A TEI Project

Interview of Marian Graff

Table of contents

1. Transcript
    1.1. Session 1 (February 16, 2010)
    1.2. Session 2 (February 25, 2010)
    1.3. Session 3 (March 3, 2010)

1. Transcript

1.1. Session 1 (February 16, 2010)

Espino
This is Virginia Espino and today is February 16, 2010. I'm interviewing Marian Graff at her home in--is this still Boyle Heights?
Graff
No, this is Los Angeles. It's called Hillside Village.
Espino
Hillside Village, Los Angeles, California. Marian, if you could just please start with your date of birth and then we'll move on to your family history.
Graff
I was born in Hartford, Connecticut, in the Hartford Hospital. My parents were living, evidently, with my grandparents, Mier [Cutler] and Esther Cutler, on a small farm in Newington Junction, Connecticut, which is just outside the capital.
Espino
Do you remember the year?
Graff
Yes. I was born in 1916, November the thirtieth, and the story in the family is that Mother [Katherine Cutler Graff] was waiting for my father to come home. It was Thanksgiving day, and by the time they got to the hospital the nurse told her, it's a good thing the window was closed, or I would have popped out right through it. And I always claim I was fat, especially when I was young, because I came after the stuffed turkey. [laughs]

Espino
That's a great story.
Graff
Yes. I really am not sure whether my folks--but I'm sure they were living with my grandparents at the time. My poor father had bad luck in business and every time he went broke, they went back to the farmhouse. Incidentally, that was an old, old house dating back to pre-Revolutionary [War] times. It was a duplex, so there were two sides to it, no plumbing, of course, no running water, a good old-fashioned type farm in the 1916s.
Espino
They used an outhouse?
Graff
Yes. I can remember walking out to the outhouse in the wintertime in the snow, and it was so cold, and I only had to urinate, and Mother said, "Oh, go in the snow bank." We didn't go all the way out there. And we used a Sears Roebuck catalog for toilet paper in those days. There's so much I can remember, but do you want me to start with the family history in Russia?
Espino
We can do that. Do you want to go back to your mom?
Graff
Might as well start from the very beginning.
Espino
Sure. Let's do that.
Graff
For my mother's father [Meyer Cutler], I knew he was orphaned at eight. I know nothing about his family, where he was born or anything. Mother's family, I do not know where my great-grandmother was born, but they ended up--my grandmother and grandfather, it was the customary arranged Jewish marriage. He was not religious, she was, and that carried through their life. They were living in Kiev, and he owned a vodka distillery. But in Russia, Jews could not own property, so he had to have a Christian partner. When they decided to come to the United States, the partner said to my grandfather, "I'll buy your share for three thousand rubles and if you don't like it, tough luck." And he had a gun on the desk.
And the reason my grandfather wanted to leave Russia was the fact that it was noted that Jews were--they had conscription in the

army, and Jews, Jewish men when there was a war, and Russia was always at war, were always in the front lines. He had four sons and one daughter, so he wanted to get out of there. He came to the United States by way of Canada by himself, and then he sent for Grandma and her five children. They came to the United States by way of Bremen, Germany, on an old-fashioned, what do you call the steamers that had the wheels, side wheels, and sails, and Mother was so sick she never could look at the ocean and waves without getting seasick for the rest of her life. It was hard to get her to go to the beach.

While they were in Bremen, of course, here she was a woman by herself with these five small children. The oldest was nine. The youngest--Mother was four, so the youngest, Leo Cutler must have been two. He was a very beautiful little boy and while she was busy doing something on the wharf, they tried to steal him. In those days there was a lot of that. Fortunately, I guess the kids noticed and got him back quickly. When they came to the United States, my grandfather, of course, wanted to buy land. This was his thing. He couldn't own anything in Russia, so every farm he bought unfortunately was not successful.

But they settled. I don't know whether he had one before--yes, he had one in Connecticut near Hartford, actually in what is now West Hartford, and years later that area, the land sold for the Hartford Country Club. But, of course, he sold at a loss. That was the story of his life. When he left there, they went to Colchester, which is a small town. I think it's near New Britain in Connecticut, and it was half Jewish and half Catholic Irish. The young priest used to come over and play poker with my uncles [Leo Cutler, Alex Cutler, Ben Cutler] who were young men at the time, and my stepfather [Joseph Graft] always teased Mother that nobody had ever heard of Colchester.

But when his daughter came out and visited us, she talked about the strange experience she had in Connecticut, where she went to this little town and they had to find a place to sleep, and in those days there weren't motels or anything. So she went into a little store. It turned out to be a Jewish delicatessen, which surprised her, with salami hanging in the window the way they used to do it, and he directed her to this beautiful colonial house, and the woman

who came out, of course, spoke with a Jewish accent, and so they were right at home.
Mother grew up there. The house they bought in Colchester had an attic full of old-time, a lot of stuff, and Mother found first editions of books by, oh, "Around the World in Eighty Days" [Jules Verne]. I can't remember his name right now. It'll come back to me. But anyway, she had these rare books, and she became a reader. She read them all. This is a later part of the story, but when we moved to California, she packed them up in crates and gave them to her sister-in-law to hold until she was settled, and when she wrote back to the sister-in-law and said, "Send the books to me," they couldn't find them, and she had a suspicion that her sister-in-law had sold them. But that's a side story.
But in Colchester she went to the New Britain High School, I think it is, and in those days you really got an education. She learned to speak German. She already spoke Russian, English. She learned to speak German, Latin, and French, so she and her friend Mary used to write letters to each other in Latin. She had a beautiful voice. She was brought up without prejudice, because the young girl or woman who accompanied her when she sang was black, and, of course, the two of them were frequently the result of anti-Semitic and anti-black--
Espino
Okay, we're back on, and you were talking about how your mother grew up with an African American--
Graff
Yes, with prejudice, right.
Espino
--without prejudice.
Graff
And so she raised us not to be that way. She remembered one thing she told me, that somebody had called her a sheeny, which was an old word that they used like kike, were the words that were used, derogatory words against Jews. And so she said to the woman, "Do you know what that means? Look it up in the dictionary." And she looked up sheen and, of course, it's very bright. [laughs] But my mother always could find answers like that.
Espino

But did this African American girl go to the same school? Was it integrated?
Graff
Yes, oh, yes.
Espino
So it wasn't segregated?
Graff
No. Well, this was in New England, remember. They didn't have segregation really. They may be prejudiced people, prejudiced against black people, but they did not have segregation like they had in the South. So she had that feeling from the beginning. After she graduated high school, she went to work in the largest department store in Hartford, and just an idea of how inventive she was. The aisle walker, the manager for the department, constantly was coming around and putting his arms around her waist, because she was evidently a very attractive young girl. So she took a belt and took pins and pushed the pins so the points were outside, and when he went to put his arm around her waist this time, he got pricked, and that took care of it.
So then when we were growing up, my father would keep trying to get off on his own and do something. They had a tobacco farm in Silver Springs, Connecticut, and that evidently didn't work out, but I remember things as I grew up part of my time there. Then I guess then he had a grocery store in Hartford, and I don't know whether this is appropriate or not, but their favorite story about that grocery store was it was a mixed neighborhood of Jewish and non-Jewish people. They would come in, and in those days, remember, the sugar was in a barrel, and if you wanted some, you shoveled out some into a bag, weighed it and paid for it. So my father was pouring sugar into a bag for a woman who was Jewish, and she kept saying, "Shit, shit," which means, "Pour, pour," in Jewish. And the woman who was not Jewish who was standing next to her looked in shock and said, "That old woman using that kind of language!" [laughs]
Espino
Is that Yiddish, or is that Hebrew?
Graff

It's Yiddish. Hebrew was not a language for people to speak to each other until they had Israel. Before then, it was strictly a religious language and the way you practiced your Orthodox religion.
Oh, and going back to Colchester, that's the name of the town where Mother grew up. They did have a synagogue there, and, of course, the Orthodox Jews were not permitted to drive, to work even animals during the Sabbath, so they were supposed to walk to the temple. Well, they lived out on the farm a mile or so away. It was just too much. And all the Jews who lived away from it would drive up to like maybe six blocks from the synagogue and then walk the rest of the way. [laughs]
Espino
Would you consider your family Orthodox?
Graff
No. My grandmother would have liked to be. She always celebrated--we always celebrated the holidays. She would read the Bible in Hebrew. She was also--she in Russia was--can I go back to that point?
Espino
Of course, of course. Yes.
Graff
Because this is disjointed, I know, but you can put it all together in chronological order. Her father died when she was, I guess, in her late teens. Her mother remarried, and the stepfather did not want to have anything to do with her daughter, with my grandmother. So they farmed her off to an uncle, who was one of the few Jews in Russia who had been given land when Peter the Great said they could own land. So he had this large farm, a staff of servants, cooks, everything else. She was head of the household. She ran it for her uncle. This is when they would have a pogrom, and that would be around Easter time or Christmas. The Cossacks or just the people themselves, riled up by the church, would come into the Jewish settlement and had been told stories that the wine that they drank, the ritual wine for the Jewish meals, was the blood of Christian children. They were told, oh, that a Jew had killed Christ, all of these stories, and they would come and literally murder. I mean, if you've ever seen "Fiddler on the Roof," it was at that period of time where they were doing those things.

And the servants were so appreciative of the goodness of the family that they would take the silver and the important things and put them in their homes and put crosses in the windows so that they would be bypassed by the pogroms. So Grandma had a hatred for Christianity and as a result, I could not have a Christmas tree. That's how these things sort of interrelate. But then, let's see, where was I?

I was back--my father got this grocery store, and unfortunately, one night rats got into the matchbox, scratched, and started a fire. And I remember, I must have been four or five, I remember my mother taking me up and the smoke-filled room. So then we're back in Newington again, living with my grandparents.

Espino

So the whole thing went up in flames?

Graff

Yes, the whole thing went up. Well, in those days they didn't have the kind of protection we have now. But this seemed to be his pattern, to have just constantly bad luck. So then I remember the farm in Newington is the type of farm they had in those--they called them strip farms. The farmhouse was on the street, the road, and it went back and it was a truck farm and behind that was a forest, and as little kids we had jobs. We had to sort out the tomatoes, for instance. Well, we ate the little ones and gave the big ones to sell. My brother [Victor Bernard Graff] and I would sit there doing these sorts of things, but that's the only job that I remember.

I think it was when we were on the tobacco farm, there was a pile of rocks out in the back. I'm really telling you everything I can remember, and it's a lot. My brother said, "I'm going to climb up there, and why don't you throw rocks and see if you can hit me?" Well, at that time he must have been five. That means I was three, and, of course, I couldn't hit him worth a darn. Then he says, "Now you climb up, and I'll try to hit you." Well, he did and down I came tumbling. He hit me in the head. My mother came out, picked me up, and here she is on a farm, no communications. My father is in Hartford selling the produce from the farm, and so she puts me--oh, no, that's a different story. I escaped death a lot of times. Anyway, I came to and everything was all right.

But then my brother is riding the tricycle, and I'm standing on it, the foot rail behind, and he gets off without telling me that he's

going to get off, and I go over and I hit my head against the coal shuttle, and again I pass out. So my mother, that's when she picked me up, held me in her arms and the next thing you know, she passes out. She doesn't know what to do. And when she came to and my father came home, everything was okay.
Then we moved from there to the tobacco farm, I guess. In those days, medicine closets were attached to the wall, and you took them with you. So Mother's arranging the stuff in the new house. The medicine closet is standing up on the floor in the bathroom, and I see this little bottle with red in it. Oh, that's good, must be strawberry. Iodine; I drank it. My mother comes in and sees this red coming out of my mouth, evidently, and walks me, so this was in Hartford, I guess, rather than on the farm. She walks me to the drugstore, and the drugstore told her to just keep giving me milk until I threw up, and so that's what happened. So I'm still here. [laughs]
Espino
That sounds like a really, well, compared to the way we lived in the city that sounds like a very bare-bones existence.
Graff
Well, no, but that's the way it was. Remember, this would be 1920. My mother always said she was so happy, in a way. She lived from seeing the first automobile drive down the road, the first airplane fly overhead while she was out in the fields working, and to see a man land on the Moon. Then I stop to think, and look at what have I seen in my time? That's another thing.
Espino
So in those days, well, you had an outhouse, you didn't have all those modern conveniences. Probably in other areas you might find indoor plumbing, but in farm areas--
Graff
Right. No, in the farm--that house was--before we left--in other words, when I was about five years old and we were still living there--it had indoor plumbing. Because I can remember I was always afraid of the dark. I was a very cowardly, shy child, and I didn't want to go up the stairs to go to bed and to the bathroom by myself. I was used to my mother always taking me out to the outhouse, so I wanted her to continue. And my father is telling me, "You're old enough to go there. It's indoors. You can do it on your

own." They never punished--neither one of them ever took a hand to us. They reasoned with us. So I remember I was standing there between his legs, and he's telling me this, and I had to go up by myself. Horrible. [laughs] But these are the things that happened.

Espino

Did you work on the farm? I mean, was it a family run farm?

Graff

Well, it was always a family run farm. My grandfather had a lot of bad luck with farming. After all, he was actually a vodka distillery, not a farmer. So until his sons grew up and began to use technical, you know, began to study farming--they started a chicken business. It was very successful until the chickens caught some kind of a disease and they all died. It was this story over and over again. Oh, Mother worked out on the farm. In fact, when she was married, she says that she and my father used to work out in the fields and sing to each other, because he had a beautiful voice too. How I got mine--I don't have one. So anyway, these are all just the chopped-up memories that keep coming back occasionally.

And finally, oh, I have a little egg, I think I still have it somewhere, that says--when they were married, their financial situation at the end of the first year of marriage was zero, so he gave my mother an egg--you know how you blow them out--with a little note on it about their financial state being zero. So we had wealthy uncles living in Long Beach, who had made their fortune on Signal Hill, so they persuaded my father to go out to California. He went out on his own, and Mother, of course, went back to Newington Junction to live with her folks until he sent for her. He came out here, bought a gasoline station in Anaheim and got himself established, sent for Mother. She packed up, took us on the train by way of Chicago. We had to change trains in Chicago to Long Beach and then when we came out here, when she was coming down the stairs of the train, she sees family there that she doesn't really recognize, because she had never met them, the ones from Long Beach. And she said they came up and spoke to her. I guess she had pictures and knew what they looked like.

Espino

These were your father's brothers, or your mother's?

Graff

No, my father's uncles, my great-uncles. Now, his name was Kelmanson. Later on when Mother remarried, we took my stepfather's name, but these were all Kelmensons and they had a large family. But they were fairly well-to-do. They lived on Ocean Avenue or Boulevard just off the coast in Long Beach and had made a fortune in oil wells. We stayed with them for two years until Mother got a job. Well, no, we stayed with them not that long, for maybe six months. Mother got a job. Oh, she didn't want to go back East. We came in February. She had left when the snow was up to the windowsills, and they asked her, "Did you want to go back home?" And she, of course, cleaned out everything at home. There was nothing to go back to except her folks, and she said she didn't want to go back. She was sick and tired of frozen sheets on the line. Because February was beautiful that time, so we stayed here. She got a job in a children's clothing store, and the king of the gypsies in that area liked her because of the way she treated him, and he bought a lot of stuff from her. I don't know whether she was on a commission or what. But anyway, there was a court on Cherry Avenue, and she moved us into there, just the two kids and herself.

Espino

So when she came back, your father wasn't waiting for her anymore? I mean, when she first arrived in California.

Graff

He had been killed the day before.

Espino

Oh, I didn't know that.

Graff

Yes. Oh, I thought I'd mentioned it. He'd been killed the day before.

Espino

Oh, I'm so sorry.

Graff

It was a foggy day. He was driving to the station that he owned, and he was crossing the tracks. He was hit by a red car, and the red car people say that the signal was working. But a witness pointed out that there was somebody working on the signal the next day, so Mother had to sue, and she got like thirty-five hundred dollars. Now, in those days it wasn't a small amount, but for a woman with two children aged six and eight it was nothing. So she had to go to work, and I can never forget this one morning, my birthday that

year. I woke up and I touched something at the end of my bed and here was this gorgeous doll this high. But every time I was in the store where she worked it was sitting up on--and I was admiring it, and she had bought it for me for my birthday, and I kept that doll until much later.
But then a year after she was here, well, we moved into this court. Everybody in that court had at least one kid, so we had a group of us. Somebody gave one of those kids a pair of guinea pigs, and somewhere I have a picture, and maybe it's in my big book that I haven't looked at recently, of every one of the kids had a guinea pig. [laughs] The girl who lived upstairs next to us also played the piano, and it was always a contest of who was given first to go and practice the piano, because we all wanted to stay out and play. So it was an interesting little time for us.
But then a year later, Mother learned that her father had cancer. It was stomach cancer. In those days--he had been kicked in the stomach by a horse, and the doctor said that was the cause of it. But actually, he was a chain smoker, had been all of his life. Mother hated smoking as a result. When she was growing up, she had the job of making his cigarettes, because you couldn't buy packs. You had this machine that rolled them up. So she decided to cure him. She made him cigarettes of horse manure. It didn't cure him, but it sure got her in trouble. [laughs]
Espino
She knew it was bad for him even before science was telling us that it was.
Graff
Yes. Well, I think she just didn't like the smell, and she didn't think--the fact this his mustache was always stained yellowish, his fingers were yellow because of where he held the cigarette, so she knew something was there. Anyway, and he was cute. He had four sons, but he said if he's going to die, he wants to die with Katherine Cutler Graff. So they came out. Grandma and he sold the farm and came out to live with us, and he lived for about a month or so. I don't even remember that. What I remember is being forced to stand a year later next to the monument when they installed--the Jewish thing, you put the monument up a year later, and they forced my brother and I to stand on either side while they took pictures. That I remember.

I remember a few other things about living in Long Beach. I had two great-uncles there. One was Sam, the other was Max. They were both equally wealthy. Sam had this big house on Ocean Boulevard, and he had beautiful Oriental rugs, and you were told to walk around the edge of the rugs, not to wear them out. Now, they insisted on taking my brother and I to temple every Sunday, but when we'd get in his Cadillac he'd say, "Don't lean back. You'll wear out the upholstery." So we said to Mother, "No more," and that was the end of that, and that was the end of my religious training. [laughs]

So when Grampa died, there was nothing to go back to and Grandma stayed with us. And actually, until she passed away, she took care of us while Mother worked. Then a couple of years--let's see. We came to Long Beach in February, 1923. Oh, did I mention the Santa Barbara earthquake? [1923]

Espino

No.

Graff

I think it was in 1923.

Espino

Okay, we're back, and you were going to tell me a little bit of what you recall about the Santa Barbara earthquake. Was that 1920--

Graff

It must have been 1923, because we were still staying with my great-uncle in Long Beach. It was during the night, and I had this terrible nightmare in which a hospital was burning and people were--I still can see it in my mind. People were running out with their crutches on fire and everything, and then Mother came and woke me up, and we realized--well, she'd never known anything at all about an earthquake, but they explained that it was an earthquake. The funny thing is, I have never been able to erase that from my memory. I may not remember what happened two minutes ago [laughs].

The other thing I remember at that time, because we came in February and years ago, in February was the rainy season for Los Angeles. It rained the whole month of February and never rained the rest of the year. So we had just gone to bed, and there was a rainstorm, and my uncle came and woke us up and said, "Oh, you've got to come out and see the lightning," because they never

had really had lightning. Well, in Connecticut lightning is there all the time. They only have lightning storms. So we just wondered, what in the world was so exciting about it? Anyway, that's going back. Now we can go back up to where we had gotten.

Espino

Okay. But I'm also curious about how you felt as being Jewish when you came to California. Did you find that you had a community of people that you identified with?

