

A TEI Project

Interview of Edward Asner

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1. Transcript

1.1. Session One (November 29, 2011)

COLLINGS

Here we are on November 29th [2011], Jane Collings interviewing Ed Asner in his home. Why don't we start off with hearing where and when you were born.

ASNER

I was born on November 15th, 1929, to usher in the [Great] Depression. I was born in a place called Evangelical [Community] Hospital in Kansas City, Missouri. I was the last of five children, the first born in a hospital. We lived on the Kansas side of Kansas City. So people say I was born in Missouri, but only because the hospital was there.

COLLINGS

You said that your father was in the junk business.

ASNER

That's right.

COLLINGS

Was it primarily metals that he dealt with?

ASNER

Everything. Bones, rags, papers, mohair, bottles, everything that's junk. Exciting business.

COLLINGS

What was exciting about it?

ASNER

People who clean up their lives and bring it to you, and you find all kinds of secrets, as I think I told you before, the 1854 edition of Pope's translation of The Odyssey.

COLLINGS

Which you still have here.

ASNER

Morocco bound, gold-edged pages, beautiful piece of work.

COLLINGS

Were there a lot of treasures like that coming through?

ASNER

Yes, quite often. People who clean up a place don't realize sometimes what a treasure is, and they'll help it in with junk. My dad used to bid on the police department's junk sales, so he'd bid and he'd get it as junk, and barrels of jimmied revolvers and pistols would come in. As a kid, I had no lack of toys to shoot people with.

COLLINGS

So you had an arsenal.

ASNER

Uh-huh.

COLLINGS

What would he do with all those guns?

ASNER

They'd go in his junk. I mean, they were useless.

COLLINGS

Were these guns that had been confiscated during the prohibition?

ASNER

During commission of a crime, I guess, most of the time.

COLLINGS

Were there many books in the house? You mentioned this Pope translation had come through from the junk business.

ASNER

There were many books. There was never a lack of books. I had two college-educated sisters who certainly kept books in, and my brothers read sporadically, and I was spoiled, so when I wanted a book, I generally found a way to get it, although I certainly used the library a great deal.

COLLINGS

So you were a reader when you were growing up?

ASNER

I guess so, yes. Nothing indicating genius, but anything promising me escape from Kansas City, Kansas, I was eager to participate in, and that sense of romanticism led me to acting, I suppose.

COLLINGS

Did you see a lot of movies growing up?

ASNER

As a kid, my brother, who was working at the junkyard, would come pick up my mother and they'd drop me off at the Grenada Theater, and on a Saturday noon, I suppose, I'd sit there and I'd watch two features, a short newsreel, cartoons, and a serial, and I'd be chewing gum a lot of the time and porking up on popcorn, so when I came out, it was dark, practically, I had a headache from so much viewing and chewing.

COLLINGS

What kind of movies did you like?

ASNER

I guess anything adventurous. I don't remember the black-and-whites that well, but certainly Snow White was a phenomenal event in my life.

COLLINGS

Really? [recording interrupted]

COLLINGS

Okay, we're back on. You said that Snow White had been a revelation for you.

ASNER

Oh, yes. I had a little soap figure of Dopey that I treasured, never used, so you could say I was one of the great unwashed.

COLLINGS

Last time I met with you, you asked me to ask you a question about your grandfather's winemaking.

ASNER

My mother's father lived alone and he was on the Missouri side. I never heard these stories about my father, and my

brother seemed to reveal them a few years ago. A neighbor of my grandfather came up to him one day and he said, "I know you're making wine. If you don't want me to report you, you'd better slip me some cash." So my grandfather was terrified at the thought that the authorities might jump on him, so he told my mother, who told my father, and he said, "Tell him not to worry. I'll take care of it." And the guy was supposed to come back the next day, so my father drove over there and he parked around the corner and walked to the house, I guess pre-dawn, practically, and went in and waited. The guy came along and said, "Seliger, you got my money?"

And my dad pretended to be my grandfather, stood in for my grandfather, said, "Yeah, come on in." The guy came in. My dad beat the crap out of him. He says, "Is that enough money?" So my grandfather's concerns were tabled.

COLLINGS

Tabled, so to speak. Was he making wine for—was it a business?

ASNER

No, no, for us, to give to friends. For all I know, he may have sold some of it. It was not top-label Chardonnay, I'll tell you.

COLLINGS

You said that in your family a sense of fairness was very important.

ASNER

Yes.

COLLINGS

That was sort of how you characterized the moral tone within the family. What did you mean by that and what are some examples of that?

ASNER

It's hard for me to pull up examples. Another story about my father and his fists, which I never witnessed. Never laid a glove on me. He loaned a guy \$25, and then the guy was dilatory in paying it back, so one day my dad was with my uncle and was in, I guess a coffee shop or whatever they had then, and he saw the guy and he said, "Say, what about that \$25 you owe me?" The guy said, "Asner, I told you, when I

get it, I'll pay you." And the implication was, you know, "Don't bother me about it." So my dad whupped the hell out of him, and the guy paid him his \$25. So I guess I tell that story to indicate that your word was your bond, and I noted that whenever people seemed needy, that if they had it, they'd provide it.

My uncle down in Texas was also in the scrap iron business. A big oil company went belly-up or something, so they put all their stock for grabs. So it was too big a venture for my uncle to go in alone. I guess this was in El Dorado, Arkansas. So he talked to my dad, and my dad was always in awe of him because this was my mother's younger brother, and when they all came to Kansas City, they all went to work in the packinghouse. Even my grandfather worked in the packinghouse. The fellow workers, many of whom were Slovaks, "hunkies," as we referred to them in those days, would rag him for his beard. My uncle, who was quick to take offense, would beat the crap out of any and all. He was a bitchin' street fighter. So my dad was somewhat in awe of him and his ready fists. So my dad went in with him and they bought the junk. They looked at all this oil-drilling equipment lying around, and my uncle said, "Why don't we plumb for oil?" I guess this was in El Dorado. So they did, and they struck oil. They set up a company, began drilling. About this time the East Texas bonanza came in, so oil they'd been selling for 90 cents a barrel went down to 30 cents a barrel. They went belly-up. So my dad came back to Kansas City and we were ostensibly broke, other than the business. So they set to work and had contacts with the Italian bootleggers in town at the time, so my mom assiduously would wash bottles all day, supply the bootleggers, and they got some kind of added chemical that was used in liquor making. For some reason they were able to buy it, which the bootleggers couldn't. They supplied that. My dad, because he was a junk man, was capable of getting copper sheets, anyway, a coppersmith, and he got the coppersmith to come in and he made stills at night, which he then fed out to the bootleggers. That supplying the materials

to bootleggers did an enormous amount in keeping us afloat during the Depression, along with the junk business.

I came home from college, I guess it was, or the army, I can't remember which. I was on a streetcar coming back from Kansas City, Missouri, and I sat next to a guy who was a cop who had been disabled on duty, now retired. We began talking and I told him who I was. "Oh, yeah, I can remember how we used to make raids down there. One time they raised a house, got this thousand-gallon still, and they took it down to City Hall and they punched a few holes in it and put it up for auction, and your dad came up and he bought it," patched it up, I guess, and he put it back into business. I mentioned it to Dad on the way home one night, I'd run into this guy, and told him the story, he became outraged. "I never!" [imitates his father] I mean, he thought I knew nothing about the illegal activities of Clan Asner.

COLLINGS

Did he think that your other brothers knew about it?

ASNER

Oh, yes.

COLLINGS

He thought you didn't?

ASNER

I don't know what he knew, and maybe the story was apocryphal.

COLLINGS

Did your dad retire from the junk business or did he go into something else?

ASNER

No, never. No, to him retirement was death. I'm glad to say I inherited that asset.

COLLINGS

So he kept on in that business all his life?

ASNER

Yes.

COLLINGS

What were the family's hopes for you as the youngest son?

ASNER

Well, both my brothers make a mint. They're both highly intelligent and were not for college, but both my sisters became college graduates, so I guess they thought by the time I came along, that I would be the last one who would go to college and become an intellectual success, as opposed to a—

COLLINGS

An intellectual specifically?

ASNER

Well, doctor, lawyer, Indian chief. So I went to the University of Chicago and spent a year and a half, and then became trapped by acting, dropped out of college.

COLLINGS

Just to take you back with one more question, you spent a lot of time in Hebrew School, as I understand.

ASNER

Yes. My brothers didn't have to go to Hebrew School. There was a transition period where the old rabbi left, and while awaiting the arrival of the new rabbi, a [unclear] tutor came in who could barely speak English, and he would drill my brother and me at the house on learning our Hebrew, etc. Of course, we used to laugh a lot because every time he drank his water, he'd dribble down his red beard. That didn't last long. Finally the new rabbi arrived, American-born and -educated, holy enough to be tolerated by my father, so they started Hebrew classes after school. So I was the only one in the family, prior to my Bar Mitzvah, who every day after school I had to go catch a streetcar and a bus and go down to the synagogue and learn Hebrew. I was thereby denied being out on the empty lots playing football or whatever they played, basketball, whatever, and I felt quite segregated from my peers. I felt cheated because I wasn't learning and experiencing the fundamentals of sports.

COLLINGS

But you didn't rebel against this?

ASNER

Oh, you couldn't rebel, no.

COLLINGS

Why was that?

ASNER

Well, my father was quite Orthodox for that area. If they said I had to go to Hebrew School, I had to go to Hebrew School. But when I started Hebrew School, the rabbi passed a rule, because he knew that he would face rebellion from the older kids, so he passed a rule whereby he said the older kids would go two days a week and the younger kids would go at least four days a week. So it all reached a dénouement when time passed and I was his prize pupil, a 5,000-word Hebrew vocabulary—

COLLINGS

Very impressive.

ASNER

—which didn't mean anything. I looked around. It was a rainy day. I was the only kid in school, in Hebrew School. The rain kept the others away. I'm sure I broke down in tears because I said, "Well, the older kids go two days a week. I go four days a week. Now I'm an older kid and I'm still going four days a week." And he gave me a big speech about what a valued student I was, so on and so on. Nothing changed. So by the time I was Bar Mitzvah'ed, I'd go for four days a week. There were Friday night services that you'd attend, and as I approached by Bar Mitzvah, there was Saturday morning service, and I'd go to Sunday School. So I was chained to the synagogue. So as I went through my Bar Mitzvah, which was a failure—

COLLINGS

A failure in what sense?

ASNER

I was very nervous, I was high-strung, and I had a greater load than any kid before me because I was not only doing the Haftorah and my speech, but I was also leading the Saturday morning service. And the rabbi went on his vacation and I only had him for six weeks prior to the Bar Mitzvah, so I felt very shaky about my workload. So when I participated in the Bar Mitzvah, I was too high-pitched. At one point I had my hands clasped behind my back, and my father knocked them away and said, "Keek nickskeet," "Doesn't look good." The hands were too close to the ass.

And I'd be rattling along, and he or my uncle would say, "Too schnell. Too schnell." "Too fast." Okay. I finished it. Well, I felt a failure. I had friends from school there, which embarrassed me even more. Afterwards in the Social Hall everybody was leaving. I had a huge cardboard box filled with gifts. I pointed it out to my dad. I said, "Dad, look at my gifts!" "You son of a bitch." I don't know what he called me. "You son of a bitch. Goddamn you." Dismissed me. I was terribly shaken by the rejection. So you had to supposedly sign a contract with the rabbi to continue going to Hebrew School a year after your Bar Mitzvah, and I was amazed, I [unclear] maybe halfway through and I was released from my religious taskmaster. I then plunged into sports as eagerly as I could.

COLLINGS

Was there much political education, discussion of social justice, or that kind of thing in the religious education?

ASNER

No, no. There was Old Testament. Well, I was thirteen, so that's 1942 we're talking about, fighting a war [World War II]. My two brothers were gone. My two sisters were gone. I was alone in the house, and every Saturday I'd go down and work in the junkyard, which was fine. I liked that.

COLLINGS

Were you hearing much about what was happening to the Jewish community in Europe?

ASNER

No, you didn't. You knew the Jews were hated. You didn't know the enormity of the crime. I don't know when I fully realized it. I don't know. It was a very slow accretion of the knowledge gathered in bits and pieces, even though Washington [D.C.] and the government certainly knew all about it.

COLLINGS

What about discussion amongst the Jewish community that you were involved in, that your family was involved in?

ASNER

When you're Jewish, especially at that time, you're always aware of the vicissitudes heaped upon the Jew, no matter

where he is. So it may have evolved into a greater, louder moaning and groaning, but it was always there.

COLLINGS

So when your friends were at your Bar Mitzvah—you said friends from school—were they Jewish friends or were they friends that you had invited?

ASNER

No, they were non-Jewish friends. When I was just beginning the second grade, my sister convinced the family, my older sister, to move out of the railroad apartment that we occupied above the yard, to Westheight Manor in Kansas City, Kansas. It was like a white-bread community. Bankers and doctors lived there. It was quite a change.

COLLINGS

So your father was doing quite well at this point.

ASNER

Quite well? Middle class. Most of the girls that I was in school with were Mexican girls, and I can remember the awe when I finally went to class in our new neighborhood, I saw all these pretty little white girls. My god, all these—and I've been a sex fiend ever since. It's unbelievable.

COLLINGS

This is when you were in second grade?

ASNER

Yes.

COLLINGS

Oh, gosh. [laughs]

ASNER

Well, I was looking at creatures of beauty. I wasn't necessarily—

COLLINGS

And they usually had really nice clothes and—

ASNER

Oh, yes. And the teacher was pretty, and they sat on the teacher's lap. I said, my god, what familiarity. Unbelievable. My god. I was the perfect rube in the big city. Time went on, and I was busy soaking it all up.

COLLINGS

So when you were getting ready to leave high school, you were interested in running off to the Amazon or other kinds of far-flung places, as I understand. [recording interrupted]

COLLINGS

So, out of high school, you were looking for adventure, as I understand.

ASNER

Yes. There was an ad in some magazine talking about coming down in South America and working on oil pipelines, but you had to bring your own Juan de Fuca blow-dart [unclear], and I never—I mean, you were always looking for somebody to go with you. Applied, sent out applications for working on the boats. [recording interrupted]

COLLINGS

All right. So you were yearning for adventure.

ASNER

Yes. I applied to get on as cabin boys in the ships plying the West Coast, the Alaska coast.

COLLINGS

That'd be great.

ASNER

Did some checking. My sister had come back from Alaska, where she had worked for two eighteen-month stretches on Kodiak Island—

COLLINGS

Oh, how wonderful.

ASNER

—as a civil service worker, and she wrote letters for me to the canneries on the West Coast. Never got any word. So it looked like college was the only resort left.

COLLINGS

Nothing else left. [laughs]

ASNER

I didn't have the guts to pack a bag and just hit the road. After all, I'm a Jewish prince.

COLLINGS

Yes. How did you choose University of Chicago?

ASNER

Political science intrigued me, as much as it can intrigue anybody who's a simpleton. Didn't know that much about it. I had a cousin who was working on his Ph.D. at the U of C, so I thought, well. We applied to many schools for scholarships, and U of C was certainly—I believe it's called U Chicago now.

COLLINGS

I don't know.

ASNER

Yes. Was sort of renowned for being expert in political science.

COLLINGS

Absolutely, yes.

ASNER

So I thought I'd give that a whack. Chicago had its own form of giving a B.A., wherein you took placement tests. It was the Hutchins Plan. Whatever you placed out of there, you didn't have to take. Whatever you didn't place out, you had to take those courses. It was a fully rounded Great Books type existence. I did about average for a high school student. Maybe eleven out of fourteen I had to take. You got your Chicago B.A., which was not accepted at many places.

COLLINGS

Oh, really?

ASNER

Then you went on and worked three years for your master's there. I applied for scholarships everywhere, thanks to my sister, and so I had to take a test to see if I qualified for the scholarship. The day I was supposed to take the test was also the test for Washington University, where my older sister had gone, so I chose Chicago instead, and I passed the test, but I didn't get a scholarship.

