

A TEI Project

Interview of Burt Wilson

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1. Transcript

1.1. Session 1 (December 5, 2005)

COLLINGS

So, OK. And I'll just ID the tape here. Jane Collings interviewing Burt Wilson at the UCLA Oral History Program office. December 5th, 2005.

WILSON

Oh, wait a minute.

COLLINGS

OK. I'll pause.

WILSON

That's protected. There.

COLLINGS

Are you OK now?

WILSON

OK. All right. Go ahead.

COLLINGS

OK. I'm -- I -- you -- OK. All right. So good morning, Burt.

WILSON

Good morning.

COLLINGS

Glad you could find us OK.

WILSON

Thank you very much.

COLLINGS

Why don't you start off by telling us a little bit about where and when you were born?

WILSON

I was born January 24th, 1933, in Stockton, California. I moved to Sacramento when I was three. Went all through Sacramento schools, including two years to Sacramento Junior College, now City College, where I got an A.A. degree. And then in my last semester, I was Men's vice president, and we went down to southern California my first trip for a student government conference. And the dean was from USC, and he took me through the campus, and there was Channel 28 right on the campus at that time. And I came back, and I tore up my admission to College of the Pacific [now University of the Pacific], where I was going to study radio, and wrote down to USC and got my acceptance three days before the semester started. Drove down in my '38 Chevy, and up to the Student Union; said, "I need a room."

So I spent two years at USC, and graduated with an A.B. degree in Telecommunications, as they called it then, and the first class to receive a degree in basically television production. I then went back to Sacramento, started a jazz band -- the first jazz band to play in a Shakey's Pizza Parlor -- I played trombone and piano -- and -- which was a landmark thing. I then went in the Army, and ended up in Fort Carson, Colorado, where I worked for Army P. I. O. [Public Information Office] -- as a radio announcer. And I was shipped to Germany, and I was eventually switched over to Special Service and ordered by the commanding general to produce Kiss Me, Kate for his going-away party (laughter) and to tour it throughout Europe to the troops.

I came home; I married a German girl in Germany. I speak fluent German, so it's --

COLLINGS

Before you went over?

WILSON

No. I took -- I -- German was my language all through college, however. And I had to ask for her hand in German. (laughter) And we got married. I got out in 1958, December; came back to Sacramento. And within a few months, I was hired as a copywriter at KXOA Radio. Three months later, I was hired as a producer at KCRA Television. And six months after that, another fellow and I opened up our own advertising agency in Sacramento, backed by two people. We were all of 26 years old and in business for ourselves. (laughter)

The advertising agency got to be a rat race, and I quit it in 1965 and wanted to change my life, because I'd had a mild heart attack at the age of 30 because I was doing everything myself. And I moved down here to Venice, walked my dog on a beach for a couple of months, and played piano at [Venice] Shakey's Pizza Parlor in Santa Monica. Then I decided to go back into the advertising business, but on my terms, and I hooked up with a local agency: Boylhart Lovett and Dean. I brought the Shakey's account into them. They -- then they

hired a whole bunch of guys that -- the business is very competitive, and it was dog eat dog, and I didn't like that part of it, and especially with the other guys they hired, which they thought they were creative. I thought they were goons. So I went out and got a better job, at \$5,000 more a year, at Needham Harper and Steers, a worldwide agency, as a group creative director. So I went from the account side to the creative side, because I'd always done my own creative. And I did a campaign -- a great campaign for Wynn Oil Company for their gasoline additive called Spitfire -- it was "give your car a kick in the gas." And the creative director became jealous of me. (laughter) And we eventually had it out. He put his mistress in charge of the production of my unit, and told her to control me. So I went to the boss and I told him what happened; he says, "Well, Burt, you leave me no recourse but to fire you." So I got fired.

COLLINGS

You walked right into that one. (laughter)

COLLINGS

(laughter) Probably the best thing that ever happened to me. I then went to work later for a movie guy, an old movie guy, Mort Goodman, at the Goodman Organization, and through that I became involved in writing campaigns for American International Pictures. And I soon quit the Goodman Organization and went freelance, and I wrote and produced broadcast radio and television campaigns for American International Pictures all during their exploitation years, you know? Dr. Phibes Rises Again, Frogs: Today the Pond, Tomorrow the World -- all of that stuff.

COLLINGS

So what were you planning to be when you grew up? You know, when you were in your early days (inaudible)?

WILSON

Believe it or not, the first thing I ever wanted to be was a forest ranger. My father wanted me to be a structural engineer.

COLLINGS

Is that what he was?

WILSON

But I had always demonstrated a talent for advertising and promotion in one -- and so it was -- it became a natural thing for me to get into that.

COLLINGS

So you were sort of headed in this direction even during your early --

WILSON

Yes.

COLLINGS

-- school years, and...? Yeah.

WILSON

Yes. The most important thing as far as I'm concerned that happened to me: I was in the Army with a guy by the name of John Erwin, who was an actor whose claim to fame is he was the voice of the Morris the Cat commercials. And we were very good friends, and I hooked up with him when I moved down here. I was divorced by then. And John would never go out with me on Thursday nights. I said, "Why not, John?" He said, "Well, you wouldn't be interested."

So it turned out he was going to a meeting of a metaphysical teaching called Agni Yoga. A-G-N-I is the Sanskrit word for fire. I said, "I'm into that!"
(laughter)

COLLINGS

What year was this?

WILSON

This was 1966. So in 1966, I met my guru, Ralph Houston, when he came out to Los Angeles in October. (coughs) And while we were meditating -- this is -- this gets a little far out, so...

COLLINGS

That's OK.

WILSON

While we were meditating, I heard him say in my consciousness, "Go to Watts." And so I went up to him after the meditation, and I said, "Did you send me a message in meditation." He said, "Yeeeeees," like he would do. "Was it 'go to Watts'?" I said? "Yeeeeees." "Well, what did you mean?" He says, "Well, there's some people down there who need help, and maybe you can help out." And that's all the direction I got.

So what it is I did: I ended up buying a lot of paint and some ladders -- and I had a convertible -- and I went to Watts, and I hooked up with the Westminster Neighborhood Association there. And I said, "Look, I've got all this paint -- can you tell me somebody -- a lady who needs her house painted, and I'll go paint it?" They said, "Fine." So I went over and painted a house, and the first thing I noticed was I had -- well, I was the only white guy down there, so (laughter) that was an attraction in and -- but all the kids came.

So the next week that I went down on a weekend, I bought a lot of small brushes for the kids. And pretty soon, I had the kids on a whole block painting a house, you see, with me. And they were having fun. They didn't think it was work, you know? And I --

COLLINGS

Tom Sawyer. (laughter)

WILSON

-- I saw a real value in that. So --

COLLINGS

Now, was -- oh, I'm sorry.

WILSON

Go ahead.

COLLINGS

Was this your first sort of social project? Because it sounds like you had been doing advertising --

WILSON

Well, my first social --

COLLINGS

-- before this.

WILSON

-- project was in Sacramento, which was kind of funny because the Sacramento Bee newspaper, at that time run by the matriarch of the McClatchy family, Eleanor [McClatchy], they were -- they wanted to revitalize First and Second Street, Front Street and Second Street in Sacramento and make something out of it. And the cry became, "Where are the bums going to go?" You know, they're going to drive the poor people out of that section -- where were they going to go? And were they going to tear down historic buildings? So as it turned out, I knew -- because I'm an old-time Sacramentan -- that the McClatchy newspaper company tore down the old Buffalo Brewery, which was a landmark, to build their new newspaper plant. So we started a campaign: "Restore the Buffalo Brewery." (laughter) And it became quite a local attraction. We had sweatshirts and t-shirts, and badges and bumper stickers...

COLLINGS

Now, how old were you at this time?

WILSON

I was twenty -- let's see. I was probably about 29.

COLLINGS

OK. So this was your first foray --

WILSON

This was my first --

COLLINGS

-- into the...?

WILSON

-- foray into that. But where I really got involved was in Watts. And I came in contact with a guy by the name of Ned Coll. He later ran for President. (laughter) He was the one that had his -- who -- up in the campaign up in New Hampshire put a rat on a table and said, "This is what poor people have to deal with." Ned -- well, let me say first of all, the death of President Kennedy changed my life. It really changed my life. I got to thinking in terms other than

myself, other than my own self-interest. And he's the one who did it, because that was, you know, "Ask not what your country can do" --

COLLINGS

So you had --

WILSON

-- "for you, but" --

COLLINGS

-- you had been interested in him before then? Yeah?

WILSON

No! No, not that much. But with his death, it all of a sudden penetrated into me because that was all that was on television at that time.

And so I became the West Coast chapter of the Revitalization Corps, which Robert [F.] Kennedy was really interested in. And I stayed in Watts for six years, every weekend except Christmas and Easter. I was in Watts Saturday and Sunday, and sometimes Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. And since I was working freelance, I could do that. And the people -- so I was on the board of 11 different black organizations, including the National Association of Negro Women.

COLLINGS

That's an unusual placement. (laughter)

WILSON

Yeah, it is. And they told me later, they said, "Well, we watched you closely to see what you were going to do, and we gave you six months, and you -- it turned out OK because you weren't down there taking money." See, I never -- this was a completely volunteer organization. At the time, I had a program -- a public service program -- on KLAC called "What You Can Do for Your Country." And I produced interviews with people in Watts and put them on the air. And this is why I was invited to high schools and colleges all over southern California to talk about the work, and we ran thousands of people through the program -- the first time they'd ever been in the ghetto; the first time they'd ever been to Watts. And I thought that was doing a lot of good.

But you see, at the time -- and this is one of the reasons that really made me go there also -- the idea to save Watts was to throw money at it. And what that meant was they took people, and they just recycled them through training programs in which they earned \$4 an hour, or something like that. And that was called "doing something for the poor people of Watts." Well, it was nothing -- absolutely nothing.

I was involved with Budd Schulberg and his brother Bob, who is now deceased, too, in the Watts Writers Workshop. And I had a great deal -- I had a -- I was well known throughout the community at the time, and we had hundred -- including Darryl Strawberry, the baseball star, was one of our charges. And

near the end, I got involved -- one of the people in Watts -- you see, the city had a plan to build townhouses in the area around 103rd Street, which --

COLLINGS

And this was all after the riots?

WILSON

--- was all ravaged, yes, after the riots. And so they were busy condemning land and buying up people's land, and things like that. And their plan was to put up a ten-foot wall around this community, with a fire exit and an entrance. Now, we all knew -- at least I knew at that time -- that this was an old police plan in which you could control a maximum amount of people with a minimum amount of effort. And so I started a campaign called "No Walls in Watts." And Art Kunkin, who was the editor of the Free Press at that time, gave me a front page story and picture, and printed 1,000 extra copies, and let me distribute them around the community.

Now, the community was all on my side, but Mayor Yorty and City Hall was not. And (coughs) I was offered two bribes. The first thing they asked me was, "Well, Mr. Wilson, we're going to give you a contract to fill sandbags for \$10,000." And I said --

COLLINGS

But you weren't even in the contracting business.

WILSON

No, no, no. But this is the way the city pays people off, you see. So I get ten -- supposedly, I get \$10,000; I hire the kids at \$1 an hour to fill the sandbags, complete the contract, and I keep \$9,000. That's the thing. And I said no. (laughter) "No," I said, "I'm not your boy."

So then they called me in to a guy named Washington, who was later, I believe, indicted in a kickback scandal. He was one of the real skimmers of the Yorty administration. And he sat me down in front of his desk and said, "Burt, what do you want? How much do you want, and what do you want?" And I said, "I want the people of Watts to have better housing, single-family houses on plots of land with air between the houses. No townhouse, no ten-foot wall."

So the people asked me to be on the Watts Community Development Advisory Committee. So one of my friends whom I'm staying with now, Garth Sheriff, was an architect. And what we did, which was the first time this was ever done in the history of a community redevelopment project: we drew up our own plan according to what the people want. And I'll never forget going down to the City Council, to Calvin Hamilton, who was the socialite of whatever they call it in charge of building in Los Angeles -- some kind of manager. And we're sitting there, and there's a lot of people in -- black people in the audience, and we're talking about the project and what we want. And all of a sudden, he plays the race card. He says, "Well, all I see out here are two white guys and a plan."

And a [black] minister stood up in the audience. He stood up and he said, "Mr. Hamilton, these gentlemen speak for us." (laughter) And you should've seen his face! I mean, he was -- that was one of my greatest experiences.

Well, there were a lot of interests in this because there was a lot of money involved here. Plus raising the city tax base --

COLLINGS

A lot of contracting money?

WILSON

Yes. Contracting money and power. And power. And least of all, raising the tax base by getting more density per lot than before. But that wasn't what the people wanted. As an example, they had a manufactured house manufacturer come down and build a model home on 103rd Street. They had lights on it all night; they had a 24-hour guard. It was furnished inside and everything, beautiful chips around the -- redwood chips around the lot and everything. It disappeared overnight. (laughter) The guard said, "I didn't see anything!" They -- see, if the people of Watts didn't like something, that's the way they let people know that people were coming down there to exploit them, you see? And since I wasn't taking any money, and government money, and we were a non-funded volunteer organization, I was welcome. I wasn't trying to rip them off.

COLLINGS

Yeah. So how did this all -- oh, I'm sorry. Go ahead.

WILSON

Go ahead.

Well, that was an indication of how they felt about housing, you see. And I was trying to articulate that for them in the meetings. So in the end, they sent a guy to beat me up in the meetings -- his name was Lewis Green -- who eventually tried to run for City Council, and he was Yorty's man [Lewis Green]. He was an inch taller than I was, and I was coming out of the bathroom at night, and he had the Free Press in his hand, and he punched me in the chest and he said, "We don't like what you're doing here." And I looked at him and I said, "Well, I don't need this." So I went and sat down back in the meeting. But he persists and comes up to me, and grabs my shirt and pulls me up, and he's got his fist like this. And my first reaction was, "Hey, this is my best suit!" (laughter) You know?

And then he starts dragging me across the room, and I'm thinking, "Should I hit him? I wonder what it feels like. I've never hit anybody in my life." And by -- see, the plan was to get me to hit him first. I was to throw the first blow, and then I would be the aggressor and so forth. But it took several seconds -- maybe 15 seconds -- and I didn't throw a punch, and so people separated us. Then I had him for assault. And I gave everybody a declaration of what they had seen

there. There were 12 people. And I said to myself, if I get six people to back me up on this, I will go ahead and bring charges against him. I got three. I got three.

So I quit, because you see, that committee, the mayor had his own people on there, the police had their own people on there... I mean, that opened my eyes to what politics and city politics is really all about, and the fact that you could get hurt --

COLLINGS

Well, yeah. I think you are --

WILSON

-- if you are --

COLLINGS

-- probably get -- starting to be --

WILSON

"You are" --

COLLINGS

a real danger.

WILSON

-- "interfering with the natural form of nature, Mr. Wilson!" (laughter) And...

COLLINGS

So this all started with just driving down on weekends while you were working for the ad -- one of the ad agencies?

WILSON

Yes, yes.

COLLINGS

Which one were you at at the time?

WILSON

Boylhart Lovett and Dean. Interestingly enough, I was nominated for Advertising Man of the Year for this work, but I lost to [H. R.] Bob Haldeman, (laughter) who they don't even recognize anymore because he's a convicted felon! (laughter)

COLLINGS

(laughter) That's pretty ironic.

WILSON

It is. But I know -- you see, I was to meet Robert [F.] Kennedy on June 9th, and he was killed on June 6th, which was probably one of the saddest days of my life because I know he was very interested in our work, and I know I would have gone to Washington with him. Because he put out a proclamation once that this was an outstanding example of individual and community volunteer involvement. And it was. It was all volunteer, and the people who came down there came down there of their own accord. I lost a whole new -- I lost a set of

old friends who were all afraid that I was going to ask them to join me -- and I never did; I never asked anybody -- and developed a whole new other set of friends, who were interested in social issues and doing something about it. So...

COLLINGS

Right. So how did this all -- OK, you started going down there on weekends, and then you started meeting -- you started going down there on weekends, down to Watts, and you started meeting some people in the neighborhood. And then -- but how did that transition from just helping out people by painting houses into a whole organization? I mean, how -- what was the -- what were the steps in there?

WILSON

Well, you see -- and we will get to this later with CAUSE -- radio was my organizing tool. It was my electronic town hall. And people, young people who listened to the program, invited me to speak. I told them that what they were doing, they always liked it because there was no money involved, you see? And so they came down to join me. Now, out of (coughs) probably about every 50 people -- and there were thousands who came down to work a weekend in the ghetto -- one would stay. One would really understand what was going on there in the depth of the whole thing, and stay.

COLLINGS

And people were originally hearing about it through your radio program?

WILSON

That's correct. Or through -- the newspaper wrote some articles about it, and you know, I was a darling of the advertising -- (laughter) you know, I'll tell you a funny thing. The advertising agencies, the Western States Advertising Association, which nominated for -- me for Ad Man of the Year, decided they were going to give me \$500. It was the hardest \$500 ever, because they insisted that I incorporate -- and they have a person on the board -- and all this for a lousy \$500

COLLINGS

Yeah. This was \$500 toward the project?

