time that her book came out. Now I've forgotten the name of it. She made an attack on the planners for the great high rises which were so far apart. She said that a Corbusier concept didn't work here. It didn't even work in France because Corbusier didn't really have an opportunity to try it out. Jane Jacobs' book—you know. You probably remember it too. Many of us who were involved in the whole housing question that we were so concerned with at that time—

LASKEY:

That certainly turned around thinking on public housing and development.

WILSON:

Yeah. We were horrified by her book. But in looking back on it now, I think she was right. Of course, at that time, it was hard for us to accept it. Although she said some things that were just marvelous, like the fact that in the old downtown Bronx you had houses upstairs and you had retail downstairs. So all people had to do was go downstairs, go down to the old brownstones. Downstairs you had shopping, little shopping pushcarts. You bought your vegetables and your fresh things. There was a little delicatessen in one of the walls. She said there was a self-protective atmosphere in these areas. Now, maybe that is no longer true in New York. Maybe these too are battlegrounds—these areas where you had people living upstairs, and retail downstairs. I don't know.

LASKEY:

Well, our urban spaces in most cases seem to be developing into battlegrounds.

WILSON:

Right, but there was a period just some years after the big immigrations that my mother was a part of, when she lived in parts of New York, when there was a sense of community, even though they were blighted areas, or considered blighted areas. There was a self-protective atmosphere there. That is, if somebody's there, it is less likely you'll get beaten up, because you have all these people around you. Now it's different, because there are so many gangs and gangs are not going to stop the beatings.

LASKEY:

I think in Los Angeles you can still see some of that community, what an ethnic community can do. In Little Tokyo, which is probably one of the fastest-growing areas and certainly the most pointed-to-with-pride kind of an area as far as development, caring, public housing, housing for senior citizens, community concern. But I don't think of any other place in Los Angeles where you see that anymore.

WILSON:

It never had the same atmosphere that New York had, anyway. What Jane Jacobs was talking about was New York and Boston, I guess, some of the bigger cities in the East.

LASKEY:

I think your point was that public housing never really has been acceptable in the United States.

WILSON:

No, it really hasn't.

LASKEY:

Where it was a very acceptable kind of idea in Europe.

WILSON:

To some extent.

LASKEY:

So that the idea of public housing, whether the garden cities or whether they're like the German worker housing that [Ludwig] Meis van der Rohe and some of the others came out of, never had the same kind of acceptance here that it did. Maybe there wasn't the need. Germany, after all, was devastated and they needed housing. Maybe they were more willing to accept the idea of public housing.

WILSON:

Traditionally, the great movement to the United States was based upon people who were trying to get away from Europe. Maybe they were another kind of

people—I don't know—that didn't accept this life. I don't know what the answer is.

LASKEY:

How did you feel when the announcement was made about Dodger Stadium?

WILSON:

Oh, I was devastated to feel that I had anything to do with making that feasible. Now, of course, since then, I've been down at Dodger Stadium any number of times to see games. I'm glad it is there, but I have very sentimental feelings about how my own emotional commitment to what I was doing when I was working for Sy [Simon] Eisner and what we were doing then.

LASKEY:

Wasn't Rosalind Wyman somehow involved?

WILSON:

Yes, she was a councilwoman.

LASKEY:

She was a councilwoman. Somehow I think of her as being involved in helping to bring Dodger Stadium to Chavez. She was helpful—?

WILSON:

Yes, she was very good at one time.

LASKEY:

I have that remembrance.

WILSON:

Really? That she may have been involved in getting Dodger Stadium there?

LASKEY:

Yeah, I just wondered if you have that remembrance, or if you remember her?

WILSON:

I don't remember her well enough. No, I think it was—

LASKEY:

Because she was, I think—wasn't Roz Wyman the first woman councilwoman in Los Angeles? So she must have been very visible. No?

WILSON:

She was very visible. I don't remember what her role was. For some reason, I thought she was a liberal. Maybe she was involved. I don't know.

LASKEY:

No, I think she was a liberal. Both she and her husband [Victor Wyman]. But somehow there was a connection. I don't know the politics of Chavez Ravine.

WILSON:

It would be interesting to find out what the whole story is in the back of that. Somebody's probably written about it, just like somebody wrote about the whole water scandal in Southern California. Many people have written about it,

getting water into Southern California under the editor of the *Los Angeles Times*, the old editor.

LASKEY:

Chandler. Harry [Chandler], I think. Or Norman [Chandler]?

WILSON:

Norman.

LASKEY:

Harry. Harry, I think. Then Norman was his son. Then Otis [Chandler].

WILSON:

Right. So there's got to be somebody who has written a story about how Dodger Stadium got built there. It ought to be written, anyway, if it hasn't been. So politically—you asked me what my role was politically.

1.9. TAPE NUMBER: VI, Side One (April 2, 1989)

WILSON:

It was the first example of my disenchantment with the ideals with which I had started architecture, which was that I felt that being in architecture I could help poor people. I was always going to work for the poor and the downtrodden and try to raise them up, as I raised up the whole world. This was the first example of the fact that the power structure was so deeply entrenched that individuals, even large groups, can't do very much.

LASKEY:

Now, this is the Chavez Ravine public housing program.

WILSON:

Well, that, yeah. It was a shock to me because we had all such—

LASKEY:

Do you remember specifically the politics of any of that?

WILSON:

I wasn't deeply enough into it. I honestly don't. I was only there for about a year and I became pregnant. And I—did I mention this story? I came in one day, was about seven months along and—I had had my drafting table where I worked, and they had put a piece of plywood on it and cut a big semicircle into it. [laughter]

LASKEY:

No! You hadn't mentioned that.

WILSON:

I came in and sat down with this big drafting table that had been cut out to my shape! So I figured that they decided that it was time for me to go home. So shortly thereafter I went back and had my child. Anyway, the baby was premature, so it was just as well. But the politics, no. I was not—it was just that

I knew by the time that I left there that the whole thing had collapsed, and that all of this wonderful work that had been done by Frank Wilkinson and all those people who worked so hard to get this done, and getting all those Mexican-Americans out of there, that all was going down the drain. I would say that this was my first touch with reality after being a schoolgirl.

LASKEY:

Well, the whole conflict then between [Fletcher] Bowron and, was it Norris Poulson—?

WILSON:

Yes.

LASKEY:

And the real estate lobby. You were there.

WILSON:

I really wasn't there in touch with—we were in an ivory tower up on the very top floor of the city hall, on the twenty-fifth floor. You know where the cone, the pyramidal form takes place?

LASKEY:

Really?

WILSON:

Yes, that's the room we were in. It was a beautiful room.

LASKEY:

I know the room! That's where the observation—

WILSON:

Now they've turned it over to observation. They even have a lunch thing. I don't know what's up there now but that was our room.

LASKEY:

It's a meeting room. Really!

WILSON:

It was just wonderful, because we used to be able to go out on the balcony and see the city—and that's when you could see the city! [laughter]

LASKEY:

You really were in an ivory tower, then.

WILSON:

We really were.

LASKEY:

Almost literally.

WILSON:

Literally.

LASKEY:

Before you went with the Los Angeles Planning Department, you had worked in other drafting departments.

WILSON:

Summers.

LASKEY:

I don't think that we had discussed that in detail.

WILSON:

No. The [Los Angeles] City Planning Department was the first job I got after I graduated. I went directly there. Then after that I had the baby, and so whatever it was, six months later or so—then it was a lot of political things going on that started in Hollywood that time, which I—how active was I? I was active on a neighborhood basis. And I worked a lot with other architects who had similar political beliefs, and we started a group called the—I don't know exactly what year this was, but I think it was like '48 or '49. We started a group called the Architectural Panel. It was myself, David Hyun, and [J.] Marx Ayres. We were the three. Marx Ayres is an electrical engineer who is still active in [Southern California] Library for Social [Studies and] Research. It was an immediate smash. What we were trying to do was establish a forum for architects who wanted to talk about architecture relative to the whole social structure—the whole social-international structure. So we always had speakers and then we had long discussions. Speakers only spoke for a few minutes, mostly it was a question of discussion amongst us. Or we would have a panel of speakers. And this thing took off incredibly. I just can't believe it. Just in the attempt to raise the level of political awareness of our fellow architects and engineers, it was such a successful concept that, even after the three of us no longer were active in it, it went on. They had joint meetings with the museum and it became a gigantic organization. I don't know whatever happened to it. It finally fell apart, but I think it went on for—even after we went to Europe they were still going strong, and they would have rented auditoriums. Before, we used to meet in people's living rooms. [laughter] I really was kind of pleased. I thought that we had some sort of an instinct about providing a possibility for people to get together and talk about other issues than just the aesthetics of architecture, or what period of architecture we're into. We talked about social issues relative to the built environment.

LASKEY:

Well, that's fascinating. The AIA [American Institute of Architects], were they doing anything like that at that time?

WILSON:

No! That's—we were trying to fill a gap. We thought there was a gap there. And apparently there was a gap that was really needed because it went on for so many years. Even after, as I say. Our beginning group sat around the living room one night and decided this was a good idea. [laughter] Well, anyway, at the same time, then, I went back to work. I think my first job was for [Richard]

Neutra. Was it for Neutra and [Robert E.] Alexander? Yes. That was my first job. They had several very interesting projects together, but their association didn't last very long.

LASKEY:

Now, how did you happen to end up with Neutra and Alexander?

WILSON:

Well, I wanted to work for Neutra because he was very famous. And [I was] following through on what I had done when I was in college. When I went to apply for a job there, he had set up a separate partnership. So he was functioning in a parallel way. He had his little—he had his beautiful house down at the lake, and he had his own practice. He did primarily residential [architecture] at that time. He did a lot of other things. He was working on some public housing things. Alexander had come from a great success with Baldwin Hills [Village] so they joint-ventured or became partners on another level. The Neutra and Alexander office was up on—oh, what was the name of that? It's another street that's up higher and parallel to Silver Lake Boulevard that goes around the lake.

LASKEY:

Was it Glendale Boulevard?

WILSON:

Glendale Boulevard, that's where we were.

LASKEY:

Well, I think that Alexander and Neutra formed their partnership almost as a direct result of Alexander's being interested in the Chavez Ravine project.

WILSON:

Really? I didn't know that.

LASKEY:

And that Howard [L.] Holtzendorff, who was head of the city planning department [Housing Authority] at that time, felt that Alexander wasn't a strong enough name by himself. He needed an important name, and that's how Neutra came into the picture, which is interesting because that was the project that ultimately you ended up working on when you went to the city planning department.

WILSON:

Yes. However, by the time I got to working for Neutra and Alexander, that was no longer a project in the office. They had several other projects though, some of which were multiple-housing projects. Plus the Orange Coast College campus. And then I had a project that I was in charge of, which was the Assistance League child development center, which was set up for the psychiatric observation of disturbed children. It had an outer structure where the children played, and then they had the whole inner structure, which was the

instructional area, where the children were observed through a one-way mirror. They were observed everywhere. That is, the whole inner structure observed the children at play in the room. Outdoors, you could see through windows into the bathroom facilities—windows everywhere. I mean, they could see everywhere. So it was a kind of an interesting project for me to work on. It really gave me a wonderful background in doing child development centers. Since then I've done about six or seven. Not the same kind. This was very special, although many of them have had viewing rooms in them for the Psychology Department if they were in connection with the University or with the hospitals.

LASKEY:

Well, this was the one for the Assistance League. Where was that?

WILSON:

It was on Hollywood Boulevard.

LASKEY:

Is it still there?

WILSON:

Somebody told me it was being used for something else now, but I'm not positive.

LASKEY:

Working for Neutra-Alexander, were you particularly interested in the International style?

WILSON:

Oh, yes. I was very much a part of the International style. That's not the only thing I did while I was there, because I also got involved with Neutra in the sense that I used to go down to the other building once in a while. I'd go in to see the Great Man. He always did his work in bed.

LASKEY:

Did he really! [laughter]

WILSON:

Well, as far as I know, he did most of his design work in bed. He had a dumbwaiter right beside him. His draftsmen—who were not paid, they were from all over the world—came there, and they were put up in the building. That is, they had room and board. This was a whole different scene, because we on the upper office were paid. We had a regular drafting room where everybody got a so-called living salary. It wasn't very much, but it was something. But these people down there just went to work for Neutra like the whole atelier system in France and in Europe, where you go and you work for the great master.

LASKEY:

Yeah, you essentially apprentice yourself.

WILSON:

That's right. Now and then I would get to see the great master if we had some designs. He looked at every single design that went out of the office, no matter which office it was in. I took some drawings up to him in his bedroom. He was propped up there with about six pillows, with a drafting table that sat right in front of him on his lap, you see. Well, it was a kind of a structure like this [illustrates]. He would make those beautiful sketches, where you'd get glimpses of the building through a lot of foliage. They were marvelous drawings. There have been exhibits of them. But you just got a kind of essence of the building without really seeing it. Then the people downstairs would take over this somewhat impressionistic drawing he had made and turn it into a building. So I went up there to his bedroom. He joked a little bit about my coming up to his bedroom, but it wasn't very serious. I sat there, and I was kind of embarrassed by being there. But he asked me a few polite questions about myself. He had on his silk pajamas. He was sitting up in bed. [laughter] I don't think he was sick; that's just the way he liked to work. His son [Dion Neutra], you know, became an architect and his wife [Dione Neidermann Neutra], and they had these soirees. Did you know about his soirees, where she played the cello?

LASKEY:

Yes. I have heard, and until very recently, I think, she continued to do that.

WILSON:

She still went on. Yeah. Well, you know, the wives try to carry on. I'm saying this because the Taliesen West, Frank Lloyd Wright, had the same thing. The whole place was in the never-never land of architecture. I'm putting it down because I think Frank Lloyd Wright was the greatest architect we've ever produced. But there still was a kind of a cult around Frank Lloyd Wright, and around Neutra, too. People came from all over the world to be with him. He sent one of his young men, who was quite a capable young man, who had come from Switzerland to work with him—I was a job captain on this Assistance League building, and he sent him up to the other building to work with me and do some drafting. And he refused to work with me, because he said no woman was ever going to tell him what to do.

LASKEY:

Oh, really!

WILSON:

This young Swiss graduate student. He asked to be permitted to work on something else or under somebody else.

LASKEY:

Was that your first—?

WILSON:

It was my first really dramatic encounter with male chauvinism, yes, in an architectural office.

LASKEY:

Do you remember your reaction, how you felt, what you did? What kind of support did you get from Neutra and Alexander?

WILSON:

None.

LASKEY:

None.

WILSON:

You know, after all, the guy was working for nothing, and he was living down at Neutra's house, so he could hardly force him to work—he had come [for] Neutra. He wasn't about to work with a woman who had just graduated from college herself, and not too long ago, just several years out of school. I didn't have my license at that time, so he was very insulted that that's what they had done with him. Anyway, I didn't do anything. I didn't make an issue of it. If he didn't want to work with me, okay.

LASKEY:

Well, wasn't it somewhat unusual for them to have made you job captain?

WILSON:

Well, that already was a rather unusual step. Somebody else had started the job who moved to Hawaii or something. I had been working very closely with the other job captain, so I was more familiar with it than anybody else. I took over where he had left off and completed the job. Job captain is just a name they gave to somebody who was in charge of the production of the construction drawings.

LASKEY:

But still, considering the chauvinistic nature of architecture in general and the particular time that you're talking about, that certainly was a step forward.

WILSON:

Absolutely. As a matter of fact, I think it was probably more Alexander than it was Neutra. [Alexander] was married to a rather strong woman. I remember her coming into the office from time to time, because she was a spectacular woman. She was about five feet eleven and just gorgeous, a blond, Viking-type of a woman. I don't know what their relationship was, although I understand he had rather stormy relationships with almost all of his women. I don't know whether he told you that part or not [in "Architecture, Planning, and Social Responsibility," interviewed by Marlene L. Laskey, 1986 and 1987]. [laughter]

LASKEY:

Partly!

WILSON:

But she was a very strong person, and so she certainly must have made him aware of women and their role. [laughter] This is all conjecture. I don't know. But it was Alexander who gave me this opportunity.

LASKEY:

Well, I think—

WILSON:

I've been very lucky in my career, very lucky in things like that. [laughter] You're looking at me skeptically.

LASKEY:

[laughter] No, I'm just waiting for enlightenment!

WILSON:

No, well, I just mean the things like that that happened. I was able to take it over because somebody else quit, and then you're in the right place at the right time. I'd say a lot of that has happened. Now, if I was a person who was not competent, of course it wouldn't have happened. But being in the right place at the right time and having the energy and the desire to do it has been—there's a lot of very fortunate things that have happened to me in my lifetime, and that was one of them, because I was able to see it through to the completion of the job. I went out on the job and I did construction observation, which was way over my head. It was a very complex building. Because Neutra, in order to get his look of a building that was of ultra-simplicity and classic lines—the formal aspect of the thing was so important to him, but the convolutions you had to go through to get that you wouldn't believe. It was a very complex building to build. You know, to get a simple room like this, inside are steel I-beams that go across there. Even though it looks like it was just made naturally out of wood or something. No, it's got a complexity. [laughter] Or if he wanted an exposed beam in a room and the beam couldn't take the span, he would enclose the beam. He would enclose a steel beam inside of a false-wood structure just to give it that wood look. I'm not saying that's bad. Now it's done all the time. But at that time—although now we have materials where you don't have to do that. We have glued-laminated beams or steel I-beams, which would take the load of a long span or trusses or whatever. There were certain things that he did to keep the appearance of simplicity. Keeps lightness. You have a very light-looking building, and actually it had a very complex, heavy structure. [laughter]

LASKEY:

Did you learn these kinds of ideas from Neutra?

WILSON:

Oh, I learned a lot from Neutra. And I don't mean—I'm just saying that it was a little bit phony. But what I did learn from Neutra, which has carried through to this day, is that every surface and mass is articulated. In other words, you don't just have a wall that kind of dies into another wall and another wall takes off.

This wall is articulated, and you have a space there which was painted black or something to give a sense of a mass that you—the whole room or the whole building was like a Mondrian in three dimensions. I'm not explaining this very well, but—

LASKEY:

No, no, you are, actually. I know exactly what you're talking about.

WILSON:

Oh? [laughter] Yes. Or where you have a wall, and sometimes he would paint it another color to articulate it. But you couldn't have a plain wall where you had one stripe of color and another. That was unthinkable, because that wall was this way, and then you had another wall which came and just barely—but you could see there was an articulation there.

LASKEY:

Very crisp.

WILSON:

Yes. He did that in his massing, too. The only criticism I would ever have of Neutra is that he practiced architecture in California, and he was one of the most important of the International architects who had come to the United States, but he never changed.

LASKEY:

No, he never did.

WILSON:

He always was the same. That is, he came with this Bauhaus concept, and he never really—he felt this was the only kind of architecture. Whereas I think there were other architects who were more creative, such as [Rudolph] Schindler. I've talked to you about Schindler.

LASKEY:

In fact, that was a question that I was going to ask you. You had talked just a few minutes ago about Neutra having his cadre of disciples. I was thinking about your stories about [Rudolph M.] Schindler, and that you worked with the two most important architects in Southern California, Schindler and Neutra.

WILSON:

I think they were. I was very lucky.

LASKEY:

Yet Neutra had this enormous following and Schindler never really had that following. It's probably not a fair question to ask you, but why do you think that was?

WILSON:

Because Neutra was one of the most marketing-aware architects I've ever known. He marketed himself, and he was brilliant at it. His wife was right there. She practically was in charge of his marketing. They had articles. They

had interviews. They were in contact with the newspapers. Whenever a new building just came out, immediately all the newspapers knew about it. The magazines knew about it, and they were doing articles. They were getting it photographed by [Julius] Shulman. Shulman was the big architectural photographer at that time, and he and Neutra worked very, very closely. He photographed every single one of Neutra's buildings.

LASKEY:

I think he started out with Neutra.

WILSON:

He probably did, yes.

LASKEY:

I think the Lovell House was one of his first projects.

WILSON:

Yes. By the way, I just saw today that a man I worked with on several jobs, on joint ventures, Carl Maston, had just gotten some kind of a prize. I just saw it in the real estate section today. He'd gotten a prize for a lifetime of achievement. What was this? At USC [University of Southern California]?

LASKEY:

Could it be out at Cal Poly [California Polytechnic State University, Pomona], by any chance? Because I know he did the architecture building.

WILSON:

I know he did the theater arts building at Pomona and the architecture building at Cal Poly. Those were mentioned in the article. I was trying to think who—was it Los Angeles-Beautiful or something like that has given him a big—? I don't know. But I was very pleased to hear about it, because Carl has always felt that he was unappreciated, not as appreciated as Neutra and [Raphael] Soriano and as some of the others. And I must say for Carl he really tried to keep up with new technical developments, and he didn't stay in one mold all of his life. Although he was very interested, he basically stayed an International-type architect, but he was not quite as rigid as Neutra. I had a very interesting experience working with him.

LASKEY:

Now, that was a little bit later, wasn't it?

WILSON:

It was just a few years ago. It's like six, seven years ago, since I've been in Ojai, that I did these joint ventures with Carl.

LASKEY:

That's what I thought.

WILSON:

But he was very alive and functioning at that time, and doing some beautiful work, too. But I did not work with him at that time. I just knew who he was from a distance.

LASKEY:

There was a lot of beautiful work being done at that time—

WILSON:

Yes.

LASKEY:

With that whole collection, but particularly in residential design in Los Angeles.

WILSON:

Right.

LASKEY:

And I—there's somebody whose name is right on the tip of my tongue that I want to ask you about, and I—that's terrible not to be able to—do you know the name?

WILSON:

Another architect?

LASKEY:

Another architect who was very underappreciated, who died a year or two ago.

WILSON:

Gregory Ain! Was it Gregory Ain?

LASKEY:

Gregory Ain? No, it wasn't Gregory Ain, although his name began with an "a."

WILSON:

Gregory Ain was also a very good architect, an excellent architect.

LASKEY:

Did you know Gregory Ain?

WILSON:

Oh, yes. Sure. But he was sort of leftist in his—

LASKEY:

Yeah. But he and Harwell Hamilton Harris were very, I think, similar at about the same level, and, again, rather underappreciated for the work that they did.

WILSON:

Yes, they were. Harris is kind of an "in" architect. We architects know about Harris and really appreciate him, because Harris kind of combined what [Charles] Greene and [Henry] Greene had done into a kind of a more comfortable, warmer environment than—

LASKEY:

I think we mentioned that before when we talked about your involvement with—

WILSON:

Harris, yes.

LASKEY:

As your teacher, that your later work that you do up here, you can see elements of Harwell Hamilton Harris.

WILSON:

Oh, there's no question about it. I would say I was very influenced by Harris, very influenced by him. Probably combining my experience working with Neutra and Harris—there was a kind of a warmth and humanity about Harris's work that I really appreciated. It has influenced me, yes. It's interesting that you observed that. [laughter]

LASKEY:

Well, I think it's the softness. It's maybe the wood, perhaps, but a definite lightness, softness—whatever the word is—that softens the lines of the International style, the harshness of the modernists.

WILSON:

Well, one of the things I share with Harris is I'm terribly interested in the people who use the buildings. I'm very user-oriented. When you're user-oriented, you have to design that way. You want to know how are people going to feel in a space, not whether everything's articulated, like Neutra did. Neutra didn't write that way, though. When he was writing, his writing was—he's the one who said that "I can guarantee that I can design a house where the couple will get divorced within a year."

LASKEY:

That's right. We talked about that.

WILSON:

So he was aware of the people in the house but not in the same way I think that Harris—Frank Lloyd Wright, too, except that Frank Lloyd Wright built to his own scale. Everything, his doors were smaller. He was five foot seven or five foot six, I don't know. Everything was kind of—but he created cozy areas, cozy inglenooks that were absolutely delightful, which how could you help but love? Because this is the way people are. They like to get into little groups and get crowded up against each other.

LASKEY:

It's true.

WILSON:

Yes.

LASKEY:

Which you don't see in Neutra.

WILSON:

No, you don't.

LASKEY:

I mean, everything is absolutely pristine, doesn't leave you room for clutter or whatever.

WILSON:

Right.

LASKEY:

So when you start a design, then, you start with the purpose of the people who are going to use that.

WILSON:

Oh, yeah. I design from the inside out, no question about it. But you're designing at so many different levels at the same time, where you're designing. I have two new houses I'm doing now, actually three, and I want to know everything I can possibly know about the families. When you start to know what their needs are—you're designing on so many different levels at the same time, either orientation of the house when the sun comes up, where the trees are, and where's the driveway coming in. There's the public areas and the private areas, and what view do you want out of what part of the house? And how do they spend their time within the rooms? What is their relationship with their children? Are they close to their children? Do they want to be real close, or do they want them to be close but not too close? What side of the bed do they get out of? [laughter] And do they sleep in a king-sized bed or do they want two separate areas to sleep in? You know, there's all sorts of—are they gourmet cooks, or maybe they don't care very much about food. Or who does the cooking? I get very involved in all of that. Very involved when I do a house.

LASKEY:

Right.

WILSON:

When I do anything. It seems to me that you have to do it that way.

LASKEY:

That's if you're going to be concerned about the person who's living there—

WILSON:

Right.

LASKEY:

—as opposed to your philosophy. If you're imposing your style or your philosophy on someone else, then I think you would start from a different point of view.

WILSON:

Well, particularly in housing. In schools, well, I don't know. The schools are similar, too. You have to really know what their point of view is toward

education and the relationship of the children with the teachers, whether they line them up militarily or do they have a better relationship with the children?

LASKEY:

Of course, Neutra was known for his school designs. Did you work on any of those? I mean, Orange Coast College—

WILSON:

The Assistance League, yes.

LASKEY:

And the Assistance League.

WILSON:

And the college.

LASKEY:

But he did the famous elementary schools—

WILSON:

The university. No, I was not involved with that at all. Yeah, I know he's known for that. I think he did some wonderful schools, the lighting and the quality of the light was absolutely beautiful. He knew how to use daylighting in buildings to get the maximum use of light without glare. He was very, very good at that.

LASKEY:

Now, was he helpful to you?

WILSON:

Personally?

LASKEY:

When you were doing the Assistance League building, in that element?

WILSON:

No, by the time I got the building and I was the job captain, the building had already been designed. He and Alexander had gone over the design. They really were in charge of design. But conceptually, as I said, you know, he had these kind of vague-looking designs, and somebody else made reality out of them. And Alexander too. But it's interesting, because I'm doing the same thing myself now as an architect who's been around a long time. I don't feel like sitting down and making working drawings anymore.

LASKEY:

Oh, you've paid your dues! You don't have to do that anymore.

WILSON:

I've paid my dues, and now I get to have the fun of just doing the designing. Oh, I do a lot of marketing, but [I'm] just doing the designing, and somebody else does the working drawings. [laughter]

LASKEY:

That's great.

WILSON:

Yeah, I'll show them!

LASKEY:

You've earned it!

WILSON:

Anyway, I worked there for a while, and then what happened? Oh, I know what happened. A group of my fellow architects and I decided to open our own office, and many of them I had political connections with. We had our little political club. David Hyun and—I hope he doesn't object to my saying this—a few of the others. Then there were some guys also who were kind of liberal-thinking people. We all got together, about six of us, and decided to open a kind of socialistic endeavor. It didn't last very long.

LASKEY:

Oh, that's too bad.

WILSON:

No, it didn't. We didn't have enough work to really make a living for six people.

LASKEY:

Now, what period are we talking about?

WILSON:

Then later many of those people went out and had very, very successful careers. So it wasn't that it hurt us in any way. Now, we are, let's see. That was, let's see. Rebecca [Wilson] was a baby, and we lived right off of Glendale Boulevard. That was 1950. So the beginning of the fifties, I guess about that time. There's all sorts of things that were going on at that time, too. The Hollywood Ten. Mike [Michael Wilson] was very, very active in the defense of the ten. I would go to demonstrations, but other than that I was pretty much tied up with the architects and the Architectural Panel. Whatever I was doing was more on another level. I was not as close to the Hollywood people as some of the other wives, because of having my own profession this way.

LASKEY:

Now, when did Michael's problems begin with HUAC [House Committee on Un-American Activities]?

WILSON:

He was called in 1951. In '51, I think he testified. He testified in September of 1951.

LASKEY:

Now, that's just about the same period that we're talking about.

WILSON:

It was just previous, yeah.

LASKEY:

It was just a little bit before.

WILSON:

Yeah, it was a little bit before, but it was beginning to start then. So the whole fear atmosphere began, where you'd go out the door and there'd be somebody, there'd be two men with hats on sitting outside in a car. We were very, very careful on the telephone. Sometimes we were followed, and sometimes our house was broken into. You just knew. I just knew that this was—you could tell. Not that anything was disturbed, it's just enough was disturbed for you to know that people were coming into your—

LASKEY:

Somebody had been there.

WILSON:

Yeah, looking through your papers, whatever they were. Mike's desk. We were very, very careful on the telephone not to say anything except "What do you want for dinner?" or something like that. My sister had a friend who was a kind of a "Dorothy Parker type" of a woman. She called up Sylvia [Gussin Jarrico] and asked when was the next meeting of the Communist Party? [laughter] Because she wanted to come!

LASKEY:

Oh, god! [laughter]

WILSON:

Sylvia acted like she didn't know what the hell she was talking about. So the next time she saw her, she said, "You've really got to be more careful on the phone and not say things like that." She was such an outrageous lady anyway—very, very funny. So next time she called up, she said to Sylvia, "My mother's in town, and she'd like to know where she could get some marijuana! [laughter] Could I pick it up next Tuesday night about seven thirty?" [laughter] Or "What evening would be convenient for me to come pick it up?" She was absolutely hilarious. Well, there were a lot of funny things that went on during that entire period.

LASKEY:

Well, I would think that that might be the only way you would survive that sort of pressure is with a certain amount of humor.

WILSON:

Oh, yeah.

LASKEY:

Without your going totally out of your mind.

WILSON:

Absolutely. You know, there's a new book out—what is it called? It's called *The Romantic Left* something like that. [Vivian Gornick, *The Romance of American Communism*]. It's a brand-new book. It talks about how romantic we

all were, about how idealistic we all were about what we possibly could achieve. Because this was the nature of the left movement: [it] was one of making life better for everybody. None of us would believe any of the terrible things they were saying about [Joseph] Stalin. We didn't believe a word of it. We said, "That's an invention of the Hearst newspapers." Because to think that he could be a monster and be killing his own people was just unthinkable. They're just trying to disenchant us with this, or to disenchant everybody with what the Soviet Union could accomplish. Of course, we thought that they were all eating strawberries over there with cream. Because we had a joke about that. I'm saying that because that was referring back to a joke. Somebody says, "When we have the revolution—" Oh, there were two Russians. They were talking and they say, "When the revolution comes—" He was convincing him. He said, "We will have everything we want, everything. And everybody will live the wonderful life. You'll have borscht with rich sauces and meat in it and you'll have a wonderful life and you'll have cars and a yacht and for dessert you'll have strawberries and cream." You know this story?