Graff

Well, I never even thought about it in those days. My great-uncle that we were staying with was a member of the congregation of a synagogue. We went with him and his family regularly. In fact, at one time, I've forgot what the particular holiday was, they were putting on tableaus, and I was one of Solomon's wives, with a long cigarette thing. But then after we had this thing where he said, "Don't lean back. You're going to--," we said to Mother, "We don't want to go anymore." And I never went back into that synagogue until many, many years later, when my stepfather's niece was married in that synagogue and we went to the wedding. So I wasn't brought up with any real religious--but I knew Jewish history. I'd never lived in a Jewish community, so that will come later, when we get to Los Angeles. But I didn't even think about it at the time.

Espino

But even though you stopped going to the synagogue, you would still celebrate the holidays?

Graff

Oh, yes. Well, we weren't going to miss the Passover feast, the Hanukkah with our eight little gifts that we got all the time. My grandmother saw to us, that we observed these and that the meals were traditional. So I knew what all of the Jewish holidays were, I knew Jewish history, in a sense, only verbally, from talking about it in the family. But we were not religious in that sense. In fact, when I was growing up, when they would ask me what I was in high school I would shock them by saying I was an atheist, but now I say I'm an agnostic. That's a little honest. It just hasn't been proved to me yet.

So I really didn't become aware of being different because I was Jewish until I was in junior high school. That's when one of the girls in my class was a Methodist or a Baptist, I don't know what, but

they were so religiously strict that her parents came to have lunch with her in school so that she wouldn't get contaminated by the non-believers. That's when I began to realize, hey, I'm--and also that in junior high school, when I was coming, I always ate with a group of girls, and as I approached them I heard one say, "Oh, here she comes. Let's move." Then I realized, uh-oh, they're looking at me differently, and so from then on I became a loner.

Espino

How old were you when you moved from Long Beach to--

Graff

I was eight.

Espino

So you were still in elementary school.

Graff

Oh, yes. In fact, it's an interesting thing. Now, my brother started school in Connecticut. In Connecticut, you could start first grade at six, no, at seven, at seven. I was six when we left, so I hadn't gone to school, but my brother had been going to school. He'd come home, he'd read his books to me. I would pick up the book and read from it, seeing nothing but turning the page at the appropriate moment, and people were amazed that I could read. But when I came to Long Beach, they permitted me to enter at six. So I went into the Long Beach school system at six years, and I went two years, so I graduated from the second grade when we came to Los Angeles.

In Los Angeles, I was going to the Santa Barbara Elementary School at Santa Barbara and Western Avenue, and in the third grade, every time the teacher asked a question my hand went up. I knew the answer, because we had studied it the year before. So the next thing you know, I'm in the opportunity room. Now, I was an adult before I learned that this is where the sent the troublemakers. But it was really an opportunity for me, because I was permitted to study on my own, and then there was a fourteen-year-old émigré from Germany. Now, nobody could understand him, but Yiddish is so close to German, I could understand him, and I became his tutor in school, which is perhaps the reason I always wanted to be a teacher.

So when I graduated two years later--when we moved when my mother remarried, he had a tailor and cleaning shop on Denker near

Exposition Boulevard. We moved into a little rental cottage there and two years later they bought the house on 70th Street off of Western, where we lived until, well, during the depression, when we lost it because we couldn't pay the mortgage. Anyway, to go back to school, I ended up--in two years I must have graduated grammar school, because when we moved to 70th Street, I started junior high school. So I was two years younger than everybody else, which [unclear] put me in a different class, so I was really a loner when I was growing up.

Espino

And that was in--is that what is considered now South Central, 70th Street?

Graff

No. It was South Western.

Espino

South Western?

Graff

The main street was Florence Avenue and then Manchester Avenue, and at Manchester Avenue was the end of Los Angeles City, as it were. Beyond that were fields, the Japanese truck gardens.

Espino

And at that time, that neighborhood, it was primarily--

Graff

It was primarily Anglo. It was from--let's see. We lived on 70th Street just off of Western Avenue and two blocks from Florence, and, well, it was so Anglo that the family living at the corner of our street, who I went all through school with their son, moved out of the neighborhood about maybe five or six years later, and they said the neighborhood was changing because Italians had moved in. I don't know what they did if they ever found out that we were Jewish.

Espino

And that's when you experienced the first feelings of being different, in junior high school you said.

Graff

Oh, in junior high school is when I--but I felt it only in connection with the school. I didn't see it with anything else.

Espino

Not in your neighborhood.

Graff
But the ironic part is they moved to Leimert Park, and, of course, that's now totally black, so life is full of ironies. Well, when we bought the house on 70th Street, that also had been truck gardens originally, and it was a very big lot. We had a garden in which we grew our own vegetables. The storm drains only came up to 68th Street, I think. I went to junior high school at Horace Mann Junior High School. It was only a half a block from where we lived, and there a lot of things happened that really I think shaped my life. I got into the orchestra right away, because Mother gave us music lessons, both my brother and I. I know I'm jumping back and forth--

Espino
That's fine. No, it's all fine.

Graff
--but each thing triggers something else. We went to this music school, and I was learning the piano, twenty-five cents a lesson, and my brother was learning the violin, and he was doing very well. The only trouble, the instructor told him, "You know, if you keep up this way, you're going to be as good as Misha Elman," who was the top violinist in those days. So my brother said, "Well, if I'm so good, I don't need to practice." And my mother said, "If you don't practice, I'm not paying for lessons," and that was the end of his musical career. I kept the violin, and I had it until I was actually teaching at Cal State, which was thirty or forty years later. There was a young woman in my typing class who was a musical major, and she had to learn--she played the piano and she was very good. She has played with the Israeli orchestra at one time. But to be a teacher, she had to learn a second instrument, and she couldn't afford a violin, so I gave her my brother's violin. She took it to a violin maker, and he fixed it up for her so it was okay.
But this music school gave recitals. They trained us well, and the teacher said, "You have to memorize what you're going to play. But to keep your memory, take the music out with you and sit on it." So you had the foundation that it was there if you needed it. And we played our little piece. It was sort of a ranch-style song or something, a duet with a boy who was the same age, I guess, as I was. We were dressed in clothes, straw hat and a little gingham dress, and I did fine, no problems. But then we were to get up after

we through, face the audience and bow. Well, we got up, and I faced the audience and I froze. He had to pull me off the stage. [laughs] And I was very bad at being in front of anybody until I was an adult after that.
So with the music they had a very good instructor for the orchestra. He could play every instrument except the piano. There were six of us who were really fairly good players, so he took us. I played the piano. He took the boy who played the first violin chair and the second violin chair. The only cellist we had was a girl, and we had a clarinetist, and he played whatever else was necessary to play a sextet. In other words, we could play quartets, quintets, and sextets. So while the rest of the orchestra was in uniform, we would come out. I was in a long, black velvet formal, and he had me practicing five hours a day during the summertime. That's when I really got into the piano, although I didn't have formal lessons, really good formal lessons, until I was adult and working and paid for them myself.
Espino
Did you enjoy all that practice?
Graff
Yes.
Espino
You didn't feel resentful?
Graff
No. I loved playing exercises. The interesting thing is, I was a very good technician, and I enjoyed the music. But I remember my stepfather, who knew nothing about music, but had a beautiful bass voice and used to sing at weddings back in Hungary, where he came from, I played a piece that I knew he liked, and he went into the kitchen where my mother was and said, "She's not playing it right." After he left, I said, "I played every note correctly. I don't know what's wrong." Well, what was wrong is I was playing the notes correctly, but I wasn't feeling them. I wasn't playing with--I started doing that when I was in my seventies, when I forgot about technique and it changed at that time. But, no, I never stopped playing the piano. I practiced every day. Even when I was working, I would get up, practice the piano. My mother would prepare dinner. My mother would make the beds, would do everything about the

house, but I had to do my exercises and do my piano playing, so I kept it all through.

Espino

That's true commitment. When your mom married, you're saying she kept the house. Was she able to stop working when she remarried?

Graff

She had to go back to work. Well, my grandmother was with us, you see, all this time, because when he married Mother, he not only took on her two children, but he took on her mother. It was a big joke, because he was also Jewish, but again, in Hungary the Jews, there weren't very many Orthodox Jews. He was not brought up religiously. He used to love pigs' feet, and Grandma would make them for him, and he always accused her of tasting it, because it was always perfect. [Espino laughs] But then I remember--and she would say, "No." And I remember she told me once, going back again to--this must have been Colchester, where they used to have the big families get together with the barn dances and stuff. Everybody would bring food, and Grandma had the sandwich from a neighbor, and she said, "It was delicious. What was it?" And the neighbor said, "Ham," and Grandma went into the bathroom and threw up, because, see, she didn't keep a kosher house in that sense, but we never ate bacon, we never ate ham or pork. She kept the rudiments of it without keeping the separate dishes and everything else that was necessary.

Now, going back again, when Mother married my real father, he came from an Orthodox family. His father was the pillar of the synagogue. His mother was a demon. They were married--she was married when she was thirteen, with the usual contract through the families. The wives and husbands didn't meet each other sometimes until actually the day they were married. She had nine children, because there were no contraceptives or anything like that. She was a wonderful baker, Grandma Kelmenson, but she'd bake all of these things and she'd put them in the bottom drawer of a cupboard and lock it so the kids couldn't get it. Here she had nine kids who were dying for sweets, because it was for company. Well, the kids are smart. They opened up the drawer above, and she never did figure out why there wasn't anything there when she wanted it. [laughs] These are the little stories I remember their telling me.

Espino
Do you remember what it was like for your mom when she heard the news about your father?
Graff
Yes. It was terrible. In fact, months later I was still--I remember, she had these two friends over, a couple who introduced her to my stepfather. But they had come by themselves to visit us, and all of a sudden I came into the room and I said, "When is Daddy coming home?" And Mom just went into the bedroom and started crying. I remember that. So your asking questions like that brings up more memories. But she was a very wonderful woman, and talk about the iron hand in a velvet glove. She had control of herself, and whatever was bad she made the best of it and just kept right on going, and I always admired her for that.
We had problems with my stepfather. It turned out he was a drinker, and as he got older he [unclear]. When he wasn't drinking, he was a wonderful person. He considered us his children, but my brother, of course, being two years older, remembered our father. I didn't. As I say, the only memory I have is that time when he scolded me because I wouldn't go up the stairs by myself. So he always really, I think, hated my stepfather. In fact, he mentioned it to me when we finally reconciled fairly recently. But, no, it was hard for her, but she never let us know how hard it was. She was that kind of person. I mean, she went through--with her father dying, coming out here to die to be near her, and then Grandma, of course, had the same kind of temperament. She was a wonderful person.
I knew that with Mother, her first marriage was a love marriage. My father met her at a party in Hartford, went home and told his mother, "I just met the girl I'm going to marry," and they must have had a wonderful relationship together. Like she said, they used to sing to each other while they were out working in the fields. Like she said, when she was growing up, her brothers wouldn't let her go ice skating, because that was for men, things like that. But it was all right for her to shovel manure in the barn, and she always remembered that.
But let's see. We were up to junior high school if I remember rightly, right, in the orchestra. The teacher's name was D'Ipolito, and after we moved out of the neighborhood I went back for some

reason or other. I went down and I saw he'd opened up a music store in the area. At that time it was not black. See, that would be, if we bought that house I think in 1929, yes, just before the depression. But his keeping us interested, and he got this little sextet together, and we played more difficult music. Then when I went on to--oh, the '33 earthquake was while we were on 70th Street. I had been staying late at school for practicing, and so I had just come home, I guess, when it hit, and I can remember so distinctly, I came out the front--we knew when there's an earthquake, get out of the house. So we went to go out of the house, and the house had a patio like this. There was a walk from the street up here into the patio and then you went into the living room. Well, when I got to the patio--and there were bushes growing against that patio wall--the bushes were this way, and the wall was still there, and you could see the waves in the street, because we were fairly close to Long Beach.

I had a white signet ring that the next-door neighbor had given me. They didn't have any children. They had a French bulldog instead as a child, that they treated like it, but they were very fond of my brother and I. They took us to things that we couldn't afford to do sometimes. Well, this white signet ring, I clenched my hands like this, because I knew my brother's ship--he was in the Navy, and this was before he was an officer. He was an enlisted man in the Navy, and I knew his ship was in Long Beach at the harbor, and until we heard from him we didn't know what was happening. Except we heard that Long Beach was the worst, it was the hardest hit. A day later the phone rings. He's patrolling Long Beach, and there's a phone out on the street, so he picked it up and called us to let us know that he was all right.

But by that time I was going to Washington High School. Well, in Washington, I was still in the orchestra there. Oh, before we get out of junior high school, I'd been the pianist for the orchestra for the first two years, so the third year this enraged mother came to the teacher and said, "I've spent all this money on my daughter's piano lessons, and she's not gotten a chance to play in the orchestra." So he came to me and he said, "Would you mind?" I said, "No, it's all right." He said, "We'll put you on the timpani." Well, the drums. Now, the timpani have to be tuned by ear, and the problem was that's the reason I was such a good technician is I don't have a

good ear. I had to be--and besides which my piano had a broken harp and so it was out of tune. So my hearing was not correct, but I was supposed to tune this thing all the time. Anyway, for a year I played the timpani.

Espino

When you went to high school, did you stay in that same neighborhood, or did you move again?

Graff

No, we lived in that neighborhood until 1939, when we lost the house, and so we got a rental house still in the same neighborhood. We moved to 50th Street, I think, from 70th Street. So I went to George Washington High School, which is now an all-black school, but it has--I just saw something in the paper that their emphasis, trying to be, is to get them into academics. But anyway, when I was there it was practically all Anglo. I remember one black student, and he lasted for about three months and he left. He transferred to another school. Half the school was Japanese American, Nisei children of the truck gardeners. We won all the art awards for the city. The other half were just mixed conglomerate. I think there were--well, in my graduating class, there were over three hundred. I think five of us were Jewish, and we sort of found each other.

Espino

Really.

Graff

Well, actually, in my class; I don't know about the other classes. But in my class there were two boys who were Jewish. One boy's father had the shoe store on Vermont, I guess, and I don't know what the other boy did, but we were all in journalism together. And then I know there was one Jewish girl who wanted to become my friend, because actually she wanted to get an introduction to my brother, who was a socialite, and here I was the loner. I was not doing with anybody.

I graduated in 1933 and the joke was always in the family that it took an earthquake to get me out of school. It wasn't quite true, but I think I would have flunked chemistry if it hadn't been that the professor--it was midterm, I guess, and we had turned in our notebooks, and he put a bottle of concentrated sulfuric acid on top of the stack of notebooks, and, of course, with the earthquake it broke open. All of our work was gone, so he had to pass all of us.

And we spent the rest of that time--they set up temporary tents, because we could not use any of the buildings. We graduated using the quadrangle rather than the auditorium. We had tents and then we had classes in the bleachers, and the boys, when you were changing classes, were all going underneath the bleachers to look up to see the girls as they were walking down, underneath their clothing. So we were the first school, most likely, that permitted girls to wear slacks, in '33. Women didn't wear them in those days. They were just beginning.

Espino

Because of that? Because they knew the boys were looking up their dresses?

Graff

That's why administration permitted us to do that. Oh, administration was very firm in those days. When we graduated, we had to have ankle-length dresses, fancy dresses, and I don't remember what else, but it was kind of interesting growing up in those days.

Espino

Well, I'm curious as to how you said you found each other, the other Jewish students. Was that something that, because you were looking for somebody who was similar to you?

Graff

No. It was just they would say something or I would say something that we realized we had a common background. None of us spouted out that we were Jewish. In fact, when I would come home and complain to my grandmother, from junior high school, that somebody had made an anti-Semitic remark, she said to me, "It should be like water off your back. Don't pay any attention to it. They're ignorant people." Well, I took that attitude until we moved here and there was an incident, and from then on I became fighting against anybody who used any anti-Semitism.

That incident--it would be out of sequence in our chronology, but the man across the street two houses up was a member of the FBI. He didn't know it, but I was a member of the Independent Progressive Party [IPP] at that time. However, I had a mimeograph machine, and I used to crank out information for all kinds of people. My friends' kids were running for office in high school. I gave them cards to pass out. But anyway, he came over and he said about, "Be

sure and get enough copies so that that loudmouth Jew woman at the top of the hill gets one." And I turned on him and I said, "That loudmouth Jew woman is the reason you've got a school in this district. She worked for that." And then they start, oh, apologizing, and his other friend, also a member from the FBI, who lived farther away but still in the tract, said, "Oh, he's got a friend and they love Jews," all of this stuff.

And I came in and I was trembling after they left, and I came in and I was trembling, because I had the mimeograph in the room behind the garage. My mother said, "What's wrong?" She knew--I said, "So-and-so made an anti-Semitic remark, and I told him off." Well, from then on, he treated me with kid gloves, and I know this is backward racism [laughs], but from then on I never let anyone make an anti-Semitic remark without stopping them. I decided this water off the duck's back isn't going to cure anything.

So when I got to high school, I was such a student, I took every class I could. I took an academic course. I did take one class in shorthand. I thought it would help me in college. And by the time I was a twelfth-grader, the only thing that I needed to graduate was chemistry. I had not had it because it always came up first class in the morning, and the first class in the morning was orchestra, so I skipped orchestra that last session, last term, and took chemistry. I took weaving, I took chorus. That's where I found out that I had a contralto voice, but the only thing I wanted to sing was the melody. I could not harmonize.

And I had a four-hour study hall in the afternoon, so George Washington High School was at 109th and Normandie. It was the very--now, when we moved in '29, Manchester was the end of the city. But the school had been built out there in anticipation, evidentially, that the city would expand, so we had to take the bus in the morning, and then that last term I walked. In those days, a girl by herself could walk the three miles back from the school to home. Why should I stay in study hall when I had nothing to study? And my brother was going to--he picked--there were two high schools we could go to from where we were. We could go to Fremont, which was noted for its arts, and Washington, which was noted for its--they had a unique aircraft section where you could learn about airplanes, and that was for my brother. So he was going there, so naturally I went there. So I would just walk back.

Espino
There were some stories that I've been hearing in doing these interviews with primarily people of Mexican descent who were growing up around that same period, and they would talk about their high school experience a little bit differently. Not all of them, but some of them would mention how they weren't allowed to take the academic courses.
Graff
Right.
Espino
Did you have any Mexicans in your school, or do you remember that kind of tracking?
Graff
In junior high school there was one girl. She was very light-complected, and she was the niece of Leo Carillo, the motion picture actor, so she had no problems. As I told you, we had the one black person, black boy who came to Washington and quit because he couldn't make any friends or anything else. I didn't hear, but I know about that because of my activity in community service organization. My friends Manuel and Consuelo (Connie) Meneses had to fight Lincoln High School hand and tooth to get their kids into the academic courses. Their son ended up being a principal of a high school in San Bernardino, but they had to really fight. When we get into that section of community organization, I can tell you some of those fights, because I did participate in them.
Espino
Excellent. So but when you were going to high school, you don't remember anything like that?
Graff
I don't remember. I remembered seeing this--he wasn't in my class. I remember seeing this black boy and then not seeing him, that's all. I remember all of the Japanese students there, so during World War II when they did the evacuation of the--I could not understand it. I knew it was wrong right from the beginning, because, in fact, we would occasionally have an exchange student at Washington from Japan, and they hated him, because he kept telling them about how wonderful the emperor was, they should all move back, and they weren't ready to do that. They were Americans. And so I

knew it was wrong. Those are the things that helped formulate how I acted later on.
But, no, I don't remember that there was any particular--and there wasn't any prejudice against the Japanese, actually, because there were so many of them. No, I can't--
Espino
So do you think that the Japanese American students also were free to take academic courses and regular courses?
Graff
Oh, yes. There was no question about that. In fact, I think, let's see. We had the academic course, which I took, and they had the vocational course, which was the business, in other words shorthand, typewriting, stuff like that, and they must have had a class for like mechanics or something. Oh, well at Washington they didn't have auto mechanics, they had the aviation mechanics. That was it, which was a considerably higher level, really, than the auto mechanics.
The school system, you know, I got an education in high school that was equivalent to what my friends who had gone to college. I could match them with my knowledge, and it really bothers me to see and listen [unclear] jeopardy, and people who are in their twenties and thirties who know nothing about American history, know nothing about geography. We knew all of this. Of course, there was a lot less to learn, because there have been so many things afterwards. But I was trying to think of--no, I didn't really feel--I felt discrimination in junior high school, just from that little group, not from the others, and I never felt it--in high school, the discrimination I felt was that my brain was better than theirs. My friends would study, stay up all night. I'd read the book once, and I'd get an A on the test, and I know that that affected the way some people looked at me.
In fact, my best friend in high school was an Anglo girl who wasn't very bright, but we remained friends until I guess several years after we--I graduated, and she came back to do postgraduate work. But she was really the only close friend I had in high school. I work with a group now that they all went to school together over here. They either went to the Catholic school or the public school, and I envy them, because they've had that relationship all their lives, and I didn't have that kind of a relationship.