WILSON

Yes, yes. And to make sure I didn't cheat or spend it on something, I think -- well, that was -- that eventually killed the program. Well, no -- what eventually killed the program was the people not supporting me on the Advisory Committee. But years later -- you see, there was a guy from the Western States Advertising Agency which led the effort to give me \$500. Years later, I read his resume, and he put on there, "Spearheaded a program in Watts to help..." (laughter) He was, you know, undercutting everything and grabbing everything for himself. That's --

COLLINGS

Now, I'm sorry; you may have --

WILSON

-- advertising.

COLLINGS

-- said this, but what was the name of the radio program at the time?

WILSON

"What You Can Do for Your Country." I won a Major Armstrong Award from Columbia University as the Best FM Public Service Program in the United States.

COLLINGS

And you were broadcasting from USC [University of Southern California] at this point? The --

WILSON

No, no.

WILSON

-- radio station at...?

WILSON

I was broadcasting from KLAC, which was a talk radio station at the time. It had Mort Sahl, Joe Pine...a lot of other guys. Jack Thayer was the head of KLAC, the general manager, and he and I became very good friends later when he went through a bad time, and evidently -- and eventually ended up in New York City as the head of NBC [National Broadcasting Company] Radio. And I had later moved to New York City, so we got together.

But he deserves credit: the -- my salesman, Bill Powell, asked him about it, and he said, "Well, I've got a program on an FM station, KMET. I could give you an hour between eight and nine in the morning on Sundays." And I said, "I'll take it." You know, I didn't care what it was. But FM was just getting popular. It was an underground music station then, and The Beemer was the disk jockey on KMET FM. And I had public service announcements all over the station day and night, because they had no commercials advertising my program. So what a -- an aid. What a fantastic aid, you see. And here am I, a trained radio/television guy, (laughter) and able to understand how to use the medium. I later took an idea to George Green, who was the sales manager of KABC, the biggest talk radio outfit in time, and George looks at it and says, "Nobody's going to do this! Nobody's going to do that!" You know? And he just couldn't see past the commercial possibilities of radio, of really getting involved in public service through motivating people to do something in their own communities. That was the whole idea. And it worked.

COLLINGS

Now, just to backtrack a little bit, did your parents have any kind of public service interests?

WILSON

Absolutely not. My father -- my mother [Mabel Ethyl Wilson] was institutionalized when I was 12. She was a schizophrenic, unfortunately. I mean, today, she would probably, you know, take a pill, and because it was a gene thing, I think the whole -- that -- her whole side of the family had problems. And my sister [Gail June Wilson] was depressed most of her life, too, so it was a gene thing that didn't affect the males. And my father [Wilburt William Wilson] was completely against -- well, he was never for what I was doing. He thought I was interfering and should be making money, and all of this stuff. (laughter)

So it -- I got no support. But I mean, I was used to not having support from my family anyway. And in effect, by 1965, I had a much better family, which were the people who were working for me and working with me in Watts. See, the whole thing -- we said in the community, "We're here to work WITH people rather than FOR people." And they understood that. And they fed us; they would make chicken for us when we were down there, you know? And I said, "Look, we're not here to paint your house -- we're here to help YOU paint your house." You see? And then we attracted all the kids. And then on weekends, we'd take the kids on trips around the -- oh, we went to -- took them to see a submarine, we took them fishing, we took them to Mt. Wilson -- Sunday was the field trip day. And we got all of these cars from all of our members, and we'd load the kids in, and the mothers were so glad to see them go, you know? (laughter) And we never had any accidents or anything like that, thank god, but -- we came close, but... I mean, that was really a lot of fun. That was a lot of fun.

And people always asked me, "Well, what good did you do, Burt?" I said, "I don't know." You don't do it for measurable results, you know? Sooner or later -- and this is what happened to me -- you do it because you have a deeper understanding of life. And like when my guru said to me, he said, "You have some abilities which you can use there." And President Kennedy said, "Those to whom much has been given, much is to be expected." And that meant something to me, you see? So I -- and having gone through the money phase -- I was making \$36,000 a year in 1963, you know? That's like, what? \$250-300,000 today, you know? I had more money than I knew what to do with, and I wasn't happy. (laughter) So...

COLLINGS

And did -- were you affected at all by the -- what was going on in the rest of the country? The Civil Rights movement and...?

WILSON

Well, I was --

COLLINGS

Was this kind of -- or was this more of a personal mission?

WILSON

The Civil Rights movement was -- I believed I was doing my part with the Watts thing, because because of that -- you see, people who don't want to get personally involved love to have people talk about it to their club, (laughter) you know? And you may reach one person, two -- I went around to schools, and in those days, in the Sixties, the late Sixties, I was also on the steering committee of the antiwar movement here in L.A. at the time at USC, because I got involved -- or the Kennedy Action Corps at USC became one of my people who came to be involved with -- and later, I had a talk show on KUSC, which helped a lot, too. But I was also in the antiwar movement, and everybody on the steering committee got investigated by the IRS the next year. (laughter) Every -

COLLINGS

(laughter) What a coincidence!

WILSON

-- one of us. Every one of us. But you know, I was in my 30s by that time, and they were all 17 and 18, but they understood -- kids at that time understood -- they all had a social -- not all of them, but many of them, more than usual, had a social consciousness. And they understand -- they understood, and by the fact that I had done something and was doing something, I became an example for them. And I was aware of that responsibility, too. But I was also aware that you can not ask people to do anything. You can not even subtly coerce by appealing to their sense of this and that and the other thing. It has to be a free will decision; otherwise, it's no good.

COLLINGS

OK. If you -- sorry, I hate to sort of keep dragging you back, but I just wanted to kind of --

WILSON

Sure.

COLLINGS

-- establish a few... What were the -- sort of the date when you began to get into yoga and this kind of spiritual exploration?

WILSON

OK.

COLLINGS

And -- I'm sorry, but what -- to ask you, but when did you do your first broadcast, and your first radio broadcast, and your first TV broadcasting?

WILSON

Well --

COLLINGS

Those are two separate questions.

WILSON

OK. Well, the TV comes later. Well, actually, TV, when I was in Sacramento at my ad agency, I wrote and produced and was the talent in all of my -- most of my radio and television commercials. So I was on television doing commercials -- funny commercials and straight commercials.

COLLINGS

And what year -- what -- when -- what year did you start --

COLLINGS

This was --

COLLINGS

-- doing that?

WILSON

-- '60-65. '60-65. I did the first remote television commercial in Sacramento. I used to dress up in pantaloons and sweater with the big "W," and I was "Daring Dick Waring," the car dealer's mascot, on Saturday mornings. And all of that got old pretty fast. I also did the news on the radio when I first went to work for KXOA, which was my first job.

COLLINGS

And so the first radio job was at -- what year was that?

WILSON

The first -- my first radio job was KLAC in 1968. '68.

COLLINGS

OK. I'm just trying to -- just wondering when the media really got going here. Right. And then earlier than that, you had begun to get into yoga and some other kinds of spiritual...?

WILSON

I moved to Los Angeles in 1965. In 1966, I got into yoga. Now, this was not a "funny position" type yoga -- it's metaphysical philosophy is what it is. And I had an epiphany when I was ten years old. I was out in the streets in Sacramento on a hot night playing hide and go seek, and I stretched out on a lawn after a particularly strenuous game, and I looked up in the sky. And I had seen stars before, but I connected with a star at that time -- at least, it seems to me that it... And I received a feeling about that which I couldn't put into words until a few years later, when I was able to articulate it. And it said that -- basically, it's that there's more going on than meets the eye, and it is all knowable. And ever since then, I wanted to know it. (laughter)

COLLINGS

Yeah. So let's know it!

WILSON

And that's what this book is all about, you see. This is an alternative order of creation.

COLLINGS

Well, I'm looking forward to taking a look at it. So...

COLLINGS

You know, while we're on the subject of you being ten, I understand that you're going to be doing some -- you're participating in a documentary about ten-year olds' remembrances of World War II?

WILSON

Yes. Ken Burns' Florentine Films is finishing up a documentary now called The War, and it's seen through the eyes of ten-year olds in the Forties -- you know, approximately; give or take a few years -- and in five small towns in the United States, and Sacramento was one of the towns. And somehow they got hold of me. And so that's going to be out next year.

COLLINGS

Yeah. And so what were your memories of World War II?

WILSON

Well, my memories was -- the war never touched us, you know? It's like now and the Iraq war, you don't see the body bags like you did in the Vietnam War, you know? And in those days, the war was even hidden more from you, and the only way you had any contact with -- certainly not in sleep cowntown Sacramento in those years -- was when a neighbor got killed, or -- you know, and we thought rationing was fun, and going around collecting aluminum and cardboard... The thing that -- one of the things they're going to use is I had an English refugee friend, Royd Buchanan, and he came over to my house one day. In those days, we called people out from the street. "Burt, Burt!" "Hi, Royd." He says, "You know what a dirty German sub did?" And I said, "No, what?" And he says, "It killed my father." And looking back, I can remember -- I said I didn't know what to do about that. I didn't know how to react, except say, "I'm sorry, you know?"

And -- but other than that, we were actually shielded from the war.

Interestingly enough, though, my mother was an America First [member], and she used to take me to meetings where they -- and I loved their song: "You can defend America; nobody will if you won't." (laughter) And Lindbergh, who was a later hero of mine, he was a big leader of that movement.

My mother, I -- you know, I have to say my mother did instill with me -- before she went off -- a social consciousness. I really have to say that now, because she was like a defender of lost causes. And she had this side to her that felt people's misery, you know? And she also played the piano by ear, and I play the piano by ear. And so I think that -- for instance, the first time I used the "N" word, she said -- she sat me down; she said, "Now, Burt, I want you to -- I don't

want you to ever -- hear you use -- and this is why." And so forth and so on.
And I understood it, you know? And I never did it again. (laughter)

COLLINGS

OK. So just -- we've got you down in -- we've got the assassination of Kennedy, which struck you quite a bit in '63. And you had had your heart attack prior to that?

WILSON

Heart attack was in 1963.

COLLINGS

Oh, it was the same...?

WILSON

Yeah. Yeah.

COLLINGS

And then you come down to Los Angeles, and you get involved in the philosophical exploration?

WILSON

Yes.

COLLINGS

OK. Meditation?

WILSON

And that led to my participation in Watts and other things. Then in 1970, because of my radio program, the Tribal Council of the Taos Pueblo Indians contacted me and asked me for help. And who knows why they call me? Although I know I was an Indian in a past -- a southwest Indian in a past life. But -- and interestingly enough, my guru had healed their chief years and years -- it's 20 or 30 years later. Coughed up cancer. And... So anyway, they ask me to help them, because the governor, the lieutenant war chief, and the secretary were coming into Los Angeles, and this was the first time in 5,000 years that the Pueblo leadership had ever left the pueblo.

COLLINGS

Really?

WILSON

Yes. In 5,000 years. And the reason they were is because the government wanted to confiscate their Blue Lake lands, which was the Indian church. This is where they sent the braves out for a year for their year of initiation and everything to live on their own off the land and so forth. And the government wanted to confiscate that land and put up a sawmill and a ski run. And of course, they thought it would be blasphemy. So what I did is I did -- I managed -- I created and managed a PR tour for them here in southern California. All over: a big Los Angeles Times story, television, you know? I mean, it was quite an event.

COLLINGS

How did you get the television time?

WILSON

I'm good at getting that.

COLLINGS

Well, let's hear about that.

WILSON

(laughter) Well, I know how to phrase a story that appeals to a producer's ear as soon as he or she hears it. And I can couch it in terms in which they immediately see visuals and see a story here, and a conflict. So that's really the key to that.

COLLINGS

Yeah. And you must've known people to contact as well. You had a lot of good

--

WILSON

Not -- no, I wasn't into that yet. Later I did, yes. Later, I had a whole book. And so we did that. And at the end of the tour -- this was one of -- I -- this was completely unexpected -- the secretary of the council talked to me for about 20 minutes, and praised my efforts in ways that were so simple and beautiful and unique, I was overcome. I'm still overcome thinking about it. And they -- then they presented me with a ceremonial blanket, and they said, "Your name will be spoken in kivas all over the West." (laughter) Now, that was totally unexpected.

Now, the big problem was, is that the secretary took the wrong route to get there -- Paul Bernal, the secretary, who had once boasted that he was going to die the richest Indian in America. Well, he should've been alive today! You see, if the Pueblo had gone through George McGovern and the Indian Affairs Committee, they would have gotten the title to those lands. But that was too long a process, Bernal thought. So he went through [President Richard M.] Nixon, and they got a 99-year lease on the land. Now, I -- to me, that was a betrayal of the Pueblo. But they all went for it. See, when the Indians go down in their kiva to vote on something, they don't come out until everyone is agreed on the -- picture that at City Hall.

COLLINGS

Yeah, really.

WILSON

And you see, at the time, the southwest artist Emil Bisttram, who started the Taos Art School, was a friend of mine, because he was a disciple of my guru also. And I would stay with him in Taos. He's a world-famous artist, and I have some of his paintings. And I was introduced to Trinidad, who was a dancer who

my guru healed his heel so he could dance again. And they were all very praiseworthy of my teacher there, and I got to go back for victory day. Now, this is kind of a long-about story, but my -- there is a peace banner that was approved by the United States in 1935. It's called the Roerich Banner of Peace. Nicholas Roerich, who was my guru's guru, introduced it to Henry Wallace, who introduced it to Roosevelt, and it was passed on April 16th, 1935, and signed by Roosevelt and all 21 South American countries. Mexico still flies it, Sweden flies it, India flies it. There are stamps from all over the world that -- it was called "the Red Cross of Culture" because it was designed to protect museums, and scientific missions, and all cultural institutions in times of war. Of course, with the advent of the atomic bomb, you couldn't be selective, so it died. But Roosevelt himself said the underlying premise of this text is deeper than the text itself. And there is a -- there is this thing of recognizing other civilizations' contributions to culture, and through that recognition become more culturally sensitive to another country. Because every country has made contributions.

So I had one of these banners, you see. And I went to the victory day celebration in 1970, and of course Nixon gave them a cane, which was a symbol of authority of their pueblo, because they had a cane from Abraham Lincoln, and it was hanging up on a wall, and I hated to see that. But when I got there, they had this bandstand like, and Nixon and [Vice President Spiro T.] Agnew's picture were on there. And they were honoring Kim Agnew, who was there with Leonard Garment, an advisor to Nixon, for the presentation, giving her a headdress and everything. And when the governor saw me arrive, he went down to the kiva and got this banner, and came out and just threw it over the bandstand -- half of it over Nixon's face, and I thought, (laughter) "Success!" But that was that.

COLLINGS

Yeah. Would you like to take a break?

WILSON

No, I'm fine. I'm fine. If you're fine.

COLLINGS

No, I'm fine, too. Well, now, the --

WILSON

I'm up to 1970 now.

COLLINGS

Yeah. But didn't you skip over your involvement in the West Coast Vietnam Moratorium Day?

WILSON

Oh, OK. OK.

Through the Kennedy Action Corps and through the worldwide movement and everything, I got involved in the antiwar movement. And I became a member of the steering committee, which put on the big program at USC in 1969. Dr. [Ralph] Abernathy came out to speak, and he gave a light-AM speech and everything. And I was an advisor to that movement for strategy and tactics, and that's about what it comes down to. We also did the march down Wilshire Boulevard in 1969 or '70, in which people carried the banner. (laughter) The Banner of Peace.

COLLINGS

The banner --

WILSON

The Roerich Banner. The Roerich Banner of Peace and Culture. So...

COLLINGS

So how did you get involved in that movement? Were there -- I mean, you joined a committee, or what were the --

WILSON

No, I was --

COLLINGS

-- sort of the steps in that?

WILSON

-- invited by the students to join because of my role in Watts. And I was invited by the students to join.

COLLINGS

The USC students?

WILSON

Yeah, the USC students. I guess they liked the fact that I was doing -- I was an adult, and I was doing something --

COLLINGS

You were over 30, but you could be trusted.

WILSON

Yeah, exactly. Yeah. And the Daily Trojan put out a booklet which had all -- you know, a lot of people came down, and they took pictures and wrote a story about it and everything, and about USC's involvement in Civil Rights. And that was very nice. So I guess I became a person the people saw as real in their eyes. You see, in the eyes of my peers, I wasn't too real! (laughter) But I didn't care.

COLLINGS

Your peers being who at this point?

WILSON

People in the advertising business. Yeah. Because they're all focused on money, you know? Except the creative people. They have -- they -- creative people always have a different slant on things -- mostly.

COLLINGS

You were still in advertising at this point?

WILSON

I was still in advertising. And it was around then, too, that I started in what turned out to be a long history of doing editorial rebuttals on the local stations. I did several. So many. Then in 1972, [George] McGovern was running against Nixon, and I became the principal speaker of the McGovern campaign out of southern California. And because I was working freelance, I could go to colleges. Oh, I had such a -- I could go anywhere. There's Beverly Hills -- Jack Palance's wife [Virginia Palance] organized a big thing, you know? (laughter) And I got over, and I worked up a fiery speech against Nixon, and -- because we all hated Nixon. And when he finally resigned, I felt as if a friend had...(laughter) left me, you know? Because I was so involved with that for so long.