LASKEY:

No.

WILSON:

And the guy says, "Well, what if I don't like strawberries and cream?" He said, "Come the revolution, you're going to eat strawberries and cream and like it!" [laughter]

1.10. TAPE NUMBER: VI, Side Two (April 2, 1989)

WILSON:

We haven't gone very far chronologically, have we?

LASKEY:

Well, it was a very complicated time.

WILSON:

Very complex, yes.

LASKEY:

I mean, so much happened that would affect what was going to happen to your future.

WILSON:

Right. At the same time that I was developing myself as an architect, I also had my children [Rebecca and Rosanna Farrow Wilson], who were very tiny. Mike was being hounded like so many other people were, and the Hollywood Ten were on trial. I was trying to be a useful member of society. We had this Architectural Panel thing going where we were trying to raise everybody's level and make architects more aware of their social responsibilities. My life has had

so many different layers to it that it's hard to get everything put together in my own mind. This is helping me. It's almost like catharsis to get it all out and to think about how I did everything. I came home, cooked dinner, shopped and cooked dinner.

LASKEY:

It seems to me like I'm always asking you the same question, but how did you cope? With all of these things going on simultaneously, what about your children, how did you handle them?

WILSON:

Well, I think that my children did not get enough attention from me, and they certainly feel that way. Because their idea of what I did was I just dropped them out of my womb and immediately went to work and immediately went out to change the world, you see. [laughter] I didn't feel that way. Because when I got up in the morning I was with them in the morning until either I took them over to the nursery school or eventually to elementary school. So I was with them in the morning, preparing them and getting them dressed at the same time I was getting dressed. Mike got up later and fixed his own breakfast. He worked very late at night, and he was a late sleeper in the morning. But I was with the children, and then I went to work. I had a woman who came in in the afternoons when they came back early from school, because they got off at two o'clock and I didn't get off until four thirty. Then I had to travel from where I was working to get home. Then as soon as I got home I was in charge. If I went out and did some shopping, I took them with me. We did our nightly shopping. Then I was in the kitchen cooking dinner.

LASKEY:

How about Michael? Did he ever take care of the children?

WILSON:

No, he didn't really. When they were older he would—Michael was not I mean, he was crazy about the girls, but he really was not all that comfortable with being a father. And the girls have suffered from that. They've suffered from that, and they've suffered from the fact that I was not a mother who was totally dedicated to her children. Particularly my daughter Rosanna [who] is such a consummate mother now that she's given up her painting. She's extremely talented. I think eventually she'll get back to it. She's thirty-eight years old. She's teaching children art, but she's not really painting herself. So many of the wonderful things you see around in my house are done by her. She's very talented. And she is an unusually dedicated mother, absolutely compulsive about it, I think. I'm not being critical of her. I just wonder if the fact that I had been so busy changing the world and being a political person and being a professional person and a wife, whether I could have been with them more. Yes, I think so.

LASKEY:

But you were also doing this at a time when most women were not doing this. I mean, if you were doing that today, they might not feel quite as abandoned. Because I think more women today are doing what you did then. But in the fifties, very few women were doing what you were doing—as far as being professional then.

WILSON:

No, there weren't as many. But I think now because you can't even—a young family can't even exist and have anything that they want unless both mother and father work. And inasmuch as women make up—what 49 percent of the work force—? It may even be beyond that now, I don't know. Then just in order to have a little house and have enough food on the table, both people have to work. In poor families, it's even more drastic. The men are out of work and the women are doing all the work. The kids are latchkey kids, or they're in inadequate child care facilities of some sort. They have no place to go in the afternoons when everybody's working. The fathers are not looking after them. In black families, it's even worse.

LASKEY:

Yeah, it doesn't seem to have gotten better.

WILSON:

No, it doesn't. I think there's an awareness at certain levels of the child care situation. Certain corporations, I understand it, in New York and maybe in some of the big corporations are setting up child facilities.

LASKEY:

Finally.

WILSON:

I'm very interested in that movement. In my own office I have only women now. That was kind of accidental, but when it happened it was kind of nice. And so my secretary is pregnant. She's five months pregnant, and we're already talking about where we're going to set up the nursery in the office.

LASKEY:

Wonderful!

WILSON:

I have a woman draftsman who is beginning to see her biological clock ticking away, because she's about thirty now, thirty-one, and she wants a family, too. So I think she's trying to get pregnant, and when it happens we'll have a little nursery. If it works out, I'm very interested to see how it's going to work. They're both wonderful women, and I will keep them as long as I possibly can. So for me it's wonderful if they can do it, and for them it's wonderful. They need the money. We'll find a place, we'll just do it.

LASKEY:

Well, it definitely is a coming trend, finally an acknowledgment that this is something that has to be attended to when it's been ignored for so long.

WILSON:

So I'm very happy that I've had this training in child development centers. I mean, not that the ones I was doing were so huge. I did one for Vandenberg Air Force Base that was for about 250 children. That's the biggest one I've done. The one at Cal State [California State University], Los Angeles, was for about 120 children. But on this scale I'm very interested in this movement and wish I knew how to market my skills so that I could become more involved in it. But I haven't found a way yet. I may have to go to some marketing experts and see if they have any thoughts about it.

LASKEY:

And find a PR [public relations] firm.

WILSON:

Yes.

LASKEY:

Because this certainly is a need. It's a wonderful idea.

WILSON:

It is. I'm very excited about it. But anyway, you asked the question, and it's a question that is asked to me very often when I've given lectures to young women. I'm very often asked to lecture. I'm very sorry I missed this last thing at UCLA, but I got the flu and couldn't do it. The last meeting of the Association of Women in Architecture.

LASKEY:

Yeah. At the Biltmore [Hotel].

WILSON:

I was on one of the panels, a panel speaker, and I just couldn't make it. I was just too sick. But I've done it a lot. I used to speak at Cal Poly [San Luis Obispo]. For ten years I was speaking there and the other conferences that were held. All the women ask me—I can talk about—I can remember going down to San Diego and speaking before the Women in Architecture Association. I finished. I showed my slides of my work and talked a little bit about my office. There were about thirty women, and several of them had brought their husbands. It was a very nice group. I spoke in somebody's house. It was all very comfortable. I got through. I gave my philosophy of architecture and all that. When I got through, the first question that was asked me was what you just asked me, "How did you be an architect and a mother and a wife and a community person?" Because in addition to all this—this was later—I got very active in the community when I got to Ojai. "And all of these things all at the same time?" They all want to know the same thing.

LASKEY:

But it's exhausting to think about it.

WILSON:

They didn't want to discuss my philosophy of architecture. They didn't want to discuss my buildings that I had done. That was not it. They wanted to know, "How did you do it? How am I going to do it? I mean, am I going to get into a marriage that I can't handle because I'm so busy? Or what do you do?" So I just have a standard answer for that, which is true, that's how it's worked out in my life. And that is, "I was not a perfect mother. I was not a perfect architect. I wasn't perfect in anything. You do the best you can, and you have to decide at certain times in your life what your priorities are." I mean, if your kid has chicken pox, you're not going to go to work that day or several days. Either your boss understands it or he doesn't. If he doesn't understand it, you're working for the wrong person. Or if your husband is in some sort of a crisis, you're going to be taking care of him, as you assume that if you're in a crisis, your husband would be interested in your crisis. It doesn't always work that way, but—

LASKEY:

Well, the crisis that your husband was involved in was so pervasive.

WILSON:

Yes.

LASKEY:

It was so much more than most women have to deal with, and that's on top of all these other things. I mean, being a wife, a mother, and a businesswoman all at the same time. We know that that's difficult. But then, you had this other thing on top of it, which seems to me would have had to have permeated your entire life.

WILSON:

Of course it did. Not to mention all the cloak- and-dagger that went with it. The FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] after us and all that fear atmosphere.

LASKEY:

I mean, how did you prime yourself to continue? How did you go to work every day? How did you and Michael deal with the situation together? How did you get through that period?

WILSON:

[Pause] Well, for one thing I'm a high-energy person. I'm not as much now as I was then. But even now, to continue at my age, I've got to be a high-energy type person. Certain things get pushed aside for a while. They have to. There was another aspect of it, too, and that is the fact that Mike was blacklisted and was making very little money. You know, he had previously made \$50,000— [tape recorder off]. But in addition to everything else, Mike was getting— where he had gotten \$40,000, \$50,000 for a screenplay—later he'd got more, of

course, when he was working on the big films, and we were able to make a living—he suddenly went to making screenplays for \$2,000 or \$3,000 that he delivered to the drugstore in a paper bag, and the guy would give him his money in a paper bag.

LASKEY:

How did you ever make that contact—with your druggist? [laughter] How did that happen?

WILSON:

The drugstore was around the corner on Moorpark Street. We were living in the [San Fernando] Valley on Colfax [Avenue]. The guy who ran the drugstore was a very nice leftist person who was active as a community liberal, sort of. They worked out that arrangement whereby Mike would deliver a screenplay which he was writing for \$2,500. He didn't deliver the whole thing all at once but he delivered his treatment and he would deliver half the screenplay and he would get paid in little increments. So the point I'm making—it really was kind of funny in a way that you could get paid in a brown paper bag. But I'm saying that I, in order for us to make ends meet, was working like crazy, overtime and everything, just to make enough money for us to meet our living costs.

LASKEY:

Well, were you getting any pressures because of Michael's political involvement and your own political involvement?

WILSON:

Oh, absolutely. Oh, yes. Didn't I tell you about being fired from DMJM [Daniel, Mann, Johnson, and Mendenhall], known as the biggest architectural firm in the United States?

LASKEY:

Actually, we haven't come to that yet.

WILSON:

Then we've skipped ahead, because that happened—oh, no, we haven't skipped ahead. Because that happened while Mike was making *Salt of the Earth*.

LASKEY:

Yeah. I think before that, actually, you also worked for Victor Gruen.

WILSON:

No, Victor Gruen was later.

LASKEY:

That was later. Okay.

WILSON:

No. No. I went into this partnership I told you about, so going back in chronological order, I went into this partnership. The partnership only lasted about a year and a half, and this was another parallel thing that was happening amongst all the other things we've talked about, the political things, and Mike's

being called before the committee. So the partnership kind of collapsed, and we all went our separate ways. David Hyun became quite, quite an important architect in the Korean community. Aaron Cohen became the chief architect and later became a partner for Max Starkman. There were a couple of other guys who were in there, too. One guy got out of architecture altogether, Tom Bonenberger. Became a potter. So I got a job at DMJM. DMJM is [Phillip J.] Daniel, Arthur E. Mann, S. Kenneth Johnson, and [Irvin F.] Mendenhall. That was a huge firm. It was a real factory of draftsmen.

LASKEY:

It still is.

WILSON:

Still is. You know about them, huh?

LASKEY:

Yes.

WILSON:

They were getting involved in a lot of military work. But I was not involved. I was doing only schools for them. That's another fortuitous thing that happened to me when I went to work for them, which is that I just came to work as a draftsman. The woman who was in charge of their interior design and color department retired. She had been in charge of that department for, I don't know, twenty years or whatever—as long as that organization had been in existence. She was one of the real old-time architects who never made much of a splash as an architect, but she was another pioneer-type of person. I can't remember her name. A very nice woman. I'd worked with her relative to the interior designs and colors and materials and carpets and things like that and tiles. They liked me very much over there. I was working very hard, as I always did. So when she retired, they gave me her job. I was just—as I say, I wasn't all that experienced. Well, I had pretty good experience working for Neutra and Alexander and then on my own for a while. I was there for about a year and a half, and the whole other crisis was taking place. Mike was blacklisted. He couldn't work in the studios anymore, and he got together with Paul [Jarrico] and Herbert Biberman and they went off to make *Salt of the Earth*. Mike wrote the screenplay, and all that was taking place at the same time. Meanwhile, I was working away at DMJM, trying to make a living for everybody. [laughter] Mike had some income coming in, because they were able to raise enough money for Mike to get some money when he was doing the screenplay of *Salt of the Earth*. They started to have a lot of trouble on this, in New Mexico, while they were shooting *Salt of the Earth*. The airplanes were buzzing the set, and there was all sorts of sabotage going on. And the IATSE [International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees] wouldn't help them at all. On the contrary, they sabotaged the filming and processing. They had terrible problems. They had

sound problems, and they couldn't get any technical workers. So they had unbelievable technical difficulties getting that film made. But anyway, it hit the—oh, then, let's see. Howard Hughes got involved, was attacking Paul Jarrico, because Paul Jarrico had worked for him, and said that this film has got to be stopped.

LASKEY:

Howard Hughes?

WILSON:

Yes. The vigilantes were sent out there. *Time* magazine picked up on this and wrote an article about it, about these communists who were making this film in New Mexico. I was working at DMJM, doing the color design for all of their schools. Meanwhile, they had had a security check on me. I didn't know about it. You know, as though I could do any harm. But they were starting to do a lot of military work. They weren't starting to, it's just that they had been doing it. They were doing big airfields all over the United States, and they had gotten into military work, whereas they hadn't been before. So they needed security clearances for all their employees.

LASKEY:

Whether you were working in military or not.

WILSON:

It didn't make any difference. The serendipitous thing for me was that I not only got to design all the interiors but I got to go out on the job site. Their schools were all up and down the California coast, so I got into my car and I'd go during the finishing of the jobs, which was an extraordinary experience for me to be doing construction supervision on this part of the work on these great big, enormous schools. I was just a snip of a girl, [laughter] you know, a young mother and all that sort of thing! So I got to do traveling and construction observation. I just couldn't believe my good luck that this had happened. That's why I'm talking about the many things that have happened that have been—

LASKEY:

You still didn't have your license at that time, did you?

WILSON:

No, I didn't have ray license. So anyway, I was there about a year and a half and the thing came out about Mike. It was brought to their attention, Mike's making *Salt of the Earth* in *Time* magazine. Mike's picture was in *Time* magazine. It was brought to the attention of my superiors, Arthur Mann and Ken Johnson. I was called into the office and summarily dismissed. But that was not the reason given.

LASKEY:

They didn't tell you.

WILSON:

No. They told me that—Ken Johnson was the one that did the dirty work. Arthur Mann just sat at his desk with his head hanging down. They told me that some of my color work had been questionable, that they didn't like the color I'd painted one of the gymnasiums at Santa Monica High School. This story was in the film *Legacy of the Hollywood Blacklist*. I'd painted one of the gymnasiums blue, a color blue that nobody liked and we had to change to gray. I said, yes, okay. The first coat came out. If I'd known what they were doing at the time, I would have said, "You're lucky I didn't paint it red!" [laughter]

LASKEY:

You didn't know!

WILSON:

But I didn't, unfortunately! I didn't know what they were doing at the time or why they were firing me. I assumed—well, I didn't assume. I assumed it for a few minutes that I really had done something that was offensive to them. So I said, "Are you absolutely certain this has nothing to do with my husband and what he's doing?" And they said, "Oh, no, no, no." He said, "This has absolutely nothing to do with that." They denied the whole thing. So I was asked to get my things together and to leave that afternoon. They paid me my two-weeks termination pay and whatever sick leave I had coming, and I was to get out of there that afternoon.

LASKEY:

That's astonishing.

WILSON:

It was absolutely astonishing. They apparently had gotten back some report from the security people saying, "You've got a subversive in your office, and here you are, you want to do the airfields in the Middle East—" And they were doing airfields in the Middle East and all over the place. You know, American airfields wherever they could build them. This was during the Cold War period.

LASKEY:

Well, this was right at the peak of the insanity.

WILSON:

It was. That's right.

LASKEY:

Of McCarthyism, the security scares.

WILSON:

Right. We were building—very, very anti-Russian period. Not that it's improved. Well, it's improved a little bit recently. Anyway, I went out into my drafting room and the rumors had already reached it. There was one other guy involved, and he got fired about a week after I did. He was not a communist; he was just a liberal, a very nice liberal guy, who had probably been connected with some left-connected organizations. But I don't—he was not nearly as

involved as I was. So I made a big noise about getting my stuff cleaned up. Then the chief draftsman came over to my desk and said, "What's going on?" I said, "I was fired." The head of the drafting room was a guy named Tefik Kutay. He was Turkish. He did not have his citizenship as yet. He was just a very, very sweet guy. We had always been very good friends. He was married, had several children, and we were very fond of each other. As a matter of fact, I had a lot of good friends in there. So everybody was standing around in little groups. This was a drafting room. There were about a hundred people. People were all standing in little clusters. They were all standing around me, and they were all talking, "Zelma Wilson was fired." This was on a Thursday. I was packing up my stuff very noisily, [laughter] and the bosses came in. They saw this. The secretaries were rushing around, and there was all this commotion. The bosses finally came in, and they announced that everybody had the rest of the day off.

LASKEY:

Really?

WILSON:

Rest of the day off. Then the following day, about 50 percent of the people didn't show up at all. It was a sort of a semi strike. It was really quite remarkable. It was just amazing. Then that night, this guy Tefik Kutay—he had gone into the office that I had just come out of and said, "I resign on Zelma's behalf." Later that same day they offered him a partnership. He came over that night to my house. He started to cry. He sat and talked to me and started to cry. He said, "Zelma, they've offered me a partnership. I'm not a citizen. This is an opportunity of a lifetime, and I have to accept it." He apologized to me for not resigning, and I was comforting him. You know, his tears were running down his cheek, and I was comforting him. I said, "Tef, you did the right thing. It's the opportunity of a lifetime. If I was in any way influential in your getting a partnership—you deserve it. You're a wonderful person, and you should be a partner in the firm." I made him feel better, but it was a funny, ironic situation. It was really a kind of a demonstration on my behalf. I mean, the whole drafting room demonstrated really on my behalf. There were some people I'm sure who didn't agree with me or didn't like my politics.

LASKEY:

But they never acknowledged that—

WILSON:

They never acknowledged that it was political, but everybody knew it was. Well, I tell you, within a week I had another job. Maybe two weeks, because I really was so unnerved by this situation that—

LASKEY:

Well, Michael was in New Mexico at the time.

WILSON:

Right. He was in New Mexico.

LASKEY:

And, again, you were alone with the children.

WILSON:

Yeah, I was alone with the children, and I had to work in order to keep us together and to make ends meet. Anyway, I got a job working for Neal Deasy, who is a wonderful man and a liberal. It was Deasy and [Robert] Boiling. He's one of these architects who's also a very good writer. He's teaching now. He's quite old now. He's teaching up at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo, and has a ranch out on the edges of San Luis Obispo and is an extremely respected man. He does work for the state of California on writing the exams for the licensing of architects. I've worked with him because he calls me up there to help as part of the committee of architects who work on the examinations. But I'm going ahead again now, just to bring it around.

LASKEY:

No, you're just explaining who—

WILSON:

When he hired me, then I worked for him for about a year. Then I went to work for Victor Gruen after that. [Deasy] didn't fire me. He just laid me off, because he had a very, very tiny office. I mean, he had only about three or four draftsmen and a partner, and they weren't doing that much work. I was really hired for a specific job, which I completed. Then I was offered a job by Victor Gruen and I went to work there. It was from Victor Gruen that I took a leave of absence when we went to Europe.

LASKEY:

Now, when you were at Victor Gruen, that's Frank Gehry. That's where you made the connection with Frank Gehry.

WILSON:

That's where I made the connection with Frank Gehry and a lot of very brilliant, brilliant guys.

LASKEY:

Was Cesar Pelli at—

WILSON:

Yes. Well, Cesar Pelli was not there at that time. No. He came later. But they had a very, very fine engineer who was a part of the firm. What's his name? I'm not very good at names, unfortunately. I'm not the best witness in the world. Well, anyway, so Gruen was doing a lot of high rises.

LASKEY:

It wasn't Contini, was it? Edgardo Contini?

WILSON:

Contini. Yes, Edgardo Contini. Thank you! I really was very fussy about who I went to work for. I mean, I just didn't take any job. I wanted to work for people where I could learn something. Victor Gruen had a wonderful reputation. Now, he was a guy who had taken his background—he also was a very articulate man and was a lecturer and a writer. He practically single-handedly invented the shopping center the way it is now. Malls. The shopping center mall was an original idea of Victor Gruen. Now, he also came out of the International school of architecture, but he changed with the time but more in a business-oriented way. He used his training in the International school, but also he was very influenced by Frank Lloyd Wright. He was influenced by Le Corbusier, too, and took that concept and turned it into something that was useful for businesses and shopping centers and skyscrapers. I don't mean he was the only one who did that, because there are many other very fine architects who were working in New York who were doing all the most remarkable—like [Eliel] Saarinen, who did the TWA building. And Neutra has a building there, too.

LASKEY:

In New York?

WILSON:

Yeah. Of course, Mies van der Rohe did the Seagram building.

LASKEY:

And Skidmore, Owings and Merrill [SOM] were probably the big ones.

WILSON:

Oh, yes. And Kevin Roche, Richard Johnson, and Edward Stone.

LASKEY:

Was Victor Gruen involved himself? I mean, did you deal with—?

WILSON:

No. I very seldom saw him. He was always abroad. He was giving lectures here and there. So I really had very little to do with him. He wasn't that involved anymore as a designer, really.

LASKEY:

That's what I wondered.

WILSON:

His firm was also very large. Not as big as DMJM, but he was more of a spokesman and a theoretician. But I think I learned an awful lot about shopping centers and the way people shop, and the commercial aspect of architecture more than any other previous jobs. Wherever I worked, I always learned a lot. I got more out of it than they got out of me, I'm sure! [laughter]

LASKEY:

[laughter] Well, it probably helped you eventually when you came up to Ojai and were involved in remodeling of the main street.

WILSON:

That's right.

LASKEY:

But I just, out of curiosity, when you were working way back then with Frank Gehry, was there any indication—

WILSON:

Of his brilliance?

LASKEY:

That this great superstar would emerge?

WILSON:

None whatsoever. We all knew that he was very talented and capable, but there was a whole group of young men who were very close and comprised a kind of a clique of brilliant young architects. They were very snobbish about their—it wasn't—snobbish is not the word. They were very protective about the fact that they were the elite of the office. I was kind of on the fringes of it, because they liked me, but it really didn't include me.

LASKEY:

Did they accept you as an architect?

WILSON:

Well, I still was not an architect, but neither was Frank at that time. As a matter of fact, none of them were—the guys in the graphics department. Gruen was absolutely brilliant in his use of graphics people, graphics and color. There was one absolutely brilliant guy named Fred Usher. Fred Usher was probably the leader of that group, and yet, as it turned out, he was one of the least successful on his own. It was Fred Usher and Frank Gehry and Bob [Robert A.] Kennard. Do you know Bob Kennard?

LASKEY:

That name rings a bell.

WILSON:

He's a black architect.

LASKEY:

I think he worked for Robert Alexander at some point. I remember the name.

WILSON:

Yes. Then he also worked for Victor Gruen. I met Bob Kennard there. We became very close. I still consider him a very close friend.

LASKEY:

He's still practicing, isn't he?

WILSON:

Oh, yes.

LASKEY:

Yeah, that's what I thought.

WILSON:

He has a very successful firm. He really came in on the upside of affirmative action. I mean, he's got a huge office. Very, very successful architect and a wonderful person.

LASKEY:

I remember Robert Alexander talking about him.

WILSON:

He just got his FAIA [Fellow of the American Institute of Architecture] about a year or so ago. I called him, like he called me when I was made an FAIA. It was very touching. I wish I could see him more often. So my experience there was extremely positive. I was a job captain there, too. Although my first job there was to build a bird cage that was three stories high.

LASKEY:

Oh! For what reason?

WILSON:

Because they were doing the Saint Louis shopping mall. It was one of the first enclosed malls in the United States. One of the attractions of it was to put in a—it was a marvellously shaped—which I helped design—bird cage that was three stories high. The birds all flew up and down like this and they had different levels to land on. That was one of my first jobs there. That was the first job I had there—to do all the working drawings of this bird cage. It was a fun job. Then later I started working on one of their Tishman buildings. No, I was working on a drive-in bank. They were doing a whole lot of Tishman buildings on Wilshire Boulevard.

LASKEY:

The first ones that went up on Wilshire around Normandie [Avenue]?

WILSON:

Yes, something like that. They're very attractive high-rise. Then he did the first drive-in bank. That was another one of his creative contributions.

LASKEY:

Where was that?

WILSON:

It was in San Fernando Valley someplace. I did work on that. I was the job captain on that job. Then, meanwhile, again, all this stuff was going on about Mike. The film had been—*Salt of the Earth* was completed, and Mike was—it was in the depth of the blacklist, so this was in '54, '55. *Salt of the Earth* was getting a lot of international notoriety but couldn't get a commercial release, and Mike was going crazy. He was awarded the étoile by L'Académie du Cinéma. The Baccarat glass étoile for *Salt of the Earth*. They'd received many prizes, but that was one of them. He wanted to receive it in Paris personally. Rosaura Revueltas was going to be there, because she was not allowed into the United States after she was deported when she was doing the film. It was a very

exciting time, and so he went there, and he met—oh, the excitement about getting him out of the country was just unbelievable. Because, you know, none of us could get passports at that time.

1.11. TAPE NUMBER: VII, Side One (April 2, 1989)

WILSON:

Oh, everybody, everybody else who'd been blacklisted had been refused a passport, except that you can travel in Mexico without a passport. So many of the blacklisted people went to Mexico, you know, like [Dalton] Trumbo and Hugo Butler and Ring Lardner [Jr]. They all spent a good part of the blacklist period in or around Mexico City. Oh, they still were doing writing. You know, Trumbo was writing pictures under other people's names. You know all that commotion about Robert Rich and that sort of thing.

LASKEY:

Well, in fact, I just—

WILSON:

Mike [Michael Wilson] didn't—

LASKEY:

I shouldn't interrupt you here, but there was something in, I think it was, *The Inquisition in Hollywood*, that Dalton Trumbo and Michael were sort of a clearinghouse at one time for—

WILSON:

Well, they were. See, Mike and Trumbo were already well-established writers at the time of the blacklist. So they were fortunate in the sense that they could keep on working during the blacklist. Not all of them were. In fact, few of them. Only a few of them continued to work during the blacklist, but Trumbo and he did. So they were getting a lot of work at that time—little jobs. They were terrible little pictures. But Trumbo and Mike had a kind of a shuttle operation going where Mike would do the structure, because Mike had a real talent for putting films together. Then he would get it delivered over to Trumbo, who lived on the other side of town in Highland Park. He would do the dialogue and Mike would do some more outlines and they would just be going back and forth. He got jobs for some of his friends, too. He had a sort of little writing factory going there for the blacklisted people.

LASKEY:

Anyway, I didn't want to sidetrack you from the—

WILSON:

That's all right; that's okay. No, I'm glad you reminded me. I'd forgotten about that, yes.

LASKEY:

So how did you handle getting out of the country?

WILSON:

Mike got out of the country then. He went down and applied for his passport; everybody else had been denied it. I didn't want to go to Mexico because—well, Mike was all involved with doing the *Salt of the Earth* thing, and he was still working. But there came a point where these other Hollywood assignments became so boring, and he got tired of this cloak-and-dagger and this having to deliver it to the drugstore in a brown paper bag and all that stuff. He got this opportunity to go to France. He went down and applied for his passport, and he was one of the first of the blacklisted people to actually get a passport. Now, there's some people who had gone to France before they were subpoenaed just to get out of being subpoenaed. There already was an expatriate community in Paris, but these were people who never received subpoenas. They got the hell out just before and avoided it. So Mike was going to get this big award, very important etoile from—

LASKEY:

L'Academie du Cinema.

WILSON:

Yes. He got his passport within one week. Everybody was in a state of shock because nobody had been able to get a passport. So he said, "I'm leaving right now," as soon as he got his passport. In order for them not to figure it out that they had made a mistake, he went the roundabout way to get to Paris. He flew to Montreal in one of those red-eye flights, got to Montreal, and shifted over so he flew out of Canada rather than out of New York, because he was afraid that he'd be stopped in New York and not be allowed to go. There was more darned running around and feeling like you were in a spy movie, getting him out of the country. [laughter] Anyway, he went over there and got his award. He was there for about four weeks, when contacted by Sam Spiegel, who found out that he was there. Sam Spiegel had a British production company which did not recognize the blacklist. So he offered him the job of doing the *Bridge on the River Kwai* for \$10,000. Now, inasmuch as Mike had been doing films for \$2,500, if he was lucky, \$10,000 seemed like a lot of money to us at that time. Well, \$10,000 at that time was worth about \$40,000 or \$50,000 now. [laughter] He grabbed at it. He called me up and said—he had done some sort of an under-the-table TV thing for some producer, and they hadn't paid him. They owed him \$1,500 or something like that.

LASKEY:

Here in the United States?

WILSON:

Yes. He called me up and said, "Gather up the kids. Get a leave of absence from your job I have a job here. And call up—was it—the King Brothers. One

of these fly-by-night types. Actually, the King Brothers are not all that fly-by-night, but I think it was the King Brothers he was working for. It was the first TV show Mike had done. I don't even remember what the subject matter was. And he hadn't been paid for it. They owed him \$1,500 or \$1,300. He got Paul [Jarrico] to help, and they put it to them: "Mike needs his money and he wants his family over in France." [laughter] So I got my two little girls [Rebecca and Rosanna Wilson] all packed up and got a leave of absence. I got a six-month leave of absence from my job at Victor Gruen. I was gone for eight years!

LASKEY:

Did you have any trouble getting a passport?....

WILSON:

Yes! I had a lot of trouble getting my passport. By that time they had found out that they had goofed on Michael Wilson. So my passport I waited for for six weeks. He got his passport in one week and I waited six weeks. I had to go down there how many times to pressure them that I was being separated from my husband, that my husband was in France and that I was here. We wanted to reunite the family. I threw myself on the mercy of the passport people, immigration authorities. They were terrible people at that time. Maybe they're still terrible people. One of the worst departments, I think, in the government.

LASKEY:

I've never had to deal with them.

WILSON:

Oh, well. You know, when you think of the difficulties that they've made for some of the Latin American people.

LASKEY:

It's so arbitrary. Much of it seems so totally arbitrary on who will and won't—

WILSON:

Anyway, I finally got my passport. It was kind of a miraculous thing. They made me wait a long, long time. Because now you can go down there and get it within a few days. Mike got his, I'd say, within a week, and I had to wait for six weeks to get it. He was calling me every night, "Well, did you get it?" I thought I never would get it.

LASKEY:

Well, if Mike was working for Spiegel in England, how did you happen to decide to stay in France?