COLLINGS

Oh, dear.

ASNER

Well, I didn't expect to. So I went off to Chicago.

COLLINGS

How did you like the Windy City?

ASNER

I came to love it. I love it still.

COLLINGS

What did you like about it?

ASNER

Well, first of all, the Midway is beautiful. The university itself is beautiful. It introduced me to the world. It introduced me to students, some coming from outside the country, but those primarily from the coasts, who seemed so vastly more sophisticated and learned than I was. I was a minnow in a sea of sharks. I loved Chicago for its proximity at the lake and always felt that the lake means more to Chicagoans than the ocean means to New Yorkers.

COLLINGS

Yes, I think that's very true. Yes, definitely.

ASNER

I could never get tired of driving on the outer drive, through the loop, walking down Michigan Avenue. They put up ropes in those days in the winter so you wouldn't get blown over and slide. But it's beautiful, and Renaissance Park is absolutely gorgeous. And my younger son feels the same way about it.

COLLINGS

That's nice.

ASNER

It's an ugly city.

COLLINGS

It's a very industrial city.

ASNER

Yes. "Hog butcher of the world."

COLLINGS

That's right.

ASNER

I had many miserable days in Chicago.

COLLINGS

Of course. The weather.

ASNER

After my hiatus from Chicago, I went back and rented a room for four dollars with a friend who was the overseer at a

Jewish school on 56th and Ellis, and it was a small room, bathroom down the hall, I guess, and it had a window which opened onto a roof, an airshaft roof. So I never saw the sun. I saw the rainwater collect, dirty, sitting on the roof. It was a most depressive habitation. The friendship of the building manager did not pay off for me. He was busy screwing his girlfriend and gave me some questioning as to why I bothered her while she was doing her homework.

COLLINGS

Sounds uncomfortable.

ASNER

But I was trying to be friendly and get away from this schmuck. And I found a much nicer place, only it cost me ten dollars a week, maybe twelve, and there was a basement, converted coal cellar, which, once again—

COLLINGS

Had an airshaft?

ASNER

No. Looked out on windows up above, basement windows, which looked out on back yards. You never saw the sun. Concrete floor with rugs, and you had to go through a passageway which, when it was raining, you had to hop and skip over the water to get to your door. He pointed out the heating duct that ran across the top of the apartment, and they were wrapped in asbestos, I suppose, in those days. He said, "Well, as the winter progresses, if you're feeling cold, just rip off the wrapping on the hot-water pipes and they will provide you with heat." And I didn't stay there until summer to question what do I do, wrap them back up again come summer? But it was a decent apartment. I got a roommate in, an ex-Marine I'd known in the dormitory system. We had girlfriends, which I was going through a busted-up affair at the time and our girlfriends tended to conflict, so finally I moved out and found a wonderful room at 57th and Dorchester, and let him have the subbasement. We stayed friends. He taught me how to play chess. Unfortunately, he eventually committed suicide.

COLLINGS

Were you starting to get into theater at this time?

ASNER

Yes, I was acting whenever I could at the university, where you could act even though you were enrolled.

COLLINGS

Oh, really? [recording interrupted]

COLLINGS

So you were starting to act a little bit. Was it just a hobby at that time?

ASNER

Not in my mind. It's what I wanted to be.

COLLINGS

When did you decide that?

ASNER

Oh, shit. When I was chosen to be the lead in *Murder in the Cathedral*. That was the summer of '48, I guess. Yes. I ended up doing the lead. It hooked me. I began my affair with Joanna Redfield, daughter of Dean Redfield, Robert Redfield. We had a wild, wonderful—it was my first affair. Then went on to do *Sir Pertinax Surly* in *The Alchemist*, which I loved doing as well.

Then I went home for Christmas during that time. Letters came from Joanna, which revealed that I was having this relationship with this shiksa. My father found out and gave me instructions to break it up and all that.

COLLINGS

Or else?

ASNER

Uh-huh. So by the time I was getting ready to go back to Chicago, he found out that I had not broken it off, so he said, "No more money."

COLLINGS

That's what I was thinking.

ASNER

Yes. I said, "Okay." So I went back to Chicago, supposedly to get my stuff.

COLLINGS

Wow.

ASNER

And in the meantime, I had been cast as Creon in Oedipus Rex, which was to take place in February sometime. So everybody was yammering and pressuring me, "You've got to stay. You've got to do it." So I called home and said, "I'm coming home, but I'm going to do this play first." And my sister was on the phone handling the conversation. My father shouted out, "Listen. He didn't make it as a student, he's not going to make it as an actor." I said, "Well, I'll be the judge of that." And I stayed. David Greene was the translator of the version we used. He was on the Committee of Social Thought at the university, Irish expatriate who had been involved with the Gate Theatre, and took a fancy to me and I more or less felt like a protégé of his. So he said, "When I get ready and want to go over to Ireland," he'll seriously get me introduced over there and help me. So, in the meantime, I'm planning, I'll go back to Kansas City and get a job or do whatever I can and try to earn some money, and then finally leave and go to Ireland with Joanna, who was doing to The Goodman School at the time.

I came home, as I refer to myself, as a sad sack of shit.
[recording interrupted]

ASNER

I tried a few jobs, tried learning how to sell encyclopedias, and was so outraged by the techniques employed.

COLLINGS

Oh, really?

ASNER

My taste of the real world, to see that the Great Books and Robert Hutchins had degenerated into encyclopedia, with the trashiest means of salesmanship I've ever seen. I had a field manager who nauseated me. So I quit that, took a job as a shoe salesman, which I had done as a kid in a fancy shoe store, except they had no customers, so I quit that. I had friends, finally, who were working down at the Oldsmobile and Pontiac assembly plant in the Fairfax District, so I put myself on the line there, and it was my taste of the real world, an open-shop plant. So they were busy. This is '49 by now. Cars were going through at a mile a minute. I was not a good worker. I sweated like a son of a bitch, did not have

the deftness or the willingness to cheat, as most of the—I was put on the polishing line of roofs. My first day, I was sweating like a son of a bitch and thirsty, so I jumped off the platform to get a drink, and this scrawny red-headed foreman, “Where you going?”

COLLINGS

Wow.

ASNER

I said, “To get a drink. “You don’t get a drink till you get out of the hole.” I jumped up and continued to work. I realized that whatever I didn’t do, my fellow workers had to do, so that didn’t make me happy. I felt very guilty. Finally, I put my polisher down, I looked around, because I wanted to quit, but I couldn’t find the foreman. I saw my fellow workers going further and further in the hole because of my lack. I jumped back in, did what I could. Lunch came. I said, “I’ll eat my lunch.” That revived me, so I went back and stayed the day. Kept on. I still was not a good worker. So finally my foreman pawned me off to another foreman for hoods and fenders. I did all right there. I’d come home and I’d built up a callous on this thumb just from the pressure, twice the size of my thumb, and I was covered with filth from the splash-back of the polish. I remember coming home and washing up for dinner. My dad passed the bathroom, saw me in there, and the greatest tribute he could have paid me—he didn’t know I was seeing him—and he saw the dirt and the filth, and he shook his head like, “My god.” So I felt very proud.

COLLINGS

So he thought that you had come through finally?

ASNER

No, no, I hadn’t come through, because he knew he still didn’t control me.

COLLINGS

Was there ever any question of working with him at that point or working in his business?

ASNER

He would offer to have me. My brother wanted me to come in, and I’d be Mr. Inside and he’d be Mr. Outside, but I said, “No, it’s not for me.” So I continued working there. In the

meantime, Joanna joined her folks in Europe. Remembering my first mistake of having the letters come, I rented a mailbox, and whenever I could, I'd call her with tons of quarters from a drugstore on the payphone and call her in Europe. As time went on, the letters began to change, and I finally got a letter which was a copy of the previous letter she had sent.

COLLINGS

Oh, gosh.

ASNER

So I knew something was amiss. So finally correspondence stopped. My sister tried to betray me to my folks, but it didn't—

COLLINGS

Why did she do that?

ASNER

Because she thought I was ruining my life, I guess. Is this boring?

COLLINGS

No, it's fascinating.

ASNER

So I realized the day that Joanna was due back, I knew she was going to be staying with her sister in New York, so I called there and found out where she was staying, called there, and we were talking for the first time in a long time. She said to me, "I'm pregnant." And I said, "Is it mine?" And she said, "Yes."

I said, "Don't." She was going in the next day to have an abortion. I said, "What'll I tell the guys?" My buddies who were waiting for me. We were out on a night out. I thought it was the most stupid question I've ever realized.

COLLINGS

It's an interesting question.

ASNER

"What'll I tell the guys?" That's the shock I was in. So I made up some story. I kept on working. When I stopped writing her, she was my focus of concentration every time I'd bear down on the grinder, on the polisher, and I would be polishing her face away. So we reunited on the phone, and

finally I went back to Chicago for a visit, a weekend visit with a couple of friends, saw her, and my reappraisal of her, first time I saw her, was like a painted whore. I could never really get that look out of my mind.

COLLINGS

So this was not your child?

ASNER

No.

COLLINGS

Couldn't have been, because it sounded like you were separate for too long.

ASNER

So I started various jobs in Chicago, drove a cab, sold over the phone TV advertising, was a failure at that. I drove a cab, and you've got to keep cruising when you're driving a cab. I'd pull into cab stands and read plays. Finally I realized I needed more money, so I went to work in the steel mills at \$1.30 an hour. [recording interrupted]

ASNER

I had a bunch of friends who were working in the auto plant, the Ford plant there, so I vowed I'd never go back to an auto plant again, but making \$1.30 an hour in a steel mill, bored to death. My friends were making \$1.90 an hour. So I went and I applied, I got a job as a metal finisher, which I'd been told before was the hardest job in the plant, but it was much nicer than being a spot polisher.

In the meantime, I had ran into a guy at the steel plant who had been a "Jew runner" to Israel. He introduced himself and said he had met Joanna and would I mind if he invited her out. I said, "No. Fine, go ahead." So he started dating her, and I would see her from time to time. I still ached. Finally they became firmly attached, and I began seeking other women, anyone I could. And above all, the Ford plant taught me what a union plant was like, as opposed to an open-shop plant.

COLLINGS

You say that your friends got you into both auto plants. Were these friends from high school or friends from college?

ASNER

I knew guys that were working there.

COLLINGS

How did you know them?

ASNER

Around the university or high school, some of them, on the first job. The second auto plant, guys I knew at the university.

COLLINGS

Because now the world of universities, particularly someplace like University of Chicago, and the world of auto plants is very separate. It sounds like there was a lot of mingling of these worlds in your experience.

ASNER

No, I don't think so. I don't think they mingled.

COLLINGS

But in your experience they did.

ASNER

A guy or two I may know who worked and gave me the feeling of there's a better life. So I went to work in the union shop and I stayed there. In the meantime, I did plays, the next thing I did at the university, and then I was able to do plays. I was cast as Creon in Antigone. I evidently went out of control while doing Antigone, and it was the Sunday matinee, I guess. The director of the theater came backstage and he pulled out each actor, Fritz Weaver, this one, that one, said, "You stunk here. You stunk there. You stunk there. It's all because of him."

COLLINGS

Oh!

ASNER

That I had supposedly thrown his creation out the window and gone crazy.

COLLINGS

He thought you were overacting or what?

ASNER

Shouting, I guess. So that, in essence, he would eventually banish actors from the group. I became banished, so my days at university theater were over with. Then a new group of rebels began putting on plays at the Ida Noyes Hall at the

university, and I was asked to do one of a guy named Omar Shapli, poet, teacher eventually, and he asked me to do Napoleon in Man of Destiny, which I did with Alex Hassilev, who ended up with the Limelites as the banjo man. I did that performance quite well, I guess their first performance. That was followed later on by they needed a curtain raiser for Androcles and the Lion, in which Mike Nichols was going to do the lead. Mike directed me. I don't think he'd ever directed before. This little curtain raiser, I can't remember the name of it, William Butler Yeats, Purgatory, it's called, grandfather and he kills his grandson in the play, about fifteen minutes. That went well. So at this point I knew that Korea had now started and that I was going to get my ass hauled into the service. My brother needed to take a vacation, so he asked me if I'd come down and fill in at the yard with my father. I said, "Okay."

So I left Chicago, went to Kansas City, and stayed in the junkyard, stayed around until my draft notice came. Went in the army to Camp Crowder, Missouri, placement camp. Spent two weeks there, then got shipped out to Camp Gordon, Georgia, for eight weeks of basic training and eventual placement in the Signal Corps, one of their schools, which was at Fort Monmouth, New Jersey. I went through the basic education fine. As long as it was all book learning, I was great. Then I got into the general questions and you start studying radar, various sets of radar, and working with the manuals. We had an MIT manual that we were to use in a week. Of course, you could barely understand it. We would get tested. I mean, you'd either test there, you'd get bounced, and you'd go into the infantry. So they had G-2 test answers, which would give you maybe an 80, so we'd always be privy to these G-2s, and I'd go from one G-2 to another G-2, coasting along, feeling guilty. I hated what I was doing, the fact that I wasn't learning that much. Later on I realized what they did, they gave you basic training, and while they decided where to put you, how to put you, and then when you'd finally get assigned, you'd learn while you're on the job. There was one radar set that required a tent, so you spent a week in the class, then you spent a

week in the field, then you'd take a test. By this time, my class had gotten too big, so they split it in two, and I was in the second half. As I'm going in to take the test, a guy in the first half said, "The G-2's no good. It's only worth a 60." How terrible, how terrible. So I had the old G-2 of 60. The guy catty-corner from me in the row in front of me had one for an 80 that he'd occasionally show to me, and on either side of me were two guys who had done radio repair, say, in private life, and I'd take a peek at their page once in a while, look at my 60, look at his 80. I'd put down the answer. I was the only one in the class who got a 100. The class, to a man, said, "Let Asner give the critique. Let him give the critique." I said, "I'd be glad to." So I got up there, and with multiple choice, working on the board, "So that's why I chose this one." I got to about the third answer and the bell rang, and that was it.

COLLINGS

That's good.

ASNER

So, finished the course. Waiting, waiting for assignment. I got radar MOS, supposedly, and I began to get very paranoid about why I wasn't getting my assignment. Finally, after about two weeks, I was assigned to radar repair and given orders to go overseas, to France.

COLLINGS

Rough assignment.

ASNER

Yes. Went overseas, a week or two at Camp Gr___ in Germany, then to Saumur, France, where the great French Cavalry school had been. It was an 180-man post, and a lot of stripes came back from their foreign tour in Korea first, then when they reassigned them, they'd actually send them to Europe or elsewhere. Lots of brass. They didn't need a radar repairman there. I was first assigned to the training section; nothing for me to do there, like an office clerk. Then they put me in the orderly room and I was assigned to the warrant officer who headed the training section for the post, so my main duty was to type up a stencil of the week's activities for the post. When I came in, I saw what was to be

done, so I used a lot of dittos, so a two-page stencil turned into a half-page.

Warrant officer came up, said, "What is this? What is this [unclear] you got?" I said, "Well, it's just a repetition of what was—." "It doesn't look good." He wanted to see it the other way. So I went back to my two-page stencil. They started a basketball team on the post, so I went out and I worked out with the basketball team, the volunteers. They put up a gawky Kentuckian in charge, tall, but didn't know his ass from his elbow, so I complained to the captain. I was friendly with the captain by now. "He's got to do this. He's got to do that." He said, "Well, why don't you do it." I said, "Okay, if you'll give me Joe Brook as well." Joe Brook spoke French. We were getting invitations from French towns to play their teams. So he said, "All right." We'd go on weekends on the bus and we'd play French teams. We were horrible to begin with, but we were truly a United States team, a guy from Utah, a rabid Mormon, a guy from North Carolina, a guy from Indiana, wonderful.

COLLINGS

Like the World War II movies.

