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**Betty Reid Soskin**

**Rosie the Riveter World War II American Homefront Oral History Project**

A Collaborative Project of the Regional Oral History Office,  
The National Park Service, and the City of Richmond, California

Interviews conducted by  
Nadine Wilmot  
in 2002

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Interview with Betty Reid Soskin  
Interviewed by: Nadine Wilmot  
Transcriber: Sam Schramski  
[Interview #01: October, 30, 2002]  
[Begin Audio File: Soskin1 10-30-02.wav]

1-00:00:05

**Wilmot:**

Good morning. It's October 30<sup>th</sup> and I'm here with Betty Reid Soskin. Just to begin can you tell me when you were born?

1-00:00:19

**Soskin:**

Yeah. I was born on September 22, 1921 in Detroit, Michigan.

1-00:00:25

**Wilmot:**

In Detroit, Michigan?

1-00:00:27

**Soskin:**

Yeah, my father was working there and it was just before they returned to Louisiana, which was the family home. So I've never really known anything about Michigan.

1-00:00:40

**Wilmot:**

Hmm. What kind of work did your father do?

1-00:00:43

**Soskin:**

My father, at that time was working in the automobile plant, I think at the Ford Plant. He was a millwright. He was an architect by training. Not so much by education, just by training through his father.

1-00:00:59

**Wilmot:**

And what did your mom do at that time?

1-00:01:02

**Soskin:**

I haven't a clue, but I think my mother did little. I know very little about my mother's educational background, if there was any at all. I'm not sure she went to school. Her education may have been purely by older members of the family. She had an aunt who lived in the same home she was raised in, who created the first school for black children in St. James Parish, Louisiana. So I think my mother's education was pretty much informal. To the extent that she did work, she was a service worker.

1-00:01:43

**Wilmot:**

[pause] I was just taking notes. Can you tell me your parents' names?

1-00:01:50

**Soskin:**

My father was Dorson, D-O-R-S-O-N, Louis, L-O-U-I-S, Charbonnet, C-H-A-R-B-O-N-N-E-T. My mother was Lottie Allen, Lottie Estelle Allen I believe. She was from the Breaux family.

1-00:02:12

**Wilmot:**

Were they both from New Orleans?

1-00:02:14

**Soskin:**

My mother was from a Cajun line of people in Saint James Parish, Louisiana. My father was from New Orleans.

1-00:02:27

**Wilmot:**

Now for me, I get confused between all the terms, Cajun, Creole. I'm wondering if you could tell me what would that mean to be from the Cajun line of people?

1-00:02:41

**Soskin:**

The Cajun line of people are the people who arrived—at least my part of the family history I've done—arrived from Loudon, France. That's L-O-U-D-O-N. Back in 1631, the first of the Breaux family. That coincides with the witch burning period, so I don't know how those things connect. They left France; they arrived in Nova Scotia where they were for a number of years, generations. They went from Nova Scotia into Maryland, and from Maryland they received a land grant from the Spanish who had then settled in Louisiana Territory and wound up in Saint James Parish, Louisiana, which became the—they were the Acadians, which were the French who became the Cajuns. My mother, I can only go back to her grandmother because the slave curtain drops and you can't get anywhere before from about 1830. But that is her side of the family.

1-00:03:57

**Wilmot:**

And you said your father was an architect and a millwright? What was his education like as far as you know?

1-00:04:02

**Soskin:**

I'm just learning now about my dad's background. According to a correspondent that I'm working with, a researcher at Louisiana State University now—we happen to share the same family name, de Charbonnet and he's researching for his children—what he's discovered in his family history is that in our line there was an arranged marriage back in the early 1800s, in which there was apparently unhappiness and the male Charbonnet in the family took on a mulatto woman as his consort, or whatever, paramour, I guess it would be in French, with whom he fathered eleven children. And that was my grandfather's background. Those eleven children he educated very well. My grandfather, apparently, became an engineer through correspondence courses at Tuskegee early on, and that was passed on to his children. So, to the extent that there was formal education, that was pretty high education in those days. I still have those books here that taught my grandfather.

1-00:05:37

**Wilmot:**

I saw them upstairs. They're marvelous. How long did your family live in Louisiana before your family moved as a child?

1-00:05:51

**Soskin:**

I was only four when we arrived in California, so all of my education from kindergarten up was here.

1-00:05:57

**Wilmot:**

Do you have any memories of New Orleans?

1-00:05:59

**Soskin:**

Oh sure! I can remember when I was three and four years old, and that was before I even began to consciously seek out history. I have images in my head of the first time I was allowed to walk to the store alone. I have images in my head of standing on top of a huge wooden chest outside of the grocery store in which ice and oysters were kept. And the men in the community would be out cracking oysters and drinking beer, and my dad standing me up on top this wood chest and my singing, "In a little Spanish town." [chuckles] I must have been three, because I was four when I came to California. But I have images of the time being separated out and sitting on the front lawn when my baby sister was born. I remember the house, I remember falling and bumping my head sitting on some sort of coil the hose was kept in. I have memories of a huge hurricane that hit and sleeping on mattresses atop boxes to be above the water that was in the house. I remember a lot of things about being a small child in Louisiana.

1-00:07:23

**Wilmot:**

So you remember where that house was?

1-00:07:24

**Soskin:**

Yeah, it was on Touro Street. When my sister first was born on Frenchman Street, I remember that house, too.

1-00:07:34

**Wilmot:**

You lived in two different places. What part of New Orleans was that?

1-00:07:37

**Soskin:**

It was called Downtown, which was the Creole section.

1-00:07:43

**Wilmot:**

My familiarity with New Orleans is very limited. I know a little bit of the French Quarter, a little bit of Esplanade Avenue, a little bit of uptown by the university--

1-00:07:57

**Soskin:**

Right, right.

1-00:07:59

**Wilmot:**

--by Tulane University. So what was downtown?

1-00:08:02

**Soskin:**

Well, downtown for me was Corpus Christi Church which my grandfather had built. I was sitting on the front porch on Baton Rouge Street in a duplex that my grandmother lived in. I remember sitting in her lap, and you know how women have this fleshy part of their arms between the elbow and the shoulder? I remember cuddling that, holding it. And now I know that because she was blind from diabetes that my mother must have run that household, because they lived with my grandparents and she must have taken care of the little girl because my mother was taking care of the little baby, who was my younger sister. Maybe it was even before that. But I can remember brushing her hair, for long, long periods, her waist length hair. And I guess the way a blind person takes care of a child is they keep them close, they hold them as much as possible. I can almost smell my grandmother, I can have a deep sense of her though I can't visualize her, I don't know what she looked like. But I remember holding on to her lower arm, or her upper arm underneath, and brushing her hair. I learned how to braid on my grandmother's hair, and I must have been four.

Those are big memories for me. They are more important now and they're freshening up because I've been consciously searching out memories.

1-00:09:31

**Wilmot:**

Does she have hair like you?

1-00:09:34

**Soskin:**

No, her hair was heavy, very dark, much coarser, straighter. Her parents were [*islenos?*] from the Canary Islands, heavily Spanish, named Morales. What I remember of her is that kind of image. My cousin Doris who looked like that, one of the most beautiful women I think that I have ever seen. She died when she was quite young. I thought of my grandmother when I saw Doris.

1-00:10:16

**Wilmot:**

Will you tell me your grandmother's name?

1-00:10:17

**Soskin:**

Victoria Morales Charbonnet.

1-00:10:24

**Wilmot:**

So she married in to the Charbonnet family?



1-00:10:26

**Soskin:**

She married into the Charbonnets.

1-00:10:28

**Wilmot:**

Wow, do you know the story of how she came to New Orleans?

1-00:10:35

**Soskin:**

Well, according to recent research, her parents came from St. Bernard Parish, which was the place where most of these *islenos* lived. They were brought in to settle when the Spanish were dominating New Orleans. You have to remember that was a territory long before this was a country. And my family, my father's family, arrived here, those two brothers before the Louisiana Purchase. Into Natchitoches. Natchitoches! One of them went to Haiti, he died in Haiti. But his family made it back to the country at the end of the war in 1812. We were on the wrong side of the Haitian Revolution, apparently. [laughs] Toussaint L'Overture was among the—. But that's when, I think that was before the family crossed over and had become—no, that would not—. I'm not clear when the African-American branch came into it. I know that this was a woman who was a mulatto who was married into the family, who also lived to be 101.

1-00:11:53

**Wilmot:**

As your mother did.

1-00:11:54

**Soskin:**

My mother did, and her grandmother lived to be a 102.

1-00:12:00

**Wilmot:**

Wow. I'm holding off on going into your whole family history because I think that's a whole session in and of itself, but—I think we might actually get there today. You mentioned your sister being born. Can you tell me about your siblings? Were there more than the two of you?

1-00:12:20

**Soskin:**

There were three girls. Yeah, Margie was the oldest.

1-00:12:23

**Wilmot:**

Marjorie, yeah.

1-00:12:25

**Soskin:**

And we were each spaced out so that we were four years apart. I don't remember sharing much life with them, because we were never in the same schools at the same time. We were never in the same social groups at the same time. We didn't really share much life until we got to be adults. By that time I think it was too late, because we didn't forge close relationships because my eldest sister married when I was, what, she was nineteen which means that I was fifteen.

1-00:13:01

**Wilmot:**

That was Marjorie?

1-00:13:02

**Soskin:**

Marjorie. So that she went out of my life and into her own and I became the oldest. And then when I was married at nineteen, my youngest sister was only fifteen.

1-00:13:14

**Wilmot:**

And her name?

1-00:13:15

**Soskin:**

Lottie.

1-00:13:17

**Wilmot:**

Lottie.

1-00:13:17

**Soskin:**

So that I moved out into my own life. And as we became nuclear families of our own, we didn't reconnect. I don't ever think we really got there. My sense of us as adults is that we're all pretty much strangers. Marjorie moved to Southern California, or at least to Kansas for a long time, because her husband was with one of the black insurance companies. Then they moved to Southern California, which is where they raised their children. My younger sister also moved around a good deal more than I did. And I moved out into the suburbs. So that we disconnected early. I wished that we had more—my own kids were spaced closer, and I think that was consciously why.

00:14:18

**Wilmot:**

So you had this interesting way of—you described your mother as—actually I described her as beautiful and you said that was her job. I wanted to ask you what kind of person was your mother, what was she like?

1-00:14:34

**Soskin:**

In one of those binders is the obituary I wrote for my mother that describes who she was for me better than I can—

1-00:14:46

**Wilmot:**

Should we get it? Will that be okay?

1-00:14:48

**Soskin:**

Yeah, I'll go get it for you. [flipping through pages] This was her obituary; here's the part. [reads] "You'll be remembered as a single bright feather on a pink silk hat aimed heavenward.

Three inch heels on {Noirée?} sandals with small red rose on toes. As a single, fragile butterfly in a windswept world of those too caught up to know your needs for touching and loving and caring, and most of all, for seeing your beauty. Bereft of worldviews, books unread, causes unserved, your time on earth was spent in simple ways, ways suited to a temperament shaped by your motherless beginnings that brought no models for your own mothering but instilled a deep appreciation for family in its broadest sense, the legacy of that love-filled cabin in Saint James, and your dear Maman who nurtured her brood with such warmth. It's that larger family that will miss your presence on this earth, family and friends of all ages, many of whom stayed with you through a long, long life as a replacement parent for those lost until the end game. I will miss you deeply, as we came full circle during your long lifetime, reversing roles, until near the end, you quite seriously introduced me to others as "Mother." Perhaps I became that in return at some point. You invariably made the correction, but I knew that no error had been made. We honor you in death as we loved you in life. Betty." Her mother died when she was only seven months old.

1-00:17:42

**Wilmot:**

[pause] I'm smiling because I'm reading the part where it says; "She was active in St. Bernard and St. Benedict Catholic Churches in East Oakland where she and her husband rededicated their marriage after fifty years together."

1-00:17:50

**Soskin:**

Um-hmm.

1-00:17:57

**Wilmot:**

And your father?

1-00:18:00

**Soskin:**

Tall, handsome, seemingly remote but soft and loving, formal. My dad wore a necktie to garden. He was an aristocrat. And now I know why in checking out the research of what went into that Charbonnet name for him. And I understand him better now than I did even then. I never saw him unless he was fully dressed. I don't think I ran into my dad in his pajamas until his last ten years of life when he was bedridden a good deal of the time. My dad, I remember as the man who counted the church collection as the head of the St. Vincent de Paul Society for his church. But that's only one side of it. The other side of it is that this very handsome, blue-eyed man, proud, arrived in California just before the Depression hit with nothing, having lost everything in the hurricane—home, business. He owned a rice mill that was rusted out when the water went down. We arrived in California, and my dad in the Depression could not get a job because he wasn't black enough for the railroads and he wasn't white enough to be white. He wound up being a—actually he got a job with the Ford Plant, but somebody reported to them that he was not white, that he was a black man passing, and he was fired. Then he got a job on the railroad wearing a white apron and for years was a lunch car man.

1-00:20:17

**Wilmot:**

How would they find that out?

1-00:20:19

**Soskin:**

You know, someone who was African American apparently—you know this was dog eat dog days, in the Depression, there where just no jobs. The same thing happened to me eventually, so that this was real. Before he ended his work life, however, the Albers Mill burned down in San Francisco; there was a huge fire. They couldn't get anyone to rebuild that place. A millwright, I guess you know, takes a function and creates machinery to perform that function. My dad put together the design that put together the equipment that coated the rice with vitamin B, that whole process, and reestablished the belts; the conveyor belts that put together Albers rebuilt. By that time it was called Grosjean's Mill on the San Francisco Bay and that was my Dad's work.

1-00:21:34

**Wilmot:**

Grosjean, that sounds like a Louisiana name, too.

1-00:21:34

**Soskin:**

He finally came back into his own, and one of the things that I was able to hand to my son David was Dad's union card, David who eventually became a carpenter too. But Dad never rose above again the classification of carpenter, even though he was doing the work of a millwright, because of racism. But I think he never forgave anyone—and to this day, I think if he'd lived—that had he not left me New Orleans he would have had, as his father did, a special status as a Creole. And come to California where none of that counted. My dad described racially people other than Creoles as white, Creoles, or American. I didn't understand that until I began to read the research that's been coming into me from Ken Jenkins in Louisiana. That really was true; it wasn't just my father. I used to kind of laugh at that. There were white people, there were Creole people, and there were Americans.

1-00:22:49

**Wilmot:**

What did that mean?

1-00:22:50

**Soskin:**

I didn't know what it meant. I know now.

1-00:22:53

**Wilmot:**

What does it mean?

1-00:22:53

**Soskin:**

It means that the people downtown—I think to describe it most clearly, my sense of it is that the Creoles were the people who related to both sides. They were educated; they were treated differently. My father used to tell me that if any of his seven brothers got into trouble and were taken downtown to the courthouse, that Judge Charbonnet, who was white, would take him into the back room, talk to them, pat them on the fanny, and send them back home. That they were a special class of people. They were not treated in the same way.

1-00:23:32

**Wilmot:**

As?

1-00:23:33

**Soskin:**

As ordinary African Americans. It was a different class of people. I didn't know that, and I rebelled against it when I was growing up, because it seemed like another form of racism to me. I'm only beginning to get a full picture of what that culture was like now that I'm looking back on it as a researcher.

1-00:23:52

**Wilmot:**

If I understand you, then his universe looks like white, Creole, and then is it American or African American?

1-00:23:58

**Soskin:**

No, no. he called them Americans. Anybody that wasn't either Creole—for me, I didn't know there was anything such as a white Creole. Creoles were always people who were mixed. They were French, Spanish and African. But they were a class of people who were simply separated out. They had their own culture. My parents were bilingual! They spoke a patois of French. But that didn't matter in California, nor did they teach it to their children. But there was this language. I mean, they were a separate people. I regret now that they didn't pay more attention, because I think there was more to be salvaged there than even I was aware of. I turned my back on all that in the fifties and sixties when I began to be confronted by racism by myself. At that point I had to choose sides and I chose to work with the Panthers; I chose to prove my blackness; I chose to turn my back on all that. And now that I'm in my early eighties, and looking back on a culture that's disappearing, I regret it, I wish I had listened harder to the stories. I wished I paid more attention. I'm getting it though. I'm getting it now second hand through research from people who still remember.

1-00:25:22

**Wilmot:**

You know you mentioned your father's mill was rusted out by the hurricane, but what brought him to California, what was it about Oakland—?

1-00:25:39

**Soskin:**

My mother's father was already here.

1-00:25:40

**Wilmot:**

Okay.

1-00:25:41

**Soskin:**

So the family already began to gather here. But this is my mother's family. There were already a number of Creoles who had arrived during the teens, in the First World War and just after had begun to arrive here, so that my grandfather was one of these people. He was a waiter at the

Oakland Athletic Club, and my mother, this was the place my mother could come to because her father was here. And then her sister Vivian, whose picture you saw there, she had graduated from Xavier Prep in New Orleans and then came out here and did three years at Cal.

1-00:26:22

**Wilmot:**

That was her high school, Xavier Prep, so then she went to Cal.

1-00:26:23

**Soskin:**

Yeah.

1-00:26:31

**Wilmot:**

It's interesting to me when you talk about her education and we compare it to what you know of your mother's education.

1-00:26:37

**Soskin:**

It's not hard to understand that my mother's father was the eldest in a family of fourteen, fifteen children. His mother was widowed; her husband who had served in the Civil War was a veteran and died, leaving her with these children. Her eldest son George married my mother's mother who was fourteen. They had one child who was my mother and when my mother was seven months old, she died. That was Julia, known as Minette.

1-00:27:14

**Wilmot:**

Which means?

1-00:27:15

**Soskin:**

I don't know.

1-00:27:17

**Wilmot:**

I think it means, well it's close to "cute."

1-00:27:19

**Soskin:**

Yeah, yeah.

1-00:27:23

**Wilmot:**

Mignon is cute, different.

1-00:27:25

**Soskin:**

Yeah, but he brought her back to Maman's house. This was a little house on the Mississippi that Maman owned that was on a strip from the river back. I have pictures of that land now; somebody in the family went down and took pictures. The house is no longer there. My mother grew up there then her father George went out and remarried Vivian's mother. They had five

children and then that wife died. This was Desiree Fernandez, also Spanish again. He brought those children back, they grew up in Maman's household, so that my mother was the eldest of the grandchildren and then her five—or four brothers and sisters, because one of those children died very young—but those children were brought back to the household.

So my mother grew up in this household of fifteen to twenty people, all children. They worked the farm, they took care of things, they took care of each other, they educated each other. And then as the older members began to leave Saint James and move into town, which was New Orleans, Vivian went in to live with my Aunt Emily, with my father's next oldest daughter, who married a doctor. She lived there while she went to Xavier Prep, so that the older members of that family began to take on the younger members. But my mother, being the first, didn't get in on that, so she never left the country until she married my father when they were both nineteen. So when I get it all in perspective on a timeline, I can understand it and it makes sense to me. But it means my mother's hunger to be seen, my mother's need which is the sort of thing that sort of characterized her, her returning easily to being a dependent for me after my father died, because my father had been the caretaker for her for all the years. Her never leaving the child in her, it was always up front. But I understand that, because she never lived that out. She was invisible in a household of many, many children. I'm grateful that I began to get that sense of her before she died, which is why I wrote what I did. That it was okay to let her be who she was. And I really do remember her in that way with the feather, and that's okay, that was her role.

Is it okay?

1-00:30:24

**Wilmot:**

Yeah. When your family came to Oakland, the primary pull factor was that your mother's father was already there.

1-00:30:34

**Soskin:**

It was a place to go.

1-00:30:37

**Wilmot:**

Was there anything else about the Bay Area that brought—?

1-00:30:39

**Soskin:**

No.

1-00:30:40

**Wilmot:**

It was just—

1-00:30:41

**Soskin:**

Because I was so young and we all lived in my grandfather's house. So he was replicating what his mother did. My uncle Lloyd, who was his eldest son, Aunt Vivian, my mother and dad, and their three children all lived in a little two-bedroom house out on 76<sup>th</sup> Avenue, a house that's no

longer there. It's a foundry that sits on the land now. But the extended family was their way of life. So until my parents were in a position to buy a little piece of house, which they did, out in East Oakland in an area that was largely Portuguese, actually. In East Oakland, and that was where I grew up, in East Oakland. They all fanned out from my grandfather, having formed a base, as immigrant families do. This is what we were.