COLLINGS

So you were speaking at campaign rallies --

WILSON

I was --

COLLINGS

-- for McGovern?

WILSON

Yes, but I also became a spokesman for the antiwar movement. I would go around and debate Marines on campus against the war. So I was doing both of these things, but they were both tightly entwined, because everybody who was against the war was against Nixon. All the military who was for the war was for Nixon. So it became pretty testy, you know, and people wanted to get -- some people wanted to get violent. You see, the thing is -- and this especially happened at UCLA: in the antiwar movement, there were agent provocateurs placed there by the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] who got people to do violent things so they could be arrested and look bad, you know? I mean, the things you learn. I mean, how can...

COLLINGS

So how did you learn about that?

WILSON

Well, we lived it. We lived it. We uncovered them. You see, this comes later, but I was one of 108 people in 1984 -- 108 activists in Los Angeles -- who sued Darryl Gates and the Los Angeles Police Department for illegal surveillance -- and won. We won \$1.3 million, and my share was \$7,500. And \$2,500 of that

came from an FBI -- a local police television crew filming us when we did -- had -- did our CAUSE [Campaign Against Utility Service Exploitation] stuff. And none of us had ever been arrested; none of us was -- you know, we were all clean. (laughter) And we were doing our -- what we consider our patriotic duty. And you read -- when people write books and when people give speeches, especially about Constitutional issues, they say, "So and such has a chilling effect," you know? And I never knew what that meant until I read my own file. And it sends chills up and down your spine to think you're trying to be a good citizen, and the police is keeping files on you. I mean...

But also a that time, you see, I was the head of the Democratic Socialists of America in Los Angeles. But that's much later. I'm getting ahead of myself.

And --

COLLINGS

OK. All right. No, don't get ahead of yourself.

WILSON

-- that was a no-no, too.

So -- the government. We lost, but several of us have stayed together all of these years. In fact, we got together a basketball team. And when I was in high school -- I didn't play sports in college, but in high school, I -- football, basketball, and track. So we got together a basketball team, and played in the city league, and that was a lot of fun.

COLLINGS

Yeah, that does sound fun.

WILSON

So after the McGovern campaign, a woman who had worked with me in Watts, Claire Pershing, she called me up one day, and she says, "Burt, I'm down in Indio, and I'm working out of the UFW office here, and we're having problems with Teamsters beating up farm workers in the field. Would you come down and help?" I said sure. So this was before the grape strike of 1973. So again, I'm working freelance, and at this time, actually, I was doing the advertising for Self-Realization Fellowship. Because they were on my radio show once at KMET, and they found out I was in the advertising business, and they said, "You're the only one that we of -- we know who knows what we do who's in the advertising business. (laughter) I said, "I'll be glad to help you." So I did their advertising for seven years.

So I went down to Indio -- Coachella, actually, Coachella -- and I worked there from Thursday through Sunday. And when you first get down there -- I didn't know this at the time, but they put you to a test, in which they run you all day without lunch to see if you're going to complain or -- you know? And --

COLLINGS

That's interesting.

WILSON

Yeah, it is. That's how they test people to see their commitment.

COLLINGS

How do they know if they had, you know, like a big breakfast? (laughter)

WILSON

(laughter) I didn't know that, either, but I mean... You know, I think I began to realize what was happening later, when he refused a request for lunch and everything, you know? And it -- but I did get to visit farm workers out in the field, especially the Filipinos, which is a wonderful culture. I mean, there were no women there, but I mean, they had these huge woks where they did their squid, they ate communally, they lived communally. They had chickens outside they used for cockfights because that's part of the culture, and every day they went out and twisted vines around wires.

And so anyway, the problem was that the Teamsters were beating up farm workers in the field. So the first thing I did was organize a news conference, and I got all the media from Palm Springs and everything to show up. And there were --

COLLINGS

How did you get them to all show up?

WILSON

I called them up. Because farm workers were news then. The farm workers/Teamster battle was news. And I called them up. And we did a news conference, and what my goal was -- and it worked really well -- was to position the Teamsters as the bad guys, the farm workers as the good guys in a way that if the Teamsters tried anything from then on, they would further increase their position as the bad guys.

COLLINGS

So how did you achieve that positioning?

WILSON

By articulating the conflict. And you see, farm works are simple people with great hearts. And you just listen to them talk simply, without any guile, and without any trying to get something or do something, and you see there's no defense for that. (laughter) So, and they're convincing, as they should be. So we were able to do that to project that onto the media. And it worked, and it worked well.

WILSON

In the meantime, I was living in a trailer which was cockroach infected; you'd get up at 1 o'clock, and the floor was --

COLLINGS

Oh, god!

WILSON

-- covered with cockroaches.

COLLINGS

I hate that.

WILSON

Oh, it was terrible. And everybody was proud of the fact that they were earning \$5 a week. And I went to Ray Huerta's house many times. His sister was Dolores Huerta, César's [Cesar Chavez] aide. And you know, he's putting two girls through Berkeley on \$5 a week. Sure you are, Ray. (laughter) You know? But that's all right. And Ray used to get drunk and come and terrorize the women in the trailer. So it was nice that I was there (laughter) at the time.

COLLINGS

Now, you met César Chávez? Is that correct?

WILSON

Well, I never met him, actually, but this is a very interesting story. Let me tell you what happened. I was -- I took Spanish in junior high school, so I knew a little Spanish, and I learned more, and I was actually writing press releases in Spanish. (laughter)

COLLINGS

Really?

WILSON

Yeah, and going around and visiting Spanish language radio stations, which were just a cement block house with a 45 RPM player, which they used for a turntable. And so one day, Ray Huerta calls me, and I'm just lapping up what's going on: the fact that even though the farm workers there -- the farm workers were still acting like the old coyotes, which were the labor organizers and so forth. And there were several people in the movement that really wanted -- we went to a Safeway store one night, and the guy gave us bicycle chains. "We hear the Teamsters are coming. There might be a fight." Now, last thing I wanted to do (laughter) was get in a fight, but I mean, there were people there spoiling for a fight, you know? And you learn after a while that you are dealing with a spectrum -- the whole spectrum of human life in a movement, you see? So Ray Huerta calls me in, and he says, "César wants you to stop."

COLLINGS

Stop the publicity?

WILSON

Yes. And I said, "Why?" He says, "You're doing too good a job." Well, here's the thing. You know -- and this was confirmed later by a friend of mine who was in CAUSE, Peter Christiansen, who was the minister of the First Unitarian Church on 4th and something in L.A -- because he -- the people who were helping César, raising money and so forth, I mean, they were just cutthroats. And they were just shameless, but they raised money. Well, here's the thing:

the reason César wanted me to stop was because the farm workers were getting too good of a name. And he was going to go out on strike, because the minute he went out on strike -- you see, if César could've won the battle in Coachella and got the contract away from the Teamsters, he could have won all the way up the valley, because the farm -- the -- I've visited farmers and the growers, you know, and they said that they would hire [United Farm Workers] farm workers over the Teamsters. He could've won the whole state all the way up the valley. But no -- he chose to go on strike, because he immediately got \$688,000 from the AFL-CIO So it was a money deal, you see, and he thought he could advance his -- this would finance a program of conflict against the -- you see? So I was very conflicted about --

COLLINGS

So he wanted to go for the larger struggle?

WILSON

Well, he wanted the money to finance what he believed was a conflict which could attract followers. With no conflict, he could've won, but with conflict, he could go to people and say, " I need money for the conflict, you see? And so I lost a lot of respect for César. You couldn't say it on the streets at the time, and the Unitarian minister, Peter Christiansen, is still a friend of mine. He said at the time, he says, "You can't go around talking about this, Burt, because everybody loves César Chávez. And I'm not saying that that was César himself, because he later wrote me a nice letter, Because I think Ray told them that I was really pissed off, that he called me off for doing a good job (laughter) in a cause that they wanted -- that they asked me to do.

COLLINGS

So you had been continuing to get the news to cover --

WILSON

Yes.

WILSON

-- the struggle between the Teamsters and the farm workers?

WILSON

Yes. And we were winning, you see.

COLLINGS

And they were covering it sort of almost on a nightly basis?

WILSON

Yes, yes. And we were winning, and I was on talk shows, you know? And we were winning, and he called us off because he wanted conflict, and I was neutralizing the conflict. And so that was 1973. (laughter) The grapes dried, Now --

COLLINGS

OK. Excuse -- you've been going for --

WILSON

65 minutes.

COLLINGS

-- an -- 65 minutes."

COLLINGS

Yeah. Would you like to take a break before getting into CAUSE?

WILSON

Well, I'm OK if you're OK.

COLLINGS

OK. All right. I just don't like to wear out my interviewees.

WILSON

No, I wouldn't --

COLLINGS

That's why I'm asking you.

WILSON

When I'm on a roll, I want to... (laughter)

COLLINGS

All right. OK, good. OK. So now -- yeah.

WILSON

Now, several -- six of us who were disciples of my guru, Ralph Houston, moved into a big house together. So we had a community. It was written up in the L.A. Times by Ellen Stern Harris. And we were living for \$170 a month -- rent, food, and utilities.

COLLINGS

OK. And what was the basis of this community?

WILSON

The basis was they were all working in Watts with me, so we had that in common, and we were all followers of the same guru. And we had that in common.

So -- and plus, when you live in common like that, it's a great training ground for personal relationships. Because you have to have rules about cleanliness and sex; otherwise, you can fall apart. And most --

COLLINGS

Can I pause this for a moment?

WILSON

Yeah. Most communes that you think of in the Sixties fell apart because of -- there was no cohesiveness, and they either fall apart over people sleeping with each other -- and so I -- we said, "No problem. Just go outside. (laughter) Or just go somewhere else." Or cleanliness. So we had rules, which were very simple. And I cooked three nights a week for six people, and that was wonderful I love to cook.

So about this time, I was still doing freelance commercials for AIP. That was my --

COLLINGS

"AIP" being...?

WILSON

"American International Pictures."

COLLINGS

(phone ringing throughout) I'm sorry about that.

WILSON

(laughter) That's OK.

In 1974, I think it was, I got a -- I got my own television show [The C.I.A. (Citizens Intelligence Agency)] on channel 63, which was an alternative PBS [Public Broadcasting Service] station at the time -- a huge --

COLLINGS

I've got some pictures of that --

WILSON

-- experience, yeah.

COLLINGS

-- that you sent me. Yeah.

WILSON

Yeah. Yeah. It was a huge experience, because it was like a movement station, (laughter) you know? And my show was called "The CIA." I had formed this -- formed the Citizens Intelligence Association. --

COLLINGS

Oh, very good.

WILSON

-- and I called it the CIA. And I started out --

COLLINGS

(phone rings) You know what? I have got -- OK. All right. There we go. So you had formed a group called the...?

WILSON

The Citizens Intelligence Association. And I put out a newsletter. I might have had one somewheres --

COLLINGS

Yeah, I think you had that.

WILSON

-- in these articles. And the first thing I did was take on Chief Davis, at the time, for gay bashing. Now, I'm not gay, but I really didn't like policemen going around beating up gay people. So I put the issue on the air, and it came to be a big thing because it made -- it publicized what was going on. And once you get into the light of the public, it's hard to continually doing it without -- so

it eventually led to communications between the gay community and so forth and the police, and that sort of thing stopped. And so then I was -- every time there was a gay event, I was invited -- their candlelight march down Hollywood Boulevard, and things like that.

And about this time, CAUSE started. And I went to them, and I offered to put the issue on my television program. And Peter Christiansen was my co-host. And we had -- now, you'll find it in magazines, but I had a beautiful horse statue -- it was about a foot high -- that I had won in a state fair in 1952 or something like that. And what I did was I sawed the front end of the horse off, so just the back end of the horse was mounted, you see. And we gave -- we -- that was the Earl Butz Award. (laughter) People of course called it the Horse's Ass Award, which is awarded each week, you know?

But the program -- and the program, I guess if I have a particular talent, it's that I can delve into issues, and I can articulate both sides in a way that I can simplify issues for people to make them understand, even if I have to draw diagrams and stuff like that. So I got involved with CAUSE, and we started putting this stuff on the air. Now, along the way, CAUSE was -- Tim Brick was one of the founders of CAUSE, along with Larry Gross. And this movement had spanned from Communists to labor unions to senior citizens' organizations. And we began meeting about this.

Now, the issue was that ARCO went to the -- ARCO told everybody -- and kept telling people -- that we would be out of energy by 1995. And Southern Gas they went to the Southern California Gas Company, and they said this was called an advanced payments deal: "We want you to bill your ratepayers in advance for all -- for millions of dollars, \$660 million -- which we will use not for oil, not for natural gas, but to secure first bidding rights on this." And the Chase Manhattan Bank was managing the whole deal, and of course, at that time, ARCO, every- anything with a red, white, and blue and a logo was a Rockefeller. And of course, it was a whole Rockefeller money-grabbing operation. And we citizens were supposed to pay for it, an advance payments. And the PUC [Public Utilities Commission] approved it! (laughter) Or they were in the process of approving it. They were for it. And this was a Jerry Brown deal. Now, Jerry Brown I consider to be the worst governor that California ever had, because he gave a liberal face to the community but never did anything. As Tim used to say, he manipulated symbols, and that's all he did. So I thought, my god, this is wrong! (laughter) This is really, really wrong! It's taken money from -- where does it say in free enterprise that you can have people give money additionally to their gas bill in order to give an oil company bidding rights on Alaskan oil in Prudhoe Bay? And the PUC wants to approve it, and Jerry Brown is for it -- come on!

Well, by that time, I had worked somewhat also with Ed Koupal of People's Lobby, who I found to be a very interesting person. And I made use of their printing press a lot.

COLLINGS

So it's interesting that this particular issue seemed to galvanize people from so many different organizations.

WILSON

Because it was out of their pocket. You see? It was out of their pocket. And it was VISIBLY out of their pocket. You see, my proudest possession of all of this is that little refund certificate that says you're going to get -- you see? We were responsible for that. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

So one day at CAUSE, we got together all of these organizations, and... So we had -- we felt we had to have leadership. So we had an election in our office over on Pico [Blvd.], which was in this -- People for Economic Justice or something like that.

COLLINGS

Pico and what?

WILSON

Pico and Sepulveda [Blvd.]. (laughter) I don't know. I don't know. It was around there. Fifty -- the address is on some of this stuff. It's...I don't know.

COLLINGS

All right, all right. I'm just wondering where it was. OK.

WILSON

Yeah. And Tim Brick and I were elected co-coordinators. We both got the same amount of votes. Now, this was a -- this...I -- Tim Brick is the most wonderful person I've ever worked with. And we worked hand-in-glove. Also, the idea of having co-coordinators in a movement that spanned 29 different organizations, that meant -- because everybody secretly wants to be leader, and wants to be on television, and wants to be the hero, you see? And that means they couldn't shoot down -- they had to shoot down both of us, so nobody ever tried. So it was hard enough to manage 29 different interests.

COLLINGS

Yeah, and how did you do that?

WILSON

And -- by being inclusive. We were inclusive, and we -- you know, and for me, who was used to doing everything by myself up until that time, and Tim lived in a community house, too, in Pasadena, you see. And Tim was extremely -- Tim was an Irishman that had a gift of gab, and he was extremely good in articulating the issues, and also dissecting issues and making them plain to people and talking about them. So we had a steering committee which really knew how to operate.

So what -- the first thing I did is we explained the issue on television.

COLLINGS

On your show?

WILSON

On my show, right.

COLLINGS

Which was the Citizen Intelligence --

WILSON

Yeah.

COLLINGS

-- at that point? OK.

WILSON

Incidentally, Peter Christiansen tells the story, but I went to a police meeting one time by City Hall there at whatever the place is now -- I can't remember the name -- the glass city. And it was something about police brutality or something to this -- and I was scheduled to speak, and there must have been a couple of thousand people in the audience. And I came up to the microphone, and I said, "My name is Burt Wilson. I'm with the CIA." (laughter) And then I paused dramatically and said, "The Citizens' Intelligence Association." And the place broke up! It -- (laughter) just, laughter rolled throughout everybody. That was a wonderful feeling.

But anyway, what I did was -- I think my biggest contribution was I decentralized the organizing process. Because I got -- we printed up -- over at People's Lobby Press, we printed up -- there were four 8 1/2 x 11 sections you could run off, and then fold over until you had something on the front and something on the back. So we printed -- I wish I had one -- we printed the nature of the problem, the solutions, the lies they were telling, what you can do about it, and we had little scissor marks. And so we said, "Write in for this. We will send it to you. You cut it apart, xerox it in your local -- and distribute it in your own neighborhood," you see? So this was an entirely new way of thinking: using television as an organizing tool, you see? And it worked. (laughter)

COLLINGS

Now, just as an aside, do you have any idea what the ratings were for that show?

WILSON

No, but -- I don't know if it's in here, but it was reviewed by John Barber one night on Channel 4, and he gave us an excellent review. But we do know -- you see, the other part of that is through our own newsletters and our own organizations, we told people to watch the show, you see? So it was a --

WILSON

So you had a lot of word of mouth going?

WILSON

It was a bi-level marketing. We had a marketing, and a listening thing going on at the same time.