ASNER

Yes.

COLLINGS

Did you have a guy from Brooklyn?

ASNER

Yes.

COLLINGS

All right!

ASNER

Named Olson. We had about eight good players. I became the manager. They knew basketball better than me, and I'd just send in somebody who seemed a little drunk from last night. And they did very well against all the French teams. We were hated in France at this point. We're talking about 1952, '53. But we'd get good press because the French got to meet us, they liked us, and the colonel in charge of our post realized that we were the best thing for Franco-American relations that ever came down the pike. So we did

well. I eventually was mustered out the end of May '53. That team went on to play the top French team in a previous year in Brussels. The officiating was cheating. They lost by one point. I think they became the second best team in Europe, army team.

COLLINGS

Wow.

ASNER

So I thought we had achieved something.

COLLINGS

What did you think of France? It was your first trip outside of the United States.

ASNER

Well, as I say, they hated us.

COLLINGS

Throwing bottles, or what?

ASNER

No, we'd go to Angers to play the team there, come out in our jackets, and our bus was plastered with stickers that said "Les Américains dans l'Amérique! Vive la paix!" Americans in America, long live the peace. They were right.

So a week or two before I got out, got a letter from Paul Sills out in Chicago. He said, "Come back and join us. We're starting a theater here. We'll do classics and we'll do new plays." It was like my life had fallen into place. I came home, spent a week at home, went back up to Chicago. They had already opened with—I forget which Brecht play. They'd gotten very good reviews from the Sun-Times and the Daily News. Their opening night or the second night, which was La Ronde or Round Dance. The next day I started rehearsals as the lead in Woyzeck. So we were in it. I lived in the theater. We had little cubicles surrounding the audience. We all had our own little cubicle.

COLLINGS

That's great.

ASNER

I was put in charge of cleanup. We did a lot of good plays, Woyzeck, La Ronde, Widowers' Houses. We reprised me as Thomas Beckett, Murder in the Cathedral. We did a pirated

version of Threepenny Opera. Caucasian Chalk Circle was the Brecht play. Dybbuk. I can't remember them all. But sometimes the Daily News liked us. Chicago American, with Dettmer, didn't like us. Claudia Cassidy came to the first play, Chalk Circle, and her review stated that Playwrights and she walk on different political sides of the street, so she never came back. Then after the first year they wanted to expand. We also had a ruse that they worked out, which was that as a theater, it would have been too punitive to operate as a theater, so they called it Playwrights Theatre Club, so instead of paying theater admission, you came up and you paid your Theatre Club dues, made it all different. In the second year, we moved to a three-hundred-seat theater above Ballantine's restaurant at Dearborn and Division, and decided to put on a summer of Shakespeare while we were there. Romeo and Juliet, Henry IV, Part 1. What else did we do? Macbeth.

COLLINGS

Maybe Midsummer Night's Dream?

ASNER

Mid-summer Night's Dream and The Tempest. I played Bottom in Mid-summer, the King in Henry IV, Duncan in Macbeth, Prospero in The Tempest, and Juliet's father in Romeo. Successful summer.

COLLINGS

What did the reviewer mean when she said that her politics were different than the politics of the company? Was she referring to the company?

ASNER

She regarded us as leftists, and she was a representative of Colonel McCormick.

COLLINGS

Did your company espouse political views?

ASNER

Certainly not in our plays. We also did Seagull, we did Peer Gynt, along with originals, a few originals. But Brecht being the East German theater [unclear], she automatically associated us with leftist leanings, whether we opened our mouths or not, and that's the way it stayed.

COLLINGS

What about your audience? Who was the audience for this company?

ASNER

North Side, a lot of people from the university who liked seeing classics. We had good actors, Zohra Lampert, Byrne Pivin, Joyce Pivin, Lee Henry, Bob Kidd, Joy Carlin. You don't know most of these names.

COLLINGS

No, but it's good to get them into the—

ASNER

Tom Erhart, excellent when he wasn't drunk.

COLLINGS

What school of acting do you—were you into the—

ASNER

We had no method other than our own. Paul was the son of Viola Spolin, who created Theater Games, and from that you could start spinning improv. David Shepherd was his partner. Somewhere in the second year of Playwrights and Deerborn [unclear], Paul and David both wanted to get into something that more directly connected with the audience, ala improv. People's theater is what they were talking about. So when we weren't busy at Playwrights, they began the Compass Players. Elaine May had joined us by then. She had directed me and Zohra in Miss Julie, which was a flop. They'd done [unclear], which Paul's mother directed, which was a flop. So Mike [Nichols] and Elaine began working with them at the Compass, on the South Side, Jimmy's Tavern. Severin Darden began working with them. Shelley Berman joined them. Barbara Harris by now was almost married to Paul, who became a part of it. [End of November 29, 2011 recording]

***1.2. Session Two
(December 6, 2011)***

COLLINGS

Today is December 6th [2011], Jane Collings interviewing Ed Asner in his home. You were going to talk about a particular incident regarding a football game.

ASNER

Yeah. As I said, I was the youngest of five, three boys. Both my older brothers were sort of good athletes in various capacities. But we lived in the bottoms, as I said before, at the time that they went to high school. I don't know whether it was because of the orthodoxy of my parents or what, but they didn't go out for sports, or maybe they didn't have the freedom to. By the time I came along, I went through my turgid bar mitzvah, and all the sports activities I had missed going to Hebrew school all that time. When I got into high school, I was determined to do something about sports, so I went out for football, and through the years of high school worked my way up to my senior year, when I evidently worked hard enough and impressed the coach enough that I started at right tackle on the line. My ability was still in question, in my opinion. We trundled along and had a great deal of fun working, and we were a very green team, only four returning lettermen, only one returning first-stringer, our quarterback. We finally came to the game with Leavenworth. I happened to look at the calendar and saw maybe in three weeks, a month before, that it took place on—we played on Friday nights, that it occurred on Kol Nidre night, the holiest night of the year for Jews. I immediately became concerned about I couldn't see myself playing on Kol Nidre night. So I mentioned it to my brothers and mentioned it to my coach, and he said, "Well, let me talk to the principal, who's on a [unclear] mixture of Christian and Jews that met periodically." He talked to the principal, who called the rabbi. I guess thinking he was a priest, and expecting him to give some kind of papal dispensation. I talked to the rabbi, and he said, "That has to be up to you. I can't tell you what to do, " and as he said to the principal, "It's up to Eddie's conscience."

Oh, god. My brothers kept saying, "Don't worry, don't worry. We'll work it out okay. We'll work it out okay." Because I was attracting attention for the family that had never been paid

before. It had been a white-bread district for the first time, and no longer chained to the minority status of the bottoms. My brothers' conversations with my dad were fruitless, of course. I didn't know what was going to happen. The team kept saying, "You got to play, you got to play, you got to play." The morning of the game, I was getting dressed upstairs and feeling miserable. My father stood at the bottom of the stairs before he left for the business, and he said, "The boys tell me that you wanted to play tonight, and I ask you not to do it. Don't do it." I believe he said, "I beg you not to do it." My father never spoke in language like that. I said, "Okay, Dad. Okay, okay." When I came down to breakfast, my mother said, "Eat up, and when you come out of school, you come home quickly and you eat your dinner and get out of here." Well, she was complicit in the cabal as well. So I did as she said. I came home, I ate my dinner, left to go to school to get on the bus and drive to Leavenworth.

COLLINGS

Leavenworth.

ASNER

Yeah.

COLLINGS

Should I pause?

ASNER

Yeah. [interruption]

COLLINGS

Okay. So we're back on. So your mom was telling you to go.

ASNER

Yeah. I came home, ate dinner quickly and left, and got to the game. The coach in the locker room said, "All right. You don't want to go out there win this for this or that. You want to go out there and win this for Eddie."

COLLINGS

That was very sweet.

ASNER

Went out there. They didn't need me. They beat the crap out of them. So I came home. God knows what I was coming home to. The house was filled with people after the service, and the word was, "Everything's okay. You just get up early

and go to the synagogue early.” Well, if you ever played football, you know that you’re totally sore and aching and move like an eighty-year-old man. So I got up late, and I guess my brother was late, too, but the blame was on me. Went out to the synagogue, went up to the front pew where my father was, and he looked at us and picked up his prayer book and left for the rear of the synagogue. So we stayed there through the whole day of Yom Kippur. Then as the sun descended and the shofar blew, he came up to the front of where his seat was usually. My brother went up to him and my dad took his hand and shook and they embraced. You could see that he wanted to say, “You son of a bitch.” Then I came up like a sorrowful sheepdog, and I embraced my father and everything was okay. But I always carried that guilt. I carried that guilt because I felt I dishonored my religion, and that for whatever opprobrium I might face from my peers, since we wouldn’t have lost anyway, that I failed in my duty to say that the religion meant something and that there can be some things bigger than the game. I mean, I have my own problems with religion anyway, but most of those occurred in future years.

It was an occasion which made me realize that sometimes, no matter what the cost, you have to stand alone, and I should have stood alone. I’ve failed to stand alone a few times in my life, wherein I did the convenient thing. But that, to me, was the signal incidence which marks my failure to stand alone when it was necessary.

COLLINGS

Why did your family want you to play in the game?

ASNER

I was the first standout in the mainstream of our lives. I brought attention to the name and family. It was a place of pride. I ended up being chosen by a couple of the papers for the all-star first team in the city. The following year, nobody remembered a goddamn thing about it, nobody gave a shit, but at that moment, in that time, I was bringing pride to the family. I mean, Jews make a great thing of the fact that—I don’t know if it was the World Series or not—but [Henry J.] Hank Greenberg did not play for the Detroit Tigers, and, of

course, he was a great, great hero to Jews. He had played on the previous year on Rosh Hashanah. Well, when it came to Yom Kippur, he did not play. In my mind, of course, I compared myself to Hank Greenberg. I speak of myself as a sad sack of shit, who created the sympathy and support of my fellow teammates, but none of it mattered, none of it.

COLLINGS

When did you realize that? At the time or much, much later?

ASNER

At the time. There was no sense of victory at all to that. I live only for my father begging. I dishonored my father. The rest of the family didn't care really, or not to the extent he did. All tragedies like that take place in religion all the time with all types of people.

COLLINGS

Well, I think that that story is interesting, and probably has bearing on your later activism, I would think.

ASNER

Well, if that story generated other times when I was credited with standing alone, then I can thank my stars that that happened. So I'll look at the positive aspects.

COLLINGS

In our chronology, we left off with your discussion of your participation in the Compass Players.

ASNER

My participation was non.

COLLINGS

Oh, okay.

ASNER

At the time, we were performing in Playwrights [Theatre Club]. In the second year, Paul and David, our chief producers, Paul Sills and David Shepherd, were not happy with doing artistic commercial theater.

COLLINGS

Oh, right, and they spun off, yes.

ASNER

They wanted to create something more of a people's theater, as they referred to it. As I said, Paul was the son of Viola Spolin, who created Theater Games, which became the basis

for most improv groups. So they would rehearse and perform sporadically on the South Side of Chicago, as we were on the north side with Playwrights.

Mike and Elaine became part of the company, working out with them. Barbara Harris, who actually married Paul Severin Darden. Shelley Berman joined the group. I can't remember who else. So we continued the downward descent of Playwrights with the city hounding us, and eventually forcing us to close, and by the time we finally closed—and I could have joined, but I, who had taken such a leap in my mind of becoming an actor, a so-called legitimate actor, also I was too eager to find a way to employ my glowing reviews, primarily from the Chicago Sun-Times and the Chicago Daily News, to go on to New York and see what greater fate awaited me. So plunging into Second City [Theatre] and improv, which was, in a certain sense, a whole new field, and I felt I could do it, but there being no tradition for it, no popular acceptance in my mind for it, it would have delayed my search to become a star on stage. So I said, no, I wouldn't do it. So they opened and they succeeded for a few years, working out of a South Side bar, where I used to go all the time. I don't know what caused them to close eventually, but they did. Paul went on and went to Europe with Barbara and audited the Berliner Ensemble, discovered what he could there, came back, ran the Studebaker [Theatre] for a few years, for a year, I guess. Big productions, Geraldine Page, that type of thing. Then drifted away and instead began his start of Second City. When finally they came to California, after my six years in New York, I would work out with them on stage improving and having fun, but I never actually joined. When Second City had their twenty-fifth reunion, they invited me as an alumnus to perform with them and I did, and it was okay. I was glad to be called one of their number. I never was, actually.

COLLINGS

You were looking for legitimacy.

ASNER

Yeah. Yeah. Six years of grinding it out in New York, it had its up and downs.

COLLINGS

Were you thinking about TV at all at that time or were you planning to stay in the theater?

ASNER

I didn't even know TV. I had watched the Army-McCarthy hearings, I think, on my week at home from the army, but I never watched TV in Chicago. I was on stage every night. I did an extra on a soap opera out of Chicago called Hawkins Falls, just to pick up extra money. I did another, must have been on one of the educational channels, I did the [Abraham] Lincoln-[Stephen A.] Douglas debates at a reading with other actor in our Playwrights company named Tom Erhart. I did that. I don't know that anyone ever saw it. Just before I left Chicago, I did an extra in a Dennis O'Keefe movie which took place at a racetrack, and I saw how miserable an extra's life could be.

COLLINGS

This becomes significant later, doesn't it?

ASNER

Mm-hmm. I vowed I'd never do that if I could. So I came to New York. After Playwrights folded, I was approached to do two plays in summer stock, the Drury Lane Theatre and I forget the name of the other one. I don't remember. One was in a tent, the other was in a theater, and we switched theatre; two weeks in one, two weeks in the other. The first one was Goodbye, My Fancy, where I played Lynn Barre's lover. Claudia Cassidy referred to it as pink sudsy soap opera. Then the second play was with Pat O'Brien in My Three Angels, and he was problematical, but we did it. With those two shows behind me, I went to New York. The fellow who had been cast as Oedipus in the play at Chicago, which I did before I returned home in disgrace to Kansas City, I'd run into at the bar in Chicago, and he told me that I could co-rent his apartment with him, which is at Fifteenth and Third, a third-floor walkup, roach ridden, mouse and rat ridden, used to look down at the Quaker School. I think the rent was like seventy-two or seventy-six dollars a month. I

moved in with him, looked up some friends from Chicago who had been on Broadway, touring in Chicago. They were getting ready to do a one-nighter at the Phoenix Theater, so they offered me a bit role in the piece. My main activity was being one of the conspirators in this preserve, was to howl like a wolf as a signal to the fellow conspirators to meet at the assigned meeting place. In the meantime, I made the rounds religiously. I had pictures made up when I came to town. Since I didn't expect to get anywhere, I said, "I will learn New York," by daily going out and dropping my picture résumé off at each production office, at each agent, and I envisioned, of course, that they probably threw them right in the wastebasket after I left, and I learned the city that way. I walked the city. I even had the chutzpah to go down to the Delice Theatre and get an appointment with the two producers of Threepenny Opera, and discuss with them the fact that we had done a pirated edition in Chicago with a piano, that I had done it. They said, "Well, let me put you on the list for a replacement, if it comes up." It so happened the night we did Venice Preserved, an opening arose as one of the cooks, and I bitterly lamented to Carmen Capalbo, the producer, "Oh, god. I'm committed to this." He said, "Ah, don't worry about it. Don't worry about it. There'll be more." So that was in December. Nothing more took place until February. I got another call. "Come in." I became one of the crooks. My added assignment was to understudy the police chief. In the meantime, I enrolled at the Stella Adler School for classes, started going there, Upper West Side. I did not care for her at all, did not care for the classes. Spent three months there and stopped.

COLLINGS

What didn't you like about it?