Espino
Do you know why? Do you think that--
Graff
Yes. I was very shy. I was not--well, after that first experience at the piano recital [unclear]. No, in high school there was a boy who was rather similar. We had similar problems, and he talked me into running for vice president or something, and again I had to get up in the auditorium, and it just killed me. So I just retired. I had my head in my books, I studied, I did my things. I had a passing acquaintance with all of the students, but I didn't get very close to them.
Espino
Socially, you didn't go out anywhere on the weekends, movies?
Graff
No. I went to the prom with the fellow who lived at the end of the block, who took his girlfriend and me to the prom. And at the prom somebody wanted to know if I was one of the sponsors, because I looked older, a lot older. My hair was down to my waist. I wore it in braids over my head. I just wasn't a part of the crowd, that's all, and I knew it, and I was content.
Espino
Okay, well, let's talk about your parents' view of education. Was it something that came from you, or did your mom--
Graff
Oh, from Mother, my mother. My mother was--well, you have to remember, my grandmother was educated. Now, it wasn't customary for Jewish women to be educated in Russia, and she was educated. She spoke French and German and Russian, and then they didn't speak Yiddish in Russia. They had to learn it here, because one of their farmworkers was a refugee they hired from Romania, Jewish, and he spoke Romanian and Yiddish. My mother is the one who learned the Yiddish, until the rest of the family did and communicated. She was terrific as a linguist. So what was your question again?
Espino
You were talking about how your grandmother was educated, and one of the few women.
Graff

Oh, right. Yes, one of the few women, so that she had this emphasis on education. It carried over to my mother, who found this attic full of books and carried through with that. We'd been readers. My brother and I used to read--if we didn't have something to read at the breakfast table, we read the cereal boxes, and we were both the same way, great readers. So we had this feeling for education, and part of that, I feel, is from the Jewish culture, although in the Orthodox it's the man who gets educated, and the woman stays home and takes care of the kids. In our--because we weren't Orthodox--the emphasis was still there on education.

Espino

Did you always know you were going to go to college, then?

Graff

I assumed I was. I took the college courses. When the time came, we couldn't afford it. We were living at 70th and Western. There were no junior colleges then. My brother had to go to UCLA. It was a fifty-cent bus ride. We didn't have that kind of money. A dollar a day? Some of the guys were working for only eight dollars a week. So he went to UCLA for one semester. This was, let's see, he graduated in '31, so it was right in the midst of the depression. All of the kids were going to school because they couldn't get jobs, and so he couldn't get any of the classes he wanted.

He was an alternate. My stepfather knew our congressman, and he got the congressman to name my brother as an alternate for the Annapolis appointment. Unfortunately, his original choice passed the test, so my brother joined the navy and he went into Annapolis through the navy, which is what they called the back door. But college had always been--I realized that college was not--I would have to work for four years. I wanted to be a teacher? I'd have to work for four years before I could earn anything. And my stepfather was earning enough money to buy our groceries, but that's all. And he had to close his tailor shop. Who needed tailor-made clothes? And who cleaned them afterwards? So he went on the road selling tailor supplies, and he traveled all over southern California.

So my mother got a job as a checker in a dry-cleaning plant, and so she worked all during that time. Grandma kept the house. This is while we were going to high school. And so then I guess Woodbury College sent somebody out to talk to us about joining, and I decided I would go to Woodbury College, because they said after six months

I could get a job part time. And although I took the two-year course, it was supposed to take me three years. By the time the end of the two years, and I'd been working half time, I had completed everything except a course they called charm, which I thought was how to be charming in the office. No, it was how to attract boys, and that was the last thing I was interested in. So I never completed it and I never graduated from Woodbury College. But it's funny. Woodbury was on Figueroa and 8th Street; on the second floor was the college. Oh, and they told us when they came and talked to us at Washington that they were going to be moving to a really nice building on Wilshire Boulevard. They did maybe five years after I left, and now they're out in the valley, and they're a four-year university. But when I was going to them, they were a certified business college, but they were only three years, and all of the subjects that I took at Woodbury I could not get credit for when I finally started going to Cal State in the fifties, when I was fifty.
Espino
Why was that, do you know? Why they didn't accept the credits.
Graff
Because it wasn't a four-year certified university. It was a business college. There's different levels.
Espino
Right, right. So that charm class was the only thing that kept you from finishing?
Graff
Right. I didn't see any sense in going on, when they asked me if I wanted to. I was working part time. They asked me if I wanted to work full time. I said yes, and as soon as I started working full time, after a year I said to Mother, "Quit your job." My grandmother had passed away by then, and so she had the burden of a house and working, and I said, "Quit your job. I'll take care of it." And I take care of her and my stepfather ever since.
But the interesting thing is, then you go on with life, and a very good friend that I made at the college women's club, turns out her husband used to be one of the accounting instructors at Woodbury, not when I was there, when they were at the other--and her daughter was a graduate of Woodbury when it was a four-year. It's really interesting how people cross your path.
Espino

But some of those skills you learned at Woodbury, did they serve you in your--
Graff
They were better than anything I ever learned, and that's the reason I became a business educator. I went down to work as--I got a job in the insurance agency. I worked there--each of my jobs were about ten years. I worked there and then I went to work for a warehouse, a steel warehouse. This was during the war, and I worked there for nine years, best job I ever had. When I quit there, because I caught the boss's brother, who was the second, the vice president, telling lies about the employees in order to put credit on himself--do you go to your boss and say, "Your brother is a liar"? or do you quit, so I quit. See, in those days I wasn't aggressive. I learned that later on. But it's all a long story.
From high school I went to Woodbury, and I worked there for six months and then I got a job. The reason I leave my jobs is very interesting. The Bryan Tire Company was on Aliso Street, which isn't there anymore. It's where the freeway is. I worked there in the office half days just doing the books. Then one day the boss comes to me and says, "My wife is divorcing me. Can you fix the books to show that I'm not making any money?" So I went back to my accounting professor and I said, "I've been asked to do this. What's my responsibility?" He said, "You can't be held responsible if you're doing what somebody else told you to do." But I'm not going to have that poor woman--I was already a feminist, working. I'd got that attitude, so I quit. But that was the second job I quit.
The first job, they got me working--a professor from USC, a German professor, was writing an engineering book, and he needed someone to type up the script. So I got the job, and I'm working with him, and he's a German of the old school. One day he was sending a letter to Santa Ana, so I typed out Santa Ana, A-n-a. He says, "No, it's double N. My wife's name is Anna with two Ns." I said, "No, this is Santa Ana. It's Spanish. It's only one N." And we're arguing there when a couple of guys come in from USC, and they say to him, "You know, she's right." But then they started talking, and I find out this guy supports Hitler. I never went back. I lost a sweater that way. So that was my first time.
The second job with the Bryant Tire Company, he asked me to fix the books, and I'm not going to do that. I was a very

straightforward, honest woman. I wouldn't do anything that was out of line. I quit. Then I got the job with the insurance agency and then they asked me to work full time, so I went full time, and that's when I started working full time, another interesting experience. Each of these could be a day. From the insurance agency--he was Jewish. He did not know I was Jewish. They didn't know I was Jewish until his first son was born; no, his second son was born. And his father-in-law, who had lost his garment factory during the depression and was really being supported by my boss, came in and was telling me this joke. He says, "I have to tell you this. My grandson--," all of the people were coming in to the family, and they were saying because it was a new baby, "Mazeltov," you know, congratulations. He said, "Somebody came in and asked the older boy, "What's your mother's name?" and he says, "Mazeltov." And I started laughing. And he says, "You know what that means?" I said, "Of course. I'm Jewish." And he was so shocked, because I'd been there for like five years.

The boss treated me like I was the upstairs maid. You know, he was a pillar of Jewish society of the Wilshire Temple, very active in that. But I didn't say--he didn't come in on the holidays, but he didn't ask me if I was Jewish, did I want to come in. I worked on the holidays, the Jewish holidays. So, anyway, it worked out that I was working till nine, ten o'clock at night, and I wasn't getting any overtime, and I wasn't getting very well paid either. So then I tell him, "We need somebody to help. Can we get somebody?" "Don't get anybody experienced with insurance," because they might take his secrets, and I thought to myself, what kind of secrets do you have in an insurance agency? But as a result, I couldn't get competent help, and I kept packing up and I'm getting farther. Finally one day--and I was practically the sole support of my family. I was keeping Grandma, Mother, my stepfather. My brother wasn't contributing anything. He was in the navy at that time and going to Annapolis, which means he had no income. His income just took care of his immediate things.

So I finally just took all of this--it was a stack this high. I said, "Mr. Kozberg, here's the things I haven't finished, and I can't get them done, because you won't let me have the right kind of help. I quit. I give you two weeks notice, and I will not assist you in hiring anybody to take my--you have to do that." So I get into the

elevator and in the elevator is an accountant from a higher floor who we used to go ice skating together, and I said, "Well, this is the last time. In two weeks, this'll be the last time you see me here, because I just quit." "Don't take another one until I talk to you." And it's been that way for all of my jobs. I've looked for some and I found them, but I've always left them for reasons that they were doing things that I didn't like. And then I ended up teaching at Cal State.

Espino

That's an incredible job history. But I'm wondering about that one thing you just mentioned where your boss didn't know you were Jewish. Do you think that you subconsciously kept it from people?

Graff

No, I wasn't used to going in saying, "Hey, I'm Jewish." I just lived my life, and when I heard anti-Semitic remarks, I took my grandmother's [unclear] and I didn't say anything, until I started saying it. So it was just I thought I was an average person. I knew that I was Jewish and that my parents were originally from Russia. I knew those things, but it didn't seem to be that important. Now I've been reading a lot of Jewish history, and I've been getting a kick out of it.

I really began to think of myself as being Jewish in junior high school, where this gal who was such a devout Christian and some of her friends would be--oh, at Christmastime. And so you'd go back and they said, "What did you get for Christmas?" And I said, "I didn't get anything for Christmas." I said, "Well, I'm Jewish. I don't believe in Christmas. We have Hanukah." And then they started asking me questions. I didn't know the answers, so I began to read the Bible, and I found my answer in Genesis.

And I used it on the Seventh Day Adventists that come around door to door and the hallelujah guys. I'm working in the garden and they start giving me a lecture on Christianity. I said, "Look. I'm not Christian, I'm Jewish." And then they want to convert me. And I said, "Listen." How did I say it? "If you've read Genesis, you read that God, when Abraham was going to sacrifice Isaac, God told him, 'My church will be an unhewn stone and there will be no stairs leading up to it.' Therefore, I'm not going to any church that has stairs, whether it's Christian or Jewish or any kind," and that was

my point from then on. But that made me start, so I began to read the Bible. I got about halfway through and that was it.
So I didn't really become conscious of my Jewishness until later, starting with the incident at the house, and then I would make a point of letting people know I was Jewish so they wouldn't make anti-Semitic remarks in front of me, because I, quote, "didn't look Jewish."
Espino
Well, how about during World War II? Like you said, you didn't like one of your bosses because he was a Hitler supporter or a Hitler sympathizer. Did you feel empathy, or what was your reaction to what was happening there and to the U.S. response?
Graff
Well, I felt very badly about the U.S. response, but I didn't think there was anything I could do about it. I was apolitical at that time. I didn't become political until I moved into this house in 1940, and there was an incident that created that, and then my life went on an entirely different thing from what I had ever been before. That's the best part of my life.
Espino
Okay, so then maybe you can tell me a little bit about some of your remembrances of the whole World War II period. Did you know anybody who went to fight?
Graff
Well, my brother was in the navy, and he got a Silver Star. He was in the Coral Sea, and my mother, who was I think slightly--I was going to say psychotic, and that isn't the word--
Espino
Clairvoyant?
Graff
Clairvoyant, yes. She had a terrible nightmare, and it was the night that he was being bombarded, his ship was being--and he was totally deaf in this, and I finally when we got together a few years ago, I said, "How did you become deaf in that ear?" He said, "I put my head out of the cabin where the captain is up on top, and the big gun went out," went off right next to him. It just ended his hearing in that--so, no, I worked as a volunteer.
That's when I began to change. When I was about twenty-one I said, something's wrong with me. I don't have friends, I don't have

any of the--is it me or is it them? And I decided it's me. So to break this lonely thing that I had--I volunteered at the USO that was run by the Salvation Army, and it was the second floor over the old PE terminal at 6th and Main, and I worked there every Sunday all during the war. I told them when I volunteered, I said, "You know, I'm not very good socially, but I do know the city." So they put me in the information booth. Well, eventually I came out of the information booth. I played Ping-Pong with a guy who was--oh, I played chess with a guy who in one minute mated me. Turned out to be the Brooklyn champion. But every time he would go through, because they were doing desert training and the troops would come into Los Angeles on their weekends, so every time he would come up, he would come up and I'd still be behind the information booth, and he said, "Have you got one minute? I've got one minute. Do you want to play a game of chess?"
And then they had a piano there, and one of the soldiers or sailors said, "I wish somebody could play the piano so we could sing." So I began buying popular music, which I had never played, but because I did not improvise it was good and they could sing. So we had a gang around the piano, and so I became out from behind the counter, and it was really a wonderful experience.
Espino
Do you remember some of the songs that you used to play, by name, that were popular at the time?
Graff
Oh, all of them.
Espino
I wouldn't know.
Graff
Well, I had a stack of music this high, which I gave to a professor at Cal State who played the piano beautifully by ear, and at fifty years old he decided he'd learn how to read music, so when I retired from Cal State, I gave him all my music. Yes. Any of those songs from the forties. There were so many of them, "Begin the Beguine," no, "Moonlight and Roses" goes back to the twenties. Right now, see, my memory goes--I'll think of them all.
Espino
Yes, and then you can tell me next time, maybe just a couple, just to get a sense of what was popular.

Graff
Yes. Well, I'm thinking of the more popular ones. Oh, "Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree With Anyone Else But Me," you know, all those war songs, but in addition, some of the ones from the years before. That was such good music, and, in fact, my son-in-law gave me a station that plays, and I haven't had a chance to set it up on my hi-fi.
Espino
That plays music from that period?
Graff
Yes. It's music of the forties and the fifties; no, music from the thirties to the sixties. Turn that on and you'll hear the music that I played. But then a couple of men came in, discharged from the army because they were gay. They played the piano and they played beautifully, but the guys couldn't sing to it because they improvised and everything. But one of them, the female partner, used makeup and everything, very nice guys, so that was my introduction actually to gay people, and I've always had an open understanding there. In Woodbury there was one man who was gay who was taking the secretarial. We called them fairies in those days, and he stood out because he always wore a white suit and white shoes. But he was taking the secretarial course, and that was the only contact I had until then.
I'm clouding up for some reason or other with my allergies.
Espino
Well, it's actually been over an hour and a half. Are you ready to stop now?
Graff
If you want to. If you want to go on a little longer, it'll be okay.
Espino
Maybe one last question, and that is, so these men who were discharged for being homosexual, I'm surprised that they would have been open about it, that they would tell other people, because at that time it was--
Graff
They didn't tell other people. What happened is they just said they'd been medically--oh, they were medical discharges. See, that's the way they discharged them. But I realized what it was when one of them called me and he was sewing a jacket, and he was asking for

some help on that. And I had them over. My folks--my stepfather was still alive, and we had them for I think Thanksgiving. I invited them with a couple of other sailors or soldiers who were there over to the house for the holidays. So, no, they weren't open about it, but I came to the conclusions. Well, as soon as I saw cosmetics on his face, I knew. He was actually using makeup, so I knew he was the female partner.

Espino

But did other people treat him? I mean, this is like--

Graff

They didn't seem to pay any attention. Some of them may not even have thought about it. The only thing is they didn't like it when--they liked listening to their music, but they couldn't sing to it, so that's when I started bringing the music in.

Espino

You just hear so many stories about, you know, just like discrimination against Jewish people and Mexicans. Well, you hear that about back in the forties and fifties and how hard it was for people who were gay to be open--

Graff

Yes, right.

Espino

--and so it's interesting that they were in this environment that was a military environment with mainly soldiers, and they were welcome.

Graff

Well, I don't know what the guys thought about them actually, only my reaction.

Espino

I see.

Graff

No, it was a very interesting experience, because we were seeing them just before the--coming from training, and this was the transition before they went overseas, and that place was always filled. And once in a while it was really quiet, and the Salvation Army guy said, "Okay, girls, get out on the balcony. Throw your legs over the balcony, pick up your skirts, give us some guys in here." I've always given to the Salvation Army since then, because they were so--he was so good about it.

Espino
And did you do it?
Graff
No. Of course not. [laughter] No.
Espino
Oh, that's interesting. Well, that must have been a place where if you're a young woman, single woman, attractive woman, a lot of men are coming through that haven't seen or been close. Was it hard in that sense?
Graff
Was it what?
Espino
In the sense that these men haven't seen a woman or been close to a woman in--
Graff
Well, some of them tried to date, but since most of them were--we would see them just once. In other words, the ones we would see continually was maybe for the time--I don't know how long the training period was in the desert, but they would come in on the weekends and then, bingo, they'd be gone. But they would tell us about--one of the guys had gotten a Dear John letter and he sort of cried on my shoulder. You did your best.
But I actually met this one man, and I really think most likely the only love of my life. I just saw sparks when he touched me, because he sat down on the piano bench next to me, and we corresponded all during the war. We were planning on getting married, and I suddenly realized I hadn't told him I was Jewish. And he was Polish, so I knew he was Catholic, so I wrote him a letter. I said, "It doesn't make any difference to me, but I thought you should know." Well, that was it. I went back East. Most of my friends don't know this. I never told anybody about it. I went back East and I met his family, heard them make anti-Semitic remarks, realized this was it. He was the one who said this was it, that it wouldn't be good, it wouldn't be a good marriage. Then he was telling me about he'd had an affair with a nurse in Australia, because he'd been injured, so when I came back--oh, I stayed back East in Hartford for--because my cousin was living there. I stayed there for about six months and then my old boss from Rich Steel Company called and said, "Come back. We need you," so I came back home. But it's funny.

Now, back East the situation, I couldn't understand it. My cousin lived on a street; everybody on that street was Jewish. The next street over, everyone was Polish. The next street over, everyone was something else, and they continued that separate relationship all the way through school. In other words, they kept their little cliques in school, and she couldn't understand how I couldn't understand the way they lived, because in California we'd been much freer.

Espino

Well, on that note I think I'm going to end it, and we'll pick up--thank you so much. I'm going to stop it now.

1.2. Session 2 (February 25, 2010)

Espino

This is Virginia Espino and today is February 25, 2010. I'm interviewing Ms. Marian Graff at her home in Hillside Village, Los Angeles, California.

Last time we finished off with your volunteer work with the USO and so I was wondering if you can tell me a little bit about some of your employment activities right after your experience at Woodbury College.

Graff

Yes, I never--

Espino

Around that same time, right? Was it around that same time?

Graff

Yes. Well, I went to work--remember, this was before the war. I went to work part time for an insurance agency, Edward Lee Kozberg, while I was going to school, because I worked my way through and then they wanted me to come on full time, so I never really graduated from Woodbury College. Didn't make any difference; I had the skills. When I was working there, I'm trying to remember--can you turn it off for a minute?

Espino

We're back, and you were going to tell me a little bit about your work history.