WILSON:

Well, he wasn't working for him in England. He went down to Ceylon to work on *The Bridge on the River Kwai*. That's where they were shooting the film. He rewrote the film from Carl Foreman's script. The whole introduction of William Holden into the film—they wanted it to be more appealing to the American public, and so they felt they had to have an American character. They wanted

Mike to figure out how to get an American, an important American character, and write a role that would appeal to an important American star. So Mike wrote that into the film, in the process of which he had to rewrite the entire film, although he kept a lot of Carl Foreman's material. The basic structure that Carl Foreman had developed was there. So when both of them got the Academy Award [posthumously, in 1985, in a special ceremony] it was a legitimate split, even though they hadn't worked together. I don't know what had happened to, why they didn't call Carl Foreman back in, but I think that by that time he had antagonized David Lean somehow or other. David Lean is easily antagonized.

LASKEY:

I was going to comment on that. [laughter]

WILSON:

Because Mike also, finally, when he was on *Lawrence of Arabia*, had antagonized David Lean, and that's one of the main reasons that Mike didn't get credit on *Lawrence of Arabia*, even though he was given credit by the British writers' guild. And not only credit, he was given an award by them. So I finally got my passport. I didn't want to fly. I was too frightened of flying. I've gotten so I love flying now. I fly all the time. The way we went was so great, and the girls had such a marvelous time. I wanted to make a kind of an adventure out of it for them. So we went across the country on the train, on the Santa Fe [Pacific Railroad]. An Indian got on at Santa Fe, Big Chief Silver. We sat up in the observation car, and the Indian came through and sold little trinkets and then he got off at Albuquerque or something. Then we changed trains in Chicago and went to New York.

LASKEY:

How wonderful! What a great trip.

WILSON:

Wonderful trip. Then we got onto the French line, the Flandre, which was one of the smaller of the French lines. Mike called it the Flounder. But I had a marvelous trip over. And we did—although I don't know how we did it—that whole thing for \$1,500. It doesn't seem possible. Now it would probably cost \$8,000 for a woman and two children to make that kind of a trip.

LASKEY:

Oh, yes. Absolutely.

WILSON:

And it was first class all the way. It was a fabulous trip.

LASKEY:

It sounds wonderful.

WILSON:

Mike met us there. We stayed in a hotel for a while. Mike and I took a little vacation. He didn't have to start immediately. We sent the girls to a children's summer camp that friends of ours had sent their children to. It was supposed to be very good, but they hated it.

LASKEY:

[laughter] Kids are like that!

WILSON:

They were like six and seven, I guess, at the time. Let's see, '49 to '56, that's seven, eight years. We left in July. I guess Rebecca was eight by then and Rosanna [Wilson Farrow] was seven. Is that right? Yes, that's right. It was seven and eight. So they were able to appreciate the experience at that age. We stayed in a hotel, and they went off to a camp in northern Switzerland. Mike and I took a trip, the two of us. We went through France and Italy and onto the Cote d'Azur. We had a wonderful time, a terrific time. Then when we got back, Mike then had to go to Ceylon. It was the end of the summer, and I had to get the children into school. I found a school for them, and I found an apartment in his absence, too.

LASKEY:

Now, this was in Paris?

WILSON:

This was in Paris. Mike had hired a young woman who was bilingual, to help me. She later became Mike's secretary. That was Nicole Toutain. She was only about nineteen years old when she came to work for us. She came to work as a kind of a translator, a helpmeet, a Girl Friday for me, and she always was very helpful with the children. So it was great. She helped me find an apartment and do all the negotiation. Meanwhile, I was going to the Alliance Frangaise to learn French, and we got the girls into a school called Pere Castor, which means Father Beaver, which was a kind of a preschool. Maybe they were younger than that. Maybe they were six and seven. Why would they go to a—? Well, it was an elementary school, but it also had pre—yeah, it was an elementary school. It was a private elementary school. I thought to throw them into a French public school at that age would just be too difficult for them. We found this place, which was absolutely delightful, and enrolled them there. I found an apartment about a mile away, and the girls started to go to school on the public buses, public transportation, because it was very safe. Oh, Paris was very safe at that time. Now it's not safe at all. At that time, all children went to school in the public transportation.

LASKEY:

'Fifty-six? Now, this is just prior to [Charles] De Gaulle's coming back into power. Is that right?

WILSON:

Yes. De Gaulle came back into power. The Algerian War was finally over. It was a very exciting time. We became part of the American expatriate group, who were quite political. We got to know some of the more political people in the motion picture industry in France, like Simone Signoret and Yves Montand. Yves Montand was probably a communist. I don't think that Simone was. Now he's a conservative.

LASKEY:

Not unusual.

WILSON:

Yeah. Right. We became very good friends with him, particularly Mike. They were very, very fond of Mike—and me too—but that was really the connection. And Jules Dassin, who broke with his wife, a musician, and married Melina Mercouri. They were our friends, too.

LASKEY:

That's quite a group.

WILSON:

It was an extraordinary group. Then Betsy Blair, who had been Gene Kelly's wife. She was living with her lover who was a French actor whose name I can't remember right now. That was a part of the group. And Tammy and Lee Gold and Vladimir Posner. Vladimir Posner is not the Vladimir Posner who was a spokesman educated in the United States, you know, spokesman for the Soviet Union.

LASKEY:

This was not the same person?

WILSON:

No. It's his uncle, I think.

LASKEY:

Oh, that's interesting.

WILSON:

This uncle who was also a left-winger and part of the Jewish intellectual group in France. But his family basically came from Russia, so there was his brother, who was the father of Vladimir, the Vladimir Posner. So we knew them. Then we were quite close to Haakon Chevalier, who was fingered by J. Robert Oppenheimer and spent the rest of his life trying to vindicate himself. He had been teaching French at the University of California, Berkeley, at the same time that J. Robert Oppenheimer and many of the other brilliant young physicists, who were also leftists, like Phil [Philip] Morrison. Phil Morrison who is another great legend. He's a legend in his own time now, who became the head of the physics department at Yale and was very close to Robert Oppenheimer, too. I'm going off on one of my tangents.

LASKEY:

Well, speaking of that, there's one thing. Before you get on to your experiences in France, I want to backtrack a little bit to that period of the blacklist. What kind of support group did you and Michael have here in this country to get you through that period, or were you isolated?

WILSON:

Well, we were isolated in the sense that some of the people who had been our friends found it too awkward to continue their relationship with us. But the people who were blacklisted constituted, and still constitute, a kind of a tribe of people who had gone through a specific experience together and because of that have remained over the years very close. I was just talking about that last night because I went to the anniversary of the Levitts [Alfred and Helen Levitt]. All the people there—it was Cleo Trumbo and Alex Shulman and his wife. He's head of surgery at Cedars [Sinai Hospital]. We all were somehow victims of that time. We were talking about how we've remained, through all those years—this is now '89, so that's almost forty years that we've been friends. How it created friendships for us that were just irreplaceable. Sure, we had a tremendous support group for each other, the blacklisted people. A few friends outside the blacklisted people too remained, who believed in basic civil rights but who were not necessarily leftists. The Levitts I don't think ever left the country. They stayed here and just kind of braved it out. He got other jobs. There were quite a few people who got into other professions, many of whom never got back into screenwriting. Al Levitt was one who did go back into screenwriting, and they do mostly TV now.

LASKEY:

He's still writing?

WILSON:

He's still writing, but he's extremely active in the Screen Writers Guild. I'd say most of their activities are around the guild. He is the one who was most instrumental, he and a few other people, in getting this posthumous award for *The Bridge on the River Kwai* for Mike through his activities in the Guild. Now he's working on getting Mike credit for *Lawrence of Arabia*.

LASKEY:

Oh, I hope he's successful in that.

WILSON:

I hope so, too. He might have to mount a lawsuit, which I hate to do. I hate lawsuits. I hate the whole process.

LASKEY:

Well, you've gone through so many of them.

WILSON:

Mike just absolutely hated them. He really hated lawsuits. He'd been involved. He was Wilson et al. for the entire blacklist group to prove conspiracy to

blacklist, which was against the law. It was lost in the appellate court. It didn't even get up to the Supreme Court. That was very hard on him. He hated that kind of thing. I think he was brought up to be a really good little boy by his Catholic father [Frank Wilson] and his fundamentalist mother [Nell Wilson], not to complain, to be a man and take it on the chin. When he went into the service he was a marine. He wanted to do the hardest thing he could possibly do. He made such demands on himself. So to think that he could be involved in something as disagreeable as a lawsuit, he felt it was like he was being outside the law and it was distasteful to him.

LASKEY:

Well, he must have demanded a lot from you at that time.

WILSON:

Of course, yes. Mike was a very demanding person, very hard to get along with. He needed a lot of peace and quiet around him, so I was always protecting him from the children. He was an alcoholic, so we all were putting up with that. We've learned so much about alcoholism now. The family becomes an accomplice to maintain his alcoholism. But, see, I didn't know that at that time. I was very innocent about picking him up when he fell down. I don't mean that literally, because Mike was not a falling-down drunk. Mike was a steady drinker. He wasn't a lost-weekend type of drinker.

LASKEY:

Well, I think that's what I was trying to get at earlier, when we were talking about how you survived this period. Because it seems to me that that was such an additional pressure on top of everything else that you had to do. On top of the wife-mother-businesswoman, that you had this dependence on you or that pressure on you, in addition to all these other things. I would imagine that it would simply have required so much from you. That Michael would have required so much from you.

WILSON:

Yes. He was very, very demanding. Well, he was demanding in what his needs were because we had to build a whole structure around him so that he could continue to write. There was his alcoholism to contend with and the fact that he was a brilliant writer who had to write with no credit. You know, at least if you write books you have your name on the book. But when he wrote these fantastic screenplays that he was writing, he knew that he wasn't going to get credit for them. Just the emotional stress of it was enough to make a person an alcoholic, even if you weren't in the first place.

LASKEY:

He also was not in a position to give you anything, any support at the time when you had these other pressures.

WILSON:

No. Mike was not a very supportive person when he—later in our marriage, especially after he had his stroke, he was extremely supportive to me. He began to realize, I guess, what a remarkable thing I had done. We came back to the United States. I had opened my own firm and was, for all intents and purposes, trying to take care of him and run a firm and be an architect and mother and raise teenage children at that time. So I think he became more aware of his dependency. Because you develop certain sensitivity after you have a stroke and you realize the value of life. I don't know. It made another person out of him. But that's another part of my story. I'm leaping ahead. But there was a distinct change.

1.12. TAPE NUMBER: VII, Side Two (April 22, 1989)

LASKEY:

Well, the last time we talked, we got you to France but we have neglected to mention that you got your license.

WILSON:

Yes. I finally obtained enough credits in working as an apprentice for other architects, counting the months that I'd worked while I was in college for the architects that I mentioned to you. So having my five years at school plus three years of credit working under a licensed architect, I was able to take the exam. Meanwhile, however, I was having children.

LASKEY:

Children and other problems. [laughter]

WILSON:

And all that. Rebecca was born in 1948 and Rosanna was born in 1949. Rebecca was born a year after I graduated, and Rosanna was born two years after I graduated from college. So I was pretty busy. I worked during each pregnancy, and I went back to work fairly soon, within six or eight weeks, maybe. Then I started to study for my examinations at night or whenever I had an opportunity. After the kids went to bed, I'd go out to classes to brush up on some thing that I never was very strong in, like mechanical engineering and structural engineering. I had a sense of structure, but I didn't really know as much as I should know. So I took some of the courses that were given around town. I brushed up on history, and I took my exam the first time, I think, in 1955. It must have been 1955, because I took the two examinations in succession. I passed everything except mechanical engineering, as it's an extremely difficult examination.

LASKEY:

How long does the exam last?

WILSON:

Three days. It's still three days. What you have the first day is—now they don't even give an examination in history, which I think is a shame. And also everything's computerized nowadays. It was not computerized at that time. The exam consists of three-hour exams in several of the disciplines, like structural engineering, mechanical engineering, civil engineering, site analysis, site design, professional practices—that's things that you do in your office, and how you conduct an office, and in design, design of a building.

LASKEY:

Are you given a project, an easy project, to do as part of the exam, or are there specific questions? Is it an essay type?

WILSON:

At the time that I took it, they gave you a building, and you did, say, all the structural calculations on that particular building. You determined where the sheer walls were, what the span was, and how you were going to span it. It wasn't a very complex building, naturally, because you don't have time for that in three hours. Then they ask you a lot of questions, some of which are true-false and some of which are multiple choice. Everything is multiple choice nowadays because that's the way the computer is set up to do it. I'm not criticizing or comparing the two things, except I think the way we did the exam was more interesting because we also wrote essays. Somebody had to sit down and correct that, and machines don't know how to evaluate essays—I mean computers! [laughter]

LASKEY:

That's also assuming you knew how to write.

WILSON:

Yes, that's right, which a lot of architects can't. So I passed everything except mechanical engineering. All I had to take the next year was mechanical engineering, and I passed that. As soon as I passed that, everything about mechanical engineering went out of my head and has never returned. [laughter] Thank goodness we have consultants in our practice who know a little bit about it. All that an architect can do for a simple building you can pretty well determine, but for size of ducting and for a complex building you always have a mechanical engineer. I'm not saying that architects shouldn't understand that. They should understand it. They've got to know where the duct is going to be, whether it's going to be on the roof or whether it's going to be on the—but I don't want to go into that. So I got my announcement that I had passed my examinations and was now a licensed architect, and I went for my orals. I think it was two months later I left for France. It was in 1956.

LASKEY:

So you never actually had a chance to practice in this country as a licensed architect.

WILSON:

Never. No. It just worked out that way time wise. Believe me, I didn't think to myself, "Gee, now I've got my license, I don't have to worry about architecture anymore!" [laughter] And go off to Europe and have a marvelous time! Although it did work out that way. So anyway, I was very, very pleased. It's a great achievement when somebody gets their license. It's such a marvelous, euphoric experience.

LASKEY:

There were very few women who were licensed at that time.

WILSON:

Very few, right. In 1956 they constituted about 1 percent of the entire architectural profession. Later they crept up to about 2 percent, and now I think it's up to about 4, maybe 6 percent.

LASKEY:

At the most. It hovers at a very low percentage.

WILSON:

Yes. It's the lowest country, probably, in the world, maybe with the exception of South Africa or some of the undeveloped countries.

LASKEY:

So when you went to France, then, as a woman architect, you found it actually a freer environment for practice and for work than you had here?

WILSON:

I did. But I was so preoccupied with—yes. I did practice there for a while, but I was so preoccupied with acclimating myself and acclimating the family to living in France—as soon as I got to—have I gone through this with you, about what I did in France?

LASKEY:

Only partially. We really only sort of set you up there. The children were in school—

WILSON:

Gosh, we have a lot go go through yet. Well, we don't have to do the whole thing. There are a lot of years where not very much was happening. [laughter]

LASKEY:

But you got to Paris and then Michael took off for Ceylon—

WILSON:

Not immediately. We stayed in the Golds' apartment, which was at Avenue de l'Observatoire, near an astronomical laboratory, I mean, they studied astronomy. The avenue is named after that lab because it was on that street somewhere. And it's on the Left Bank, close to the great restaurant the Closerie des Lilas, where the intellectuals used to hang out and speak and talk to each other. Alexander Dumas used to hold their soirees and evenings there. Nearby was the

Dome. Was it the Dome? The Coupole? The Coupole is where Ernest Hemingway and [F. Scott] Fitzgerald and Alice B. Toklas and—

LASKEY:

Gertrude Stein?

WILSON:

—Gertrude Stein and the Shakespeare [and Company Book Store]—Mike loved being around there, and I did, too. It was a lot of fun. That's where we lived for about six months, because the Golds had a place in the south of France and they went there and they were away. Mike and I took a vacation, and we put the children into a children's vacation place in Switzerland. Mike and I then started traveling by car down through Switzerland into the northern part of Italy. Our first part of our trip was through Italy. It was just about as romantic as you could possibly believe. Mike and I hadn't seen each other for four or five months. We went to Venice, and I thought I'd died and gone to heaven when I got to Venice. It's one of the most beautiful things I'd ever seen in my life. From Venice we went to Siena, which is not far. Siena is so beautiful. Were you ever in Siena?

LASKEY:

Yes.

WILSON:

It has all those striped cathedrals.

LASKEY:

Yes, it was beautiful, the cathedral in Siena.

WILSON:

They have a racetrack where they have the traditional horse races in the middle town—

LASKEY:

The Palio.

WILSON:

Is that what it was called?

LASKEY:

Yeah.

WILSON:

I didn't know what it is. They have—it's the great event of the season, the great event of every year, the horse races. Anyway, I fell in love with Siena. And of course we had to go to Padua, where Shakespeare had set—is it Padua—Romeo and Juliet.

LASKEY:

Verona.

WILSON:

Verona it is, yes. Anyplace that had any literary significance we went to.
[laughter] And also architectural significance.

LASKEY:

In Italy that's not hard to find.

WILSON:

Yes. Of course, Florence, all the great writers—well, Venice, too—all the great writers have been there.

LASKEY:

Did you go to Harry's Bar?

WILSON:

Of course! [laughter] We went to Harry's Bar everywhere! Paris, Rome—!

LASKEY:

Oh, I didn't even know there was one in Paris.

WILSON:

Oh, yeah, there's a Harry's Bar in Paris. Yeah! Sure! Then we eventually got to Rome. [tape recorder off] We went to Florence. The artwork in Florence is—well, I guess you've seen it.

LASKEY:

Some of it, at least.

WILSON:

Florence, in many ways—architecturally, Florence is much more interesting than Venice. Venice is so beautiful and so romantic.

LASKEY:

It's so unique.

WILSON:

It's so unique, and the Uffizi Gallery is so beautiful. Is the Uffizi there, or is it in Florence?

LASKEY:

Yeah, the Uffizi's in Florence. But a lot of the great Gothic and Byzantine architecture is in Venice. It's so beautiful.

WILSON:

Yes. Florence is a very cultured community. We went to Bologna. Bologna, the best food in Italy is in Bologna. The best food I ever tasted anywhere.

LASKEY:

Really?

WILSON:

Yes. It's well-known for its cuisine. We had extraordinary meals there. Bolognese—you know, you always read recipes with so-and-so Bolognese.

LASKEY:

Oh, yes, I know. It's noted for its—

WILSON:

So we ate our way happily—well, it was a feast. So anyway, we got back home. I'm not going to give everything we did. We went to the Cote d'Azur. We went to Monte Carlo and Cannes and then made our way homewards, eating our way through France, using the Michelin guide. We got back and went up to pick up the children.

LASKEY:

It sounds wonderful.

WILSON:

It was a great trip, certainly one of the highlights of my relationship with Michael. He really took off time to be with me. He already knew that he had the job doing *The Bridge on the River Kwai*. He knew he was going to have to go to Ceylon, and I had just gotten there. It was one of the few times when he felt relaxed enough, because he had gotten away from the United States. He had picked up the etoile for *Salt of the Earth* and had a wonderful time in Paris with all the intelligentsia there and the movie people. He got to know all these movie people. Oh, when we were in the south of France, we visited with Simone Signoret and Yves Montand at their house, their place at the Colombe d'Or. That's a little village right on the Mediterranean, but it's up high. It's on the third corniche, you know, way up in the air. Yves Montand still has their place there.

LASKEY:

It must be beautiful.

WILSON:

It's gorgeous. Mike had met Simone because she had got a prize for something else she had done at that same event where he got a prize for *Salt of the Earth*. We went and picked up the children and came back and then Mike left very soon afterward for Ceylon. Then it was my job to find an apartment and school for the children, and I didn't know any French. I started to go to the Alliance Francaise to learn basic French, and I learned it also by just going out and having to learn it. Because you can go to school for forty years and you won't learn the langue courante, the language of the streets, until you start having to speak it. When I went out hunting for groceries, and you have to order two pounds of tomatoes, you want to make sure you're going to come back with two pounds of tomatoes and not with potatoes. So I learned a lot of French just living my life and just being thrown in. You know, you are thrown into the swimming pool and you start to swim.

LASKEY:

It's such a difficult language.

WILSON:

We got the kids into a school called Pere Castor. It means Father Beaver. It was a French little private school, and they had no other. We were the only Americans there. The kids were, what, seven and eight. Six and seven, I guess.

LASKEY:

How much French had they picked up by this time?

WILSON:

They were practically speaking French by the time we picked them up at this children's camp. I mean, they picked it up so fast. Within six months they were totally bilingual.

LASKEY:

That's wonderful.

WILSON:

Totally bilingual. And I was still struggling with— [laughter]

LASKEY:

Oh, it's much harder! It's much harder on adults.

WILSON:

Well, they barely knew English, let alone French! No, I'm kidding. They knew English, but all of their formative years, which were of those eight years that we were there, when we learn, when you learn ideology, when you learn literature, and you get your first taste of almost everything in this world that's worthwhile—music, literature or anything that's worthwhile, they had in French. I think both of them have ambivalent loyalties.

LASKEY:

I'm sure they do.

WILSON:

They feel French. They still feel French.

LASKEY:

Well, their backgrounds have got to be so different from those of their peers.

WILSON:

That's right.

LASKEY:

What they learned in school and how they learned it, what was important.

WILSON:

I mean, they know who Moliere is, and they know every single river in France because they had to learn it by rote. They know French literature and poets and they still do some of their mathematics in their head in French, just from those eight years, those early eight years.

LASKEY:

Yeah, but they're a very critical eight years.

WILSON:

Very critical eight years. When they came back, even though all of their schooling, except for one short period where we had stuck them in the English school of Paris—which they absolutely detested, every second of it they detested, this English school of Paris—it was so prissy. It was for the British, the children of the British diplomats. It happened that when we moved out to the country that it was very close to us. It was only about five miles, six miles away, and Mike was concerned that they were losing their English. He knew that eventually we would move back. So we thought it was a good idea for them to go to English school and start learning things in English. But the English schoolmasters and teachers were exactly the way you read about them. They were just so prissy and so meddling.

LASKEY:

And mean.

WILSON:

Mean. They were mean. Well, there was a lot of French teaching, too, that's based on humiliation. You learn by humiliation. Some of the teachers were really sadists. They got the kids up there, and if they felt the kids were weak in some subject, they would humiliate them in front of the classes.

LASKEY:

That's terrible.

WILSON:

It is, but that's the way it was done. And they worked hard. They worked so hard, those kids. When they got into junior high and into high—they don't call it that. When they went to school, they had to be in class at nine. They had the usual two-hour lunch, which they didn't need, really, they didn't need a two-hour lunch, but that's what the habit is of the children there. Then they'd come home at six o'clock at night, and they'd have about two hours of homework to do. There was no athletics in school. There was no student government or any of the extra-curricular activities that kids have. In the English school, they had more extracurricular stuff than the French children do.

LASKEY:

Sounds tough.

WILSON:

It was a very tough schedule. So by the time we moved back to the United States—in 1964 we moved to Ojai and we put them in Nordoff High School. Rebecca was a senior, and Rosanna was a junior. They had learned everything in French, except for this brief period in the English school, and they were the smartest kids in school. They were smarter in everything. Everything! They were ready to go to college.

LASKEY:

I'm not surprised.

WILSON:

It was just remarkable. Even though they started taking everything in English, they just knew everything, because their little brains were just more practiced. However, the curious thing is that when they took their SAT examinations—you know what that is—to get into the university—they were part of the baby-boom children, and the competition and getting in there was so hard. They did not do well on their SATs, because their written English and comprehension was just not as good as kids who had been educated here in English. These kids who were so bright—both of them are brilliant children—had a very tough time with the SATs, even though they had graduated with honors.

LASKEY:

Well, also, some people don't test well.

WILSON:

That's possible. But I don't think it's that. I think that they just were not all that comfortable in the language. It's like a foreigner trying to take the Scholastic Aptitude Test. That was it. You know a little English, enough English to fool yourself by. So Rosanna came back, and she was homecoming queen. Rebecca was—they were so thrilled with having activities with their peers that that's practically all they did their last couple of years here.

LASKEY:

Well, they earned it.

WILSON:

They earned it. She was editor of the school annual, Rebecca was, and Rosanna was homecoming queen and was going out with the football team. [laughter] It was a very funny thing when they came back.

LASKEY:

While you were in France, at what point did you feel comfortable enough with the language and settled enough to start to pursue your own career?

WILSON:

That was several years, because I just really wasn't ready. I think it was after about the third or fourth year that we were there when I finally felt comfortable enough. I'd gotten everybody settled in, and Mike was starting to work more often at home, because he was away a lot. He was away in Ceylon. He came back from there, and then shortly thereafter he went off to work on—no, that wasn't shortly thereafter. It was about three years later when he had started to work on *Lawrence of Arabia* and he spent some time in Jordan. He was in England a lot. Then there was a period when we had no passports. We couldn't go anywhere.

LASKEY:

The French had confiscated your passports?

WILSON:

No, the Americans would not renew our passports.

LASKEY:

Oh, really? When was this?

WILSON:

Well, let's see. We got our passports in '56. They were good for three years, and then after three years they would not renew our passports. We were in France for at least three years more, two years more, without any passports at all, and we couldn't go anywhere. Except we got some visas through our French connections, we were able to travel a little bit. I remember Mike was working on a film which later was called *Topkapi*. He did the first screenplay of it. I was reminded of this because I had lunch yesterday with Bea Dassin, who was married to Jules Dassin, who later married Melina Mercouri, the cultural minister of Greece.

LASKEY:

And star of *Topkapi*.

WILSON:

That's right. Mike had started to work on that, which was taken from an Eric Ambler novel called *Light of Day*. It was a very entertaining book. Mostly it was about a kind of a lumpen British guy who drove a taxi in Athens, a marvelous character who was later played by Peter Ustinov. Somebody had conned him into taking a bunch of jewels and money into Istanbul. Mike wrote a very, very entertaining screenplay about how they had stolen the jewel out of the crown in the *Topkapi* Museum. That was the story. A very minor character in that was a woman who was in on this game, and so Jules Dassin, who was married to Bea Dassin—[laughter]

LASKEY:

Half the time!

WILSON:

—my friend, Bea, and had three children with her, was having a love affair with Melina Mercouri. He wanted her in this film, so he wanted Mike to rewrite the film totally to make her the prime character in the film. Mike said, "Well, that's not this book." He said, "It's not apropos." Mike always stood up for what he believed. He never minded arguing with directors or producers. He was an extremely courteous man, basically, but when it came to his art and what he thought was right, he fought like a tiger. Jules Dassin got mad at him because he did not want to enlarge Melina Mercouri's role that much, so he set the meeting up with the producer in some elegant place like Birkenstock or someplace in Switzerland, and Mike couldn't get to Switzerland because he didn't have a passport.

LASKEY:

Where could you go? At this point, could you leave France at all?

WILSON:

Let's see. There were certain countries where we could just get a visa. I think Italy was one, but we couldn't go to Switzerland. We couldn't go to Belgium, and we couldn't go to Spain. We certainly couldn't—well, we could return to the United States, yes, without a passport, if you could prove you were born in the United States. The function of a passport is simply to have foreign protection. It guarantees the protection of the American government no matter where you travel.

LASKEY:

So you could have come back to the United States?

WILSON:

We could have done that. The other option was to sign a very, very long statement saying, "I'm not now a communist; I've never been a communist—"

LASKEY:

"I will never be a communist."

WILSON:

[laughter] "I will never be a communist!" They had a hell of a long loyalty oath of some sort. "I've never belonged to any organizations that would advocate overthrowing the government of the United States; I've never belonged to any front organization of the Communist Party—" It just went on and on.

LASKEY:

Now, this was a U. S. government agenda or whatever that you had to sign to get a passport.

WILSON:

Yes. To get a passport. We could have gotten it. We could have returned to the United States, but Mike would have been out of work here because the blacklist was still on at that time. Besides, we wanted to stay in France at that time, and we wanted to be able to travel. We couldn't travel; we had no passport. So anyway, to get back to my story. Jules Dassin, who's not a very nice person, sometimes, set this meeting up in such a place where Mike couldn't go, to convince the producer without Mike's presence there that he should include Melina Mercouri and that she should play the main role in this film. So anyway, they broke off, and the film came out. Mike could have contested it, but he was so pissed at that time because it was basically, again, his structure.

LASKEY:

Really? It's charming.

WILSON:

He decided not to arbitrate it. He didn't want to have any connection with it at all.

LASKEY:

It's a charming movie.

WILSON:

It turned out to be a pretty charming movie after all. Yeah. He hired a British writer that he had worked with on some other films. They finished up. They adapted the film and finished up. Anyway.

LASKEY:

So how long was. Mike in Ceylon doing *The Bridge on the River Kwai*?

LASKEY:

Oh, he was there for quite a while. He was there for about six weeks, I think. It was a tremendous experience for him. to be on the set and to see how they built the bridge. It was primarily built by the force of elephants. That is, the elephants did all of the hauling of the timbers and [were] rather cruelly treated as Mike described it. Not at all the way it was shown in the film where it was built only by the people in the camp. But apparently this was the case during World War II. I don't know where all the elephants were, but they were not building bridges.

LASKEY:

[laughter]

WILSON:

But when they built it this time, that's where it was. Actually, see, the actual battle did not take place in Ceylon, which is no longer Ceylon, it's Sri Lanka. It was in New Guinea or someplace else that the actual battle took place in the Pacific. Not in the Pacific, but what was it? The Indian Ocean? I don't know. I don't know exactly where the battle took place. It's when the British were fighting the Japanese at another time during World War II. The Americans really had almost nothing to do with it whatsoever. Historically, I'm not really quite clear on when that time was, but I do remember that the Japanese attacked India. Probably in Burma. Mike stayed with a Singhalese family. Well, he stayed in a hotel most of the time, a wonderful hotel he loved. He said it. had great fourteen-foot ceilings, a very elegant old hotel. It was probably built by the British.

LASKEY:

Yes, probably an old imperial hotel.

WILSON:

He had a boy who took care of him personally. He said that the boy's yes was like this [gesturing]; this was no [gesturing]. It was very confusing to him. He became friendly with a family where the woman was an architect.

LASKEY:

Well, that's interesting.

WILSON:

So he saw them a lot socially. When I finally saw a picture of her, I got jealous because she was so beautiful. [laughter] But anyway, that doesn't matter. To be

on the set under such circumstances was fabulous for him. It was such an interesting film. He had an excellent relationship with David Lean on that film. David Lean just thought he was the best writer he had ever come in contact with. Mike was very good at putting things together and making them make sense, and this was what he was able to do on that film. I mean, as well as his capability to write good dialogue. He had a very good sense of the thrust of the film, what you really were trying to get out of it.

LASKEY:

It's his background as a philosophy major.