ASNER

She was so busy being flamboyant as an actress, and I saw her being cool with the one student and unappreciative. I didn't like her comments on another student's work. I thought they were a bad assessment, and my heart wasn't in it, so I stopped. Carmen called and I went in. I think I performed maybe several days, maybe a week, and came

down with strep throat. I was home sick for a week. I thought, "Oh, god. Will I ever?" But they kept my job open, and I came back and began doing Bob the Slaw [phonetic]. Zohra Lampert, who had been our female star at Playwrights, was studying with Mira Rostova, and she strongly encouraged that I should come see Mira. I came and saw Mira. I liked what I saw, and began going to classes there. My roommate was preparing to leave. He was getting married, so I elected to take over the apartment on my own, and because I didn't want them raising the rent on me, whenever the rent was due, I'd go uptown and pay in cash. So that took care of that.

Somewhere in the spring, Leon Janney was our Peachum. This is the role I had played in Chicago, and he was a great guy. He mentioned that he was getting ready to leave to go do Silk Stockings. The police commissioner was leaving as well, said he was leaving a week earlier. I said, "Oh, god. Peachum is going to be open, and I will be stuck in as the police chief. Oh, god." So Leon said, "Oh, don't worry. I'll delay my departure by a week."

COLLINGS

That was nice.

ASNER

Beautiful. So I auditioned for Carmen and Stanley [Chase], and they said that I was okay to step in as Peachum, which I did. The whole time, two years and nine months, let's say two years and seven months, that I spent as Peachum I was constantly dogged with guilt that I was just being a performing dog, playing for the laughs, always playing for the laughs. A couple years into it, Brecht's Threepenny Novel came out. I thought, "Oh, god. This is so gorgeous and glorious." He wrote it after he wrote the musical. I thought, "This is for me." So [unclear], I went on one night and sang my opening anthem, came downstage to talk to the audience. There were maybe three laughs in the opening speech to the audience. I tried to play the Peachum of the Threepenny Novel, I did my opening speech and didn't get a laugh, and I said, "Oh, shit. Oh, my god," and I jumped back onto the tracks that I had so easily spurned fifteen minutes

before. I never got off the tracks. Also, sometime, two years or a year and a half into the show, Jane Connell was back as my Mrs. Peachum, and she is marvelous, hilarious. The company manager called me to a meeting one day, and he says, "I don't know. I'm sure you're going to have to shape up. You've been doing it for some time now, and you have Jane now as your Mrs. Peachum. You're not working [unclear]."

I thought, my pride took over, and I said, "Well, fire me, you fuck." I had no idea whether this was his own idea or Carmen and Stanley's. So I didn't do anything differently. I said, "Well [unclear]." They didn't fire me. I kept on staying on the tracks. But that guilt was eating me up, and I went into a psychotic state, wherein I would come to the theater and say, "I'm going to blank out." I would go through the first scene and hover right on the edge of blanking out for two or three nights, always coming in with the right words but always hovering over the chasm of forgetfulness. I thought looking at the script does no good, does no good. I wouldn't even look at the script. Until I got to the nth degree of failure, then I felt I had successfully gotten through it, and then it would begin with the second scene, and then the third scene. I think only once did I throw in an added or different word. The rest of the time it was all—but my state of nerves. I always translated that state of nerves of being that inner voice saying, "Get out! Get out!"

COLLINGS

What did you think you should be doing?

ASNER

Creating a role on my own, manufacturing it, rearing it, creating it, not being an automaton. So two years and nine months went by, and then Off-Broadway. I kept waiting to be discovered for Broadway as well, kept making rounds wherever I could, and I was doing Sunday morning shows on CBS. You could get out, giving sufficient notice for a week or so. My understudies would take over.

Finally—what happened? Kept working my way up also in what was called "Under Fives" in those days, such as Studio One, Armstrong Circle Theater, Omnibus, that type of thing,

[United States] Steel Hour. So I kept working my way up, acquiring a name for myself. But then at a much smaller theater, the Renata [Theatre]—I forget what street it was on, can't remember. It was east of Seventh, around Tenth Street, I guess, somewhere in there. No, no. It was below maybe Fourth Street. So two producers came to me. They opened with Ivanov. It had the best reviews Off-Broadway that year. Here's where names begin to eat into me. I can't remember the main producer who wanted me. His partner was Dan Heinrich. I can't remember. So they wanted me to take over the role of Borkin, the manager of the estate. I went to see it. I loved the play. As I said, it got the best reviews of the season. Smaller theater means smaller money, but I knew I had to break away from the railroad tracks. So I gave my notice, and I guess we lasted a few months, but the newspaper strike was on and nobody knew about the goddamn play, so it closed. But I was so free. I had taken [unclear], and the director, and I can't remember the little shit's name, he was the main director for ACT [American Conservatory Theatre], [William] Bill Ball. He gave me one rehearsal, and I learned nothing from it. Worked with the stage manager a few times, and began my—and we had a wonderful cast, fantastic actors. So it closed. At this point, I left—what am I talking about? I'm skipping the most important part of my life. Towards the end of '56, Frank Perry, the producer, David and Lisa and One Potato, Two Potato was playing one of the gang members in the show. So on Sundays, he'd invite—we were out to dinner between shows, and he said, "Next week I'm going to cook dinner at my girlfriend's place. You guys are going to have a dinner, steak dinner."

So Jerry Ohrbach and I went and had dinner there, and his girlfriend had a girlfriend there. I'd been going out with a girl named Nancy Ponder, and she was married but we were still seeing each other. [Theodore] Ted Flicker was beginning with The Premise in St. Louis and she went off with him, marvelous actress. So she left and said we'd get together when she came back. But at Frank Perry's place, his girlfriend had her girlfriend there, and her name was Nancy

Sykes; still is. So she impressed me because she let me have half of her steak. She told me that she was going in the hospital the next day for some minor surgery. So the next day I went up there and I took some flowers, and she was touched. I guess I made a date with her to go to the movies. We would always go to the movies. I had a roommate by then, I should say, a little guy named Bobby Ball, a wonderful comic. At the theater there were three couples, [unclear] Ohrbach, Stanley Schneider and his girlfriend, and me. So we'd go to the movies Saturday night, probably see a double feature. Get home at dawn, eat breakfast at—was it Hector's? Hector's, I think. Then go home, read the paper, sleep until we had to get up to go to the matinee on Sunday. So I invited her to go to the movies Saturday night. She said, "Fine." Went to the movies, and she came home with me and we began our affair. I always laugh because the man she had been seeing for some time was named Eddie. My departed girlfriend was named Nancy. So I always knew we could shout and scratch and scream out names as much as we wanted to and it wouldn't bite us. We began our affair. She was working at MCA, I believe. No, what am I talking about? She was working at the Lucy Kroll Agency. I didn't have an agent at that time, and very shortly after, she arranged that I join the agency. She was Lucy's right hand.

COLLINGS

Did having an agent make a big difference?

ASNER

No, not at all. Most of the time, it's never made any difference. When an agent, I've found, has made a difference if he has anything at all is negotiating the best he can do on a contract. My agent in California did that. Although, to my knowledge, I never think old Lucy ever negotiating more than what we were offered. So that went on. Nancy finally moved in with me, and two pregnancies occurred, which were terminated in Cuba.

COLLINGS

Cuba?

ASNER

We desperately tried to find an abortionist that people would tell us about, and then we could never get there, never find a—we even went down Pennsylvania to look for this doctor.

COLLINGS

How did you find the one in Cuba?

ASNER

We heard that it was permissible there.

COLLINGS

Oh, I see.

ASNER

You check into a clinic there, and they take care of you. The first time one of my best friends went down with her. I failed again. I didn't leave the show to take her. The second time, she went down alone. But it really was a traumatic experience for her. You're getting me to think about things I haven't thought about. So that happened, and I felt the guilt of not going with her.

COLLINGS

Well, while we're talking about guilt, you had said that you—this is sort of presaging the El Salvador stuff, but you said that you felt that you had been a silent partner in the blacklist of the fifties. What did you mean by that?

ASNER

Oh, shit. I knew the blacklist was going on. You had to be an idiot not to.

COLLINGS

How did you know it was going on?

ASNER

I heard about it. I read about it.

COLLINGS

Not from direct experience?

ASNER

No.

COLLINGS

Just from the media.

ASNER

I had signed the Stockholm Peace Pledge years before. [unclear] are they going to nail me for that, which I understood was on somebody's list. I got to New York, and

before you could have any TV job, you had to sign a loyalty oath, which guaranteed that you had been on one of these organizations, and I hadn't. So CBS squared me, and I gather that cleared me for the rest of the networks. I don't know if I told you this, but I think I may have, that while we were still in Chicago, our dark time was Monday, and—can't remember his first name—[Herbert J.] Biberman, the writer married to Gail Sondergaard, came to Paul and David and said they'd like to schedule Playwrights for a screening of Salt of the Earth, the movie they had made about the repressed miners in New Mexico. New Mexico or Arizona, I can't remember.

COLLINGS

Southwest, yes.

ASNER

They said, "Okay." Bill Alton, Zohra's husband, heard about it, and came to the actors and said, "This is an identifiably comic group, and it could redound on all of us if we had the screening. So I think it's up to you people, but think you ought to discuss with David and Paul that they were committing you without your consent." So we had a meeting. At that meeting we all, most of us, voted to revoke the permission, which they sadly had to do. So I was, once again, skirting controversy by my participation in voting no.

COLLINGS

Had you heard anything about the film prior to that, about Salt of the Earth?

ASNER

No. Once I was known in California, a girl named Marina Dominguez came, who was trying to get started a film to depict the filming of Salt of the Earth, and I certainly gave my consent and willingness to participate in that. It never came to pass, though. So there was one other thing. Studs Terkel had a—I mean, we were thought of us as liberals, commies, whatever, but there was nothing to indict us with. He, being blacklisted, had gotten up a show called Elizabethan Miscellany. He had an Elizabethan contra tenor, Big Bill Bronzy, [Winifred] Win [J.] Stracke, who had played with the Weavers, and I know somebody else. They took us

on for a Monday night show at Playwrights, and sent out invitations to all of our members. I'll never forget how shocked I was that one of the response cards came back and it had a very fancy stamp on it, in addition to its postage, very fancy stamp, which was "fight communism," the "UN" in bold letters. Then around Terkel's name in red grease pencil was "Keep this red out of Chicago." I thought, "My, look at the money in this card." Expensive. That's the only one I saw. They put on their show, and it was a wonderful show.

COLLINGS

Did you run into people like—I think Will Geer was in New York doing theater at that time, because he was blacklisted.

ASNER

I worked with Will when I went to Stratford. I'll be getting to Stratford soon.

COLLINGS

Okay.

ASNER

But I can't remember the names.

COLLINGS

Now, what did the blacklist feel like for performers, for people in the theater world, in the film world at that time? I mean, was it chilling or was it just sort of something out there on the periphery that you didn't think much about?

ASNER

You didn't think much about it because you weren't making any moves to endanger yourself, which is why I eventually made one of those moves when I came out on El Salvador. You just didn't take those steps.

COLLINGS

Did people talk about that amongst themselves? Did you have conversations with other people?

ASNER

Well, we talked about politics and fighting politics and trying to [unclear] in politics, or ala the American way. "The American way." I can remember walking down the street at the election, '60, and there was a poster for [John F.] Kennedy up there, and this young guy was jumping up and ripping the poster down, and I was merely going to walk past

him. Some good ole lefty with bowlegs and everything else came up and bearded the young guy and cursed him and got him to stop it. I thought, well, once again, I looked on. I didn't do anything. So you reminded me of that.

So then there were several Off-Broadway shows I did after Ivanov folded. A bad play by [Jean] Anouilh on—I forget, but badly done. The director of *The Tempest* came to town, wanted to—it may have been after Stratford, I don't know; I don't remember timelines—and he wanted to recapture *Tempest* in New York. Oh, yeah, loved to do, Prospero and all that. We didn't have the same cast, but we tried to recapture it at the East 74th Street Theatre. We opened and [Justin] Brooks Atkinson, it was the next to the last review, and he wrote and said I sounded like a train conductor, and my anger—I was not whipped—I became angry. I knew it was his next to last review, and I said, "That son of a bitch. He won't be there to eat his words when he sees me starring in the next show," or whatever. Ellis Rabb was starting—well, I'm jumping ahead. In the meantime, I was informed by friends that Nancy wasn't going to stick around forever. So I, at the thought of losing her, I said, "Let's get married." But I had one problem. My father had died by now, but I didn't know what to do about the lack of religion. So we had a small wedding at a hotel, my friends and her family, her parents, and she said she wanted someone from my family, so I invited my sister in Philadelphia out for the wedding, and because of my guilt—I knew of a rabbi—and asked her if she'd go through some form of conversion for me. So, for me, she did it, and it's a very, very mild conversion, would not be accepted properly anywhere. Several months later, my mother came to town, and we had a Jewish type of wedding, I guess. I can't even remember where it was or what happened. My mother was there as well. So she made that sacrifice, and she was a great Jewish mother.

COLLINGS

Did you raise your children in the Jewish religion?

ASNER

In my illiberal fashion, yes. My son was Bar Mitzvahed. The girls and he went to Sunday School, and when it came time

for his Bar Mitzvah, he trained for it and did it. I broke down in tears. He and I had not got along very well at all, but after he—I clutched him afterwards, “I am so sorry. I’m so sorry.” He said, “No. I loved it. I loved it.” So I gave my little speech, and he loved it. He’s been a great son. They’ve all been great. They identify as Jews, but other than the holidays, they don’t do anything about it. Their sons will probably be Bar Mitzvahed. I don’t know. I don’t think my son’s son will be. So Nancy and I got married March 23rd, 1959. Barna Ostertag had been with the agency, and had a bitter breakup with Lucy Kroll, but she was still very friendly with Nancy and very thick with the Stratford crowd. So she got them to offer me a summer at Stratford. I did a reading or two for Jack Landau, and—oh, my god. What is his name? The creator of Stratford, the American Shakespeare Festival, John Houseman. So they gave me small roles: Bardolph cut down to three lines, [The] Merry Wives of Windsor, Samson, an attendant in Romeo, and because Inga Swenson’s husband [Lowell Harris] wasn’t right for The Apothecary, they had me take over that role. Nothing really. As Merry Wives came on, there was only role in there that meant anything, and that was the innkeeper, and they gave that to one of the veterans, the guy I had taken over for on Ivanov, Jack Bitner.

So I was unhappy about what I had had to do so far, so I called my agent one night. My wife, Nancy, said, “Well, be prepared for her getting upset with you, being upset.” So I called her because I thought of not taking the gig at all. This was before I went up there. I said, “You know, they said that they were good roles. Well, they’re not good roles. So I’m thinking of saying no.” All she said, “Well, they said good roles. You do whatever you have to do.” Yeah, that’s really fighting for me. She really did something there. So I thought of the money, more than I’d ever gotten, of course. So decided to do it, and had a wonderful time, wonderful time.

COLLINGS

It sounds like you enjoy Shakespeare.

ASNER

I do. I enjoy acting.

COLLINGS

What were you getting out of acting at that time?

ASNER

Well, it seemed I got the respect of those around me. Every role I did was convincing. Even as Bardolph I decided to wear a rubber nose, and when nobody was watching, I'd suck in on it, delight Morris Karnovsky and Will Geer with my antics. The ladies seemed to think I was pretty cool, Nancy Wickwire and Sada Thompson and Nancy Marchand, above all.

[interruption]

COLLINGS

So what did you want to do with your career? What was your goal for your career at that time?

ASNER

I suppose working my way into leads whenever possible.

COLLINGS

In theater?

ASNER

No, it didn't matter, didn't matter. One great embarrassing incident took place when—as I said, I was working my way up in TV the whole time, starting with "Under Fives." So they decided to do War of the Worlds on CBS. Now, this was really showing what was going on throughout the country. The various incidents that took place, the fear, the alarm at hearing this show. People thought it was real. So they said, "You're going to be one of the members of the radio cast." "Oh, shit." To me, it sounded like a lead. So I called home. Once again, told them my latest break. So my brother, without my knowledge, in the local paper had a big article written up on me being the lead. Yeah. The lead, you know, War of the Worlds. So I was humiliated. I was like actor one or actor two, and it was embarrassing. Then Stratford finished, and came back to the apartment, which was a wreck from the two girls we had rented it to. The next thing that happened, I got hired by the Bert Leonard organization to fly down to Grand Isle, Louisiana to do a Route 66 with Bruce Dern. We were Israeli secret agents on the look for a Nazi, who we thought was Lew Ayres.