And one of the funniest things was at a meeting one day -- you see, we had some people who were old Jewish Reds. Now, if there's one class of people in the world ever that I love, it's old Jewish Reds. And they all lived together at the First Unitarian Church, Peter Christiansen's church, in a place called Sunset House, which was a senior living -- I used to go and talk to them about, you know, the IWW [International Workers of the World] and the things in New York that happened and everything. I mean, and these were people who put it out there, you know? And oh god, what an inspiration they were to me! And the funny thing is while we were doing this electronic organizing, we had one woman who came to our organizational meetings weekly and would stand up and say, "Vat ve need is shtreetcorner distribution!" (laughter) And that became like a codeword between Tim and I. Whenever we'd see each other, we'd say, "Vat ve need -- streetcorner distribution!" Here we were using the most modern way to organize.

So then I came up with the idea -- I need to characterize the issue, and I thought, well, we call people who rip people off for money financial -- in the financial industry "loan sharks." So we'll call this "oil sharking." And Jaws was the big movie at the time, and so I got the idea of making up a papier-mâché shark. So Howie Stover, who became our representative on the Department of Water and Power rate committee -- Howie was an MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology] genius. He could do anything. And Howie built the shark with moveable jaws, (laughter) you see? And we called it Rippy, the ARCO Shark, ripping off more money -- you know? It was -- I mean --

COLLINGS

Boy, that's -- that was a good one.

WILSON

And we built this 12-foot shark, and you saw pictures of it in there. And to cut to one part of the chase right away, I was debating the ARCO people one night, and they called up the television station and said, "If he brings that goddamn shark, we're not coming!" (laughter)

So then, I wrote a guerilla theater skit called "Out of the Jaws of the ARCO Shark." Now, we put this on at high noon out in the patio in front of the ARCO building.

COLLINGS

Downtown?

WILSON

Downtown. And what it was, we had a rope stretched across with little waves on it, you see, and the female consumer was adrift in the sea of economic disaster, you see, trying to make it toward shore. And she's almost made it, and then the shark comes in! (laughter) And bites her for more money and so forth. And while this is going on, there's a guy standing -- and all the ARCO executives were out there, you know, with their arms folded, (laughter) looking at this like --

COLLINGS

But the other people are all office workers --

WILSON

They were all there!

COLLINGS

-- working downtown. It's not --

WILSON

And the media! The media loved it. It was all over the papers and the media. And -- you see, because visual, you had to be visual. And nobody in the consumer movement before, to my knowledge, had ever had this sense of doing things precisely with the media aspect, you see? It was usually streetcorner distribution, you know? And so -- and then a guy out in the audience stripped off his clothes; he had a Superman -- he says, "I'll save you!" You know? And he's a consumer and CAUSE, and he runs out and saves her. Oh, it was fantastic. It was just fantastic.

And then I think that there were two PUC [Public Utilities Commission] commissioners: Batinovic and Ross. And these guys were Jerry Brown liberals, who -- Robert Kennedy hated liberals, and I sure began to understand why: because all they do is talk. And they were for the ARCO Southern California Gas deal, because the numbers are there; we're going to run out -- you know? And they were articulating the whole gas company program. So the first thing I did was -- I wasn't an attorney, but I went down and I read -- I went down to the library and got all the law books on Public Utilities Commission law. And I looked through there and everything, and I found that anybody with 20 -- who could get 25 signatures could file a complaint against the -- against a public utility, see? So I drafted up a complaint citing previous decisions, you know, in Public Util- because we all went back to Hiram Johnson (sp?), you know, who said, "We must control the utilities, or the utilities will control us." And that was our warcry, you see? And of course, who loves the utilities, you see? So that was -- we had a natural audience that all we had to do was get them excited about money being taken from them illegally. It was an illegal deal from the word "go." They would've got away with it if it wasn't for CAUSE.

COLLINGS

And was there any concern about the environmental impact in Alaska?

WILSON

This -- of course. Not only there, but this came -- and I'm getting a little ahead of myself -- this came slightly later, but it overlapped in the LNG [liquefied natural gas], them wanting to bring LNG into California, which is still going on today, you see. They wanted to bring it in at Point Concepcion first, which has the strongest tides, riptides; it's the worst place to bring something like that in. They wanted to bring it into L.A. harbor. They wanted to bring it in -- you know, to public places. But that -- I'm getting ahead of myself with that.

COLLINGS

Yeah, yeah. We'll get to that later.

WILSON

So we started filing complaints against the utilities for this and that and the other thing. And when a complaint is filed, you have to have a hearing. (laughter) And we just had one hearing going on (laughter) after another, you see. And we really got a lot of people excited about this. But then it came down to -- and we were doing stuff all the time.

COLLINGS

Well, you were --

WILSON

We were on the media constantly. Constantly. I was -- either myself or Tim, or both of us, constantly. And about that, by the way -- and I think this was -- this helped: I always insisted on dressing like a straight guy in a sport coat and tie. Everybody else looked like a longhaired radical hippie, you know? But I thought I could communicate better with people if they didn't -- if they weren't disturbed by my look so much. So I always projected a clean-cut image, as if I were one of the people, you know? And then I could reach right wingers, too, because you see, they hated the utilities almost as much as we did unless they had stock, you see? (laughter)

And one of the things I just remembered now was that I found out that I could control an interview. Tim could control an interview, too. And I found out the techniques of controlling an interview. So I never worried about going in to interview. I always felt confident. And the media began to compliment me when I would put out the whole issue in 30 seconds, which they could then show on the news. And Warren Olney gave me a special spot on the -- on an interview on Channel 4, because Warren Olney was a Socialist, too. And I'm not a Socialist, by the way, but that's another story.

So the only interviewer I couldn't control was George Putnam. I was on the late news one night, and it was -- this was about a phone company issue, which was much, much later, but I started in trying to control the interview, and all of a sudden he just swept me up! It's like an aura came out from him and engulfed me, and all I could do was respond to what he said. It was absolutely ethereal,

the thing that was going on. And I couldn't -- he's the only one I couldn't -- where I couldn't control the interview.

COLLINGS

So you would usually control it by -- sort of the way that the politicians do, where every question, you kind of go back to your issue?

WILSON

To my issue, exactly. That's controlling the interview. But then it was unheard of in consumer groups. And the other thing that we had going for us: you see, it wasn't until we started against the phone company -- because you see, we're not only fighting the utilities, and the banks, and everything else -- we're fighting the California Business Roundtable. Which is the biggest underground organization in California. And when we started -- when we exposed the phone company giving out unlisted numbers to people without a warrant -- you know, to the library; anybody could get your unlisted number.

COLLINGS

And they were charging you for --

WILSON

Charging you 15 cents. You -- we stopped that. And we had a news conference out in front of the phone company, and we said, "Go up on the fifth floor -- that's where all this is happening -- and talk to them." Well, they went up there, and they talked to the engineers. And engineers are honest, you see, and they said, "Oh, yeah -- we've been doing that." (laughter)
Well, within a week, the phone company had a public relations specialist by the name of Doug Cameron. And he was specifically detailed to counter me wherever I went, you see? And he is in this picture.

COLLINGS

Oh, OK. I was going to ask you about that picture.

WILSON

That's Doug Cameron next to Ciji [Ware, Channel 28 TV host] --

COLLINGS

This is -- and this is a Channel 28 debate?

WILSON

Channel 28, yeah.

COLLINGS

KUXE?

WILSON

That's Doug Cameron right there. And this is a PUC guy who didn't have anything to say.

COLLINGS

And who is this?

WILSON

Cigi Ware. Ciji Ware -- that was -- C-I-J-I. That was the woman.

COLLINGS

And what was -- was she from the...?

WILSON

It was a Channel 28 debate on the phone company issues, because everybody hates the phone companies. We had all that going. But back to before. Then I read the back of the gas bill. And you'll find that it's changed since then. They changed it soon after. It says, "If you disagree with your bill" -- and it didn't qualify what your disagreement was -- "send it along with a check to the PUC, and they will investigate your grievance." So I got together with Tim and the other people, and I said, "Let's go ask people to withhold their payment on their gas bills by sending them to the PUC instead."

COLLINGS

Right, right. And this was the boycott, then?

WILSON

This was the boycott, right. Well, one of the most interesting things about that is before, when we were speaking, there were several seniors who just wanted to get on television so badly -- Ed Novakov (sp?) and Herman Mulmann (sp?), they were longhaired radicals who just wanted to rant, you know? And they would show up at everything we did. Everybody deserted Tim and I when it came to this one (laughter) because we were asking people to withhold their gas bills, and a lot of people thought that that -- if it didn't work, it could be our demise.

So we called a news conference at the Press Club, and we showed them what to do, withhold the gas bills. And the next week, they started coming in. Pretty soon, thousands of people -- and we went into the PUC office, and they had a special basket (laughter) for the CAUSE people who were withholding their gas bills. And shortly after that, the deal was called off. And you see, Batinovic and Ross, who would scream because we'd show up at the same liberal meetings, you know, and Batinovic would shout across the room, "You guys better not get in a pissing contest with us!" And Batinovic owned all the xerox machines in the post offices throughout California, you know, and he was a big liberal Democrat.

So then we won, and in the stories -- the Times finally printed a story about CAUSE's participation, but you wouldn't think that CAUSE participated at all. All of a sudden, Batinovic and Ross were supporting the decision to stop the ARCO Southern California (laughter) Gas deal, and so forth. And so we secured a \$1 billion consumer victory. It was the largest in California, Erin Brockovich be damned. And some people said that it amounted really to a \$3 billion win because these same kinds of deals were being orchestrated in other states throughout the United States -- about six or seven other states, you see?

And so it was a huge victory. It was a huge victory. And we -- I feel like I just experienced a victory myself, you know?

And for a long time after that, we didn't know what to do, and there became -- and after this I'll stop -- there became a debate within the group. Well, first, the L.A. Times printed a story on us. They wanted to show how we were just a paper tiger who won -- and in effect we were, you know, because there's always four or five people who do the work, and everybody else loves to wave the flag. But all the people who we represented -- and I'm right before the LNG deal now -- all the people who we represented, the leaders of organizations, they said good things about us. And I don't have a copy of the Times story, but none of the other -- the Times especially -- and the Herald-Examiner was part of that -- and officially, CAUSE never existed when it came to the victory. It was not a -- you know, because we had beat -- (laughter) in our own naive way, we had beat the powers of California! Oil, gas, city, state -- I mean, we won! The PUC. It was unheard of. I still can't believe it today! (laughter)

COLLINGS

I know! I still can't believe it, either! (laughter)

WILSON

But I mean, I think it has to go down as one of the most unusual fights, and one of the most unusual victories you'll ever find by consumer organizations.

Usually, maybe it's one consumer organization which is a single-issue organization, but ours was a multi-issue.

And there -- and then we came into the thing: what should we do with CAUSE? Well, let's incorporate it, and we'll go out and be like Sylvia Segal and -- with TURN [Toward Utility Rate Normalization]. She founded Toward Utility Rate Normalization, which was an allied group with ours. She worked out of San Francisco, but she was totally money-oriented -- but she did good, too. But you see, I'm not -- neither Tim nor I were the types who could go out and ask people for money. I'm not that type. I don't know how to. And my reasoning was that consumer organizations or organizations which fight city hall should be ad hoc and organize for a specific purpose, and then de-organize until the next issue comes along. But we stayed organized, and as it turned out --

COLLINGS

And how did you stay organized? Through holding regular meetings, or what?

WILSON

Yeah, yeah -- holding regular meetings. And by that time, we were the superheroes of the movement, and everybody thought that we could beat anybody -- and WE thought we could (laughter) beat anybody! And people would bring the issues to us. I mean, eventually -- and I'll get into that later -- people from within the gas company and the phone companies were sending us

internal memos, (laughter) you see, which we could exploit. And -- because I'm telling you, most everybody hated the utilities.

Now, the most interesting thing to me was after the issue was dead, A. Donald Anderson, who headed the PR group for ARCO, asked me to what he called "an economy lunch," you see? Because he thought, you know, I wouldn't go to the Jonathan Club with him or something -- and I wouldn't have, you know? (laughter) But he -- we went to some salad bar somewheres, and we sat down and we talked. And then he offered me a job at ARCO. Forty grand a year, which was a lot of money in 1973. And I was to head up ARCO's campaign to get a rapid transit in L.A., one; number two, to get a stop right under the ARCO building. See? And with me heading that campaign, you see, I would -- they would use my integrity which I had established in Los Angeles to have their own way. I turned him down, of course. (laughter)

But it was interesting, you see? Because first, they'd try to buy you off, and then they'd offer you a job. And that's the way they co-opt people, you see? They think they -- they really think that anybody can be bought. But I know for a fact that -- I know Tim couldn't be bought, and I couldn't be bought, and there are several people who couldn't be bought. But what an education in relationships there is in a movement when you're dealing with all these diverse personalities.

COLLINGS

And the range was from senior citizens' groups all the way to -- what would you say was the --

WILSON

Communists. Communist front organizations, you know? And like that. So --

COLLINGS

And one representative from each of these groups would come to a regular weekly meeting? Is that --

WILSON

Yes.

COLLINGS

-- how it would work?

WILSON

Yes. That was the idea. And then they would watch my television program. Now, the television program, the television channel was run by Leslie Parrish, a movie star. She played Daisy Mae in the Lil' Abner movie. And Leslie was a good friend of mine. She's married now to Jonathon Livingston Seagull author Richard Bach. But Leslie was a very emotional person at this time. She was trying to run a television station. And she was a good organizer, but I think that when challenged, she couldn't react in a way -- she would react more in hostility than in a way -- like Peter Christiansen used to say, you attract more

flies with honey than you do with vinegar, you see? And there are a lot of people out to get her, and she eventually lost the station. The station went dark, and it never saw the light again. Now, that was not because of the programs we were running on the station -- it was some other issue having to do with an alternative PBS station. I mean, the facilities were crude. I want to tell you, it was volunteers doing all the work. It was great -- the kind of thing I love, you know?

COLLINGS

Oh, yeah. Like the cable -- the early --

WILSON

Yeah.

COLLINGS

-- cable stations?

WILSON

And at the same time -- by then, too, I also had a -- I was on the radio three times a week at KPFK doing an hour talk show. And of course KPFK was the big liberal radio station, so you see, I had a lot of outreach. And to this day, I would say that the use of the media was key to our victory, and key to our -- to what we did next. Because everybody knew us by that time, and...

I got to tell you one story --

COLLINGS

Oh, yeah, please.

WILSON

while it's on my mind, OK? This was during the LNG [liquefied natural gas] campaign -- liquid natural gas. And I was scheduled by ABC [American Broadcasting Company] to debate former Senator [John V.] Tunney, who was going to represent the Gas Company on the issue. And Jerry Dunphy was going to do the interviewing, OK? So I got there early and everything. Tunney breezed in, whipped off his coat, and he had this big legal pad which I could see he just came from the Gas Company, or they already gave him all the debate points on the thing.

So we took our places, and the segment started, and Dunphy says to Tunney, "Well, what do you think about this, Senator?" And (laughter) Tunney goes into this explanation of LNG, you know, and what it means, and everything like that. And he said, "And Mr. Wilson, what do you have to say?" I said, "Well, the issue is easy if you remember the 'three Ds': LNG is dumb, dangerous, and damned expensive." (laughter) And I saw Tunney -- Dunphy's eyes just do circles, and he started going the opposite directions. He was so angry (laughter) that I had taken the whole issue away, you see, and completely deflated Tunney. And Tunney never survived. And then it became the two Irishmen against the German, you see? (laughter) And he was trying to support Tunney,

and I was coming back with these things. You know, it was almost like my words were coming from somewhere else, but it was a wonderful debate. (laughter) I wish I had a copy of it.

But you see, that's what you had to do, because the people we were fighting were of the "elite class," if you want to put it that way, and they felt they had a natural right to issues. And they felt that because of who they were that people would understand and believe everything they said. But when they came on something that shot back and undermined their position in simple words that created conflict, BOOM! Well...

COLLINGS

And as you said before, came back dressed as they were dressed, and --

WILSON

Yes, yes.

COLLINGS

-- speaking their language?

WILSON

Yes. And this was the thing: both Tim and I were able to take any debate down ten levels, whereas the average person we talked to could go to maybe three. So we could bring up stuff that they didn't even know. But after that particular debate, I sat down and tried to gather myself, and Dr. George [the KABC weatherman] comes over and he says, "Isn't there some way we can do this without acrimony?" And I looked at George, and I said, "NO." (laughter) You know? Because another thing you have to be careful is because people get uncomfortable with open conflict. And -- but that was our whole strategy, was open conflict. But what we had going for us was the truth, and that counts a lot, I think. A whole lot.

COLLINGS

Well, and also it was a period when there was a sort of an entry point for attacking these --

WILSON

Oh, yeah.

COLLINGS

-- quote/unquote, "establishment..."

WILSON

Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. People were on our side more than they were on Tunney's side. Look at Tunney: he was a defeated one-term Senator. So...

COLLINGS

So your tactics were the boycott, as you described it, the --

WILSON

That was a biggee.

COLLINGS

Yeah. The guerilla theater?