WILSON:

Probably. So it was—he came back really very, very happy with the job they had done, and they were so happy with him. But he only got \$10,000 for that.

LASKEY:

That's incredible.

WILSON:

And the picture went on to make—so the whole experience was terrific, even though he did not get very much money or even a piece of the picture—

LASKEY:

What a shame.

WILSON:

The picture went on to make \$90 million.

LASKEY:

And that's in fifties dollars.

WILSON:

That was 1950s dollars, that's right. Mike, as I say, got—we were thrilled because you could live pretty good on \$10,000. When he came back with \$10,000, we were in heaven. I was able to really get a nice little apartment. Everything was so inexpensive at that time. It was more inexpensive in France than in the United States. In the 1950s, you could live a year on \$10,000, with a family, at least.

LASKEY:

You were still living in Paris.

WILSON:

Yes. By that time I had rented an apartment on the Left Bank, on the sixth floor, and I had fixed it up a little bit and got some furniture for it. The kids were going to Pere Castor. Then Mike got back, and he was working on a few more things. Then, having settled in, I started to take some courses at the École des Beaux-Arts in their graduate school of architecture. I took some courses in sculpting.

LASKEY:

Had you done sculpting before?

WILSON:

Only as a freshman when I was at [University of California] Berkeley. I loved it. I just loved the feel of it, and realized that I had a kind of a knack for it. I would never be a brilliant sculptor, even if I started young, as far as I know, but I just enjoyed it so much. Just something that you get lost in all that clay. I learned so much in that class in France about massing and putting together of forms. It was an architectural experience for me, as well as an artistic experience, for me to be a sculptor.

LASKEY:

Was there any difficulty at this point with women going to the École, or was this just more or less accepted?

WILSON:

No, there were others. There were other women in the architecture department. As I told you, they're better than we are. I took a course in urbanism at the École. That was a little bit hard for me, because the language was so complex. This is like city planning. A course in city planning from a French point of view. It was very interesting for me to hear all about how Baron Haussmann redesigned Paris. He redesigned it for Napoleon III. The basis of the redesign was to prevent revolution. He cleaned out the entire center of Paris and probably cleaned out a lot of beautiful old buildings. All the central part of Paris, which is the Arc de Triomphe, the Place Vendome and the Place de la Concorde, all of that, and all of the Etoile, you know, the stars that come out of the Arc. All that area was entirely cleaned out. It was probably the biggest redevelopment that's ever taken place anywhere. It could only have been done under a monarchy. We've done a lot of redevelopment in the United States, and it hasn't been very good. We spoke about this once. You know, our public housing. But he came in and he cleaned out the entire center, all the tiny, little, narrow streets, because that's where all the revolutionaries were able to barricade, those little, narrow streets, and were able to protect themselves against the King's forces. They almost mounted a revolution. You know, the revolution had been going on for a long, long time. And it was pretty effective in the long run. It didn't help them, because the revolution did take place. But out of it we got a magnificent center of Paris. Probably, if I'd been a Parisian at that time, I would have been horrified that they were gutting the whole center part of Paris. But they did something absolutely gorgeous because they had the Louvre at one end and the Place de l'Etoile at the other, Place de la Concorde in the center, and then the beautiful—and the Palais Royal, which is in there, and the beautiful galleries, and you know, Le Grand Palais and Le Petit Palais, and the home, which is now the home of the presidents of France.

1.13. TAPE NUMBER: VIII, Side One (April 22, 1989)

WILSON:

I'm just telling you what I learned in this class in urbanism that I took, some of the things I learned, plus some of the newer things that they were doing like what they were planning to do at the Place de la Defense, which I saw the last time I was in Paris.

LASKEY:

What did you think of that?

WILSON:

Well, I kind of like that building that was done by an obscure Danish architect. That skyscraper is about a hundred feet apart, that goes straight up, then it spans a hundred feet at the top, then they have an object which is called the cloud, Le Nuage, that hangs down below out of vinyl cloth. Then down below they have outdoor sculpture. The French are so conscious of art. Everything is so artistic. It will never replace—it is not like the Arc de Triomphe, but it is good looking. It's very handsome.

LASKEY:

Did you have difficulty when you went to the École des Beaux-Arts? Since your most recent practice and your most recent education was in contemporary or International style. Then you go back into the École, which was essentially what the International style was reacting against. Did you run into problems of your own?

WILSON:

I wouldn't say there were problems. It was an eye-opener for me. We had so little concentration on the history of architecture when I was in school, because we had been so overtaken by the Bauhaus school. The only architecture was this architecture of extreme simplicity—the refinement of simplicity. But to go into a city that has so many layers of history in it, and to define the beauty and spaces, that we don't have in the United States. We don't have a sense of place in the United States, most especially California. Back East, sometimes you have a—in New England you'll get a sense of place. It is closer to the Europeans who have founded that area. But, for example, in Italy, when you come into a space—I'm very conscious of this—you come into a little plaza and there's a little fountain there with little buildings around it. You go down a very narrow street that opens up to something that's so big that it just takes your breath away. Then there's another sense of place that's magnificent. Then you go back into another little narrow street. Then suddenly it opens up into something else. Then you have another gorgeous fountain or a gorgeous something-or-other in there and little restaurants around it. Honestly, I got such an appreciation for European—for our roots. For our roots that have been so wasted here. When I think how much that was ignored when I was in school—

so I would say that my European experience architecturally made me three times the architect that I would have been if I hadn't gone there.

LASKEY:

That was going to be my next question. Did this affect your own architecture?

WILSON:

Absolutely. Absolutely. When I came back here, I really started moving away from the Bauhaus in my own work—well, in my own work? I hadn't done much in my own work. But in my own practice here, I think that's why—that's a part of what my appeal has been in this town, in this community. While it is true that I am not great on marketing, I am quite well known in the community and there is a lot of respect for me here. I've gotten quite a few honor awards for my work. I think that has to do because I went to Europe and I got the sense of what it is to be cozy in a place, and what it is to be in a larger place where it is a more ceremonial place. What it is to be in a public place and a private place. I developed a sense of scale there that I don't think I never would have had, because we were just doing big rectangular rooms with windows from door to ceiling.

LASKEY:

Is that what led you to take the class in city planning? Is this something you felt—?

WILSON:

Well, I was very interested.

LASKEY:

—that you recognized after you took the class?

WILSON:

I think I told you I went to work for the Los Angeles City Planning Department. We went through all that when I was in—

LASKEY:

Right. When you were here, you worked for the city.

WILSON:

I considered the possibility of going back into city planning, because even though I had been so terribly discouraged by my experience, as you know, I was very interested in city planning. So that's why I took that class. Also, I just wanted to know. I was so impressed with the European sense of space that no architect—I don't think—had designed really. Much of it just came natural to the Europeans. They knew that there had to be a public square, and they knew there had to be little narrow streets. The towns there were built for self-protection. They were protecting themselves from—all the towns were little walled cities, because there was constantly inter fighting between the walled cities. The fields were out there, but they lived here as a means of self-protection. They lived here and all their fields were there. That's dispersed a lot

now when you go down and you see farm and farming communities. There's still a little community where you have the—what is that? The bourg? The place where all of the government agencies and all the red tape takes place? Where you register for everything. And the town government and the town church and the big marketplace. The big marketplaces where the people bring all their vegetables and their fish and cheese and sell them. The marches, which were set up several times a week. To me, this was the way communities ought to be. I thought of how I had grown up. While there was some sense of community, it was nothing like the sense of community that you felt when you were in Europe amongst the people.

LASKEY:

You grew up essentially in what we out here would consider a community, in Santa Paula and Ojai.

WILSON:

Yes, I had that, and maybe I was attracted to that too. That is why I was so attracted to the little communities there. Santa Paula did have a sense of place. It has less of one now when you go there, but it was an eye-opener to me. Also, the role of art in architecture. You can't do very much unless there is in the budget something for artwork. It's seldom in there. Architects have to fight to get some artwork into the buildings. In New York, I understand, the art commission has been able to get all of the people who put in skyscrapers to have some kind of artwork down below. It has become such a tradition, they may do it without even being asked. I don't know.

LASKEY:

I think Los Angeles has that now, too, that fund for public art which requires a certain percentage of the cost of the building to go into public art. But that's very new. It certainly isn't part of our background. It's not built in to how we feel.

WILSON:

Anyway, moving ahead, I took that class and then I went to work with a French architect in Paris. That was not a particularly good experience because my training had been so different in the School of Architecture that we really and truly didn't really get along. I don't mean that we fought or anything. It's just that artistically we were so divergent in our points of view. However, there were certain interesting experiences which came out of it. For example, I did a dormitory—a celibataire is what they call it—for him. I got my sister [Sylvia Gussin Jarrico] and we traveled down to Montpellier, which was outside Marseilles, where there's a university, the University of Montpellier. I was to do a dormitory. It was right on the Mediterranean.

LASKEY:

How lovely.

WILSON:

Oh, it was so gorgeous. Then we did another chore, which I'll tell you in minute. But meanwhile, I came back and I designed the dormitory for him with all the dormitory rooms facing on the water—because it was so beautiful in the Mediterranean—and sort of in the California style.

LASKEY:

Also very modern. Very International style.

WILSON:

So I still was designing in the International style, despite the influences on me. [laughter] But I had made a courtyard. I had all the dormitories facing this way [illustrates]. It was about a four-story building [facing] onto the water. I had some sport facilities here, a kitchen there. In the interior, I had the dining rooms and the public rooms and the little library. Anyway, when I developed this idea when I was working with him, he actually threw it out, all out. He said, "Why are you facing the dormitory rooms onto the water?" I said, "Well, the water is so beautiful and so blue." I had balconies for everybody. He said, "This is not the way we think in France. You don't face that direction, because the life of the dormitories is in the inside. If you put all those windows on there, they'll get dirty. The windows will get dirty. You'll get all the winds that come off the water. The wear and tear on the building of having it face the sun—" I thought, "My god, I'm in another world."

LASKEY:

It truly is another world.

WILSON:

It's truly another world, because everything in—they turn inward. It's an inward life in France. You know, the faces of the buildings, like people's homes, do not face on the street. There are great walls. You get down on the street and there are just great walls. The life of the building is in the inside of the courtyard. To them, a view is not important. If you want to see a view, you go out and look at the view. [laughter]

LASKEY:

Oh. What a loss.

WILSON:

So here they are in the Mediterranean and—anyway, he threw out my design totally, and he did his own design of that. However, by that time I already had experience doing shopping centers. I did a shopping center for him for a little town. I forget the name of it. It was kind of a little industrial town. He liked that design. As far as I know, he proceeded with it, but I didn't follow through on it. The other experience had to do—his lover—his wife was living with him. They lived in different parts of the house. He had his bedroom and his drafting room.

His wife was in another part of the house—a little bit like the situation I had with [Rudolph M.] Schindler.

LASKEY:

I was going to say it sounds like the Schindler house. [laughter]

WILSON:

But his lover lived with him.

LASKEY:

In the same house? They were very French, huh?

WILSON:

Yes. They were very French, very French. His lover was an extremely interesting woman. She worked for the Department of Health. There had been reports that there was a certain village in the south of France, near where we were going, where they were sending oysters to Paris. They had marvelous oyster beds there, and the oysters were making everybody from Marseilles sick because they were spilling all their sewage into the bay.

LASKEY:

Even then?

WILSON:

Oh, yeah. So Sylvia went with me and we went down there and we were around Montpellier. She had asked us to go over to this—it's an island—and talk to them and try to convince them not to send any more oysters to Paris until they can get their bay cleaned up a little bit. To see if they couldn't—give them a chance to clean up the bay of some of the sewage before they sent the oysters to Paris. They were very well known for their incredible oysters and clams. It was the whole basis of their making a living. You're not going to tell these fisherman [that]. So they were not supposed to fish, but they used to get up at four o'clock in the morning and go out fishing anyway to bring in their oysters. They would sell them through—

LASKEY:

Did they know that people were getting sick because of them?

WILSON:

They had been ordered by the Health Department to cut down or to shut down their operation, but they had refused to. How would these people have made a living?

LASKEY:

The French government didn't act, of course, to clean up the bay?

WILSON:

Not as far as I knew. Eventually, I think they did. What's going on now must even be worse. So Sylvia and I go down there. We are two American women who didn't know French very well, and we were supposed to convince them. [laughter] It was the silliest thing I had ever heard of, but the experience of it

was so great that we decided to do it. So we get in there, and we crossed to the island in a little boat. The head of the union knew we were coming. He had been forewarned through the Health Department that we were coming down there to inspect them, and that we were working for the Health Department or something. They wined us and dined us. The first thing we did was come into somebody's house where they laid out a table that was loaded with all these, what they called huitres. You know, huitres are all shellfish. Sylvia and I thought we should be polite. You can't just say, "No, we don't want any huitres because they're all poisoned!"

LASKEY:

Well, it would have been an interesting protest.

WILSON:

I did it anyway. I ate it and never did get sick. They must have gone out into their healthy beds where they knew they were healthy to pick up these. They wanted to prove to us, to take the information back to Paris and to the Health Department of Paris. We had a wonderful time there. We had fun with all the union leaders. They had a dance for us. They did all their native dances [with] all the costumes. It was an absolutely extraordinary experience, but I won't go into it any more than that because I know we are short of time. Anyway, so I did that. I worked with an architect and went to school and mostly I traveled a lot and did some drawing when I was there. Like an old-fashioned architect, who used to make their drawing tours of Europe.

LASKEY:

How wonderful. You took your sketchbook and traveled.

WILSON:

I took my sketchbook, which is in the office, or it's gotten scattered. I don't know where the heck it is now. But I did quite a bit of drawing there.

LASKEY:

Now, was this before your passport was canceled or was this while you were restricted to France?

WILSON:

I think that's during the time I was restricted, but there's so much to see in France anyway. There were so many other trips that I took. I took a trip down to see the caves of Lascaux, you know, the painted caves.

LASKEY:

Oh, that was before they were closed. You actually got down into the real caves.

WILSON:

That's right. Just before they were closed, because about a year later I heard that they were closed.

LASKEY:

That must have been fabulous.

WILSON:

So I got to see—oh, it was so thrilling. Sometimes I would travel with the children in the summertime. The family always went to the south of France every summer because everybody else did. It was such a tradition, we just fell right into it. So we always rented a little house in Saint-Raphael or the other place right across the bay that's so famous. That's the chic spot where you could go, but we didn't ever go to that [Saint Tropez]. And we usually went down to the Cannes Film Festival every year, too. When *Friendly Persuasion* won the award at the Cannes Film Festival, Mike [Michael Wilson] went down and had a press conference and said that he was the writer, but as it was done during the blacklist, he didn't get credit. When he made that remark, there were about one hundred people from the press from all over the world there. All he did was to have to announce that he was the writer of *Friendly Persuasion* and there was no problem getting him there. So Mike did have a sense of public relations, I guess. Well, it was not a sense of marketing, it was more like justice. But the sense of justice that he had, I guess, brought him into the forefront. Well, I don't know. Who's to say? Mike seemed such a modest person in his personal life, that to think that he would do this just to market himself, I don't think so. What he wanted to do was to let the world know of these political actions which affect artists—these political disasters—and the effect of the blacklist in Hollywood. Let it be known internationally. So whenever we went down to Cannes, everybody was competing for his attention there. We were invited to many embassies for big banquets.

LASKEY:

Well, besides, it's simply a matter of justice. He wrote *Friendly Persuasion*. He did the screenplay. It was his work. He certainly did a lot of monumental work that he never got recognized for—that's very unjust—which would have offended his sense of justice.

WILSON:

Of course it did.

LASKEY:

It has nothing to do with vanity or anything else. It just wasn't fair.

WILSON:

No.

LASKEY:

Now, he eventually did get recognized. Didn't the [Screen] Writers Guild here eventually recognize him as the writer of *Friendly Persuasion* What was the final—?

WILSON:

Yes. He was given credit by the Screen Writers Guild.

LASKEY:

But he still does not have credit on the film even today?

WILSON:

Even today. Or even on *Bridge on the River Kwai*, even though he got the posthumous Academy Award for that.

LASKEY:

It still isn't on the credits for the film? That is amazing. Absolutely amazing.

WILSON:

You see, there is no way to force the studios—that I know of—to change the credits. Because what you're asking is for someone to change the credits. Apparently it costs them about a hundred thousand dollars just to change the credits. [I have just received notice from Columbia Pictures that the screen titles of *The Bridge on the River Kwai* are being changed to give him credit]. [Wilson added the previous bracketed section during her review of the transcript].

LASKEY:

They spend more money than that on phone calls for a film. Even if it costs that much, that is not a lot of money to a studio.

WILSON:

No. They just don't want to do it. But we went down there every summer. We were there. Rarely did we miss a summer staying down at the beach. The children loved to be at the beach, and it gave us an opportunity to go to the Cannes Film Festival, or to go down to Monte Carlo and gamble a little bit and just have fun.

LASKEY:

Was it Saint-Tropez? Is that the place you were trying to think of?

WILSON:

Saint-Tropez, yes. We usually stayed at Saint-Raphael, which was right across. Mike didn't like to go to real chic places. Oh, then we found a wonderful hotel that we went down [for] three or four summers that we stayed at. It was called Saint-Christophe. It was just a—well, we used to have a lot of fun doing our own cooking when we used to rent an apartment on the beach. But Saint-Christophe was such a super hotel that we—it wasn't an elegant hotel, but it was right on the water, and it wasn't across the highway, like most of the hotels were. It was right on the water, and it was built on a cliff going down. You just looked over and saw the whole Mediterranean and down below they had sort of a natural little pool—sort of a swimming pool but it was made of water from the Mediterranean—where children could swim. We had a balcony. It was absolutely beautiful, and the food was fabulous. We used to go down there and stay. It was near Cannes. It was only about twenty miles from Cannes. Saint

Raphael, where we usually had stayed, was further away. We got into the habit of staying at the Saint-Christophe.

LASKEY:

Now, were the girls with you?

WILSON:

The girls were always with us in the summer.

LASKEY:

Yes, they must have loved that.

WILSON:

They did.

LASKEY:

Of course, I can never hear of a vacation like that without thinking of Mr. Hulot's Holiday. This is my image of vacations in France. [laughter]

WILSON:

Actually, Mr. Hulot's Holiday was the northern coast of France, across the Channel from England. That's where he had his holidays. It was another kind of a beach. The Cote d'Azur doesn't look like that at all. His area was flat, whereas on the Cote d'Azur it was mountainous right down into the water, you see. It was a very different atmosphere. I forget the name of the town that—we used to go out there once in a while because our friends, the Golds, had a cottage up there. That's where you take the—if you want to go by train all the way over to England, you got on the train [at] the Gare Saint-Lazare, which we did several times when we were in France. You go all the way north to this coastal town I'm telling you about and they take your train and they push it right onto the water. Have you ever done this?

LASKEY:

No. I've never been to England.

WILSON:

It's great. It's just incredible. They just take your train—it is an overnight thing. They put your train onto a ferry. Theoretically, you're supposed to be asleep at this time, and they ferry you over to Dover, or close to Dover, then the British engine and the British eating car is stuck on to it, and then you go on to London. When you get out, you're in London.

LASKEY:

How fantastic.

WILSON:

And you started in Paris.

LASKEY:

That is not Le Havre, is it?

WILSON:

No, that's not Le Havre. This is in the north of France where we did this, where the Channel is the narrowest.

LASKEY:

Oh, that sounds fantastic.

WILSON:

Everything I'm telling you sounds so wonderful, the experiences we had.

LASKEY:

It does. [laughter] Well, did you have any trouble going into England without a passport?

WILSON:

By that time, I think, when we did those trips, either it was before—one of them we made before and one of them we made afterward. Once I drove over with the children and did all the countryside in my Peugeot that I had bought when I was there that I loved so much. The kids and I drove all over the countryside and went to Scotland. Mike was somewhere. I don't know where he was. Mike is not a very good traveler.

LASKEY:

That surprises me. I would think a writer would want the experience of travel.

WILSON:

Well, I mean he was a traveler in the sense that he liked luxurious circumstances. He wanted to know always what was going to happen. He was not the kind of guy to rough it.

LASKEY:

I can sympathize.

WILSON:

Wherever we went, we always went first-class. His father [Frank Wilson] was that way. His father—everything was first-class. You went on an airplane, you went first-class. That's how Mike was. He was not one to live in poverty or to enjoy it. We spent all of our money over there. Whatever money we made, we spent. When he finally started to make more money, when he went to work for [Dino] De Laurentiis and did quite a few films for De Laurentiis—he did three or four films for him, and he went to Rome. He was in Rome. We stayed with the De Laurentiises in their house in Monte Carlo. No, it was just across the border. You see, Monte Carlo is on the border between France and Italy. I think their house was in Monte Carlo, but it was right near the border. He was married to that beautiful Italian actress. I forget her name. Anyway, she was there. They weren't getting along.

LASKEY:

Silvano Mangano.

WILSON:

Silvano Mangano. She was there. We spent about three or four days there once. He invited us and the children. The children all had the children's wing—all the De Laurentiis children who are now big shots in the De Laurentiis Group. You see their names all over credits all the time.

LASKEY:

Yes, Rafaela [De Laurentiis].

WILSON:

Rafaela, yes.

LASKEY:

She has probably been the most successful of them, I think. This is Dino you were with?

WILSON:

Dino, the father.

LASKEY:

The father, right.

WILSON:

And Silvano. Our kids were just about the same ages as their children. He made so much money with all these potboiler, terrible spaghetti westerns that he made. Anyway, we stayed with them in this unbelievable place in Monte Carlo. Mike was working for him, and Dino De Laurentiis made us marvelous moules marinare, Italian style. Moules means mussels in French, and marinare is marinated, Italian style. It was just unbelievably good. He made the whole lunch. He himself got into the kitchen. Of course, he had about five assistants in the kitchen. [laughter] But they had the fresh spaghetti that they had just made with their pasta machine. Then he fixed the—we had the pasta dish, and the fish, moules marinare, and a great dessert. Unbelievably good vegetables. He was a wonderful cook. Silvano was a little bit distant. The children ate separately. Our kids ate with their children, the De Laurentiises' children, out with the nanny someplace else.

LASKEY:

Very civilized.

WILSON:

Very civilized. [laughter] Then they had a party for us because he wanted to introduce Mike to meet everybody. His catch was Mike because Mike was such a catch for people like that, because he had this incredible reputation. He had been blacklisted. He could hire him for not nearly as much money as he would have had to.

LASKEY:

Nothing.

WILSON:

So he was showing Mike off. Silvano made a play for Mike because it was still during his gorgeous period. [laughter] But she had another lover.

LASKEY:

Was this just a known—is this simply known information? Did Dino know it, for example?

WILSON:

Well, I don't know. I presume so. I think that marriages were so open at that time. Marriage in Italy is a declaration of independence for the woman because up to that time she's kept virginal. When you get married, because now you're no longer virginal, now you have the opportunity to—I'm talking about the middle and upper classes, not the working class. Was the signal for them to begin having love affairs. Suddenly, *la dolce vita*, there's a lot of truth in that. Once you get married, now you're settled into a marriage, and you are settled into your life, but then you really start to have a good time. Then you could have—you have women, if you're a husband. You have your mistress, and you set her up someplace, and the wife takes on a young lover. That is the way life is there. Eventually, I understand they separated. I don't know what happened.

LASKEY:

Yeah, they did.

WILSON:

I think that there was just too much hostility there, too many love affairs. Maybe he fell in love with a younger woman, because he became such a powerful producer and so wealthy that he probably could have anybody. She probably got too old for him. I'm just guessing, because I don't know for sure. Then there were times when we were together. Mike and I went to England and left the children in France. Then we would meet a British producer and an American producer there. Then we went up to Burgenstock in Switzerland, which was way, way on top of a hill and there was a whole bunch of cottages up there that were owned by various movie stars. This is where David Lean would have his conferences. He was married to a very, very beautiful Indian woman.

LASKEY:

David Lean was? I didn't know that.

WILSON:

He had been married to a British actress. That marriage had folded. He married this Indian woman. By the way, he had talked to Mike about producing and doing Gandhi. He wanted to do Gandhi.

LASKEY:

When was this? Are we still in the late fifties or early 1960s?

WILSON:

Mike was then working on *Lawrence of Arabia*. So I'm leaping back and forth in time.

LASKEY:

No, it is just interesting how long *Gandhi* was in the works.

WILSON:

Well, he didn't do *Gandhi* finally. It was done by [Richard] Attenborough. It must have been a great, great disappointment to him that he didn't get to do *Gandhi* because he even had Mike doing research on the man's life and reading all the books just to see how he can put together a film on Gandhi. Eventually, and long after we had returned, then *Gandhi* was made. But this was always a dream—to put *Gandhi* together—so I'm sure that. Lean was extremely disappointed that he didn't get to do it. And there was Sam Spiegel. We went on Sam Spiegel's yacht several times. He had his yacht down on the Mediterranean. I am skipping around a lot because I can't remember the hronology of some of these things.

LASKEY:

But all this was taking place at essentially the time that you were in France between '56 and '64?

WILSON:

Right. Mike did a lot of traveling on his own when he was doing films. I couldn't leave because I had two children, even though they were in school. Once in a while I was able to leave them for a short period. We were able to leave them for short periods of time because Nicole Toutain, that I mentioned before, eventually became Mike's secretary. She stayed on in the motion picture industry. Through Mike's influence she became an assistant producer, eventually. She was a script girl, then she became an assistant producer. She's still working in the motion picture industry and is a very valued person because she's extremely experienced now. Last time I was in Paris, which was last year, I guess, '88, my daughter joined me, Rebecca. They've always been very close, she and Nicole. We saw her and had a wonderful time with her. She's still working in the motion picture industry. She lived with us almost the entire time we were living in France. First she was my girl Friday, then she became Mike's girl Friday. She was always just part of the family, like an older sister who was also working. But she did all of Mike's secretarial work and assisted me when I had to deal with the various French agencies or make all the complicated phone calls and deal with—when I'd get a traffic ticket or something, she'd always help me take care of that. Get our money out of Switzerland, things like that.

LASKEY:

Which sounds like it might be very complicated.

WILSON:

It was very complicated. Everything you do there is complicated. Their bureaucracy is layered beyond belief, and everything is in triplicate or quadruplicate. It's worse than the military, I'm sure. Mike wrote almost the entire time. When he wasn't writing screenplays for various producers, he was writing his own material. He wrote part of a book, which he finished when we got back here. He wrote the outline of several plays. He wrote some poetry. He was always writing something. I never saw Mike take a—as I say, except for this one vacation. Even when we were in the south of France, where really we were vacationing, he always spent at least every morning working on something. He was not happy unless he was working. This was his prime goal in life: to work and to learn. Anything else was a diversion for him. I mean, as much as I think he loved me and the girls—when he felt that he could no longer write, he wanted to die, after he had his stroke and he was not capable of writing the way he had before. This has been a source of great pain in the family. Because the girls felt that he wanted to die and he died. I'm skipping around again.

LASKEY:

That's all right.

WILSON:

And that he did it almost deliberately, because he started to abuse his body again with alcohol, even after he had a stroke, and smoking on the sly. But the drama of how he died is—I've got to tell you that eventually. I don't know at what point because that was quite a many years later.

LASKEY:

Yeah.

WILSON:

So the European experience, I would say, except for the last few years when I began to feel like if I didn't get back into my profession I never would—

LASKEY:

Now, you were not working then?

WILSON:

No. I worked about a year and a half with this architect, and I went to school for another year and a half. But that doesn't take care of eight years. The rest of the time I was traveling or settling in. We had moved to the country, you know. We lived three and a half years in Paris in the sixth arrondissement near the Gare Montparnasse and on Rue Blaise Desoffe. He was a minor painter. Therefore, it was a very short street. [laughter]

LASKEY:

Most of the streets in Paris are, I think. At least the names are very short. It may be one street, with ten different names.

WILSON:

We had many experiences which I'm skipping over, because we have so much to cover today. A boy next door—I'll tell you this one because it was very traumatic for the girls and for me, for everybody. It was during the school vacation. There was a very, very handsome boy who lived in the next apartment on the sixth floor. The apartments there are huge. They had four or five bedrooms. They were just tremendous. So we had one. The ones even in the sixth arrondissement, which was more of the intellectuals' arrondissement—it's not the upper-middle class, like around the Etoile, the sixteenth arrondissement. That's a very elegant area. But even in our area, you can't tell by looking at a building unless it's an extremely depressed area that there's any poverty at all. That's there's anything at all. You can't tell because nothing faces the street. When you go upstairs in these rickety, old, open-wire elevators—you get up and you go into a place and it's beautiful. You have no idea that it's so beautiful. We lived next door to people that we barely saw, that had very little to do with us. We had one meeting when we first moved in there—we lived there three and a half years. The boy was in high school and working towards his baccalaureate. He got to be friendly with Nicole through the backdoor of our place, because we both had this exterior escalier where we put all our trash and the retarded son of the concierge came and picked it up once a week. Very, very sweet boy; he was studying for his baccalaureate. His parents had gone off for the summer. We got back a few weeks before he was to take his baccalaureate. We were all pulling for him. He was seventeen years old, sixteen years old, I don't know.

LASKEY:

He was staying alone?

WILSON:

He was staying alone in the house. One night we went out to dinner. We came home. I think it was the girls who smelled it first. They said they smelled gas. So we knocked, and we could smell it from coming underneath their door. Their door is this way [illustrates] with the door and this corner and then there was our door. But it was coming through. We smelled it when we got up to the sixth floor. Mike knocked on the door, and there was no answer. He tried to break down the door, and he couldn't do it. The doors were just—I mean, they were that thick, the doors. Everything is very protective up there. So he had to climb from our balcony to their balcony on the sixth floor because we got to worrying about the boy. Because we knew that he was home for the summer studying for his baccalaureate. He finally got into their apartment through the balcony. You know, I didn't even want to look because here's the balcony and five feet away is another balcony going in another direction. He had to climb down on his knees, six floors below, and so he had to climb over there. He got into their apartment, and the boy indeed had committed suicide. He had turned

on the gas, and he had his head sitting on the door of the oven. It really was an extraordinary experience for him and for the children because we had known him. He had committed suicide because he felt he couldn't take his baccalaureate and fulfill what his parents expected of him. This was very, very common in Europe. If you know anything about the baccalaureate, it is like their—the SAT that we take in the United States is nothing compared to the baccalaureate there. You have to take part of it in a foreign language. His was German. Then [in] another [part] you have to write a great philosophical essay on some subject of the—but they would say, "In the Cartesian thinking, the role of the soul is," and on and on and on. Then they have to write this big essay.