COLLINGS

It was set in the United States or it was set in Europe?

ASNER

No, in Louisiana, in the oil rigs, Grand Isle, Louisiana. So Bruce and I went down and we spent three days down there. Did the role in close-cropped grass in the middle of the day, three o'clock in the afternoon, with mosquitoes just chewing the shit out of us. It was nice and uneventful, and came back to New York.

Then they liked me enough. Marianne Doherty, the casting director, liked me enough that a Naked City came up, a show I loved, they cast me as a detective lieutenant in that. Those were Robert Duvall's—his first starring—not starring, but I guess he was a star. So I did it. I did it to satisfaction, all nice. That was in December, I think. Then, in the meantime, Ellis Rabb was starting APA [Association of Producing Artists], and he and three other directors were putting on a series of Shakespeare at the McCarter Theatre in Princeton. So he tried to interest the other directors in hiring me, and they were not interested, which was a blow to the ego. But he liked me enough to cast me as Claudius in his Hamlet, starring Richard Easton. I did it. I was good, quite good. Bill Ball came backstage, and I could see, though he was quite reserved in his praise, that I had the feeling that he thought I stood out. So that ended that. I can't remember what other Off-Broadway I did. Then in March, Marianne Doherty decided Naked City was running behind, so they decided to shoot two shows simultaneously. So they sent Paul Burke and me to California to extradite two brothers who were wanted for murder or something, [Robert] Bobby [Robert] and Frank Sutton, while they shot another show in New York with Horace McMahon and Harry Bellavor. The trip to L.A. was exciting. I'd always envisioned succeeding in New York. What am I talking about? In the meantime, I got another Broadway show. I got a Broadway show called Face of a Hero. Nancy, by now, was working for Robert Joseph, the producer, and it had been a success on Playhouse 90, and decided to try it on Broadway. A fantastic cast, Jack Lemmon, James Donald, Ellen Holly, Sandy Dennis, Ed Sherin played a small role, George Grizzard, Russell Collins.

Oh, and the big guy. I can't remember his name. We did Boston, we did Philadelphia, and came into New York. We weren't eviscerated, but it was not praised. We didn't last. So, by the first of the year, I was out of a job. Another Naked City came up, and they sent us to California. By this time, I was now disappointed with what I saw to be new Broadway.

COLLINGS

Disappointed in what sense?

ASNER

The director was Sandy Mackendrick, who had directed all of the great comedies from England with Guinness. I thought, "Wow, he's bound to be great." I guess there weren't enough laughs in it. The night before at the cocktail party he said, "Loved your reading. Of course, you can't be that funny." "Okay." He's the great director. I'll be fine. The character was only written for two reasons, to commit perjury and to get laughs. He had me doing it half the time with my back to the audience, and stifling what laughs I could get. So it was a bitter experience. I was unhappy with that. In Boston, they decided to bring Harold Clurman in to redirect the show. When they did, I saw how he restructured Albert, a big huge guy. Goddamn it. He left me alone, and I saw that after he had performed his ministrations to redirecting these actors, they then left and a week later they were back to doing what they had been. They had been on their own rails and hadn't gotten off. So his ministrations didn't change anything, but his direction was good.

So then that play folded, went to L.A. to do the Naked City. Felt good doing it, and going out there everybody said, "While you're out there, you look this one up, you look that one up. You got to see this one, you've got to see that one." The wardrobe man was sending me to what ended up to be my eventual agent.

COLLINGS

Oh, really?

ASNER

I saw other people that people told me to look up. So after the first week, by that time I was finished, I called Nancy

and I said, "I'm going to stay another week." She said, "Oh, shit." I stayed another week, saw more agents. Finally decided where I had to go, and called her before I came home, and I said, "I want to move out." She said, "Oh, shit." So came back in March. We immediately began making preparations to leave. She had taken over as Houseman's secretary during the latter half, and he liked her a lot. That was '59, so all through '60 she was teaching at the [American] Shakespeare Academy—not teaching, but doing the secretarial jobs at the school. Then the winter of '60 came before I got the Broadway show. No, the summer of '60. That was the other disappointment. Here I had thought I had stood out. So Landau and his assistant called me to tell me what roles they'd like me to do in the coming season, and here was—what show was it? I can't remember, but it was very stocked with male performances. The best thing they offered me was Menelaus in whatever production that was. I can't remember. A darling old husband of Helen. I thought it over, and after awhile I felt I had done and proved [unclear] . I said, "No, thanks."

I went and did [Duke of] Exeter in Henry V and [Joseph] Joe Papp's in the [Central] Park, did very well there, and then waited and went into rehearsal for the Broadway show, which failed. So I didn't like the way I saw things being done in New York, and I coined a phrase at that time which made it easy for me to come to L.A. I said, "Yeah, they're full of hypocrites in L.A. Sure. Okay, I'll buy that. But then I see nothing but hypocrisy in New York, and at least in L.A. they blow smoke up your ass," and that was the convincer. So we came to L.A., and thank god we did. [interruption]

ASNER

Because my agent, Jack Fields, had been a decorated pilot in World War II, he was called back to fly again in Korea. One of his tasks as an agent was to seek reinstatement of blacklisted actors. I can't remember them all, but Gill Green was one, Ned Glass was another. There was a couple that I can't remember their names. Goddamn it. But he worked assiduously and would get them work.

COLLINGS

Was this because of his own personal politics?

ASNER

Well, they couldn't indict him. He was a decorated aviator of World War II. So he felt they didn't come with—that was his job, and he succeeded at it. So I fell under his sway and influence in terms of progressivism, and what I discovered in L.A. was that in New York nobody gave a shit what you did, everybody fought for the cause, supposedly, there. I was amazed when I came across—

COLLINGS

Everybody fought for the leftist cause, supposedly?

ASNER

Yeah. So I was amazed when I came across a Republican actor. But when I got to L.A., I was immediately sought after to contribute and join SANE, to contribute and join the ACLU [American Civil Liberties Union], to join this progressive—the battle lines were out here, and they were much more active in attempting to enlist as many guns as they could. In New York, they didn't give a damn.

COLLINGS

That's very interesting. Okay. [End of December 6, 2011 interview]

1.3. Session Three (December 13, 2011)

COLLINGS

Today is December 13, 2011, Jane Collings interviewing Ed Asner in his home. We said last time that we would pick up with you coming out to Los Angeles.

ASNER

Yes. Well, as I said, I kind of turned sour on New York. It did not seem to have the pleasing inspiration that I had looked for, and having succeeded in a couple of two or three pieces for the Bert Leonard organization, they decided to repeat and make it—not repeat, but do a Naked City, since they were running behind, do one in New York with Horace McMahon and Harry Bellaver, and send me, repeating my role as Lieutenant Busti, with Paul Burke to California and do a

Naked City there, whereby Paul and I were to reclaim two brothers who were wanted for, I think, murder, Robert Blake and Frank Sutton. [Martin] Marty Balsam was their attorney, and they were his wards, more or less. So at the extradition hearing, they snatch a gun off a sheriff and shoot their way out and make their escape. I get shot, wounded, and Paul Burke pursues and with the aid of the local police, kills Frank Sutton and brands Bobby Blake. So that was my second Naked City. During that time, everybody kept saying, "Well, you're out here, you've got to see this one, you've got to see that one, you've got see this, meet this one," and I'd say, "Yeah, yeah," and I kept meeting agents who wanted me, a few producers. I knew John Houseman from Stratford. Two agents wanted me, and I finally decided to go with the more powerful one, the Sid Gold Agency, primarily with Jack Fields as my caretaker.

When the first week finished and I called my wife, I said, "I want to stay a little longer and see a few more people." And she said, "Oh, shit." She saw the handwriting on the wall. Spent another week, called again, I said, "I want to come out here." She said, "Oh, shit." So I came back. We spent that time preparing, she did all the work, hired packers, rented a fourteen-foot U-Haul. My mother and my brother, who was doing well at the time, bought us a new Chevy Impala.

COLLINGS

Oh, that was nice.

ASNER

Yes. We rented a fourteen-foot U-Haul and the packers loaded it to the gills, airtight, and my old Volkswagen that the brother of my wife's best friend gave us, and I spent \$300 on worthless improvements. A Route 66 came up. So I left early, leaving my wife with all the packing work, etc., and took the Volkswagen. It broke down on the way to Youngstown, where I was to shoot.

COLLINGS

Youngstown, Ohio?

ASNER

Yes. Darren McGavin and Lois Nettleton were starring in the piece, one of the best pieces of work I ever did. I got a '56

rebuilt engine put into this '53 Volkswagen. In the meantime, she came down pulling the trailer with a friend who was going to California at the same time, and they limped into Youngstown after me. The trailer was so loaded they couldn't go more than 40 or 45 miles an hour, hit every goddamn bump that came along.

COLLINGS

Sounds like a wagon train.

ASNER

Finished the Route 66, during which we went to a burlesque show. My wife had never been to a burlesque show. My friend and I decided it would be a fun time to take her to a burlesque show. It was like family night in Youngstown, and they were not breathtaking. The show was one of the most obscene language shows I've ever seen or heard, and out of embarrassment, my friend and I decided to leave at intermission. We'd had enough. So he took off in my Volkswagen, newly repaired, and Nancy and I began our trek to California, driving 40, 45 miles an hour. We also had excess furniture, which we sent by Mayflower, maybe a thousand pounds worth. Nothing in the U-Haul was damaged. Every goddamn piece of furniture that Mayflower touched, rope-burned, scars, gouges, and they had to pay us back some money. Horrible. I think it must have been a bunch of drunks who loaded it. So then we stopped in Columbus, Ohio, to see Nancy's relatives, then came to Kansas City to see my family, show off my wife, and, fortunately, my oldest brother who had bought us the car with my mother, had a building materials business and quite a large one at the time. He later went broke. I worried about the rest of the trek going 40, 45, and, fortunately, he had mechanics who could put air shocks on my new Impala, and we rode at 60, 65, pulling a U-Haul. We went everywhere. We went through Utah, stopped at the Grand Canyon, went up to the north rim, spit, and it was sunset and we came down. I had gone three thousand miles out of our way just to see the Grand Canyon, and it was a costly bit of time and effort. Came down, went through Albuquerque, went through a hailstorm that I thought would never end. Ended up in

Vegas, dropped a few bob in the slot machines and we started to roll into Los Angeles. It was Memorial Day weekend, the beginning. As we drove, every lane of the cars coming at us was filled. It was a sea of lights and I actually thought, "Jesus Christ, they must have dropped the bomb. Everybody seems to be leaving Los Angeles."

We finally got here, and I called a friend who had roomed with me in New York. He had a place in Hollywood right off Highland, and he put us up for a few nights. We found a wonderful little apartment in the hills and we begun our life in California. We knew we had really struck a bonanza because the first or second night I was sitting there watching black-and-white TV and hear this rustling outside, so we figured some kind of animal. We peek out and look, and in the crotch of the big avocado tree next to our domicile were two raccoons lying on their back eating avocados. I thought, "How nice to be here."

COLLINGS

Oh, that's great.

ASNER

So, immediately set to work. Jack Fields specialized in getting blacklisted actors, as I told you.

COLLINGS

Yes. So you only knew him when you came out here.

ASNER

Yes.

COLLINGS

Was that why you worked with him, because of his political views?

ASNER

No. I liked his style. I liked the other agency very much because they expressed such desire to take me. Jack, of course, was giving me the professional fisheye and saying, "We'll see how you do."

COLLINGS

What kind of parts did you seem to be a natural for at that point in television?

ASNER

Young character parts, I guess. I can't remember. In the same line as the Route 66, not a youthful type, but not old yet. I mean, I was fairly young.

COLLINGS

You played a sort of a salt-of-the-earth type.

ASNER

Yes. I concentrated on that. It's what I used my résumé for, all those jobs I had before I got acting jobs.

COLLINGS

You also said that when you came to L.A. you were pursued to join groups like SANE and ACLU.

ASNER

Yes. Jack, being the big liberal that he was, steered and guided me into groups.

COLLINGS

Oh, he did?

ASNER

Yes. They seemed to come in over the wall, SANE.

COLLINGS

To you in particular?

ASNER

Yes.

COLLINGS

Or to everybody, you thought?

ASNER

No, I think to me. No, I don't know. I don't know. But it did impress me that I certainly was not sought after by progressive groups in New York, but they were hungry for me, because the battle lines were here. New York, they were assured of victory. You had to fight for everything here.

COLLINGS

So did you join SANE, for example? Did you work with them?

ASNER

Whenever they asked me, I would do whatever they asked. The ACLU, wherever I could appear, be with them, I wanted to identify with them.

COLLINGS

So they were looking for celebrities to espouse their cause, to be visible.

ASNER

Yes, or potential celebrity. I came the end of May, so I'd say it was seven months, and in that seven months I made more money than I'd ever made as an actor. So that made us feel very comfortable being in California and living well, or at least compared to what we had been living in, and we never suffered before either. I'd get one job after the other. I think one of my first movies out here was Halls of Anger, with Calvin Lockhart and Jeff Bridges. I played a physical ed [education] teacher at a high school. A lot of bad stories about Calvin Lockhart and his behavior. The story was not prepossessing. Then there was a show Target: The Corrupters!. I think that starred—I can't remember the names. Let me think. I probably was able to squeeze in another Route 66 that year, for all I know. We're talking about '61. Did some episodes on television.

COLLINGS

Where were you trying to take your career at that point?

ASNER

Just to be able to support my wife and myself and a couple of kids, send them to college, that's what I was hoping for. I think there was an inner being that said I want to be a name up at the title, but I don't know that I talked it up that often. Busy learning, learning how to be in film. I can remember in New York my first film show there was something Casey, starring Beverly Garland, Crime Photographer. The director that had chosen me got sick the first day, so the alternate director, Stewart Rosenberg, was brought in. I was dieting, too, at the time, and it was a cold, wintery, blizzardy day that first day. It's one of the two times I've been picked on as the goat.

COLLINGS

On the set?

ASNER

Yes. His nose was constantly going up in a sneer at life and everything around him. He carped at the way I walked away from camera. He carped at the hat I brought in. He had nothing good to say, and I felt miserable and found no one I could be friendly with in the show. The next day the star

appeared, Beverly Garland, and I'd woo and win her if I could, and was taken over to be introduced to her and she acted fragged out totally and couldn't give two shits as to who I was and what I was doing. So I said, "Well, you're a big help," I thought. I got her later. Finished the beast, so that when I got to California and doing film all over the place, what I could, I was learning all the time. I was learning how to walk confidently, how to look sharp, be sharp, learning to survive.

COLLINGS

These were still relatively early days for TV as well.

ASNER

Yes, '61, yes. Didn't get active in the union yet. I can't remember anything memorable that year. I should go to the records and look it up and probably give you a hundred stories, but I can't.

COLLINGS

How did you get involved with the Mary Tyler Moore Show? That's jumping ahead a little bit, but that started in 1970. What's the sort of lead-up to that?

ASNER

Well, in '63, I was busy. They got me into, as they bargained for it and got it, as first co-star on Slattery's People, starring Richard Crenna. I was looking for importance. The pay was certainly not great. I'd been zooming along as a freelance actor and was feeling very good about it. Well, in the meantime, my wife was busily looking at houses all over the place for us to settle in, and we got a wonderful house in '62, a cantilevered house right off Mulholland, and the money was higher than what we thought we'd be going for. We were looking at a house with an empty lot across from where we rented. I came across this house. She wanted to show me what kind of house I was looking for, and, by god, it was almost within reach. So I contacted all the members of my family who could come up with any money, and most all of them did, and we put down a down payment, and I was in seventh heaven. We had a view with an eighteen-foot deck that looked out over the whole valley and it was marvelous.