1-00:31:37

**Wilmot:**

Yeah, it's interesting thinking about it.

1-00:31:44

**Soskin:**

Yeah, I think that's the way life goes. I'm not sure it's still that way. Maybe it is, maybe it is.

00:31:56

**Wilmot:**

You mentioned that your father passed to the extent that he was able to get a job at the Ford automobile factory, and you talked a lot about the way that colorism and racism played itself out in his life or you talked some about it. I'm wondering, in your family, how was passing regarded? How did you parents look upon passing?

1-00:32:21

**Soskin:**

I think that would best be described when I went to my mother when I was about in seventh grade, was about to—or was it eighth or ninth—when one decides on a foreign language. That my mother's comment was, when I said I wanted to take French because, of course, they spoke French, because of course they spoke French and as a kid this would let me into the club, you know. I'd never been able to really know what the family gossip was because the older members would drop into French or Creole as soon as they didn't want us kids to hear. And for me it was learning French, and my mother said, "No, you look more Spanish, you need to take Spanish," because I was darker than my two sisters. And I took Spanish. So that I think that passing as a way of getting into the mainstream was accepted for them. And there was a certain amount of shame, I think, connected with dark skins because my parents certainly expressed more racism than I saw outside.

1-00:33:31

**Wilmot:**

They expressed more?

1-00:33:32

**Soskin:**

Yeah, and I don't know because it was partially pride in what they were and I don't think we can underestimate that. Some of it was Creole pride just in being Creole, and I'm appreciating that more now. Part of it was just the same kind of racism that I saw outside. It took me a long time to forgive them for that, because I came from a generation where—you have to understand that in the forties suddenly I was in a black world where I had been in a world where it was pre-segregation. It was not that there was no segregation. It was simply before there were rules made against it. There weren't enough of us for anyone to make any rules about. To some extent we



were together by choice, not because we were separated out. Our social life was protected by our families, and we were pulled together as an enclave of young people.

But I remember my mother saying unforgivable things like, she looked at one now well known accomplished woman in my age group and saying, “Those parents sure better educate that girl because she’ll never get a husband.” Education was second to physical attractiveness, always. There was no thought of my going to college for instance, none. That was definitely not—it was never even thought about. Never even talked about, nor my sisters. Everything was towards moving us to marry someone as soon as we could. And we did. My younger sister was seventeen, and Marge and I were both nineteen. It was the only way to leave home.

1-00:35:36

**Wilmot:**

You’ve described a little bit about the community you lived in, what was that? I know that East Oakland now, I know that East Oakland has the—I grew up in East Oakland, so I know what East Oakland is now—it’s transforming right now actually, at this moment, it’s changing again.

1-00:35:55

**Soskin:**

It’s becoming, yeah, more and more Latin.

1-00:35:59

**Wilmot:**

It’s becoming more Latin and also there’s a lot more white people becoming more excited about East Oakland. But what was East Oakland like then, what was your community then?

1-00:36:14

**Soskin:**

I knew almost intimately every single African American family in East Oakland. There was the Watkins on 91<sup>st</sup> and the {Swannigans?} on 21<sup>st</sup> and the {Warleys?} on 27<sup>th</sup> and the Charbonnets on 83<sup>rd</sup> and the {Goosebys} on 27<sup>th</sup>—everybody, we were all there was. The {DeBiques} on East 17<sup>th</sup>. We all were one. A big band would come to town to Sweets Ballroom and they would hold what was called *danzons* which were afternoon parties and we would all go for Duke Ellington and Jimmy Dorsey and whoever it was, and everybody in the East Bay would be there. And the Ribs down from San Jose, they were the black family from San Jose—and there were a couple of families like the Williams who lived in San Mateo. All of us would be in one place together. You drop a roof over it and you’d have every—but this population must have not been more than ten or fifteen thousand people. In the entire Bay Area, that was it! Of those there were the enclaves of the Creoles who sort of hung in there together. I have pictures of my mother and her bridge clubs that were all women who looked alike, all out of New Orleans, who would during the Depression get onto a bus with card tables and go to each other’s houses to play cards with folding chairs. I remember going to parties with my parents because there were no such things as babysitters, and the kids would be thrown on a bed to sleep among the coats while the grownups partied in the next room.

It was very, very—there were no strangers in the Bay Area. There were no strangers. It wasn’t until just before the Second World War, well in the late—no, it was just before the Second World War that it exploded and I found myself in a world where I had to make choices. Being

black—there were exclusive tennis clubs, for instance, that Tom Berkeley and Lionel Wilson who's a former mayor and a publisher of the Post, these people were students of the University of California, and there were tennis clubs that came up from Southern California from L.A., to play the tennis clubs up here. Very exclusive, with parties afterwards and before. Black people were together because they wanted to be. We were not separated out. We didn't have the sense of being separated out. When the black baseball teams, the black leagues came to town, we were all in the stands because we wanted to be, because black baseball was great! I dated Jackie Robinson and Kenny Washington, people who would be in town for these games!

1-00:39:22

**Wilmot:**

Wow.

1-00:39:23

**Soskin:**

Yeah! That's a different kind of black pride. Black pride, then, was sort of untainted and innocent. The black pride that I moved into in the sixties, as a member of the National Black Caucus was a different black pride. It was a labored, hard, black pride. But it was not unfamiliar to me because I didn't have to not be proud of being who I was. It was tainted by being Creole and being light-skinned—I'm sure that's something you have to deal with—but I didn't have the same kind of hollow pride that my parents had. But now I understand the ethnicity stuff that they were involved in which was a different kind of pride that they had. And I still have it. Someone once said to me that it was very hard to feel superior to somebody who refused to be inferior. [laughs] That's been me all my life. I've never had a period when I didn't feel equal. It moved around. But I still don't feel unequal. I feel whole. And all of that stuff went into it, all that stuff went into it.

1-00:41:00

**Wilmot:**

I'm very interested in the ways that you compare the different ways of experiencing black pride and just how that consciousness was different between your early upbringing and during the time of the 1960s. Sounds almost like it came from different kinds of origins.

1-00:41:28

**Soskin:**

Oh, I'm sure and I'm only beginning to understand that now that I have a life span to measure all of that against. That's one of the luxuries of being older. Really it's incredible because you get to look back. It's like you get to live your life in blocks of time and then change comes. It's like reincarnation without ever leaving. So I get so now I almost recognize the cycles changing, and I begin to feel the restlessness and begin to wonder what comes next. And it seems to come in ten to twelve year cycles. And now I look back at those cycles and wonder how they were lived. I think I told you one day I had this sense of being all the women than I ever was. And they all come out at different times depending on what's going on. But I'm aware of that now. I don't think it's something that I could have been aware of until I'd reached this age.

You only know it in retrospect, you don't see it coming up. But, now, it's the excitement of being an octogenarian. Because I have the luxury of coming from strong genes that go on for long periods, I have a sense of really having eight more years of sentient living, and maybe I

won't, but that's not the way my life is colored. I look at this next ten years and wonder what am I moving into now. It keeps me propelling forward. Without being able to look at those long lives, on both sides, it's the slave women who had it. My father's great grandmother who was a mulatto and a slave, 101, and my mother's grandmother, 102; one of her daughters went to 107, my mother, 101. I don't have a sense, barring accidents; I don't have any sense that this isn't also another one of these periods. It's incredible! [laughing] Are we done?

1-00:44:14

**Wilmot:**

Do you need to be done today?

1-00:44:16

**Soskin:**

I need to be at work. What time is it?

1-00:44:19

**Wilmot:**

Well, it's been about forty-five minutes. I wasn't quite ready to be done, but if you need to be—

1-00:44:24

**Soskin:**

No, no, no! I need to leave here in time to get to a 12:30—

1-00:44:27

**Wilmot:**

We just need to have a clock with us at all times.

1-00:44:29

**Soskin:**

Let me get a clock. [searches for clock]

1-00:44:36

**Wilmot:**

And then we can be able to do this. I should have brought my watch. Do you want to end for the day?

1-00:44:54

**Soskin:**

[shouts from another part of the house] we've about a half hour.

1-00:45:00

**Wilmot:**

Okay, thirty more minutes, I think that's great. Well, I have a question for you which is we talked and you've really given me this amazing description of what the African American community was like pre-1940s, before World War II, and I'm wanting now to bring your memory to the physical, what was your home like, your immediate neighborhood, where you lived? What was that like?

1-00:45:35

**Soskin:**

It was mixed racially. There was Ma Jones who lived a block away, a huge woman, who used to sit in her window. She must have weighed three hundred pounds and everyone talked about Ma sitting in the window with her telephone she was the neighborhood gossip. It's funny, she hadn't come to me until now. But she had several children, I don't know where they were from. She never left her house and she was one of the main characters. And there was my family, the people who lived next door who were also African American, and my mother's cousin who lived next door to her on our left. She had three sons and she and her husband would have come to the house next door. Mrs. Lewis who lived next to her. These were the black families. Oh, and across the street there was a family that was also mulatto—like my family but not Creole. My father would say they were “Americans.” [laughs] Then there were the Portuguese families and a few Irish families that lived around the area.

There was a life that was shared among the black families. Not a social life—this is interesting to me when I look back—because that social life, my mother's social life, was Creole and they came from throughout the Bay Area. As I told you, they got together and they got their card tables and folding chairs and went to each other houses. They planned lemonade parties for the children and kept us all together in a little group, so my social life was managed very much by my parents. We'd have skating parties where we would start at 90<sup>th</sup> Avenue at the Watkins' home and we would skate downtown to Lake Merritt, actually on skates.

1-00:47:36

**Wilmot:**

Roller skates.

1-00:47:37

**Soskin:**

Roller skates. Our families planned all these activities to keep these children together. There was a lot of that going on. I remember another thing that was a phenomenon that you don't see anymore, and maybe it's because cars were not that—everybody didn't own two cars. But, we would do what was called going for a ride: We'd get in the car and drive off to Miles Canyon and we would have a picnic lunch. My father would just take us sightseeing and we would pile into the car on Sundays. We'd go to church; we belonged to St. Benedicts Catholic Church, which I gave up very early on. My mother rarely went because she practiced birth control. My father was active because he didn't have to bear that sin.

1-00:48:34

**Wilmot:**

Whoa.

1-00:48:36

**Soskin:**

Yeah! Isn't that interesting?

1-00:48:39

**Wilmot:**

Yeah it is.

1-00:48:40

**Soskin:**

It was the woman's problem.

1-00:48:42

**Wilmot:**

Yeah.

1-00:48:44

**Soskin:**

My father, you know, he belonged to the St. Vincent DePaul Society, and the men's things and all the stuff but my mother hardly went to church. When I asked my mother one day, because we couldn't go out, unless we went to church on Sunday morning, we had to stay home. When I asked my mother, when I got to be a teenager, how come she stayed in bed and we had to go to church? She'd say to me, when I got old enough, "I can't do this, because I believe in birth control," and my mother would say, "But some things are none of the priest's business." [laughing] "You don't have to confess that because some things—." That was always a problem for her I think. I remember music, lots and lots of music. My dad and Mr. {Dewson?} across the street, the American non-Creole, he played drums and Dad played piano, ragtime, and an old trumpet that he painted baby blue to plug up all the links. And he played bass on the door. He would wet his fingers and then he'd bump his hands against the kitchen door in the rhythm of the music. There was one other instrument. There were three of them—they called themselves the Three Blind Mice and those three men would get together on weekends and play. Any of us who wanted to could be in the band but—you use comb and tissue paper or the pots and pans in the kitchen. Anything, anybody can be in this.

I don't remember ever learning music or learning to dance. Those were things people were born with. Everybody around me made music, but there was nothing about learning anything. I don't know if that makes any sense. It came out of some place in you and it was expected of you. And so, I began to write music when I was—I have a developmentally disabled daughter—and when she was young, I went through a mental breakdown because I had three little boys, a very busy husband, and a handicapped child. And I had to have ways to travel while she could hold on to my skirts. And I began to write music out of this, and I was writing things that I couldn't reproduce. I was writing them in my head. I began to play a guitar by ear. Now, I know that was part of the same phenomenon, that it's something that you assume that that everybody does. I didn't know I couldn't do that so I did that.

I've written lots of music. It's also interesting that I stopped writing music after I married the second time. I married a professor at the university. I began—I wrote a couple of things and I remember one night, we were living in this lovely house up on Grizzly Peak, and I ran downstairs into the library where he was working on a grant proposal. I said, "You've got to put this down," I had my guitar, "Listen to this!" And every one I wrote was the most beautiful song in the world. This is it! I sat down and started singing and I sang this song and he listened, he really did listen. And I got all through, he said, "You know, you are so good Betty, I think that I can get you into the Music Department as a special student at Cal, and you can learn how the real composers do it." And he said "The joy you're going to have when you get all this really polished." And I said, "No! It's all done." And he said, "Oh no, the joy is in the editing and rewriting." And I said, "No. If I try and do that, it's going to turn into something else, because

twenty minutes from now I'm going to feel differently. This is what I felt five minutes ago upstairs. This can't be changed." He knocked my confidence and I went back downstairs and said, "This is how real composers do it." And for the first time I thought, 'I'm not composing, I'm making up songs like I did when I was six. This is not real.' And I stopped and never wrote another piece.

But I think the importance in that is that I think that's how —it isn't that we just turn off children, that's how we turn off people. That's how we turn off people. I feel teary even thinking about it now, because it's shut down the poet in me. It squeezed out in other ways—and you can tell by writing, that it had some place to go, and it's gone there. And so it's found its way into my computer, into the Internet, into strangers across the world. It's found a way to bleed into life.

1-00:54:22

**Wilmot:**

Into the way that you communicate everyday with everybody.

1-00:54:24

**Soskin:**

Oh I don't know, but it's still there. It's reshaped itself like the rest of my life reshapes itself. But it was a rich period, and I'm going to show you some of that stuff before we're finished. Because some of it is—in fact, there's a tape somewhere, an audio tape. Some [inaudible] that's really quite lovely. Makes me feel like somebody else. Now if I listen to it, it feels like somebody I once knew. There's no ego involved in it at all. I listen to it and I think, "That's wonderful," but without having any sense of created it. Somebody I once knew.

1-00:55:12

**Wilmot:**

Maybe it's like you said it's one of the all of the people that you are.

1-00:55:17

**Soskin:**

That's where some of that comes from. This one that I wrote, that I sent to my grandson in this first packet of family history that's called "To Each of Me." It was about the period when I struggled my way out of strong blackness and a sense that for a period of time I had gone through feeling like I was nobody because I couldn't pin myself to black, I couldn't pin myself to black. And then suddenly, a flash of insight, realizing that I wasn't nobody, I was everybody. I wrote this song about to each of me.

"To each of me, to love within the reach of me,

and if this love could teach to me why each of me in turn

must torture so the soul of me and tear apart the whole of me.

Within life's play, each role of me must speak to me,

must learn that blackness and the white of me

are just the day and night of me.

I'm not the wrong or right of me.

Can't you see there's got to be some answer to this planet's pain,  
my microcosmic world insane.

If only I could make you see,

It's here to see, just look at me.

There is within me all of you,  
from distant lands to whole of you.

The dreams, the heart, the cell of you.

If only you would see that black and white are part of it,  
my brown gets to the heart of it.

And blending is the start of it.

And someday it shall be that blackness and the white of us  
are just the day and night of us,  
are not the wrong or the right of us.

the weak or might of us, then we'll be free.

00:57:43

**Wilmot:**

Okay.

1-00:57:43

**Soskin:**

Isn't that amazing?

1-00:57:45

**Wilmot:**

That's amazing.

1-00:57:46

**Soskin:**

Isn't that amazing?

1-00:57:48

**Wilmot:**

Yeah, you're a songwriter. That's a beautiful song.

1-00:57:54

**Soskin:**

Isn't it? That's what I sent to my grandson, because I kept thinking that some day, you know, the torturing through all this stuff is going to be a value to somebody. Isn't that an amazing piece of work?

1-00:58:16

**Wilmot:**

Yes, it is. I hope you'll show me the picture of this grandson who you sent. I think you showed me when he was sixteen.

1-00:58:32

**Soskin:**

Yeah, the one who was sitting down with a guitar with my mother. I'm hoping that by giving him some sense of the genetic line he sits on top of, that he'll find his place, because teen years are so hard on a kid who is as mixed as he. Because I know that he's going through this at a younger age than I went through it. I went through it later, much later.

1-00:59:02

**Wilmot:**

What do you think is different now that you went through it later and he—? Were you more protected or--?

1-00:59:11

**Soskin:**

He's even more shattered, I think, racially. Because added to the racial mix that we already are, which is Spanish, French, and African and all the rest of it, added to that, his mother is Filipino, his best friends are Mexican. He's in space without a sense of an anchor at all. The world I grew up in wasn't politicized around race.

There were things—when I went to high school at Castlemont, for instance, there were only, I think, three or four black kids in the entire school. In my graduation class there were only two, and my sister was one of the first black kids to attend Castlemont, if you can believe that! When I went there, I remember being in the drama class and I must have been about a sophomore, a junior maybe, and we were reading Maxwell Anderson's *Winterset*. I was reading for the part of Maria and I knew I had done well. I knew I had done it well. When I was reading, the kids were all quiet and the teacher was intently watching. When it finished, she held me after class and she said to me, "You did a very good job in that role but you know I can't give it to you because the parents would never allow for that." And for the first time I understood that but for the fact that I wasn't white—and she told me. She said, "Eddie is—you can't play that against—Eddie's white." Eddie Castro was one of the Portuguese kids. But they couldn't put me in that role.

So that, that kind of thing popped up just enough so that I had a sense of being guilty for bringing this to her. Because I wanted her approval; I wanted the part. But there was no constituency. There was no group; there was nothing to feel except that I was inconveniencing



everybody. I don't know if that makes any sense. But there was a certain amount of shame mixed in with the hurt of rejection that's very different than what kids have to deal with now. Now there are political positions; now there are kids with ethnic studies. Now there are formalized differences that didn't exist then, they simply didn't exist.

But I also had a retreat into my own social group. The kids that I was going to parties with on weekends, our boyfriends were at San Jose State, they were at Cal. As I told you I was dating men like Kenny Washington from UCLA who was their big quarterback, Jackie Robinson, all these people. There are pictures upstairs and I should show you. My niece, even her generation, my sister's daughter with Bill Cosby and all these people, Muhammad Ali. We were among the celebrity group as long as we were black, so that we were black by choice. We were going to the International House to parties and formal dances and my contemporaries at school were going with the guy who worked at the gas station around the corner. The white kids were lower class white kids, while the black kids were part of an elite group. So that played against that, I didn't go to my senior ball, there have been nothing there for me. I was going with the kids at sororities and the fraternity's kids at Cal. I wasn't even relating to children at my high school. I've never even been back to a reunion.

1-01:03:36

**Wilmot:**

What about the Portuguese children in your neighborhood that you grew up with?

1-01:03:40

**Soskin:**

They weren't the kids that I grew up, but they were not—my parents, by that time, had built us into this elite group of people, which I'm sure they were in New Orleans.

1-01:03:52

**Wilmot:**

In your neighborhood, and I do this thing, trying to situate you. I understood you grew up on 76<sup>th</sup> Avenue—

1-01:03:59

**Soskin:**

No.

1-01:04:01

**Wilmot:**

And also 83<sup>rd</sup> Avenue.

1-01:04:01

**Soskin:**

I grew up, when I was very young, I lived on 76<sup>th</sup> in my grandfather's house and then we moved to a little house that was behind my grandfather's house. And that all became industrialized, which is not far from San Leandro Boulevard down in where there are iron foundries and things. There were meadows with cows and things.

1-01:04:23

**Wilmot:**

Is this by East 14<sup>th</sup>?

1-01:04:24

**Soskin:**

No, no, no, down near San Leandro Boulevard is—

1-01:04:28

**Wilmot:**

Oh, right where the BART train is now.