1.14. TAPE NUMBER: VIII, Side Two (April 22, 1989)

WILSON:

Our girls were—the baccalaureate thing—maybe that's one of the reasons Mike didn't want them to have to go through that. Also, he wanted them to go to American colleges. We both did. We knew that eventually we were going to go home, especially the last few years, because 1961 or '62 was when the blacklist was actually broken by Dalton Trumbo when he did *Exodus* and *Spartacus*. Maybe *Spartacus* was before *Exodus*. That's when we started thinking about coming home. Mike wanted to work under his own name, and I wanted to go back into my architectural practice, and the girls were getting to the age where they are just about to finish high school. It was time for us to come home.

LASKEY:

So that was your decision. Your decision was based on just a desire to come back?

WILSON:

It took us two years to decide because we had the most glorious circumstances to live that I'd ever seen in my life. It's unbelievable when I think back on it.

LASKEY:

This is your country home.

WILSON:

The country home.

LASKEY:

What was that like?

WILSON:

We were there four and a half years. In the city we were three and a half years. In the country we were four and a half years. The country home was on eleven acres, five hectares, which comes out to about eleven acres. It was the home of a very famous movie actor named Gerard Philipe. He had just died in 1959 of cancer of the liver. Cancer of the liver is very, very common in France because

they drink so much wine. The kids start drinking wine when they're—it's either cirrhosis of the liver or cancer of the liver. But their livers are weakened through generations and generations of alcoholism. The kids start to drink wine when they're nine years old. They cut it by putting water in it when they're children. Anyway, he and his wife, who was Jeanne Philipe—I guess her name is—was the head of the—she was the chief anthropologist at the museum of man, Musee de l'Homme in Paris. Extremely brilliant woman. She was about ten years older than he was. He was one of the most beautiful men of all time. He felt more comfortable with an older woman. He was so besieged by women. Who knows? An actor of that amount of beauty, whether he was fighting his own sexuality—I don't know. Who knows? But in any case, they had two beautiful children, and she was a marvelous woman, extremely bright. She wrote several books about him—about their love affair and about his life—that I read when I was there. Anyway, in France at that time, no property goes to the wife, all the property goes to the children, upon the death of the spouse. The kids don't get control of the property until they're of age. It stays in a kind of a limbo. There is a word for it. It is stata, or status, or—it stays in limbo. It is owned by the children, but they can't do anything with it. So for that reason, she rented it. We rented that place which they had lovingly restored. It was an old sixteenth-century building that was part of a huge principality, and the great chateau was down a ways. It had been taken over by a government school for the retarded. This was one of the buildings which may have been the country house or somebody's home. It was a beautiful three-story building that's very typical of the seventeenth-century architecture—heavy metal shutters and a tile roof and masonry construction.

LASKEY:

Sounds beautiful.

WILSON:

Oh, it was so beautiful. You came in at one end and you turned down what they call the allee, which means the entrance to the chateau, so to speak. Either side of this long roadway—it was about a quarter of a mile—was lined with horse chestnut trees, the marronniers. You know the marronniers in France, the big horse chestnut trees. They're huge, and they turn these unbelievable colors. They turn yellow, then they turn red, then they turn brown. And then they're totally without leaves. The leaves cover the driveway as you walk in in the fall. When the leaves finally fall, it's like driving over gold. It always absolutely took ray breath away. Then in the springtime, they had these fantastic blossoms. They produce a chestnut which is more or less edible. The villagers make a sort of a flour out of the chestnuts and use it to bake things and cook things with. But we didn't do anything with them. So you're down this alley. Then on each side of the alley there were the tennis courts on one side. The

tennis courts were clay courts. Every year they would freeze, and they would have to be resurfaced every year. On the other side was the cherry orchard and all the vegetables that were grown. There was about a half an acre of vegetables that he grew there and apple trees. Then there was the philodendrum garden, you know those huge flowers like this that you see in cold climates. So beautiful. And then there was the rose garden, too, over in that area. Then as you came up toward the house this way, then there was a circular driveway. In the middle of the circular driveway was the lawn. In the middle of the lawn was what they called the massif. Massif is flowers in a circular—they're probably about fourteen feet or fifteen feet in diameter, and they were in a very geometrical pattern. The gardener, which I'll tell you about in a minute, planted these every year in a different color scheme. And in the middle was a statue.
[laughter]

LASKEY:

It sounds like a fantasy.

WILSON:

Oh, it was absolutely a fantasy. It was alongside the river Oise. You know, that area is called the Seine-et-Oise [departement].

LASKEY:

I don't know that part of France.

WILSON:

Oh, you don't, okay. The Oise is a tributary of the Seine and gives into the Seine, which is about five or six miles away. Then there is a wonderful little town called Conflans, confluent in its translation. Then that went down and went all the way down to Le Havre and got quite large by the time it got to Le Havre where all this river poured into the Le Havre harbor. So we weren't that far from Normandie, even though we were only twenty-eight miles from Paris. There was this beautiful house that Gerard Philipe and his wife had restored. It was three stories high. You came into the downstairs, and we had taken the big study—it used to be Gerard Philipe's study, where he had his acting classes or whatever he had there. We'd made it into Mike's workroom. Then on one side was the laundry. It was just sort of a gallery. I mean, it was just sort of an open area. Then there was the beautiful sweep of the stairway. The furnace was back in there someplace hidden, tucked away. It was a coal furnace. Then we went up this beautiful stairway and you landed into this absolutely gorgeous room. They'd put in a lot of glass in there that wasn't in there before. They had all glass across the dining room and a refectory table that was all tile, beautiful Italian tiles. Then our master bedroom was off one side, and the living room was off the other side. The living room was a great two-story space with a walk-in fireplace and a balcony. And the balcony—it was all furnished by them. We only brought in a few pieces of furniture. We didn't have much

furniture, anyway. We had furnished, partially, the apartments. We took that stuff with us, but it wasn't very much. Her furniture was beautiful. She had this great grand piano and some lovely pieces of furniture, some antique, some modern. Everything extremely tasteful. So there was the master bedroom and a guest room on that floor where we were, then upstairs where the—upstairs, well, there was the usual mansard roof. You know, Mansard the Frenchman who invented the partial roof. Then upstairs were the children's rooms and maids' rooms. Then there's one other upstairs where there were some more rooms, because usually all of the staff stayed up there.

LASKEY:

So that's where the servants used to stay.

WILSON:

That's right. But we were able to fix them up. We had room for each girl, plus Nicole stayed there. Then there was another guest room there. Then if you went further, there was another two or three other rooms. So there were actually four levels. It was just an absolutely gorgeous place. Well, there's a painting of the kitchen. The kitchen was an old-fashioned kitchen. We had a vineyard. The gardener [Julien Brunet] would make some kind of a red wine, which wasn't very good. He told Mike that it was an ignoble wine. [laughter] But he made marvelous apple cider every year.

LASKEY:

This is the gardener?

WILSON:

The gardener, now, had been there for fifty-five years.

LASKEY:

Fifty-five years?

WILSON:

Fifty-five years. Gone through three wives. His original wife was the daughter of the other original gardener of the original—and so he had gone through World War II there. In World War II, that place had been taken over by the high-level German staff, the big generals and their immediate staff. I never did find out what the name of the general was because Julien didn't know. But he was there, and he worked the place during this period. Near the end of the war, they took all of the antiques that were in this place, beautiful furniture, and they put it on the Pontoise train, because this was near Pontoise. They sent all of those antiques back to Germany. Even the beautiful statue—there's a lot of other statues out in the yard too, here and there. They took all the ones that didn't break. And then Mr. Brunet, the gardener-caretaker, had put all of the statues back together again. Even the one in the middle as you came down the driveway that I told you about. So the place had been denuded on the inside by the German high command when they left. Mr. Brunet had gone through that

period with them. They had their own separate cottage. He and his wife, who was a villager—he didn't have very much respect for her because she was just a peasant woman, whereas his previous wife had been on a higher level.

LASKEY:

Oh, my!

WILSON:

He didn't treat her very nice. That was Monsieur Brunet, we always called him. His first name was Julien. He was absolutely in love with Rebecca and Rosanna, our little girls. He wore beautiful, high, leather boots, corduroy pants, a tie, a velvet jacket, and a casquette—you know the kind of things that—

LASKEY:

A tam? Beret?

WILSON:

Beret. That's right. That's how he did his gardening, in this outfit. He looked so beautiful. By the time we moved there, he was already about between sixty and seventy, I would think. They were crazy about the girls. They were constantly inviting the girls—the girls used to eat lunch up there sometimes with them. He carved some of the plants into roosters. You know how they do that?

LASKEY:

The topiary.

WILSON:

Topiary, is that what they are called?

LASKEY:

The carving of bushes into shapes, yeah.

WILSON:

He asked me what carvings I would like to have in some of the bushes. I said, "Well, I honestly like kind of the natural look better, so I'd rather have bushes." And he was insulted. If I had known him better at the time when he first asked me, I would have said, "Go ahead and do whatever you like." But I don't know. I'm very opinionated when it comes to architecture and gardens.
[laughter]

LASKEY:

Oh, I know. [laughter] You were living there.

WILSON:

I was living there. A very elegant man, very well spoken, self-educated. I had started this sculpting, and I continued to sculpt. I would go into Paris to my classes at the École des Beaux-Arts. We had our own atelier near Gare Montparnasse. We had one of the professors who was a sculptor, who used to come over and criticize our work. I had my own studio on the balcony overlooking the living room. I was sculpting up there. During the wintertime, Monsieur Brunet didn't have very much to do. He saw me sculpting, and so he

decided to do his own sculpting. I want to show you what he did. [tape recorder off] This guy was a natural. [tape recorder off] Monsieur Brunet started to carve then about the same time that I did, because I was doing all my sculpting. He came up and was inspired. He was an artist anyway. If you could sculpt and make a chicken out of a bush, you could certainly do sculpting. [laughter]

LASKEY:

That's true. That's true.

WILSON:

Yes. He was very clever. So this was during the time when the farmers—all the land is frozen over. There is nothing for a farmer to do except sit around the house and try to fix—so he started to whittle. That's when he took these pieces of wood and came out with all these beautiful things. But in general our life there was very quiet. The children—we had another couple we hired who helped us. Oh, in this entire place which had all these things I told you about—the tennis courts and all the gardens and the cherry orchard and the apple orchard and the prairie—it had an enchanted forest that was absolutely beautiful at all times of the year. In the fall it was dazzling. In the summer you walked through and all the plants and flowers just seemed to be floating. I knew where all the hidden sources of wild strawberries were. I would go out with ray basket and get the wild strawberries. I got to be familiar with all their hiding places, and I would come back and they would—if you've ever had wild strawberries, you've never tasted anything like it.

LASKEY:

I have never have.

WILSON:

Because what they do is—the smell of them is like essence of strawberry. It's like strawberry perfume. When you eat them you have to put—they're a little bit sour because they're wild. And they're very tiny. You know, they're only about this big. You had to put sugar and creme fraiche, which is really sour cream. They call it fresh cream, but it's sour cream because it's slightly sour. That's how you eat them. I would go out and pick them. They're a great delicacy and they're very expensive. But because I knew where the resources were— [laughter] that's one of the things—you asked me what I did there. I was the countess. This place was called Le Mesnil Gency. That was the name of our estate. Anyway, the gardener cost us—he lived on the estate and he ate off of the estate, except for the bread which he bought in the adjacent village and meat which he purchased in the local boucherie. That means meat market. He ate off of the land. So all the things that he grew there. We grew almost all of our vegetable needs, including asparagus, endive, and all of the exotic wonderful vegetables they eat a lot of in France, and peas and string beans and

tomatoes. Everything. Everything there. So the rent on that property was \$550 a month. [laughter] Isn't that wild?

LASKEY:

That is inconceivable!

WILSON:

It's inconceivable now. And Mr. Brunet and his wife who helped him. I think they were—because they had their own house. I think it was about—for the couple, it was like \$150 a month. Then we had a runaway couple that we hired. They had run away from Marseilles. They were in their forties. A little skinny man and a very nice, lovely plump lady that was his wife. That was Alexandre and Juliette. He did a lot of chores around—manly type of chores. She did the cooking and housekeeping. He helped her with the cooking. We got a lot of food from the south of France, which I learned how to make. I can make a wonderful bouillabaisse now, which I didn't know how to do before I used to hang around the kitchen and watch them cook. They were an absolutely adorable couple. They would go for walks. They'd go hand in hand throughout the garden in the time of the afternoon when they had off. Then they'd stop and have a kiss. You know, we used to watch them, Mike and I, and say, "There's something very odd about this couple, because they're so loving and darling with each other after all these years of marriage." So finally it came out that she started to get heavier and heavier and feared that she was pregnant. Then the whole story came out. They were a runaway couple from Marseilles. They each had a stall in one of those marchés, you know, which they set up several times a week. He was a fishmonger and she had vegetables. They worked in adjacent stalls and they got to know each other and fell in love. They each had separate families. She had about four children, and he had three children and his wife, but they fell in love. Then her husband, who was an official in the Communist Party of Marseilles—he and his goons went out and beat the shit out of him. [laughter] Excuse me. I'm sorry. They were going to beat her up, too, but decided she was pregnant. She knew her goose was cooked, so they took off. They drove all the way to Paris, deserted their individual families, with the official of the Communist Party and these guys chasing after them. [laughter] Mike and I really had to laugh because of our own situation. The tables were turned on us.

LASKEY:

At least you can sympathize.

WILSON:

People had told us the best place to put an ad was in the *Herald Tribune* and that the French couple who want to come out there would see it. We had tried a couple of other couples that hadn't worked out. So here this adorable couple came along, and they never left. They went for little short drives. They had a

little, old, beat-up car. They went for little short drives, but they always came back right away. They really were hiding out while she was getting ready to have her baby. They were just the sweetest, the most wonderful people I have ever known. We've kept in contact. He finally died some years ago, and she moved in with her daughter that she had deserted. She's finally forgiven her. Her family wouldn't talk to her for many, many years.

LASKEY:

I can believe that.

WILSON:

They named their child after Mike, because they so adored Mike. It was possible—I couldn't be one of the christened godmothers. My two daughters—they also were in love with Rebecca [Wilson] and Rosanna [Wilson Farrow], like most everybody else was. So they became the godmothers. I couldn't be a godmother because I was Jewish. But I could go to the ceremony.

LASKEY:

Oh, good. [laughter] That was big of them.

WILSON:

The child was named Michel, which is the French way you pronounce Michael. They called him Mike, like we used to call Mike. He was born at the hospital at Pontoise. Anyway, it was all so romantic. [laughter]

LASKEY:

And they stayed together?

WILSON:

They finally were able to get divorces from their respective spouses and they've stayed together. They opened up a restaurant around Lyon someplace, a very nice little restaurant. She was a sensational cook, and I gave her all possibility and openings to cook as much as she wanted to. So we had a lot of food from the south of France.

LASKEY:

Good move.

WILSON:

Good move. [laughter] Anyway, we had these nice people who worked for us. Mike was doing a lot of traveling, but I didn't mind being there alone. I was traveling, too. Our friends were the other expatriates in Paris, the Golds that we talked about before. Tammy and Lee Gold. They were very close to us at that time. And Jack Berry, who was a director, and his wife and their children. We saw a lot of them. Jack Berry. My sister and her husband, Paul Jarrico, had moved to Paris shortly after we did. They came in 1957; we came in '56. They rented a house on the Rue de Rivoli, a beautiful apartment on Rue de Rivoli. So we saw a lot of them. Sylvia was doing some research with Mike on some film work. She worked a lot with Mike. Paul and Mike collaborated specially on the

De Laurentiis things, which Mike really didn't want to do anyway. So he was hoping to throw some of those assignments to Paul.

LASKEY:

Now Paul was—is he still a screenwriter?

WILSON:

Yes. Yes.

LASKEY:

Is still writing? He's still writing.

WILSON:

Yes. He's a good writer. I mean, he's is a very competent writer. Very. He and Mike were extremely close, which is nice. It was a very good situation. Mike and I were quite broken up when he and Sylvia broke up. We took it very hard.

LASKEY:

Yeah, all four of you were so close in so many ways.

WILSON:

We really were. All of us were very close. Sylvia and I are very close. Sylvia was very close to Mike. And I was close to Paul. It was very close—

LASKEY:

You're still close to Paul, right?

WILSON:

I'm still close to Paul. Oh, yeah. So anyway—so who else? What other expatriates—? The Barzmans were there. They had a place in Paris, and they also had a house in the south of France. Ben and Norma Barzman, who also were screenwriters. Ben was quite a well-known screenwriter, made a lot of money. He did *Ben Hur*. You don't know him?

LASKEY:

I do. I'm just amazed that this country threw all these people out.

WILSON:

Yeah. Oh, Ben was a fine writer.

LASKEY:

The best.

WILSON:

And Norma has done a lot of writing, too. I don't know of other of Ben's credits. That's the most famous one I know. Then the Gordons were there, Bernie Gordon and his wife [Jeanie Gordon], who was working for Philip Yordan, who was quite well known at that time—as a matter of fact, he did quite a few of those spaghetti westerns. They were doing a lot of work in Spain. Yordan was not a blacklisted writer. What he did was he had a crew of blacklisted writers who worked for him.

LASKEY:

Sort of exploiting the territory?

WILSON:

That's right. He had like a stable of writers. Bernie was one of them. Bernie made a lot of money at that time.

LASKEY:

Now, when you're referring to the spaghetti westerns, are you talking about the things that Sergio Leone did?

WILSON:

I don't know the names of the guys who did them. They were just westerns that were made in Italy that had a similar flora and fauna of the West. They made them very cheap, and they were just cheap little westerns. They put out many of them. I don't think they do that much anymore, or if at all.

LASKEY:

It made a fortune for Clint Eastwood.

WILSON:

Did he do work in Italy, too?

LASKEY:

He made a bunch of spaghetti westerns.

WILSON:

Really? I didn't know that. So there was that scene. And then, these people—I would say at least twice a month we had—we would have a Sunday—at least once a month, and usually it was twice a month, we would have like a Sunday in the country. They would all come out to Le Mesnil Gency. Because it was very pleasant. They'd have baseball games. Oh, Art Buchwald. We used to see Art Buchwald from time to time.

LASKEY:

That's right. He was a correspondent in Paris for a number of years, wasn't he?

WILSON:

For the Herald Tribune, that's right. There were other baseball games that were held in the Park of Saint Cloud. When we first got there, we were playing baseball in Saint Cloud. Some of the other expatriated journalists used to play with them, too, but I can't remember their names right now. Other people on the *Herald Tribune*, the Paris edition. Some of the people who worked in *L'Express*. It is like *Time* magazine now, but it wasn't at that time. It was a newspaper. It is a sort of a slightly left-of-center—or more than left-of-center at one time—newspaper. We knew a lot of those people too, especially the cartoonist named Tim [Louis Mittelberg]. There's a cartoon—when you go into the restroom in there, there's a cartoon of De Gaulle.

LASKEY:

Oh, that's very funny.

WILSON:

In regarding the head of DeGaulle. That's right. And that was drawn by Tim. Tim was probably—and maybe still is—the best-known cartoonist of France. He was also a friend of ours. Ellie and Jean-Mathieu Boris. Ellie was an American actress who was married to a Frenchman. Anyway, so we had these afternoon events at our house, where my Marseilles cook would cook up something marvelous. And I would come up with something American. Or we would have a barbecue, but not as often. Sometimes we'd have American-type barbecues. This was summer. We ate a lot of the corn that came off of our property and the zucchini and the squashes. She made ratatouille, which is a French—well, you know what ratatouille is.

LASKEY:

Oh, I love it.

WILSON:

With all the southern French flavor to it, all the oregano, sweet basil and all that stuff. Then I would usually make some American dishes, too. We ate a lot then and we'd play games—tennis, when we could on the court, or baseball. We had a baseball game. Sometimes a lot of people who were passing through came to visit us, like Mrs. Donald Ogden Stewart. Ella Winter. Do you know Donald Ogden Stewart?

LASKEY:

Yeah.

WILSON:

So his wife came through. He never came through. He never went anywhere. He stayed on their—they used to have their afternoon parties outside of London, too. We went to one only once. Sometimes the London contingent of the expatriates came over. Who were they? Well, the Borges. I don't think these are people that you would know. We did not ever see Carl Foreman and his wife.

LASKEY:

Oh, really?

WILSON:

We saw them once at a party when we went to London. Mike and I used to get over to London from time to time and go see a whole lot of plays and see friends over there. Then everybody who came to Paris came out to see us from all the Hollywood contingents. - A lot of people that we wouldn't expect to see, like Bertholt Brecht's wife, and then actors. When Mike was working with Burt Lancaster, he came up to see us. I sound like I'm name dropping. Forgive me. I don't mean to do that.

LASKEY:

No, no. You're just defining your life at this time.

WILSON:

I'm just telling you what happened. We saw Simone Signoret and Yves Montand quite often, not only at our place but at their place. Other actors who used to come that Simone used to bring out. Simone came out more often than Yves, She was crazy about Mike, and he was very fond of her. Whether or not they had a love affair, I haven't the foggiest idea. I'd just as soon not know. But they probably did. She was very beautiful at that time. Let's see. Who else?

LASKEY:

Well, Frank Gehry came out to visit you.

WILSON:

Frank Gehry! Of course. I forgot about Frank Gehry and his wife and their children, who came up to see us. Of course, they came out several times on one of our Sunday things. Yes. I've forgotten a lot of them. I meet people who say, "Don't you remember when we went to one of your Sunday things?" Then I'll remember. But I've forgotten. So many people were there. A lot of our American friends came over to visit, people who were in other professions who were not blacklisted.

LASKEY:

How could you bear to leave? I mean, it sounds almost idyllic.

WILSON:

It took us two years to decide, because the blacklist was actually broken two years before we left. Mike could have gone back to Hollywood to start to work. As I say, I was chomping at the bit to go.

LASKEY:

Well, could you have—at this point, you had been there for eight years. You're probably much more knowledgeable about the language. Did you ever consider the possibility of living there permanently and setting up your own business?

WILSON:

We would have bought that house. I think I couldn't have functioned that well.

LASKEY:

Really?

WILSON:

No. If I had found a really good French architect that I was more compatible with, I would have done so. But the one I found was not. Then I met some others. I met Alvar Aalto when I was there. He was down for a conference, and he made a pass at me.

LASKEY:

Really?

WILSON:

I was very flattered until I heard that he makes a pass at almost everybody.

LASKEY:

It sounds like an architect! [laughter]

WILSON:

I made a lot of architectural tours while I was there. I went to see practically everything that Le Corbusier ever built.

LASKEY:

How did you feel about those buildings, the Corbusier buildings, actually seeing them?

WILSON:

Well, I thought that they looked run-down, for one thing. They were not very well taken care of. Maybe they weren't built very well, I have no idea. Maybe the builders didn't understand what he had in mind, but they always looked like they were falling apart. But the Rognon, which is the church that he built—I don't know why it's called that. It is one of the most beautiful buildings I have ever seen.

LASKEY:

That is not the little chapel at Ronchamp?

WILSON:

Ronchamp? Maybe that is it—Ronchamp. I'm sorry. I got the name wrong.

LASKEY:

It has the prow like a ship, and it's set down in the valley.

WILSON:

Yes. What is it? Ronchamp?

LASKEY:

Ronchamp, yeah.

WILSON:

I'm sorry.

LASKEY:

Yeah, that has always looked—at least to me in photographs—like the most accessible of his buildings.

WILSON:

Well, it is absolutely gorgeous, on the interior particularly. It's a little bizarre on the outside. But when you get used to it and you understand what he was—it was so unusual at that time, especially as it was being built during the period of the—everybody else was doing everything in the International style. So for him to do something so unusual—he was a real maverick of his time. So I really appreciated that. Inside that church, the sources of light are so marvellously mysterious that it gives an air of, I don't know what—*Murder in the Cathedral*? It is just gorgeous, gorgeous on the inside. Probably, if the light was brilliantly lit, it wouldn't look so gorgeous. But he has a tower where suddenly there's some light trickling down. You don't have even the foggiest idea where it's coming from. There's sort of a tower that goes over like a chimney and then some light here and then it sort of reflects here and then it finally sifts down.

You don't know where it's coming from. It gives it this marvelous, mysterious, mystical look to the place—the little tiny spots of light here and there with different colors. It is a great piece of architecture, in my opinion. And then I saw his lighted city in Marseilles when I was down there. This was a pilot project for a larger public housing. He was very interested in public housing. I think we talked at one time about his influence on public housing in New York and Robert Moses, who used so many of his concepts. I think that was a great error, because it didn't really work. It was a good idea, but it didn't work.

LASKEY:

It didn't work in France, as I understand.

WILSON:

No. No. The high rise that they're doing now is quite different than Corbusier's. He's a very respected figure. I heard him speak once. Did I? No, maybe he was dead by the time I got there. No, he was still alive, but he was almost inaccessible. He had isolated—he became a recluse. He felt that he was not appreciated by the world. But he did come out for a speech once. And I went to the University to hear him, but I didn't understand him, except that he was being very defensive. Somebody with me was trying to translate for me.

LASKEY:

Well, there's also the problem of his involvement with the Nazis.

WILSON:

That's right.

LASKEY:

That may have been—he certainly would have had to be defensive about that.

WILSON:

Of course.

LASKEY:

Did you do any designing at all during this time, for you just to keep in—?

WILSON:

No, I did drawing.

LASKEY:

You were sketching.

WILSON:

I did drawing and I did sculpting. I got a tremendous kick out of my sculpting. A lot of the stuff that I did over there I didn't bring back with me. A couple of the things I did got frozen. I had done several pieces. We always worked with live models. This atelier, that was in a building that was about five hundred years old—they had this furnace in there that we kept feeding with coal. We were working—I always went up there all bundled up in my heavy coat and everything to do the work. The models were naked, of course. They were on

the dais, and they would rotate the dais so they could get cooked on one side then the other side. [laughter] They'd get all red on one side, and they're frozen on the other side. [laughter]

LASKEY:

Poor things!

WILSON:

Anyway, I made a figure of a man who was this—actually, it was the body of that man in there, that the head of that—

LASKEY:

That you have the head—

WILSON:

It was a Greek student. He was at the Sorbonne. We had a lot of students at the Sorbonne, who used to work for about eighty cents an hour, who used to pose for us. Anyway, I made a figure of his head—the Professor came in one day and said it was terrific. I can't tell you how pleased I was. He said that it's the best thing I'd ever done. I was so thrilled. So I had done that, and I had done a smaller figure. This one was the biggest thing I had ever done. It was almost life-size. It was life-size. So I had begun to be able to deviate somewhat from the [Aristide] Maillol and Rodin mode. It made me feel better that I was starting to do something more original.

1.15. TAPE NUMBER: IX, Side One (April 22, 1989)

WILSON:

I'm telling you a lot of glowing things, but there were problems, too. My kids were teen—well, to finish about this piece of statue I'll finish that first. I'll finish something, for Christ's sake. [laughter] I'll finish one thought at a time.

LASKEY:

Too many thoughts?

WILSON:

I really do have a trashy mind. [laughter] It's so full of trash and stuff floating around my head. So anyway, it was the best thing I had done, but we had to leave. We went down to the south of France. It just got too damned cold. Did we go to the south of France, or did we go to Rome that time? We might have gone to Rome. Anyway, I got back about three weeks later. Do you know how a clay sculpture is made? You know, you build an armature, which is a metal thing. It's like the skeleton of the thing that you're going to do. You put some newspapers and stuff in the inside. Then you start piling clay on. You start to build it up, you see.

LASKEY:

Oh, no, I didn't know that.

WILSON:

Well, there's this kind of sculpture that you build. Then there's the kind of sculpture that you take away, if you're building from stone, like I guess Rodin did most of his stuff. He did a lot of clay, too, but he also worked with stone. He whacked away at it, so that's carving. Then there is sculpting; they are both sculpture. Anyway, this was in clay, and I was supposed to have it cast when I got back. So when I got back, it had frozen and then it defrosted. What happens when things defrost is that they just collapse. They don't go back to the way they were. It was frozen into its shape that I had given it. When it defrosted, I came back and there was the armature standing there like that, and all of this clay like a bunch of mud right in the bottom of the [laughter]

LASKEY:

Real feet of clay.

WILSON:

That's right. [laughter] So my great work turned into a bunch of clay at the bottom of somebody's feet, [laughter] Fortunately, somebody made a photograph of it, which I was looking for the other day and couldn't find it. So anyway, that was one of the great disappointments of my career as a sculptor.

LASKEY:

Down the drain?

WILSON:

Right. Down the drain. Mike [Michael Wilson] was struggling with *Lawrence of Arabia* and trying to get credit for it and all that fight that went on. Finally, the British Writers Guild gave him credit. He was suffering a lot, and he was doing a lot of drinking. The girls were turning into teenagers. Rebecca [Wilson] was absolutely impossible. Well, she wasn't. She was a wonderful, beautiful—they both were beautiful, wonderful children, extremely bright but very challenging. She was extremely challenging to Mike. Mike didn't take well to that. He took a pedantic view of how to relate to your children. He felt that his role was to teach the children. When we would sit down at dinner, instead of it being a pleasant experience—this is when they were turning into teenagers and were able to say, "What do you mean by that, Daddy?" instead of saying, "Oh, Daddy, you're so wonderful." And Rebecca, as the oldest and the most daring of the children—Rosanna [Wilson Farrow] was much quieter—was always challenging Mike. They'd always get into a fight. She was challenging his concepts a lot. So they'd get into a fight, and Mike had too much to drink, as usual. Because Mike was not working. When he was not working, he always had too much to drink. They would get into this terrible fight, and I would have to sit there quietly. If I took her side, then he would start to holler at me. Then I would finally get the kids to bed. Rosanna suffered a lot during that period because she wasn't getting very much attention. Rebecca was getting all the

attention, even though it was a terrible kind of attention, in the sense that they were having fights. And Rosanna would just sit there with her head hanging down. So she apparently went through her youth feeling that she was an unimportant member of the family because Mike's attention was directed towards her sister.

LASKEY:

Who was demanding the attention.

WILSON:

Very demanding of the attention. In order to get her father's attention and try to make him respect her, she would give her opinion, which would make him mad. With the amount of alcohol he had—they really were going through the trauma of having an alcoholic father, and I was caught in the middle and was not taking a strong enough position. When they started their fights, I usually would shut up because if I took her side then Mike would get mad at me. If I took his side, she'd get mad at me. So usually, then, I'd let them go to bed, and then I would start my battle against Mike, saying, "Why don't you try to develop a better relationship with your kids?" Then he'd start, "Why are you taking their side against mine all the time?" I said, "I'm not doing that. I'm trying to get you so that you have a better relationship with them." Mostly this started during their teenage years. When they were younger, they had a very loving relationship. When they got older—when Rebecca got older. Rosanna always kept her mouth shut around Mike until she was more of a grown woman. And Mike treated her differently. Rebecca being the first child, he had greater expectations. The kids were on the third floor, I told you about. We usually went to the living room to have our fights after the girls went to bed, and they listened. I found out later they were listening to every single fight that we ever had. [laughter]

LASKEY:

Of course.