WILSON

But first, you see, here's the thing: there's an old saying in the ancient wisdom that you can not defeat evil in disguise -- you have to unmask it first. So our task was to unmask for the people the evil of the money-grabbing, you see? And that's what we were able to do. That played a big part in the tactics, because by the time we got through doing graphs with circles and arrows, people understood the complexity of the issues and what was being put over on them in the guise of -- you know, there's a phrase that came out of Eisenhower administration: "enlightened self-interest." And ever since then, politicians have been couching private gain under the auspices of "public good." It still happens today. It happens everywhere. And this was another one of those instances, you know? So...

COLLINGS

So you had rallies; you had -- for the -- this was --

WILSON

Oh, yeah. We had teach-ins, just like the antiwar movement. And this is where Tim really excelled. Tim -- and we were kind of like a one-two punch, and because of my involvement with the gay community, the gay newspapers and everything supported us like crazy, with big editorials and everything. And some of the local shopping newsses would take up our cause. But by and large, we would go around and speak everywhere: little senior citizen lunches -- anywhere. And the thing was that we were both available to do that. So we could articulate the issues, and...I'm getting ahead of myself, but... Well, I'll wait for that when we get into --

[BREAK IN AUDIO] [END OF AUDIO FILE]

1.2. Session 2A (December 5, 2005)

COLLINGS

I'll just ID this tape. This is Jane Collings. This is the second part of the interview with Burt Wilson. I am switching over to a tape rather than the digital recorder, because there is something I don't understand (laughter) about the digital recorder. And we'll resume -- we will carry on with the tape for the moment, for the time being at least. OK. All right.

WILSON

Now wait a minute. Can you stop yours for a minute?

COLLINGS

Sure.

COLLINGS

OK. All right.

WILSON

You asked about the organizing process, I think.

COLLINGS

Yeah.

WILSON

OK. One thing -- Ed Koupal of People's Lobby, who did petitioning and was able to bring about change through petitioning, he used to say you need 50 crazies, (laughter) and you could change California. That means 50 people who were crazy enough to work 24 hours a day, seven days a week getting people's signatures. Of course, today they pay for it. In those days, you didn't -- that's why you had to be crazy to do it. (laughter) And so that's part.

On the...for our part, for organizing, you first need an issue, and you organize around that issue, and you have to articulate the different points of it. When it comes down to the actual people, what it usually comes down to is a few people doing the work, but making sure everybody else gets equal credit. And so it's kind of, you're performing a service. You sacrifice your ego for the good of the whole, is what it comes down to. And this has spiritual principles for me that -- in that because the difference between Zen Buddhism and Mahayana Buddhism, for instance, which is the Dalai Lama sect, is Zen Buddhism, you sit up on top of the hill and contemplate your navel until you block everything out of the world and become one with god, so to speak. In Mahayana Buddhism, you be of service to others and lose your ego within the whole -- that. And Manley Palmer Hall, who was one of my mentors and ran the Philosophical Research Society here, of which I was on the board later, after his death; I took over some of his speaking engagements -- Manley used to say what the Zen Buddhist does is he may achieve liberation, but it's an illusion. (laughter) So I have always preferred the public service, and if for nothing else, for the fact it...people who are trying to use other people for political or financial gain don't understand it. They have -- when they come up against somebody who can't be bought, they don't know what to do, except kill you. (laughter) Or get you out of -- and I've got some things to talk about in that line, too.

But so what it was was -- I mean, I can't impress upon you enough the fact that it was a team effort mainly between Tim [Brick] and I. And we complemented each other so well, and Tim was so smart and so articulate, and he understood everything I was doing, and I understood everything he was doing. And we taught each other. We -- as we went along, we cross-pollinated. And Tim couldn't be bought either, you know? And so there was no way to come at us. And because we were articulate on the issues, there was no way anybody internally could come at us, which is what frequently happens, or somebody places one of their people in your organization to try to disrupt you. And there might have been, as far as that goes, but nothing could. And nothing ever did. It

was -- to me, it was a once in a lifetime deal. And that was mainly because of Tim and my association with him. I think if Tim were the sole leader or if I were the sole leader, oh, there'd have been problems.

COLLINGS

Now, the whole thing -- the CAUSE action, as you might call it, was from August '75 through January '76? Is that correct?

WILSON

Yeah, that sounds about right.

COLLINGS

That sort of six-month very concentrated...?

WILSON

For the advance payments deal, yeah. Yeah. That was then. But CAUSE extended long after that.

COLLINGS

Right, right. That -- but that was for the ARCO...?

WILSON

Right, right.

COLLINGS

And so you were doing the -- you talked about the rallies, the boycott --

WILSON

Yes.

COLLINGS

-- the guerilla theater, and the leafleting. So those -- and Rippy the Shark. So those --

WILSON

Yeah.

COLLINGS

-- were your -- those were some of the --

WILSON

That was --

COLLINGS

-- cornerstones of the...?

WILSON

Everybody -- I used to put Rippy the [ARCO] Shark on top of my station wagon -- strap it up there, you know -- and people would honk when I'd ride down the street. Because we'd take it everywhere, because it was such a symbol. And it grew into such a symbol. It was a brand name, you know? It had that same integrity. (laughter)

COLLINGS

Yeah, yeah. So what was -- the victory celebration was on January 24th, 1976. And what was the actual mani- you know, how was the victory achieved? It was --

WILSON

The victory --

COLLINGS

-- ARCO dropped the deal?

WILSON

-- the -- no. The victory was achieved when -- I'm sure Brown had -- [Governor Edmund Gerald] "Jerry" Brown [Jr.]-- had a hand in this, but the Public Utilities Commission ended the deal. And they ended the deal because too many people were not paying their gas bills and sending them in to the PUC. That -- of course, they would never admit that. And Batinovich and Ross tried to come out as heroes in the thing by saying, "It was a bad deal for California, and we recognize that!" I mean, they just made asses out of themselves, not to the public at large, probably, or anybody in northern California, but certainly in southern California they did! (laughter) Because they were going after it. And this was Brown... Afterwards, when we -- after the -- at the end of the LNG fight, which I am getting a little ahead of myself, but -- Tim did all this work in exposing the Brown family oil business, and we went to Sacramento, and we had a meeting with Jerry Brown. And Jerry got up and walked out of the meeting. So Tim and I went over to the Senator Hotel and I called a news conference, and we put the thing up, and we exposed the Brown family oil business. (laughter) And it made the papers, and I mean, it awakened a few people that, I mean, the Brown family was big in LNG and oil, especially in Indonesia, where [Governor Edmund Gerald] "Pat" Brown [Sr.] went to -- Pat Brown went to Indonesia at the request of the Indonesian government, Sukarno. He says, "I taught him how to build freeways!" (laughter) I love Pat Brown; hated Jerry Brown.

COLLINGS

Were there any instances of what you might call "culture clash" between -- among the groups that participated in CAUSE? I mean, you had 29 different groups. Were there...?

WILSON

Not really, because you see, even though there were a lot of groups involved, their involvement was leaders mainly coming to meetings and taking notes to distribute backward. The biggest culture clash we had was between the ideologues and those of us who didn't espouse any ideology. And by "ideologues," I mean the Marxists, because they had a -- and (laughter) this is what made it difficult, because they had an ideological goal, you see? But I mean, you'll never find me out in a -- marching around a building saying, "The

people united will never be defeated!" You know, that wasn't my thing. I was not an ideologue. Neither was Tim, although both of us have studied Marxism and Socialism. As a matter of fact, we -- Tim and I put together that public enterprise program that you saw in there, and I had two op-ed pieces in the L.A. Times, you know, which those were significant, I felt, in articulating -- and I congratulate the Times for printing them, you know?

COLLINGS

Yeah. I was really surprised to see those --

WILSON

Yeah.

WILSON

-- if it's in the packet that you sent? Yeah.

WILSON

Yeah. Right, right. So that shows that -- you see, all of a sudden, after that, we became legit. And then it became how long can you stay legit? You see, my -- Tim's...and my -- I believe Tim agreed with me -- was that if you wanted to keep on as a consumer-based organization fighting the big utilities and so forth, you had to raise money. And then when that happened, you had to spend more time raising money than doing the actual organizing job, and that's what we didn't want to get into. That's why I think both Tim and I had the idea that ad hoc organizations around a single issue are important, because then you become like everybody else, where you're mailing out invitations to a -- you know, you get somebody to speak at this -- you know, I hate that. I just hate it.

COLLINGS

So were there people among these 29 groups who wanted the -- who wanted CAUSE to go on to become --

WILSON

Almost everybody did. Almost everybody did.

WILSON

I've got to mention one person: Billie Heller. Billie Heller, her husband was Liberace's agent. She lived over here in Beverly Hills. And Billie Heller used to come to these meetings where -- which were -- you know, we were all poor, you know, and she'd walk in in the latest Beverly Hills fashions -- it was wonderful. And she felt so sorry for Tim that she bought him a suit. (laughter) Tim never looked so good in his life, you know?

COLLINGS

Yeah, I'll bet it was a nice suit.

WILSON

Oh, it was a beautiful wool pinstripe suit, you know? It was a wonder. She was a wonderful woman. God bless that woman.

We had a lot of wonderful women in the movement. And I would say that half of the people who were from organizations were women. And there were many senior citizens there, too, so it -- because you know, when you're living on Social Security or something like that, a few dollars here and there makes a difference. It really makes a difference. So it was --

COLLINGS

And was it mostly, like, white people that were in CAUSE?

WILSON

Yes. Mmm hmm.

COLLINGS

And from -- was it from the West Side? One of the newspaper articles suggested that --

WILSON

A little louder?

COLLINGS

Was -- one of the newspaper articles suggested that it was a group of West Side organizations. Is that the case, that it was mainly West Side people?

WILSON

No. Because we had an office on Pico Boulevard, that's where they got the West Side deal.

COLLINGS

I see. OK.

WILSON

But we extended out into the Valley, too. No, it wasn't totally West Side. I lived across the -- across Beverly Boulevard from Silver Lake at that time. And there were many people around our area, too, that were involved.

COLLINGS

Yeah. Is there any complete listing of the 29 groups? Because, you know, it's always mentioned that there were 29 groups. One of the articles mentions Fight Inflation Together --

WILSON

Yes!

COLLINGS

-- Seniors for Legislative Issues --

WILSON

Yes, yes.

COLLINGS

-- Seniors for Political Action --

WILSON

Yes.

COLLINGS

-- Gray Panthers --

WILSON

Uh-huh.

COLLINGS

-- and the California Citizen Action Group.

WILSON

Yeah.

COLLINGS

But I was just wondering what the -- where I could find a list of what the other groups were?

WILSON

You can't.

COLLINGS

Yeah. Why is that?

WILSON

Because I don't think there ever was a complete list. That's because we didn't want to list the Communist groups, the labor unions didn't want to be listed because in many cases, their membership was split, but they wanted to support it, and at least one of those organizations that you just mentioned was maybe two people. (laughter) You see?

COLLINGS

OK. Which one was that?

WILSON

Seniors for Politician Action.

COLLINGS

That was two people?

WILSON

Yeah.

COLLINGS

Oh, that's interesting.

WILSON

(laughter) Ed Momen and Ed Novikov -- er, Herman Mulhman and Ed Novikov.

COLLINGS

All right. Two -- they should've called it "Two Seniors for Political Action."

WILSON

Well, they were the two guys who loved to rant. And it -- they were wonderful people, don't get me wrong, but there whole thing was...you know, there's -- now that I'm all of 73, I can say this (laughter), is that seniors -- frequently, there is a segment of seniors that feel life when they're in conflict with something. And being able to express conflict gives them energy. And that's

what these two guys were. They loved to fight. And I think what it was is that Tim and I both knew how to use these people in certain situations, you see? And they ate it up, and we all loved it, too.

COLLINGS

What kind of situations would you use them in?

WILSON

Well, I'll tell you. I'll never forget this. There was one situation on a Gas Company issue. It might have been LNG -- where, again, I had written a citizens' complaint, and I put in -- I was almost a barracks lawyer when this was finished -- I put in all the citations from the law books and everything, 25 signatures, filed it. We had a hearing. Ben Wolf, god bless him, was the senior...I forget what his organization was, but when we had the hearing, he showed up with three busloads of seniors down at First and Broadway for the hearing. And we all got into the room, and then Herman Mulhman and Ed Novikov started working them up. And I wrote in there -- because I was on -- I was writing at this time also for The Advocate, which was a paper that a guy started up to articulate alternative views, which was later responsible for the unlisted number issue. But we unleash Herman Mulhman on them, (laughter) and Ed Novikov, and they got so rowdy -- and we were singing; I wrote songs for the -- all the movements, too --

COLLINGS

Right, right, right.

WILSON

-- you see. I wrote --

COLLINGS

I've got that here.

COLLINGS

-- eight or nine songs. I'll send you a copy of them.

COLLINGS

OK. Well, here are two.

WILSON

There's one, yeah. Yeah. Tim and I can still sing that song. (laughter) But anyway, the Public Utilities Commission judge went and got himself a four-man police escort before he would walk into the room! Oh god, it was funny! (laughter) To see him walking in with this escort of burly sheriffs around him, you know?

COLLINGS

Because of all of those --

WILSON

As if we were going --

COLLINGS

-- dangerous seniors?

WILSON

-- to jump him, you know? And we were singing songs and everything, and of course -- I mean, the media was there, and the media was eating this up, of course. And this guy comes in with an armed escort. I can't -- that was wonderful. (laughter)

COLLINGS

So would you send press releases to the media --

WILSON

Absolutely.

COLLINGS

-- in advanced of these -- yeah.

WILSON

I turned out press releases like you wouldn't -- I learned to write a press release. And then we would call -- you see, we would call the City News Service, which would distribute our press release to everybody. That was the easy way to do it. But later on, I established relationships with the producers at the TV stations, who I would call and say, "We're doing something today." "Thanks, Burt." Boom! They were there. Because we made news. We were news. And that's the way it went. (laughter)

COLLINGS

Would you like to go on to talk about the -- well, the Lifeline comes before the --

WILSON

Tim knows about Lifeline. I know nothing about Lifeline.

COLLINGS

All right. OK. I'll talk to him about that. And then the next thing was the LNG event.

WILSON

OK.

COLLINGS

Well, the phone company issue came before the LNG --

WILSON

No. Really?

COLLINGS

I -- that's what I thought. But of course, (laughter) you know better.

WILSON

OK. No, I don't know best. This was a long time ago, 30 years ago. I --

COLLINGS

Because I thought I had these in chronological order, but...

WILSON

Well, let's go to LNG next, because it still concerns the Gas Company. Now, liquid natural gas is a gas which is frozen to 290 -- I still remember this -- below Fahrenheit, in which it becomes liquid, and then can be shipped in containers. And they wanted to bring this into L.A. harbor. Disaster.

COLLINGS

Down at San Pedro?

WILSON

In San Pedro, right. They first wanted to bring it into Point Concepcion, but as - - that was an environmental disaster, and we all knew it, and they knew it. But they thought by going -- and they were correct in their thinking of going to some place where it was uninhabited that they would be better off, and they are correct in that. But I mean, they picked the most dangerous currents for offloading a dangerous thing.

Now, the thing about liquid natural gas is after it becomes a liquid, it's delivered in these long tankers. Now, the tankers were not double-hulled in those days. Today, they are, and the issue is still in front of the people of California today. They had single-hulled tankers, and they were as long as two and three football fields, and the thing about those tankers is that nobody knew that they -- their engines had to be put in full reverse five to ten miles before their docking point, at which time they were virtually unmaneuverable. And this they wanted to bring into L.A. harbor!

Now, the thing about liquid natural gas is if it escapes, there are three ways to die. Because it's heavier than air, it hugs the ground, and it spreads out aground. Now, anything that comes in contact with -- it asphyxiates every living thing it comes into contact with.

COLLINGS

Because it sucks all the oxygen out?

WILSON

Yeah. If it is ignited at any point, whoo! It goes up like that. And it incinerates every living thing in its path. And I forget the third way, but that's enough. And

--

COLLINGS

Freezing, wasn't it?

WILSON

Pardon?

COLLINGS

Freezing? Wasn't there something about how it could freeze...?

WILSON

Yeah. Well, that's right. It either freezes or asphyxiates everything in its path if it's still in the cloud, the white cloud. If it sets fire, it incinerates everything. So there are your three ways to die. Thank you.

And of course, people didn't know this, and of course, nobody ever told them. This was a huge environmental issue, and they wanted to bring it into L.A. Harbor. Now, one of the things I remember most about this besides my debate with Tunney was a debate I had with John Ferraro, who was the USC All-American (laughter) at the City Council. Because I was down there telling them -- telling people and the Council why they shouldn't bring liquid natural gas into L.A. Harbor. I may be getting ahead of myself on this issue. And Ferraro says, "Well, everybody takes risks. You know, you take a risk when you fly an airplane!" And I said, "Well, yeah, but that's a risk I choose to take. You're talking here about a risk that is imposed upon me by my government." And out of that sentence grew my op-ed piece: we deserve -- or the...we're -- we shouldn't have -- according to the Constitution, life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. It implies that we're not going to put -- be put in danger. And that was my op-ed piece that the L.A. Times printed.