1-01:04:29

**Soskin:**

Yeah, yeah, way down there. Very, very close to there.

1-01:04:33

**Wilmot:**

And—

1-01:04:34

**Soskin:**

Now there's a huge foundry there.

1-01:04:36

**Wilmot:**

I know, yeah.

1-01:04:38

**Soskin:**

Okay, there were two houses and my grandfather had his truck garden, grew all his vegetables and there was a dairy and the cows were all on it. It was—you can't imagine. It was all swamps between—there were two railroad tracks, the Southern Pacific and the Western Pacific, and everything else was swamp land, all wetlands. And we watched the Oakland Airport be built from one hangar to what it is today. That's how far back my life goes there. So I went to Lockwood School, which is I don't know what there is now, is it still Lockwood?

1-01:05:17

**Wilmot:**

Lockwood, yeah, it's right there—

1-01:05:18

**Soskin:**

I went there for my first, second, and third grades.

1-01:05:23

**Wilmot:**

It's on Sixty-Eighth Avenue.

1-01:05:23

**Soskin:**

And then when I was about the third grade, my parents bought a house over on 83<sup>rd</sup> Avenue, just about a half a block below East 14<sup>th</sup> Street and I went to Highland, and then I went to Elmhurst Junior High on 98<sup>th</sup>, and then to Castlemont. I went to Lockwood Junior High for a short period when I first got back. I don't know what I was doing there, but I think I went to seventh grade.

1-01:05:55

**Wilmot:**

First got back?

1-01:05:56

**Soskin:**

Yeah, I was away for a year in—what was it called? Livermore. There was a place for children who may have a tendency for tuberculosis. My father had tuberculosis at one point, so I spent a year in [Dell Valley?] which was a—and this was another place where I got disconnected from family and was just absolutely, just totally isolated. Because my mother couldn't get out to see me because I was out there for a year. And that was when I was twelve or thirteen. And then I came back and went to Highland for a year. Not Highland—Lockwood and then went to Elmhurst.

1-01:06:39

**Wilmot:**

Do you remember what that time that place? I guess there's an old name for it, they used to call it a sanatorium, a place where you could—

1-01:06:53

**Soskin:**

No, there was actually a sanatorium, which my father spent some time in because he actually did tuberculosis. But it was a few miles away, farther up the road from where we were. That was a sanitarium, that was Livermore Sanitarium and people there actually had tuberculosis. Where I was it was called a [preventorium?], and it was [Dell Valley?] and it was just for children.

1-01:07:18

**Wilmot:**

And so there were a lot of children there?

1-01:07:20

**Soskin:**

Yeah, it was dormitory. I don't remember any other black kids there.

1-01:07:24

**Wilmot:**

So you were there?

1-01:07:26

**Soskin:**

I was there for about a year.

1-01:07:27

**Wilmot:**

Yeah.

1-01:07:28

**Soskin:**

I can close my eyes and remember it. I can remember being on some sort of deck and wearing loincloths and laying in the sun, because every day we had to toast our selves on one side and then the other. I remember caroling, I remember singing at the—being taken to sing for the

patients at the sanatorium, which is why I recognize that so well. Because we went there and did Christmas caroling.

1-01:07:57

**Wilmot:**

What were the other children like? Remember them?

1-01:08:01

**Soskin:**

I can't even remember them except that I was at the upper end. Most of them were, I think, younger children. I remember that we were in huge, we were in dormitories. It must have been twenty beds to a ward. It's funny, I hadn't even really remembered that until now.

1-01:08:24

**Wilmot:**

What authority would locate, would choose out a little girl and say she was a potential TB—

1-01:08:31

**Soskin:**

The County. Because I was what was known as a delicate child, always underweight, very small. I think that's why, from a very early age, from a very early age I must have been very confusing to my mother because I was obviously very bright. I think I thought myself around her, past her, when I was six. But I also was a reader; so I was alone a lot and liked being alone. I remember discovering Renaissance. I must have been, before I went to [Dell Valley?] I loved—

1-01:09:12

**Wilmot:**

Discovering--?

1-01:09:14

**Soskin:**

Renaissance. I must have been withdrawn as a little kid. And I remember being very, very thin. I didn't weigh a hundred pounds until I was fifty. So where now I look slim to people, I'm big for me, I'm huge, [laughs] but I was always small and my parents were very small-boned, little people. Dad was tall at six feet, but he was slender always. So it was genetic. But I remember spending a lot of time in county clinics. So I don't know all that was about, I didn't have any recollection of what that was.

01:10:10

**Wilmot:**

Was that a common thing you do you think, just to choose children up and say, "Go away from your family for year and live in--?"

1-01:10:16

**Soskin:**

No, I had no idea what went into that.

1-01:10:18

**Wilmot:**

That's very interesting to me.

1-01:10:20

**Soskin:**

Those decisions were probably made, probably made in French. [laughs] Seriously, I really think those conversations were confidential. I simply never experienced—I simply was gathered up and taken there for my own good. I remember being just terribly disturbed by it for a while. I came back into a nest of strangers; it took me a long time to get back into the fold. In some respects, I never did.

1-01:10:48

**Wilmot:**

Hmm. I want to ask one last question for today, because I know we're running out of time due to your constraints, not mine. This is the same question I asked you before we started recording: What did being a Charbonnet mean to your family? The way I would ask this a little differently, the second way I would ask it, is what stories did your family tell about being Charbonnets? Almost like mythologies that people have about themselves as a family.

1-01:11:37

**Soskin:**

That's not easy to answer because the standards by which people judged—I don't remember having any connection to money, for instance, because during those years my parents' social life—they were together around being Creole. And names meant a lot to Creoles: the {Bejois?}, and the Charbonnets, and the {Le Boeufs?}. All these people were all here and they were Creole, and that was status. Those Creoles were also barbers; they were dentists; they were redcaps; they were postal workers; they were rarely teachers—I think the first teacher was when I was an adult, the first black teacher in the state of California. So that women didn't have the status of men, but it wasn't based upon money, it was based upon names. And the Charbonnets apparently in New Orleans—and I'm learning now—were very, very old families. I told you, they came here before this was even a nation, before the territory, before 1805, that's when the Louisiana Purchase was made, and they were already here. So that even the Creole Charbonnets carried that same special-ness about them. So that, I remember my father telling me that when my granddad died, because he was such a great man in the French part downtown—"Creoles lived downtown, Americans lived uptown, and Canal Street divided them," you know—because he was such a special man, his body was laying in state on the altar for three days so that the community could pay homage. This was the man whose picture is up there that you see. So he was a big man and I knew that. My dad's pride in his father was unbounded. I remember my dad even as a blind man, after he had lost his sight, because he was blind for ten years before he died. My dad knew that the length of his thumb, I guess from here to the end, was exactly one inch. He would make home repairs and set things by using his finger. This kind of precise thing about him. He would tell me, "You never go back and measure any thing twice," because my father always told me, that if you have to do that, you weren't careful in the first place. So my dad never retraced his steps. And I find that in myself, I never drive by the places I once lived in. I never drive by. In Walnut Creek, in Berkeley, I never retrace my steps. So I can see in myself the remnants of those stories from my father and my grandfather and I know what that's like.

There were wonderful stories that my dad used to tell me about New Orleans, but they were always family stories. His brothers—always crazy stories about them, and many of them I thought were lies. My mother would be standing behind him and laughing, "Don't you listen to him!" And he would tell these wild stories about his brothers. There were seven boys and four

girls. He would tell these wild stories about these brothers that were just wonderfully crazy, and I wish I could remember them now because I remember just sitting spellbound.

My mother's side of the family also had stories about being Creole. There was a cousin Olga who was my mother's first cousin, Aunt Louise's daughter, who ran what I now know must have been a whorehouse. I mean I know that's what it was. No one ever explained but Olga was a character and she had this house. I remember the first time I met her, I was fourteen. I had gone down there on a trip, my parents sent me down. We were approaching this woman, this huge woman, who was scrubbing her front steps. You know these New Orleans houses, if you've been there, they're right on the street with steps and you go into a courtyard, and this was the way her house was. We called them patios, but they were courtyards for them, but the door was on the street. She was cleaning her front steps with pounded red brick: I'd never seen that before; water, red brick, and a brush. Here was this huge woman doing this. You'd go into her house, through this courtyard, and inside there was a jukebox in the living room. I should've known! [laughs] I mean, at fifteen, what do you know? Then I learned later that this was the place in New Orleans where all the bands who came through that couldn't stay at hotels because blacks couldn't, stayed at Big Olga's. She was the place where everybody went. So if you wanted to see any of the sidemen, Ellington, and all these people, and Jimmy Lunsford, they all stayed at Big Olga's. Well Big Olga eventually—Mother used to tell this story and just laugh—had opened a bar. And of course in New Orleans at that time, I don't know if it's still true, there are no minor laws, anybody who could stand at a bar could drink. Anybody.

1-01:17:47

**Wilmot:**

Did you say Mother Theresa?

1-01:17:47

**Soskin:**

No. Mother—I don't know what I said that sounded like that. But anyway she opened this bar, but the thing that was wonderful was that she had named it the "Holy Bar." And the reason was is that the priest in the parish had given her some of the old altar cloths that could no longer be mended, and she opened a bar and put them on—and here in her Holy Bar, she had these altar cloths from Corpus Christi Church on the bar. I mean, Olga was as sacrilegious as anybody could be. [laughing] But she was also—the stories about Olga were—one of mother's stories—no, this was when I was down there. Olga had been taken to jail on the streetcar. She'd got on the streetcar and she—at that time, you had to sit in the back and there was this thing, what they called the "bar" that you could slip into the slots at the back of the seats. White people could move it back, but black people couldn't move it up. But Olga got on, there were no seats in the back, and she picked it up and she moved it. And the conductor came back, knowing her because that was her line, and told her she couldn't do that. And she said, Yes, she would and he wasn't going to stop. They took her downtown, the streetcar, past the jail, and took her to off to jail off the streetcar. [laughs] Because she simply, she was going to beat them all up with the bar. [laughs]

Mother had some really wild, crazy Creole characters in her family. My dad used to be embarrassed by this, the Charbonnets. My mother was the Cajun black, my father was the Creole black. And both—my father came from what he saw as aristocracy and my mother he married from the country, St. James. So that, that's early on where I got the sense of the difference. My

father and grandfather built the first convent for black nuns, which is the first black order in this country, for the Holy Family Sisters out on Gentilly. My husband, my second husband and I, I guess in 1986, went back to New Orleans and visited and looked at the cornerstone and knocked on the door and went inside. That was when I first began to get really interested in family history.

But my dad's younger brother, Louis, was a contractor. He also was a builder. Most of the seven boys were builders of one kind or another. My father was the closest to my grandfather. But Louis and another contractor who was a white Charbonnet across town used Canal Street so all the jobs that came up on one side would go to Paul Charbonnet who was white, and all the jobs that would come up on the other side would go to my Uncle Louis because he was the Creole brother. There was this understanding between the families and these two contractors worked with that.

My dad—God, I wish I could have a conversation with him at this stage of my life. There's so much I want to know that I'll never know now. I understand so much better his quiet times, his withdrawal, his formality, his huge pride. I understand it now. At the time, as a teenager—

1-01:21:56

**Wilmot:**

Listening to the stories you're telling in response to my question, and I'm hearing some different things, but they're very, very interesting. I'm hearing that part of your family story is, "we were wild," and part of the story is, "we were aristocrats." And part of the story is this; "we were a special people." "We were wily." It's very funny.

1-01:22:31

**Soskin:**

But it's true, we are that complex. That's what's so interesting to me, that one of the things that comes with getting older is losing the need to be that concrete, that you learn to live comfortably with conflicting truths, that when I was younger, something had to be this way or that way and now they can be both.

1-01:22:58

**Wilmot:**

Yeah.

1-01:23:00

**Soskin:**

Because it is that complex. My father's younger sister was as wild as my father was staid and aristocratic.

1-01:23:10

**Wilmot:**

And what was her name?

1-01:23:11

**Soskin:**

Dorothy. Doritha is what they called her: D-O-R-I-T-H-A. I know now she must have been nuts, I'm sure that she was really crazy. And she died, with what I'm sure must have been

Alzheimer's. It must have been early set in thing for her because I remember she used to beat her husbands. She was married twice and she was just crazy, I mean, absolutely crazy. She had one child, I haven't see him in years and years and years, he's a musician too, and he lives in Santa Cruz. I haven't seen him since he was a child.

1-01:23:50

**Wilmot:**

How'd you hear that?

1-01:23:53

**Soskin:**

How did I hear that? She lived with my father and mother for while when she first came to California. My father finally had to ask her leave. She used to keep our house in chaos. And after she was gone, she would come sailing back, and my father and her husband behind her and their would be all this stuff and my father would call the police. And, you know, she was absolutely crazy. She was so embarrassing to him. I mean, she was so embarrassing to him.

1-01:24:23

**Wilmot:**

But that was his sister.

1-01:24:24

**Soskin:**

Oh, yeah! That was his younger sister. So, all these pieces are there. I don't anybody else in the family except maybe my dad's youngest brother, Louis, who shared that regal kind of stuff. The rest of them were all pretty straight ahead guys. I don't know what my dad was holding up. He revered his father, God, he revered his father. I'm sure that was the gift from his father. Oh yeah, you can see in these pictures. I can see it now. I didn't even know him. I was four when he died.

1-01:25:14

**Wilmot:**

Well I think for today we should close.

1-01:25:16

**Soskin:**

Okay, all right.

1-01:25:16

**Wilmot:**

Because you have run.

[End of Soskin110-30-02.wav]

Interview with Betty Reid Soskin

Interviewed by: Nadine Wilmot

Transcriber: Sam Schramski

[Interview #02: November, 7, 2002]

[Begin Audio File Soskin2.wav]



2-00:00:03

**Soskin:**

--Because they were suddenly sort of giving me permission, when I didn't feel permission was necessary. So the people that were offering to give dinner parties to introduce me to the neighborhood were being rebuffed. So that all of this was deepening my black consciousness. So by the time the sixties came around, I already had been forced into a position of being strongly politically black.

2-00:00:35

**Wilmot:**

Today is November 7<sup>th</sup> and we're interviewing Betty Soskin, and what I'm thinking is that for now, because we're going to sit down and talk to each other, could I just turn off the music?

2-00:00:54

**Soskin:**

Sure, do.

2-00:00:56

**Wilmot:**

Okay. Just hold this for one second. [goes to stereo system, turns off jazz music]

2-00:01:06

**Soskin:**

The bottom far left.

2-00:01:21

**Wilmot:**

We've been talking a little bit about your family, and also we've been talking about the fifties and the sixties when you moved out to Lafayette. Just to start off today, I was hoping that we can start off where we left off last time which was in highschool.

2-00:01:48

**Soskin:**

Oh! I don't remember where we were last time! [laughs]

2-00:01:50

**Wilmot:**

That's where we were, we were talking a little bit about high school and you were at Castlemont, Castlemont High School in Oakland. You were living there on 83<sup>rd</sup> Avenue.

2-00:02:01

**Soskin:**

Yes.

2-00:02:10

**Wilmot:**

It's really interesting when you describe your parents and your mother. Was your father's attitude toward education pretty different than your mother's? Or was his expectation the same, that you kind of just need to get married and that was the--?

2-00:02:23

**Soskin:**

I think that was true for the both of them. I don't think my father, when I look back, I don't think he was ever comfortable with having three girls. Our relationship to him was very formal. He grew up with seven brothers, and there were several sisters, but my dad spoke rarely about his sisters so I think that he was just not particularly comfortable with girls because I remember him as a very formal being. I don't remember many intimate conversations with my father, though he was certainly loving and he did all the things a good father is supposed to do. I don't remember him—I remember only being playful in the context of being with other playful adults. I don't remember him being playful with us as children, which I think is important because I've since seen parents who are playful with children. But he was loving and I did love him.

2-00:03:41

**Wilmot:**

You told me that at the close of our last conversation that you actually met your husband when you were—the boy who was to become your husband when you were thirteen?

2-00:03:54

**Soskin:**

Yeah. I used to— my grandfather, my mother's father, now here was a playful man. He may not have been the world's most accomplished male, I remember working in my grandfather's truck garden out on 76<sup>th</sup> Street, and digging in the soil with him and he his always singing little funny songs that I now recognize as the kind of blues and folk things that come on record from Laughton Hawkins and Jimmy McCracken and people like that. I remember my grandfather as singing these little songs that had no meaning anywhere outside the context of that gardening thing that we did together. I didn't hear his songs on the radio, for instance. But I only know that looking back. But my grandfather, who was known as Papa George, we lived in his home at that time. But we lived in his home as a tiny, sort of—the house was built like a railroad car, all the rooms were in line. And surrounded by fields. In fields where there were—Mr. Mueller who had the dairy around the bend on 75<sup>th</sup> pastured his cows there, and this was before the iron foundries came up. But my grandfather lorded over a family in that household with my Aunt Vivian, my Uncle Lloyd, my parents and their three children, and his third wife. We were all living under that one roof. This is when we came to California, left as a very small child.

My grandfather remained my closest adult friend for a lot of years, and I suppose he was the only one in the family with the kind of time that other adults in the family didn't have. He would pay me a quarter to cut his hair, and he was bald, but I can remember doing that from the time when I was a little kid. This all transfers into meeting my husband, because every Saturday night, Papa George and someone called Daddy Joe, who was my cousin's father, played penny ante. They got together every single Saturday night of their lives. And I would go with my grandfather to my cousin's house where she lived on 27<sup>th</sup> Street in Oakland— I guess East 27<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> Avenue. But we would go and I would play with my cousins as my grandfather and Daddy Joe played this card game. That was every Saturday night. But every Sunday, through my childhood, I went with Papa George to San Pablo Park in Berkeley where we would watch the colored leagues that would come through, baseball. And the man who was later to be my husband, I met at a baseball game where he came and he was on his bicycle and delivering papers. I was there watching the baseball game with Papa George.

Now later, Mel, who was my husband, who lived around the corner from San Pablo Park on Acton Street became a player with the California Golden Eagles who was part of the black leagues. So now, Mel was a part of that inner circle of black families who were sort of kept together. Our parents would take us across town for lemonade parties on Sundays and skating parties and all sorts of things, were kept together as a social group. Mel was a part of that group.

2-00:07:59

**Wilmot:**

How would you get across town?

2-00:08:01

**Soskin:**

With Papa George on his little {Flavor?}, which was a terrible little Ford.

2-00:08:09

**Wilmot:**

Ford Flavor?

2-00:08:10

**Soskin:**

Fliver, he called it a “Fliver.” And we would stop at every third or fourth stop sign and I became adept at—there was a spark and, what, two levers that you pulled. He would get out because the motor would die and he would crank it. And then I would work the spark and whatever this other thing was until it’s fired up again and then we would start off. Sometimes it would take us an hour to get across town to get to Berkeley, but my grandfather was always available with his little Ford. It was a Model T, I suppose. But we went everywhere together. He was the adult in my life and he was kind of a scandalous character according to my mother. She was very embarrassed by him.

2-00:08:58

**Wilmot:**

That was her dad.

2-00:08:59

**Soskin:**

Yeah, but she was embarrassed by him. They didn’t have a good relationship. He was very close to her younger sister, but I think that comes from the fact that my mother was sort of abandoned to my grandmother as a baby and then he brought back these other children from another marriage and they never really reestablished a relationship.

2-00:09:18

**Wilmot:**

When you say he was scandalous?

2-00:09:22

**Soskin:**

My grandfather? He was a womanizer of the worst kind. I only know that—and I don’t know whether or not that’s true, now it’s filtered through my mother’s prejudices. When he was in his eighties—because I got this family of long lives—and his third wife had died and he was rumored as supporting some woman across town on his pension and that my mother’s younger

sister, Vivian, was supporting him in this life of sin. It was that kind of thing. I don't know now whether that was anything or not, except that he always had a wink in his eye and he was always somebody I was a little apprehensive around, which means I don't know whether he was—I don't know. But there were reasons why my grandfather was kind of scandalous, and I'm sure I was prejudiced by my mother. But it never did turn me off enough to back away from him because he was my grownup friend. [pause]

But at that time San Pablo Park in Berkeley was the center of social activities for the black community. It was the place where there was a tennis club that played. And the YWCA in Oakland on Linden Street was a great place for people to gather. The black community came together both at San Pablo Park and at YWCA and that was--what was her name? Chapman, Lucille Chapman, I believe. There was a woman there who was the director there for years and years at the YWCA. My husband, Mel, later became the playground director at San Pablo Park. His great hero was someone name Dutch, who was a red-haired, white director at that park when the black leagues played there. The colored leagues, I'm sorry, they were not black at the time.