COLLINGS

Boy, you must have thought you had really arrived.

ASNER

Coyotes and fox and quail and hawks and even an eagle at one time, and I was in seventh heaven. I couldn't wait to get done in the yard and start working on it. So within a year, I'd paid off all my relatives. Let's see. Then in '68 I got the Slattery's People, and Richard Crenna was the star of the movie, and he was also the conscience, state legislator, so that almost all the stances he took on whatever problems were attacked I had very little or nothing to do or say. I was seemingly an unnecessary appendage. So I did the first thirteen. I saw show after show coming along with more of the same, so I thought I would have been happier continuing to do guest shots.

I complained to Jack, and he said, "Well, yeah," and he tried to stall me out of it, but I guess I seemed determined.

Finally, he showed me how much money I'd be sneering at. The series ran its course. I didn't care. I wanted to act. So, god bless him, Sid Gold finally said, "Okay, we got you out of the contract." Gene Cooper was also in the show. "We got you out of the contract. What we have to do is guarantee—they want you to agree to come back and do whatever show they want you for at the same price, solo price." So I said, "Yeah." Sid said to me at the time, he said, "Don't worry about it. You worked before. You'll work again." So I took that as a blessing and freed myself from the show. As it turned out, they had a script written for me, heavily starring me, and I would have paid to do it. Leo Penn directed it, a wonderful man, wonderful director, and Sean Penn's father, and I benefitted from Leo's direction, and it came off well. I began my march again, doing Route 66s, FBI, Gunsmokes. [interruption]

COLLINGS

So you were taking on a lot of different kinds of parts again in order to get different kinds of exposure and experience.

ASNER

Yes. Route 66s; FBIs; four Untouchables, two of which were spinoffs with Barbara Stanwyck. They went nowhere. An

Eleventh Hour, with Wendell Corey. Maybe a Please Don't Eat the Daisies in there. That was about the only comedy I did. In the meantime, we had twin babies, boy, girl, in '63, and in '67 we had another girl. I'd do the TV or whatever movies I happen to be in at the time, I can't remember what they were, and everything seemed fine. Then in '67, '68, '69, the well all of a sudden dried up, '67 to '68, I think it was, and it got to such a point where I began to think we'd lose the house. My son says he can remember how I'd get the Sunday Times early Saturday night and go through the want-ads looking for work to supplement.

COLLINGS

What kind of work were you looking for?

ASNER

Whatever I could do. But almost everywhere it seemed like—I was approaching forty, and I was untrained to do most of the work. It was more depressing than not working. I never found something that I could really jump up and hope to achieve, hope to get. At the same time, heavy rains caused our slope to slide out. Neighbors down below were getting together to rebuild the slope, and the plans they came forward with were Gunniting the slope and doing this and that. I couldn't pay the costs that they were talking about, so I got my own engineers, and they said that I could try the board-and-batten approach, which is scaling down with boards every five, ten feet. I forget what it was. Because if I'd done the Gunnite approach, I'd have to cut down all the trees that were still standing on that slope. I thought that was stupid. Supposedly, the city was no longer accepting that kind of approach, but they did in my case. So I fixed the slope, my slope, at a much lesser cost, and I think it's still standing. What happens there is that ground squirrels and gophers come along, eat up the plants they want, and though you have cement runoffs, they've undercut it so that the water comes down, it goes down the gopher hole and the slope gives out, and the runoffs aren't worth a damn. Planted the slope wherever I needed to, and we were saved. In the meantime, I was going under financially. Then '69 came along and, wonder of wonders, I had the best year I

had of all the times in California. I did two TV movies for [Walter] Wally Grauman directing. One was a spinoff starring Jim Hutton to replace Perry Mason. I made the character a comic, a police chief. The suits at 20th [Century Fox] were worried about it, but Wally ignored them, thank god. I can't remember the name of the other movie. It was a ninety-minute. Ray Milland was in it in a minor role, and Gene Tierney a minor role. It was quite exciting to be in something that they were in. It restored my ego, so that in '70 when I'd not done comedy at all, except for two shows, maybe, and I came along with the interviews and readings for Mary Tyler Moore.

COLLINGS

How did they come to you?

ASNER

I guess I was just on the cattle list. The two producers were Allan Burns and [James L.] Jim Brooks. Grant [Tinker] had been an executive at 20th at the time I did the Jim Hutton pilot.

COLLINGS

Grant?

ASNER

Tinker. I have a feeling that he recommended that I was pretty funny in it, so he recommended me. They asked Ethel Winant, vice president in charge of talent, could I do comedy, and, amazing enough, she said, "He can do anything."

So they had me in to read. I read, and I believe it was Jim Brooks sat down and said, "That's a very intelligent reading." I said, "Uh-huh, that means it wasn't funny." Says, "Why don't we have you back to read with Mary. We want you to read it wild, wiggly, wild, all out," blah, blah. I thought, "Well, I'm coming back, but I don't know what the hell they want." I started walking, I turned and I said, "Well, listen, let me try it that way now, and if I don't do it, don't have me back." They were quite shocked at that kind of attitude, an attitude I rarely, if ever, have had since. So I read it like a meshugenah, and they laughed their asses off. They said, "Read it just like that when you come back to read with

Mary." So I said, "What did I do? What was it I did? What did I say? How did I do?" I still didn't really know.

COLLINGS

What was the scene?

ASNER

Where I hire her. Came back a week or two later and read with Mary, still trying to remember what I had done, and they laughed again, and they thanked me and I left. After I left, Mary turned to them and said, "Are you sure?" She certainly had her doubts. They said, "That's your Grant." Okay.

COLLINGS

Did you have the sense at that time that this was a great opportunity, or was it just sort of one—

ASNER

I loved the script. The script was funny. I just wanted to be able to be good at it, to find a way to be good at it, to be funny. I believe they had a guarantee of thirteen. So we went to work. But before we went to work, they wanted us to do that same scene to show to the advertisers, so we worked at a dreg-ish studio down in Hollywood, and the interesting story there is that Jay Sandrich was the director and I found him to be quite a pain in the ass. I thought to myself, "Well, once this show gets off and we're running, I'll make sure that they keep him away from the show. I'll see to it. I'll work at it." He directed 95 percent of the seven years. But what it taught me, having that good year, of doing the best I had earned, I came into that reading humbled, but at the same time sustained by the ego of the previous year. It was a nice combination and gave me enough confidence to act like I knew what I was doing. They later acted like they were very embarrassed at the way that scene looked, but you could look at it today and it would look very close to what we ended up doing on the show. Supposed to do promos with Mary, so I went to Chicago with Mary, and because I didn't want to wear glasses in the show, I tried memorizing all of the—each individual station's blah, blah. By the time we got to the third room, I had a headache trying to memorize, so Mary took over big time and got us through the remaining

promos. Then was sent down to Atlanta to do the second half of the country with Cloris Leachman, and I was still wondering, "What am I going to do? What am I going to do?" She looked at the stuff and she said, "Oh, let's just do it our own." So we improvised our way through, with her as the catalyst, and it became a breeze.

We started rehearsals on the show. The first year was at a leaky-roofed studio down in Hollywood on McCadden, and we had a wonderful cast. As it came to the week of doing the show, they decided to tape it in front of an audience on a Tuesday night. We taped it, the audience was not receptive, and we had to shoot on the following Friday night. Mary was in tears, and as Grant left that evening, he turned to Allan and Jim and he said, "Fix it."

COLLINGS

What was wrong? Why didn't the audience—

ASNER

It wasn't getting the laughs.

COLLINGS

What do you think it was?

ASNER

I guess we were too nervous. It wasn't sharp. The only adjustment really made was contributed by Marge Mullen, our script supervisor, who said, "Well, Valerie [Harper] is coming across as so New York aggressive, the audience may not like her." So they engineered that Cloris' daughter Lisa [Gerritsen], Beth [Lindstrom], at one point would say, "Well, I like Aunt Rhoda," and it almost seemed as if that were a saving grace for the audience to accept her as well.

COLLINGS

Interesting.

ASNER

Friday came, we didn't know what we had. Got into my first scene with Mary, got to that first line of, "You know what? You've got spunk." And she toes her foot into the tiles. And I said, "I hate spunk." Well, got a laugh. Well, I played it so perfectly, Mary played it so perfectly, the audience erupted. They boomed forth with laughter. I felt so powerful. I felt like I'd ordered the three hundred people in the audience off a

cliff. I was filled with power. Certainly from that point on, the show was a big success in that first show.

So we started off on our trip of making a hit TV series. We were never number one, almost never, I don't think, but we were always up there, number four, number five, and we became beloved. As Jay said at the time, he said, "The first year you'll be in out in public and people won't know who you are. By the second year, you'll see a big difference." When the second year came, Ted [Knight], Gavin [MacLeod] and I would go to lunch and I'd see people on the street. They'd start to demonstrate recognition, and I'd avert my eyes of being Humble Harve. But Ted would go look at them, light up, and shake his head as if to say, "Yeah, it's me." We would be very strongly recognized.

COLLINGS

Now I understand that Ted was based on actually the character, the person of Jerry Dunphy.

ASNER

That's what they were writing. He in his performing tended to approach emulating George Putnam, but I think he was closer to the mark.

COLLINGS

And your character was based on Pete Noyes from The Big News.

ASNER

Yes.

COLLINGS

Did you ever meet him?

ASNER

I may have. I can't remember him. He was bald, like me, or like I was getting. So in the first few years there, we guys would get together. We had a marvelous time, get together every Friday night with our wives, have dinner after the show and drink up good, but more attention was being paid to the girls. When you get Mary, Cloris, and Valerie in a scene, you're going to get performance interruptus, and Jay was spending a lot of his time with them and they were writing more, it seemed, for the girls. We suffered minor jealousy,

the fact that we had less time on screen, but we didn't let it get in the way of our work.

Well, I'm skipping ahead. I won an Emmy [Award] the first year. The beginning of the second year, I can remember standing in the wings with Ted and Gavin, and I'm hearing the music, and I think, "Man, this is everything I ever wanted or hoped for." They both looked at me and said, "Not so fast, Buster. We got our Emmys to win yet." There was difficulty with Ted those first years also, paranoia, jealousy, and he got difficult at times. When he wasn't difficult, we were the best of friends.

COLLINGS

The show is considered to be very important in terms of images of women. I mean, here's Mary, she's unmarried, she's not looking for a husband, she has a career and this is all in 1970 and going forward. Did you have a sense of that when you were working?

ASNER

Well, I never did. Maybe because those first few shows, first years, were so concentrated on the feminine side that that's how it was achieved. But then Valerie got her own show and Phyllis got her own show. The only girl left with Mary was Georgette. So they more and more began to concentrate on us guys. We felt it, we liked it, and we delivered.

COLLINGS

Lou Grant is such an iconic character. Why does he have such an appeal for the viewing public? Or what does Lou Grant represent in that show? We'll talk about the Lou Grant Show later.

ASNER

What does he represent? I think middle class, war veteran, filled with principle for his industry, a lover of it. He's the gruff lovable uncle everybody has and likes.

COLLINGS

But he's a straight talker.

ASNER

Yes. That's part of the gruffness. But what is that word that escapes me now? That straight talker who tells you like it is, doesn't sugarcoat it. Putting up with Ted with all of his

imbecilities, and as Tom Shales wrote when Mary was cancelled, finally decided to retire, his love of the show and its people, but these were a wonderful bunch of losers. Well, we're all losers in every respect. Ted. Murray, i.e, Gavin, an unsuccessful writer. Mary, who had come out of nowhere into a position she was not really qualified for. And me, who had been in the business a long time but certainly never struck sparks. The last station you turned to in a city. I was being led along, of course, and cultivated and taught, learning. I learned how to deal with an audience. Finally had a show written where Mary and I were pitted together as potential lovers, and then I broke it by laughing about the kiss, that type of thing.

COLLINGS

What was it like to work with Mary Tyler Moore?

ASNER

She was excellent, absolutely excellent. Giving, never any pettiness from her. We honored her as our queen.

COLLINGS

Did you get a sense of what she was trying to do with the show? Would she talk about that in sort of larger terms?

ASNER

She left it to the boys.

COLLINGS

To the writers.

ASNER

Yes, and there were girls on there, too, good women writers. I wish I could dwell more on the direction. And the same was true of Lou Grant. I never told them what subjects to pick up on. With Lou Grant, I always said that we touched every base except dealing with three subjects: busing, abortion, gun control.

COLLINGS

Those were the three you did not touch. Was there a reason for that?

ASNER

Too hot. It would have ignited too many fires, I guess. I don't know.

COLLINGS

How was it to transition from Lou Grant in a comedy to Lou Grant in a drama? What did you have to do with the character to accommodate that?

ASNER

It was a nightmare. It was a nightmare. When I finally got the offer by CBS to do a show and I chose MTM to produce it, I asked for Allen and Jim to produce it, and they said, "Fine." They didn't know what it was going to be, so a month or two later they came back and said, "We think we want Lou to stay in journalism, to go back to print, his first love." So I said, "Fine." Who was I to question their wisdom? But to go from a three-camera, three hundred audience, half-hour comedy to one camera, no audience, hour show, which was called a dramedy, I guess, it was like the other side of the moon when I first started in it.

I did the first shows, and I was in therapy at the time, and after the first show came on, I was on the couch with my therapist and I said, "What'd you think of it?" He never said anything.

COLLINGS

The TV was on while you were—

ASNER

No, no.

COLLINGS

No. I was just going to say. [laughs]

ASNER

No. He had seen the show. "What'd you think of it?" His one and only comment that I heard was, "Why do you grimace so much?" I thought, "Jesus Christ, I guess I do." And I realized that being an hour show when there were laughs, and we did try to achieve some laughs, we were listed in TV Guide the first two weeks as Lou Grant, a comedy. So many people tuned in to see another comedy and turned away. Lou Grant, a comedy. Because nobody could laugh when we made a laugh, I guess I found myself grimacing to give the audience at home some idea, "This is where you laugh." It's not a very smart ploy. So I reined myself in and started to get busy finishing the first year. Our young female reporter was Rebecca Balding, and we did three shows with her, and they

felt she wasn't going to work out. So they brought in Linda Kelsey, and there was hell to pay. Bruce Davidson was Rebecca's boyfriend at the time, and he came down and wanted to punch a few lights out. But we got over that. Then Linda learned how to do what was required of her, and she was very good. Rebecca went on to a lovely success in Soap after that.

COLLINGS

In the show Soap?

ASNER

Yes. Then we went through the year, and Grant was talking to—I believe it was Max Liebman at the time, and Max said, "I know what to do." Grant laughingly said, "What's that, Max?" "Demote him." Because as the editor, I was chained behind the desk, couldn't get out, couldn't get involved like the reporters were, and that's what it was crying for. Nothing could change that, and they had to work double time to find those ideas where I could be featured more prominently as the star of the show. We had probably the best supporting cast you could ever find. They were all great. The show they were in culled forth the greatness within each actor. So we learned how to pinch and bend and clip, and I stopped grimacing. It took a few years, though. We did not command great ratings at all. I don't know if I won an Emmy that first year. I may have. What I remember the second year, my wife was out of town with the youngest kid, I think Katie, and first day of work I was busy being late and racing. I went in to shave, and my razor wasn't properly closed, double-edged razor. So I lifted it to my face and it sunk in. I screamed louder than you've ever heard. Liza came bursting through my door and said, "Are you all right?" I said, "No." I'm bleeding like a stuck pig, so I said, "Call the studio and tell them. I've got to drive myself to St. Joe's Hospital," that being the closest hospital to the studio. Went down there. Unfortunately, I had to wait a long time, but it was well worth the wait because the doctor they brought in was a plastic surgeon, and they put twenty stitches in, which made it impossible to even see it now. I went to work and worked that afternoon, and they explained away why the Band-aid

was on my face, that I was trying to save time and tried shaving in the shower and had a mishap. But I always felt it was my unconscious desire to get away from it. I was not happy.