Graff

Right. I was working at Kosberg's. They asked me to come on full time and so I just quit Woodbury. The only course I didn't complete

was one called charm, which I thought was interesting since I was really not the least bit interested in men, and I just quit. I figured there was no sense in my wasting my money paying for tuition to take that kind of a course. Eventually, within a couple of years I was the office manager. The office manager had become ill and quit, and I struggled there with the fact that my employer treated me like the upstairs maid. I never had a feeling that there was a real connection between us.
He would not let me hire experienced people, because he said they would steal the secrets, and I don't know what kind of secrets you could have in an insurance agency. But I was naïve, and I needed the job, because I was already beginning to support my family, and eventually I got so far behind in the work with the help that I had and everything, I just walked in after nine years, took in a stack of papers, and I said, "This is the work I haven't done yet and I'm not getting done, because you won't let me hire anybody who's capable. I quit."
I got into the elevator and one of the men that I used to go ice skating with, who was an accountant, had offices in the same building, said to me, "Well, don't take another job until I talk to you." And as a result of that, I went to work for the Los Angeles Flower Shippers, which was very interesting. Going back to Kosberg, he was Jewish and a pillar in the temple on Wilshire Boulevard. He supported--because of the depression, his father-in-law had lost his business and used to come in and talk with me frequently, and they never realized--they never asked me and I never told them that I was Jewish. So when the father-in-law came in one day after Mr. Kosberg's second son was born, to tell me a joke, he said people were coming into the house and telling the parents, "Mazeltov, congratulations on the new child," and when one of the friends asked the older boy, "What is your brother's name?" his answer was, "Mazeltov." And I broke out laughing. And Mr. Levine looked at me and said, "You understood?" I said, "Of course, I'm Jewish." After all those years. Didn't make any difference in the way my boss treated me. But anyway, that's one of the side stories.
Espino
Well, you said something about him treating you like the upstairs maid. Can you explain what does that mean to you?
Graff

It means that he never took a personal interest in me. During that time I worked for him, I was very heavy. I actually weighed 190 pounds, although it didn't look--I wore a size eighteen dress, and I had long hair which I wore in a braid over my head, because my stepfather [Joseph Graff] wouldn't let me cut my hair, because the braid reminded him of his favorite sister. So then I just finally talked my stepfather into saying, "Let me get my hair cut." And I did it. I also had an abscessed tooth, and the dentist said I had to wait a week or two until the abscess opened before he would pull the tooth, so I wasn't able to eat anything but liquids. I walked into the office on a Monday morning forty pounds lighter, my hair cut and done in a beauty parlor. He looked up and he didn't say a word. In other words, I was a tool for him in the office and that was it. It made me aware of how important it was to treat people as people. And my constant fight with him besides not only to get a better-equipped assistant was to get a better wage. In those days, of course, I was underpaid, and I was afraid to ask because I was supporting a family. So finally when I decided to heck with it--and by that time we had unemployment insurance, so I felt I had a little guarantee.

Then I went to work for the Flower Shippers. Does that explain to you your answer, give you your answer?

Espino

Yes, thank you.

Graff

When I went to work for L.A. Flower Shippers, I really liked the job. I had to go into work at six o'clock in the morning, but I was through at one, because I had to get in and take the telephones and record all of the shipments, the orders that had come in. They would then buy the flowers, pack them up, ship them out by air, and I was through by one o'clock. The only problem with that was I did not like the atmosphere around the flowers, the street where all of the flowers were sold. I think it was Wall Street in Los Angeles and a couple of incidents, including the fact that one of my bosses was having an affair, and they carried it out in the back of the truck, and I was a very naïve and very proper young lady at that time, and I decided I--oh, then he came to me. The owner was unhappy with his wife, or she was unhappy with him, I guess, and she sued him

for a divorce, and he wanted me to fix the books so it would look that he didn't have any money.
And, oh, at that time, no, it wasn't part time, but I went back to Woodbury to one of the accountants and asked them what was my responsibility, and he said, "If you're told to do it and you do what you're told, it's not your responsibility." But I still didn't like the idea of a guy trying to cheat.
Oh, I'm out of sequence. Actually, this all happened while I was still going to Woodbury and working part time.
Espino
At Kosberg?
Graff
No, before Kosberg, before. In other words, in 1934 when I--after six months, they would get you a part-time job. I don't know, did I say anything about the part-time jobs? Let me go back to that then. The first one was for an engineer who was working at USC, a German who was writing a textbook, a technical textbook on electrical engineering, and he wanted someone to type the script for him. So I was doing that typing, going in every afternoon. One afternoon he dictated a letter to me to go to somebody in Santa Ana, and, of course, I spelled it correctly, A-n-a, and he's telling me I don't spell it right, because he's German, his wife is Anna, and her name has two Ns in it. Well, we argue about it a little bit, but then somebody came in from USC and said to him, "She's right," so that took care of that.
But as he talked with this other friend that came in, I realized that the guy was a Nazi. He was telling about what a good job Hitler was doing in Germany. Well, that upset me so much I went home and I never went back, and I asked them to get me another job. Well, the next job was Bryan Tire Company on Aliso Street, which is now the freeway. But when I was going there--and it was fine, except he suddenly asked me if I would fix the books so that his wife, who was suing him for a divorce, would not get any money. Well, as a woman that disturbed me a great deal. That's when I went back to my professor at Woodbury and asked about my responsibilities, and they said if I'm just doing what he told me to do, I'm really not responsible. But it still bothered me, so I quit that job. After that I went to Kosberg's.
Espino

And then you went to the flower shop after that.
Graff
And then I went to the flower--well, it wasn't a flower shop. It was flower shipping. They air-mailed flowers all--and I'll never forget one of the things. I got an order for three orchards. They couldn't spell orchids. But anyway, I quit that. Temporarily I went to an agency and got a job. Those were unimportant things, though.
Espino
Well, can I ask you a question about those jobs just in general? How were the gender roles divided? Were you the only woman that worked in those offices, or what was the breakdown of men and women's roles?
Graff
Oh, well, first of all, at Woodbury I was taking the executive secretarial course, so my skills were secretarial and bookkeeping. Of course, with the German engineer, I was the only woman. It wasn't really a business. With Byron Tires, the salesmen--everybody was male. I was the only girl. I was half time, very alone. With Kosberg, he had one secretary and then they hired me. That made two women in the office. He had no one helping him with the sales. In other words, he was the whole thing. It was a trio of offices. He rented out one to an accountant and the other one to an attorney, both male.
At L.A. Flower Shipping I was the only girl, woman. There was I guess the boss and his brother. It was the brother who was having this affair that upset me. So all through my life at that particular time, and this was in the thirties, a woman's role in the office was as a secretary, and you were less paid for anybody, a man doing the same job. That was very obvious.
Espino
Were there expectations as far as serving food and coffee? Can you explain a little bit the culture?
Graff
That didn't come until I went to work for Rich Steel Company. I'll explain it there, if I remember. The culture was primarily the secretary was not an important person. She just did the things that had to be done. Kosberg wanted me to clean the office, and I said, "No way. If I wanted to clean houses I'd have gotten married and stayed home. You can get a janitor to do it." I did stand up for some

things, which indicated that women were expected to do these things.

Espino

You weren't afraid of losing your job at that point?

Graff

No, I didn't even think about it at the time. I just said, "I'm not going to dust the desks." It just was, I'm going to business college to get a career to do something else, so it was really interesting. At the same time, incidentally, while I was at Kosberg's, the office workers' union was trying to organize, and unfortunately, I was stupid and naïve. I didn't think there was any need for a union. Woodbury professors were all extremely conservative. In fact, they would go home and I would go home and I would have a bunch of ideas they were anti-Roosevelt, they were all of this stuff and for big business.

My stepfather, who was a registered Republican but always voted straight Democrat, because when he first became a citizen--he was twenty-one when he came to this country from Hungary--he registered as a Democrat. He voted for Wilson, because Wilson had said he would keep us out of war. My stepfather had been conscripted into the Austro-Hungarian Army and had participated in that, and he was opposed to war, very much opposed to war. So then when we got into the war and Wilson ran for reelection, he wouldn't vote for him because of that, so he re-registered as Republican, but he always voted straight--and my mother [Katherine Cutler Graff] was Republican, because her father had been a Republican. So then when it came to voting for Roosevelt, my mother and I talked. We were both going to vote for Roosevelt, but we wouldn't let our stepfather know that. We knew he was, but when we came out of the voting booth, Mother said, "Who did you vote for?" And I said, "Roosevelt." She said, "So did I."

Espino

What were some of the big debates between the two candidates, Roosevelt and I'm forgetting who he was running against.

Graff

I've forgot. Oh, Hoover. Roosevelt replaced Hoover. Hoover was big business. His slogan was "a chicken in every pot." In other words, everybody should have a job. But he had done absolutely nothing as the depression--and I guess the stock market fell that Black Friday

or Monday, whatever day it was. He was a civil engineer, and he really did not do anything. He didn't only foresee, but he left it up to--he thought that business would straighten it all out, as my recollections.
Whereas Roosevelt was interesting, because he was willing to try anything, and people did not--well, there have been books written about it. There's no need for me to go into that. But there's a recent one I read that was very good, and that was on the development of FDR from his childhood, how he became a rich brat to a liberal politician. Anyway, now we can go back.
Espino
You were talking about your conservative boss, who was probably pro-Hoover, and your--
Graff
No, I was talking about the conservative professors at Woodbury and then my stepfather, who was a liberal Democrat but always registered Republican. Then I was working already when Social Security started, so I'm reaping the reward of that long time, but I'm not reaping an award like they're reaping today, because our salaries were so low. I think the first year I worked full time, I made $800 for the year.
Espino
Wow.
Graff
And by the time I quit, I was maybe making twelve hundred, so since it's all--
Espino
How did you manage during the depression? Did you have to change your lifestyle at all?
Graff
No, we were very poor to begin with. My stepfather had been wealthy in Chicago, but when he divorced his wife or she divorced him, I don't know which way it was, anyway, she evidently took most of what he had, so he came out to Los Angeles. By the time my mother married him, he had this cleaning shop and tailor shop, and as the depression deepened, people were not buying tailor-made clothes, and they were not even cleaning them, so his income really went down. When I started working--oh, my mother started working then, so she had a steady job as a checker in a dry-

cleaning plant, which was our main source of income, and my stepfather, when he closed the tailoring shop, began to travel all over southern California selling cleaners' supplies and tailors' supplies. And he made enough really to keep us in food, but not enough to take care of all of the bills, so that eventually in 1940 our house was foreclosed and we lost our house.
By that time, I was working, and I had insisted that Mother--let's see. We lost the house I guess in '39, because we lived for two years in a rented place, and I insisted that Mother stop work, and I started taking care of the family. But I can remember, I was begging for a pair of shoes when I was in school, to the point where I had cardboard insoles, and we didn't have the money. We finally got enough money so I got a new pair of shoes. And my grandmother, who was taking care of the house for us while Mother was working, so she was being the cook and everything, would go down to the corner grocery store and meat market. Remember, in those days the butchers got the whole carcass and cut it up themselves. She would ask for bones for the dog, and she would make soup out of it before she gave the dog the bone.
We had one little soup she used to make which I loved. It was just plain water, a little chicken fat and seasoning for seasoning, and then she would make a dough, not like a dumpling but a little closer to the kind of dough you would have in pasta but thicker, and cook that in the soup, and sometimes if we had potatoes, she'd add potatoes to it. So we got by, but it was not easy. In fact, I made all my clothes until I think I was working for about two years before I had enough money to buy a dress in a shop, and in those days a dress was eight dollars. So it was rough, of course not as rough as a lot of other people had it.
I remember Grace [Montañez] Davis--I don't know if she told you in her review that they existed on beans for a long, long time, so the times were rough, but we did not hurt as much as those people who had absolutely nothing. But it was a good experience, and, in fact, we never thought of it as a bad experience. It was just life. We didn't have television. We finally got--when we got the house on 70th Street, we bought that in 1929 just before the stock market fell, so in other words, we paid top price for it and top insurance premiums, interest on the mortgage, which we couldn't pay off. We paid the interest, but we never could pay off any of the principal.

But as kids growing up, we used our imagination. We had our games. We did all sorts of things, but we didn't have gadgets. Our first--we finally got a crystal set radio, must have been about 1930, and a little later on finally when the radios were developed, we bought a console radio, and it was not good. We were buying it on time, and my stepfather kept telling them, "Take it--." He didn't want it. It was no good, and they wouldn't take it, so on his trips he would go down to San Diego, and then he'd usually cross over to Mexico to have a beer or something like that. So he wrote a letter telling them they were moving to Mexico, they could take it or we would take it, and they came and got it. After that we got one of those Philcos that sits on the table that you see in all of the old, old pictures, and we had that for years.

But we didn't realize that we were deprived in any way. We were like everybody else who was having problems. Well, after Kosbergs and the flower shippers, I went to an employment agency. I got a job that I didn't particularly like in an engineering office, so I looked through the ads constantly, and there was an ad for a steel warehouse that was very close to here. By that time, we had already moved into this house, and the warehouse was alongside the L.A. River just off of Main Street. So I went and applied for the job, and I got a little disturbed, because the owner said to me, "You know, it's important that our personalities click because we're practically like husband and wife." And I--uh oh, because I'd had a friend who had gotten a job and was constantly running away from her boss. But that isn't what he meant, of course. He meant--and so when I thought about it, okay, I'll try it, and I started working for him.

At that time it was in the war. He had his connections in Chicago with the steel mills, so we'd order carloads. This is what they called a secondary warehouse. It was not prime steel. He would order the carloads into the warehouse, hire a temporary crew to bring them in, to unload them, and eventually he set up a big steel shear. They would, in other words, cut them down so that what they ended up with was prime sheets. They just got rid of all of the ragged edges. So we'd be real busy when a load came in, and then I'd have nothing to do until the next load was ready to come. In other words, no record keeping or anything, just the normal stuff, no regular employees, and so this is where my boss--and it was Gus Rich,

Gustave Rich was his name--he'd say, "Why don't you go out and buy us some stuff and make us lunch?" And so I got in the habit of making lunch for the two of us, and eventually I was making lunch for--as it expanded. But I didn't resent it, because there was no place around there to eat. We'd go into Union Depot, where they had a Harvey Restaurant, or someplace like that, so it was really very convenient and I had no objections to it.

Because there was so little work at times, I remember I knitted, I think, three dresses in my spare time, and my boss and I got very well acquainted. He played the violin; I played the piano. He was Jewish and we had a lot of community things together, and in the war his brother was a veterinarian who was serving in Europe and who said that he ate just as well as Eisenhower, because he was checking the food. His job was checking the food that went to Eisenhower's, where he was staying, to eat. So during the war you were not permitted to raise salaries. So instead, he gave me a Hudson, a brand new Hudson, company car with a credit card for the gas, which was really very good, and all in all that was one of the best jobs I ever had, because of the atmosphere and everything.

The interesting thing was that when he'd call in these temporary crews, and eventually some of them became permanent. There was a young black man, everybody called him Junior, tall, and he stayed on as the company expanded after I left. Well, before I left they opened up another plant where they pickled--they called it pickled and oiled the steel [unclear] improved it. And Junior became supervisor of that. The other thing is the crew was a motley crew, and they got together a baseball team, and I went to watch one of the games. The warehouse manager was a friend of the boss's, Anglo from Chicago who'd been a baseball player, and he had that loping walk of a base--when he ran to make to make a basket, he had that walk. One of the other men, a black man, had been a boxer. His way of approaching the basket to throw was different. It was really interesting to see all of these things. And that man was from the South, and whenever he walked into the office, he always cast his eyes down. He never looked at me. I could tell that he had that kind of a background. Junior came from California, so he was open and was fine.

Espino

Did he look you in the eye? Junior, did he look you in the eye when he talked to you?

Graff

Oh, yes. Oh, yes. No, I can't remember the name of the other guy. He was the only one who didn't do that. And I didn't really know the rest of the crew very much, but he was the second to Junior. In other words, he was not an assistant manager, but he really helped manage the crew. So he was a perfectly capable person, but it always bothered me that he did not like to talk to me, and it was obvious. So these are the things that were happening in the forties, before we got to the stage we're in now.

Espino

Well, that reminds me a little bit of the description of the city, Los Angeles at that time, and how people moved around from place to place, and if you found you encountered people, because in your high school you encountered Japanese Americans and African Americans; did people stay in certain parts of the city, or did you all intermingle in downtown?

Graff

Both. It was actually after the war that we became a little more segregated, because of the black people all moved from the South, into the southwest. What happened, of course, the war was the real changing point. Ed Roybal, for instance, was born in New Mexico. His family moved here. He went to UCLA. His first job was in a cleaning shop, like a tailor shop, doing the pressing. When he went into the army and then he came back, this is when he became politically active, so that it was the war itself--before that, I don't think there were segregated areas except for the Mexican Americans or Mexicans. They lived east of the river, and I remember when I was working at the tire company, which was on Aliso Street just before the bridge over the river, on the other side, when I'd take the bus or it may have been a streetcar, to get to work from Woodbury, and it let me off across the river, and I had to walk back over the bridge, and I saw these little cottages. You could see it was a very poor neighborhood, but with vines, very colorful with a lot of flowers and everything. This was the Mexican community. I hadn't known--living southwest, I didn't even know it existed.

And I never lived--the Jewish community was Boyle Heights. They had communities. But we were Jewish; we weren't living in Boyle Heights. So that it was really pretty well integrated. That's the thing that really astonished me when I went back East after the war and discovered in Hartford that it was still not integrated. One street was all Jewish, one street was Italian, the next street might have been Irish Catholic, and my cousin told me that they kept the same cliques in high school. They never mingled. Whereas we didn't have that problem. Even though I was living southwest, which was primarily an Anglo community, I think we had two or three Hispanic students. One of them was the niece of Leo Carillo, the actor, so, of course, there was no segregation in terms of her, and she was light-complected with blonde hair. I don't recall actually being in contact with any black people at that time, but the only thing is that it was a shock to me when I saw the Mexican community there.
So let's go back to where we were. I'm off on a tangent again.
Espino
No, that's great, because it's a nice picture of the city. You were talking about your interaction with some of the employees at--
Graff
Right, Rich Steel, and my interaction with the boss. He was liberal and a very nice guy. Only one problem. As we got bigger, as we enlarged I had to hire a bookkeeper, which was fine, and he began to meet with the heads of other steel warehouses which were much larger than we were at the time. And Gus was the kind of person who, whoever gave him a suggestion, he'd latch onto it. Well, he'd come back with the suggestions. Like one of them was, we should stay open longer because another one of the warehouses did. Oh, Saturdays. Well, we had always worked--when I first started working, your working day was nine to five and half a day on Saturday, nine to twelve. And at Kosberg's my nine to five lots of times went from nine to nine, because I didn't have enough help to do the work, and I wasn't getting any overtime.
So then we would keep the office open and the warehouse at the Rich Steel Company on Saturdays, but I realized as office manager, there was no need for all of us to be there. So I got Gus to okay one of us, the sales manager or I or I guess it was the two of us would alternate Saturdays. And then I'm sitting there on Saturday and nothing is happening. So I asked the sales manager, "Did you get

any calls?" He said, "No." So I went back to Gus and I said, "You know, it's ridiculous for our coming in here on Saturday. Nothing happens." So we stopped--we began working Monday to Friday, and fortunately nobody said anything about reducing our salary, so in a sense that was a raise.
Then he would come back with these suggestions, and I would generally be able to veto most of them, and I had full charge of hiring of--we grew pretty big, so that we had a receptionist, we had a bookkeeper, we had me as office manager, we had a sales manager, we had a couple of salesmen. It was an expanding company. And after the war, when I needed a bookkeeper, a friend of mine who was at that time--by that time I was politically active--suggested he had a friend who was a bookkeeper. She was a Nisei and she had been secretary or bookkeeper for the Japanese American veterans, and so I hired her and she became my life-long friend. But that's going a little farther ahead, because we have to go back. You wanted to know about the USO.
Espino
You already talked to me about that the last time.
Graff
I've talked about that. So then as the warehouse grew they built a new plant around Santa Fe around 37th Street, I think, and from there we moved all the way out to Beach Street at around 80th Street, so that I was driving. I started out living very close to work and then it kept getting farther and farther.
Espino
Do you feel that you were compensated for the responsibilities that you had?
Graff
Yes. Yes, especially being given a car that I could use for my personal use as well as the company use, and a credit card. That was quite a boost to my salary, actually, when you get down to it. And Gus was a fair guy. I didn't have any problems with him until the war was over and his brother, who was a veterinarian, was also a communist, but he also liked money. It was a very strange combination. So Sig [Rich], the brother, came to work for us as a vice president, and he took over my duties as credit manager, so we had that. And as we were going along there was a slight

depression after--was it the Korean War in the early fifties? I think so.