WILSON:

Because what is more fascinating than listening to your parents fight?

LASKEY:

Especially about you?

WILSON:

We had fights about other things, like if I suspected him of having a relationship with Simone or somebody else. Then I would holler at him about that. Or "Why do you have to go to Rome? Why can't we go with you?" or something like that. Something stupid. Whatever it was. And they were listening to the whole thing. All of that. Actually, Rebecca was developing into an extremely intelligent girl, but her attempts to have a relationship with her father were absolutely the wrong way to go about it. It was hard to tell her. She

had to find her own way. But she never did really find a way to be at peace with him after that. That was when she was fourteen. She was about fourteen when most of this aggravation between them started, and I don't think it ever did really get over. She did the most daring things, as time went by, in order to attract his attention and make him respect her. Well, she did them because she was that way, but she also did it because she wanted him to respect her as a real human being and not just an erring daughter.

LASKEY:

So she would go further and further out?

WILSON:

Yes. She went to Hanoi right in the middle of the Vietnam War. She and a group of other students who were organized by some of the famous "Chicago Seven," including Jane Fonda's husband. What's his name?

LASKEY:

Tom Hayden.

WILSON:

Tom Hayden, her former husband, I guess, by now.

LASKEY:

About-to-be-former husband, anyway.

WILSON:

About-to-be-former husband, yeah. He organized a national group of student leaders—student body presidents, student—not he alone. There were a whole group of them. And organized them to go to Hanoi to make a separate peace with the students of Vietnam.

LASKEY:

Oh, when was this? About '67, '68, '69?

WILSON:

Somewhere in there. Actually, I think it was in 1970.

LASKEY:

You came back in—

WILSON:

In '64. Rebecca had one year of high school left, and she then went to the University of California, Santa Barbara. About her second or third year, she became editor of the college newspaper. She's an extremely intelligent, brilliant girl, in my opinion. She became very, very active in radical politics. It was while she was editor of the paper there that there were the big riots in Santa Barbara. She was involved in the riots peripherally, but she swears to this day that the burning of the Bank of America in Isla Vista was instigated by the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] or some other group, and that her group of dissidents or antiwar group had nothing whatsoever to do with it. All the violence, she says, was started by the police up there. I believe her. Anyway,

the Hanoi thing came quite a bit later. But jumping around again, a group of students flew off to Hanoi, and she had the experience of going to Hanoi, the same kind, I presume that Jane Fonda had, where all the bigwigs come out to greet you. She met a lot of the top brass. She didn't meet what's his name?

LASKEY:

Ho Chi Minh?

WILSON:

Ho Chi Minh, no. But she met the man just under Ho Chi Minh [Pham Van Dong] and a lot of the other people. A lot of women, who had been with children, who were maimed, or children who had become—women were carrying at the time that they were putting Agent Orange all over North Vietnam, and children who were born with stubs of arms. It was like the thalidomide children. She saw a lot of that, and she came back totally and completely convinced, if she wasn't already before, that we were conducting a brutal unjust war in Vietnam. She became very, very—even more—active in the antiwar movement at the time. She was quietly picketing one of the plants that was making some war products up in Isla Vista, and a month later she was arrested because somebody identified her in a photograph as being one of the leaders of this picket line, which was just a small group of students who were picketing. The Santa Barbara police had taken pictures of them. Then she was identified as being one of the leaders because she was the editor of the newspaper there, and as a result of which she was arrested a month after the incident of picketing and charged with inciting to riot and about six other charges. Finally, she copped a plea and all they arrested her for was blocking traffic.

LASKEY:

That's a nuisance. You know, harassment.

WILSON:

Really, it was harassment. Because she wasn't even arrested at the time. They weren't doing anything, just walking up and down with pickets. They weren't even causing any problems.

LASKEY:

It is not illegal to picket.

WILSON:

No.

LASKEY:

At least it didn't use to be.

WILSON:

So they got her for blocking traffic. She got thirty-three days in jail or \$200 and probation for two years. So she decided to take the thirty days in jail.

LASKEY:

Really?

WILSON:

Absolutely. She said, "I don't want to have two years of probation. Why should I be on probation for two years and have them watching me every minute of the time? I would rather serve my time in jail and get it over with."

LASKEY:

How did you feel about that?

WILSON:

Terrible. Who wants their daughter in jail?

LASKEY:

That's a very bold move.

WILSON:

But I considered it, I could understand—very bold. She's a very bold person. She is a very courageous person. Even when she was a little girl and started to climb to the top of trees, and I would say, "Get down this minute. I can't stand looking at you on top of that tree." She said, "Stop looking." [laughter]

LASKEY:

Yeah, it's interesting, because essentially that's a lot of what you and Michael were doing, too. There were a lot of bold moves that you made in your careers.

WILSON:

Yeah, but she—

LASKEY:

She was a little more flamboyant.

WILSON:

She was more—I don't consider myself a particularly bold person. I think that I've taken a lot of moves maybe other women have not taken, but I'm not physically courageous. I've always felt that she was physically courageous—doing things. I wouldn't want to go to jail. I'd be terrified to go to jail. But this was her choice. You know, we used to try to get in to see her on weekends and there'd be a hundred people waiting to see her. Because she was this great political heroine who's in jail for her beliefs. So they had a new martyr on their hands. [laughter]

LASKEY:

She obviously made a very shrewd move, whether intentionally—

WILSON:

I don't think she intentionally made a shrewd move. She just made the moves she believed in.

LASKEY:

But it turned out to be obviously a good move.

WILSON:

I don't mean they were great to her. They didn't let her go outdoors. They were supposed to let her outdoors twice every day or something like that, but somebody escaped from the county jail in Santa Barbara. So they only let them outside once a week. She wanted me to make a fuss about that, which I did. I talked to one of the jailers and I said, "My daughter needs fresh air." So they managed to let her have fresh air. But the kids—the young women—that she was in jail with, most of whom were drug addicts or pushers or prostitutes, usually Mexican or black. She had more visitors than they had. That's Rebecca. That's Rebecca. She is remarkable. Oh, they're both remarkable girls. I'm very proud of both of them. Anyway, so we came back to the United States. There are many more stories to tell you about Europe, but I think we better move along because we have about two hours or so for me to tell you all about the United States.

LASKEY:

Yeah. You came back in '64?

WILSON:

Yes, well we came back a year earlier and bought this house. Well, not a year earlier. About six months earlier. We went up and down the coast, which I told you about. I said to Mike, "I used to play tennis in a little town called Ojai, which is near to Santa Paula. It's a very pretty little town. Would you like to see it?" So we came up here in November. It was terrible weather. It was a little bit drizzly, but he immediately fell in love with Ojai. It's a charming little town. So I came back then by myself.

LASKEY:

From France?

WILSON:

Yes, to try and find a house. I went through many, many houses in Ojai, and I finally found this house. Then I got Mike back here for a short trip to see the house. I inspected it, and they'd get somebody else [to] inspect it. We had several choices. We decided on this one. And he loved it. There was a separate place out in front where he could have his work area and be quiet away from the children. The children had all this area where they could swim and have their friends over.

LASKEY:

Oh, it's beautiful.

WILSON:

We found this place, and it was a pretty good buy. Then we bought the property next door. I'm sorry we didn't buy the property on the other side, which was for sale for about \$15,000. We wouldn't have to look at this great, big, ugly house on it. We bought the property, the acre—over an acre—next door. I don't know if you've ever seen it. Well, you haven't seen it. I have two and a half acres here

now. This is on an acre point four, and that is on an acre point one. We bought that piece of property for \$11,000. And this house we bought for \$68,000.
[laughter] Isn't that silly?

LASKEY:

It is horrifying.

WILSON:

It is horrifying. Everything is about ten or twelve times as much. Is that right? Yeah, about ten or twelve times as much in value. This house is worth I don't know what now. I have no idea.

LASKEY:

It certainly is a fabulous setting.

WILSON:

I would say it's pretty close to \$750,000.

LASKEY:

That would be my guess, at least, just from the setting. This location is so beautiful.

WILSON:

And the house—this is without the house, maybe. The lot next door is another—I don't know what it's worth—\$300,000; \$275,000? I'm sitting here, and I don't know exactly what to do. Leave it to my kids? Because I don't think I'll be able to move out of here.

LASKEY:

Why would you want to? Or is it just getting too big?

WILSON:

Well, a lot of things are going wrong. I've recently put in about \$3,000 or \$4,000 of—because I'm living off my income now. My income. I get some rents, and I get—I've had some residuals from Mike. I sold some property, and they pay me a little bit on the mortgage. What is it? A take-back mortgage or whatever it is. I bought with my own money, that I earned in my office, I bought an office. I bought a building. Then I had a big downfall and had to sell the building. I lost a lot of money.

LASKEY:

Is that the one I have a picture of? A Spanish—

WILSON:

Yes. Oh, you have a picture of that? That's it. How should you happen to have a picture of that? Did I take you by there?

LASKEY:

No. Actually, I took this picture three or four years ago when I had come up for the Ojai Music Festival.

WILSON:

Oh, that's right. Because that was my office right there.

LASKEY:

I was taking a walk, and I was just struck by the building. That was before I knew who you were, actually. I just happen to have a picture of it. [laughter] I thought it was so charming.

WILSON:

Yeah, that's right. That is it. So where are we? So we moved back here.

LASKEY:

How did the girls feel about coming back?

WILSON:

They started nagging us about coming back a year and a half before we came back.

LASKEY:

Oh, they wanted to come back?

WILSON:

They wanted to come back and see what it was like to be an American. They were beginning to feel more and more American all the time.

LASKEY:

Oh, that is interesting. I thought it would have worked the other way.

WILSON:

No, they really were tired of being French. [laughter]

LASKEY:

It's nice when you have a choice.

WILSON:

We had stuck them in another school, which they disliked. After we took them out of the English school, they went into the SHAPE School. SHAPE was the school where they put the—the SHAPE School was a school that was run by the French school system, and it was for the children of NATO or military or diplomatic personnel who wanted their children to have a French education. SHAPE stands for the Supreme Headquarters, Allied Powers Europe. The teachers were extremely rigid, and they were quite unhappy there because of the rigidity. My daughters didn't particularly like the American children, but the American kids there started to tell them what it was like to be an American student. What it was like and all the fun they used to have playing baseball and being on the team or being the student body president and having—just that school was so much easier there and all the advantages of being an American student. All the kids had cars and they all hung around the drive-in restaurants, and that sort of thing. But it was half American and half French students. The students of that area went there, but the Americans went there too—but it was really run by the French. They excelled in everything. The kids did, in all their studies. So as I say, when we came back here and went to school here they were part of the top of their class, and they hardly touched a book when they

came back here. Mike immediately began to work on *Planet of the Apes*, almost immediately. That is, he was immediately in demand as soon as he got back into the United States.

LASKEY:

And he was able to produce under his own name now? The blacklist had been lifted?

WILSON:

Yes. Because the blacklist, let's say, had been broken by [Dalton] Trumbo, and the other people started to work, too. Carl Foreman actually started to work quite a while ago, several years before anybody had. But it was suspected that he had cleared himself. Nobody knows the circumstances of how he cleared himself, but there's lots of conjecture that are not necessarily complimentary to Carl.

LASKEY:

Really.

WILSON:

Carl was extremely ambitious. Yes.

LASKEY:

That's sort of a shock.

WILSON:

Mike didn't like Carl because he had published some articles—neither of them had credit on *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, you know—but he had published some articles. And talk about marketing yourself! Carl was brilliant at marketing himself, making himself a very famous person. When he was in England he got himself a new wife, his secretary, a very pretty woman who looks a little bit like Nancy Reagan, only prettier.

LASKEY:

Is this Eve?

WILSON:

Eve, yeah. Eve Foreman.

LASKEY:

So she was his second wife, then?

WILSON:

Second or third, I don't know. I don't know, whatever. But she was a good wife to him. They had children together. He has children with his first wife, too, who I knew. Foreman had printed some articles in some magazines claiming full credit for *Bridge on the River Kwai*. Mike was very aggravated by that. So Carl called Mike up and asked him once, when Mike got back, if he would like to join him in trying to get them the Oscar that they so richly deserved. Mike said, "Not particularly." Mike was being very—he didn't want to join forces with Carl doing much of anything. He was hostile to him. But he treated—he was

courteous, and I fixed lunch for them. The two of them went out under that arbor there and talked about it. Mike said, "Go ahead and do what you want to do, but I'm not going to do anything." That was Mike's nature. He was a very modest person. Anyway.

LASKEY:

So Mike never knew that he was going to get the award, did he? Carl Foreman, as I understand, lived—although he died before the award was given, he pretty much knew that he had cleared the hurdles.

WILSON:

Oh, yeah. He had many friends in Hollywood. I have to give him credit for that, because probably if it wasn't for Foreman's effort this wouldn't have happened. But then Mike had his own friends. When it looked like it—[when] there was a possibility, then Al [Alfred] Levitt and several of the other people who were very active in the [Screen Writers] Guild started to work on Mike's behalf to get him the credit. And so with the combination of Carl's friends—Carl was a much more social person than Mike. Mike was reclusive, as I've told you before. We came here, and he became increasingly reclusive.

LASKEY:

Well, it would be very easy to be a recluse here.

WILSON:

It would. I have those tendencies too, now. I've got to fight myself.

LASKEY:

I can understand it.

WILSON:

Because when I finally get with people, I talk them to death, like I do with you.
[laughter]

LASKEY:

But it's so comforting here.

WILSON:

It's very comforting. Then I went to work in a partnership with a local architect.

LASKEY:

This was '65?

WILSON:

That was in '65, yeah. So we were here a year, and I got myself acclimated back into—and it was a real culture shock for us to move back here.

LASKEY:

I'll bet it was.

WILSON:

A real culture shock, because the French are definitely a cultured people. All the things that they say about themselves are true. They're interested in the theater and music. Even the lowliest person, the working-class guy, is more

cultivated, a heck of a lot more cultivated, than our lowliest working-class person. And they're knowledgeable. They read the newspapers, and they take positions politically. And they demonstrate. They make their presence felt. They're not always right about everything, but they're just more aware people. You go along in the Left Bank and the places, outside cafes, and the young people are sitting around having very earnest arguments about philosophical questions and quoting poetry to each other. You don't see that here. It's not this atmosphere. So when I came back here, it was like going backward in time. I'm not putting these people down because Ojai is probably better than most communities. But it was a culture shock to talk to people who didn't know what was going on in the world or were not aware of what was happening anyplace else except their immediate surroundings. Who don't read the newspaper. Who were very closed in.

LASKEY:

Did you feel any trepidation about coming back?

WILSON:

Why absolutely. I was very nervous about it. For one thing, I had not really been tested as an architect. You know, I had worked for the large firms, and there was a certain protective atmosphere working for the large firms, even though I was fired once, but you're in a protected situation. To think now that I had decided what I really wanted was to open up my own office and not work for somebody else again. So it was probably the smartest thing I could do, was to move to a small town and not try to open up my own office in Los Angeles. So when Mike said, "Let's not move back to L.A.," I was delighted. This is what I had wanted. Besides, I had loved being at Le Mesnil Gency, that place. Why wouldn't I, for heaven's sake?

LASKEY:

Yes, why not indeed?

WILSON:

I mean, I lived like a countess there. It was incredible. You know, servants and all that stuff. So I had to come back here and face the fact that I was not going to have servants. Not that that was so hard. I mean, I never had servants before we left.

LASKEY:

But I would think that that was something you could get used to quickly.

WILSON:

Yeah. Very easily. I never had a cook or anything like that. So I went back to work with this architect, and it was not a very good experience in the sense that he was quite an elderly man. His name was Chalfont Head. He had been, in his time, quite a good architect, also very much influenced by the International movement, but he was sickly, and he wanted to retire. He was working with his

son who did not have his license yet and couldn't seem to pass his exams. His son Michael [Head]. He probably should have been a physicist or a mechanical engineer because he was brilliant at that kind of thing, at working out wonderful little gadgets and stuff like that. He was an inventor. But he was not an architect. He'd studied in Switzerland, and he had some form of multiple sclerosis. Well, Chalfont Head needed a licensed architect functioning in the office, as he wanted to retire. What he failed to tell me when he left the office and went off to retire was that they were in debt by about \$50,000. And I had signed a partnership agreement with him. I was very green. I've never been very sharp about business anyway, so it didn't even occur to me to ask him for a financial statement.

LASKEY:

Oh, wow.

WILSON:

So I worked there for a year and a half without taking any pay because every single month when money came in when I was working my forty hours a week—and I was taking responsibility because I was the licensed architect and Michael wasn't—I couldn't take my pay out because it all was going to pay off the debt. Michael appealed to me and said, "Look, you have a husband who is supporting you. And I don't. I'm supporting my wife and child. I have to take something. Besides, it's my father's place. I have to take out a draw, and you will not be able to take out a draw until we've got this debt paid off."

LASKEY:

What a con.

WILSON:

It was an incredible con. I was really furious. I should have walked out right there and then, but we were in a middle of a project, and like me, you know, I think, "Well, I've got to finish this project. I can't just walk out on it." Michael was there. He's not a very good designer. I was constantly trying to improve his designs, but not very successfully. His father was coming in when Michael was out and telling me what a bad architect his son was. It was just a disagreeable situation. So I left there. I started to make some contacts on my own and I became active in the community. Mike was working and making pretty good money. So I borrowed money from us. I borrowed \$4,000 and rented some space in a building downtown and hung out my shingle. [laughter] I became very active in the community, not because I thought—you say women don't know how to market, and I'm sure they don't. They don't know how to market, but I was very lucky. I guess I was doing something smart without knowing it, which is I became the chairman of the Ojai Beautiful Committee during the time when Mrs. [Lyndon B.] Johnson was starting this "America, Beautiful!" campaign. We were very active in the Ojai Beautiful group. The outgrowth of

that was the Committee to Preserve the Ojai, which is still active. The Ojai Beautiful thing, after about four or five years, became defunct. Then there was the Committee to Protect the Ojai, which had certain very important goals, like preventing a freeway from coming into Ojai. That's really what has kept Ojai—it won't do it permanently, because eventually Ojai is going to get overgrown, too. But it has kept it with a small-town flavor. Even though it's grown a lot, grown imperceptibly, but it's grown. So there were certain issues that I became very active in, protective of Ojai. I became active in local politics.

LASKEY:

This is the Ojai Planning Commission or the Ventura County—

WILSON:

Ojai. And then I was also active on a county basis. I was on an advisory committee to the Architectural Review Board there, and then I became a member of the Architectural Review Board in Ojai. I would remain on the Architectural Review Board for five years. Through these things—I developed a close friendship with the editor of a newspaper, Fred Volz, who was a really nice guy and a liberal. We became very good friends, and he gave me excellent publicity without my asking for it.

LASKEY:

How nice. How nice.

WILSON:

So whenever a building of mine was finished and got published in the newspaper, he always would give me credit. Usually architects don't get credit, except in the real estate section.

LASKEY:

But that is true when a major building opens. The regular-newspaper part of the paper—it is very hard to find an architect's name.

WILSON:

That's right. But he always gave my name. Just through assistance from him, and my activities on various environmental types of groups, and on the Architectural Review Board, planning commissions, and all that, I became known and I started to get very good projects.

LASKEY:

Now, this is one of the questions that I was going to ask you: how did your clients find you? You're saying that it was the contacts you made through being involved with these various organizations.

WILSON:

Well, the first really big project I had was Meditation Mount. [It] was big for me. And they wanted a local architect. They were somewhat naive about how you'd go about it. Maybe I should say, "Thank goodness" because if they had been more sophisticated, they might have gone to L.A. or someplace to get an

architect. But they didn't. They wanted somebody local that they could get a lot of personal attention from, and they needed it.

LASKEY:

How would you describe that project?

WILSON:

It's a temple of meditation. Did you see it?

LASKEY:

I have seen pictures of it. I haven't actually seen it.

WILSON:

It's on the east end of Ojai. It's on the top of a mountain, and there's a great temple. But didn't you say it's like the—when we went into the restaurant?

LASKEY:

No, I was thinking of your little chapel.

WILSON:

Oh, the little church, the Saint Andrews Episcopal Church.

LASKEY:

The Episcopal church down there, that chapel, yes.

WILSON:

Actually, the other one is different in the sense that it has glued-laminated beams but it's also in a pyramid form. But it goes up like this, [illustrates] somewhat. They wanted something that reflected slightly the fact that they were oriented to eastern religion. I tried not to make it look that way, obviously. But it does, I guess. In spite of myself, I was trying to reflect the sweep of the mountains around Ojai when I was doing my buildings. There are about five or six buildings up there. There's a shrine. There's the great temple, the shrine, the administration building, and then there's about five residences up there. Yes, I guess it is a little redolent of oriental, or Tibetan, or something. I don't know what the hell it is. It's a really eclectic kind of building.

LASKEY:

Eastern. Sort of vaguely eastern.

WILSON:

Vaguely eastern, vaguely Ojai, vaguely nothing. Vaguely Zelma. I don't know. [laughter] It's very nice. I'm not trying to put it down, because I think it has some lovely qualities about it. It brought me quite a bit of attention, that building. It was a woman that I became very friendly with who was in real estate who recommended me. Then the period of affirmative action started. During affirmative action, it was unbelievable. I would interview for a job and I would get it. Usually, it's maybe one in ten jobs you interview for you'll get. But this was like 75 percent of the buildings I would get interviewed for in Ventura County. So I was doing community centers, the Simi Valley Library—huge buildings—I mean huge for me—a 36,000-square-foot building, this Simi

Valley Library. I went into a joint venture with Carl Maston on that building and the Senior Citizens Center which was adjacent to it in the Simi Valley Civic Center. During the period, as I say, of affirmative action, I got several university jobs. Are these a list of my credits there?

LASKEY:

A list of some of them.

WILSON:

Well, I don't have to mention them again then. These are the ones that I got. There's the Senior Citizens Center You've got that. [pauses to glance at list] No, no, no. I've got a brand-new Senior Citizens Center. I did do the remodel of a senior citizens center, but I also did a brand-new center, the Simi Valley Senior Citizens Center, which was quite large. The one here, the remodel, was a small job. The [Vandenberg Air Force Base] Child Care Center. Then I got some federal jobs. This is the university job that I got. Then I got the Vandenberg Child Care Center. Have you got that down?

LASKEY:

No, I don't, actually.

WILSON:

Okay, the Vandenberg Child Care Center, about a 12,000-square-foot building, which they are going to start soon.

LASKEY:

Now, this comes out of your experience almost going back to [Richard] Neutra, right? With the child care centers?

WILSON:

Yeah. The first thing I did for him when I was—by now I'd done about six child-oriented care centers. So I did that one, and I did the Port Hueneme Child Care Center. I don't know if that's listed or not.

LASKEY:

No, these are—this is just from your application for the fellowship. These are a list of your awards and some of the things that I had.

WILSON:

Yeah. There's the Port Hueneme Child Care Center, and the Vandenberg Child Care Center, and the California State University Child Care Center. Then Oak Grove had a preschool. The Oak Grove Elementary School and Pre-school. Then I did the Oak Grove Secondary School, which is not mentioned here, which also got an award recently.

LASKEY:

Yeah, those are both lovely buildings, the Oak Grove schools. It's so beautiful sitting up—

WILSON:

Yes, I think I took you up to see those.

LASKEY:

Yes, we went to see those.

WILSON:

They are very pretty buildings. I think they are nice. Well, they have such a wonderful setting. Yeah.

LASKEY:

But again it sort of comes out of the child care centers.

WILSON:

Yeah, I'm very interested in child care, and I'd love to get some more child care—

1.16. TAPE NUMBER: X, Side One (April 22, 1989)

WILSON:

Meanwhile, my girls are going off to college. Rosanna [Wilson Farrow] is at [University of California] Berkeley, and it looks like she is going to be a dropout. She fell in love. And Rebecca [Wilson's] getting into all sorts of trouble. [laughter]

LASKEY:

This is at UCSB [University of California, Santa Barbara].

WILSON:

And so Rosanna drops out of college and goes off with her lover. Pretty soon she's supporting him by working as a waitress, and one thing and another. Then—I'm doing my career thing, and Mike [Michael Wilson] is doing a lot of writing and playing tennis. He's taking pretty good care of himself. He is enjoying coming back to the United States.

LASKEY:

You started your business?

WILSON:

I started my business, and it's flourishing. I'm hiring people. Then eventually I get a partner. During this period of affirmative action, I get lots and lots of work, big work, bigger work than I've ever had before. I don't get all of them, but I get a lot of work that I wouldn't have gotten, and work that's harder for me to get now. It'd be very hard for me to get a big library now, I think. But it is not only just affirmative action. It's the fact that I am also older. So there's ageism, and the fact that I'm a woman.

LASKEY:

It's probably sexism.

WILSON:

Ageism and sexism, and the combination of the two has probably—in spite of the fact that I'm a fellow [of the American Institute of Architects (AIA)] and

that I am a good architect—kept me from being a really big, successful architect. But I'm in a small town. So in a sense, I'm a big fish in a little pond, and everybody knows me or knows who I am. Even the waitress said, "Hello, Zelma" You saw that, didn't you?

LASKEY:

Yeah.

WILSON:

It isn't that I go up there every day. I don't go up there that often, actually. The family who was sitting adjacently, who had run the 10-K, that's my doctor and his wife and their two children. So in a sense, it has been a very satisfactory experience for me. It's frustrating sometimes, and I get very upset, especially when my projects don't go the way I want them to go, like the redevelopment was a very big disappointment to me. And a few of my projects which I lost in the middle someplace and somebody took them over and they screwed them up, just a few. But I have had a lot of satisfactory things happen, too. Well, for being in my later years, I've done well. Then I became a fellow of AIA in 1983. You know about that, anyway. And my partner—

LASKEY:

How did you become a fellow? How were you selected? How was that process developed?

WILSON:

Okay. You have to be nominated by another fellow, or by your chapter, or a combination, or by the California Council of the AIA. I was nominated by my chapter. Then I had to—then my sponsor was my partner. My partner became the mayor of Ojai, by the way.

LASKEY:

Really?

WILSON:

My partner, Richard Conrad. He was my first partner. My second partner was the one I had so much trouble with. My first partner, Richard Conrad, was a very nice guy, and we worked well together. He was very productive and he was very good relative to meeting people. He was useful. At the same time, he appeared sincere and easy to get along with and competent. These were the same qualities [which led him to] decide to run for the city council, where he made it, and why he became mayor—the same very outgoing qualities that he has. He's handsome, but not too handsome. You know, he's just right. Everything is right. He is a tall, good-looking guy. And all the qualities that made him very good to interview with. People were always impressed with him. He is knowledgeable, and he had a good memory. So all these qualities—he eventually became mayor of Ojai. When he became mayor of Oja—oh, and

I told you that I started to teach at Cal Poly [California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo]?

LASKEY:

I know it, but we haven't talked about it on tape.

WILSON:

Because George [J.] Hasslein and I— He was the dean of the School of Architecture. He had been a teaching assistant when I was a junior and senior at USC [University of Southern California]. We remained friends, and he was very fond of Mike. Mike had used his name as a character in *Planet of the Apes*, and he was always very proud of that. Anyway, when he found out that I had come back to the United States and that I had my own practice and that I was getting a certain amount of renown or getting well-known, he asked me to come up and to give a lecture. So I did. I was a very popular lecturer up there, particularly because I was quite sympathetic to the women students, and women were really coming into architecture in droves at that time. At least a third of the freshman class were women at the time.

LASKEY:

Is that what you lectured on, women in architecture specifically?

WILSON:

No. I didn't lecture on that specifically. I lectured about how to have a small, one-person, or a small firm, in a small town. He got about ten lecturers during that time. He was the dean, but he gave a course, an introduction to architecture. It was part of the introduction to architecture. About every other time, he had an invited architect. They were always very well known architects in California. I was the one who usually represented a woman's office, and a small office at the same time. My lectures, according to him, were the most popular of any of their lectures, because the women related to me, the minorities related to me, and the men who wanted to be on their own and not go work for big firms related to me. They were to select, I think, five architects over a period of one semester to write papers about as part of the syllabus to at least [help] give these students a grade, because there were some 300 or 400 students in this class. And most of them wrote about me. I used to get hundreds and hundreds of letters every year. They were enough to turn your head. They were such great letters.

LASKEY:

Oh, how wonderful. Marvelous.

WILSON:

I've kept all of them. I thought I wanted to do something with them sometime—I don't know what. Take some of the funniest or the most touching ones and do something—what I don't know—a book, some articles about how the students

changed over a ten-year period, because I lectured from 1972 to 1983. I went about twice a year, and I lectured.

LASKEY:

Ten very interesting years, the yuppies to the yuppies.

WILSON:

Yuppies to the yuppies, exactly. You hit it right on the nose. When they first started out, they all were very hirsute and interested in ideals of architecture, and how to protect the environment and still be an architect. They were asking me questions about did I ever take any projects I didn't believe in.

LASKEY:

Idealism?

WILSON:

Idealism of my field. And listen, they had a good subject here, because I was a very romantic person about architecture when I graduated, and still am to this day. So they asked me questions right up my alley, all these long-haired kids and girls with their long skirts and their hair all parted in the middle. Then they gradually changed, and they became yuppies. My last class was asking me how much money I made! [laughter]

LASKEY:

How you beat out the competition?

WILSON:

How you beat out the competition, that's right. I didn't teach after '83, because Hasslein was kicked out of his position. He had such a power realm up there, it was extraordinary. He was asked to resign. He wouldn't resign. He refused to resign. So they literally ejected him, except that as he had tenure, they couldn't eject him from the campus. He kept on teaching; he is still teaching up there. Anyway, that was a wonderful experience for me to be teaching. Then in 1983, it was the year that he was—when all the politics about his getting fired were occurring. The whole academic body was taking sides—for him, against him, and all that stuff. It was a very ugly period. They had been asking me to teach up there on a full-time basis. I decided to try it. I taught fourth-year design, and I could only take it for one semester.

LASKEY:

Really?

WILSON:

Because of the hostility and the acrimonious relationships between the members of the staff. Now, maybe it had to do with George and George's situation. Maybe it's not like that usually, I don't know. But there was some hostility against me too because I was George's girl. I don't mean his girlfriend, but his—

LASKEY:

His friend.

WILSON:

His friend. And because I was a practitioner and not an educator. So they felt why should I have this honor. After all, what do I know about what architecture really means? I am just out there struggling with putting two-by-fours together.