Now, talking to the City Council is like talking to a blank wall. You're really down there talking to the media, and that's all. They've got it all planned out. Everything's -- oh, god, what a -- what guys, you know? What jerks. I mean, when I say that, I don't mean personally, but using their offices to enrich themselves, and they're -- and personally, I mean, there was one guy, Art Snyder, who was wrapping hair around the penis of his son, and he got -- oh, he was doing terrible things. And...Councilman [John] Gibson, who couldn't even think. I went down and had a meeting with him when I was in Watts, and he would mostly be, (in a slow voice) "Well, we don't like what you're doing down there, Mr. Wilson." (laughter)

COLLINGS

And did he say why?

WILSON

What?

COLLINGS

Did he say why?

WILSON

No. It was just this -- you see, I was interfering with the city's plans, and they don't want interference.

But back to LNG. The next morning, Tim Brick calls me up. He says, "Burt, you're a prophet!" I said, "What do you mean?" He says, "You haven't seen the news yet?" And I said, "No." He says, "The Sandanista blew up in L.A. Harbor last night!" (laughter) Now, the Sandanista was not an LNG tanker, but it was a ship that blew up L.A. Harbor, you see, and so everything was just -- you know, it was a -- everything was just reinforced. That reinforced our --

COLLINGS

There wasn't any -- ever any suggestion that your group was involved, was there?

WILSON

No. No. No, no, no. That was another thing. But now, here's what I consider to be one of the keys to our victory, because we did end up keeping liquid natural gas out of L.A. Harbor, is that what I did -- because you know, visuals -- I took a Monopoly board and covered it with paper, and I made -- I took a city map, and I made an outline -- a very good one -- of L.A. Harbor, the entrance and L.A. Harbor. Then I created these little tankers out of clay, and I painted them, you see? And then (laughter) I called a news conference down there, and not only the local media showed up, but the regional media showed up, too. And I said, "You want to know what happens to LNG? Here's what happens: it's frozen (inaudible). Now," and I said, "here's the LNG tanker coming in. Let's say it" -- and then I took out this large wad of cotton, and I said, "The first thing it does is it spreads out in this white cloud, where it freezes or asphyxiates everything within its path." And then I took a match and I lit it on the side, you know? And this thing just goes FWOOSH! like that, and all the cameras are coming in, you know? "Or, it incinerates everything in its path." And it was such a demonstration you wouldn't believe it. I did one interview on Channel 4 on a morning show, and I remember the Gas Company said they're not coming if he brings that demonstration. (laughter) Because it was so vivid, you know? Here was the cloud, and there it was, VWOOM!, incinerated. I mean...

COLLINGS

And what kind of arguments did they use to rebut that? Do you -- on -- when you would go on --

WILSON

We were going to run out of energy by -- LNG by 1995. It was scare tactics, and it was all scare tactics. You might want to ask Tim about this, but Tim -- see, I left here in 1998, and Tim, after he became part of the Establishment -- I mean, excuse my words -- he ran into, like, women who worked as secretaries at the Gas Company and everything, and she said that "you and Burt Wilson gave the gas company more late nights" -- that they were -- "they spent days and days just trying to figure out how to combat you guys." See, they had their own (inaudible) and everything.

I was -- I filed a -- I joined a complaint about the Gas Company's profits.

Because in those days, you could intermingle profits among their companies: Pacific Lighting, which was a holding company for Southern California Gas, which also owned the diamond walnut growers and everything. And you could move profits around to benefit other things. And I began talking about this. I have the testimony, and I had that Gas Company cornered in moving around profits, mingling profits from other interests with the Gas Company profits.

And I had him cornered, and it was late in the afternoon, and I mean, he was taking -- he was sitting up on that -- and he was -- because he knew that where I was leading him was to say that they mingled profits.

The hearing examiner -- who I always felt was on the side of the Gas Company, anyway -- says, "All right, that's enough. We'll resume tomorrow." We went in the next morning, he got up on there, and the hearing examiner said, "Repeat Mr. Wilson's last question." He repeated it. He ran off on a string (laughter) that he had rehearsed. You know, they had gone and rehearsed him all night before to come in and say what he had to say the next day. But that was -- it was fun playing barracks lawyer with all of that.

But the LNG, we once again -- we used the same tactics as in the ARCO-Southern California Gas deal, and we were able to articulate the position -- especially the fears -- to the point where people understood that a fear later of lack of gas was not as -- was far behind the present fear of being killed by it. And we cited -- we kept citing an actuary put out by somebody -- I forget now -- which said that within a hundred-year period there'd be two accidents. And now today, they're still trying to get liquid natural gas into California, but what they've done is they've positioned the intake point a mile offshore, where it runs through a tube and they offload it a mile out. The problem is then that the ship is a shooting duck for terrorists.

COLLINGS

Yeah. And isn't there going to be a depot in Baja California? I think --

WILSON

Where?

COLLINGS

Baja California?

WILSON

Yeah, there -- yeah. I think they have one there now, or they're contemplating it. But they want to bring it into San Diego, L.A., some place up north. I'm not familiar -- although I did write a letter recently, and I wrote an article for the Sacramento Bee -- they didn't print it -- about the dangers of LNG, because whether it's a mile offshore or not, if something still happens to the ship or something like that, it's -- the prevailing winds would blow the cloud on the shore. There's no guarantee that it's going to completely dissipate before it reaches land.

We -- I must say, every one of us was an environmentalist. Every one of us. We were all aware of the environmental disasters that these things could cause in the name of -- you know? And we were all against any drilling in Prudhoe Bay or the North Slope, or anything like that.

COLLINGS

And do you think -- I wonder if one of the reasons why these two campaigns were so successful was that there was a general belief in the society at that time that perhaps they didn't need to have such large, energy-driven lifestyles? There was, at that time, a sort of an examination of the American way of life, and interest in making one's lifestyle greener and more environmentally sound.

WILSON

Well, I think we articulated that premise in the costs: that this would all decrease our lifestyles, and -- because it would -- once you get something into the infrastructure, it doesn't go back out again. It's there forever. This is why medical costs are so high now: because they keep inventing new machines which doctors for years and years and years did without, but now they have so they can charge for them. Then they become part of -- and the rates go up, and everything like that. That's a whole other story. But that's precisely what it was with LNG: it would lower the standard of living for a lot of people. And we articulated that, and the people understood that.

COLLINGS

They understood that their standard of living would be lowered if they did not have this energy source?

WILSON

No, no -- they thought it would be if they did, because there would be more to pay -- the rates would go up. Every -- see, everybody understood that the rates never go down. (laughter) They always go up, you see? And this is why our position that we articulated was one of public enterprise, which was having municipal utilities throughout the state of California. Like I live in Sacramento. We have a municipal utility -- SMUD. And our rates are much lower than a PG&E [Pacific Gas and Electric]. And why can't we have this throughout...? But because -- you see, utilities, because they are utilities, because they are regulated utilities -- regulation doesn't mean that they can't make a profit. Regulation means -- is that the only way they can make a profit is by expanding their rate base, which is why -- happens through building more facilities, which takes away land, which take- we harped on this all the time, you know? They're going to grab this, and they're going to grab that, because on a regulated utility, that's the only way you can increase profits, and everybody's goal was to increase profits. And just because it was regulated by the PUC doesn't mean a thing, because they can justify a rate increase if they can come in and say, "Our rate of return to our base has to be increased so we can make a profit to pay our stockholders." And Europeans laugh at us because we pay a stockholder profit on the utilities. It's totally... But you see, even though schools are socialism, and roads are socialism, and things like this, the opponents will wave the S-word every time. They'll say, "They're trying to socialize duh-duh-duh. You want the government running your utilities? You'll be blacked out in a day!

You won't" -- you know? And this is -- I'm sorry to say, but this is an understandable issue with the people. And they will vote against their own interests every time because of that -- you wave the S-word, and it's gone. So we tried to always avoid that part of it, because we knew we couldn't win on that level.

COLLINGS

Yeah. So yeah, I'm just -- I guess I'm just wondering how much the social activist climate of the Seventies helped you along with your political efforts? I mean, what if you were doing the same things today?

WILSON

Well...I'm mostly writing today. (laughter) My interests have changed. But I mean, up until a few years ago, I almost got -- I moved back to New York for -- upstate New York for two years, and I exposed our local state Senator [Tom Libous] selling sportswear out of his Senate office, and the Democrats wanted to run me against him! (laughter) Because I was his biggest nightmare at that time. But you have to be a five-year resident. But I worked for Citizen Action back in New York, but...

It was the Sixties and the hippie movement and so forth that raised the consciousness of everybody toward social action. Now, what happened -- I'm going to give you an insight on this. I'm a big fan of Thomas [Paine], and I've written -- especially his theology, and I've read everything he's ever written. But in a biography of Thomas [Paine], I was reading that when he was a tax collector in England under [King] George III that people were talking about overthrowing the king. It was in the hamlets and villages; everybody was -- riots were fomenting. I mean, a movement was fomented in the streets. So what George III -- probably his advisors -- did was they released gin, which was the drink of the aristocracy, into the local pubs. And within a week, everybody -- women and children were falling-down drunk in the streets. No movement. End of movement, end of revolt -- everything done. Now, I am convinced that somewhere, there's a book where things like this are all written down, and it's inherited by kings and presidents, OK?

So now let's switch to the Sixties, you see, and drugs. Because the problem with the hippie movement -- it had a chance. There were two things that ruined the hippie movement. One was it devolved into drugs, sex, and rock n' roll. And the other one was that they couldn't accept anybody's leadership. "Don't trust any authority." This was the biggest -- I mean, if they only knew that -- you know, every conductor -- every orchestra has a conductor; a ship has to have a captain, you know? You need leadership. You need enlightened leadership. But they didn't trust anybody, you see? And so the government, you see, was -- has been in the dope business every since the beginning of the Vietnam War. The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia, that book. I mean, the

CIA is bringing it back in diplomatic pouches and everything. So that -- so all the agent provocateurs went out and started giving everybody dope, and get everybody hooked on -- end of movement, you see?

But still, that and people like Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King [Jr.], you see -- and then they got assassinated. And you see, all three -- the two Kennedys and Martin Luther King -- the real story of their assassination has surfaced, but I mean, it was all government/CIA/mafia plots. The government has been taken over by the mafia as far as I'm concerned, and people don't even know it because when -- The Godfather, Kate says to Sonny, "Sonny, you promised me by 1957 it would all be legit!" You see? Because all their sons and daughters have gone to Harvard now, and there are holding companies that have holding companies and everything, and they buy off the politicians, and they buy off the local judges, not in a buy-off -- giving an envelope to somebody on a dark street, but providing them with trips and this and all -- you know, like this guy in San Diego recently who just caught. Everybody's bought off. The government is bought and paid for. And there's nothing anybody can do about it because nobody can get it together, and if a hero ever did emerge -- and believe me, a lot have tried -- they'd kill him. And I think the only hope today is for an economic disaster, and we'd have to start all over again. And I don't think we're that far from it! (laughter)

COLLINGS

You sometimes wonder these days. Did you have any examples in the things -- movements that you were trying to organize of instances where people from the Left refused to take -- to be organized or to take direction, or to accept any kind of leadership? I mean, were there --

WILSON

Well, CAUSE, they accepted our leadership, yes. They absolutely accepted our leadership, and the only reason they did it is because Tim and I spent the time necessary to understand the issue. And you see, in organizations, the way somebody takes over -- you know, just as if -- let's say a martial arts class instructor, if somebody comes in and wants to take over his class, he's got to have a fight with the instructor; if he wins, he wins the class, you see? In the movement, you articulate better than somebody else, and that way you bring people to your side -- things like that. And --

COLLINGS

Let me flip -- [END OF AUDIO FILE]

1.3. Session 2B (December 5, 2005)

WILSON

OK. In the movement, you -- people come at you by articulating the issues better. And there wasn't anybody in CAUSE who could articulate the issues better than Tim or I. Now, that was a great -- a part of it. But the other part of it was where -- that we were co-coordinators, you know? You can't fight two guys who can articulate the issues. It was that time in history when everything came together in the proper way. We didn't know it. You only understand this by analyzing it later, you know? But that was the thing: nobody could knock you off when you've got two coordinators. They can't knock off two guys. But we inspired leadership. I mean, afterwards, oh god. I mean, people came to me to lead all sorts of causes. And I ended up leading the tax revolt in the Valley with a bunch of right wingers! And that was tough. Taxpayers United for Freedom. But I don't know; that's -- you know?

COLLINGS

That's another story, right?

WILSON

Yeah.

COLLINGS

When -- now, when did CAUSE disband, so to speak?

WILSON

CAUSE disbanded after the phone company issues, because there were no more issues. What kind of you -- the Department of Water and Power, we had a guy on the rate-making committee. We defeated the ARCO Southern California Gas deal. We defeated LNG. We stopped the phone company from charging for Information calls for a number of years. We exposed the phone companies giving out unlisted numbers without a warrant. We got them to change their whole procedure on that, because we either -- said you either do this or end the 15-cent charge for having your number unlisted, which was specious. So -- and it was after that -- after the phone issue of unlisted numbers, there were suddenly no more issues.

And I look back on it now, and I see that what happened was the playing field had changed, and it was the utilities which changed the playing field. And from then on, it was like the phone company putting this guy Doug Cameron on me, you know? We made them -- to combat Tim and I, they had to change the way they did things. So the way they changed things was to be a consumer advocate on a big issue -- not a local issue, and there are plenty of local issues that we didn't get involved in because we were always on state-wide issues -- that you had to almost be a lawyer to do things. And that's the way they changed the playing field: that you couldn't be a guy off the streets with a few smart to come in and -- with nothing to lose and take on the utilities. You had to be a lawyer. You see? And that's when the whole playing field changed. And I could feel it. I could feel that I was -- it's like being somebody in a business (laughter)

who your job is suddenly outmoded one day, there's no use for you anymore. And there always in on local -- and things you can do something about. But now you had to have a team of lawyers in back of you.

COLLINGS

So they were just simply protecting themselves legally on every front?

WILSON

Exactly.

COLLINGS

Whereas before, they had not bothered because nobody had been challenging them?

WILSON

Our actions changed the way they wrote the procedures on the back of the gas bills. They wrote that out so people couldn't just file a complaint if they felt like it, which they could in those days, which we discovered and went after. The phone company changed their rules on unlisted numbers and other things. They eventually got -- one of our biggest things with the phone company -- this was wonderful -- was they wanted people to pay for calls to Information. And remember, at that time, you didn't have to pay for Information calling. So they had it before the Public Utilities Commission that they wanted to institute a -- I forget what it was at the beginning -- five, ten, or 15 cents charge for information. So I looked through the regulations and everything, and I concluded that in order to charge for information, we had to have access to the numbers through phone books. Because what they wanted to do was cut down phone book usage -- you see what they're thinking?

Of course -- let me digress a minute. Every utility -- and I can't say it -- this wasn't planned a long time ago -- suddenly realized that anything they could bifurcate or separate or put off into its own little area became a profit lever. And any time you wanted to raise profits, all you had to do was hit this lever here. Operator charges, Information charges, unassisted numbers -- you know, the whole thing, they became profit levers. So this was a profit lever. But at the time, you could make the case -- which is what I did -- that it's -- oh, what's the word for it? There's a constitutional word -- confiscatory. It's confiscatory to charge us for looking at -- have an operator look under -- up an unlisted number if we don't have the directory.

So we called a news conference, and we asked everybody, "This is what the phone company wants to do." And of course, the phone company would deny it. "So call up the phone company and order all the directories (laughter) to be delivered to your house." Well, somebody in the phone company sent me an internal memory --

COLLINGS

Memo.

WILSON

-- memo that the phone company was saying, "Try to dissuade them on the phone, and by all means don't mention this -- the Catalina directory because the insurance would (inaudible)." So we said, "Ask for all the directories, especially the Catalina directory!" (laughter) And then on my TV show, we started -- we had a person coming on, and we had this big -- I mean, when you - - they were delivered, it was this high, with -- it's bundled in twine. So we had a person saying, "What you can do with your phone directories!" They make good scratching posts for cats. You can put a tray on them, (laughter), you know, and all this stuff. I mean, we just -- ridicule is the greatest thing in the world when you're fighting power, is ridicule. And this was ridicule. Well, then all of a sudden we won. And I think this is probably the best thought I ever had in the whole movement, because there we are, we've won, and we've got nothing more to fight, you know? So I called up Peter Christiansen, and I said, "Let's go around and collect all the directories and return them to the phone companies." (laughter) So we got in my station wagon -- his -- we went all over; we collected all their -- and we called the news media, and there we were (laughter) carting the directories -- cameras everywhere. Oh god, the phone company hated it. (laughter) So we milked that situation for more, and it was wonderful media. It was wonderful theater, because that's when you get -- when you get right down to it, it's theater, you know? Theater in the purest sense, from (inaudible) , when theater began as a means to instruct people in things. Moral issues.

COLLINGS

It sounds like so much of what you did was theater. Did you have an interest in theater all along?