Espino

An economic depression?

Graff

Yes, an economic depression, and business was going down. Gus calls me into his office and he said, "I want to talk to you." He said, "Sig just gave me this order." And he said, "You guys are sitting around and you're not doing anything. Why aren't you on the phone getting orders?" And I looked at the order, and I'll never forget, it was from Baby Line Furniture. And I said, "Oh?" and walked out, asked the receptionist, "Did you get a call this morning from Baby Line?" She said, "Yes." They called me every month and gave me their order. I was on the phone, Alan the sales manager was on the phone, so she gave it to Sig. He did not call them; they called us. Now, do you tell your boss, "I just caught your brother in a lie?" I quit. I lived with it for a little while and I said--but the interesting thing is before this happened Sig was a very--as I said, he was a communist.

I had the experience living here--we'd already moved into this house. The councilman at that time--I think I touched on it lightly in the other interview--was a Gerald K. Smith, anti-Semitic. He passed out leaflets that were very anti-Semitic, talking about the Protocols of Zion, which was what Ford's [Henry Ford] business that he started with that was also anti-Semitic. I got so angry I called the Democratic Party and I said, "I want to be involved in the election. How can I help?" And they never called me back. Now, that bothered me, and I mentioned it to Sig, and Sig says, "Well, that's the way the Democrats are. They don't really care about new people." He said, "You know, we're starting up a new party, the Independent Progressive Party. Why don't you join us?" So I was out in Pasadena. I was on the streets with this petition to get people to sign so we could get on the ballot, and the spiel was, "You don't have to vote with us. All we want to do is get on the ballot and then you have a choice. You have more choices of who you could vote for."

Well, from that I ended up being president of the Independent Progressive Party here in this area. But I met some wonderful friends who were friends for the rest of my life. The primary one

were the Burrows, Rube and Madeleine Burrow. I think I mentioned it in the previous thing, that he was a reporter for the Los Angeles paper before the "L.A. Times" and was a part of when they had the reform administration with Mayor [Fletcher] Bowron. He went in as commissioner, I guess, for water and power, and three months after he was, then he quit. He said, "There's no change in the city hall at all." He said, "People are meeting me in the hallways and offering me crates of champagne to vote for their thing." So he quit, and he was one of the very active people in that.
And his wife Madeleine was a screenwriter, but in those days women screenwriters did not get recognition. She was never given a byline. She was writing Westerns, and she had these fantastic stories about what the old studios were like there down in Hollywood, but very wonderful people, and they became very friendly with my mother and I. We did a lot of things together. But they were honest liberals. They were really concerned with trying to change the world to make it better.
So from there, that's when I got into the Progressive Party.
Espino
Do you remember the first meeting that you went to before you decided to join? Or what was it that convinced you?
Graff
Well, Sig convinced me. When I went out on the streets with the petitions, I was convinced. Then I became a member. I don't remember the first meeting or how it happened, but I know that Madeleine arranged a meeting of people in this area. They lived in Highland Park; I think it's Highland Park. It was up in the hills there, because her hobby was growing iris and cross-pollinating them, and I have lovely iris that she had given me. But anyway, I don't know how we got together, but we started meeting in homes and eventually I was suggested for the next president for the club, of the El Sereno club.
And Mother always--two members, a husband and wife, were astrologists, not astronomers but astrologist's. And so when my name came up, they called Mother and wanted to know when I was born so they could--and they pulled this whole thing about me. Mother told them I was born in the late afternoon, because it was on a Thanksgiving Day. It was after dinner. And they said, "Oh, that

can't be. Her complexion doesn't agree to that." [laughs] And Mother said she was there, she knew when I was born.
But from there I became active in the Independent Progressive Party and then as president I was active in the central committee, and it was from there that they made the suggestion that I go to the CSO [Community Service Organization] and ask them to come to this meeting at the El Sereno--at that time it was a high school and junior high school together, where Richard Ibañez, who was running for judge and one of the first Mexican Americans in a long time to run, was going to speak, and so that was how I got involved in that.
Espino
What year was the Independent Progressive Party generating?
Graff
Well, it started with Wallace, when Henry Wallace was running, so I would say that would be '47, '48. And after he was defeated, they still kept on trying to get going.
Espino
Right. That was '48, his unsuccessful attempt. Then at that time as well there were communists. The Communist Party was starting to grow as early as 1938 or 1942. Did you know there were communists in the Independent Progressive Party?
Graff
Not in the beginning, but eventually I found out, and the ones that I knew were wonderful people who were concerned. For instance, we got involved--well, this was, I'm trying to think, before the--we weren't involved, Mother and I weren't involved in the first [Edward] Roybal campaign. It was the second one, and they needed people to register voters, and the registration office downtown was not prone to have registrars who were Mexican American. So they asked Mother if she would--oh, I guess we asked Mother. The Independent Progressive Party was then working with Roybal, or working for Roybal, let's put it that way, so they asked Mother if she would like to be a registrar, and she said yes. And she said, should she change her registered party? She was a Republican. We said, "No, don't do it." And she did a tremendous job, as I told you, of registering people.
Now, also, remember, there were two housing projects or more I guess in the area that was primarily Hispanic at that time, and one

of the women in the tenants council--I'm trying to remember the name of the housing project.--anyway, it was Bertha Marshall. She was a communist. That's when I learned that there were communists. She had been secretary to the Committee for the Sleepy Lagoon. She had been very active in the East. She was tremendous, a little live wire. She would come and pick up Mother and take Mother into the housing projects to register people, and we became very good friends. She was halfway between Mother's age and my age, and we went on vacation every year together. So she knew the Roybals, and when the council raised the question about [unclear] communists, and Ed Roybal was opposed to it, she was one of the women who helped him keep his--under pressure, that stood behind him under pressure. But also most important was Lucille Roybal, his wife. She really was the background for that.

Espino

What do you remember of that? Do you remember any of the stories that came out of that, when he was the lone vote against the communist registration legislation?

Graff

Yes. Well, Bertha never was a member of CSO. But she lived in the housing projects at that time, and then she moved to Wolverine, I think it is, the one near the old Sears Roebuck near Olympic, and so she was active in public housing. This is where she met Selma [Palmer] and her husband, who were also active. So they sort of all sort of tied together. Later on I began to have an idea who the communists were, and then there were some that we always had doubts about, and there were some that we were sure were informers that we had doubts about.

Espino

Well, just getting back to that vote that Roybal--and you said that Lucille was really the one. I mean, you have Bertha Marshall was supporting his choice and then--

Graff

Yes, but Lucille told him to stick by his guns. I don't know, this is what I've been told. I have no--I wasn't involved at the time. I was still way out on the--I've always been out on the outskirts, so I can't tell you anymore about that, and unfortunately, Bertha passed away, so the--

Espino

Okay. Well, did you have--I mean, just try to take me back to that period when you first got involved with the IPP. Did the fear exist about communists that existed after the McCarthy--

Graff

No. There were people who were opposed to communism.

Espino

Even as early--

Graff

Even back then, yes, but before the McCarthy period, but mainly because they considered it a socialist--the rich people were afraid they were going to take their money away from them. That was really--and poor people who didn't have any money thought, well, if they ever got money, this would happen, and so I think this was the reason that they had opposition. But mostly, going back to the early thirties, and this I know only from having read, because I was apolitical until this thing happened with Sig Rich at the Rich Steel Company, look at all of the people who were branded, who participated during the depression, when there was a real need for political reform. They were all branded and then they got the idea that if you even looked at one, you became like them, so that--but I wasn't aware of any of that until actually I knew that the IPP was considered a progressive--well, of course, it was the Independent Progressive Party.

But I agreed with what they were working for, and so I was perfectly willing to work on fair housing. I was willing to work on equal opportunity in employment. These were the things that came up. I remember one of the campaigns we had for--there was a petition on the ballot, what do they call it, a proposition on the ballot. They wanted to--they had great big billboards all over the place about "protect your aged relatives" or words to that effect. And actually, it was completely contrary to what the proposition was proposing, which was to reduce welfare and senior citizen benefits, so that the people who were opposed to things that were really good for the people, which are the things I was for, were the ones who were conservatives, and they could be Democrats or Republicans. And I remember seeing those billboards and saying, "They're telling a lie and nobody is aware of it."

And I don't know, I think both my mother and my stepfather--he was liberal, and Mother was a very fair-minded person, so that was

the background of how I got into it. But an indication of the way I've always felt is after I graduated high school, I'll never forget the "Herald Examiner," the "Examiner" before it was the "Herald," had a contest, what would you do if you won a million dollars? And I answered. I sent in an essay, and I remember very well what it said was that I would take enough of the money and put it aside to be able to support my parents and myself on a moderate level, and the rest of it I would give to public housing, because I was very much aware of the fact other people besides us had lost their homes and had no place to go. And I won. I won twenty-five dollars, and that was a lot of money.

But they never publicized it in Los Angeles. Mother's friend Mary, who she had befriended way back in high school, read the article in New York and sent us the clipping. I mean, I got the money, but they didn't locally advertise it.

Espino

That's interesting.

Graff

But it shows you the way my tend was, that I have always been, and this was obviously because of my upbringing, that I've always been for the people who need it most. That's been my governing force through life.

Espino

Did your mom also join the Independent Progressive Party with you?

Graff

No, she didn't. She stayed a Republican so she could be a registrar. And then, of course, when the Independent Progressive Party died, she re-registered as a Democrat.

Espino

Did she ever learn Spanish? I mean, she was going to these public housing--

Graff

Yes, she learned enough Spanish. Now, our friend Henrietta Villaescusa, the public health nurse, was a liberal Catholic, very devout, very active Catholic, but she was supporting the Catholic labor organizations. So Henrietta talked her into being--asked her to be a volunteer for the well-baby clinics, and Mother learned enough Spanish to ask, "When was the baby born?" the questions that she

had to ask in order to fill out the forms. She could read Spanish. It was close enough to Latin, and French if you adjusted how you pronounced the words, so that she could read Spanish, but she never became really fluent in it. But she really participated in a lot of the CSO things. So where do we go from here? I keep going off on tangents. That's the problem.

Espino

No, that's great. The tangents are perfect, because those are the memories that you have really firm in your mind. But I did want to ask you, just going back before you talked about your mother and the CSO, the Independent Progressive Party, in the very beginning did you find that it was primarily Jewish or Caucasian, Anglo? I don't know how they would describe it.

Graff

It was mixed, because the Burrows were Anglos, and they're the ones who got me in, and they were the ones who were really active in it, and then it depended upon--there were quite a few Jewish people in it. There were quite a few blacks. I can remember--and when it was going downhill after Wallace lost and we were trying to build the party up, there was a meeting, I guess it was on the Southside, because there were quite a few blacks there, and they're talking about what are the issues that we should start taking up in order to try to build and keep the party going, and they talked about telephones, the telephone rates were going up and everything. And this black man got up and said, "You know, telephone rates are not a primary issue for us. We don't have telephones. The issues with us are employment and these other things." So I remember that. And, well, I don't remember a lot of specifics anymore.

Espino

That's a very interesting fact, though, that they would bring up--well, that you were all in this organization together, but depending on your race, maybe even your gender, your issues were different.

Graff

Right. Of course.

Espino

Were there other women involved in the IPP?

Graff

Oh, yes, yes. In IPP there was a good, like Madeleine--in other words, husbands and wives participated equally, out in the open. Now, what happened in CSO is husbands and wives participated, but the wives were behind the husbands, naturally. In fact, I remember, the next thing I was coming to was the political campaign that I was involved in. I was told if you're calling--and this was for a Mexican American candidate--they said, "If you call a worker and a woman answers, be very explicit that you are so-and-so from so-and-so, and you want to speak to her husband about such-and-such, because otherwise the wife is going to think, uh-huh, it's a girlfriend." This is how I began to understand the culture. So the women were more a part of it; in IPP there was equality. I think I can say that, because there were both--leaders were female and male.

Espino

Well, it's what people say about the 1960s organizations, the 1970s organizations; primarily I'm talking about Mexican American, and they would say that the women were doing all the cooking, doing all the paperwork, and the men were the leaders. Can you speak to that and maybe compare to the IPP?

Graff

Well, the IPP was strictly a political party, and I think there was equality. I didn't see anything where husbands were--usually, husbands and wives were both active, and sometimes maybe the wife was and the husband wasn't, but I can't remember any specific incident.

Espino

Did you have fundraisers? Did you have rallies?

Graff

In IPP?

Espino

Yes.

Graff

Yes, we did have, although CSO had much better fundraisers and rallies. Primarily I think we paid dues, and I don't remember--we had rallies. I remember one, again it was on the Southside, and Paul Robeson was coming to speak, and I will never forget that. He walked down the aisle, and, of course, everybody was applauding and yelling. They had assigned two bodyguards to him, and, of

course, he was a head taller than the bodyguards. I can remember that so well. Of course, I also was fortunate. I saw him in "Othello." I saw the first "Showboat" in which he sang, five times or seven times. I just kept going back. Every time they'd show it, I would go, because he was so--well, the whole "Showboat" itself was a wonderful musical.
So we had those rallies. I don't remember the rallies too distinctly, too much. That one stood out because of him. We must have had fundraising parties. Otherwise, where did the funds come from outside of our dues?
Espino
Did you have other politicians? You might not have had a big budget from your fundraising, but did you have other politicians coming to you for support, coming to your organization?
Graff
No, only IPP candidates. No, the others were very much opposed to us. In fact, it's really funny. I don't remember--what really happens, when I joined CSO, at that time IPP was on the way out, and somehow or other CSO took the place. It seems I always had to be involved in some kind of an organization.
Now, CSO fundraisers, we had a big one when J.J. Rodriguez was president. We hired a park out I think near Pico Rivera. We got dealers to give us a car to auction off. I was in charge of the funds. In other words, I collected, and I think we raised a tremendous amount of money, something like five or ten thousand dollars, which was a lot in those days. There must have been a thousand people at least that came to it. It would be in the CSO records somewhere about it, but that was a tremendous fundraiser. The other fundraisers were little things in private homes, where somebody would come, or, for instance, when they had the--
Espino
Okay, we're back. You were talking about the fundraisers.
Graff
They used to have the Friendship Festival in Boyle Heights, which involved the Jewish Community Center, CSO, any other Latin organizations. I don't think they had any black people particularly living at that time in the area. Well, each culture would set up a booth and supply their food, and my mother was busy boiling beef for the tacos for the CSO. I can't remember the name of the man

who started that. He was part of the Jewish organization, not the United Jewish Welfare, but there was that Jewish settlement there off of Soto Street. They had a building.

Espino

Okay, we're back, and we were trying to remember the name of one of the organizers of the Freedom Fiesta, but we can't remember that. But we'll get it for next time. You were mentioning also the diverse groups that were involved.

Graff

Right. I had forgotten that there was Japanese and Mexican and I'm sure that by that time there may have been a black group. I'm not sure, because it was in a process of change.

Espino

And it seems like it was also very heavy on labor.

Graff

Yes. Well, because the CSO and the representative in CSO was Gil Canales, and he was a great anti-communist. All of them were. In AF of L [American Federation of Labor], what was her name? Oh, she was great. She red-baited me all over the place.

Espino

She was in the CSO?

Graff

Yes, in CSO.

Espino

Hope Mendoza Schecter?

Graff

Hope Gonzales.

Espino

Not Hope Mendoza Schecter?

Graff

Yes. Yes, that was her.

Espino

She red-baited you?

Graff

Oh, yes. She did, Tony Rios did, all of the labor people. They were great red-baiters. And this was before the McCarthy.

Espino

And this was when you were still in the IPP?

Graff

Well, as I say, I really--there was only a couple of months of an overlap. I don't remember in time, but there was a small overlap and after that I was primarily CSO, because I got involved, and when I get involved, I give it all my time. And they needed my skills. They didn't have people who were trained to do mimeographing and do things. Tony Rios with all of his red-baiting, when he had an important letter he wanted to write, he came over here to the house and asked me to help him, and I did.

Espino

You said Tony Canales. You mean Tony Rios?

Graff

Tony Rios, yes. I'm getting confused.

Espino

Well, let's back up just a little bit, because I'm curious that you said that the Democratic establishment, the politicians within the Democratic Party, did not like people from the Independent Progressive Party. They didn't like the party. So what was the relationship with the Roybal campaign? They were Democrats, I'm assuming.

Graff

Right. I don't know whether in the beginning Ed was aware. I'm not sure. But, for instance, Bertha Marshall was a communist and in the Independent Progressive Party. He accepted their help, because I think he recognized that their goals weren't too much different from his. And there wasn't really an openness in terms of who belonged to what. If you were working for CSO, you were CSO. This other stuff like the red-baiting was behind my back to other people. I can remember one of the--oh, at one time I was secretary and when they had the elected officers stand up, this other friend of ours, Jesse del Campo, said after I came back off the stage, he said, "That was really funny. You were the only light-colored person up there." [laughs]

But in the beginning, you see, there were the two CSOs. The original one was in Boyle Heights, and then there was a branch in Lincoln Heights, and eventually that branch melded and went over to Boyle Heights and became just the CSO. But actually, we were a little more liberal than a lot of the people in the Boyle Heights area, and I think that disturbed Fred Ross a little, because I think he's the one who encouraged our joining the other.

Espino
Was Fred Ross opposed to communists, communism?
Graff
Oh, yes. Yes.
Espino
Would you call him anti-communist?
Graff
Yes. Yes, because when I came in from Independent Progressive Party to the Lincoln Heights meeting and made the suggestion, he opposed it very strongly. One of the members got up and said, "Well, but then why didn't you oppose our passing a petition for something else?" I mean, he had proposed petitioning like for traffic lights and stuff. "Why shouldn't we petition for this also?" I mean, see, that group was pretty good. When we moved over there, we became a threat to people like Tony Rios. Now, Tony Rios and Ed Roybal were very close friends originally, but there was antagonism toward the end toward them. It doesn't show in a lot of places, but Ed did not approve of a lot of the things that Tony did, and part of it, I imagine, could have been this red-baiting.
Espino
Do you have any specifics of what he opposed?
Graff
No. No. I just have a feeling about it.
Espino
And Bertha Marshall, so she was open communist. She was not--
Graff
Well, you didn't talk about being a communist or anything. If somebody asked you, I don't know what you would have answered, frankly. I know that when she got to know us, Mother and I, she began to tell us about her background, and her background was the Sleepy Lagoon, in the Midwest organizing farmers' unions, and I don't know what she did in New York, but she was always active. In fact, her family continued. I think I mentioned to you that I went to her son-in-law's funeral, and there--of course this was recently--and there they were openly telling about the things that he had done and the things that he belonged to, so it's kind of hard to--some of these things. But with Tony people would tell me what he said, but also I would hear him talking to somebody about me while I was talking to somebody else in the same room, so I knew how he felt.