LASKEY:

That sounds very academic. [laughter]

WILSON:

Anyway, it was not a very pleasant period. I loved the lecturing, that was a lot of fun. I really loved that. But when I started teaching and having to live with these guys every single day—these other professors and all their little problems. They're so small. As far as they're concerned nothing is happening in the world except what is happening on that campus. The academic atmosphere was not pleasant to me. Women are not particularly well regarded in this atmosphere either. Women professors is another field where women are very much discriminated against.

LASKEY:

Women professors of architecture, in particular.

WILSON:

Probably, yes. But my students sure loved me. Anyway, I got very high marks from my students when they had evaluations, according to George.

LASKEY:

That's a shame.

WILSON:

It was a shame because I was isolated a lot. George was totally preoccupied with trying to keep himself together during this time, because he was fighting with the administration of the state university system. He was in this very powerful position, and they wanted to strip him of his power. But anyway, so that happened. I haven't gone back there to lecture. But I have worked, in addition, with the [California State] Board of Architectural Examiners. I do oral interviews every year. I'm going to do one in June. I go down there for three days and I do oral interviews. These are students who have passed their examination and need to have their oral interviews in order to see to it—to meet them face to face to see if we feel in the oral interview there are any areas in their experience which have not been covered. So we give yays or nays. If they pass the examination, it's usually yea, but not always. Sometimes they show areas of lack of experience which did not show up in the examination. So I've worked with them a lot. In addition to which, I was one of the insurance trustees for about three years of the California Council AIA, who administered a \$6 million health program. That's a position of great honor. We were extremely well treated. What we got paid for was the interest on the money that

was sent in by the various offices until it all accumulated in a month. Until all the money and the interest is all accumulated enough to make the deposit to the insurance company. That interest helped to support us and helped to support all the publicity about our programs. We made certain important decisions about the health programs. We always went to the very best places to have our meetings and have our retreats. Then I served on the editorial board of Architecture California, which is the magazine put out by the California Council. I served on that for three years. I also served on the Governor's Emergency Task Force on Earthquakes. I was on the recovery committee. That was just not architects. It was architects and a lot of different kinds of people—scientists, physicists, county administrators. Some of us made a trip together to China.

LASKEY:

Now, this was under [Governor Edmund G.] Jerry Brown [Jr.], right?

WILSON:

Yes, but it continued for quite a long time under [Governor George] Deukmejian also.

LASKEY:

Oh, it did? I was curious. If this happened, this appointment, as a result of the work—we have to backtrack a little bit here—with your work with Carl Maston on the library, the Simi [Valley] Library. As I recall reading about it, it's built between two fault lines. Did that have any—?

WILSON:

No, that had nothing to do with it.

LASKEY:

Because I think when you went to China, you lectured on structure and—

WILSON:

Yeah, I did lecture to them. It was presumptuous for me to lecture on it because I am no expert on earthquakes, but, no, the library was later. There was a group of people who had been invited by the Chinese government, people who had some experience with earthquakes. There was a mechanical engineer, several structural engineers, a couple of architects. Frankly, I was taken over there because I'm a woman. They were looking for a woman because 33 percent of the architects in China are women. They didn't want to have an all-man committee go over there. But what do I care what the reason was? Besides, I felt I was qualified, not as an expert in earthquakes, but certainly as an intelligent observer.

LASKEY:

And a woman architect.

WILSON:

And a woman architect, that's right. It was one of the great experiences of my life to go over there and confer with our Chinese counterparts in China. Then they gave us the real red-carpet treatment.

LASKEY:

Did you just go to Beijing or did you travel extensively?

WILSON:

Oh, we traveled all over. And everywhere we went, the Architectural Society of China took care of us. So we had the red-carpet treatment all over China. We spent seven days in conference in Peking. But we also went to Hangchow, to Nanking, to Shanghai, to Canton, to Beijing—excuse me, not Beijing. It was Peking at that time. And of course we went to the Great Wall. We went to that place where they have those terra-cotta soldiers. Where those terra-cotta soldiers were buried.

LASKEY:

Oh, yes. I know what you mean. I don't know where the place is, but I know that must have been fascinating.

WILSON:

I don't remember the name of the place either. Everyplace we went, we were treated unbelievably well. They paid for everything except the airplane trip. Then, as a result of that, I met the man who was in charge of the governor's emergency committee, Robert Rigney, who was the administrator of San Bernardino County where the major San Andreas fault is. This was five months after the death of Mike, and I was still mourning. So it was a wonderful experience for me to have. Naturally, I fell in love with Robert Rigney, and he slightly with me, too. [laughter] He just died. He died about a year ago. He died of Parkinson's disease. He must have been in his middle fifties, I guess. I cried when I heard that. He just came to mean so much to me because he was such a fantastic guy. In California, because of his marvelous work in earthquakes, he became the head of the [United States] Federal Emergency Management Administration. Then after that, the emergency committee was run by—after he left it—Kenneth Topping. Kenneth Topping was on the committee at the time I was on it. He's now the head of the Los Angeles County Planning Department.

LASKEY:

Does he have any relation to Norman?

WILSON:

I don't know. He was at the Ojai Valley Inn about four or five months ago and called me up. It was a very long conversation on the phone. He is the one who told me about Robert Rigney's death, which I took really hard. I didn't expect to take it so hard. We didn't have a love affair, we just had sort of a romance on the trip. [laughter]

LASKEY:

The trip was in—

WILSON:

Late 1978, the fall of '78.

LASKEY:

And Michael died in '78?

WILSON:

In April of '78, yes.

LASKEY:

So you must have still been in mourning.

WILSON:

Oh, I was still in mourning, yes.

LASKEY:

Was Michael's death sudden?

WILSON:

[pause] Death is never really—forgive me for talking this way, but you never really accept it. You don't really accept it. Mike had a stroke in 1970. He died in 1978. So after a stroke, you either have more strokes or something worse. You usually don't recover from this. Either you have an immediate remission within a year, or you—Mike did not do well, under his stroke.

LASKEY:

After a recovery period?

WILSON:

After the stroke. No. Well, do you know how he had it?

LASKEY:

No.

WILSON:

Is that important to this? I'll tell you about how he had the stroke. Well, it was an important event. Mike had cancer of the tongue from all the drinking and smoking he had done all his life. He went to the dentist, and the dentist found it. He had a biopsy, and indeed it was cancer. It was just a touch of cancer. The dentist had it all set up for him to go to Ventura, and they would just do a kind of local anesthetic. Well, he would be put out, but they would take out the cancer that was on his tongue. I said, "Are you kidding? You're going to Ventura to have somebody fool around with that?" I said, "I'm not going to have that done. We're going to go to Alex Shulman, the chief of surgery at Cedars of Lebanon [Hospital, now Cedars-Sinai Medical Center]. He is going to find us the finest oral surgeon in Los Angeles." I said, "I'm not going to let you fool around with some doctor in Ventura." So we got the finest oral surgeon in Los Angeles, and he decided that—Alex Shulman, who was a very dear old friend of ours and an old left-winger who also was a blacklisted doctor—when he came back in, he was a brilliant doctor, a brilliant surgeon.

He was made head of Cedars of Lebanon. He wanted to show off for his friend Alex—I mean this doctor. I don't know, I'm reading motivations and I shouldn't do that. I have a tendency to read other people's motivations. I shouldn't do that, but I do. But I can't figure out what happened. What happened was that they decided to not only cut out part of his tongue but to take out his lymph glands on that side where the cancer was. Because again, it's a question of malpractice. Let us say [hypothetically] that he took out part of his tongue and left some cancer in the lymph glands in the neck. So he took out all the lymph glands in Mike's neck, which turned out to be clear of cancer. Somehow or other—one does not know how—Mike goes into intensive care, and an hour later he has a stroke. From whatever happened to one of the arteries up to his head—to his brain—a clot got into his brain and he had a stroke from this operation.

LASKEY:

From what should have been a fairly simple—

WILSON:

It should have been a very simple thing. I've always felt that guilt thing about having taken him to L. A. If he had gone to Ventura and just had this thing taken out—which was just a pimple on his tongue—it looked a little suspicious. Taken off—who knows? One doesn't know.

LASKEY:

You can't blame yourself for that.

WILSON:

Well, I don't totally, but I do feel that if I just left things alone and not have been such a motherly, meddlesome—

LASKEY:

He may have had the stroke anyway.

WILSON:

I know.

LASKEY:

It is entirely possible.

WILSON:

Because Dr. Shulman, who observed the operation, said it was an absolutely perfect operation. He said it was so beautifully done that it was just so—Shulman said it was a combination of smoking and drinking.

LASKEY:

Right. Michael drank a lot. He smoked a lot. He had a stressful life.

WILSON:

He had plaque in his arteries. He had a very stressful life, and he couldn't take that operation.

LASKEY:

But I think that would have happened. The probability is it would have happened.

WILSON:

This is what Shulman says, but at the same time we have a good friend here, a neurosurgeon, who has no confidence in any doctor. He says, "They're all charlatans." [laughter]. He says, "I know. I've been one." [laughter] He wanted Mike to sue for malpractice. But Mike says, "No lawsuits for me." Anyway, I would say that Mike kind of went to pieces after that. He became very emotionally fragile, and he was scared to death that it was going to get around in the motion picture industry that he had had a stroke and he couldn't work anymore.

LASKEY:

Which didn't help any if he was trying to recover.

WILSON:

And then he started drinking and smoking again.

LASKEY:

After having a stroke?

WILSON:

Yeah. We never knew if it was going to be another stroke, because strokes are often followed by other strokes. It was a very, very tough period, because his whole right side was paralyzed. We expected him to be aphasic after the operation, because the—excuse me. Was it the left side? No, the right side was paralyzed. Well, you know, it goes across this way, because the lymph glands were on the left side. We have this cross thing that happens in our bodies. This part of the brain controls this side of the body. So the speech centers are on the opposite sides. If you're right-handed, they're on the left side. So Mike's—he immediately started to speak even right after the stroke when he was just waking up, saying, "What's wrong with me? I can't move my arm." I remembered that Mike had been born left-handed, and the nuns had taught him to write with his right hand and do everything with his right hand.

LASKEY:

Forced him?

WILSON:

Yes. So he did start to speak. Thank god he could still speak. We figured that his brain must be in an okay condition. He did, indeed, continue to write, but with enormous difficulty after that, and became increasingly fragile emotionally. His body went to pieces, because he had been an athlete all his life and a very good athlete. I told you he was on the track team at [University of California] Berkeley, and he was an excellent tennis player. He got fat, very, heavy for him. I mean, it was extraordinary how heavy he got because of lack

of exercise and all that drinking. He didn't eat very much. It was mostly alcoholic calories.

LASKEY:

Which will put weight on.

WILSON:

Yes. Anyway, we were going to a party one night. It was the anniversary of Al [Alfred] Levitt and Helen Levitt, their fortieth wedding anniversary. We were driving. I did all the driving at that time. He had his driver's license taken away from him, which made him very unhappy. He could only drive around Ojai.

LASKEY:

He was still mobile?

WILSON:

Yeah. He got a brace on his right leg. His right arm never did function. It just hung there loosely. He got a brace and learned to walk so he could get around. He wore the brace, and he liked to sit in his wheelchair. I tried to get him to give up his wheelchair, because he really didn't need it anymore, but he wouldn't give it up. He liked having it there; he felt secure in it. It was a very strange period. He had to be bathed, because he would have to take off his brace to take a bath or shower. I did it for a long time. Finally, our housekeeper, who just loved Mike profoundly, she took over his care. She was a natural-born nurse anyway. That was Edith [Mount], a British woman. She started to bathe him every morning, which was very helpful to me. But I took care of him otherwise. We made a trip to Europe together, to England, after he had the stroke—which was an unpleasant experience—to meet Fred Zinnemann, because Fred Zinnemann wanted him to write something. What was he going to do for Zinnemann? Zinnemann was in the middle of finishing up *Julia*. He wanted Mike to do something on a marvelous project. God, I can't remember what it was. It never came off, and he never did it. It was one of his ideas he had that never came through. Anyway, we went to see Fred Zinnemann, so our trip was paid. I took care of Mike. We stayed at a marvelous hotel, Hotel Connaught. Then we went over to Paris. But physically for me it was very hard, because I was taking care of Mike. Physically, it was very hard to lift Mike. There were no showers so I had to lift him out of the bathtub, and we were constantly falling down. Sometimes we would get to giggling and laughing about it, because what else can you do. We'd both land on the floor. [laughter] I used to get naked and try to get him in and out. He was very angry at himself that he was unable to travel. We went to Paris, and he saw another producer over there, a friend of his who wanted him to do something else. It's extraordinary how Mike's popularity went on, even after he had a stroke. They wanted him to keep writing. When we were here, everybody came to him. He said, "If they want me, they'll have come to me." And they did. They all came

to Mike. Jane Fonda was here and Henry Fonda and Marlon Brando and Julie Andrews and all the producers that came out here all the time. We had a stream of people out here trying to get Mike to do things, before and after his stroke. It was absolutely amazing that people sought him out all the time, he had such an incredible reputation. So in a way it was kind of fun. We had our Sunday things here, too. At least once a month we'd have a Sunday party here.

LASKEY:

A perfect place for it.

WILSON:

So the day that he died—we were going into L.A. He was getting increasingly depressed about his condition. We had an awful fight after Marlon Brando had come out and asked him to do a story on the Plains Indians. This was a subject that was near and dear to Mike's heart. He was very interested in the genocide of the Indian people by the settlers and what had happened to the few that were remaining. You know, this is one of Marlon Brando's favorite subjects. So Mike was very thrilled about having this possibility, but he didn't know how to handle it because his stroke made it impossible for him to work the way he had worked before. He was not used to dictation. It was hard for him to dictate because he used to pace up and down to dictate. He would type out his own outlines, and he thought them out as he typed them out. It was hard for him. His whole process of working had been totally turned upside down, because he couldn't function the way he had functioned before.

LASKEY:

Plus, I would imagine his ability to research was cut down by the lack of the ability to use his one arm.

WILSON:

Yes, of course, he only had the ability of one arm. And his ability to get to the library. People always had to do this for him. He had a whole support system worked out around him. He had his secretary, and the housekeeper, who was giving him showers and bringing his lunch out to him, and me. I was hovering around a lot. I was trying to work and be—I was fixing his dinner every night. You know, getting him to bed and that sort of thing, which was hard, because he never went to bed before two o'clock in the morning.

LASKEY:

How did you survive then?

WILSON:

I used to survive on four or five hours sleep every night. Anyway, he did not like to go into L.A. very much, but we used to go in from time to time for something really important. So this party, which was the anniversary of our friends, he wanted to go to this because he really loved Al Levitt very much. Helen was dear to him, too. Al had been wonderful to him. Everybody was

supposed to get up and write something on their behalf. Mike had written a beautiful statement about his friendship for Al—I can't quote it to you now; I've got it somewhere in there—in which he stated that after everything is gone—it's like poetry, the implication being that when—most of us had been disenchanted by what had happened, disenchanted by what had happened in the Soviet Union. So many of us had been disenchanted by what had happened in Russia, and when it turned out that all the terrible things that the [William Randolph] Hearst newspapers had been saying about Russia turned out to be true, about Stalin, I mean—

LASKEY:

How did you take that?

WILSON:

Very badly. We took it very badly. We went to—one of the reasons we went to Europe, in my opinion—well, Mike would never say so, but for me it was true certainly—was to get out of the left movement here, because we were so disenchanted and so confused about what had happened. And with the exposure by [Nikita] Khrushchev of Stalin—we had felt that the Soviet Union was standing there as the example for all of us, and the possibility of having a more perfectable society—the wonderful romance that we had—there's a new book out, I've got to get it. It's [Vivian Gornick] *The Romance of American Communism*, which is about the Left. I would love to read it. Anyway, Mike's statement to his friends was—oh, on the way in to Los Angeles, he said, "Who's going to be at this party?" So I said, "Well, I think it will just be your close friends and Al and Helen's close friends." And he said, "But who is going to be there?" I said, "Honey, I really don't know. I guess Sylvia [Gussin Jarrico] and Paul [Jarrico] will be there. And I think Rebecca and Rosanna are going to come." They were coming on their own. "And the Shulmans will be there." You know the Shulmans that I mentioned, the doctor—Connie and Alex Shulman. I mentioned a few more people that I thought would be there. He said, "Is that all that's going to be there?" I said, "Oh, I think Cleo [Trumbo] will be there and maybe her children. [The] people that are still left of our tribe that are important to us will still be there." I thought that was very strange behavior. Oh, yeah, the fight that we had had the day before was after Marlon Brando was here. They had given him this assignment on the Plains Indians. I said, "I have to say this to you, Mike. I think the only way that you can do this assignment—forgive me for saying this. This is something that I should have said a long time ago. That is you have to go dry out. You've got to go someplace and get completely dried out of alcohol. With the stroke and your weakened condition, you can't be a drinker anymore." This was only about three or four days before this happened. I should have been saying this for years and years, but I had never said that to him. It was the first time I ever said

that to him. So that is why in the whole thing about wives and husbands and families being coconspirators for the alcoholism of somebody in the family—we were all co-conspirators. We all were holding him up all the time. All this network of women that he had holding him up—my sister, his secretary, my housekeeper, me, the girls—we were all propping him up all the time and keeping him functioning. He got very angry with me, very, very angry. He said, "You think I'm an alcoholic?" I said, "I know you're an alcoholic. You know that. You know it, Mike. You are." He said, "So this is what you think of me, that I'm an alcoholic?"

LASKEY:

He'd never confronted that before?

WILSON:

Not verbally to me. Even though I'd stated it before, he always used to laugh at me or holler at me. He said, "Do you think I have to go to an institution to get dried out?" I said, "Well, I don't know how to do it. You can't do it." And then, you know, he got very angry at me and started to holler at me. I said, "Okay. I can't control you. If you're not going to do it." So we were not on very good terms when we went off to this party. And he accused me of not loving him anymore. He said, "How could you love a man like me? I'm impotent. You're still young and beautiful." I said, "I'm not young." He said, "Well, you're still beautiful." [laughter] He said, "Men desire you." I said, "Once in a while." So he was in a very, very bad mood—blue, very depressed.

1.17. TAPE NUMBER: X, Side Two (April 22, 1989)

WILSON:

Everybody made lovely statements about the Levitts. They are a very nice couple. They've now been married fifty years. [Michael] said, "When all of our other illusions are gone, what is left of us is only the golden friendships that we all have for each other and the love we have for each other." And he sat down and almost immediately had a heart attack and died.

LASKEY:

Oh, my god.

WILSON:

In front of all of his closest people—his daughters, his wife, and the closest people. And Shulman—Alex was there with Connie. They all knew—what do you call it?

LASKEY:

CPR. [cardiopulmonary resuscitation]

WILSON:

CPR. They tried to bring him back, and he went into fibrillation. Then we finally get to the UCLA Medical Center, because we were in Westwood. We got to the UCLA clinic. Forty-five minutes it took for the ambulance to get there. Alex was so goddamned mad, he almost had a fit. He was head of surgery at Cedars. He was the one who called UCLA to get the ambulance. It took them forty-five minutes to get there. Meanwhile, for forty-five minutes they worked on him, trying to keep him alive while all of us were standing around. He was still alive when they finally took him to the hospital. Alex went in and they did a tracheotomy and did everything possible to keep him functioning, but he finally died. It was so dramatic. I can't tell you. It was so dramatic and so prophetic. It was like—I don't know. He'd been talking about suicide, anyway. He was in a terrible frame of mind. When he felt that he couldn't write anymore, it just was like death for him, not to be able to write. So. Do you think you have enough material? Or do you want to hear more about Zelma's career? [laughter]

LASKEY:

We still need to figure out how you became a fellow. I guess the first question is how active had you been in the AIA [American Institute of Architects] through the years when you came back?

WILSON:

When I came back from—? Well, when I opened up my own office and I started being—I told you all the things I did for the AIA?

LASKEY:

Right, then we got sidetracked.

WILSON:

Yes, I was on the executive board of the AIA. I was president of my chapter here in Ventura County and on the executive board of the chapter for seven years. [I was] on the executive board a couple of years, and then I started doing all these other things that I told you about. So I was very active. Yes.

LASKEY:

Now, was it on the basis of those things, and particularly on your community action that the chapter—?

WILSON:

They made me a fellow for a combination of things. One, I had done a lot of traveling, and the fact that I spoke French—so it made me kind of a very cultured—I mean, the outline of my life, so to speak, gave me a high shine of culture, which a lot of architects lack. I mean, many of them are cultured, but many of them aren't. They aren't cultured like the old-fashioned architects who were world travelers and understood the architecture of the world. So I would say there were many factors. And because I had gotten honor awards and recognized as a good designer as well as a good architect and because I had

been an educator and a world traveler. I think that all those things combined together to make me a fellow.

LASKEY:

I think I read that at the time you were made a fellow there were only like thirteen women in the United States out of twelve hundred fellows.

WILSON:

No. There were twenty-one women architects, of which about half were retired. So there were very, very few. Now, as I say, I think there are more, but not many more. That was in 1983, and this is—? Six years—? Six years, maybe five more women?

LASKEY:

Well, you must have been very pleased.

WILSON:

To say the least. I got it in—the convention was in New Orleans, and it made me feel bad that my husband was not with me. I took my sister. We had a lovely time.

LASKEY:

Bittersweet, probably.

WILSON:

Bittersweet. Because naturally, you want your highest achievements to be recognized by members of the family.

LASKEY:

Were you in the partnership at that time? You were still in your partnership with Richard Conrad?

WILSON:

Yes. My partner Richard Conrad, who was the mayor of Ojai still—he was very helpful in getting me my fellowship. He worked very hard on it. He got it organized for me. I had to do some of the writing on my own history myself because nobody knew my history as well as I did. But he got all the other architects organized to write letters on my behalf. He made his own evaluation of being my partner for those years. So I had a lot of help from some very nice people, both architects and non-architects who wrote letters on my behalf.

LASKEY:

Have you ever had any repercussions businesswise because of your politics, or your political history more than your current politics? Was it any problem in Ojai?

WILSON:

None that I have been—I'm sure that there are people who won't have anything to do with me because of my politics, but I don't really know who they are.

LASKEY:

And obviously you don't miss them. [laughter]

WILSON:

But I seem to enjoy so much respect from people. I don't know who the people are who don't like me, except for a very few. I know there's a few people who maybe have problems with me. I'm outspoken, but I don't try to impose my politics on other people. As you get older, you do it less and less. For one thing, I'm not even sure what my views are anymore. [laughter] I still have a humanist, environmentalist view, but to say that it is possible to make a better world—I'm not sure that it's possible anymore. I certainly believed it was at one time.

LASKEY:

That's really sad, I think.

WILSON:

That's a sad statement?

LASKEY:

Yeah. It's probably a fairly accurate one, but nonetheless I think it's very sad to hear you say that.

WILSON:

That doesn't mean I've stopped trying.

LASKEY:

Okay. You also haven't talked at all about your involvement with the city and the actual reworking of the center area, of the mission, the arches that—

WILSON:

That was a thirteen-year period that I worked on that. It was my own idea to do this, but I immediately got support from people who'd had similar notions. The back of the Ojai arcade—the arcade was there, and the back of the arcade was still the old frontier buildings that had been built god knows when. Some of them had been rebuilt, but most of them had never been rebuilt. They were just ramshackle huts. The back of the arcade looked like a stage set. The front was the beautiful arches, and the back was just ramshackle junk, very junky. It was my thought that in order to prevent other shopping centers from springing up and stripping commercial [space] along Ojai Avenue, what we ought to do is expand the city out back from the arches. We couldn't expand into the park, but we could expand in that area rear of the arcade and turn that into the big superblock of a very attractive shopping area. One way to start was to remodel and retrofit those buildings back there and to make that into a walking mall, parking facilities, and other things. So a committee of us got together, the Downtown Businessmen's Association [Ojai]. Then I got the city manager, Johnny Johnson, interested in this. He said, "The only way to do this is through the California Enabling Act, the Redevelopment Act of 19—" Whatever it was? I don't know what the act—in 1980 or something. In 1975? The enabling act was that when you improve your property the increment of taxes that you have

to pay, because you've improved it, instead of it going to the state or to the county it would then go into the redevelopment fund which we then started [for] the enabling act. But in order to do it, we still had to float a bond, because the money was negligible—what we were able to collect that way. But getting all fourteen owners of different parts of the arcade to agree on what was going to happen behind, all of this took an extremely, extremely long time to get them all to agree on what they were going to do back there. So I made a design, and then I changed it. I kept changing it, changing it, changing it, because we couldn't get everybody into agreement. But I had wonderful support around me, the city manager and several of the councilmen—not all of the council but several of them, enough to make a majority. There's five members of the council.

LASKEY:

Thirteen years?

WILSON:

It took thirteen years for this entire process to go through. We tried to get permission to buy the property. We had powers of condemnation, but the city manager did not want to take advantage of it.

LASKEY:

Well, you never do if you don't have to. That's a pretty radical thing to do.

WILSON:

A very radical thing to do. So we tried to get somebody who would be willing to sell their property to the redevelopment agency so we could get a pass through to the rear. Otherwise, we'd have none. That took almost a year to finally get somebody to agree. I had to keep changing the basic design of the master plan. [laughter] So the pass through was there, or it's going to be there. I wanted to make the pass through the central core, central theme, wherever the pass through came through. And it kept changing. That drove me crazy. I have a model of it in my office. One of these days when you return from your trips, you'll see it. They redid the backs of the buildings, but the new buildings that they were supposed to put in there they didn't build.

LASKEY:

But they can still, theoretically, at least, do that?

WILSON:

They can still do that.

LASKEY:

At some future time?

WILSON:

At some future date they'll finish it, but it is not finished now. It's never really functioned as I and other people envisioned it, which was to be a very bustling area. It would be a community area. I thought of it as an open community

center where they could have activities and banquets. They've done that to some extent. They have certain festivals back there. But I always thought of something that was truly alive and full of people walking around and places for children to play and outdoor eating areas, and it never became that because they never finished it. There wasn't enough business back there to attract people. But it has improved the appearance of it. I can say that it looks better than it used to, but it doesn't have the character that I had in mind.

LASKEY:

That may come in time, too.

WILSON:

It may change. Nothing remains the same.

LASKEY:

It takes time. People in Southern California, for one reason or another, given our wonderful climate, are not taken to doing things outside. You were talking about the public squares of Italy early on in this conversation, or even in France. We don't have those kinds of public squares here for some reason.

WILSON:

We don't have a pedestrian society.

LASKEY:

If we have them, you know, when we do see the plazas that are built for our skyscrapers, they're always empty. You don't see people using those plazas. I don't know what's wrong with us. It may just take a long time for it to drift in.

WILSON:

In the eastern cities, there's more of it. If you go to New York, New York is much more pedestrian-oriented than we are in California. I think with the influx of all the different nationalities into Los Angeles, Los Angeles is getting certain specifically pedestrian-oriented areas that has changed its character a lot, too. Don't you think so?

LASKEY:

What are you thinking of specifically?

WILSON:

Well, I'm thinking of Westwood Village, which is full of people.

LASKEY:

Oh, that's true.

WILSON:

And Koreatown, which has its little people—there's always people all over the place. They're always filling up the streets.

LASKEY:

There's downtown, South Broadway.

WILSON:

There's Broadway, around Central Market. And around some of the parks— what is it called? Westlake Park? MacArthur Park?

LASKEY:

No, it's called MacArthur Park now.

WILSON:

Yeah. There's a lot of pedestrians around there. There's little ethnic pockets where people really do walk.

LASKEY:

That's true: Chinatown, Little Tokyo.

WILSON:

Yeah. I like seeing that. I'm not crazy about Los Angeles, because I'd be scared to live there. [laughter] But I like these pockets. They are what makes a town. It's that mutually-protective aspect of it. In those pockets, I don't think there's much crime going on. The crime is more hidden, isn't it? Are the streets places where they sell drugs right on the streets?

LASKEY:

Well, at MacArthur Park they sell dope right on the street. Especially Sixth Street, which is the far edge, is a rather terrifying place to be.

WILSON:

It is, I see. Is it scary to walk the streets there? Can you be attacked in the streets?

LASKEY:

Yes. That personally bothers me a lot, because in my own neighborhood, up to two years ago, I used to go walking at night. I liked that because I like walking and especially find it a great stress releaser. I would like taking a walk. But then there was a sudden rash of so many robberies, of drive-by attacks right in our little neighborhood, that now I can't. I don't feel comfortable walking at night. And we live in a pleasant little neighborhood, and that shouldn't be. I understand that it's pretty much the same whether you're in Beverly Hills or in my neighborhood or wherever. I used to think it was all just paranoia, but I think maybe there is something to it, that it really is not a good idea for you to be out there by yourself walking the streets at night. That depresses me, because we live in such a fabulous climate. You should be able to go out and enjoy it anytime you want to.

WILSON:

So there's positives and negatives to these ethnic centers, or to any kind of centers.

LASKEY:

Oh, yeah. What about your association with Carl Maston and the [Simi Valley] Library? Because I know the last time we talked, you spoke very highly of him.

WILSON:

Yes, and he has been recently honored by something or other.

LASKEY:

USC [University of Southern California]. They're having a lifetime achievement award, or something like that.

WILSON:

Yes, that's right. That's great. Carl actually brought me into the Simi Valley Library project. They wanted somebody from Ventura County to be associated, but they were kind of interested in the fact that a sophisticated Los Angeles architect like Maston would be interested in doing this. That was also during the time of affirmative action. He had heard of me, so he called me up and asked me if I would like to joint-venture with him. I said, "Sure." And we went in, interviewed, and got the job. They were very pleased with the library, so we also got interviewed for the Senior Citizens Center. We got that, too.

LASKEY:

For which you won a—? Did you—?

WILSON:

Neither of them won any awards. No, I got an award for the city hall and the seniors building in Ojai. It was retrofitting and remodeling, taking two existing residences and turning them into city administrative offices and council chambers.

LASKEY:

Very pretty.

WILSON:

It's a pretty little building. It's a very pretty little complex, yeah.

LASKEY:

With the walks that you've made around it. It doesn't look like a civic complex, though.

WILSON:

Well, I think it's apropos for Ojai, It looks like Ojai.

LASKEY:

It looks exactly like Ojai. Let's sort of wind up. What's your favorite building that you've done? Do you have one?

WILSON:

Well, my favorite complex is the Oak Grove School.

LASKEY:

Now, there you did a beautiful library.

WILSON:

I did a beautiful library there, yes.

LASKEY:

Taking full advantage of the view and the setting.

WILSON:

I felt that the Simi Valley Library was a little cold in its appearance. But since it is covered with so much foliage, the trees have grown, it looks very nice and it's softened a lot. I must go out and photograph it again one of these days. But when Carl came up with this design, I was in disagreement with it. We worked together on the floor plan. We got it to work a little bit together, but on the exterior design—because he wanted to use a tilt-up process. Do you know what tilt-up is?