WILSON

Oh, yeah. I was (inaudible) in junior college, I did a number of plays. And I've always been a musician and an MC in my bands, and you always have to tell jokes, you know? And I almost won an Army talent contest in Colorado Springs with my ukulele and jokes, snappy patter, and... So I was very comfortable on the stage. I always have been. I don't know why, but since I was a kid, I never feared getting up in front of people and talking. And Tim didn't, either. Tim could get up with anybody, and he'd just make it up as he went along. Tim was wonderful. (laughter) It was wonderful.

COLLINGS

Yeah. Well, you must have missed CAUSE after you left it.

WILSON

Well, it's like when I left Watts. Can you imagine leaving Watts after six years of every Saturday and Sunday -- and most Thursdays and Fridays, as far as that goes? Six years!

COLLINGS

Yeah. That's a long time.

WILSON

-- of spending every weekend in Watts. My first weekend, I didn't know what to do. I did not know what to do. And it was then that I realized, well, dummy, (laughter) this is what you do. You know? But I have never been one to go out and look for something to do, because in those days you didn't have to. There was a much -- so much chicanery going on that everywhere you looked, there was something you could get involved in. And I said to myself, "Well, you know..." I mean, because you -- it's on a scale. You weigh things, and you think -- the old paradigm was, "I have to make a lot of money to look out for my retirement, and do this." On the other hand, I'm single, I'm free, I can do -- that's one thing about my life: I've done exactly what I've wanted to do my whole life. I've never had to compromise. And how many people can say that, you know? So I was available! (laughter) And I had found a calling, you know? And sadly -- I tried to capitalize on that when I ran for office, State Assembly. And I would've; I found out later that Mike Roos, who actually won that race -- I should've pulled out of the race. Dave Roberti, who was the president of the Senate, said he was going to support me. He withdrew support me -- he withdrew support and threw it behind Sabrina Schiller, who was a carpetbagger whose husband Bob wrote for All in the Family. And after every event that we spoke, Bob would come up to me, and he'd say, "You're the best guy in the race." (laughter) I loved him for that.

COLLINGS

So right after CAUSE was when you ran for Assemblyman?

WILSON

I ran for Assemblyman in 1977 because [Assemblyman Charles] Charlie Warren, who as a politician was a backer of CAUSE, went to join the [President Jimmy] Carter administration in the energy field. Charlie introduced a lot of bills, and he and I were good friends. And so it was an open race, and 17 people ran. And I had found out that somebody had done a poll in a district, and I had a 9% name recognition already in the district through my CAUSE activities. And I thought I would be able -- I would probably be a single-term (laughter) Assemblyman, but I might be able to create enough, (laughter) you know, in my two years.

I shouldn't have run. I mean, I was one of those people that was -- you wouldn't think it from what we did, but I was naïve in many ways. I learned things about the inner workings, and I learned them the hard way. And one was this: it was that Mike Ruce financed four other people in that race. He financed the senior citizen guy, the Japanese guy, the Filipino guy... I got the black vote. I got -- because my district extended down near Watts, and I was friends with all the

black ministers, including the guy who worked with Martin Luther King, James -- I can't remember his name now. But all -- I was -- the black ministers supported me. And I went around the black churches, and I found out that I could -- this was a lot of fun -- I could speak in a black cadence. I could start out slow, like Martin Luther King did, and gradually increase, you know? And lead people along step by step (inaudible) do. And it was a wonderful, wonderful -- I love black people. I mean -- of course, I was black in my last life, so... (laughter) A black piano player in New Orleans.

So...I remember that. But he financed four other people in the race. Now, here's the thing: he won the race with 6,000 votes, and I came in third or fourth with about 2,600-2,700. And that was a special election in May of 1977. In the regular election in November of 1977, I ran for Democratic County Committee, and I headed the ticket with over 10,000 votes, you see? So his splitting the vote by financing four other guys really won him the election.

Now, let me say this: everything I just said was my opinion, and (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)

COLLINGS

Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah -- of course. Now, was there ever any thinking among the CAUSE participants or you and Burt that CAUSE could perhaps go into other kinds of efforts, like American foreign policy or other...? Because you say there were no more issues. Was there ever any thinking that you might change the agenda, the kinds of things that you were going after?

WILSON

Well, the only way -- you see, the driving factor in our success was this was money coming out of people's pockets, and it was their personal self-interest. Those other causes --

COLLINGS

Too abstract?

WILSON

-- it -- I mean, where you have 99 in the personal self-interest, it goes down to one percent where it's a national issue, and do I have time to do -- do I want to worry about this? I mean... That's why I'm in love with USC football right now: because it takes my mind off [President] George [W.] Bush and the Iraq War and all of that, you know? I'm serious! Otherwise, I would...don't get me started. (laughter)

COLLINGS

Yeah, really. (laughter)

WILSON

But also, I have a website now on which I talk about that stuff. It's called "Ancient Wisdom for the 21st Century." And I get 3,000 hits a month. And

what I do is I articulate spiritual issues in a sense of what it means to a person in daily life, rather than (inaudible) the cosmos, you know, or...

COLLINGS

Right, right, right. So the daily life issues are like a real cornerstone for --

WILSON

Exactly.

COLLINGS

-- everything that you were doing?

WILSON

Exactly. OK. So whether you believe in reincarnation or do you believe? Why is there reincarnation? How does karma work, you know? Those are things -- and I get 3,000 visits a month from all over the world.

COLLINGS

Did you have these kinds of spiritual interests while you were doing all of this very --

WILSON

Yes.

COLLINGS

-- very practical --

WILSON

Yes.

COLLINGS

-- political activity?

WILSON

Yes. It was something I drew upon. It was something I drew upon because it was like -- I treated it not as if I was getting the bad guys, because you always have to have respect for your opponent. When you lose respect for your opponent, that's when they turn around and bite you when you least expect it. But I looked upon it as an education, from my standpoint. I looked upon it -- I was educating myself in government; I was educating myself in human relationships; I was educating myself in movement politics, which involves both of them; and I was learning, learning, learning about people and issues, and the way things work, and especially how people respond to different things. Because that's the whole thing. I used to say in my speeches responsibility is the ability to respond, you see? And not everybody is responsible in that way. They don't want to respond. They say, "Don't bother me with that," you know? And I would try to -- not in this way I'm explaining it now, but people think that -- you know, they draw two circles: here's the world, and here's me. And I'm outside of this issue. But I said, "No, here's the world, and here's you. You can't escape!" (laughter) You have by the very aspect of your birth a responsibility towards the common good and humanity. And that's what drives

me. You see, there's a -- there is a fragment of the ancient wisdom which says you can not advance -- now, they're speaking of spiritual advancement, which one doesn't think about anyway, but this applies to material wisdom as well -- is that you can not speak your advancement in competition over others. You can only seek your own advancement in the advancement of all. And that was my basic philosophy, you see, is that if -- and even as -- if you can empower other people. My philosophy was to give people empowerment over their own lives, and that's what it was all about.

COLLINGS

Yeah. Are there -- in the organization, were there other -- like younger people, perhaps? Is there anything that you can point to as being the legacy of CAUSE? Perhaps other groups in Los Angeles, or perhaps young people that took you as an example?

WILSON

Well, those are things you never know. It was just like out of all the people who came to Watts, I have a -- I still keep -- I have a stack of letters from people who came down to Watts and worked with me who wrote me a letter later thanking me for the experience. And what they -- they -- "Oh, I never knew it was like that," you know? Or -- and it -- the best thing we did is we allowed people to overcome their fear of black people. Because nobody would admit that, but that is a basic primal fear that they had. I had it, too. I had to overcome that. I mean, you don't want to think you have it, you don't want to admit that you have it, but basically you do. (laughter) And you have to overcome that. But our legacy, it's like then -- I don't know what happened to those people, you know? I mean, I was given an award by Aleph Zadik Aleph, a Jewish organization in the Valley, for my work. So I know I must have influenced a few kids in that, you know? And you never -- there's a thing in the ancient wisdom where you say you never calculate the effect of what you do. You spread it, and then karma will pick it up here and there, and that takes care of it. If I was working in a results-oriented mindset, I would not be able to have done the things I did. You have to do it and not worry about the other. That will take care of itself some ways. And I never look to follow it up, but I know a lot of people looked up to me, and I tried to leadership, and I tried to be a responsible leader at all times. And I hope I was.

COLLINGS

Now, when did you stop broadcasting? You --

WILSON

Start?

COLLINGS

Stop?

WILSON

Stop?
COLLINGS

Yeah.

WILSON

Oh, OK. The -- my defeat in the election -- and that was funny, because Tom Hayden is who -- Jane Fonda gave me \$500. I mean, she said, "Burt, if you want me to distribute stuff at supermarkets, I'll be glad." She's a wonderful woman. I ran into her a few years ago again. She remembers me. And Tom supported me. Of course, we supported -- Tom's campaign against Tunney was going on at the same time, and Fred Branfman, who is a big politico now, good strategist, we interlocked our campaigns around Tom's movement for economic democracy, even with people like Derek Shearer backing him up, who is a wonderful strategist and -- you know, a little on the elitist side, but...

Because...you see, this is my own idea, but I'm pretty confident with it: when you go out and try to create a movement in back of yourself, you are suspect to so many people because you're doing it for your own self-aggrandizement. And people understand that, whether they deli- you know, consciously understand it or not. There's something about it that "I'm being used here. I'm a soldier in this..." And on the other hand, there are political junkies who will -- at any -- at the drop of a hat, follow you around and do anything. But those things never worked when there was a leader like that. I -- and Tim, too -- have always been for diversity, you see, and we also tried to diversify the process, because if you -- if you're -- if the Gas Company is fighting one target, that's one thing. If they've got three or four targets, then they have to diffuse their forces. And in a 29-member coalition, we had diversity. But the other -- when people try to organize things behind a personality, or a leader, or something like that, diversity goes, and it becomes a pyramidal organization, top-down. And people I think understand that subconsciously, of what's really happening there. And I think -- that's why Tim and I came up with Public Enterprise. Public Enterprise was a state bank, a state insurance company, state-run utilities, and something else. And we felt this would free the people of California.

COLLINGS

Insurance, I think, was the other one.

WILSON

Insur- I mentioned insurance, yeah. Because insurance is a big issue. The insurance companies are losing millions of dollars a day because they can't invest it fast enough! (laughter) And so we called it "Public Enterprise" rather than socialism, you know? And later, I was recruited and I joined the Democratic Socialists of America. I was the head of the L.A. office. And I will never forget my relationship with Michael Harrington, who was one of the

most brilliant men I have ever met in my life. And Irving Howe, the writer. Again, I mean, I got to hobnob with great people. But -- and of course, they needed me, because I was the consumer guy with all the publicity in Los Angeles. And I have a socialist mind, but I'm not a communist or a socialist, but what I found out -- I only last a year, maybe a year and a half -- when I went to their meetings, they were all academics, and their show of power was which old man could walk around with the youngest blonde chick on their arm, you see? And that was their whole thing. And all they were interested in was making debating points on issues. And like Harold Meyerson, who was my friend, who was a columnist with the L.A. Weekly and also the Washington Post now, he said, "We consider ourselves the left wing of the Democratic Party." Well, they don't DO anything -- they just try to infuse ideas to work themselves up. I'm a doer, you see? And none of them were do -- none of them ever did a thing. Michael Harrington wrote great books, and one of them influenced President Kennedy: *The Other America*. And he was a brilliant thinker, just a brilliant thinker, and I enjoyed my association with him. And one night -- I don't know what led me to this, but Ed Koupal, founder of People's Lobby, we had a meeting over in the Chateau Marmont, and at that meeting, myself and Ed Koupal, Harry Chapin, Ralph Nader, a singer -- Jerry Brown's girlfriend [Linda Ronstadt] -- and a couple of other movie actresses. And Harry Chapin sat down in the middle of the floor and outlined a plan to, in a sense, take over America. To take back America, you know? And he was one of the most passionate people I have ever met, politically, you know? And I liked his plan because it was diversified. And he was for building diverse movements around issues in different areas, and I think that'll work. I think that'll work. And you have a loose-knit collaboration, you see? And I was enthralled at that. And within a year, Harry was dead. I mean, not that he was assassinated. He was dead. He died from something else. But that was a wonderful...

COLLINGS

So yeah, that was kind of an example of how you --

WILSON

Could do it, yeah.

COLLINGS

Yeah -- stepped into some of the other kinds of --

WILSON

But I --

COLLINGS

-- social issues.

WILSON

-- never, and Tim never, and Harry Chapin never -- and this is where we disagree with Ralph Nader, because we disagreed with a lot on Ralph, because I think Ralph has shown his true colors. I mean, the first time Ralph started supporting a candidate, he vote- he supported Conway Collis for Board of Equalization in the 1990s. I mean, he should've never gotten into politics. And this frequent running for President, that shows -- one of my friends -- musician friends who was a secretary of the Sacramento Labor Council, Tom Kennedy, I think he called Tom Hayden and Ralph Nader an "eco freak," because -- he says, "You're not an eco freak, are you, Burt?" (laughter) I said, "No, I'm not." But you know, that's what happens when you think -- because YOU know what's going on, you think if you go out on the street corner and say it that you'll build a following, and it ain't necessarily so.

COLLINGS

Yeah. Now, did you have any particular dealings with Ralph Nader when you working with CAUSE?

WILSON

No. We might have gotten some -- Joan Claybrook worked for him (inaudible). We might have gotten some statistics from Joan, but Ralph was into a whole other thing. We were -- we felt we were on the same side, but you see -- who's the guy? He was a good friend of me at one time. Who did the thing against the insurance companies back in the '90s? Harry...?

COLLINGS

We'll get the name.

WILSON

He was a Ralph Nader disciple, you see? They're all out there doing things to try to build an organization. We did things never thinking of trying to build an organization.

COLLINGS

Right. That's what I was wondering.

WILSON

See, and that's the big difference, because there's no self-aggrandizement involved. And people -- I go back subconsciously, see somebody out there, and they say, "Well, some guy's trying to be -- he's running for office." You don't know how many times I got accused of running for office -- and then I finally ran for office! (laughter) And I had to think about that, you know? It might have been a big mistake. When Senator [David A.] Roberti pulled out, I should've pulled out, too, but...

But it was after that that I quit my radio program ["What You Can Do for Your Country"]. I turned my radio program over to Tim, by the way, and Tim [Brick] ran it for several years after that, doing a -- he called it "Common Sense." Tim's very good at doing that sort of thing.

COLLINGS

Now, did you pull out of the broadcasting because -- in the same way that you left CAUSE? You felt that you didn't have a particular issue that you needed to address at that time?

WILSON

Well, I'll...let me be more specific. Losing an election is about the worst thing that can ever happen to you. Because you feel that you let everybody down. And I was just devastated when I lost the election, because there were so many people who were -- who did work for me, including my son [Steven Ashley Wilson], and my son was living in our community house by then. And he was also a probationary disciple of my guru. Now, our -- the disciples of my teacher, we had all gone in and bought a ranch up in Oregon -- only 24 acres, but it was a place to go. I went up there, and then I decided that...my motivations were twofold. One, I didn't want to get involved in an organization that had to raise money, and that's the way things seemed to be going. I (inaudible). The other thing is, I wanted to change my life, because I had done this at various times, and I just pulled up stakes and gone.

So I went up to Oregon, and I went up to Portland, where I had friends, and I became the head of the broadcast department of a business school [Head of Broadcasting Section of the Northwest College of Business] there. (laughter). And played in a jazz band four nights a week also. And I had a great time. And I used to go up and visit my friends Barry and Carol [Durkee] in Seattle. Carol is that Carol. My friend Barry had a heart attack; one of my best friends, died at 50. Carol was his widow. And Carol and I have known each other since we were 13, in junior high school. So gradually, we got together. But I had a great time up there, and I had a great time teaching school. I always considered myself a good teacher. And then the management changed, and it got awfully -- oh, bad. Really bad. I was brought in because they were about to lose 36 students because they didn't have the proper leadership in the department, and I was the one that saved their \$3,000 times 36, saved that money.

So from there, I went to New York, because I had -- my guru lives in New York, and I had friends there, and I got -- I lived on -- I lived in [New] Jersey. I got a job in the Empire State Building at an ad agency managing an ad agency, 66th floor, which packaged menswear campaigns and sent them out all over the country. So I was using my graphic talents as well as my production -- radio and television production talents. And that was a lot of fun.

COLLINGS

And you were completely out of issues?

WILSON

Completely out. Then I had thyroid cancer, so I went to the hospital, and they fired me while I was in the hospital -- (laughter) nice of them to do. And I was

home recuperating, and Tim calls -- because I always keep in touch all my old friends. Tim and I have always been in touch. And he says, "Burt, come on out here. I got a place for you on the Campaign against the Peripheral Canal." And I said, "I'm outta here!" (laughter) And a week later, I was in Los Angeles -- living in Pasadena, actually -- working with Tim on the campaign to defeat the Peripheral Canal. You know what that is?

COLLINGS

The -- from --

WILSON

A cement ditch from Sacramento to Stockton. Yeah. Well, we had the worst part of that time, because we had to convince people in southern California not to take as much water --

COLLINGS

Right. I --

WILSON

-- from northern California.

COLLINGS

-- would think that would be a tough one.