But Mel's ambition was to become two things, because the limitations on where blacks could go and what blacks could do were pretty well understood. He wanted to be a bakery wagon driver like his—and work at Wonderbread where his father did, but the unions weren't accepting any non-white workers so he was outside that. And he wanted to be a playground director, which Dutch was. That was also a white job at the time.

2-00:12:27

**Wilmot:**

Was his father part of the union?

2-00:12:30

**Soskin:**

No, his father could never be in--. His father worked, at that time which was Wonderbread Bakeries but later became Continental, was loading one hundred-pound flour stacks from the dock, from the railcars to the dock. He started when he was about fourteen or fifteen, retired still doing the same thing, loading a hundred-pound flour sacks from the railcars to the docks. Because that's all a black man could do. So no, he was never allowed in the union.

2-00:13:05

**Wilmot:**

So when you met Mel, he didn't go to the same high school as you.

2-00:13:12

**Soskin:**

He was at Berkeley High School.

2-00:13:13

**Wilmot:**

He was at Berkeley High School.

2-00:13:14

**Soskin:**

But he was four years older; he was my older sister's age. So the young men in my life were in high school when I was in junior high school, but my social connections when I was in high school were at the university, or at Berkeley, or they were people in Alpha Phi Alpha or they were at San Jose State or they were at the colleges around. So that was my social life in high school. And Mel was going to USF, or I guess he was going to Sacramento State and they went from Sacramento to USF in San Francisco. But it was important that men be educated at that time. And a few pioneer women were also being educated, but I wasn't one of them.

2-00:14:01

**Wilmot:**

Did Mel join a fraternity when he was Sacramento?

2-00:14:04

**Soskin:**

I don't think he did. Mel was in school on a football scholarship. He was All-State, All-Guard, all-everything, you know, all-star when he was in high school and in college. And he later went on to play for, what was it, the Oakland Giants, which was the first pro team before the NFL was organized. He played for the Honolulu Warriors for some time professionally, but that was before the big leagues were actually formed. He was a very, very well-known athlete; he wasn't much of a scholar. He was really much, much better as a—and he went to school on an athletic scholarship. And all he had to do was to play.

2-00:14:48

**Wilmot:**

So when you were in high school, do you have any memories of any teachers who especially influenced you? And you told me that at one time you were reading a lot, I'm wondering—

2-00:15:02

**Soskin:**

I was aware of racial prejudice when I was at high school.

2-00:15:05

**Wilmot:**

Uh-huh.

2-00:15:06

**Soskin:**

That's when it really began to dawn on me that we were separate people. It came to me through classes that I took, it came to me through my parents in one way, because the fact that when I was talking to my mother about taking a language—I guess that was in ninth grade—I wanted to take French because French was so dominant in my household, and my mother wanted me to take Spanish because that's what I looked more like. That was the beginning when I began to that the limitations were placed on me. There was a suggestion that I was going to have to pass if I was going to do anything of importance. That was the first hint. When I got into high school, there were things I didn't do partly because of fear of being isolated by the few black kids that were there, because I was lighter-skinned, and so you don't want to put your neck out too far because you need real friends. And not really feeling a part of white high school social life, because my social life was being taken care of outside. And if anything, I felt superior, because

the little girls I was going to school with were going with the guy who pumped gas at the corner and I was going to parties at the International House at Berkeley on the campus. So there was a real split. I didn't talk about that in school, I mean you don't talk about those things, but I really was satisfied with my own social life outside.

But academically, there was a teacher in public speaking who did tremendous things for me. I can barely remember his name now but I remember him lighting up when I get up to contribute, anyway. He was a wonderful, wonderful teacher. He, I guess, introduced me to all kinds of concepts that were beyond the limitations that I was facing in other classes. I mean we were going to New Orleans and coming back and not being prepared, because I never had to work in high school. I wonder sometime what I could have accomplished if I'd ever been challenged, because I wasn't in any way. I bounced through high school because no one ever asked for a report card, I always signed my own. My parents never participated when I was in school in any way. They were satisfied that I was going and that was it. I was a good girl, so no one had to deal with me in any way, you know, I was not a problem. So I sort of blandly went through school without being challenged at all.

This one teacher would light up, and I could see his face light up when I'd come down the hall and he would ask challenging questions. And to this day, I can remember a long debate in that public speaking class about euthanasia, and I can remember that the kids went off, as people do, into the fine line between euthanasia and murder and people being eliminated. I remember raising my hand and waving it around trying to get his attention and having him ignore me for a long time and knowing that he knew that I knew but that it wasn't time yet to let this in to the room. And I was aware, even as—I guess I was a sophomore at the time—I can remember being, having a sense of being on the same level with this teacher, because somehow we both knew that I knew. Also that I was cooperating with his game about not saying it yet, and finally toward the end of the debate of having him—or at least it wasn't a debate it was a discussion—and having him point to me so that I could say, "But you're no longer talking about euthanasia, you're talking about murder," and having him say, "Ah-ha." And having this sense for the first time of being at an adult, intellectual level and how freeing this was for a kid. I look for those moments in my own grandkids, look for those moments in time when they hit something that we can relate to as equals, that are new for me and are breakthroughs. I wonder sometime in teaching how often people are aware how great that is when you hit it. He's probably the only teacher besides my drama teacher that I really remember now. I'd know him if I saw him in the hallway.

2-00:20:06

**Wilmot:**

Your drama teacher?

2-00:20:09

**Soskin:**

My drama teacher, I remember for other reasons. Because she was so frightened by the fact that I might get roles that were inappropriate, that I remember her as being trapped by something that she didn't believe in, because I felt that she really and truly was good and knew that I was doing it well but that she didn't have the courage to step beyond the limitations of what she thought might be the limitations of the school society.

2-00:20:39

**Wilmot:**

What was her name?

2-00:20:40

**Soskin:**

I cannot remember her name, I blocked it out.

2-00:20:44

**Wilmot:**

And your public speaking teacher?

2-00:20:47

**Soskin:**

It was Mac- something, I cannot remember now. I don't think it's because I don't remember it, I think it's because I'm having a lapse in the moment.

2-00:20:56

**Wilmot:**

Did you have a sense that the other young people you were in school with were on a college— You mention that they were much more working class. Were there people who were on college tracks?

2-00:21:12

**Soskin:**

Yeah, but those kids were all white and I didn't have, that was not within the realm of possibility. So I was on a track for commercial training, typing and that sort of stuff. I could do that stuff with my hand tied behind my back. That's where I was supposed to be. I can't remember resisting this. I can't remember resisting this, which I wonder about now as an older person. Maybe it was because that was before I was politically aware in any way. And it's hard not to stamp my mature more sophisticated self on that time. But I tried to remember, and I find myself now, knowing this interview was coming up, trying to figure out what I remember and why and how. I don't remember being resistant at all.

2-00:22:16

**Wilmot:**

In so many ways it makes sense. It makes sense, because you were just fulfilling the expectations of those around you and surpassing those expectations without resisting. In some ways it makes sense it's just kind of where you were at. You were a young person.

2-00:22:33

**Soskin:**

I was being good, real cooperative.

2-00:22:44

**Wilmot:**

You know something that you really mentioned was that your family was Catholic.

2-00:22:49

**Soskin:**

Very much so.

2-00:22:51

**Wilmot:**

And I just wanted to ask you a little bit more what that meant for you growing up. We talked about it a little bit last time.

2-00:22:59

**Soskin:**

I can't remember intellectually thinking my way out of Catholicism, but sort of flunking Catholicism. I think if I'd been a good Catholic I would have wound up a nun because I was a purist as a kid. I think about that now that if I really had believed that I'd have gone pretty far and pretty deep into it, but that somewhere early on, somewhere maybe even as early as eleven or twelve, it began to not ring true for me. It was a place where I became more fascinated with questions than answers, because at that point, all of the growth was happening in the area, for me, of questions. The answers provided by the people around me didn't suffice, and it was not that I thought they were wrong as much as that I think at a very early age I became aware of how much there was to be known. That became a handicap for me, because the people around me knew. Does that make any sense?

2-00:24:18

**Wilmot:**

The people around you were aware of your precociousness?

2-00:24:20

**Soskin:**

No, that the people around me didn't have the same questions, that I was aware of how much, how great to sea of things to be known was. I felt that the man I married, Mel, in the first place, was not nearly as unsure as I was, but it wasn't because I knew less. That became a real problem for me even in my spiritual life that I didn't have to confront it until I was a young married. I was married in the church and I had to do that to—I had to go back and become, to accept Catholicism because I was not married unless I was married in church as far as my family was concerned. In order to do that, because marrying a non-Catholic, we had to go through, what is it, three or four weeks of instruction of some sort. And because Mel had no religious affiliation at all, he was intrigued by becoming Catholic and I was had moved out of it. So that it was a very rough period for me, because I was being married into a faith that I had outgrown. And I kept him from taking it too seriously. I kept him from being Catholic because I didn't honor it myself, without arguing about it, I just didn't do it. But then when I was married for three years and had no children, I decided to adopt our first child. And that child came to us through Catholic Charities. Now, in order to adopt Rick, I had to agree to bring him up Catholic, because of his mother's wishes. So as a young adult now—I'm maybe, what, twenty-two, twenty-three—I had to go back now and retrace those steps because I took my promise seriously that no matter where my thinking was, I was going to raise this child Catholic. So, then I had to go back and re-examine as an adult what I had walked away from and why. So I went to the priest in our parish, this was in Berkeley, and I said to him that I had made this promise, that I wanted him to help me to understand better my religion, because—and I was still saying “my religion,” I hadn't taken on anything else. And after two meetings with him he said to me, “The problem with you Mrs. Reid is that you're trying to be, you're trying to be intelligent about a faith and the Catholic religion is a gift from God, and as such cannot be questioned.” This was the end of the road for me. I walked away and felt that somehow, as I had known with the teacher in the public



speaking class, that I had hit one of those places where I was talking to someone who didn't have an answer and that we somehow, even though he was a priest, I had hit a weak spot and that he didn't know any more than I did and that he was giving me a pat answer that I couldn't accept. When I walked out of that building, I didn't feel that the priest had anything on me.

2-00:28:16

**Wilmot:**

Uh-huh.

2-00:28:18

**Soskin:**

Until Rick was seven and I had to deal with first communion and then it came back up again: You know, "What am I going to do?" Because there was this mother who said this child has to be brought up Catholic and I revisited this and I took him to register for first communion at the local church, though I had not connected with it at all. I had not connected with the local church. He came back from about the third catechism class and said to me—no, the nun had met with me when I went to pick him up and she said that I needed to have a talk with him, because when she had asked the usual memorization of the catechism—"Who made you?" "God made you." "Who made the world?" "God made the world."—and I can go through that even now. When she said, "Who made you?" Rick had raised his hands and said that his mother and dad had made me. She said that she couldn't accept that, and he couldn't accept anything else. So then I got him home and I couldn't support the Church's position with him. I kept trying, I sent him back, and then he came in one day and said to me, and this was a kid who was extremely bright in terms of science, he was way out there. He was building crystal sets when he was eight. He said to me, "Mom, if it takes light so many light years to get from this planet to that planet, how long does it take an angel to—" and I thought that this kid's not going to make it, [laughs] we're not going to make it in the Catholic Church. I walked away and that was the end of it.

And I became a Unitarian because I was taken to a service in someone's living room before there was a church in Walnut Creek. I went there and sat and listened to Reverend Ray {Cope?} who I think was the pastor in the Berkeley Unitarian Church on Durant, it's no longer there. I listened to this man with all of the emphasis on the questions, and none on the answers and here was a group of people who were agreeing on nothing except the right to search and this was a place that me and my kids could grow. And if they said, "Why is the grass green?" I wouldn't have to say, "Because God made it green," and I could go further. I've been on that path ever since. [laughs] It's a long answer to a short question.

2-00:31:13

**Wilmot:**

No, no that's a great answer. You have this marvelous way of referring to, saying, "When I was a young married," which is this way of talking being married that I haven't heard very much before. I just wanted to ask you about when you did become a young married, when you were nineteen, maybe a year out of high school, how did your life change in terms of the logistics? Did you and Mel move in together, did you have a job?

2-00:31:50

**Soskin:**

No, because at that time that choice wasn't open to women. You married and then you had your child, and I was a complete failure when I was married three years and had no children. I think it's interesting that my younger sister and my older sister, who were, by now, all married because my younger sister married at seventeen and my older sister married at nineteen, and my older sister had deliberately waited to have her first child. So they were both pregnant and I was not. So, at something like twenty-three, I was out adopting a baby, because I'd not done my job, I'd not fulfilled my role as a young married. Now when I look back, that really says a lot about the milieu in which I grew up, in that world, and the way those rules were laid down and how demanding they were. At that point there was no choice. I was married in 1942, the War started in 1941, and I was at home and I was to support my husband in what he wanted to do, and that was my role.

2-00:33:04

**Wilmot:**

And what did he want to do?

2-00:33:06

**Soskin:**

He wanted to go into business at that point. Yeah, at that point he wanted to go into business, which we did, early on. I stood behind that counter in that crazy little record shop that we converted out of a garage in our duplex while he went off and worked his job at the shipyards, worked with a man who serviced jukeboxes as a second job, and then I with Rick—Rick was born in 1945, so I did nothing until 1945. No, I worked, I guess, in San Francisco, I worked for the Air Force for a short period. I worked in the shipyards for a short period and we both quit at the point where we were disillusioned. That's when I stayed home. But then I had no children, and Mel was very, very disappointed that we had not had kids. And he was really pressing hard, and I thought it was a physical failure on my part that I could not have children and simply had been trying since I was married. Fifteen minutes after I was married I was going to have a baby nine months later and this just didn't happen. So at that time, I just saw myself as sterile, so I was sort of allowed to do other things. So I had worked in the shipyard, no, in the auxiliary union hall. I had worked for the Air Force. It seems to me I had another job and that was when I was in high school, I had a short job, that was about it. Then, when we opened the record shop because we were both disillusioned at this point, I worked there.

2-00:34:46

**Wilmot:**

Disillusioned with what?

2-00:34:49

**Soskin:**

The extent to which we were crashing into segregation. Because up to then, we had not been confronted with it in quite the same way, or there had been some sort of gentleman's agreement, we understood where the lines were. They were subtle lines and they weren't restricting us terribly because we were balanced with our own lives and had a sense that we were together because we wanted to be and not because we were separated out. And then suddenly, when the Second World War started, and the tremendous migration of African Americans and people of color and white southerners, suddenly all those things which were true of other parts of the

country in the South were true here. So we were confronted by blatant racism, and one of the ways to get around that was to go into business ourselves.

2-00:35:42

**Wilmot:**

So you're saying that segregation and racism really increased with the movement, the migration of African Americans—

2-00:35:54

**Soskin:**

I'm not sure that it increased with that in-migration, or whether it became overt with that because it was always there. You know, it was there. Certainly Mel's father had lived with it. Mel's family had come here after the Civil War, so that they were here in the Bay Area all since I guess 1860-something. One of the members of my first husband's family had been the first African American to register to vote in the state of California and that was 1885. So it was always here, it simply blossomed and became overt, became something we could no longer ignore. I think that's what it was. I don't think it was any different before then. Certainly Mel and I had run into it as kids. But not to the extent that our parents did. Our parents ran away from it in the South—at least my parents did, I don't know about Mel's—came here, I think, protected their kids from it by not even talking about it.

2-00:37:27

**Wilmot:**

So they didn't tell you stories about racism in the South?

2-00:37:32

**Soskin:**

Yeah, but they were privileged, they were Creoles, they were related to both sides so they brought with them as much anti-black racism as I think that was coming from whites to blacks. I think they saw themselves as being somehow between. I think that, it gets muddy here, it's hard to put that on my folks, but I think that was true.

2-00:38:03

**Wilmot:**

When they did arrive in the Bay Area, you were firmly part of the black community.

2-00:38:07

**Soskin:**

They had a social group that they moved right into.

2-00:38:11

**Wilmot:**

I have so many questions for you, Betty, right now. I have so many questions about what you just said. To go first, I want to firm up my understanding of your young married life. Young married. I'm enjoying that word so much, young married. So that meant—where did you live?

2-00:38:34

**Soskin:**

Mel was an accomplished guy. He had saved his money for getting married. He had money to put down on the little duplex.

[interview interruption]

2-00:38:58

**Wilmot:**

I could to talk you all day, Betty.

2-00:39:04

**Soskin:**

You're getting what you need?

2-00:39:05

**Wilmot:**

Oh, I think we're doing really good work together. How's your schedule look tomorrow?

2-00:40:09

**Soskin:**

Monday's a holiday, are you going to be around, because I will be here all day.

2-00:40:15

**Wilmot:**

Tomorrow's a good day then.

2-00:40:18

**Soskin:**

We are sort of behind in our office because we were all out working on the campaign and our guy got elected mayor and now we're planning our inauguration and all that stuff.

2-00:40:33

**Wilmot:**

Inauguration?

2-00:40:34

**Soskin:**

Sure, Tom's got to have his party.

2-00:40:38

**Wilmot:**

I'm a new, you know, new—this light is doing interesting things so I'm just looking around. This light is doing some really interesting things here, so I'm moving. I'm a new resident of Berkeley.

2-00:40:57

**Soskin:**

You're a new resident?

2-00:40:58

**Wilmot:**

Uh-huh.

2-00:41:00

**Soskin:**

Berkeley is so fascinating.

2-00:41:02

**Wilmot:**

To the extent that I actually voted in Oakland, because all my heart is in Oakland and I had to vote for that “Just Cause” measure. It was really important to me.

2-00:41:13

**Soskin:**

Sure, sure.

2-00:41:15

**Wilmot:**

But I am, in my work, really learning about—

2-00:41:20

**Soskin:**

Berkeley is fascinating. Berkeley is really the edge of political change, almost in the world. It’s fascinating.

2-00:41:27

**Wilmot:**

What do you mean when you say that?

2-00:41:29

**Soskin:**

That things tend to start here and then move out. If you keep in mind that the UN started in the Bay Area, the atomic bomb started in the Bay Area, I mean all these things that were the basis for social and fiscal change, even the environmental stuff, so much of this has started here. We live on the edge of the ocean; we live on the edge on everything. It’s the cutting edge of so much. I miss Berkeley, I miss Berkeley. I may go back.

2-00:42:16

**Wilmot:**

That’s too dark.

2-00:42:18

**Soskin:**

There’s a light over would that help.

2-00:42:22

**Wilmot:**

Wait a second, I’m sorry. I’m attacking your fish with a tripod.

2-00:42:25

**Soskin:**

There’s lights you can play with. Just push that button in.

2-00:42:33

**Wilmot:**

Okay, interesting, let me come back here and try not to get you this time. I think that’s a little bit better.

[interview interruption while Nadine continues to set up camera]

2-00:43:28

**Soskin:**

Where did we live, right? I think that's where it was. Mel was as locked into his role as I was in mine, my ambition to be a young married woman with a husband and a child and having this prescribed life on my side that I felt I was failing in. On his side, he felt the obligation to be a provider, to take care of a wife and children. So that when we got married, he had with his paper routes and his—he would help assist his father sometimes on weekends—he had worked when he was in school to be able to support a wife and family and had enough money saved up to put a down payment on that little duplex on Sacramento Street. The interesting thing was I think that the whole cost of that duplex was, I think, 4250. I'm not saying \$42,000; I'm saying \$4,500. So that the down payment was \$750 or something of that sort. At that time salaries were almost nothing so that it's all relative. But at any rate, we moved in as a young couple into a place that we were buying.

2-00:44:50

**Wilmot:**

Right after your marriage?

2-00:44:51

**Soskin:**

We went home to our own place after the wedding.