COLLINGS

I was just going to ask you, I mean, you had previously been unhappy when you were in these continuing roles, and here you were with Mary Tyler Moore for seven years and then on to Lou Grant for five years.

ASNER

Yeah.

COLLINGS

So that became confining, is that—

ASNER

It was confining and also it wasn't. I remember we went to a party in Bel Air. [B. Donald] Bud Grant was the president of the network at the time. Our ratings were low, and I saw him and he greeted me warmly and all that. I suppose he said, "What's the matter?" I said, "Oh, I'm just happy with what the show is doing." He said, "Oh, don't worry. If we don't do this, we'll do something else." Who the fuck wants to hear that? I want this to be the success. So we just had to pick up our socks and proceed.

COLLINGS

The show presents a lot of important social issues. Was this a driving force of the team working on the show or was that sort of incidental?

ASNER

No. No, it was their choice. They wanted to do it with pertinency, whatever they could do, and as opposed to most other shows, they tried to present the opposite opinion to their representation, never strong enough to overcome or central representation but certainly there. I thought it was a credit to the show that they did.

COLLINGS

So were you always comfortable with the views that Lou Grant espoused on the show?

ASNER

Yeah, and I was delighted to hear the rebuttals. So that went on, but I needed more. I began to get involved in, in '72, long before Mary Tyler Moore—no, during Mary Tyler Moore, I became involved with what [unclear] called the rebel movement within SAG [Screen Actors Guild], and tried to present—you'd be sent out a slate, and I suppose they still had petitioned candidates in those days, but the slate easily overrode. So I was peripherally involved with the union. I didn't want to run for office or anything, but I became interested in it and was asked by my adjoining cabalists to go to the Hollywood board meeting and try to represent the wishes of the group, which was to open up the election process to more members, to other members, to make it seem less like a closed corporation. Of course they resented that, and John Gavin was the president at that time. I thought that my presentation sucked, and would not expect anything to come of that. Eventually, Dennis Weaver became president, and as president he opened the doors much wider than they had been before, followed by Kathleen Nolan, who furthered that work, and then Bill Sholard, who by most of my allies was recognized as a progressive. [unclear] when a strike took place in '80.

COLLINGS

In '80, yeah.

ASNER

Condemned them of not being dynamic enough to push through the desires of the young Turks. When the strike of '80 took place, as a star of the show, I offered my services, and was constantly asked, as were all members of the cast. When the strike was announced, we as a cast went down almost unitedly. It was a very impressive gathering and it made a good impression, and as the star of the show, I was asked to make appearances, either on the sidewalk or in the studio, and I acquitted myself fairly well. It's then that the cabalists [unclear] that the strike was settled, but pushing my popularity to become president and I won. At that time I was becoming involved in El Salvador. I had not become aggressively active prior to that because I didn't want to lose any solid ground—

COLLINGS

In your career?

ASNER

—by political positions. I knew the fate that can befall most people that do take positions. So I avoided controversy. But when I saw these documentaries that showed the death squads and their corpses, I kept looking around for means to take action. The nun Sister [Patricia] Pat Kromer got me to sign into being on the board of the Archbishop Romero Relief Fund.

Shortly after that, Bill Zimmerman, who headed up Medical Aid for Indochina, was very successful there, he was starting Medical Aid for El Salvador, which was to provide medical help to those people, mostly peasants, in the provinces that the government was not bringing any help into. Nothing happened until February of '81, I guess right after the strike was settled, and Bill said that we're going to Washington to make the announcement of the first contribution to Medical Aid, \$25,000. An archbishop of Mexico was going to take it across the border and make the presentation in Salvador. So this press conference was called.

On the way into it, we came across Marvin Kalb, who asked what we were about. We told him. He gave us a jaundiced eye, seemed totally uninterested or caring. We marched into a very large press conference. After it was over, Mary McGrory, a columnist I certainly enjoyed at the time, came up to me and said, "What did you think of your audience?" I kind of mumbled some nonentity answer. I said, "What'd you think?" She said, "I felt they were hostile." I was relieved to hear that, because that's what it seemed like. Ralph Waite was there, Howard Hesseran, Lee Grant, Bert Schneider. Because I was the star of an ongoing series, they seemed to think that I should read the opening declaration of the group, which I did. Automatically that led into choosing me to be the first responder to questions. The first question was a softball. The second question was by a cable TV reporter, who said, "You say you're in favor of free elections in El Salvador. What if they turn out a communist government?" Wham! It was like somebody swung a bat and hit me in the

face. I said, "Jesus Christ." So easy, so easy to put you on the spot. I didn't want to endanger myself, so I gave him some kind of half answer. I went on to another question, answered his question as easily as I could, and then came back to that same cable reporter, and I said, "I was not happy with my first answer to you. I'd like to expound on that." I said, "That if it's the government that the people of El Salvador choose, then let them have it."

Soon as I said that—well, that's not true. Before I went back to him, these thoughts were racing through my mind. "Good god, you've come all this way. You've avoided entanglement all this time. Now you finally take a stand to stand for something, and you're going to waffle as always?" That's what made me turn back to that second questioner, and say, "I wasn't pleased with the answer I gave you. All I can say is if it's the government the people of El Salvador choose, then let them have it." But at that point I said, "I'm finished in the business. I'll never work again."

COLLINGS

Really?

ASNER

Well, that comment was never repeated anywhere, but in people's attacks on me they automatically say, "That Commie, that Commie, that Commie."

COLLINGS

Your statement was not broadcast anywhere, is that what you're saying? It was never printed in the articles [unclear]?

ASNER

Not that I know of. The articles may have covered it. I don't know. I don't know. But I was amazed. TV interviewers I'd known and been very friendly with, I found regarding me as the enemy, one in Texas, one in St. Louis. I was amazed.

COLLINGS

What was the first indication when you got back to L.A. that there was going to be some blowback on this for you?

ASNER

Well, the articles then appeared, some of them. At the same time Charlton Heston was leading day players and stuntmen, and other prominent names were allied with him against

SAG's intention to absorb 1,500 extras since the extras' guild had gone belly up. SAG represents extras throughout the rest of the country, in Hawaii, not on the West Coast. Most of our members have SAG cards, Screen Actors Guild cards. Maybe 500 or 1,000 don't or didn't. So a couple of congressmen elected to start a boycott of the Lou Grant Show.

COLLINGS

Because of the El Salvador statement?

ASNER

Yes, or that one comment. They never cited the comment, but it became I was flying in the face of the American foreign policy.

COLLINGS

And you lost a lot of advertising as well?

ASNER

No. That's the interesting thing. [unclear] day players were leading this campaign against, blaming me for the absorption of the extras. The union, in response, declared that for the extras to [unclear] it would take a two-thirds vote of the membership voting to a weakened position. The media were aligned against us. At the same time this action was going on outside the union with an uproar of whatever comments they took.

COLLINGS

So it was really a perfect storm.

ASNER

Yes. Yes.

COLLINGS

There was the industry problem and then there was the foreign policy problem and they were both pressuring the show at the same time.

ASNER

So they planned a boycott. They ranted and raved against me. I was never more alone in my life. That was unbelievable. Nowhere I could really turn. I was separating from Nancy at this time, so I was alone there. My sister thought I was going wacko and wanted me to see her shrink. There were threats, mail threats.

COLLINGS

They came through the mail?

ASNER

To the show, I guess.

COLLINGS

Who was making these threats? Did you have a sense of that?

ASNER

Oh, they didn't identify themselves.

COLLINGS

I mean, was it domestic?

ASNER

Oh, yes. Interesting occurrence takes place where rather than get the threat, you'll get somebody who comes forward and says, "I heard this threat," and blah, blah, blah, and I feel it's a way of their becoming buddies by revealing a potential threat.

COLLINGS

How would they know about it?

ASNER

At certain times it probably was manufactured. They manufactured it in being my buddy.

COLLINGS

Now, did you ever talk to the police about these threats?

ASNER

My publicist at the time had a gastric attack in my office. There were cops around. Somebody even supposedly left a pipe bomb at CBS. I never found out if that's verified or not. So my show had not been cancelled yet, but my career certainly seemed to be in jeopardy, and the three producers came down, the three of them, and they said—the best statement was by the producer with less seniority. He said, "I think there are two ways to do a show, to do something, to present a viewpoint. One is your way that you're involved in now, and the other way is the show, and I think the show is better." My answer to them was, "What do you want me to do? They're threatening my life, they're lying about me as to what I said, what I did. What do you want me to do, shut up,

let them run away with their accusations?" They didn't have an answer.

Later on, Jack Fields said, "You survived, and I think the reason you survived is because you wouldn't shut up, you wouldn't go gently into that good night." Every time they made a charge, I tried to answer it with a rebuttal or called it an outright lie, and I guess it took hold in the media. The show was cancelled. There were huge protests outside CBS for two weeks in a row. Eventually, a vice president I liked came out all the way to California to try to demonstrate to me that the show was not cancelled because of all this, it's because of the ending of M*A*S*H and, I guess, another show or two, that they were very concerned about their Monday night lineup, and that's why they were cancelling the show. They implied that the producers were standing in line waiting to take the place of Cadbury chocolates.

COLLINGS

Which was the one that pulled out of the show?

ASNER

Yes. Vidal Sassoon and Kimberly-Clark, who had two factories in El Salvador, and they'd been identified, and they were identified at one time by the John Birch Society. But he said because I would keep angrily retorting against the accusations, that thusly I kept myself alive in the eyes of the public.

COLLINGS

When you came out, you were struck by all of the progressive people and causes that you were running into, and now with Charlton Heston, with Anthony Hopkins, problems with them at SAG and now the cancellation of the show. Were you surprised at how powerful the more right-wing forces turned out to be?

ASNER

Was I surprised at the power of the right-wing forces?

COLLINGS

Yes, within the industry, because you said when you came out you were surprised to find just all these progressive people and progressive politics.

ASNER

That didn't mean a hell of a lot in terms of practicality.

COLLINGS

In the New York magazine in 1982, it says, "There are many people who want to defend Ed Asner, a powerful agent said, asking that his name not be used, but they don't want to go public. When it's time to get work, they don't want these other people to remember their names."

ASNER

Well, it may be an apocryphal story, but I heard that when [William] Paley came into the room and saw that the show was still up there, he said, "What's that doing there? Get it off. Get it off." He was pretty friendly with [Ronald] Reagan. The show was cancelled. Cagney and Lacey came in, despite the protests, and at the end of the summer when they were cancelled, protests arose again to keep the show on the air.

COLLINGS

Cagney and Lacey?

ASNER

Yes. And I think it was a perfect ploy by CBS to say, "There's some protests we listen to and some we don't."

COLLINGS

Very tricky.

ASNER

Yes. I heard two stories of being blacklisted. There was a hospital show that was being cast. [interruption]

COLLINGS

Okay. You said two instances of being blacklisted.

ASNER

David Victor was the producer, nominally progressive, and Howard Rodman, an excellent award-winning writer, was writing the script. Howard Rodman at one point said, "I think Ed Asner would be great for this role," and Victor replied, "Well, I think he'd be a political liability." Well, to me that suggests blacklisted, not organized, but a piece of a blacklist. Then a few years later as I started to worm my way out of total anonymity, I went to Boston to do a—I think it was for Metromedia, but I'm not sure. It was a narration for a documentary on the refusal to bomb Auschwitz. The producer invited me to lunch, and he said, "You know why

you're here?" I said, "No, why?" He said, "Because a few years back we had a documentary, and I submitted a list of names to consider, and yours was at the top of the list and your name was circled," and I know what that meant. So I know of two instances where I was ill-considered, so I figured the blacklist was on. But as my agent Jack said, I wasn't going away, and there were still people willing to take an occasional chance, so it was not total blacklist.

COLLINGS

But was there anybody who reached out a hand in support of what you were doing?

ASNER

Certainly progressives and liberals, but without any base of power.

COLLINGS

Would you like to stop for today?

ASNER

No. No. I'm merely trying to collect thoughts. Friends tended to come up and say, "Hey, Commie, how ya doin'?"

COLLINGS

Really?

ASNER

Well, more so in the past, but commenting on the general appraisal. I'm trying to get my brain to work. The guilt I felt of all those people losing their jobs was what bothered me.

COLLINGS

The show?

ASNER

Yes. That bothered me. Then, anyway, I was accorded respect as akin to the prophet who had been cast out of the tribe. They didn't like the sound of his prophecies. So we picked up and we kept on going. That's about it. During that time, I was involved in Medical Aid. I also joined the Office of the Americas, wonderful activist group, was in Nicaragua with other artists at the time the Sandinistas were defeated. I certainly chose to give them all the support I could when I could.

COLLINGS

So you traveled to Nicaragua, as I understand.

ASNER

Yes.

COLLINGS

What was the occasion of that trip?

ASNER

That was the election. Where [unclear]?

COLLINGS

Prior to the election or just after?

ASNER

At the time of the election when the Sandinistas lost.

COLLINGS

That must have been very satisfying.

ASNER

No.

COLLINGS

Oh, when they lost, when, which time?

ASNER

When they lost, yes. But at least they presented a democracy that would replace the so-called terrorist government. There was a commentator on ABC at the time of my travails at Lou Grant. I can't remember, a Jewish fellow.

COLLINGS

Are you talking about Ted Koppel?

ASNER

No. No. He's local.

COLLINGS

Oh, local? Oh, I don't know.

ASNER

An ugly son of a bitch.

COLLINGS

Yes, I think I remember who you mean, quite right-wing.

ASNER

Yes.

COLLINGS

The name escapes me. Paul Dandridge, maybe?

ASNER

No, oh, no, no, no. Paul was always nice to me.

COLLINGS

Yes, I know. I know. It's just the name. It's just the name I grasped at.

ASNER

No.

COLLINGS

I can kind of see the face that you're talking about, but I can't remember his name either.

ASNER

Howard, was that his first name? Howard? I can't dredge him up. He's such an ugly little bastard.

COLLINGS

With very white, white hair?

ASNER

No, no, no.

COLLINGS

No?

ASNER

Black wavy hair. Can't remember.

COLLINGS

But he would always come on with these very intense commentaries.

ASNER

Yes. So he started running these commentaries, and they were very highly condemnatory to me.

COLLINGS

Oh, he had singled you out?

ASNER

Oh, yes. My publicist went down to ABC, and after the first one, he said, "Listen, there have been all kinds of threats on Ed Asner. Can you lighten this up?" And the news producer said, "Well, will he appear on our such-and-such a show?" My PR guy thought it was a quid pro quo and he said, "Fuck you." Why can't I remember that? By the third commentary, this was when they'd been told there's death threats on me, he said, "Ed Asner's a dangerous, dangerous man." That's really going along with it.

COLLINGS

At the same time you were working with people whose values you respected with the Office of the Americas with the

Medical Aid group. What was your role in those kinds of organizations?

ASNER

Just being on the board and voting for certain things, certain actions to be taken, certain proposals that came up regularly within the context. I can remember one time there was a board member on the Medical Aid board that a Latin American, who was also on the board, was leading a campaign against. I had like this guy. He certainly was intelligent and prepossessing. I couldn't understand why, so I fought for him, as did others. The agitator later was proven to be a piece of shit mouthpiece. His wife was the head of one of the other organizations. He tried to imply he was a mole or something like that. I forget about these things. So we saved his ass, deciding or not deciding on who to support, who to picket, who to—

COLLINGS

In terms of political figures?