LASKEY:

Yes. That is what [Rudolph M.] Schindler did on his house. To form the molds, and once they're hard you tilt them up into place.

WILSON:

That's right. He wanted to do a tilt-up, which is really an industrial technique. They've got it perfected, so they use it a lot in warehousing and research centers. It's very cheap and very fast. I mean, the building is up before you know it. Carl has a very, very nice sense of proportion, but he is so schooled in the International school tradition that I think it would be hard for him to use decorative themes. It's not hard for me. It isn't that I'm interested into postmodern. I think the decoration should come out of the building, but I felt that the building was a cold-looking building. But the interiors were very, very successful. I couldn't say that's my favorite building. For one thing I was not wholly responsible for it. I was only partially responsible for the design. It was a collaboration.

LASKEY:

But you were totally responsible for the Oak Grove complex, which is beautiful.

WILSON:

Right, which I think is more beautiful than the Simi Valley Library. I guess that's my favorite, yes. And I think that the Vandenberg [Air Force Base] Child Care Center is going to be very handsome when it goes up. They're just barely getting started on that.

LASKEY:

Now, will you go up there and oversee the building of it or is—?

WILSON:

I hope not. [laughter]

LASKEY:

Not one of your favorite places? [laughter]

WILSON:

No. I don't want to work at Vandenberg, in the first place. Secondly, I don't want to work for the [United States Army] Corps of Engineers. They're very difficult. That's like the real estate segment of the Army Air Force. They do all their construction. They're in charge of it, and they're unusually demanding, in

my opinion. [laughter] They don't want to pay proper—you know, the government is very chintzy. We think the government gives away millions. They are not chintzy to big corporations like General Dynamics, to whom they overpay millions and millions of dollars, but they're chintzy to their employees. They're chintzy to their consultants like me.

LASKEY:

Well, to the little people, lower down on the scale.

WILSON:

Yeah, that's right.

LASKEY:

Again, it's very typical of something we keep seeing over and over in all aspects of our life.

WILSON:

When I would try to negotiate with them, like on the interiors—I did the interior design of the child care center. Usually, architects don't do interior designing. But as we had this capability, we got the job of doing the interior design. So I came up with a price of what I thought it would cost us, plus a reasonable profit to do the interior design of this child care center, which was about \$30,000 just for my fees. They started to negotiate with me and said they wouldn't pay me more than \$18,000. I said, "Well, forget it. I can't do it." They said, "We've had our experts and our people in interior design figure this out. Interior design for a child care center of this size should be no more than \$18,000." I said, "Well, I won't do it for that." So finally, with a lot of negotiating back and forth, we agreed on something like \$22,000 to do it. Well, it cost me, without any profits at all, \$30,000. Even my \$30,000 estimate was low. There was so much work involved. I had to employ a number of people to do it because it was very complex, the way they wanted us to do it, in quadruplicate, and in their form. Or we'd do it in our form, and then they'd send it back saying, "No, we want it done in our form." So we did it and redid it. And they sent it all over the United States and everybody had their input: "We don't like this color scheme. You've got too many colors in this room. You've got this. You've got that. We don't like this fabric. Use theirs." So I had to completely redo it about three or four times. I'm telling you, that with their system of checks and balances, where they—I swear, I'd get my drawings back from East Mill Pond, Texas. [laughter] Towns I'd never heard of. Where in the hell is this coming from? Somebody there was checking my drawings. Then I'd get somebody else from some woman from Missoula, Montana. She was a part of their staff. She would send down her opinions, and somebody else would say, "The colors are much too garish." Or "What are you trying to do there? Make Disneyland out of this place?" My attitude was to make a very lively environment for the children. A stimulant.

LASKEY:

Well, yes, it's a school.

WILSON:

Yeah. And they want everything to be dull gray. I don't know what the hell they wanted. They wanted army green. It was awful.

LASKEY:

It was the army.

WILSON:

I still—I fought my way out of that. I fought with the general at the base on Vandenberg. My staff couldn't believe me. My partner didn't believe me. But I went up there. He said, "You've got to change these designs. There's too much color. What do you mean we're going to have a blue roof on this building? The rest of the roofs at Vandenberg are green." I said, "Because this is a school, it's different. It's a different atmosphere." He said, "Well, we can't have this roof here." I said, "Well, I won't change it." So I won.

LASKEY:

Good for you!

WILSON:

Finally, they did it by mail. They said, "Well, we've reconsidered it. Maybe you're right. It is different. We want another atmosphere for the children." I won, because I stood up to him. Because I didn't care. That's why. If he wanted to fire me off the job—I was so sick of the corps of engineers by then, my attitude was to hell with them. Excuse me, I hope I haven't offended you with my language, but I was so—

LASKEY:

Hardly! [laughter]

WILSON:

I really felt that way, so it was easy for me. Like I said, I'm not physically courageous like my daughter is, but I have a lot of moral courage, I think.

LASKEY:

I think that's great.

WILSON:

So I stand up to people sometimes. It doesn't always make me the most popular person in the world, but you do get certain victories out of it that you don't expect to get. If you don't try for them, you're not going to get them.

LASKEY:

There is a time also—and this sounds like one of them—when you've just simply had enough.

WILSON:

I did.

LASKEY:

I mean, you had to take a stand, because otherwise you would still be negotiating.

WILSON:

That's right.

LASKEY:

Or you would have an olive gray building.

WILSON:

They had screwed me on the interiors. I was already very upset about that. [laughter] I called back the negotiator, and I said, "You really screwed me good. This job and the way it's turned out has cost me personally—not even with any profit—it cost me what my initial estimate was on it.

LASKEY:

There was no way you could request that lost money?

WILSON:

No. But anyway, in terms of how it's been to be a woman architect, I'd say that the advantage—maybe other women architects have told you the same thing—of being in business for yourself is you don't know who the male chauvinists are because they don't come into your office. [laughter]

LASKEY:

That's a great point.

WILSON:

They don't come into your office. The people who come to you come because you have a good reputation, because they're not afraid of—their ego is not in any way threatened by your being a woman. So some of my clients are excellent clients, because I can deal with them on that basis. I'm not going to trample on their ego. If my back is to the wall, like it was at Vandenberg, I'll take a stand. But on most things I am very flexible with my clients, as long as I think it's good design. I'll tell you the greatest disappointment to me really, professionally concerned, is that when I started out—maybe I've made this point to you before, we've done so much talking. I've done so much talking. My earliest romantic illusions were that I was really going to make a difference to society and to helping people who are not as fortunate as I am and trying to get equal opportunity or equal benefits to everybody. I'm not doing that. I'm building 6,000-square-foot houses for rich people. And once in a while, I'll do something that's beneficial, like maybe the downtown redevelopment. Even though it was only a partial success—or a partial failure, depending on which way you want to look at it—at least it has given the general population something, a little bit more poetry in their lives. I don't know. But what I intended to do—that's why I was so interested in city planning—it didn't really happen. None of that really happened. I hope I'm not coming out as being too cynical, but I'm saying that this has been a disappointment to me. But at the

same time, I feel that if I have not hurt the environment in any way, or not very often anyway—

LASKEY:

As with the Oak Grove School, right?

WILSON:

The Oak Grove School, right. Really trying to build with the environment. Maybe that's the best I can ask for. Or maybe my husband, because he tried to put some kind of humanity in every one of his pictures, no matter what they were. He wanted to make either an observation about the human condition or to illuminate something about the human condition. So he made a contribution. The best I can say about the contribution I made is maybe I didn't make it any worse and sometimes a little better. So I'm not cynical about it. It's just I'm trying to be a realist about what I did or what I was able to do.

LASKEY:

Well, partially, there wasn't much you could do, because we don't have a policy of public housing or things that you wanted to get into. The area that you do want to go into, the area that you're looking at, which is the child development centers and child day care centers, is getting back again to what it is in architecture that's important to you.

WILSON:

I'd love to do that if I could figure out some way of letting it be known. Whenever I get the opportunity, I do let people know that this would be a great pleasure for me to work on this. Sometimes I'll read in the paper that there are plans to build a school for homeless children. So I called up my supervisor. She says, "Well, we're having John Kulweic do some drawings for us." I said, "Well, you know I've had—" I didn't even talk to her. I talked to her assistant. I said, "You know, I've done six or seven child care centers or child-related care centers. I think that I have some experience that might be of value to you." She said, "Well, John Kulweic is doing this work for free. Do you want to do this work for free?" I said, "He's doing all of the work and drawings [for free]?" She said, "No, no, no. He's just doing some concept drawings for us." I said, "No, I don't do work for free." Because I don't believe in it. Sure, I've done charity work, but to work for the county is not working for charity.

LASKEY:

Absolutely not.

WILSON:

I mean, the Senior Citizens Center here, I didn't charge them for the work I did down there, in taking that old building and remodeling it for them. That was totally donation on our part. I donated some buildings to the park, a little pavilion in the park. I did some work for the Lion's Club. You know, I do a lot of little things like that for free, for charity. Or some work for Libbey Park, if

they want something done out there. But why should I do free work for the county? If they had money in their budget to do this building—?

LASKEY:

Then they should have money to pay for the development.

WILSON:

To pay the architect. Do you think a plasterer is going to come in there and donate his time and materials? Or a contractor is going to? Forget it. They're going to do it for money. They have to raise money to pay the builder. Why not raise money to pay the architect? So they prey on the humanitarianism of educated people, people in the professions, to get something done. But when it comes to putting out the money, they put out the money, say, to a contractor, who makes more money than anybody on these jobs anyway. But there's got to be a way for me to get in on this, and I've got to have to do some research or hire a marketing person to find out who is doing child care. I don't know what to do myself. This is a field that would really be fun for me to get into, in this latter part of my life instead of just doing houses for rich people.

LASKEY:

It would be wonderful.

WILSON:

I do like the aesthetic challenge. If somebody gives me a hilltop and says, "Design a beautiful house for me on this hilltop," it's a wonderful challenge. It's scary, it's so great.

LASKEY:

But you can do both.

WILSON:

I can do both.

LASKEY:

So there we are. Anything more?

WILSON:

There's probably more, but I think you have enough. There are a lot of things that have happened. I'd like to see my children happier than they are, but they're not doing badly now. I'm lonely a lot now, but I'm so busy during the day that sometimes I really look forward to coming home alone. There are other times when I get home and I get a terrible feeling of aloneness in this house where there were so many nice things that happened. Bad things, too.

LASKEY:

But they were extraordinary, both the good and the bad. There was nothing ordinary about your life.

WILSON:

Apparently not.

LASKEY:

In many of the aspects. Has your sister ever thought about coming up here and living with you? Have you ever considered that possibility?

WILSON:

Well, yeah, but she lives with a man that she really loves a lot. While they will never get married, she cares a lot about him, and he has come to care a lot for her. He is a black actor. They had a very stormy beginning in their relationship, but they seem to be quite happy together now. Do you know him? William Marshall?

LASKEY:

I certainly do. I saw William Marshall do *Catch My Soul*.

WILSON:

Did you really?

LASKEY:

The night that Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated. I get chills just thinking about it.

WILSON:

He's fabulous.

LASKEY:

He was absolutely fabulous as Othello.

WILSON:

And he's never made it. He's never made the grade the way he deserved to make it. I personally think he's made a great contribution, but he would never be satisfied because he doesn't have the fame of James Earl Jones.

LASKEY:

He was probably just a little bit ahead of his time.

WILSON:

You saw him in *Catch My Soul*? I'm going to tell him that.

LASKEY:

Yeah, it was a birthday present. We sat in the third row center of the Ahmanson Pavilion. It was spectacular. He was absolutely incredible as Othello. Then he made a curtain speech about the assassination of Dr. King. That had everybody in tears. That was such an emotional show anyway, and it was such an emotional night. It was just extraordinary. I'm sorry that he didn't go on into that category of [fame] like James Earl Jones because he was marvelous and he has a beautiful voice.

WILSON:

He has something that James Earl Jones doesn't have, which is a wonderful singing voice. James Earl Jones has something else, which is a kind of warmth and down-to-earthness that maybe William doesn't quite have. But if you give William a chance, he could show just as much—it's the roles that he has, that he hasn't had an opportunity to show [what] he can be.

LASKEY:

Well, opportunities for black actors seem to be improving slightly, not exactly great but possibly he'll still have a chance. I certainly hope so.

WILSON:

Well, I hope so, too. He really deserves it. Anyway, Ray Sister and he, over the years of living together—they've lived together about fifteen or twenty years now.

LASKEY:

Really? Just about the time of *Catch My Soul*?

WILSON:

Yes. She was with him at that time. He was in Paris at the time that Paul [Jarrico] left Sylvia for a French woman.

LASKEY:

Oh, that's what happened?

WILSON:

Yeah, that he is no longer with. Although he's still married to her, he hasn't been with her for a long time. She was a very beautiful woman who was married to the French ambassador to Czechoslovakia. She met Paul. She had returned to Paris and her husband was having a love affair with one of his students, because he was also a professor at the University of Prague.

LASKEY:

That is too complicated. [laughter]

WILSON:

It gets pretty complicated. And he fell for her. She was a remarkable woman. She was a writer and a doctor. Her name is Yvette [Le Floch].

LASKEY:

But Sylvia is a remarkable woman.

WILSON:

Oh, Sylvia is fantastic. Sylvia is a fabulous lady.

1.18. TAPE NUMBER: XI, Side One (April 22, 1989)

WILSON:

My sister Sylvia [Gussin Jarrico] has become a spokesperson, in a way, for all these people who are writing books about the blacklist. Everybody wanted to interview Sylvia: [Larry] Ceplair, who wrote *The Inquisition in Hollywood: [Politics in the Film Community, 1930-1960]*. [Victor S.] Navasky, who wrote *Naming Names*. To the point that pretty soon she said, "Look, I'm not the spokesperson." Her insights were so brilliant that these guys couldn't resist her. She was extremely helpful to people like Ceplair who—

LASKEY:

Well, he spoke so highly or wrote so highly about her in *The Inquisition in Hollywood*, about her abilities to write and to see into the problems and understanding them at the time.

WILSON:

I had written something out especially for you that Sylvia had written at my husband's memorial. There was a memorial for Mike [Michael Wilson] at the Screen Writers Guild Theater. There were about four or five hundred people who attended. We didn't have a funeral. Mike was a disenchanted Catholic, so I could hardly have a religious ceremony for him. Instead, we had this memorial meeting. Everybody wanted to get up and make speeches on my husband's behalf. Sylvia made the most beautiful, little, short statement. It took about two minutes. I found her notes that she had made because she made just notes and then got up and spoke. They were so beautiful. I had my secretary type them out for you, and then I didn't bring them home. [laughter]

LASKEY:

Oh, well, can you mail them to me?

WILSON:

Maybe I'll mail them to you. They were just so great, about her insights into Mike and his relationship to his work and to his family. She really gave me a lump in the throat. Anyway, so Paul [Jarrico] still loves Sylvia. They still see each other. Every Sunday morning they have breakfast together.

LASKEY:

That's remarkable.

WILSON:

Isn't it?

LASKEY:

That's remarkable.

WILSON:

And their son now is here, he joins them. Bill [William A.] Jarrico. Paul came to Sylvia and he said, "Look, I'm in love with Yvette, but I love you, Sylvia, and I don't want to lose you." He said, "Would you be willing to stay by me until this is gone? Because I feel sure that this will pass away, this need for me to be with Yvette." Sylvia said, "No, I don't want that. You just get out and do what you have to do." After a while she told him she wanted a divorce. He didn't come home. So he divorced her, and he married Yvette. That only lasted a couple of years. Then he came back, and he wanted Sylvia to come back with him. By that time, she was already deeply involved with William Marshall, even though they weren't living together. She lived here in Ojai with us for a while and she was doing research for Mike.

LASKEY:

Lived with you in this house?

WILSON:

Yes. She had the bedroom out in the cottage and was staying there. She was trying to do some of her own writing, too. But mostly she was involved with research for Mike. Then William bought a house out in Pacoima and asked her to come live with him, if she would accept the fact that they wouldn't be married and that he would live his own life. So William went there. He is very attractive to women, and he had all the women that he wanted. Sylvia was living there, too, and they sort of lived there together. She was working with William and writing a lot of material for him and helping him to design his roles when he was doing films or plays. She wrote the material for him when he was doing his one-man show on Frederick Douglass. She wrote grant proposals for him. Then, she was also doing her work with Dr. Elena Boder, who had discovered through research a certain relationship between physical characteristics and dyslexia or certain ways of recognizing different kinds of dyslexia. So they wrote a book together, she and Elena. Sylvia did all the writing; it was Elena's concepts. Sylvia would take Elena's concepts and develop them and make them into readable, understandable concepts. So finally, she had made such a contribution, not only to the concepts but to the creation of new concepts by combining—it's hard for me to describe, but she didn't do any of the initial research. Elena did that. Sylvia is very quick to not take credit for something where she feels it's not due to her. So she got co-credit on this. Now they're writing a popularized version of this book.

LASKEY:

The two of them? They're still working together?

WILSON:

Yes, they're still working together. She is working on a popularized version, and Sylvia has become very active and well-known now in the Orton Dyslexia Society. Do you know what the Orton Society is?

LASKEY:

No.

WILSON:

Well, that's the National Society on Dyslexia. Elena is their big guru. Now that she is getting very old—she has cancer, which has metastasized. So she feels that her days are numbered, and she wants to pass on everything that she knows to Sylvia. So Sylvia goes with her now. They made a presentation in Boise [Idaho] last week to the Orton Society. Sylvia made a presentation, too, on dyslexia.

LASKEY:

Fascinating turns her life has taken, like yours.

WILSON:

One never knows. Somebody should interview her, too. Is someone going to do an oral interview of Paul? He has had a very interesting life.

LASKEY:

I don't know what the program is.

WILSON:

Because they're doing one of Al [Alfred] and Helen Levitt. It is kind of a joint thing that they're doing, those two. I'm just wondering if they're—who else have they done in the motion picture industry? A lot of people.

LASKEY:

There are several people who do interviews for the Oral History Program at UCLA. I don't know how many people—if any—that they've actually done in the industry. I know that certainly the writers guild and the directors guild and independent oral history programs have done many people in a wide range.

WILSON:

I see.

LASKEY:

But I know UCLA has a program of interviewing people who were involved with what you call the old left. Maybe at some point Paul would be a candidate for that program, but I really don't know.

WILSON:

He is a marvelous raconteur. He has a wonderful memory. Sylvia would be a fantastic subject for them, because she's articulate and she remembers everything. You're a wonderful interviewer, do you know that? Because, for one thing, you have a very good memory. You've managed to get me back on the subject, because my brain wanders off in different directions. [laughter]

LASKEY:

Your brain works very well. [laughter] There's no problem there.

WILSON:

I was telling Sylvia, "I go this way, I go that way, this way—" I said, "Marlene always gets me back on the track."

LASKEY:

Well, you've been a great subject. You really have. It's been a fascinating interview. I'm really sorry to see it come to an end.

WILSON:

Well, I want you to have a wonderful time. I'm going to miss you. I expect a postcard from Venice.

LASKEY:

At the very least. [laughter]

WILSON:

You're going to get there before it sinks, you know?

LASKEY:

I don't think it will—it won't sink in the next two weeks, I promise you.

WILSON:

I understand that the center of Venice has become primarily tourist and that they service almost completely the tourist industry—the central canal section.

LASKEY:

I certainly wouldn't be surprised if that is true.

WILSON:

And that the working people work in the outlying areas.

LASKEY:

You mean off the city itself, onto the mainland and the Veneto? In that area?

WILSON:

Into the mainland, yeah.

LASKEY:

That's interesting. It's just sort of reversed its history, because the people were forced into these marshes. Now they're being forced off. The invaders forced them onto it, and now the invaders are forcing them off from it and back into the land.

WILSON:

There's supposed to be a wonderful book on the history of Venice. And then there's a great book that I read about recently about the history of the Jews in Venice because the Jews were accepted in Venice in a very unusual way. They had their own ghetto, but it was a ghetto—maybe you know more about it than I do.

LASKEY:

I know that it's still there.

WILSON:

It is?

LASKEY:

The one time I was there was with a tour that made a tour to the ghetto. But I wasn't able to go. I was doing something else or I missed the bus or who knows what? Out walking around. But apparently it's a place to go see, it's an important element of Venice. It is still there.

WILSON:

Well, as I understand it, they had one of the best universities in Venice, and from this university they used to get the finest skilled people, who were skilled in various crafts, as well as [the fact that there were] a good number of the Jewish population who were able to read and write, whereas the rest of the population were not. They tolerated them because they were useful to the community and useful to the power centers, I guess.

LASKEY:

It was a thriving community, and they needed the skills.

WILSON:

And some of the best scientists came from these areas, doctors.

LASKEY:

I'll go visit it this time.

WILSON:

All right.

LASKEY:

[laughter] Thank you for the interview. It was great. But there is one final thing that I think that we probably should talk about in a little more depth. I don't feel it perhaps was adequately covered. How do you feel about being a woman architect, what you have suffered or enjoyed or endured in your profession?

WILSON:

Well, in the first place, when you're a student, you're either—when I was a student at USC [University of Southern California] or even at [University of California] Berkeley—but mostly at USC—your relationship with your fellow students and the professor was either you were ignored and barely tolerated as a female student or you were made the class pet. I had enjoyed or suffered under both circumstances, depending on the situation. If you're the house pet, then they will do your work for you if you allow them to, which I had many offers—the boys offering to do my work for me—and they expected less from you. The professors expected less from a woman student than they did from a male student. Or there were situations in which my presence was simply ignored. I remember one incident at USC when we were adjacent to the art department. [Some people from] the art department came by and asked me—I was wearing a wonderful red dress, which I had picked up when I had been in Mexico—to pose for one of their classes. They were going to pay me something like eighty-five cents an hour. I said, "Sure, I could use the extra money." It got to the dean that I was planning to pose for the art class. He got very upset and told me that they would not allow me to pose because it demeaned the dignity of the School of Architecture. I never did it.

LASKEY:

How would it demean the School of Architecture?

WILSON:

I don't know. [laughter] That a woman in the architecture school—there were only two or three of us in the whole School of Architecture—would pose. I said, "I'm not posing nude. I'm just posing with my red dress on, which they all seemed to like." I said, "If they asked one of your male students, would you find it demeaning to the School of Architecture?" So he changed the subject. Obviously, it would have been okay, it wouldn't have been a subject. But the fact that I was a woman made it demeaning. Largely, I would say that the expectations were very low. So when I would do something good, everybody

would be in a state of astonishment. If you did not allow yourself to be a sex object—which I wouldn't—then there probably was something wrong with you. Maybe you were a lesbian, you didn't like men in that way. So my school experience was as pleasurable as I wanted it to be, as long as I was able to ignore the—if I came in with something good and made a presentation of it—if I hadn't done it at school, and I had done it home—they always expected that it was probably done by one of my fellow students or one of my professors and that I had probably gone to bed with somebody and that was how I was able to come in with a good solution to the class project. [laughter]

LASKEY:

How humiliating.

WILSON:

See, I'm trying to think of the various stages that a woman goes through. Oh, yes. I passed the exam. Of course there's no way that you can cheat on an exam, nor did they know when they passed me that I was a woman, because you're not supposed to know who the person is that you're passing. You're just given a number. So I passed the exam. That was already remarkable. There was no way for them to figure out why I should pass the exam, except by doing it myself. But when I came in for my oral examinations, they didn't ask me the questions that they asked the other male students, because male applicants—I think the assumption was that I would probably end up leaving architecture, therefore it really wasn't very important whether I became an architect or not. Because, obviously, I was going to go out and have children and then I would no longer be an architect.

LASKEY:

So they were careless in their questioning of you? Or indifferent?

WILSON:

They asked me something like—they made short shrift of it. Because usually—now that I'm on the other side and I know what an oral examination is, because I've done many, many orals now over a period of maybe ten or fifteen years—I've been doing oral examinations as part of teams. So I know of the care that they take with making sure that the person has had adequate experience in order to go out and [under] take their legal responsibilities as licensed architects. But when they interviewed me, they were very patronizing. They said, "What's a nice girl like you doing in a profession like this?" [laughter] So I said, "Just lucky, I guess." You know, the standard answer to a question like that. And then they asked me a few other kind of homey questions like, "Are you married? Do you expect to have children?"

LASKEY:

What does that have to do with architecture?

WILSON:

Nothing. I think that that's all it was. It was just small talk. Then they said, "Okay, you passed" And I'm sure that the men never got away with that. They couldn't possibly let the men get away with it, so they just patronized me into the profession. Well, you can say, "You're lucky. You didn't have to go through a big grueling interview like most young applicants." I say, "Yeah, but I want to be treated like a—" I don't want to be treated in such a patronizing way because they assume I'm not going to get any commissions if I get my license.

LASKEY:

Well, you want to be treated as an equal.

WILSON:

Yeah. I wanted them to be as tough on me as they were on the others. I was very well prepared to answer any questions they had had to come along, but I didn't get to. [laughter]

LASKEY:

It is a chauvinistic profession.

WILSON:

Very much so. Their expectations are low. Now, I'll repeat what I said before, what you wanted me to say. When someone doesn't come in to ask me for my services because I'm a woman, I never know that. That's why it's better for me to be on my own, to have my own firm. The only thing is, if there are jobs that I have responded to, or requests for a proposal which I felt that I was the best person to do the job, because it was either near me or I'd had the experience in that particular field and I thought that I was the best—it was my opinion, I could be wrong. But I thought that I was the best one to do it and I did not get the job. That has happened. Other times I had not gotten the job and I understood it because I didn't have as much experience in that area. The problem that women have is to get the right kind of experience. It's not very many architects who will allow the women in their office to obtain the right kind of experience. A woman is seldom made chief draftsman or job captain. Or they are very, very reluctant to send women out on construction sites. If you go out on a construction site, it takes the construction workers quite a while before they will respect you. You have to have gone out four or five times, be very businesslike. You don't have to be sour puss, and try not to be a sour puss. I joke around with the men and let them know they can relax with me. But they really don't accept you. Maybe after about two weeks of going out on the job, they'll finally start to accept you. Then, if you get along fine and the job goes well, you're probably sleeping with the contractor or the superintendent. But I'm not saying sour grapes. You know, I keep trying to—I keep backtracking because I've really had a wonderful career and have been extremely fortunate in my career. That's why I try not to emphasize the negative aspect of it.

LASKEY:

But you've also said that every day in your career as an architect you've been made aware in one way or another that you are a woman. That you've felt a certain amount of discrimination in your career.

WILSON:

Yes. I would say that there's hardly a day [that] goes by when you don't have a—I think I told you once the story of having been called in by a group of lawyers to be interviewed to do a law office for them? A three- or four-story law office?

LASKEY:

I don't think so.

WILSON:

This job interview was a very intimidating atmosphere, because there were books up to the ceiling, all those law books bound in Morocco with gold all over them. And then these young lions come in without jackets, wearing ties, looking very handsome and yuppie. I sat there facing this great, big, long desk, this long refectory library table, and they sort of circled around me. They were restless. They walked around. I guess lawyers walk around a lot, so they were accustomed to doing that. I sat there like I was a witness while they were taking a deposition. Or an inquisition! [laughter] So they said, "Mrs. Wilson—" [After they had] a lot of questions for me—one of the questions was, "Do you ever cry?" I said, "What do you mean, do I ever cry?" "Well, let's say if something untoward happens on the job and you get angry and frustrated, do you have a tendency to cry?" I said, "Why would I do that?" "Well," he says, "Because women do have a tendency to cry. In our profession we find this." So I thought about it for a while, and I said, "Actually, I've never cried during the construction of a project, but once I made a contractor cry!"

LASKEY:

[laughter] Beautiful.

WILSON:

So they all laughed heartily and enjoyed that joke very much, but I did not get the job.

LASKEY:

You didn't stand a chance.

WILSON:

I didn't stand a chance, not a chance. But they felt that because they had consented to interview me that they had made their gesture toward women's liberation. Just the very gesture. This happened to me a great deal. I would get interviewed for jobs that I never had a chance in the world of ever getting because they were great big, multimillion-dollar jobs. And they weren't about to entrust a woman with a multimillion-dollar job because she wouldn't know how to handle such a big job. But I would have to prepare and respond to a

request for a proposal. I couldn't turn it down, if I would get the request for proposals. You would have to respond to them, even though I knew I would never get the job. You prepare these things. You prepare for days in advance. It takes an enormous amount of time to get all the volumes of material so that you're able to answer questions and know something about the kind of construction that they were interested in or where the building is going. You have to know something about the site, you have to make a site search, and you have to make a code search to see what the ordinances are concerning setbacks. You do a lot of work when you prepare a proposal. And you put out a brochure. You present five copies, because that's the body of the people—the jury. Sometimes it would take a couple of weeks to prepare this thing, and it was very expensive to me. If they were only doing it in order to demonstrate that they were not male chauvinists—that they were going to ask a woman to present a proposal—it was an expensive gesture, as far as I was concerned, to be invited. You're flattered to be invited, but you know you're not going to get the job.

LASKEY:

What a difficult situation to be in, too. Because what do you do?

WILSON:

Yes. Because you can't just say, "No, I'm not interested. Forget it, because I'm not going to get it anyway." You want to do it. Because this is a question of being chicken. Who's going to be chicken about it? Am I going to be chicken and not even apply for the job because I know the situation and I know that they've made this gesture to prove that they're not male chauvinists? [laughter] So it works in interesting ways.

LASKEY:

You were also talking about your current joint venture when you have meetings.

WILSON:

Yes, when I have been in joint ventures in the past, and I have been in several. I am in one currently. I enjoy joint ventures, usually. They're a lot of fun, because you can talk things out in a way that sometimes you can't when you are on your own. You can talk with an equal, your colleague. But when you go in for interviews—let us say that you get the job. When you go in—well, in both cases, whether you get it or you don't get it. When you're interviewed, they only look at the male person of the joint venture, even if you do get the job. They feel that, having given it to a joint venture of man and a woman that the man will be in charge of the job. So all the questions—most of the questions, the vast majority—are addressed to the male. I do try to answer some of these myself. Sometimes, if it's a really good person that I'm with—and I usually don't try to do a joint venture with a male chauvinist. [laughter] But all men are

male chauvinists in one degree or another. They can't help themselves. Most questions are directed to—most eyes are upon the male rather than upon the female. It's hard for the males to look at the females and treat them as an equal in this situation. [pause]

LASKEY:

Thank you.

WILSON:

That's enough.

LASKEY:

Okay.

WILSON:

It is getting very late.

LASKEY:

This is the end of the interview.

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