2-00:44:57

**Wilmot:**

Did you guys honeymoon?

2-00:44:58

**Soskin:**

No, we got very busy being husband and wife and getting ready to produce children, that was our role. [laughs] But I think now that was exceptional, at the time it was what one did. We were lucky to be able to do that, so that was fine.

2-00:45:19

**Wilmot:**

While he was in college, was he ever part of a fraternity?

2-00:45:22

**Soskin:**

I don't think he ever pledged. He was an athlete and that's how he lived his life.

2-00:45:28

**Wilmot:**

And that was San Francisco State?

2-00:45:29

**Soskin:**

That was USF, the University of San Francisco.

2-00:45:32

**Wilmot:**

Okay. Do you know what course of study he major in?

2-00:45:37

**Soskin:**

He majored in history, I think.

2-00:45:39

**Wilmot:**

History.

2-00:45:40

**Soskin:**

I think that he majored in football. I don't remember Mel having the intellectual capacity to do much other than that really. No, it's true, I shouldn't--Cut it out of the tape! [laughs] But I really think that when I looked back, Mel used to ask me to help him to learn to read better. I've never even said this to my children, so I shouldn't be putting this on tape, but he never—like my mother, and that's why it wasn't strange to me, because it wasn't a given, there were adults in my life who didn't. So I didn't notice it particularly, but it wasn't very long into the marriage when I began to realize that I had satisfied all the requisites of my parents and none of my own. Because we could hardly—there were things I couldn't talk about with him. There were questions I couldn't discuss, there were—and to sublimate the stuff that was churning inside me—I eventually had a mental breakdown, actually, when my youngest daughter was two-and-a-half or three. It was at the basis of all that, ending up with the dissolution of my marriage, had to do with the fact that I had not found this place where I could be whole and use all that I was. I overcompensated; I married a professor from the University of California. [laughs] Fifteen minutes after I was divorced. So that hunger certainly was there for something more.

2-00:47:40

**Wilmot:**

Did you read a lot when you were little?

2-00:47:42

**Soskin:**

Yeah, I read a great deal.

2-00:47:44

**Wilmot:**

What texts do you remember being very important to you?

2-00:47:46

**Soskin:**

Oh, I remember as a very little kid reading my way through the Ruth Fielding series of books, this would be like a series of girls stories. Then I went into poetry, I loved Edna St. Vincent Millay when I was eleven or twelve and used to sing “Renaissance,” I mean I loved it. That's when I began to use music. I would read poetry and then wonder how this would sound, and then I would sing it. All of this was in a very isolated life of a little girl, I don't remember doing this with anyone. I loved reading. I had a teacher, how old would I have been, someone had given me a copy of *Aesop's Fables* with wood carving illustrations, I guess it was Aunt Vivian who gave it to me for my birthday. I took it to school and the teacher was reading it to the class, and at one point—isn't it funny, I never thought of this—one point someone made a noise or did something they weren't supposed to and the teacher slammed the book down in rage, just anger but then she turned to me with her face very red. She was someone who spoke very, very softly

and read very, very softly. She apologized for doing this to my book and she came back and gave, the next day brought me a copy of *Little Women*. So that, and I must have been in fourth or fifth grade I was very young at the time, and then I really spent a year in what was called a [preventorium] and that was when I was eleven or twelve, I was a lonely little girl in a strange setting very far away from home, Livermore, which was very way from home, because my parents couldn't get out there to see very often, every couple of months. So that then I can remember doing a lot of reading and so yeah, reading was a big thing for me.

2-00:49:58

**Wilmot:**

I'm trying to think of today you can read the works of DuBois or bell hooks or different people and there is a real sense of race consciousness. I was wonder if you ever had any—

2-00:50:15

**Soskin:**

Never. I was not introduced to black writers until I was an adult. In fact, I had never even heard the Negro National Anthem, "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing," and I remember hearing for the first time and thinking it was subversive. How could this be? I'd never met people who had attended Southern schools, although my Aunt Vivian had graduated from Sacred Prep, but we did not talk about those things. I don't remember, I remember actually meeting James Baldwin at a reading at a local church at one point and hearing him read his work. That was when I must have been in my late teens or young adult, I didn't know black writers.

2-00:51:15

**Wilmot:**

I wanted to ask you about marrying into Mel's family, if you could tell me a little bit about the family you married into.

2-00:51:21

**Soskin:**

I didn't realize their specialness, either, until I began to meet some of the younger members of his family who were into history. I knew that Mel's family had been here for a great many years, but I had no idea what that meant. His predecessors were Parkers and {Gaults?} I believe out of Georgia, his family came here at the end of the Civil War. They settled in Angel's Camp and from Angel's Camp into San Francisco and from San Francisco into Berkeley. They'd been in the East Bay, I guess since the turn of the century or even before. Captain Gault, who was one of his predecessors, I think on his maternal side, was a captain in the state militia. He, I'm gathering, I haven't traced it all the way back yet, I think he must have worked with Thomas Starr King, that's my guess. That Starr King was the Californian, Unitarian minister actually, who managed to keep California out of the Civil War on the side of the South. He was the only Unitarian I know of. The only Californian in the Hall of Statues in Congress.

As I said, one of the members of his family was the first black to have registered to vote and that was five years after California was admitted to the union. You can imagine how long it was then for blacks throughout the country. That wasn't until the Civil Rights movement when the poll tax and other things were lifted. His family, I guess it was Charlie Reid has a tremendous history here as a youth worker in Richmond, North Richmond. That videotape—did you get to see that? Boy, I go to give you a copy of that, you've got to see that, it's just amazing. There was really a



black community here, but it was separated out, it was a Jim Crow community. But Charlie, in the context of that—his family still exists there and the Reid in my name has some weight in Richmond because of Charlie Reid and his history way back before the First World War, which is great. Those people are gone now, the Reid family is still spread out throughout the area.

One of the Reids is the William Patterson, this is on his father's side, I think this would have been Mel's uncle, was the attorney who brought the case for Paul Robeson before the UN. He was a mentor to Paul Robeson, he has a book called—I had a copy of it but I don't—. It's We Shall—something [Patterson delivered the famous “We Charge Genocide” speech before the UN], it's not “overcome.” But this was William Patterson. And figures very, very closely. He went to Russia with Paul Robeson. The family was very ashamed of him, and nobody spoke about him. I find him a great source of pride and rediscovered him during the centennial for Paul Robeson.

Actually there's an eerie, eerie side story to that. There was a series of black books that was given to me by a Unitarian minister who was one of my mentors. This was Aaron Gilmartin. He gave me a lot of books that he had gathered together during the sixties and among those books was the book of William Patterson. But I had never read it, it sat on my bookshelf. One day long after my son and I, Bob Reid, were involved in family history and finally got into doing his father's side, which was the Reid family, Bob called me one day and said, “Mom, there's a reference to this book and I think I saw it in your bookshelf.” I said I just couldn't imagine that I would have that book. He said, “It's out of print now.” So I went in and I looked and here was the book. I opened it and there's an inscription written by William Patterson that said “To an unknown cousin” and then signed his name. That inscription was written back in, way back. I gave that book to Bob and we were really struck by this, written in his handwriting.

So there's a piece of me that's walked away from Catholicism for intellectual reasons that were sort of retrospective. I went back and thought my way out of it, long after the fact. But there's a spiritual part of me that knows that there's the ability to leap time and space within me but is not unique to me. Everybody has it, but that it has not been civilized out of some of us. That it is out of those things that religions were formed, not the other way around. I want you to take the binder that has my son's death papers in it and read through and it'll blow your mind, because that thing of leaping time and space shows up there.

2-00:57:58

**Wilmot:**

Do you want me to look at that or do you want to tell me?

2-00:58:06

**Soskin:**

No, I think I want you to look at it. You can take it home and bring it back with you.

2-00:58:11

**Wilmot:**

I'd be glad to. I'd be very honored to do that. I'm also wondering about something— Oh, I'll get to that later. I want to focus on your time before you and Mel had it up to here with working for the other people and decided to become your own bosses. You said you were working briefly in a shipyard, briefly in San Francisco.

2-00:58:42

**Soskin:**

I had worked in San Francisco in the Civil Service Commission. Actually, it was in the basement of the federal building and that was at the—I can't put that in time, it must have been—the War was already on. My job at that time was as a file clerk, very mechanical. You'd go in the morning and pick up a tray of cards that were pink and blue, I'll never forget this, and then you sit at long tables with lots of other people and these were called bar and flag files. Each of them would have findings that would demand barring and flagging of people. Flagging means look further before you hire them; barring means they could not work any longer, they could not work for the federal government. I didn't even wonder about the genesis of that stuff, because I wasn't sophisticated enough. It was a job and I was filing cards. When I would read the cards it would talk about "car license plate read within a block of communist cell meeting," that sort of thing. So this had to be FBI, CIA stuff. Obviously had to be maybe FBI stuff. But I didn't know really what FBI was, why would I even know that? I knew that there were these people, but I finally saw a card, a flag card, from my brother-in-law, my sister's husband, who was working in the shipyards of Vallejo and whose cards was seen parked, this is the car seen parked within a block of a known communist cell meeting, or a suspected communist cell meeting. But I knew my brother-in-law was in no way a communist, so at that point I became more interested in these cards and what they said. I began to find other people that I knew barred and flagged who had applied. You wouldn't get a card filed until you applied for a position in either the shipyards or any of the war plants. Of course the entire Bay Area was war plants at the time and people were not hired for all these reasons that they would never know.

2-01:2-01:09

**Wilmot:**

Which weren't necessarily didn't have direct bearing on who was being followed.

2-01:2-01:13

**Soskin:**

Absolutely not, absolutely not, no. But you'd have to sign to a loyalty oath to work in the shipyards, to work at any war plant, which meant that you'd have to swear not to work for anything that would overthrow the government, so that was the reason that they could throw you out. Because if you applied then you took a loyalty oath and you could not, you know. These were the things that said you were not who you said you were. So anyway I began to, that was the beginning of my awareness. I began to get aware of this level of government—that there was something here that I did not know about and had no reason to be aware of it until that job. Now, I don't know whether my experience as a Rosie came before or after that experience, that's what I'm not sure of, I can't put it in time.

2-01:02:13

**Wilmot:**

That was in the first three years of your marriage or the second, or—

2-01:02:16

**Soskin:**

All of this had to come within—yeah, because I didn't work afterward. This had to come early on.

2-01:02:24

**Wilmot:**

Who was working there with you, who else was at the table with the pink and blue cards?

2-01:02:31

**Soskin:**

I have no idea, just a huge floor, a basement floor of people, all kinds of people, but I can't even picture in my mind people in that building.

2-01:02:43

**Wilmot:**

So it was many different races?

2-01:02:47

**Soskin:**

I don't know, I don't remember! But I don't think I would have been aware then. Because I wouldn't have been aware that I could not have worked there if I were black, do you see what I'm saying? I would not have walked into that building and noticed, because there were people working on the war effort and until I actually confronted the problem personally, so it must have been—I know it was before I went to work for the Air Force; it had to be, because that was when I hit it straight in the face personally. Before that I'm not sure that I would have walked into that room and said, "Oh, there are no blacks here."

2-01:03:23

**Wilmot:**

Where was this office again?

2-01:03:24

**Soskin:**

It was in the Federal Building in San Francisco, it was on Macalester.

2-01:03:27

**Wilmot:**

Macalester, okay.

2-01:03:29

**Soskin:**

Okay, there was a basement—

2-01:03:30

**Wilmot:**

How'd you get there?

2-01:03:32

**Soskin:**

I have no idea how I got that job, because I probably applied as any other American, because at that point I was in American, you know

2-01:03:38

**Wilmot:**

Do you remember having lunch buddies, people you would go and sit and have lunch with outside?

2-01:03:42

**Soskin:**

I don't remember even anybody I worked with, but I also don't remember being set apart, so there was nothing extraordinary about that job.

2-01:03:52

**Wilmot:**

Do you remember how you got there physically, like your transportation?

2-01:03:54

**Soskin:**

Oh ,yeah! I got on—at that time the Key route trains ran across on the bridge, and I went across on the bridge.

2-01:04:04

**Wilmot:**

And where did they let you off?

2-01:04:07

**Soskin:**

At that terminal on First Street, First and Mission I guess it was, First and something. Then got on a trolley which went up to Macalester, yeah. So that had to be early on.

2-01:04:28

**Wilmot:**

Do you remember why that job ended?

2-01:04:31

**Soskin:**

I think I must have transferred—in fact, I was a transfer. I was a transfer from—that's why I got that job, no one bothered to tell anyone that I wasn't white because I was a direct transfer. I wanted to work on this side of the bay, and I transferred from the Civil Service Commission into the Air Force, because it was an easy transfer, because I was already sworn in and everything. So that when I went—and that job was on 20<sup>th</sup> and Broadway, or in what is now a hotel building that had been taken over by the Air Force. I think it's now offices, it's like in 19, 20<sup>th</sup> or something like that, just across from [Emporium] Capwells. When I went to work there, I was simply transferring, and again I was on a floor where the first time I got an inkling—and our desk, then, there were two desks backed up to one another, so I was facing the woman whose desk was abutting mine. [pause] And she and I got to be close friends. But I also ran into a friend who was African American, about my color, who looked like me, who was a part of my social group. I saw her several times, but each time I saw her she ducked away from me.

Now she had been a former fiancée of the man I married, so I didn't know whether she was being distant because of that or what it was, that's the way I read it. One day we met together in the restaurant for the first time, and there were no where for her to go, and she asked me, her name was Havens Newman, her father was a doctor incidentally, they lived in Kensington—she asked me what I was passing for. I said, “Nothing.” And she said, “You have to be, because you can't work here.” I said, “But I'm not,” I said, “What are you passing for?” Well she said, “My name is Newman, so I assumed that was German.” Then I became apprehensive and almost that gets within a day or two now with this sudden fear that I found myself in this position of passing

and my husband had just volunteered and gone into the navy. This was all at the same period of time, and he had gone and was back at Great Lakes and was very unhappy. He only lasted three days. In the same time span I was suddenly passing for white and didn't know it. Within this two day period, the young woman whose desk abutted mine was called up to the lieutenant in charge of our section, and I saw her go and I saw her shaking her head and nodding and her face was very red and she was up in his desk and she came back. Now I know what it is. The sixth sense tells me that someone has reported me. Mind you, I never passed in my life. There was all the shame that was connected with having to do something I wouldn't have done if I'd had a choice. Because this was not a problem for me, my race may have been their problem, but it wasn't mine. It never had to be. So here I was in this position. So, when she got back I asked her what was that about and she kept her face down and wouldn't look at me directly. I said, "Is it what I thought it was?" and she was sharp enough to know that I knew and she said, "Yes." I said, "They found out that I'm not white," and she said, "Yes, but don't worry, because I told them it's not a problem." So I said, "But it's a problem for me." So I got up and I walked the length of that room and I got to the lieutenant's desk and I said, "Who told you that I was what I was? I didn't tell you I was white, because I came here and didn't fill out an application. I came here as a transfer. Didn't you know that I was colored?" He said, "Don't worry, don't worry, I'm told that it's not a problem, that you're okay, that you can stay." I said, "I'm in line for an upgrade and you say—he said, "Everyone here is willing to work with you." I mean think about that. Everyone here is willing to work with you. I said, "But are they willing to work under me, because I can be upgraded." He said, "You'll receive your level pay raises," but it was clear that I was not going to be raised, my status was not going to be raised so I walked out on the U.S. government and told them to shove it and that was the end of that.

Meanwhile, Mel came back two days later having refused to go into the Messmens Corps, because Mel had been told by the psychiatrist there because he'd balked, he wanted to be a seaman but he was told that he could only be in the Messmen Corps. That's why he was sent from Fort Lewis or wherever he was in Washington State. All the blacks were gotten together and sent to Great Lakes to become cooks. And he wouldn't do it, so they told him that they would send him home, they mustered him out with mustering out pay. They gave him an honorable discharge and told him to go home. Then the psychiatrist asked him why he hadn't come in as white, because he could have avoided all this. Mel, who had never had to pass, and for whom his race was part of his pride. Sure he was light-skinned, as I was—but that's when we decided that we were not going to work for anybody. At this point we were going to go into business for ourselves, because the whole field had become muddied for us at that point and we didn't want any part of it.

He went back to being content, he went back to the shipyards, because there were lots of other blacks in the shipyards and he was working as a playground director where it didn't matter. Then I went home.

2-01:11:21

**Wilmot:**

Let me ask you: You said he had two jobs, but actually first, at the Air Force, when you were working at the Air Force and transferred, what were you doing there?

2-01:11:33

**Soskin:**

Just general office work. Not the same kinds of things, certainly not a file clerk, but nothing with any real responsibility. It was assembly line stuff, only clerical.

2-01:11:44

**Wilmot:**

When you were at the commission before you transferred to that basement room, what was that? The commission of—?

2-01:11:50

**Soskin:**

That was the Civil Service Commission.

2-01:11:53

**Wilmot:**

Civil Service Commission. What were you doing there?

2-01:11:55

**Soskin:**

I was just filing cards, that's all. That was my job.

2-01:11:57

**Wilmot:**

How did you get that job?

2-01:11:59

**Soskin:**

I can't remember how I got that job, except that everyone was doing their part for the war effort, and I'm sure that I must have applied in some pool to go to work. I don't remember how that came about.

2-01:12:09

**Wilmot:**

They knew you were African American?

2-01:12:13

**Soskin:**

I don't remember that ever coming up, except that I'm sure that I must have had to check a box of some sort, and that it must have been a slip-up because I would not have checked white.

2-01:12:27

**Wilmot:**

Was that the kind of general atmosphere at that time, for the war effort let's all go and put it in for the war effort?

2-01:12:36

**Soskin:**

Oh sure, I think we all had to find our role in it, somehow.

2-01:12:39

**Wilmot:**

Was it accompanied by a real sense of patriotism?

2-01:12:45

**Soskin:**

I can't say that, because as I keep saying, I like to apply my later sophistication to my person of that day, but at twenty-two or whatever I was, or nineteen or twenty, I'm not sure that I was doing anymore than following the crowd. I'm not sure at all that—I'd never seen a war, I was afraid of black outs and knew there was an enemy out there. That we all had to do something to protect ourselves from that enemy. It was also true that one of my best friends, Lillian [Onoga?], was hauled off to an internment camp with her parents, so that Japanese was not negative to me, so I was confused about the enemy. I'm sure a lot of kids were.

2-01:13:47

**Wilmot:**

Can you tell me a little bit more about that experience with Lily [Onoga]?

2-01:13:51

**Soskin:**

I remember Lily [Onoga?] from the time I was a little kid; I mean really a little, third and fourth grade. I suspect that Lillian's family were very high up Japanese although they lived in our community someplace because she went to our grammar school. They were very close to the Japanese culture, because on special days Lillian would come and do wonderful dances with her paper umbrella. The sun parasol in Japanese costumes with her obi and she was very closely identified with Japan and was therefore exotic to me. But she was also very much a little girl I had fun with and often shared lunch with. As we grew up, Lillian's Japanese identification continued, I lost track of her somewhere along the line, but she was Japan for me, more than any one in the world, when anyone said "Japanese" I thought of Lillian [Onoga?], I still do. The enemy of was ill-defined for me.

2-01:15:03

**Wilmot:**

Did you hear of, when did you hear that she and her family had been interned?

2-01:15:13

**Soskin:**

I had heard later, because that's the one person I knew. I asked in the neighborhood because my family continued to live in that same community house on Eighty-third, after I was grown up and gone. When I asked in the community, I learned that Lillian's family had been interned. I had no idea what the circumstances were, whether her folks were connected to Japan's politics in anyway, I don't know.

2-01:15:38

**Wilmot:**

Did you know when she came back?

2-01:15:40

**Soskin:**

No, she was lost to me, but she continues to be Japan. I've known Japanese people since, but the people you meet when you're a child stay whole.

2-01:15:51

**Wilmot:**

Did you know what happened to their property?

2-01:15:53

**Soskin:**

No, no, I can't place her in time and space.

2-01:15:57

**Wilmot:**

Okay, so after—

2-01:15:59

**Soskin:**

I can still see this girl with her obi and her beautiful costumes and her parasol but I don't know.