WILSON

Well, that was -- well, I'll tell you what happened. (laughter) I had visual aids, you know? I had a big cement ditch, and then all of this stuff. And we were -- again, we were able to articulate the issues. And I kicked off the campaign by calling a news conference which featured Tim. I was in charge of free media -- in other words, showtime, getting things on the media for free. And we had a lot of stunts, but we did a really good job, and it was because of the graphics that we had that we convinced Channel 2 to be on our side -- the only station in southern California to go against. And the station manager, as he was walking out of the room, he says, "Nice graphics." (laughter)

So we won southern California, and everybody thought that from the beginning, it was ours to lose. I mean, the whole election was ours to lose. So we won that. Then Tim and I went to work for -- this was 1980, '81, '82. Then Tim and I went to work for Dr. Wilson Riles.

COLLINGS

Let me get -- let me put another tape in here. [END OF AUDIO FILE]

1.4. Session 3 (December 5, 2005)

WILSON

-- you're out. And -- but Riles took a liking to me because I used to feed him lines and phrases on the issues that he can -- that he liked. So he insisted that I travel with him everywhere he went as his press secretary. So I became his

personal press secretary, and I traveled all over California, and to editorial board meetings and stuff like that, and giving him lines to say. Unfortunately, he lost the election, and he never paid me my (laughter) last paycheck. I eventually forgave it -- forgave him that. But I learned a lot in that election, too. Now, let's see -- that was 1982.

Then...

COLLINGS

So what made you want to jump back into the world of issues?

WILSON

The world of business.

COLLINGS

The world of business just kind of soured you, and probably being fired while you were out sick...?

WILSON

Well...you know, as you get more into what I would call an "inner life" -- and this isn't an especially -- an especial yoga thing; people do it spontaneously without yoga. They -- you know, you start to put two and together -- I mean, if you're smart -- after a while, and you understand what are the dynamics of this, and what are the dynamics of that, and so forth. And at that time, it wasn't hard for me to articulate the idea that I wasn't cut out for the corporate culture that much.

Now, I'm going to --

COLLINGS

(inaudible) especially the corporate culture of the Eighties we're talking about now, right?

WILSON

Yeah. Oh, yeah. That was the merger/acquisition age. But I did go into it, and I'll tell you about that in a minute.

But first, a guy who had a directory company in Arcadia -- Clark Directory Systems -- there came a -- the phone company -- they -- there was a bill before the PUC [Public Utilities Commission] to open up the directories to anybody who wanted to publish a directory. Well, this is stupid, you know? Because it means that the consumer then -- if he wants to cover the market to really cover themselves -- has to buy more ads in more directories. And the directories aren't all that necessary; neither are they all that good. And most people stick with the phone company directory. But he (inaudible) establish an alternative directory. So he hired me to be a lobbyist in Sacramento on this issue.

And so the first thing I did was stage a media event out in Arcadia. The phone company showed up. (laughter) We had a whole bunch of people saying -- you know, I mean, I had leading citizens say we don't need this and that, and duh-duh-duh-duh-duh, and it's a bad bill for business. That was my articulation

issue -- and it was. It was a bad bill for business. And then I went up to Sacramento, where it was really being fought, and I went around to see everybody -- all the politicians I knew, and all the politicians I didn't know. And what it came down to was during the hearing, before we -- he went into the hearing, [Assemblyman] Doug Bosco from Eureka was talking to the phone company guys, and so they went through the -- and we couldn't get to the point where they were talking, because it was off-limits to me, but it was OK for the phone company lobbyists, you know? And I'm running up and down the stairs and chasing everybody all around and everything.

And I forget the guy who was the head of the committee, but he was a long-term Democrat, and -- you see, it doesn't make any difference, Democrat/Republicans, in the long run -- although it may in some areas. But they took a vote, and the vote was three to three. And that would've won it for us, and he's got his gavel, and he's saying, "OK. The vote is three to three. Does anybody want to change their vote?" (laughter) "Does anybody want to change their vote?" Finally Doug Bosco, you know, who was the great liberal Democrat: "I'm changing my vote." You know? Because the deal was -- as I found out later -- was that he would vote on my side if it didn't come down to him being the deciding vote. But if it came down to the deciding vote -- you know, he was bought off -- he would vote for the phone company. Well, he did. Crushed. I was crushed. I went home, and I got pneumonia. (laughter) And that was an experience in itself. And that was in 1979.

Now, after the elections I worked with Jim [Clark], I go to work for this guy who hired me as a lobbyist as a salesman. I didn't have anywhere else to go. And I was damn good at it. But then I applied for a job as advertising -- director of advertising at Pleasant Hawaiian Holidays. Now, this involved a lot of things for me: I loved the travel business; I love to travel; I love being the head of an advertising -- house advertising agency. And out of 596 applications, I got the job. So I embarked then on five years of the most miserable five years I ever got, working for Ed Hogan and his artist wife, Lynn [Hogan], who ran the mom & pop -- we had a love/hate relationship. He loved it because I could do so many things, but he hated it because people liked me. When I got there, I instituted a company picnic; I instituted company theater parties. And then his wife wrote me a three-page memo of how I was a bad manager because all I wanted to do was have people like me. (laughter) And you see, everybody liked me, and more people liked me than they liked Ed Hogan, so that was the -- that was the problem right there.

So I was dealing with a mom & pop, big-time operation. They hired two vice presidents over me, and fired both vice presidents, because they couldn't do what I could do. And I even ended up getting a five-year pin. Now, they finally hire another vice president over me, and his orders are to get me to walk. And

they take away my parking place, they give me a small office and everything, and they were monitoring my phone calls. I didn't find this out till later. I was in touch with a lawyer, and the lawyer said, "Well, when you're fired, call me -- it's worth about 60 grand." (laughter)

So one night, I took out for drinks -- although I don't drink, I took (inaudible) out -- the vice president, and I said, "Greg, I don't know how you look at yourself in the mirror when you wake up in the morning, but I want you to know one thing: I'm not walking. You're going to have to fire me." And he says, "Well, you're already fired. We're just trying to figure out what to do with you." And I said, "Oh. OK." So I went in the next morning right to Human Services, and I said, "I understand that I have been fired. I would like a letter of termination on my desk by 12 noon." The wires went back and forth -- (laughter) this was so funny -- and -- oh! The reason was -- is because he got a new CEO, and the new CEO -- who was a pistol -- came in and started barking orders one day, and I was trying to take down the prices he wanted me to advertise in different cities, and I said, "Excuse me, Frank -- I didn't get that last price." And he said, "Well, if you cleaned your ears, you'd rather -- you would be able to hear better." And I said, "Jesus Christ, Frank, we don't need that kind of talk around here!" And of course, he was the -- of the school you don't get mad, (laughter) you get even. And "getting even" was they went -- they hired a vice president over me and told him to get me to walk. So... So after I asked for my letter of inter- termination, they call me into a meeting at two in the afternoon, and they said, "Burt, we've been thinking this over, (laughter) and we've been thinking of hiring you under a personal contract to do our videos and audio presentations for a year at \$60,000 a year." And they said, "How much are you making, Burt?" And I said, "Well" -- I was making \$50,000, plus I get a \$500 car allowance. And the new vice president said, "You what?!" (laughter) And I said, "Didn't you negotiate the same thing, Greg?" (laughter) And so I ended up in my own business, my own video production business at \$5,000 a month so I wouldn't sue them, because they had heard my conversations. And do you know, a year later Greg called me up from Seattle and apologized? Also, the woman who owned the ad agency in New York called me up from Florida, where she had retired -- sent me a letter apologizing. Two people have apologized to me. And in Watts, after the whole thing was over, I got a call from Curtis Gassoway (sp?), who was on the committee, and he said, "Burt, we want to come over to see you on Sunday." This was a year after Watts. And I said, "Why?" He says, "Well, we want to apologize." But they never came over. (laughter)

COLLINGS

And what did they want to apologize for?

WILSON

For the way I was treated when I was attacked in the meeting, you see? Because see, here's what -- let me go back to that for a minute. Here's what they did: the smart people in Watts hung onto their houses when the eminent domain process was going on, and they held out for a lot of money. So the city just gave them more money for their property, and in effect bought them off, you see? And that's why their interest was not in what I and the women of Watts -- because all the mothers were on my side -- were trying to do with single-family housing. They just wanted money for their house. And neither did they want to get involved in politics or things like that, because -- so they wanted to apologize to me (laughter) for that.

So let me see... I went from Pleasant Hawaiian Holidays and I moved to Simi Valley. I became a producer of cable television commercials until 1998, when some people who were my guru's disciples back where he had had his ashram near Binghamton, and -- asked me to come back there and teach. By that time, I had become a member of the board of Manly Hall's Philosophical and Research Society on Los Feliz Boulevard, and I took over some of his speaking engagements. And I became a teacher/lecturer there for two years. Then I went back east and things got boring, so I joined Citizen Action and got involved in local issues. And they took advantage of my strategy (laughter) and theater concepts. They were all for it. They were all wonderful. And then, since -- because I was living on Social Security and everybody there was afraid of the local state senator, they asked me to lead the charge against his selling sportswear out of the office, his office. And so I did, and I went on the radio and television and everything, and became his worst nightmare. And eventually, he backed down and stopped. And the editorials in the papers, you know, never mentioned me at all.

But the thing that -- about that incident that I really liked was the local talk radio station asked me in to debate the issue with one of their people, and they said, "Oh, by the way, Libous" -- which was the senator, [Tom] Libous -- "might be in later to join the debate." Well, "later," hell! He had a previous engagement, but they wanted to stage a debate between Libous and myself. And I'm sure Libous had asked for it, because he owned that whole city. Anybody who wanted to get anywhere had to be a Republican, and they had to vote for Libous, and they had to -- you know, it was all... And that's the way it'll be until he dies, because there's nothing like upstate New York politics -- whew!

So I get there, and another guy tries to articulate that side, and Libous gets there, and he walks in, "Here I am, the senator, and who the hell are you doing this?" and everything, and... And he starts articulating his issue, and I'm articulating right back at -- you know, and standing up every sentence to him and everything. And he says -- and he finally came down to, "Well, you know,

and this was what I'm trying to do, and here you are sitting over there smirking at me," you know? So I look at the host of the program and I said, "Roger, am I smirking?" (laughter) And he said, "No, you look very composed to me." (laughter) So I had him! You know? (laughter) And everybody commented on that the next day, you know? Because from then on, it was downhill for him the whole way. Oh god, that was funny!

And then I came back to Sacramento, my hometown, when I got a call from an ex-girlfriend that her son's video center lost its manager, and would I come back and manage it? So I did for a year, and then I arranged -- I rearranged the whole thing with new managers and everything, and said, "Look, Gary -- I don't want to work." (laughter) "I don't want to be in this kind of environment. Keep me on, and let me do video editing and telecine work," which is putting home movies on DVD, and... So that's what I do. I'm in my own business inside that business. And in the meantime, I revived my jazz band, the Silver Dollar jazz band, and we became quite well known in northern California. And I'm writing another book now. I'm expanding on this book here, because I keep learning things, and it's tough to articulate an abstract god, which is why (laughter) major religions all, you know, have an anthropomorphic god for everybody to (laughter) worship. So I have a weekly television program called Ancient Wisdom for the 21st Century, and I talk about this on that program, and I have a seminar every Thursday, and I work every day, and...I spend the weekends with Carol. (laughter)

So that brings you up to date. I've probably missed a lot of stuff. If I could go through this, I'd probably remember a lot of stuff, but basically that's it.

COLLINGS

(inaudible)

WILSON

The Sacramento Bee editorial, January 7th, nineteen-sixty...the Sacramento Bee editorial, January 7th, 1976. The headline is, "The Consumers Win One," and it talks about -- "Consumers have won a major round in the Federal Power Commission decision halting the practice under which customers were expected to put up free capital financing future natural gas supplies from Alaska." Well, there you go. It doesn't mention CAUSE at all, and when it comes to...Ross, the Public Utilities commissioner: "Now Ross says he will urge the PUC to endorse the federal decision and call upon the utilities to renegotiate their contracts with the oil companies." He was the one who was for it, you know? And now like he's trying to be the consumer champion -- Leonard Ross, that's it. "Leonard Ross, the young and vigorous new member who led PUC opposition to the advance payments" -- baloney! "Gimmick (sp?) says the FPA order will mean a savings of \$1 billion to gas users throughout

California" -- yeah, that was the money they were going to collect! That was the savings, but we saved...

Now, this is an indication of how important it was. Conrad --

COLLINGS

(inaudible) victory celebration (inaudible)

WILSON

-- Conrad did a...I mean, he --

COLLINGS

[Paul] Conrad the political cartoonist [of the Los Angeles Times]?

WILSON

-- he did -- yeah, he did what the editorial writers couldn't bring themselves to do on that thing.

COLLINGS

And what's the date on that? Does it say?

WILSON

January 24th -- and that's my birthday.

COLLINGS

(inaudible) January 24th, 1976, from the L.A. Times (inaudible).

WILSON

That's when we ended our boycott, we canceled -- "Burt Wilson Call to Action" -- by the -- "A Victory for the Consumer" -- see? "The PUC Wednesday rescinded its earlier...the gas companies... CAUSE has been the principal public group in California to muster support against the advance public payments. Wilson said the boycott eventually resulted in more than 1,000 natural gas users sending their gas bills to the PUC in protest over the surcharge. 'Why did the FPC do that?' asked Wilson. 'It's because the people were withholding their bills, and that brought nationwide attention to the ARCO deal. The publicity made it almost impossible to keep the impact of these deals secret any longer. The PUC passed the buck on this issue to the federal government!'" That's what happened! I remember now. "'The PUC made a mistake, and they've been trying to get out of it without saying they were wrong.'" Exactly! "Wilson said the PUC reversal of its decision was a result of the consumer boycott. Wilson said the group is considering leading an initiative to have the PUC members elected" -- oh, that was another thing. "And mounting public sentiment against a proposal now before Congress to deregulate the price of natural gas, a move Wilson termed 'inflationary'." Sure, if you deregulate it. Then it becomes a free market issue.

This was our -- this was my op-ed piece on making public utilities --

COLLINGS

What's the date on that?

WILSON

-- truly public.

COLLINGS

The -- it's the Los Angeles Times?

WILSON

August 6th, 1978. This was where we wanted a...to have the utilities all be municipal utilities. No profit -- get the investor --

COLLINGS

That was the --

WILSON

-- profit out of the utilities.

COLLINGS

-- the Public Utilities thing?

WILSON

Yeah.

COLLINGS

The thing that you didn't want (inaudible)?

WILSON

Yeah. Exactly, exactly. Tim, by the way -- one Sunday, there were three really good letters in the Times about the boycott and about ARCO. Tim wrote all three of them. (laughter)

COLLINGS

Letters to the editor?

WILSON

(laughter) He just put in somebody's name, you know? (laughter)

Now, here's what I was arguing in that case against... "At a news conference Monday" -- the date on this is May 9th, 1978 --

COLLINGS

And that's from the L.A. Times also?

WILSON

Yeah. "...Wilson said, 'A recent report from the Finance Division Tax Unit of the Public Utilities Commission revealed that from 1974 to 1976, non-regulated affiliates in the Pacific Lighting Group incurred losses of \$109 million, half of which were offset by tax subsidies from southern California ratepayers.'" And you see, this is where I was talking about mingling their assets. They were able to mingle the assets from their losses and regain those losses through raising the rates, which is -- what a game! (laughter) What a game! They can get money to pay for your losses!

Oh, here's one thing --

COLLINGS

This was a CAUSE press release? Right?

WILSON

What?

COLLINGS

This was a CAUSE press release that you're reading from right now?

WILSON

This is the death -- this is the Eula Love. Now, what happened here was the police came out to a woman who hadn't paid her gas bill. And we all thought -- you know? And what she did was she had a knife in her hand, and she raised it, and the police shot her eight times.

COLLINGS

Whoa!

WILSON

Yes. So we filed a complaint about that, and "...a public interest group" -- that's us -- "an attempt to establish safeguards against confrontations over unpaid utility bills such as the recent one: Mrs. Eula Love, who was shot by police called to her home in a dispute over an unpaid bill." And I said, "'We are not trying to place blame, but we want to try to formulate policies that will prevent such tragedies from occurring again,' Wilson said. CAUSE in the past" has done this and this. So what she was -- what we feel that she was doing was protecting her family, you know? And maybe there were other issues involved. But the point is, she didn't deserve to be shot eight times. You see? And I forget what the final resolution of this was. They never prosecuted the officers. But I think we might have gotten at least a bone thrown to us by a rewriting of policy on confrontations between the police and people who don't pay their utility bills, because what a threat that is to a person's family -- you know, somebody coming out and turning off your gas like that. These are the things that keep you coming back, because --

COLLINGS

The police were called because the utility guy called them, because she wouldn't --

WILSON

Yeah.

COLLINGS

-- (inaudible) turn off the gas?

WILSON

Exactly. I think she attacked him with a shovel. (laughter) I mean, she came after him with a shovel. But I mean, any policeman is able to disarm a knife-wielding, matronly woman. But they felt their lives were threatened, so they shot her eight times.

The ARCO shark was -- everybody loved that. (laughter)

COLLINGS

The shark was (inaudible)

WILSON

Yeah.(break in audio)

[END OF AUDIO FILE]

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