Espino
What would he say exactly?
Graff
Well, he would just--I can't remember the exact words, but he was implying that I was a Red, let's put it that way.
Espino
Can you tell me a little bit about what that meant at that time? Because it's probably different now, so if somebody hears you say "calling me a Red," well, what does that--
Graff
Well, in the McCarthy era and before the McCarthy era, calling you a Red meant that you were a communist, possibly a terrorist. In other words, it was a terrible thing for somebody who wasn't a Red to be a Red. It was a revolutionary.
Espino
Did they suspect that people who were in the Communist Party wanted to change the United States government? Was that the fear?
Graff
That was the fear. And the thing--that was really incorrect. But there were ties to the Soviet Union, and I can remember the time when the Soviet Union began to disintegrate and truths began to come out about what they did, like Stalin's anti-Semitism. The Jewish members of the Communist Party didn't want to believe that. They were still convinced that the party was for the people and everything. So you had people in a change, and that was the beginning of the end of the Communist Party in the United States, I think, was when those truths came out about Russia. Yet there were still a lot of die-hard communists who didn't want to believe it.
Espino
Did you ever join? Were you ever tempted by the philosophy to--
Graff
It wasn't the philosophy. Bertha got me to join the party, and I lasted for about two years.
Espino
Oh, you did join.
Graff
Oh, yes. I joined because I saw what she was doing, and I really believed in it. But then we would have monthly meetings, and I

finally came to my final conclusion was that the Communist Party that I knew was one-third idealists, one-third opportunists who thought that was the way up, and the final third were informists, and that includes several people who were friends of mine. And then I remember those of us who were liberals who had been in IPP talking about it and questioning, was he or was he not? You know? Trying to figure it out.
In fact, at one point I remember somebody approached me and they thought that Grace [Montañez] Davis was an informant, and I'm sure she never was, not the way she is. But you see, there were all kinds of rumors going around all over about everybody.
Espino
And I'm assuming that it depended on your politics, because Grace Davis is considered more conservative-liberal than radical-liberal in some circles.
Graff
Yes, right. And there were all kinds in all the groups. That's the funny thing about it. Well, if we can go back then to Rich Steel Company, I quit and I went to an employment agency. I asked Gus just to do me one favor, fire me so that I could collect unemployment insurance. So I got a couple of jobs which I didn't like. In fact, one of them was for a brassiere company, a manufacturing company. Funny thing, I've always ended up having Jewish bosses, and they would walk through the room--I was supposed to be the office manager. They'd walk through the room, the two of them, smoking, but they did not let the employees smoke on the job, and they complained because they spent time in the restrooms smoking. It was that sort of an unequal thing, and I just didn't like that at all, so I ended up again looking at the newspapers.
[unclear] After that, I had a friend who had been a member of the Progressive Party, who had Angeles Wrought Iron. They made wrought-iron furniture. He originally was a vocational teacher of welding, but he came out to Los Angeles, and I met them through the Progressive Party, and he needed someone to take care of his office. He had been doing it himself and he couldn't do it, so he hired me, and I worked for him for quite some time, considerably less than what I was getting at Rich Steel. All of these other jobs were less than that, but I had figured I didn't want the money, I

wanted the peace of mind. And I've always felt that way. I never wanted to work for a big firm, because of the back-cutting and the gossiping and everything that goes on in them and the playing favorites.
So anyway, I worked there. We enlarged enough so that I had to have an assistant. I hired a black woman. The interesting thing--he was progressive. He thought that was a good idea. But when I quit, I said that she was perfectly capable of doing all of the work. He wasn't ready to accept that. So even the progressives, you see, had their prejudices. So all of these things were interesting experiences, but that was one of the little jobs I had in between, and I guess it was after that--oh, while I was working at Angeles Wrought Iron, I guess the people who had been with the Independent Progressive Party, and I don't remember whether it was still going on or not at that time, came to me and said they were going to run Gilbert Canales for assemblyman in one of the primarily Mexican American districts; would I be the campaign manager.
I said sure. I took another cut in pay, and it was a very interesting experience. That's where I met a lot of the people that I still occasionally am able to communicate with, who became active politically. I think, of course, by then they were active in the Democratic Party.
Espino
He was running as a Democrat or an IPP?
Graff
IPP.
Espino
Mexican American.
Graff
Right. He was running against a Democrat--
Espino
Who was not Mexican American.
Graff
He may have been, but he was a conservative, and Gilbert came very close to winning. We almost made it. But I think I told you in my early history about how I froze on the stage? Well, I had to give a campaign speech at a dinner, and that's when I started speaking, and ever since then I haven't shut up.
Espino

Well, tell me about some of the things that you did for his campaign that were probably your original ideas, I'm assuming, if you were the campaign manager.

Graff

No, they weren't my original ideas. I was representing the people who really organized the campaign, and I remember one of them was Art Tekai. His brother is a motion picture actor who just died a couple of weeks ago, I guess. It was in the paper. But Art had been with the Independent Progressive Party, so it may be the IPP was still working at that time, and he was the one who came up with the ideas. I was able to implement them. See, I had the skills to write the campaign letters, to see that they got produced and into the mail and that sort of thing.

But I wasn't really--I was naïve in terms of politics, so I was more of a figurehead than a real manager. I did the work that was necessary, but it wasn't my thinking, because I had no experience in this. The only experience I had was that I was organized, and they recognized that and knew that that would be helpful. So we did that.

After that, I had to start reading papers for ads again, the ads, and that's when I went to work for Hi-Fi House. The interesting thing is, I didn't know my boss was Jewish. His name was John Coen, C-o-e-n, and until somebody called me and made some anti-Semitic remarks about him in his office, I protested. I said, "Look. You've made a mistake. Now, I'm Jewish. I don't think he is." But it turned out he was. [laughs] But that was non-political. The only thing that was interesting about that is when I quit the Communist Party, they called me and asked, the party called me and asked me if--the FBI called me and asked me if I wanted to be an informer. They didn't call me at home. They called me at my office. That's when I knew, you know.

Now, I have the FBI report on me. I sent for it, oh, about a year ago, and I've read about twenty pages. I haven't gotten through--it's ridiculous, but I want to finish reading it. But anyway, that was just a job for me. I enjoyed it. Again I catch one of the partners stealing equipment, taking it out on a weekend and not returning it, and I know that he sold it. I assume that he sold it. So again, I don't want to work under those circumstances. I quit.

And just about when I was really seriously thinking about it, Gus Rich called me and said am I happy in my job, and I said, "Not really." He said, "Come back to work for us," so I went back there. Unfortunately, the bookkeeper who had been my bookkeeper when I was office manager was convinced that I was out to get her job, and I was very unhappy there. I said, "Gus, this isn't working out. We'll have to do something else."
So just about that time--oh, Roy Allen, who was the sales manager from Rich Steel, called me and said, "There's a new steel warehouse opening up. Would you be interested? They need somebody to be in charge of the office. It's just starting up." I went out for the interview and it sounded okay, so I went to work there, and I worked there until I went to Cal State.
Espino
Well, let's talk a little bit more about the Independent Progressive Party, communism, anticommunism. You said that you were called to become an informant. Did you ever feel threatened--
Graff
No.
Espino
--or that you were being watched?
Graff
Oh, yes, I knew I was watched. We were having a march in front of the Hall of Justice. I don't remember on which of the issues it was, whether it was unemployment or whether it was housing, but you could see the FBI guys were standing on top of their cars taking photos of the whole line. No, you knew it was going on. You knew you were being followed when you went to meetings, and that's why I wanted to see how much they had really followed me. So far, I've gotten primarily--but they're always reporting from what I said at a meeting. Now, what I said at a meeting was what I think, which had nothing to do really with communists. But, no, I knew.
And then the fact that, well, finally one of the people I knew was an informant was in the Independent Progressive Party, came to the house for a meeting here, and on the piano I had the picture of my brother [Victor Bernard Graff] in his uniform. So I know that's how the navy learned that I was in the party at the time, and I was only in for two years, I guess, but I don't know whether anybody ever notified them that I wasn't. But it was in the fifties, the height of the

McCarthy era, that my brother was forced to disown both me and my mother because she lived with me, because of our connections. And he said that he had told them that he very rarely gets to see us, he very rarely gets in touch--it didn't make any difference. He was tainted. He either had to do that--and so he did.
May I have a Kleenex?
Espino
How did your mom feel about that?
Graff
Terrible.
Espino
What did she say, do you remember?
Graff
Yes. She's a very strong person, and she wrote to him three times, asking him to change his--why he did it, why he was no longer in touch with us, and I finally said to her, "Mom, he's not going to change. You might as well stop writing." And it was always, I know, a blow to her, but she was never one to indicate that these things bothered her. Manuel Maneses became her son, in a sense. When we'd have a Passover dinner, he sat at the head of the table. We developed other things, but there was always--I never talked about it to anybody. It wasn't because I didn't want them to know I might have been a communist. I didn't want them to know that my brother was such a stinker.
And even after he got in touch with me fifty years later and we began to see each other, I still no longer have the feeling for him as a brother. I went along with it. In fact, the reason I know so much about the family history is he didn't know any of it, and he asked me to start writing, and I started writing to him the information that Grandma and Mother had given me through the years, and that's why it was so fresh in my mind.
Espino
He never saw your mother again?
Graff
No. I wrote to him when she was dying, and his excuse was he was in Japan at the time, still in the navy. But that's no excuse not to get in touch with him. However, I balance it against the fact that he hated my stepfather [Joseph Graff]. He was old enough to remember my father; I wasn't. So he always resented that Mother

had married again, and I think he turned that resentment against her, because he said something to that effect when we got together again.

Espino

Was your stepfather cruel to him?

Graff

No. In fact, my stepfather treated us as if we were his kids. In fact, we used to get a kick out of his friends would come to the house, and they would say to my stepfather, "You know, your daughter looks just like your wife, but your son looks like you," and he'd get the biggest kick out of that. But at the same time also, my stepfather was Hungarian, which meant that he had the Germanic thing about women and very strong discipline.

And, of course, one time my brother and I had saved up fifty dollars between us when he was in high school. I guess I was too. He bought an old Dodge coupe for fifty dollars and it wasn't working right, so when my dad went out of town on Monday, he moved his car into the garage, our car, and took it apart, because he was a good engineer, and he was going to Washington. I mentioned taking the airplane-engineering classes. In other words, mechanical classes. He had the thing apart, and he didn't have it back together by the time my father, my stepfather came back. And Dad blew his top, because he had a van full of merchandise he did not want to leave outside, and he couldn't put them in the garage. That may have been part of the beginning of the end [unclear]. I don't know. But, no, I'd always known there was that there, and he admits all of his--he said himself he didn't really know why he had hated him so. I'm sure it was just resentment because Mother had remarried. But, no, it was funny.

Espino

Yes. That's one of the tragedies of the McCarthy era, the impact that--well, people's personal lives were destroyed.

Graff

Yes. Well, that's it. And to be tainted for such--like because she lived with me. Okay, so I took the "People's World." I took the "People's World" even after I left the party, because it had interesting information you couldn't get in the regular paper. And then when I started work at Cal State, fortunately they had just dropped the requirement that you had to sign a loyalty oath,

because I would never have gotten the job. I would have refused to sign just on the basis of principal.

Espino

And your mother never joined the Communist Party?

Graff

No, no. When we'd have a meeting here, she'd go in the kitchen and read.

Espino

Was she opposed to you being a part of that?

Graff

No. You see, recognizing our Russian background, we were aware of the problems back in the late 1890s, well actually, up to the late 1890s, of in the Russian government the prejudice against Jews, the conscription of soldiers, all of these things. There was no freedom of speech. There was nothing back there. Jews couldn't own land. Therefore, she could and I could understand the revolution, what it was based on, the interesting fact that the revolution did not come as Marx had expected, from the industrial nations, but from the peasant nations. So it was very interesting. And at the same time I could understand--I had a better understanding, so I wasn't opposed to communism. I saw it originally as a better way for the Russian people. It didn't turn out that way, but then history changes.

So she never was opposed to--she would tell me when she was opposed to something, but she never insisted that I do what she say. This was her wonderful thing. She would tolerate whatever was going on. So, no, she didn't have any feelings about that at all. I never asked her what she thought about communism. I didn't discuss it with her. In fact, I really didn't know much about communism myself.

Espino

You were drawn to Bertha Marshall and her lifestyle.

Graff

Right. Well, and then I don't know whether she will tell you or not, but Selma Palmer and her husband, they were communists. And actually I went to classes to learn more about communism when I first joined the party. So I began to learn about it and I began to read about it. Up until that time I was very naïve, but I didn't know how it was going to change my life later on.

Espino
Well, this will be the last question, because we've been here for an hour and a half, but I'm curious about the connection between fair housing and communist ideology. How did those two things fit? What I'm thinking about, it's really a class-based--
Graff
Right. Public housing is affordable housing for the working people. Communism is the party of the working people. It's as simple as that. That's why I was for all of these things, because their ideas were to equal, to take the rich to come down and the poor to go up, and there should be--end up--actually, communism was supposed to be the ultimate. First you had socialism, and then you go to communism, communism in which the people own everything and share it. Well, it didn't turn out that way, but that's what the original concept of communism was. At least that's what I learned it to be, and I was in favor of that.
In fact, I'm in favor of it right now when I see that we're getting the division between the middle class and the upper class is widening, and the upper class--I'm living on my pension at only a little bit over the poverty level. I never would have expected that ten years ago. So the idea is a good idea. It's just that the wrong people get in charge and change. I don't know how else to mention it. But all of the people in the thirties, that was the same thing then. So I don't feel badly about having been a communist. I wasn't a very good one.
One of the interesting things is, they commended me for the work I was doing in CSO. What they didn't understand is that they had suggested I do certain things, like stand up in meeting and make points, and I never did it. I'm not one to stand up in front. I'm a pusher from in back. So I talked to my people, my friends in the CSO about something. They'd ask me, what did I think about this, who did I think about. I would tell them and then they would get up and make my point of view for me. So I wasn't--their commendation was incorrect. [laughs] But I always got a kick out of that.
Espino
Were they encouraging you to bring CSO members to the Communist Party?
Graff

No. Nobody ever did anything. The only recruitment was Bertha talking me into it, and because of my feelings for her I felt it was a good thing. But then I found out--for instance, I discovered one of the IPP members was a communist informer.

Espino

Do you remember that person's name?

Graff

No, I don't. It was Sal I suspected, but I wasn't sure. But this guy I was sure. He lived in El Sereno in a little house like this, and all of a sudden he's got a grand piano for his daughter to learn to play the piano, and he was a shoemaker. So I figured he's getting money from somewhere. And he had been at the house and seen my brother's picture on the--so I could come to that conclusion.

But, no, it wasn't an overt effort on the Communist Party as far as I could see, to get members. And like I say, Bertha I felt was so right in the things that she supported that I didn't see anything wrong in going along with her if it would help other people to better their lives. Interesting the way things turn out.

Espino

Yes. Well, we're going to end on that note, and we'll pick up again next time with the CSO and more detail about that. Okay, I'm going to stop it now.

1.3. Session 3 (March 3, 2010)

Espino

This is Virginia Espino. Today is March 3, 2010. I'm interviewing Marian Graff at her home in--I keep forgetting--

Graff

Hillside Village, Los Angeles.

Espino

Hillside Village, Los Angeles. I wanted to start today with just focusing in on your specific roles and responsibilities in the different organizations that you took part in. You mentioned that you wanted to start with the CSO [Community Service Organization]. If you could just give me any detail.

Graff

Well, when I joined, actually, I just came in and sat down, and behind me was Henrietta Villaescusa, who was a public health nurse and a real worker in the community. And in front of me was Manuel

Maneses, who worked for the Edison Company. Politically he leaned toward socialism, but he wasn't really connected with anything except that I know of. So I got up. At that point I came from the Independent Progressive Party [IPP] with an invitation for anyone who wanted to come and hear Richard Ibañez, who was running for I think municipal judge at that time, and he was speaking at the El Sereno Junior High School. So I offered--well, when I mentioned it, Fred Ross, of course, was there overseeing the meeting, and he immediately said something, because he evidently knew my background, or at least he recognized Richard Ibañez was being supported by the Independent Progressive Party. He opposed me. And one of the members of the Lincoln Heights CSO got up and said, "Well, you had us pass around petitions for this." I must have had a petition for something also. He said, "Why shouldn't we do this?" In other words, they were opposing his attempt to keep it just within the frames of what he wanted for the organization. After the meeting, both Manuel and Henrietta spoke to me, asked me if I was interested in joining the club, and Manuel said he would like to go to the meeting, but at that time he didn't even own a car. And I said, "Well, I'll be glad to take you. Where do you live?" Found out he lived not too far from me off of North Broadway, so I went and picked him up and took him and Sal Rivas, who was another, I guess, officer of the CSO, and we went to hear Ibañez.

Well, after that I came to the meetings regularly and, actually, I think I became more interested in that than I was in any of the other things, because the people were so nice and interesting. We had a small committee. On the executive board was a man whose last name was Friedlander Jerry. He was married. His wife was Mexican American, and they became the center of the Lincoln Heights club, was Henrietta, Manuel, I forget Friedlander and his wife and me and Sal Rivas. And so we'd call the meetings together, but we didn't have a big membership, and eventually we consolidated with the Boyle Heights, and so we met in Boyle Heights.

In Boyle Heights I was at one time secretary of the organization, and that's because of my secretarial skills. But I also headed up the education committee and as a part of that we went down to--and this was when we had the terrible Board of Education. I've forgotten; there were a couple of women on there that were real

reactionaries. I went down and spoke to them. What we did, in order to get their attention I did a survey of Lincoln High School, Roosevelt High School, Jordan High School, and Fairfax, as the Jewish, the black, the Mexican community in terms of the classes that were offered, because Manuel and Connie Maneses were having a hard time at Wilson High School getting their kids into academic-oriented classes. They really fought it through, and I think I mentioned it before that their son ended up being principal of a school in San Diego.

But anyway, we did the survey and those papers are on file either in Henrietta's or in Grace's [Grace Montañez Davis] files at UCLA. We found out at Lincoln High School, I think the majority of the--they had something like a large number, an extraordinarily large number of upholstery classes and auto mechanics. They had had a very good ceramics class. Now, when Andrus, Dr. Andrus, was principal of--and she's the one who started AARP [American Association of Retired Persons]--was principal, and this is when Henrietta went to school there--Henrietta went to academics. She had no problem with it at all and ended up being a public health nurse. But after that they began to be very anti-Mexican in terms of if your brother or sister had come to the school and done something bad, you were automatically expected to also do something bad.

I had one family there, Martha Chavez, who had been kicked out of--well, the family, when they did Chavez Ravine in order to get supposedly for public housing, and then instead the city sold it to the Dodgers. Well, Martha and her family, and she had about seven brothers and sisters, were dispossessed, and they came over and--but they went into the new housing project, which was in Rose Hill. But she told me that her brothers all had problems at Lincoln High School because one of them had been very bad, and it was just they said, "Oh, you're so-and-so's brother? We're expecting trouble." So that was part of the thing that got me interested in looking into education.