2-01:16:05

**Wilmot:**

You don't know what happened to her?

2-01:16:06

**Soskin:**

No I don't know what happened to her.

2-01:16:17

**Wilmot:**

Were you aware of, with the war and the increase in migration, were you aware of your community changing around you?

2-01:16:27

**Soskin:**

Oh yes, yes. Sacramento Street which is, that's the location for our property; our little shop is on Sacramento Street. The train tracks, the Santa Fe Railroad that was bringing people in day after day, two or three hours at a time with people hanging out of the windows, getting their first view of California and the Bay Area. Coming in by the thousands on these loaded trains, passed in front of our door day after day, day and night, there was hundreds of thousands of people coming in. The movement in the community was a physical thing for me. I was watching this happen and people fanning out, I was watching the construction of the war housing so that these people were being warehoused. The world was literally changing around us, just so fast that there was no way—I look back now and I don't know how we survived it, except that it was like an avalanche. Our little community, our little African American community was just covered over by an avalanche of people, strangers; not necessarily black and white, but strangers. Our community physically changed within a matter of months and a few years. It's liked we moved out of the state into another state without even leaving home so it was just unbelievable.



2-01:18:20

**Wilmot:**

Those images are so striking of the trains coming in right in front of the people coming. I have questions about where did they all go, and my first question is where did they all go?

2-01:18:40

**Soskin:**

See, what I don't know because I didn't know Richmond at that time even though my husband had married into a family but had a very strong group in the Richmond community growing with it, there seemed to be a disconnect between the Berkeley Reids and the Richmond Reids, because I didn't know those people at all. So I'd not been into Richmond during those periods and don't know when they built all the war housing. There were all these, I mean just like dormitories, there were places where people literally slept in shifts, sharing a bedroom, eight and ten people because the shipyard were running day and night, three shifts. So that the people were living, just packing in like sardines every place. At that time Berkeley hadn't seen war housing to the extent that it later did. There was some down now where Albany comes in which is now student housing for the university. At one time that was all war housing, Cordonices Village was there. There were places in Albany, but most of those places were out of my eyesight, so I didn't see where those people were being housed. But I learned later that they were mostly black people being housed in North Richmond and down in what is the Richmond Annex, those places that have been largely torn down.

2-01:20:15

**Wilmot:**

Did you personally have friends among the newcomers? The new—

2-01:20:19

**Soskin:**

No. The ones I did get to know were some of the servicemen. One of our friends among the servicemen was stationed at Port Chicago and was blown up in that explosion. In fact, some of those young guys were at my house at a party the night before and they went home and we heard the explosion all the way from Berkeley from Port Chicago when that blew up, and we know that our friends had gone.

2-01:20:45

**Wilmot:**

This was in Berkeley?

2-01:20:46

**Soskin:**

This was in Berkeley, so that that explosion was felt and heard even from Berkeley. We knew some of our friends became Tuskegee Airmen, you know Buddy Hernandez and Francis Collier who were the people that were part of our social group who became—they went off to officer training schools. So a lot of friends from this community went off into OTS and became officers in the war. They were guys who were part of the fraternities that I'd known at the colleges around here who were now part of the officer training in New York. There were people that we knew who came into the area that we got to know. There was the phenomenon of the black church, which suddenly was very visible. The only black churches I knew as a kid would have been Allen Temple which was a little house Reverend [Wilby?] had on Eighty-fifth Avenue.

2-01:21:46

**Wilmot:**

What was his name?

2-01:21:47

**Soskin:**

Reverend Wilby was his name, Marion Wilby. That we could not go to because we were Catholic and it was a sin. But there was that church and there was downtown, Father Wallace's church on Twenty-seventh and Grove, eventually became the home of the [Black] Panthers. But the black church as a force hardly existed, there were just a few, the Third Baptists in San Francisco, and the handful of churches that existed but they were outside of Catholicism so I only knew those people if it wasn't Sunday. I never attended churches. Suddenly there was this force that was coming out of the black church that brought in a lot of fundamentalists, something I didn't know about. My mother referred to fundamentalist Protestants as "holy rollers," that's all I knew about that. She was almost contemptuous of holy rollers, like, they didn't know yet that anyone who had any sense became Catholic. I mean that is the way they looked at it.

So that, then we became to be buried by a whole class that grew up around us and over us, because for the first time—when we were growing up the social levels were not based upon race, I mean not based on money or degrees. Our fathers were barbers, and redcaps, and carpenters, and dentists, and doctors, and scholars, because we were together around the fact that we were all colored but that was it. But now following the migration lots and lots of other people there was a professional class that also came in. There was suddenly a lot more professional blacks who were also living here and our group became somewhat irrelevant and buried under this new class of people. Suddenly there were doctors and dentists and people to service the black community. So that we were covered by an avalanche and it was a people avalanche of outsiders, not necessarily just black and white, but outsiders.

2-01:24:11

**Wilmot:**

Was there tension then, between the older, more established, the native black community and the incoming black community?

2-01:24:20

**Soskin:**

I don't think we had enough time to develop a tension particularly. I don't remember because we were all busy in the war effort. There was this bigger thing outside all of us.

2-01:24:30

**Wilmot:**

So there wasn't hostility?

2-01:24:32

**Soskin:**

I don't remember there as being. Because there were a lot more of them than there were of us, I think they would have been not that much consciousness that there were even people like us here.

2-01:24:44

**Wilmot:**

The way this has often, the way that people sometimes tell this history that there was a more middle class black community here that was then, that was suddenly faced with a mass of working class black people from the South.

2-01:25:10

**Soskin:**

I think that that's true but to some extent I think that's stereotypical thinking. I think that it's more complex than that. I think that we were more impacted by outsiders than we were. I think that if you talked with a white person who grew up here in the same time period you'd get the same thing, that they were inundated by outsiders. I think that's a piece of what went on, and a refinement of that would have been a reshuffling of everybody racially and a whole new set of criteria set down for who was insiders and who was outsiders. At that point, there might have been some [stiffening?] up. Yeah, I can remember seeing colored things popping in, that there would have been a difference between old-timers and newcomers, that those things were refinements of that but that we were all preoccupied with the war at that time and of knowledge, essentially that were all needed, because we all really were. I'm not sure that I wouldn't have been resentful, because I certainly was resentful of what happened to me with the Air Force, but that being in the context of a Rosie thing, that was a war effort thing that was different, and I was working now with other blacks. I had not worked with only other blacks before then, and that was not a step down, but a step across because I don't remember resenting that.

2-01:26:47

**Wilmot:**

I think I have this other question which is about you've talked about growing up very much in the heart of a Creole family that was a fish out of water, there was no Creole reference. Suddenly there was a community, there were people that were coming from Louisiana and Texas and Arkansas who—Louisiana certainly, who certainly had language for Creole and a cultural understanding of that. I'm wondering what that was like for you?

2-01:27:18

**Soskin:**

There was a critical mass here when my parents came of people like them, there was, I'm sure, I can show you pictures of my mother and her social group. The pictures of her club and they were twelve or fifteen women who met together once a month on Thursdays to play bridge or whatever they did. There was a critical mass of Creoles here who preceded my parents. Lionel Wilson's family was one who later became the mayor of Oakland. There were lots of others. Now at the same time there were what my parents would call American blacks, actually my father would refer to someone who was not Creole but was also African American as American blacks. This would be Ruth Beckford's family. Very accomplished family, first one to do ballet and to later work with Katherine Dunham and to really accomplish. They were a part of that early group. There was the Ruth Acty who was the first teacher in the California school system.

2-01:28:36

**Wilmot:**

Acty?

2-01:28:37

**Soskin:**

Acty. A-C-T-Y. These were all people who were already here that were part of the group. The Newmans, you know, he was a dentist, he lived in Kensington, lovely home. Their family was not out of New Orleans Creole but were part of the same social group. There was a significant group here and enough of them were Creole. And they got buried and diffused into the general population and the professional class that moved in displaced a lot of those people. They came in with a lot more race consciousness from a positive way, I think, than my parents and their group did. My parents had escaped that stuff and were glad to forget about it, these people were people who came out of—my mother's Uncle {Raleigh?} Coker was the physician in New Orleans.

2-01:29:36

**Wilmot:**

Hoker?

2-01:29:37

**Soskin:**

Coker, C-O-K-E-R. Very high society, Creole. But Dr. Coker would have come here and from being a doctor only serving the black community because that's all he could serve in Louisiana and would have come here and would have served the black community without any— that would have been his role. That's true, there were people who came here like that who were druggists who were doctors. There was suddenly this opportunity for an upper class of people where there had not been part of the criteria for social acceptance before. So we would have become irrelevant to some extent. In a lot of ways, a lot of us continued to make it, but we had to reroute the rulebook. And I shouldn't be using people's names, I think.

2-01:30:38

**Wilmot:**

Actually that you're not—

2-01:30:40

**Soskin:**

I'm not saying anything bad about people.

2-01:30:42

**Wilmot:**

No, not at all. You're also just kind of defining what the universe was like. I had questions: as young married, where did you and your husband have fun and go out into the world? Did you go out, did you go out to parties? Did you go out to clubs?

2-01:31:03

**Soskin:**

Oh sure, lots and lots. I should be showing you pictures, that's really what I should be doing.

2-01:31:11

**Wilmot:**

Do you want to stop and get your album?

2-01:31:13

**Soskin:**

Yeah.

[end of session]

Interview with Betty Soskin

Interviewed by: Nadine Wilmot

Transcriber:

[Interview #3: November, 11, 2002]

[Begin Audio File Soskin3.doc]

3-00:00:00

**Wilmot:**

Good morning, November 11, Betty Soskin Interview three. Can you say a few words Betty?

3-00:00:13

**Soskin:**

This is also Betty. [laughing]

3-00:00:17

**Wilmot:**

If you want to just put them in your lap, I don't want you to be concerned with those. [referring to microphones] Okay.

3-00:00:23

**Soskin:**

They are pretty sensitive then right?

3-00:00:25

**Wilmot:**

They are extremely sensitive. Let me make sure I'm not giving a little bit too much sound there.

3-00:00:33

**Soskin:**

Okay.

3-00:00:37

**Wilmot:**

Well, let's see. On last Thursday, we closed with a question of where did you and your husband, Mel, go for entertainment and you showed me some beautiful photos.

3-00:3-00:59

**Soskin:**

Yeah. We really had a very rich social life. Rich in terms of what? There were lots of parties, there were lots of formal kinds of dances. Sometimes at the universities, sometimes at the Masonic Temple, which was in Oakland on 30<sup>th</sup> down sort in the edge of West Oakland. It was the Prince Hall chapter of the—which was the black auxiliary of the Masons. There was a hall there that was used for—in fact, the photo that I showed you, is I think out of that place.

3-00:01:40

**Wilmot:**

The one with you and your husband and the woman standing.

3-00:01:43

**Soskin:**

Yes. But there were lots of, you know, coming out parties, literally formal coming out parties for girls as they turned eighteen. It was very special. I guess some of this came out from the South, middle class practices of Southern refugees [laughing], people who settled out here. There were lots of dances at the International House on Campus often usually by the AKAs or the Deltas or some of the sororities. We would go as far away as San Jose where the Riggs family lived, a family that I don't know how many years that they were there. But their grandson of the elder Riggs is the race car driver, Willie T. His aunts and his mother were our contemporaries and they were part of the social group. We did weekend kinds of things, pretty well chaperoned as we were younger, but as we grew older, we continued the same social groups. When we married, that group sort of broke off. Mel and I lived in Berkeley, but in a few short years after our children came, we moved to Walnut Creek. So we weren't a part of that group anymore socially or otherwise pretty much. But during our early married life, during our teens, we were very active socially.

3-00:03:32

**Wilmot:**

You mentioned this, there's two questions that come from the other list, you mentioned this in Masonic Temple, now there was also one in— do you remember there's this one over in East Oakland by Fruitvale Bart?

3-00:03:42

**Soskin:**

I wasn't aware of that when I was growing up.

3-00:03:44

**Wilmot:**

I'm just asking out of curiosity, because I was wondering about it.

3-00:03:49

**Soskin:**

See the interesting thing is that one came into my life much, much later, because I worked for two three years with Rafiq when he was running the Upper Room there. That's when I got to know that place. When Rafiq's health failed, I was sort of an interim director of the Upper Room, along with some other people. That's when I was introduced to the hip hop world [laughing], which I'm fascinated by.

3-00:04:21

**Wilmot:**

Yeah? What do you find fascinating about it?

3-00:04:23

**Soskin:**

Oh, so much! That's a whole day in itself! That's what I mean about having the sense of having been contemporary in all the periods of my life, that I was as deeply involved and as interested in

the poets and the original rappers and KRS1 and all of these people, that it was a fascinating time.

3-00:04:51

**Wilmot:**

It's interesting too that like your niece, she works in that world.

3-00:04:57

**Soskin:**

Which one? Who?

3-00:04:58

**Wilmot:**

I'm thinking of Danyel?

3-00:05:01

**Soskin:**

Oh, Danyel? Yeah. She did a lot of writing, oh sure! She has a new book coming out in January.

3-00:05:09

**Wilmot:**

The other question that came to me out of that was, so in your early-married life also coincided with the changing landscape of your community as a result of the influx of migration from South. I wanted to ask did that impact the way your social venues looked?

3-00:05:35

**Soskin:**

My social venue was changing anyway, that had a tremendous impact, because I was married in May of 1942, which was just six months after the war started and after the influx of people began. And at that point, we were living in Berkeley—the memory of that period is so tumultuous, kind of. I'm sure there were tremendous impacts but I don't know how much it was going to be credited to simply going from being a single young woman at nineteen to becoming a young married woman, moving from East Oakland where I had grown and into Berkeley, which was a different life even then. Growing up in a world that was pretty diverse without working at it, I mean it just sort of was, into a world now that was divided racially, it was fast becoming divided racially. So all of those things, you know, there were mixed impacts of all this and my social life was affected by that.

The other thing was that Mel and I were both identifying—we're forced to identify with what about us was black culture, which was not really the black culture that was moving in. It was a different kind of black culture, more fundamentalist, a very, very different kind of—well, as I said before, I had never heard Negro National Anthem. I had never been in a society that was completely segregated. We were segregated by choice; we were with people like ourselves because we wanted to be, at least that's what we thought we were doing. We thought we were being equal.

3-00:07:47

**Wilmot:**

At the same time, you really talked about the difficulty that your father had finding work, so it sounds like it was complicated.

3-00:07:52

**Soskin:**

Oh sure! Of course! It was very complex; the whole thing was very complex. Then I'm not sure how aware I was that my father's problem of getting work was because of his race. At the time, I was a little girl. I'm not sure at all how much awareness there was of what this was, though I was certainly aware of color, because that was a big thing, you know in my family, and my parents.

3-00:08:26

**Wilmot:**

When you talk about when you say one community was more fundamentalist, are you referring to the black community that you grew up with or the community that came in?

3-00:08:37

**Soskin:**

No, the community that came in brought with them the black church. I knew there were black churches, but they're not a part of my experience. I was Catholic. So when I say fundamentalist, I'm saying there was another level of black religion. Even though I knew about Father Wallace's church in North Oakland, I knew about Reverend Wilby's church, which is presently Allen Temple, which was even then Allen Temple, I guess. I knew that there were black churches, but these were not a part of my religious life. We were Catholic, and that was a whole other—they were just other. And suddenly, they were the majority. When I was growing up, this was not majority, but in the years after the Second World War, this was the majority.

3-00:09:28

**Wilmot:**

Did your social life ever extend to Richmond?

3-00:09:32

**Soskin:**

No. It was as if Richmond didn't exist. I didn't really know about Richmond, even though I married someone who had a family member, his father's family—I think there eleven or twelve children and one of them settled in Richmond, and this was Charlie—settled in North Richmond. But the rest of the family was in San Francisco and Berkeley and those were the only one that I knew.

3-00:10:02

**Wilmot:**

Did you remember as a young, married woman coming into his family get to know Charlie Reid and his wife Beryl?

3-00:10:10

**Soskin:**

No, not at all. There was very little contact, as far as I could tell, between the families. I knew that Mel, who was an athlete, was very fond of his Uncle Charlie. I knew about him sort of mythically, but I didn't know him personally. I think I may have seen him—the family got together traditionally on the fourth of July at Mel's parent's home and that was when my children were little kids.



3-00:10:41

**Wilmot:**

Where was it?

3-00:10:42

**Soskin:**

That was in Danville; they lived in Danville. But they moved to Danville just a few years before we moved to Walnut Creek and our moving to Walnut Creek was lucky because his parents had moved out to Danville. And there were occasions where I saw Charlie Reid, I didn't know his children and I didn't know Beryl at all.

3-00:11:03

**Wilmot:**

What precipitated your husband's parents' move out to Danville?

3-00:11:10

**Soskin:**

Well, I think nothing more complicated than the fact that his father wanted to raise a horse or two and they had a couple of acres and he did have a horse and he had a truck garden, and he loved the rural life and that's what they did.

3-00:11:30

**Wilmot:**

Did you get the sense that they had a welcome experience there as a black family?

3-00:11:39

**Soskin:**

If there was any objection, it was not talked about. My guess is Mel's mother must've purchased the property, because she was very fair-skinned and they wouldn't have known until they were in. Because it was sparsely settled, it wasn't in a well-built up neighborhood, there were only a few houses anywhere near them, it was very rural at the time. I don't remember any talk about there being problems. Now that wasn't true for Mel and I. We moved into Walnut Creek, which was a lot of more neighbors, a lot of more people around to be offended by our presence. But I don't remember there being any particular problems with Mel's family.

3-00:12:24

**Wilmot:**

When did Richmond become part of your universe?

3-00:12:27

**Soskin:**

Richmond had been the western terminus for the Santa Fe Railroad. It had a history before the Second World War. And it was put on the map pretty much by Henry Kaiser during the Second World War. My sense of—I don't think that Henry Kaiser was the great, you know, reformer, by any means. But he had this imagination that he could build—he could produce merchant ships in five days and he needed bodies to work assembly lines to produce that and he didn't care who those bodies were. So he brought a lot of people, sharecroppers and—you know white and black from Arkansas and Oklahoma and Texas and Louisiana, brought them here—people who were looking for a better life, you know from whoever they were. He put Richmond on the map as a part of that effort. It existed before. I'm sure that Chevron—I think before that was Standard Oil,

and they had been here for a long time, the refineries were all here. The surrounding areas, Hercules was a place where they manufactured dynamite, explosives, I mean this was a huge arsenal. That's why there's so many brownfields here now. So much of the ground's contaminated because of the kind of activities that went on there industrially. So Richmond became a people place, you know, during the Second World War, it had been a work site I think for a long time.

I didn't know Richmond then, and there was distance—you have to realize the timeline here—when I was growing up, there were orchards between Oakland and San Leandro. Even today, I mean Richmond, you'd think there was a eucalyptus curtain between Berkeley and Richmond. There are people in Richmond who know nothing about Berkeley. There are people in Richmond who've never been to San Francisco, but on the other hand, I worked with white kids when I was working for the university who lived in Concord who'd never been to San Francisco. So there's a balkanization that happens in the Bay Area, maybe not so much anymore, maybe it's different now. But these were very distinctively different communities. And, as such, there was a distance between West Oakland, East Oakland and North Oakland. It said something when you sited those locations, you know, of who you were and where you lived. The come-late-lies, I think lived pretty much in East Oakland. Berkeley had some very, very long families that have been many, many years—black families out of San Francisco. My first husband's family was a founding member of Third Baptist Church in San Francisco and they are celebrating their hundred and fiftieth birthday this weekend or next weekend. I mean, you know, it's a long time.

3-00:16:03

**Wilmot:**

When you say you knew Charlie Reid in a mythical way. What was the myth about him?

3-00:16:08

**Soskin:**

His athletic prowess, I mean, this is someone that I knew that Mel Reid adored and wanted to emulate. So I knew about him as an athlete before I ever knew him, and that plays out in the video that you looked at. This was a larger than life kind of man, and he really was. But he didn't ever become a part of my life.

3-00:16:44

**Wilmot:**

When you went to go work for Local A36, was that your first kind of experience with Richmond?