ASNER

Yes. At one point, the—I can't remember her name either. It's unfortunate. Said she had gotten word from one of the groups, they'd like me to come down to El Salvador, and she was all gung-ho for speeding me off. Then I talked to a number of people. Should I? Well, what good will it do? Should I? Should I not? And the answer, "Well, don't go." Then, as I figured it out, if I got bumped off, the right wing would say, "Well, this is what happens when you speak badly about us." And the left wing could engineer it as saying, "It was a right-wing plot." So they both had a lot to gain, the left more than the right. Just be very [unclear].

COLLINGS

Did you ever have a sense that any representatives of the right wing were in Los Angeles possibly making threats against you here?

ASNER

There were threats coming in. I don't know who they were, how legitimate they were. Nothing ever happened. I had good company around me at the time. I was braced at one point by a meeting I was going to for SAG, and it looked like

a potato head. He and a partner tried to get a fight started, and there was one guy there who they didn't look too busy, but, boy, our side really wanted to get it on. He was capable of finding the ways to make them trigger. In this particular confab, he called me a name, the agitator called me a name, and I called him a name, back and forth, back and forth, but I wasn't going to throw the first punch, and neither were they. Exciting times.

COLLINGS

Yes. So some of the names that you mentioned off tape last time, Father Viscota, Father Cardinale, and also you had contact with Sergio Ramirez, who became the vice president for Ortega.

ASNER

They were all brief. They were all charming. I liked them. I met Ortega, met his wife.

COLLINGS

That was when you were in Nicaragua.

ASNER

Yes. I really don't remember meeting much of the heads from Salvador.

COLLINGS

You said somewhere that American policy in Central America had bothered you for a long time. Had you been following this before Sister Pat came to your office?

ASNER

Not a lot before, but I could smell it. I had been a Castro supporter. I certainly was horrified by the country's foreign policy response to Cuba, its treatment of Cuba. So I certainly became aware of Smedley Butler and that famous speech of his, which damned this country and all the dictators that they supported. Anybody can look at the revolution of Panama from Colombia and say, "How convenient."

COLLINGS

Did the fact that you were in Los Angeles and there were a lot of refugees from these conflicts in Los Angeles have any bearing on your involvement?

ASNER

I became aware of them, certainly. Didn't talk to that many of them. You don't need to talk to them when you see the perfidy of the Contras in Nicaragua, the death squads, and the bodies piled up, rotting on the hillsides, the brazenness of killing four nuns and, what, six priests. I remember reading of Coca-Cola workers in Colombia and how the president of the union would be killed, and another man would step up and take his place and he'd be killed, and a third man would rise up. I said, "Where? Where do they get the courage to even think they can survive?" I think, "They're willing to do that, why shouldn't I do what I do?"

COLLINGS

Do you think your involvement made a difference?

ASNER

It brought attention to a certain segment of the people. I don't know how many times I've heard people say, "Well, you turned out to be right about Salvador." I don't know. Where did they hear that? I mean, yes, Salvador is quiet these days. They have a more representative government, but it's still a mass of corruption and death, as is Guatemala, as is Honduras, as is Nicaragua even. [End of December 13, 2011 interview]

***1.4. Session Four
(January 27, 2012)***

COLLINGS

Today is January 27, 2012, Jane Collings interviewing Ed Asner at his home. We left off last time, you had made the comment that Central America is still a place of corruption and death. I think that was the last thing that you said, despite the struggle, the efforts made by you and others, and I wondered if you wanted to make any more other remarks or if you would stand by that sentiment.

ASNER

I guess I'll stand by that. We have become so besieged here in "Fortress America" that it's almost become pointless to think about outside the borders. I'm sure it's as horrendous down there as it always has been, but perhaps we've been so

besieged, as I said, here that their problems have gone on to either be self-helped or ignored. So I don't have a lot of recent updates to connect in terms of [El] Salvador, certainly. Nicaragua seems to be trundling along on its own inefficiency. Venezuela, one day [Hugo] Chavez looks El Supremo and the next day we hear of a lack of civil liberties here, a lack of civil liberties there. He's now cancer-free, Chavez is. So I don't know what the— [interruption]

COLLINGS

Okay. We're back on.

ASNER

Cuba bounces up and down. I don't know what that will eventually end, but—

COLLINGS

I wanted to ask you, you pointed to that moment at the D.C. press conference when you stood by the right to self-determination of the El Salvadorian people with regard to the election outcomes, as being a pivotal point in your life and certainly in your career. What has that moment meant for you going forward?

ASNER

Well, it was a great turning point in my life. My series was cancelled as a result of that stance, and I've been hooking and grabbing ever since then. I was set up as a target or became a target, and I've withstood most of the ill effects of that time. [interruption]

COLLINGS

Okay. We're back on again. What did you take away from your involvement in the Central American issue that you brought to political activism going forward?

ASNER

Well, above all, it became an open door for me, and certainly revealed to me, to anybody who wants to read it, the banana-boat diplomacy that we have— [interruption]

COLLINGS

All right. We're back.

ASNER

It revealed to me that it was the open-door policy for me, because I became very aware after—and sort of odd. All you

had to do was go back and see what Smedley Butler had to say about what he did as a general, in terms of American corporatism. The more you read, the more aghast you become, as to the Pax Americana that hundreds of countries that we're in, in terms of some kind of military official presence, which, of course, naturally their American-given duty is to influence policy, affect policy, benefitting the United States. What it revealed to me is that it doesn't matter what administration. I used to become aghast when there would be a liberal and a conservative party in most of the Latin American states, and how one would take over and commit perfidy, and then the conservatives would take over and perform even a greater perfidy. I thought, how ridiculous, how undemocratic, how unattractive, how unlike us. In the end, what I've come to believe is it's not a bit different here, that what Democrats do make a show of sorts, although many are traitors to the party and the principles of the Democratic Party. So, in the end, especially if you have a Republican majority in any house from time immemorial, they will serve as—

COLLINGS

Did you particularly come to those views around the Iraq War?

ASNER

Well, that was blatant. I mean, it's like for the first time we took off the mask, we took off the gloves, and manufactured for anyone who wants to see what a false-flag operation it undoubtedly was, is, and, of course, you look at the residue of what we've achieved there, which is zilch. God knows when, if ever, those poor people will be able to look to a country that protects them, that cares for them, that is a democratic country.

COLLINGS

You have been involved in the anti-war effort. In particular, you did the narration for *The Oil Factor: Behind the War on Terror*. Have you had the same kind of reaction within Hollywood that you had to your activism in Central America or has it been very different?

ASNER

No, no. There's been no untoward reaction to my stances, as far as I know. I've certainly got more askance looks because of my activity in terms of 9/11.

COLLINGS

We'll talk about that. As far as like opposition to the war, did you feel, in terms of the entertainment community, you were among fellows?

ASNER

Oh, no.

COLLINGS

Like-minded?

ASNER

Yeah, yeah, yeah, in large number, in large number. But you can seek and find that there are those actors who are working, who are certainly pro-military, who were gung-ho about the whole idea. They don't argue that loudly, but they certainly haven't been pilloried for their opinions.

COLLINGS

So in speaking about the 9/11 Truth Movement, just to sort of start that off, where were you on 9/11?

ASNER

I guess I was here in L.A.

COLLINGS

Do you have any memories of that day?

ASNER

I was quite shocked, questioning, awe and I was aghast. But very quickly on, I began to smell a rat.

COLLINGS

How soon?

ASNER

Very, very, very soon. I ranted and raved, and the facts began to amass themselves, in my mind, and in whatever paper you could read if you had an open mind, open ear. There was a long period there where subsequently I'd go around and I'd be on cruises and I'd talk to people, intellectuals, scientists, come across them, when I noticed a strange phenomenon. It's like what conspiracy advocates always find, that the listener, no matter what stripe of education he's got, will—there are two elements that take

place, one of two elements. One is either the listener's eyes, "I'm dealing with a wacko here," or, "Mm-hmm, mm-hmm, yes, yes," and then walk away, making sure they don't leave their name and address for further colloquy. It is either operating out of fear of being involved with someone, something that will get them in trouble, or that my stories tend to destroy the myth of Santa Claus. I'm resented on those grounds because, god knows, I was there for many years believing in the purity and the greatness and the fineness, though peppered with faults, still the greatest country in the world, and that that's how these people are influenced. I realize that I can't excuse America. It's had a great ride on its myth. I can't make excuses for it anymore. It has shown itself as craven, as diabolical, as any existing state in the world.

I'm reading a book right now written by a guy who was in the army in Korea, who had a brother there who was taken prisoner by North Korea, and has never seen the light of day since, if he's still alive. I've read his history so far of how he was shimmied and shammed and shunted, and promised and then broken concerning the, most of the time, official status of this country saying there are no prisoners alive behind. In the course of reading his history on that, he talks about North Korean delegates he has talked to, who have been eager to open the door to discussion on this subject, but that it is our government who has slammed the door shut and maintained the retention of these prisoners without demonstrating any published concern.

COLLINGS

Is there a lot of support in the entertainment community for the 9/11 Truth Movement?

ASNER

Not a lot, but there's close to a thousand members on Architects and Engineers for 9/11 Truth. I support them. I support any of the other groups that come alive. I don't think there is an official group of actors and performers or artists for 9/11 Truth. [interruption]

COLLINGS

Are there any issues that are sort of a third rail of politics in the entertainment community, as far as you can tell? We talked about how you were pilloried for your involvement with the Central American issues. But going forward and in the current climate, are there any particular political issues that one must not touch in that same way?

ASNER

When we were making Lou Grant, I used to say that there's something like three subjects that we tend to go lightly on, if at all, and that was busing, gun control, and abortion. I don't think gun control [unclear] I guess find a large—amassing a militancy against you. There's no school busing that is controversial anymore, to my knowledge. Abortion will always be the—the yahoos continually try to achieve a limitation, a diminution. That battle goes on. I don't know that if you take a stance on a particular element of abortion that it's going to lose you any more people than you've already lost.

COLLINGS

Are you talking about audiences or are you talking about people that you would work with in the entertainment community?

ASNER

Audience. Oh, that wouldn't stop us from being given jobs, unless we became outrageously controversial, and I don't know what that would—gay marriage, I suppose, was too hot to handle there for a while, but certainly since so many gays are empowered in Hollywood, certainly wouldn't affect jobs. I don't even know that it would affect audiences. It wouldn't drive them away from you necessarily.

COLLINGS

So you don't really see any third-rail issues in the entertainment community at this time, in terms of political stances that one might take?

ASNER

Well, what do we settle with? The drums are getting louder and louder on Iran. One day it's up, one day it's down. It's like the stock market. There were a million people out on the streets on Iraq. I think if some false flag was created on

Iran, it might result in a million people in the streets, but I don't think it would redound against hireability.

COLLINGS

How do you see the political spectrum within the entertainment community? I mean, it's always criticized by the Republican standpoint as being left-leaning, and certainly when it comes to the news media pilloried as being the elite media, but you've certainly run into many people who have strong conservative positions. How would you characterize the political spectrum?

ASNER

I would say that liberals are far less prominent, in terms of guest appearances.

COLLINGS

Far less prominent?

ASNER

Yeah, are far less evidenced than they used to be, and at the same time I think that those performers who are right-wingers have become more apparent.

COLLINGS

In terms of getting roles or—

ASNER

Well, they always got roles. I think now they're exposing their political beliefs more openly than they used to.

COLLINGS

Oh, I see.

ASNER

And, of course, it all breaks down into individual areas, either gun control, abortion, or whatever. So I'm sure you'll find a liberal who is opposed to gun control or who's opposed to abortion. Many liberals are opposed to abortion. I find it in my own case. I belong to what was the dominating element in the Screen Actors Guild, stemming from a six-month commercial strike that led to what I regard as a conspiracy on the part of many groups and people to weaken the direction of the Screen Actors Guild at that time. So that now we are faced with an avalanche to achieve merger between AFTRA [American Federation of Television and Radio Artists] and SAG [Screen Actors Guild], and only a small minority of

the former stalwarts fight, delay, and question and challenge. So here's a union situation which demonstrates all the visibility on any other subject.

COLLINGS

How do you see the political persuasion of the younger generation coming up in Hollywood?

ASNER

Well, I was pretty bleak on that until I saw what Occupy Wall Street was commanding in terms of attention. I guess it restored what little confidence I had, and maybe there is a pony in that tent.

COLLINGS

You've had some involvement with local issues. I'm thinking of the environmental struggle in Ballona Wetlands, and you narrated a film for the Ballona Wetlands group. How did you get involved in that project?

ASNER

Well, Sheila Laffey was a wonderful citizen involved in that, and sucked me into it and sucked Martin Sheen into it, and we made our stances known and helped fight it. Won a partial victory. I belong to Defenders of Wildlife and, of course, they're fighting constantly with the status quo. And here we have a Democratic administration with a Democratic head of the Department of Interior, and the battle is even worse.

COLLINGS

That particular battle was sort of risky for some people to be involved in. I spoke with Marcia Hanscom, who said that a lot of people that were interested in supporting the project were afraid to because of the involvement of David Geffen and Steven Spielberg.

ASNER

Yeah, yeah.

COLLINGS

Was that anything that you thought twice about?

ASNER

No. No, and to my delight, they've lately pulled out, for supposed technical reasons, etc., etc., but I read between the lines there.

COLLINGS

Well, was the prospect of going up against these moguls sort of part of the fun for you in any way?

ASNER

I suppose so. They've never given me a job before. Why should I hold my breath until they finally do give me a job? I've made a ten-minute film. I think it's for the—it might be Greenpeace, railing against the attempt to create nuclear plants in Florida. It's a dollar-and-cents ten minutes, points out the fallacy of it, the danger of it. It'll probably be getting a lot of press. I'm not sure.

COLLINGS

Well, it strikes me that your voice, which is largely synonymous with the fair-minded voice of Lou Grant, is probably in demand by a number of groups making such films.

ASNER

Even if it weren't, I'm still a name. So that if you can't get Alec Baldwin or somebody of such ilk, a Martin Sheen, I'm sure I'll be on the list.

COLLINGS

Have you ever turned down a project because you weren't happy with the politics involved?

ASNER

I suppose so. I don't remember what it would be, though.

COLLINGS

So, just sort of wrapping up, what has surprised you most about your life so far?

ASNER

I never solved anything, absolutely never solved anything. What you have to train and drill yourself to do is merely add a chip in the chop of taking down a tree illegal. You'll be lucky if you're around when it falls. It's merely adding your voice to hopefully as one of many, but it's never Fannie Lou Hamer sitting on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama.

COLLINGS

It's never those pivotal moments.

ASNER

Pure round and uncorrupted and undented.

COLLINGS

What would you like to see going forward in the future, in terms of your life and your career?

ASNER

Well, I've learned the ability of staying alive, so to speak. I'm very cynical about the prospects for America and the maintenance of its ideals. I keep romanticizing that—unfortunately, I don't see an Arab Spring here, and that if push comes to shove, that quite possibly be a conflict between right and left, and I think the left would be outnumbered. It always has been, always will be, no matter what Fox TV may say. When you see the preponderance of Christian fundamentalism in this country, the doubting of Darwin, the total acceptance and belief of the Bible, there's a fundamentalism in this country that if a call to arms took place, we wouldn't have the votes or the arms. Yet, as an example, I look to Spain post-Franco. They lived under the bloody dictation for decades, and when finally they came out of the tunnel, created a leftist government, which has not done well lately, of course, because of the financial boondoggles, but I don't think they'll ever go back to Franco, unless it just gets worse and worse and worse. That's what would happen to this country. The unemployment situation are such and no remedial measures were taken, and we've become that entrenched 1 percent, 90 percent. The disgruntlement will eventually lead to a march to find the strongman. I look for the strongman. I go around doing FDR [Franklin D. Roosevelt], and I thank god that he existed at the time he did, solved what he did, but you can't find FDRs under every rock, and that's it. Only after a great deal of blood has been shed will the ability to find and discover the strongman will appear. People will keep looking and killing each other and disagreeing with each other, and sabotaging democracy until some kind of Caesar Augustus is found. [End of January 27, 2012 interview]

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