I found out that the elementary school, and I've forgotten the name now, that was connected with the Rose Hill Project in Rose Hills, it had a tremendous number of classes for the girls in sewing and for the boys in carpentry, and very few classes, of course, for academics. So we prepared this report. We took it down to the Board of Education, and I suggested they might like to come and

see the schools. So a committee from them came to see, I think it's Rose Hill Elementary School, and the response was, "They look happy." They didn't know anything else. Then there was a change in the Board of Education, and they just told us we'd have to start all over again, and that was it as far as I was concerned. But we tried, and we compared. Jordan and Roosevelt and Lincoln had mostly classes for auto mechanics, sewing, that type of thing, whereas, of course, Fairfax had all of the academic courses and very little of the occupational. So that's one thing that we did; that is, that I did.
When they permitted the older Spanish-speaking people who'd been here for--who were over fifty or who had been here for fifty years, I've forgotten which, to study the Constitution and become citizens by passing the exams in Spanish, Grace Davis took the Daughters of the American Revolution, the DAR manual that they used and translated it into Spanish. She gave the translation to me, which I then mimeographed into textbooks for them. The interesting thing is since Grace had learned her Spanish at home and I had learned it in four years of high school, I kept correcting her spelling, her grammar, and we always laughed about that. But that was one of the things. CSO really had a beautiful program on citizenship. I remember one man. His first name was Alex. I can't remember his last name. But he was a big organizer of that. He worked for the city. He had a good job with the city. So that was two things that I did.
Then because they needed more people registered to vote, we talked my mother into being a registrar of voters. I think I mentioned that on the last time, so that Ed [Roybal] could get elected, and he was elected to the council. So I would take my mother to the housing projects or other places, and then for a long time she would sit outside where--it's now where Food For Less market on Huntington Drive in El Sereno, that was a Market Basket at that time. And if I was going to a meeting, I would leave her before the meeting, sitting at a table. She'd register people as they came out or went in, and then I would pick her up at night, so that was one of the other things we participated in.
I'm trying to think of some--oh, when Rodriguez was president of CSO, he organized a tremendous fundraiser, a big party, picnic sort of thing out in one of the parks I think near Pico Rivera or in that area. They even had gotten somebody to donate a brand-new car,

and we were selling raffle tickets. We made thousands of dollars, and I was the treasurer. I was these things because I had the training for it. And they didn't, that was the thing. So I felt wherever I could help with my background, that's what I did. And aside from that, I participated in all of the fundraisers. When they had the Friendship Festival, my mother helped make the meat for the tacos that we sold at the booth.
Oh, the other thing, I think I mentioned it in the very beginning. When the Eastside Jewish community was moving over to the West, they wanted to give up their building that they had on Soto Street, and they wanted to give it up to a Mexican organization. And in order to have communication with them, they wanted somebody who could come to their board and report back to the Mexican community, but their rules were you had to be Jewish in order to be on the board. So I became the representative for the Mexican American organization, and so this just--I fitted in a lot of things and made some very good friends there.
Espino
Can you tell me, before we move on to something else, I'm interested in your view of the relationship between the Jewish community and the Mexican American community at that time, because it seemed like there were many places where they supported each other, where they helped each other, where they worked together.
Graff
Yes. Well, I think one of the prime things is when Ed was elected councilman, he was in very close contact with the Jewish merchants all on Brooklyn Avenue. And they invited him--I think I mentioned this--they invited him to go to Israel. And they said, "Oh, don't worry." He said, "I won't be able to communicate." "Don't worry, we'll translate for you." When they got to Israel in those days, the majority of the Jews there were Sephardic, who speak a bastard Spanish, and he ended up translating for them. [laughs] So he had a very good relationship with them all along.
Espino
Do you have any insights as to why that occurred, why that closeness occurred?
Graff

No, I don't know. All I know is that whatever it was, he was in the army, and when he came out from the army, he was aware of the fact that he had been treated differently. I guess the army showed him--he met people who were raised in different areas who hadn't had prejudice against themselves, so he saw a different kind of person with a different kind of contact with people, and so he began, evidently, to work on making that change in the Mexican community.
There were a lot of people like him who came out of the army. One of my neighbors who was living down here--I can't remember his name now--he wrote a book on the Mexican Americans in the army. What the heck was his name? [Raúl Morin] But he was, I think, one of the--oh, he was one of the founders of the veterans, the Mexican veterans. I don't remember what the name of it was.
Espino
The G.I. Forum?
Graff
G.I. Forum, yes. He was active in the G.I. Forum. I'm sure he was president of it at one time.
Espino
"Among the Valiant," is that--["Among the Valiant: Mexican Americans in World War II and Korea"]
Graff
That could be. Who wrote that? Raul Morin
Espino
The name is escaping me, but I can--
Graff
Moran?
Espino
Julio? Moran? I don't remember. Anyway, we can find it.
Graff
Morin, I'm pretty sure that was his name, and he lived just a couple of houses from here. I didn't know it at the time, of course.
Espino
He doesn't live here anymore?
Graff
No. He passed away here quite early. See, this tract was opened in the forties. Well, it would be after the war, because I think we were all shocked that he had died. We just heard the sirens coming. He

had died at home, and they had called emergency and they came. But, yes, he wrote the book. So however he--I think it's just that all of these young men coming from areas where they had been held under prejudice from advancing, discovered other people did, why couldn't they, and they began to fight for it. And that's why you had the G.I. Forum, you had CSO, you had MAPA, the Mexican American Political organization. All of those were formed about the same time. CSO was, I think, the oldest, and I think Ed made the best advances of all of them.

Espino

Can you tell me what you felt connected you to the Mexican American community as a person of--I know you weren't a practicing Jewish person.

Graff

No. What connected me was the friendship with the people and the fact that I have always been for the underdog. This has been--I think I told you about my winning a prize from the "Examiner" for what I would do if I won a million dollars, so I have always been that way. I think that was part of my upbringing. That is part of the Jewish culture, to look out for the guy underneath, and charity. But I don't know, it just seemed to be something that I had no other interest in life, and it became important to me. The social relationship was important with the individuals, but also the goals, and I wanted to help. I've always been an idealist.

Espino

What do you think are some of the greatest achievements of the CSO during that early period when you were first part of it?

Graff

Registration of voters and the election of Ed Roybal. Well, CSO started out just trying to--getting the streets paved in their own community. That was a big thing. Putting up traffic lights near schools so that the children could cross in a protected area. They did a lot of civic things before they really went into politics. They went into politics because they realized they were not represented, and this is the reason they had so much trouble getting anything done. Nobody was willing to do anything for them, so they figured they had to do it themselves.

And looking at what grew out of CSO, the people who grew out of it are really--it's fantastic, and most of them are no longer alive. But

[Cruz] Bustamante was an outgrowth from that. Most of the first- or second-generation Spanish-speaking politicians would have their roots in CSO. There was one man I remember, Ralph Guzman. He ended up--and they joined. At the time that CSO was forming, these kids were in high school, like Pat Hernandez, Ralph Guzman, somebody Poblano I remember, Ralph Poblano. They all became active and became active politically. Ralph ended up being professor at UC Santa Cruz. He wrote a book which I mimeographed, "Roots Without Rights," in which he talked about the American citizens who were born here and as children were exiled back to Mexico with their parents and the fight they had to come back in. So I don't know--somebody has a copy of that, because I had one and I gave it to either Henrietta or Grace.

But he was interesting, because he told me that Guzman indicated that originally his ancestors were Jewish. There are certain names that indicate people who became Catholics during the 1400s, during the Inquisition, and remained a lot of times as Jewish. They continued their religion in the cellar, as it were, so that nobody knew they were practicing. In fact, I have a friend now who discovered that her grandfather--she'd always assumed he was Catholic. They came from Mexico. But when she went through her grandfather's things, there was a Jewish star, a Mogen David in his jewelry, and she started tracing it and she found out, yes, originally they were Sephardic.

Espino

How old was Ralph--getting back to Ralph Guzman, how old was he when he became a member of CSO?

Graff

I would say he was in his teens. He was still in high school. There was a group of them. Pat [Hernandez] was one of them, Ralph Poblano, and he was elected to office somewhere along the line. I forget which one it was. There were a group of those. Now, they came in a little later than the people like, oh, Henry Nava. In other words, they came in as the organization began to grow. I think Nava was one of the early, really early members.

Espino

Henry Nava?

Graff

Yes.

Espino
Henry Nava, not David Nava.
Graff
Right. I'm sorry.
Espino
That's okay. No, no, that's okay.
Graff
Yes, I can't--I'm amazed I can remember this much.
Espino
It's incredible. You remember the important details. Yes, Henry Nava was also president of CSO at one point.
Graff
Right. Yes. But that was before--see, now, that was before Lincoln Heights joined the Boyle Heights one. So I really never knew him, because he had moved on by then. Did he go to UCLA before he--he ended up as a professor at one of the universities, I know.
Espino
That would be, then, not Henry Nava, his brother Julian Nava.
Graff
Julian, right.
Espino
Julian, then, was young.
Graff
See, I'm not clear on those things.
Espino
Yes, yes. Well, Julian Nava is, yes, he went on to be a Ph.D. doctor and then ambassador. He had a long and important career. But he told me a story maybe you remember, of some of the ways that the young people were able to help with Roybal's campaign, and that is they would put posters up throughout the city, because they couldn't vote. They were too young to vote.
Graff
Right. No, I didn't know. See, those were related to the Boyle Heights thing before I got into there.
Espino
I see. But do you remember Henry Nava, his older brother?
Graff
I remember him, yes, because Henrietta and he were very good friends. See, she was active in the Boyle Heights one, I think,

before they--and maybe was instrumental in starting the Lincoln Heights chapter, I don't know. But we met at the "L.A. Times" Boys Club, and there is an interesting story there. She volunteered as a public health nurse to work with them, and she got into a--we had a very good relationship, the club had a very good relationship with the manager, and I don't remember his name now, and the man who was in charge of the gym, who was an interesting person. But before we joined Lincoln Heights, I know Henrietta organized an English and Spanish, two different sections meeting at the same time. I'm trying to remember what it was on, but I'm sure knowing her it was most likely related to health or politics. And if you ever get a hold of the minutes of those old clubs, then you'll really have the story of what they did.

Espino

That was with the "L.A. Times"--

Graff

Boys Club.

Espino

But her papers would have been--

Graff

Her papers are in UCLA. I think Grace's are there too.

Espino

Yes. And those workshops that she would hold would be sponsored by the "L.A. Times," not CSO?

Graff

No, no. They were sponsored by CSO. Yes, we just met in the "Times" Boys building. It used to be--I don't know whether it's still operating or not--on--I figured as much. But I think you asked about why I felt--you have to remember, being Jewish you understand what it is to have people prejudiced against you, and I saw that was there. I didn't relate to blacks that much, because I didn't have any contact with them. But the people that I met were obviously wanting to better not themselves alone, but the community, and that appealed to me. It's just, I guess, my nature.

Espino

Do you remember some of the perceptions then of--as someone who's not Mexican, you might have been privileged to hear certain stereotypes or comments about Mexican Americans at that time,

that they would be more careful to say in front of a Mexican American person.

Graff

Well, I know it wasn't said before me, but, in fact, Manuel told me. Lincoln Heights had a skating rink; Mexicans only on Friday nights. I had seen--well, this tract when it was opened up, the owner was Jewish. Mexicans were not permitted to buy a home here. Woman who bought a house across the street was Spanish. She had to show them papers to prove she was Spanish in order to buy the house here. So we knew there was discrimination in that.

When I went into CSO, I found out, for instance, that the driver's licenses, they listed Mexican Americans as Mexican, not as Caucasians. And then I saw it actually happen. I think I told you about the time that I went through a stoplight, and the car next to me, I think actually that person was black. But they stopped him, but they didn't stop me, so I began to realize that there was such a thing as discrimination. In the beginning, of course, I was very naive. I didn't know about it. But I knew about it myself.

Did I mention when I applied for a job at AT&T or Pacific Telephone? They wanted to know the religion, and I knew that was there for a purpose. And sure enough, I had better skills than my friend, but she got hired because she was Anglo. So I knew what prejudice was. I applied for a job at Prudential Insurance Company. They were ready to hire me, and they told me if I got married I would be fired. In other words, there was prejudice for things other than just race, and I had been subjected to that, so I don't know, just somehow CSO just seemed to fit into my life.

Espino

Were those ever issues that were brought up as important? For example, that specifically woman-centered issue, where she had a lack of job security because if she got married or got pregnant--

Graff

They didn't tackle that per se. I think what they were working for primarily was political recognition so that they could get things done in the community, and after that it sort of went in all sorts of directions. I remember while I was in CSO, the only Mexican American with a master's degree was [Juan] Acevedo. There just weren't any others. There were beginning to be some Mexican American teachers.

There was a convention of CSO's, incidentally. I guess they had an annual convention, and people came from Texas, and they talked about their good relationship in Texas with the police. And a little guy, Gomez I think was his last name, got up and said, "We didn't have that. I was brought up in Belvedere Gardens." He said, "Either the police were chasing us, or we were chasing the police." This guy ended up being a teacher, so he got out of that situation. But I think primarily, as I say, it started with wanting paved streets, streetlights, traffic lights, and they realized in order to get those they had to have somebody with political power, and that's when they decided to run Ed, or Ed decided to run for council. That was the beginning of it and from there it just flowered out with other things happening.
Like I think Tony Rios was the one who was really instrumental in changing the license plates. He was president at the time when they took that up with the DMV. So wherever they saw an issue, they tried to take it up.
Espino
License plates? I don't know of that issue. You mentioned license plates, changing--
Graff
Yes. Not the license plates, excuse me, the driver's licenses.
Espino
Oh, I see.
Graff
I'm sorry.
Espino
That's okay. Having the Mexican Americans--
Graff
Yes. They referred it as Mexican rather than as Caucasian, which meant every time a policeman asked for your driver's license, even if you didn't look it he knew, and if he was prejudiced there was an automatic reaction.
Espino
Well, that's interesting, because that's different from what happened later on in the sixties and seventies, where people wanted to be considered different. The whole term Chicano that emerged is very different from that early period.
Graff

Yes, right. In the early period, what they wanted to be is recognized as a part of the general community, not to be set aside. Then they decided they needed to be set aside in order to get some things happen. In other words, they got together for power, I guess anyway.

Espino

Well, you mentioned something about police abuse. Especially when you lived in projects you were vulnerable to that. And there was one incident that happened called Bloody Christmas. Do you have any details about that that you can talk--

Graff

Was that the one in Lincoln Heights?

Espino

I think it was, yes.

Graff

Yes. That happened while I was in Lincoln Heights, when we had the Lincoln Heights CSO, and some of the members knew the kids that were involved. After the case was over, the police constantly would be--they would walk down the street and a police car would follow them, watching where--a lot of them moved out of the area because of this. In other words, I think they got off. What it was was just somebody was having a party and it got a little raucous, and the police came and tried to shut it down, and then they got--so I don't remember the complete details, but the Christmas Seven, that was what they named that particular thing.

And then we would have parties, fundraising parties, and I remember we had one at Sal Rivas'. This was with the Lincoln Heights CSO. We had one in Sal Rivas' backyard. Our councilman was [Ernest] Debs, and it was interesting. He showed up dressed in an old shirt and everything. In other words, he dressed down to the community to come, and fortunately while he was there the police came, because evidently they were going to try to shut down the party. It wasn't that noisy or anything. But because he was there, he got them to go away. But it was a battle.

Espino

What was his relationship with--because he ran against Roybal. What was his relationship?

Graff

Right. Well, that was the only time that I ever saw him in the community. No, I'll correct that. When I bought here, one of my other organizations was the Hillside Village Property Association, and again I was secretary. And they invited Debs as councilman to come and speak to us, and I'm sitting up there taking notes, and he's standing right alongside of me, and he's telling about how on the little salary that he has what a hard time he has doing everything and getting people to feel sorry for him, and he was doing everything he could for them. And I looked, and he's wearing a tailor-made suit--my stepfather was a tailor--with handmade buttonholes. Now, that was in those days--this was 1940, so I knew he was a faker from the--and it bothers me that they named a park for him over here. But that was the only time we ever saw him in CSO was at that one party, and I think he was running for election at that time.

Espino

Let me ask you, then, about some of the other individuals that you crossed paths with. Let's start with Edward Roybal, if you could talk to me a little bit about what impressed you about him, some of this strengths that you saw in him, and also some of what you think were possibly his failings, things that you thought he could have acted differently.

Graff

Now, I never really looked at him critically. I liked the man. I thought he was doing a good job, and I had no criticism for him. The only criticism I had was that he didn't understand--in spite of his relationship with the Jewish businessmen in Boyle--he did not really understand Jewish history, and that was when I invited he and his family to come to a Passover dinner, which is something my mother and I had done for years. We invited our non-Jewish friends, because they were the only ones we knew, because we still celebrated all of the traditional holidays. So I knew he was a good family man, that he was very fair, and I just had faith in him and his ideas, because I'm not a critical person. I don't look at anybody, unless they do something bad. So who were the others?

Espino

Then I would like you to elaborate a little bit. You talked earlier about Lucille Roybal and her important role. Maybe give me some

specific details of some of the things that she did that were important to the organization.

Graff

I really can't, because it was behind the scenes. I know that she backed him. That was the most important thing, that she backed him and that she participated. She wasn't sitting at the sidelines. She was in there with him for whatever was happening, and I appreciated--and I liked her. So really, I never analyzed my feelings about any of these people. I just enjoyed working with them.

Espino

She was somebody that--well, you were secretary of CSO at one point. That would be the cabinet of the organization?

Graff

Yes.

Espino

And were there other women involved in the cabinet?

Graff

Oh, yes. There were a couple. I don't know if you have the name Angie Torres. She belonged to a union. I don't remember which one, but she and her husband were very active in the Boyle Heights CSO. They opened up their home for fundraising parties and things like that. There was another woman, a friend of Angie's, I can't remember her name. But there were quite a few women who participated. Although I'm trying to think in terms of the executive board. Well, Henrietta was on it occasionally, but most of the executive board was male.

Espino

I'm trying to get a picture of the decision-making circle and wondering if Mrs. Roybal would appear in any of those meetings, or if she was, like you say, in the background.

Graff

Well, I really don't remember, because when we would have the board meetings, I don't remember very much about them at all, which means there wasn't any outstanding incident that happened. But I just know that she was always there, and she was part of the planning. Whether it came from her through Ed or not, I know that she was part of it.

Espino

And within that circle of power within the CSO, did you feel that women had an equal voice in the decision making, or that they didn't?

Graff

I think they did, those who were there. Henrietta is the example, because she was a very forceful person and she didn't hesitate to speak her mind and say what she--so she was a part of decision making. I know that. I think Angie Torres would come in the same category. Henrietta, of course, was single. But Angie's husband was active, I think, in one of the trade unions and so was she. But she was the one who was active in that family, rather than the man. That was one of the--and then there was another woman, a friend of hers; I can't think of her name right now. These were all union people who were in CSO. But, now, they never were on the executive board. They participated in all of the things, but I don't recall them ever being on the executive board.

Espino

How about Hope Mendoza Schechter? She must have had some--

Graff

Yes. She had a lot of force, but she was never on the executive board. In fact, I remember when she opposed my running for secretary.

Espino

Do you remember what she said?

Graff

I don't remember what she said, but she was telling everybody that I was a Red and that I shouldn't be on there.

Espino

She's very well known in history now for her work with the labor organizing and with CSO. Did you find that she had some positive strength, she brought something positive to the organization?

Graff

I really don't know what she brought to the organization. I never saw anything that I felt was--I know that she was instrumental in getting some of the members who thought her way, but her way was actually the conservative way. I'm trying to think of specifics.

Espino

Yes, or maybe you can explain what that means.

Graff

Yes. I don't know if I can. I know that she was opposed, and that's the part that I saw of her. When Pat Brown ran for Congress the first time in Lincoln Heights, there were rumors that the unions were going around and slitting tires on the cars of the people who were supporting him. There was that kind of action, and for some reason or other I related her to it. So if she was doing something good, I wasn't noticing it. Let's put it that way. She must have been.
But, well, it's like Gil Anaya from the steelworkers. They were in CSO. They were formulating a lot of the things that were happening there. But at the same time, they were anti-liberal. That's why I mentioned Joe Saldivar from the Amalgamated Workers. Of course, that was CIO [Congress of Industrial Organizations]. They were a more liberal organization. But Hope's garment workers' organization, Gil's steelworkers, the guys who were from the truck--
Espino
Meatpacking?
Graff
What?
Espino
Not meatpacking. Meatpacking? There was a strong meatpacking--
Graff
Well, no. The meatpacking, Rodriguez [J.J. Rodriguez] was from there, and he was pretty good as a president. The Amalgamated Steel; what was the AFL [American Federation of Labor] for the truckers? I can't remember the name of the organization [Teamsters].
Espino
I can find that out.
Graff
Yes. Because they had several people in the Boyle Heights CSO. I think they were concerned with working people and something that would help their union, but I really never was close with them, so as a result I don't know exactly what they accomplished or what they did. I only know that Hope was constantly opposing anyone she felt was liberal in the organization.
Espino
And liberal would mean somebody who did not--
Graff

Who was suspected of belonging to the Communist Party, to the Independent Progressive Party, that sort of thing. Those were the people they opposed.

Espino

Would you say that would be somebody who had more of a class analysis of discrimination, somebody who looked at capitalism, that kind of thing?