3-00:16:55

**Soskin:**

Yeah, oh yes! I don't remember, and it must've been before we opened the record shop, certainly, and we opened the store in 1945. So this had to be '43, '44, I'm guessing.

3-00:17:15

**Wilmot:**

This was after your experience working for the federal--?

3-00:17:18

**Soskin:**

Yeah. We had left, you know, we were out now, and Mel was working part time in the shipyards and the San Pablo Park. It had to be some time, '43, '44, because we went into business in June of '45.

3-00:17:42

**Wilmot:**

Do you remember what brought you to work there? Why did you decided to go back to work after—?

3-00:17:51

**Soskin:**

I don't really know and my guess is that it had more to do with a friendship. I knew Marguerite and Roland before, and when he was putting that union together, they would've thought of me. We all lived in Berkeley. And at that time, Martha Montgomery and Zola Adams and Marguerite and I were friends. I didn't meet them when I went there. I knew them before. So I think that we sort of moved as a block into doing that.

3-00:18:24

**Wilmot:**

Did the Rolles', did they live in the same place where I met her before in North Berkeley?

3-00:18:29

**Soskin:**

No, they lived on Ashby Avenue; they lived in a little duplex on Ashby not too terribly far from where our place was. They moved into upper Berkeley later. But they had come out here from Chicago. And I can't remember how I met them, just don't remember.

3-00:18:53

**Wilmot:**

So you ended up working with—as someone who worked in the auxiliary, how familiar were you with the history of the auxiliary, how it came to be formed?

3-00:19:09

**Soskin:**

Not at all! I was no more aware of where I was except I was filing cards again, because this was not unlike my experience at the Civil Service Commission. It was changing—it was creating cards as people came in, it was filing the cards, it was comparing whether not we had the people already on file or whether there were duplicates, it was changing addresses. It was the same kind of no brain kind of work that I had done at the Civil Service Commission, which I think is why I don't remember that well. It was not an experience that stood out in any way.

3-00:19:42

**Wilmot:**

It's interesting though, because as someone who's filing employee cards and local auxiliary member cards, were you exposed then to just kind of sense of who was being served by the auxiliary?

3-00:19:59

**Soskin:**

I was aware of that it was African American, oh sure, or colored at that time, yeah. I was very aware of that we were working toward—but the world was becoming—I don't remember that as being exceptional, it was part of all the chaos that was going on. I had watched the people literally coming in, watched the train passed in front of my house, loaded with people coming into the area. And the war effort was an important thing. I don't remember feeling particularly patriotic in that job, you know, that wasn't what it was about. I think I felt that being clerical was a step up from being a housekeeper and, as such, I had attained something, because most of the adult women that were in my mother's group were doing day work. You know, taking care of people's houses. And most of the men were service workers. So I was doing clerical work, which was a kind of a baby step up.

3-00:21:14

**Wilmot:**

That's what the war brought into your life, you started doing clerical work?

3-00:21:18

**Soskin:**

Yeah.

3-00:21:21

**Wilmot:**

Can you describe a bit Zola Adams?

3-00:21:26

**Soskin:**

Zola was older than I at the time. She was probably the senior member of this group. She married Earl Adams; they lived in North Oakland just on the edge of Berkeley. She could've been Mexican, olive skin, dark hair. They had one child, Joan Adams Finney who later became appointee—she was the hostess to the reception center at the State Department under Carter, that was Zola's daughter. So even though we were doing that kind of work, if there was an escalator up, we were all sort of on it. Because all of those people did go on do other things that were, you know, higher up than—except that Zola didn't, but Zola's daughter did.

Marguerite was probably more sophisticated than the three of us, than the rest of us. I imagined her to be because she was from Chicago. But she seemed to talk about a more exciting life than the one that we were living, so that I kind of looked to her—she had a wonderful sense of humor, small, slightly built, sort of round and plumpish, but brown-skinned, delightful sense of humor, really fun. I didn't get to know her husband very well, but he was sort of Marguerite's husband—Marguerite was the colorful one in that couple.

Martha Montgomery. Her name was Martha Ford at the time. Very small, she was smaller than I, and I was small. I remember that whole job was being fun. These were three women who didn't take what we were doing very seriously and we seemed to get awful lot of fun out of comparing names on the cards. There were names that were just hilarious to us. That camaraderie is what made that job important to me and it's the only thing I really remember about it. I don't remember protests; I don't remember resentments; I don't remember anyone talking about the

fact that it was a black union; I don't remember the political parts of that at all. I was not aware of it. It fit the times that we were getting through, and so it was okay.

Looking back on it, I find resentment. I'm schizophrenic about the Rosie thing, because even now that I have to qualify that I was a non-traditional Rosie, which also sets me out from the mainstream. I feel almost like someone should resurrect that little whatever it was tin building, whatever it was and make part of the exhibit [laughing], because we did a job, we weren't on the ships. I wasn't even aware of the ships; I don't think I ever saw the shipyards. I wasn't even aware of them. We were encapsulated in this one little building.

3-00:25:00

**Wilmot:**

Are you saying then that you feel like people's understanding of Rosie is kind of narrow and should include the kind of work that you did as well?

3-00:25:15

**Soskin:**

No. I don't think it's a work thing; I think it's a separation thing. I think that it has to do with the fact that it's the one period in my life when I literally worked in a Jim Crow situation. It's the one example that I can bring up. There were times when I was either working or living in situations where I was obviously suddenly separated out, but I knew it and I could confront it. And this one, I was set apart in a deliberate kind of way that was new for me.

3-00:25:58

**Wilmot:**

Were there any men who worked in your office?

3-00:26:00

**Soskin:**

I don't remember men in the office at all.

3-00:26:02

**Wilmot:**

Was Marguerite's husband there?

3-00:26:04

**Soskin:**

In and out. He was certainly involved, but I don't remember anyone else working there.

3-00:26:11

**Wilmot:**

Did you know someone named Cleophis Brown?

3-00:26:13

**Soskin:**

That name is familiar. But there was a very distinct difference between men's work and women's work, I think. We wouldn't necessarily have done very much involving even Roland Rolles or Cleophis Brown or—I remember his name, I don't remember him at all. The name is familiar to me.

3-00:26:18

**Wilmot:**

I'm wondering and I'm confused about this—did you work with Reverend William B. Smith?

3-00:26:49

**Soskin:**

He would have been a Willie Smith I would think. That's such an ordinary name. I don't remember.

3-00:27:11

**Wilmot:**

I'm wondering if you have a memory of a Marin ship strike in 1943, when there was national boycott of the auxiliaries, where members refused to pay their dues?

3-00:27:30

**Soskin:**

No.

3-00:27:31

**Wilmot:**

That may have been after.

3-00:27:31

**Soskin:**

No, I don't at all.

3-00:27:35

**Wilmot:**

Okay.

3-00:27:38

**Soskin:**

I don't know whether that's because I simply wasn't awake enough or whether—I just don't remember. Does she say where that building was?

3-00:27:44

**Wilmot:**

I'll find out. We can spend time looking at this if you want to and find out where it was.

3-00:28:01

**Soskin:**

Because that was my only experience with Richmond up to moving back here.

3-00:28:06

**Wilmot:**

Did you and Marguerite and Zola and the last person who's name I keep forgetting--?

3-00:28:16

**Soskin:**

Zola, Marguerite and Martha.

3-00:28:22

**Wilmot:**

Martha. Did you go out after work?

3-00:28:22

**Soskin:**

Occasionally, we saw each other at events from time to time, but we were all young marrieds and we would go home. That was our work day. We didn't socialize that much.

3-00:28:34

**Wilmot:**

And the building as you said was located—where was it located?

3-00:28:43

**Soskin:**

I can't place it. I'm sure it must have been torn down. If it was any place still remaining, I'm sure I'd know it.

3-00:28:52

**Wilmot:**

Do you know the general area where it was?

3-00:28:55

**Soskin:**

Uh-uh.

3-00:28:59

**Wilmot:**

Wow. How did you get to work?

3-00:29:00

**Soskin:**

I cannot remember, except we must have carpoled. If we had gone on public transportation I'd know it. Because I don't ever remember here by bus.

3-00:29:10

**Wilmot:**

How long did you think you worked there?

3-00:29:14

**Soskin:**

Certainly maybe a year, I don't think it was much more than that. What would I have done after that? No, I guess that was prior to opening our own business, because that's when we weren't going to work for anyone after that. It was out of that that we started our shop.

3-00:29:41

**Wilmot:**

When you say that, what do you mean? "It was out of that that you started your shop."

3-00:29:45

**Soskin:**

That we realized that there was a huge market in race music, or at that time what it was known as and that there was no outlet for it, and that suddenly there was this huge market that was created by this influx of people from the South and that we could do that. And so we did it.

3-00:30:08

**Wilmot:**

Prior to opening up the race music store, your husband was working in the shipyards as a chipper, is that the right word?

3-00:30:16

**Soskin:**

Yeah.

3-00:29:48

**Wilmot:**

What did that mean?

3-00:29:49

**Soskin:**

I haven't a clue. I would think it would be taking old paint off. But why would they be taking old paint off new construction? I don't know what a chipper is.

3-00:29:55

**Wilmot:**

What do you know of his experiences in the shipyards? What did he tell you about his work?

3-00:30:01

**Soskin:**

He was working with—a group of men that Mel knew were all working together. So all I knew was that Mel and Johnny Allen, and {Bo Lewis?}—and these were all guys that had graduated from Berkeley High with Mel and had all remained in the area—all were working on the same ship at the same time. They would talk about maybe what would have happened during the day that was funny or not funny, but they talked very little—there wasn't any political words that I can remember them ringing back. It was just a place they went on their shift. They didn't bring much of that home.

3-00:31:13

**Wilmot:**

Was your husband part of the auxiliary?

3-00:31:16

**Soskin:**

I don't remember that he was but he must have been. I don't remember—as I remember coming across my brother-in-law's cards at the Civil Service Commission, I don't remember coming across Mel's cards. But then he must have been because he would not have been in the white union. Though Mel was lighter skinned than I was, I don't remember a time in his life when he ever passed, at all. He was very who he was. So he would have had to be in that union.



3-00:32:03

**Wilmot:**

If he was in a union then, he would have had to been part of the auxiliary.

3-00:32:03

**Soskin:**

I don't think he could have worked if he weren't in the union. I think it was a strictly a union operation.

3-00:32:09

**Wilmot:**

Can you tell me again what was the experience for him that brought him to the place where he knew he needed to be his own boss?

3-00:32:24

**Soskin:**

I think he'd always wanted to be—he was entrepreneurial. He didn't have a lot of ability but he wanted to do his own thing. His father's inability to get above a dockworker's job all those years and then Mel's inability to get into the union to be bakery wagon driver, which he wanted to be above all things, because he was not white, left him very little choice. He wanted to go into business and I think when he became really avid about it was one of the things—the little duplex that we bought when we got married—that Mel bought when got married for us was owned by a man named Aldo Russo who was an Italian jukebox—he had a jukebox route. He serviced it. He was very fond of Mel. He got Mel to help him service the boxes. He would pay him to go around and change the records in these boxes, which is how Mel discovered that whole industry. When Mel found how hard it was to find the music to put into black clubs and restaurants, all the little sandwich shops, there was no way to get them. Mr. Russo helped Mel to begin to get those things. That was the way he started off. That was the door that opened up the whole idea of putting together a shop of his own.

We opened up in the garage of our little duplex with orange crates and cigar box for money. I think Rick was—that's when we adopted him. Rick was born in March, we opened the store in June of the same year. So I had a bassinet and little playpen down near the cash register. I sold records through a window cut into a garage wall, while Mel was at the shipyards and doing his other things. We got radio time, that's what it was and we began to play records on KRE and people would line up in front of that little place to buy records.

00:09:18

**Wilmot:**

What was KRE?

3-00:35:13

**Soskin:**

KRE was—originally there is still a little building at the foot of Ashby Avenue that's sits there in that marsh, just before you hit the freeway. There was a little building there and it was radio station KRE and there was some pretty hip disc jockeys there. There were no black jocks at all. But they were excited by the music and they use to play it. We put on the first spot we had, I think, was {Wyonnaie Harris?} doing "Around the Clock," [giggling] which was really risqué for us at that time, it was really over the edge.

3-00:35:49

**Wilmot:**

What was the implication?

3-00:35:51

**Soskin:**

It was called “Around the Clock” and it was really innuendo, sexual innuendo. People would literally come down and they couldn’t even find the place because it was so tiny in this garage but they would circle the block until they found it, trying to buy this record.

3-00:36:06

**Wilmot:**

So this record was about—

3-00:36:10

**Soskin:**

It was Wyonnie Harris who was a blues singer. And “Around the Clock” was the first record. And that’s when we found out how big black music really was.

3-00:36:22

**Wilmot:**

Who were your first customers?

3-00:36:28

**Soskin:**

The black community. And a certain number of whites who were logging into the black blues at that time. We became very, very well known at that time. We weren’t into gospel at all. Eventually we became only a gospel store but up ‘til then it was all blues and R&B.

3-00:36:57

**Wilmot:**

When you say the black community, would you characterize this as the older community that had been—more native born?

3-00:37:08

**Soskin:**

No, this was an entirely new community for us. I don’t think I ever went home again after that. I think the world that I interacted with was not that original clearly confined social group. I was out of that. There were still events that we attended because we did, but my everyday non-white world was now a different one.

3-00:37:40

**Wilmot:**

Do you remember any of the other songs or records that sold really well?

3-00:37:47

**Soskin:**

Oh, yes! Anything by Lou Rawls and anything by—that early on, who would it be? It was mostly R&B and some blues but not—the traditional blues came later, there was Light and Hopkins and--? Oh, who would it be? Always Billie Holiday, we got to see her when she was in

town. Jimmy Lundsford and Duke Ellington, that kind of jazz was really big. Erskine Hawkins. Who else?

3-00:38:50

**Wilmot:**

Because you were one of the only distributors in the area of this kind of music, did you have a sense of what venues your records were being played in?

3-00:39:04

**Soskin:**

Say more about that. I'm not sure what you want.

3-00:39:10

**Wilmot:**

Did you have a network with the entertainment venues because you were the distributors of these records, so did club owners come to you to buy the records, or deejays?

3-00:39:18

**Soskin:**

Mostly individuals. The day came when people wanted to connect with us. I remember the day that I was in the shop alone and Jimmy Lyons, who was the big guy out of Chicago, or wherever he was from, who later settled in Monterey and established the grandfather of jazz festivals at Monterey, he had a show sort of midnight 'til two, three in the morning and he would contact us for records. At one point, he came over because he wanted to advertise us on his show and it was too threatening to Mel. Mel couldn't connect, he didn't want any part of it, which I always regretted. Because I used to listen to Jimmy Lyons at night and just loved his taste and loved his music. So that Mel was really protecting his individuality and his own thing from the beginning. He didn't connect easily with anyone. He grew to be a very, very important promoter.

3-00:40:30

**Wilmot:**

Your husband did or Jimmy Lyons?

3-00:40:33

**Soskin:**

No, both, but not nearly as Jimmy Lyons was. Jimmy Lyons was huge.

3-00:40:38

**Wilmot:**

What was your job and what was your role at the race music store? What was your job?

3-00:40:43

**Soskin:**

I was sort of everything in the beginning, because Mel had two other jobs. I was behind the counter, so I did it all. I organized the stock and did the ordering and did everything in the beginning until we built a home in Walnut Creek and I was divorced from the shop completely. Mel became that, and that was all he was at that point.

3-00:41:14

**Wilmot:**

What were your favorite songs and artists?

3-00:41:17

**Soskin:**

Oh God! I was certainly a Duke Ellington fan, totally for years and years, still am. I loved Sarah Vaughn, but that was in her beginning way, way back. I loved Billie Holiday, but not as much in the beginning as later. I could not relate to traditional black blues for a long, long time. I was a jazz buff always. I would move along with jazz as jazz developed and changed and could go with it, that wasn't true for me with blues. I, later, much later, when I came back into the business, recognized and appreciated black gospel as jazz come home, contemporary black gospel. The day came when I knew that the best jazz was coming out of the choir loft. This was something that I can fully appreciate.

3-00:42:53

**Wilmot:**

I'm wondering how that—because I know you also as a singer and song writer, so I'm wondering how that influenced your own work?

3-00:43:07

**Soskin:**

That's a secret life. In looking back, I know how much I compartmentalized. I didn't do any writing and composing until I was—I guess my daughter was two or three years old and that was my fourth child. And that came out of a break down—that came out of really getting needful to the place where I was able to emerge as a way of salvation. Then there's a part of me, that part of me is only known by the people that I interacted with in the Mount Diablo community. My world, that traditional world that I grew up in doesn't know me as a writer/singer at all. And the people that I came back to when I came back to Berkeley don't know me as that person at all. But during those years and you have to realize I was there from the early fifties until the seventies.

3-00:44:35

**Wilmot:**

In Lafayette?

3-00:44:37

**Soskin:**

In Walnut Creek.

3-00:44:38

**Wilmot:**

In Walnut Creek.

3-00:44:39

**Soskin:**

But during those years, I had done concerts at a number of colleges. I was always a little bit not quite admitting that I was doing this. I was Betty Reid, who was willing to sing for you, but I didn't want to be known as a singer. It's amazing, because I did a lot of that. Mostly writing was a way of getting outside of me where I can see things are happening inside of me. It was very private, very personal. And when I go back and listen to the music now, it feels like important music. At the time, I didn't have that feeling at all and I tucked it away after I came back into Berkeley.

3-00:45:39

**Wilmot:**

You didn't feel like even as this is a secret life and something that felt very private musically, where did you feel influences from?

3-00:45:55

**Soskin:**

I'm not sure I know. Except that it was more jazz than anything but probably art songs. I don't know. I remember once there's this woman that was a friend that I worked for a short time in Walnut Creek who had a dress shop, an exclusive little dress shop. And when I was trying to work my way out of my marriage, I took a job working with Jean. Her husband had been one of Billie Holiday's managers, been in New York before they ever came out to California. Musicians that came to the area stayed at Jean's place in Walnut Creek and Dizzy was a very close friend of Jean's. I remember Dizzy would never fly, he always traveled by train and he was afraid to death of flying. I would go with Jean down to the railroad station and pick up Dizzy and bring him back. And she knew about my music and a couple times she had me come over and sing for him and he said, "You don't sound like nobody, lady!" So I don't know what that meant except that I came away with the feeling that whatever influences were there were not very marked.

3-00:47:27

**Wilmot:**

You had your own sound.

3-00:47:30

**Soskin:**

Yeah. I was doing whatever was coming clearly from myself. I always valued that.

3-00:47:47

**Wilmot:**

Was Jean African American?

3-00:47:48

**Soskin:**

No, she's Jewish.

3-00:47:49

**Wilmot:**

She was Jewish.

3-00:47:52

**Soskin:**

Much darker skin than I. People took us for sisters, but she was Jewish.

3-00:48:02

**Wilmot:**

Just to return to that race music store, did you have the sense where were your customers from? Were they from the immediate city or from all over?

3-00:48:13

**Soskin:**

No, they were from all over. I walk down the street 'til this day, and people approach me on the street in Richmond and say, "Aren't you Betty Reid?" that were customers even back when. Isiah Turner, the present city manager of Richmond remembers coming into my store as a kid. So you know it's been there now for an awful lot of years.

3-00:48:41

**Wilmot:**

Did you have any competition? Were there any other—?

3-00:48:46

**Soskin:**

Eventually, there were a couple. One opened up on 7<sup>th</sup> Street in Oakland and another one opened up on Alcatraz, other black shops. They weren't quite competition, because we got a head start pretty much on the most of them. But in time, they all became kind of equal, I think. We eventually had three stores, one in Oakland, downtown Oakland and one in Vallejo, small shops.

3-00:49:14

**Wilmot:**

I didn't know that. I thought you had only one store. When did you open these other stores?