Graff

I really don't know. I wasn't thinking that way in those days, so I can't give you an opinion.

Espino

So your understanding of communism and of progressive, it didn't have anything to do with class politics, like Marxism and those ideas?

Graff

No. I was very naive. I knew very little about that. Later on, for the short time that I was in the party, I belonged to it, I went to a class or two, and I began to read something about it. But this was my first experience with it, so that I agreed with the idea that the worker should inherit the world. In fact, that was one of the communist things. When in the Bible it says, when Christ said, "The meek shall inherit the world," they said they misread the Hebrew. It should be "the workers." That's the kind of stuff that they got involved in. But I was really just there being with people, not thinking ideologically about anything. Except it took me a long time before I really knew the difference between socialism and communism, that socialism was supposed to be the first step toward communism, and communism was control of the people. And then when they got it, they got people who controlled the people, not the people controlling themselves, so that was the story.

Espino

That's an interesting distinction, because when you go back in history, words have different meanings than they do today.

Graff

Yes. Right.

Espino

So, for example, progressive, liberal, radical, all those things meant something very different, and that's why I'm just trying to tease

that out of your memory, because someone might hear you say she was opposed to anybody who was liberal, and they'll have a current-day definition of what that means.
Graff
Yes. Right, I understand.
Espino
So that was my point. Well, then, let's go to some of these other people who were involved in the CSO that you crossed paths with, like, well, since we were talking about Hope, did you ever have a chance to meet her husband, Harvey Schechter?
Graff
No. I saw him at a distance, but I never--
Espino
Okay. I think he was involved maybe a little bit later than after your involvement.
Graff
Oh, he became involved, I think, after I left.
Espino
After you left, okay.
Graff
You see, Manuel and I just got tired of every time we got up to say anything in a meeting, Tony would stop us, so we just got disgusted and left.
Espino
Manuel Maneses as well?
Graff
Yes.
Espino
So then tell me a little bit about Tony. He was the president when you were--
Graff
He was one of the presidents while I was there. See, I think Tony was president. There was the one who was for the longest time that I was there was [J.J.] Rodriguez from the meatpackers. The issues that they worked on were good issues. The only thing is that I think the unions, especially the conservative unions like the AF of L [American Federation of Labor], wanted to control the organization and have it do things their way, and unfortunately or fortunately, some of the members were a little more advanced. So really, to ask

me to peer deeply, I didn't look at any of these people deeply in that way. I just went along. I was enjoying the work, feeling that I was accomplishing something, and then as I say, when we felt that we could no longer accomplish anything, we stopped going.

Espino

And Tony Rios, you mentioned that he was anti-communist.

Graff

Yes.

Espino

So he would be one of the people in the organization opposed to, I guess, liberal ideas that you were talking about.

Graff

Yes. I never knew what his ideas were. All I knew was he was opposed, and he was opposed to the individuals.

Espino

Was there anything that you remember specifically that you brought to the organization, an issue that you wanted to address, that he rejected?

Graff

No. It was Fred Ross who objected to the one time I brought an issue. I didn't bring issues into the organization. I worked on the issues that were there. I maybe highlighted education because I was interested in education, but I didn't bring anything in. I didn't start anything, actually. It was after somebody else started it that I would either oppose or be for it, and I don't remember now what some of those things were.

Espino

Okay. And then you talked a little bit about Henrietta Villaescusa. Did she remain in the organization throughout her time?

Graff

No. She left about--well, what happened is, see, Henrietta was a public health nurse. She worked for George Brown when he was running for assembly. She went to Washington with him and ended up being a public health nurse for the State Department and being sent to Panama, so she was out of the area completely for many, many years. She never lost her contacts with them, but when she came back it was after she retired. Oh, and then when they closed her position in Panama, she went back to Washington and worked in the Public Health Department. I think she was the head nurse in

that department, and she didn't come back to Los Angeles until after she retired, and by that time CSO was really a dead issue. It hasn't done very much or you haven't heard much about it for a long time.

Espino

Then we have Grace Montañez Davis.

Graff

Yes. Grace also got involved in the Brown campaign, and she ended up in Washington working for the--now, what the heck department was it? Manpower, I think. But Grace did a wonderful job. When Ed ran for supervisor, I think I may have mentioned the fact--okay, when he ran for supervisor, and this is one of the things, see, the AF of L unions opposed him. That's where Hope, you see, opposed--for supervisor, and they sent people down to intimidate people going into the polls and turning them away. And Grace got very disturbed about this, realized it was in violation of civil rights, reported it to the federal government, and we went around and took statements, because I could take shorthand. I took the statements, and those are part of Grace's files, of the people who were kept from voting that time. So I think as a result of that she ended up working for the government for a while. But she was the one who really started that, and again, see, I just went along because I had the skills to do what was necessary.

Espino

That was an important effort. It was after he lost.

Graff

Right. It was after he lost, and actually they did rule on it. They had hearing here, if I remember rightly. She would have it. It's all in her papers.

Espino

So then that brings us up into the 1960s, and you're no longer working with CSO--

Graff

No, no.

Espino

--and you're no longer with the Independent Progressive Party.

Graff

Right.

Espino

What were your activities like then, at that period?
Graff
Well, we'll start back in while I was still in CSO. Lucille Roybal called me and said, "They've organized a Los Angeles Community Concert Association, and they want me to be on the board." She said, "I don't know anything about music, but you do. Will you serve?" And I said yes, so I went into Community Concert Organization, and I worked with them for as long as I was on their executive board, and this is interesting, nothing to do with really the field you're interested in, but my fortunate or unfortunate duty--I was bookkeeper, again because of my skills, for the organization, and we had the representative for Columbia Artists, who really organized the association, divided, deliberately divided the black and the Jewish community, who were the two main parts of it. He would talk to the blacks one way, talk to the Jewish community another way, and when we finally got rid of him, a CPA who was black, and I got a hold of the books, and we tried to make sense out of them. He had robbed us blind.
So but again you see there, he used the fact that he evidently knew that I had been in the Independent Progressive Party, was considered a communist or a Red. He kept talking about me to both organizations. So I get involved in these things and I don't know how. So after, well, community concerts went bankrupt. When the neighborhoods began to change, they met in the Shrine Auditorium. They offered classical concerts for a dollar a ticket, no reserved seats, and it was very much supported by the Jewish community. But when things got bad in that area, the older people no longer wanted to come, because they were a little afraid, and eventually we lost out. But Leontyne Price, when she was rising in fame, we had her for a thousand dollars. For our tenth anniversary we wanted her to come back, and we couldn't afford her.
So let's see. From Community Concert Association I went--well, I told you about the political campaign for [Gilbert] Canales. Then I'm thinking of the organization. I ended up, actually, like now--well, first of all, I didn't give you, I think, the rest of my personal background, working background. I think we stopped where I was working for the Canales campaign, and then I went back working again with the steel warehouse, just as an office manager. And a friend of mine suggested that I apply for a job to teach shorthand at

Trade Tech at night, because they needed someone who knew the older Gregg systems, and I had learned them. So I worked days, taught nights at Trade Tech, where the majority of the students were black, and I had, in a sense, a privilege, in a way.
I taught the night that Martin Luther King [Jr.] was killed, and I said, "I can't teach tonight. I am sure that none of you feel like taking dictation. Why don't we spend a little time talking about what we can do to continue what he started?" And they got up and told me stories about their lives and how they'd been discriminated against. This one woman got up and said, "I walked out of more offices in Chicago than you can imagine."
So from there I ended up working at Belmont. I decided, gee, I enjoy this, so I applied for additional jobs, and I got a job teaching business education at Belmont Community Adult School. And Mr. Harper, the principal, said, "You know, if you got your bachelor's degree, we could put you on full-time." And I was about sixty or seventy points toward a bachelor's degree. I was going just because I wanted to expand my mind, and my major was anthropology. So I got my degree. But as I was getting my degree I realized--oh, and he said I could get it in anything; it didn't make any difference. So then I went into the business education department and said, "I would like to transfer from anthropology to business education," and the chairman looked at what I was doing and everything and said--oh, I wanted to get into the master's. Oh, he suggested I could get into the master's for business education, complete my B.A. in anthropology, and take the subjects that were required as electives in anthropology instead of taking the anthropology electives. So I did, because my Woodbury College was not accredited at that time as a four-year university. So thirty years as an office manager and I had to take beginning bookkeeping. They permitted me to take secretarial science. If I could take a letter in dictation and shorthand, that would prove that I knew shorthand. When I got all through, then I walked in to the chairman and I said, "Okay, here are your damn requirements. Now can I get into the master's program?" And he said, "Wait a minute. I want to talk to you about something else. Would you like to teach here?" And I ended up teaching at Cal State. So from Cal State--I was working for Hoke and Katz at the time, and I had gotten disgusted with them, as I usually do after ten years, so I went to work first as an

assistant and then when I got my degree, I ended up actually teaching the business education courses.
From there, one of my fellow professors of the department was retiring, and they asked me to put together the retirement dinner for her. So I worked very closely with her, and then I said, "You know, I realize in another year or so I'm going to retire, and I don't know what I'm going to do with my spared time." And she said, "Oh, join the College Women's Club of Pasadena." I didn't know she was president at the time, but this is an organization, had been going since 1923. We give scholarships to women to complete their education, not to start it. In other words, they have to be either seniors or juniors or postgraduate work, and it started out very simply with like a $300 loan. But a couple of the women died, left all of their fortunes. They were teachers. Like one of the teachers from Pasadena City College left $60,000. Well, in the forties and the fifties, this was a lot of money. Right now we have over a million dollars in our endowment fund, and we've just received fifty applications. We'll be giving around, I think she said like $30,000. So that has been my life since I left; since I left politics. Let's put it that way.
Espino
That would be in your late fifties, early sixties when you [unclear]?
Graff
Right. Well, I didn't graduate Cal State until my--the late fifties. I think I got my master's degree in the early seventies. I retired in 1961 or '62, I'd have to go back and check. I didn't want to retire, but I was developing cataracts in my eyes, and I could not see--if I'm in the back of the room, I could not see what was on the board, or if I was showing an audiovisual, so I knew I had to retire. So that's when that happened. But I was on the executive board for the College Women's Club for about twenty-five years.
Espino
A long time.
Graff
Right now I'm one of the old members who just wanders in there.
Espino
Yes. You have all the historical memory with you. You carry that with you wherever you go.
Graff

Yes. Well, and then one of the women in College Women's Club invited me to join Dionysians, which is a small women's group in Pasadena of creative women. I said, "But I'm not creative." She said, "You play the piano." So I said, "Okay," because I'm a good editor. I'm not creative, but I can edit very well. Anyway, so I joined that, so I belong to the two of them and I still go, but I'm no longer really active, because I can't be. But that's my life.

Espino

I'm going to take you back just a little bit, because you mentioned Martin Luther King and his assassination, and that brought up for me some of the other important political figures at that time that came after Roybal. John F. Kennedy and then there was grape boycott. That was important in the sixties. Were there some other issues that you got involved in or that you felt were--

Graff

Well, with grape, for instance, that was really a CSO issue, but all I did is I didn't buy grapes. That was primarily run up north, which is where the grapes are grown, and so I participated just by doing what they asked us to do. I wasn't really emphatic. All of these side issues were all there all the time, but I didn't necessarily get involved with them. I limited myself.

Espino

And you didn't get involved in any political campaigns after Canales?

Graff

No.

Espino

There was--Tom Bradley ran for mayor.

Graff

No. I wasn't involved in the campaigns. I supported them, but I was not involved, because at that time I was involved in other things. By then I was with the community concerts, which was becoming almost full-time outside of my working hours, and each of these organizations I got into very deeply, but that did not give me time to participate in anything else. I would support them both financially a little bit and with my vote, but that's as much as I could do.

Espino

Do you think when you left CSO then you were a little bit disillusioned?

Graff
Yes. I was very disillusioned by the way it was going, the way that it was not taking up the issues that had been important in the first place. It became more a personal--it seemed to me that people were more involved in advancing themselves rather than the issues, and that was one of the reasons. And I kept thinking, you know, all that work. But lately, now I can look back and I can see what a great change in the community, and it was because of CSO. All of these things, you can see the good that came out of them. Just pick up the paper today and take a look at the Spanish names of the politicians, and you know, well, I can say, well, I helped a little bit in that, because I was in CSO. So I'm not as disillusioned with it as I was, but when I left, I was very disillusioned. I just felt it wasn't going anywhere, I was wasting my time, and there was no point in it.
Espino
Did you ever talk to Lucille about your feelings, or to Ed?
Graff
No. I was never that close, really, with Lucille. We met when we were working things together, but I wasn't--now, Henrietta was very close with them. But I wasn't, so I was always on the periphery.
Espino
Did you talk to Henrietta about your feelings?
Graff
About what?
Espino
About your feelings regarding CSO not following--
Graff
No. She wasn't here at the time. She was out of the country. So I talked with Manuel. The two of us talked about it, and we were both disillusioned. And I know that Henrietta felt very much the same way, from what she said the little times I would get to see her when she'd come home on vacation, because we were really almost like sisters. We're very close. But I feel the few people that I got close to helped make my life better. Let's put it that way.
Espino

Yes, because it seems like after that, after you left the organization you weren't really involved in the same way in a political organization like that.
Graff
No. No. No, because when I started teaching at Cal State, that became a full-time job, because I wasn't only teaching, but I helped organize the first Delta Phi Epsilon, which was the business education postgraduate fraternity, and so I was involved in that. I was involved in the California business--I got involved in things regarding teaching. Then when Mary Margaret O'Hearn got me involved in the Pasadena College Women's Club, they became full-time jobs. I didn't have time to do anything else besides that and work.
Espino
Yes, that's a lot. That's a lot.
Graff
In fact, my mother once said to me, "You said you were going into teaching because you'd have your summers off." And I worked all through the summer.
Espino
And then you were never involved in any other, like a Democratic Party?
Graff
No.
Espino
Did you ever change to become a Democrat?
Graff
What?
Espino
You were registered as an Independent Progressive Party.
Graff
Oh, yes, I'm a Democrat. I'm a registered Democrat now. When the Independent Progressive Party died, I became a Democrat, but I never became active.
Espino
Well, in my just little research that I did, it seems like the IPP went on way into the eighties. You could still find reference to it. But you're talking much earlier that here in Los Angeles--
Graff

Right. Well, because if it went on, I wasn't aware of it. Well, let's say my interest changed. See, by that time, the fifties is when there was the Canales campaign. That was my last political thing, because after that I got involved in other things. I still had a little feeling of resentment about the Democratic Party because of the fact that when I wanted to join in a campaign against someone, they never answered me. They never--so I didn't have kindred feelings toward them. I'm a Democrat because there's nothing else I can be at this point.

Espino

Because these campaigns were huge, the Viva Kennedy campaign.

Graff

Oh, yes.

Espino

They were pretty big efforts.

Graff

Right. Yes. And there were people who were--now, Henrietta was involved in all of those. She was politically active. But I got involved and I just didn't have time for it, and I didn't feel, as I say, I didn't feel a tie to the Democrats, so I went ahead and just went my merry way.

Espino

I think that you mentioned being treated--or your reputation always moving along with you, because you were in the IPP and people considered you--and you were also a member of the Communist Party, so that meant so much.

Graff

Yes. That wasn't common knowledge.

Espino

But you said that people would say--they would know your reputation.

Graff

They suspected, but they never had knowledge, until the informers, and then I don't know whether the knowledge came back to the people who were accusing me. I don't know.

Espino

But it says something for the Roybals and for some of the other people in the CSO who didn't really pay attention.

Graff

No, because I'm sure they knew Bertha [Marshall], for instance, was. In fact, she was the one who got me into the Communist Party. No, they were very fair. I think that's the thing that put him different from the others is that they concerned themselves with the issues, and they didn't get sidetracked. That I think is the important thing. And they recognized what people were doing for them. Now, he used to call Mother his girlfriend. He would introduce her as his girlfriend if we were someplace. And I don't think--he didn't label people. That might be the best way to say--he didn't label people. He took them as they were. And if their ideas were good, he worked on them, and if they weren't, he discarded them. In other words, if they were in his opinion.

Espino

Well, I heard some people say that when he left East Los Angeles to move to Washington, that it was a huge loss for the community.

Graff

Yes.

Espino

Did you feel the same way when he--

Graff

Well, I didn't feel, because I'm really not a part of that community. But yes, it was a loss, because he gave a kind of leadership that we have not had since then, really, one that was completely non-egotistical. Most of the--a lot of the people who've come up politically really were concerned with their ability to advance themselves in the political field. He did it not because he wanted to advance himself, but he wanted to advance the people. I mean, that's where he's different from what we have today. It's interesting that his daughter is continuing in his footsteps, and the other one is still involved in things.

Espino

Did you follow his career after he moved to Washington?

Graff

Well, I always knew what was happening. Yes. I read the paper. I follow what the political issues are, so I knew I could count on him. Let's put it that way.

Espino

Yes, because I did ask his wife that same question, and she talks about how there was so much work to be done that he might have

left some issues here, but what he did in Washington was also very, very important--
Graff
Right.
Espino
--because there was just so much to do.
Graff
Yes, that's true. And I knew he was doing it, so I would read what was happening, but I didn't really keep in touch with Lucille even, or, well, once in a while when Henrietta was here, well, after she retired, we did go over to see them both while Ed was still alive, but he was still having a problem with his diabetes. But other than that, through the years we've exchanged Christmas cards, we've never stopped, and I still get them from Lucille Roybal, although her daughter Lillian Roybal Rose was saying that she's in pretty rough shape. But you know, you get going in different directions, and you don't lose track, but you don't have the time. You're always going to get in touch with them, but you don't, and that's what happened with me with a lot of people. For instance, Pat Ho. I learned two weeks ago that she was operated on, and I haven't called her yet. And that's only because I forget about it when I have the time, and when I don't have the time, I think of it.
Espino
Well, I think that's pretty good for this interview. I don't know if there's anything that you want to say, anything that we didn't talk about. There's also--I mean, it doesn't seem like you were involved in any of the antiwar activities in the sixties either?
Graff
No. No. I know one person--I focus on one thing, and that usually becomes time consuming, and I don't have time for anything else. I may agree and I will support, but it's like I've been a member of ACLU [American Civil Liberties Union] for years, but I've never really participated except to give them some financial support. So I really don't know if there's anything else I can tell you.
Espino
Anything in your notes that you didn't have a chance to talk about?
Graff
No. I went over them and now I think we've talked about it all.
Espino

Excellent. Well, I really appreciate you giving me the time, and let me just--I'm noticing something here in my notes, one last thing, because the McCarthy era was so profound for you and for members of the CSO and members of the IPP. Did you know anybody who was forced to go before the committee?

Graff

Yes, Bertha Marshall. She was called and she used the Fifth [Amendment]. There were a couple of people. There was a teacher that was involved in IPP that was called before them; I can't remember. The interesting thing is that when these people died, the obituaries today point out how unfairly they were treated. I think that really makes you feel good, because knowing the McCarthy era, a lot of my friends do not know a lot of the things that I've been involved in. In fact, when I was being hired at Cal State, fortunately for me they had just discontinued forcing you to sign a loyalty oath, because I would not have signed it. And if I had not gotten that job, I wouldn't be in the good position I'm in now in retirement.

So it's funny how things have changed. But all in all, I feel it's been a good life, and I enjoyed it. There were bad times, but that's another story. We don't need to go into that. That's because there's never good without bad.

Espino

Of course. Of course. Well, you did talk to me a little bit about the one man that you were almost going to marry, until he found out you--

Graff

Oh, yes. Well, that's a war romance. That was strictly--in fact, I'd forgotten all about it until--I don't know why all of a sudden that came back to me.

Espino

And you never remarried, or you never married, or you never--

Graff

I never married. Well, the rest is none of your business. [laughter]

Espino

Yes, that has nothing to do with the CSO.

Graff

Right. Definitely.

Espino

Okay, well, I think we're going to stop here, and thank you so much, Marian.

Graff

Okay, you're welcome.

Date: 2013-10-15