3-00:49:19

**Soskin:**

No. We had one in Swann's Market, which was the big 10<sup>th</sup> Street market downtown. Yeah, we had one there for years and years. I was not involved in any of those, that was pretty much after I was raising kids and Mel was doing that stuff. Mel and his Uncle Paul. Paul Reid who was Mel's father's brother had been a really fine salesman with the Golden State Insurance, which was a black insurance company. He left there and joined Mel in the business and that's when things really took off because he had a lot of know-how. And he was the public part of Reid's. I have some pictures around here with Paul. He emceed concerts; they gave huge concerts, choir competitions throughout the Bay Area. They filled the Oakland Auditorium, absolutely filled it. But this was Paul who just fabulous. And he died eventually.

3-00:50:34

**Wilmot:**

When did this store shift or expand its inventory to include gospel music?

3-00:50:40

**Soskin:**

That was pretty much under Mel and Paul. Paul was a churchman. He was the person that sort of brought that out. I'm pretty sure that's true. They introduced Aretha's father into the area, for instance. They brought in performers from all over the country who were black performers or black gospel performers. James Cleveland out of Los Angeles came for concerts, Shirley Caesar and all of the quartets, they were all brought in for concerts, huge concerts.

3-00:51:22

**Wilmot:**

Shirley Caesar?

3-00:51:23

**Soskin:**

Shirley Caesar and the Blind Boys and all those people. They were the big gospel stars of the time. White America was not paying attention to black gospel music then. So we had a corner on that. R&B and blues was finding its way into the mainstream where it was twisted by the Elvis Presleys of the day. But black gospel was not seen as a market then. We had it pretty much to ourselves for a long time. At least Paul and Mel did.

3-00:52:02

**Wilmot:**

Did your market ever extend pass the Bay Area region?

3-00:52:05

**Soskin:**

Oh yes! The thing that I did before we left was to establish a newsletter, which eventually got be twenty thousand people, and I would write it and process the whole thing and stamp it and send it out third class mail. And eventually it got to be so expensive that we couldn't afford it anymore and we simply had to stop sending it out. But I was so political in the letters that I told people how to vote, [laughing] I would tell people all kinds of stuff. Because that became my voice and they let me have it. So that was great. I did this newsletter. So we have people literally to this day drive in from Sacramento, from Monterey. We have a customer who comes in from Reno. We did lots of mail order. We had lots of servicemen during the Gulf War, a lot of kids that were on ships that would send for stuff. We eventually began to get e-mail orders, which we still do. So, yeah, it broke out of its locale completely.

3-00:53:31

**Wilmot:**

During this time, is there anything else that you want to tell me about the race music store, I'd love to hear it. So just because I hadn't posed a question, feel free to tell me more.

3-00:53:41

**Soskin:**

That music store had as many lives as I did, in a lot of ways. It started off as a little R&B, jazz kind of spot that grew way passed its potential and did very well. Then it went through a period of being a growing gospel shop. And then it found its level with the street. All that time the street was going down. Sacramento Street eventually became sort of the sin capital of the city of Berkeley.

The year that I came back after Mel's health failed—this in the seventies I guess, it was in '76 and '77—the street was lined with drug dealers. Inside the store, when I went in to close it down because Mel's had failed, there was a room that was nothing but posters, you know those velvet kind of posters that you light up with blue light or something, there were water pipes in the counters, you know obviously it had become to some extent a head shop. It had become what the street was. I didn't know what to do with it when I first came back, because it to some extent was scary to me. It still had a clientele of church people, but its clientele had changed. Not long after I took it over, Leopold's opened just outside of Cal and Cal had the discount houses up there, and there's no way—those places were selling for less than my wholesale prices. There was no way I could compete with discount houses, so I cut out everything but gospel, because they hadn't discovered it yet.

Now the store was mine, but it was also true that I was working for the University of California—that's when I was married to Bill—and I knew that there's no way to make a financial success out of that store.

I had become so political by now, because the sixties had been by and I found a role in the Black Revolution, I was a different person than I was when I had been there before. So that I decided to keep the shop and use it towards social change. If there was some way that I could amplify my voice by being a black merchant from Sacramento Street when I went to City Hall, I could do things that as a middle class woman from up on Grizzly Peak, you know, as a part of the university, I could go down, I couldn't get very much to happen. But the people that I knew in my life as Mrs. William Soskin were the movers and shakers of the city of Berkeley. So if I could marry those, if I could go down and be Betty Reid on Sacramento Street, but could use the contacts that my husband and I had as Betty Soskin at City Hall, then I might be able to make some changes. So I very clearly and deliberately kept that business open with the idea being that if it only paid its way, but magnified my voice, that it didn't have to do anything more than that. If it paid its own expenses and paid a couple of salaries for someone to work for me. So that's when I took over the business to do a whole different thing. And that part of it—the shop had another life that was almost not related to its first life.

3-00:57:52

**Wilmot:**

Did you own the building that the shop was housed in?

3-00:57:56

**Soskin:**

Yes, but it was in foreclosure. We had owned, but Mel hadn't paid income taxes for three years. He hadn't paid our mortgage forever. He had begun to gamble heavily. So that when Paul had died by now so that the supports that he had were gone. I was gone. Paul was gone. Paul died of tuberculosis or some sort of complications at a fairly young age, I guess he was in his early fifties. Mel couldn't pull it off; he couldn't maintain by himself. And it failed. Everything went out from under him. And his health failed. He developed diabetes, which I think was to some extent very stress related.

But by now, I had been married for some time to someone else. We are still parents of kids and we were friends, because we started off as friends as teenagers. And the relationship reverted back to friendship. So that I was still that person that was friends with him, though I didn't know what things were. But when I went down and found how bad it was—called the mortgage company and asked them for an extension, called the distributors and said it looked that there's a life there and if they give me six months, maybe I could pull it out, and got cooperation from everybody, and was able to do that.

But the place was redlined; I couldn't get any insurance on the building. There were things that were impossible to deal with. I learned how to deal with them. I learned how to cope. I was told that there was no way that they could do anything for me, no second mortgages, no loans, no nothing. But if I could pick up the building and move it six blocks in either direction, they could help me. Because where it was sitting, there was nobody can help me.



01:00:03

**Wilmot:**

And you did?

3-01:00:07

**Soskin:**

No. So then I changed the community that it was sitting in. I literally changed the climate of the community. Across the street from us on Sacramento Street, between 67<sup>th</sup> and Ashby now, is what's called the Byron Runford Plaza. That was me. That was known as Betty's house to my kids.

I got myself on as an aide to one of the councilmen who happened to be my attorney. I worked with him two terms of office. This was Don Jelnick, who's still around. And that put me in City Hall. Gus Newport was then mayor of Berkeley. I had worked to support Gus. I was appointed to a task force that was assigned to find scattered site housing throughout the city for something like fifty low-income homes. At the time, I tried to get the city to take over the lots across the street from me as one of the sites and the city wouldn't do it.

But what they did do was to eventually take it on as a separate project. And I was able to convince them that it was cancerous to the rest of the community. If we would change that, all the property in the area would become more valuable. They put, I think it was eight and half a million dollars into that, tore down I think it was crack houses. Most of the people in the area were squatters, a lot of them, in those houses, so by the time they cleaned it all up, and bought it all up, built forty nine units of new housing, the face of the community was changed. Now my building was the only blight. [laughing] That's not quite true, but it's a whole different place.

3-01:02:28

**Wilmot:**

Hold on one second, I think this is going to end and I want to stop it and rewind it.

3-01:02:42

**Soskin:**

But that was wonderful.

3-01:02:45

**Wilmot:**

Yeah. Hold on one second.

[interview interruption while video tape is changed]

I was wondering when the store moved out of your duplex garage into its own building?

3-01:03:13

**Soskin:**

That happened in 1964. I was living in Walnut Creek pretty much. At that time, Mel would leave—we had built a home out there, and once the construction was completed and Mel went back full time to working on the shop and I was pregnant with David actually at that period. The building went up in 1964. We had actually paid 750 dollars now for that lot, I remember.

3-01:03:52

**Wilmot:**

Is this the one on Sacramento?

3-01:03:53

**Soskin:**

Yes. Mr. {Mossou?}. Aldo owned both the site that we bought, the duplex, and he owned the lot on the corner. And he was very fond of us and wanted us to own that extra piece of property and we did and Mel bought it. I remember it was 750 dollars.

3-01:04:16

**Wilmot:**

Down payment?

3-01:04:17

**Soskin:**

No! That was the cost. The cost of the duplex was \$4900 dollars. And I'm not saying down payment, I'm saying the cost of it. That's what property was at the time.

3-01:04:29

**Wilmot:**

So why was that other parcel only \$750?

3-01:04:33

**Soskin:**

I have no idea, but what's I paid for it. We held it until—Mel had always planned at some point to put a building there, so in 1964 when we were living in Walnut Creek, that building was constructed. I was living a very separate life and he was working twelve hours a day pretty much, seven days a week. I mean he spent all of his time in Berkeley and I spent all my time in Walnut Creek raising kids. We grew apart pretty much. But I knew little about that building.

3-01:05:11

**Wilmot:**

You mentioned that during this time after the first three years of your marriage, you had four children, and could you talk their names and the sequence that they were born?

3-01:05:34

**Soskin:**

The first child was adopted. At the age nine days. And that was Dale Richard Reid, who was our eldest. When he was five, I finally got pregnant with Bobby. Bob was born in 1950, must have been, yeah, because Rick was born 1945. Rick was our first, Bob was our first, David was our youngest son and Dori was our only daughter. So they were all quite special to me. I actually loved mothering, I mean I got a kick out of being a parent. But it coincided with our moving out of the area. Rick was a very bright little boy, and when we moved into Walnut Creek, he had been the top of his class in the third grade. When we went out to Walnut Creek, he was behind the other children in the same grade, which was when I got a good picture of the difference in education in the inner city and outside of it.

Once we had Bobby—and you said you were asking me about being pregnant—I didn't believe it until I was about four months pregnant. I remember waiting because I was very small

physically, I was just a little person. I don't think I weighed a hundred pounds until I was fifty. So I was slender, proportionate but very small. I had expected to show very quickly when I was pregnant, but I remember walking down the street in downtown Oakland one day, catching sight of myself in a display window and I was wearing a green knit suit, and for the first time, saw my body shape had changed. And realized, for the first time, that this was pregnancy, because the doctor kept telling me I was pregnant but I didn't believe it because I couldn't see it. I must've been about three and half months at that time and could see that I was not poking up but straight up and down where even though I was very small I was curved where I was straight and that baby was here. It was a thrilling experience to be pregnant. That was marvelous. Even though it was not easy, because I had a five-year-old at the time, but it was wonderful thing.

3-01:08:30

**Wilmot:**

So you got pregnant eight years into your marriage?

3-01:08:35

**Soskin:**

Yeah. Then once it got started, when Bob was a year old, I was waiting to have the next one. I wanted to get pregnant right away.

3-01:08:47

**Wilmot:**

What year was Bob born?

3-01:08:49

**Soskin:**

In 1950. Two and half years later, I guess, David was born. Bob's birth was difficult, I was in labor for about thirty-six hours before he actually was born, but he was fine. David's birth--

3-01:09:23

**Wilmot:**

Did they allow your husband to come into the labor room?

3-01:09:26

**Soskin:**

No. Now see, I don't know. Mel's working pattern was such that I don't know whether he just wasn't there because he was busy and because I was into understanding, always—I mean I was very understanding, with low expectations for his participation. He was really preoccupied with the business. But I don't remember his being with me at all during that. And I was given drugs so that I was not aware when Bob actually born.

3-01:10:06

**Wilmot:**

Which hospital were you at?

3-01:10:07

**Soskin:**

At Alta Bates. David was born at Kaiser and he was a larger baby. There were complications after he was born. I had an infection in a breast and was very, very ill for a long. So that was not good. Then I had two small children. In fact, the house was being built while I was pregnant with

David. So I was pregnant with a house and pregnant with two little kids and pregnant with a new baby. So David actually should have been named as being born in Walnut Creek, because that's where we were living though we came into town to have this child.

I became pregnant with Dori when David was what--about four and I wanted another child. I wanted a girl. There was amniocentesis at the time, so I could not know that this was a child, so there was a great delight when she was born. But I went to a black doctor; I didn't want to go back to Kaiser, where David was born, because that had been not a good experience. But this man turned out to be completely inept. Even though he was in the room, she was born in the bed, we did never get into a delivery room. I didn't know—she was born one month premature. I've gone into labor prematurely, had gone in after hemorrhaging. She was born. I didn't realize she was brain damaged, didn't know until she was a year old before I realized that she wasn't developing as the other kids had developed. She had suffered anoxia at birth, which was the loss of some brain cells from oxygen starvation in the process of birth. That was not easy; that was hard. Because on the one hand, she was our first girl, and she was my only girl, and I waited and wanted her desperately. And to have it dawn on me slowly that she had born handicapped was really hard, which was the reason I fell apart when she was about two and half or three.

3-01:12:48

**Wilmot:**

Was Dori her full name?

3-01:12:50

**Soskin:**

Dorian Reid.

3-01:12:53

**Wilmot:**

Why did you name your children how you named them? Or were you the sole namer?

3-01:12:57

**Soskin:**

I don't really know. Bob was named after one of Mel's uncles, Bob Reid. Allen's his middle name, which is my mother's maiden name. David was named after one of Mel's friends actually. I often wished I'd gone back and use some of the names in my family, my father's Dorson Charbonnet, which was not a name that was—it was the only Dorson I knew. I'd like to use that name, but didn't. Dorian was named—I'm not even sure—her middle name was Leon, which was my middle name. But I think I just loved the name Dorian.

3-01:13:55

**Wilmot:**

What year was Dorian born?

3-01:13:59

**Soskin:**

She was born in 1957. Yeah.

3-01:14:12

**Wilmot:**

David was born what year?

3-01:14:16

**Soskin:**

Well, Rick was 1945. Bobby was 1950. David would've been 1952. Dori would've been '57.

3-01:14:42

**Wilmot:**

It was in 1952 that you moved out to Walnut Creek? How did you locate that lot and decide to move there? I understand you built on the lot. How did the buying process go for you?

3-01:15:12

**Soskin:**

Because we would visit Mel's family. His parents lived in Danville, and driving home through what was an area called Saranap, which was an unincorporated area, Mel apparently saw that lot at one point and decided he wanted it. It was about what was over a half-acre. It was bordered by a creek. It had an old swimming pool in the middle of it. It was sort of in a {swill?}. No, there was nothing on the property.

3-01:15:51

**Wilmot:**

Just a swimming pool but no house?

3-01:15:53

**Soskin:**

No, but it must've belong to a house that had once been there. He decided that he wanted that, but there was no way we could buy it, because we weren't white. We both felt that there was going to be easier to buy that, because it was on an unincorporated area than if it were within the city limits. But even that we couldn't do, so we got someone to buy it for us. That was the white wife of who was judge at the time but later Mayor Lionel Wilson of Oakland. His wife Dorothy made the purchase for us.

It was eventful. [chuckle] It triggered a lot of anger. The architect that signed our place was threatened, as we were. We got letters telling us and asking us—one letter, which was really surprising—I wished I had saved it—asking if we realized—the rumor had gotten out that Father Divine, who at the time was the great spiritual leader of Fundamentalist Movement across the country, had purchased it to put in what was called the Heaven and they had gotten the feeling because that this pool was there that this is what that was going to be. So a lot of the anger, a lot of it was fueled by the rumor and no one was bothering to listen to the fact that we were just young couple with a couple of small kids. You know, I was pregnant.

3-01:17:36

**Wilmot:**

They thought a whole community was moving in?

3-01:17:37

**Soskin:**

So then even when they found that out, they realized that we were a couple and that we were kids. They would see us coming down—you know, I would come down just before the sun would set at night sometimes to see the progress of the building once it was under construction. But even before that, when they stack the lumber, we got word that if we tried to stack lumber there that they would burn it. Yeah. The neighbors were very upset about our coming in.

3-01:18:13

**Wilmot:**

So did they ever make good on any of those threats?

3-01:18:15

**Soskin:**

No. The thing that was interesting to me was that over the period of time, it must've taken six months to actually construct that home—my father was overseeing the construction and Mel was working on the job and they'd hired laborers and other carpenters—but while the house was under construction, sometimes I'd be there just sitting on the property watching what was going on. Over time, people would walk down to where I was and would tell me what their names were, tell me that they hoped that I would be happy there and I learned that almost every one of them had done it without knowing that the others had. So that over time, I realized that what they could do collectively, none of them was willing to do alone, that the Improvement Association was taking a stand against us being there, but individually the people in the community were probably not in tune with that. Because almost everybody had said to me, "I hope that you are happy here." It was a very strange kind of thing.

There was a Robert {Conden?} who was an attorney, a very high political guy, who lived right around the bend from our property, who offered to give a dinner party to have the neighbors come in and meet us. I remember saying, "No! You won't do that, because it's my constitutional right to be here and I won't have you giving me permission. I don't need this." I thought maybe I hurt his feelings but that's when I was becoming politically aware and standing up for myself. I was doing it pretty much by myself because Mel was in town working.

But Rick, I still have chills when I think about him, because he was the first black child at the grammar school. He entered at the third or fourth grade and was taking all this stuff. We put him in school before we moved into Walnut Creek. Because while the house was under construction, I was going out there every day and I would take him and he would get on the school bus. Then he was catching all this stuff at school that I wasn't really aware of. Finally after we had actually moved into the house, the principal called me in one day and said that he thought that I should not have this child in school, because we weren't residents of the district. That's when I realized that they didn't realize that we were actually in the house.

But it was only a matter of few months when somebody in the community came and told me that the school was doing a minstrel show as their big fundraiser. We were the only black family in the community and here was my kid, the only black kid in the school, and they were doing a minstrel show! I drove my little station wagon up to the school, and we were walked in the principal's office and his {endman?} costume or interlocutor whatever he was, was hanging on his door for that evening's performance.

3-01:21:51

**Wilmot:**

It was that night.

3-01:21:52

**Soskin:**

It was that night. I went in and I said, “You can’t do this.” His face was flushed and he said, “What do you mean? I know that now, but I didn’t know that before.” And I said, “Well, why do you know it now?” He said, “I didn’t know it until I saw your face.” He said, “You need to realize--” No, he said, “It’s not anything insulting, what we are doing is we are showing black people or colored people as happy-go-lucky and--” And I said, “Do I look happy-go-lucky to you?” I said, “You know this was always meant as ridicule of black people. The form is a ridicule of black people, this is not something that you can do.” That night I sat in the front row of their minstrel show. [whispers] I was terrified. I was terrified. And now I realize what my kid was going through.

3-01:23:13

**Wilmot:**

Was your son part of the minstrel show?

3-01:23:15

**Soskin:**

No. He hadn’t even mentioned it. I don’t think he’d have known what a minstrel show was. But I was also by that time involved with the Unitarian group that was pretty sophisticated, and they knew. It was one of these people that told me that the show was being held. But I had dropped my kid in the middle of this, which was just—oh! And it was about then too while I was new in the community, just before I met any liberals really, real liberals, I picked up the local newspaper and saw where a couple had moved into a housing shack out in Pleasant Hill, a black couple, a truck driver and his young wife. The Improvement Association was coming together to throw them out and make a lot of noise. By that time, my problem had been solved pretty much. I mean I was there and I was in my house. The neighbors had backed off and everything was fine. [phone rings]

3-01:24:22

**Wilmot:**

Do you want to answer that?

3-01:24:27

**Soskin:**

Yeah. It might be Dori. I can’t afford to ever not answer phones—

[interview interruption]

3-01:24:38

**Soskin:**

I was talking about the young couple. There was this young couple who were buying a house in Pleasant Hill. And because my problems had worked out, I decided that I would go and tell the people that it was okay. I was that naïve. “Just don’t pay any attention to this.” In the newspaper account, there was the address of the school where their Improvement Association was going to be meeting, so I got in my car and I put on my finest little suede jacket and my gabardine skirt and I’m looking sharp and I know it.

I drove out to this school and I walk in and sit down in the middle of the room. And I had assumed that if I were there that my presence would protect me—that being there as an African American, that there are things that they would say among themselves that they wouldn't say in my presence. So I'd never really heard what people say at those meetings.

But they didn't recognize me as African American.

So I sat in the middle of their meeting and the room was full and I heard things that I had never heard before, such as, "If all else fails, we can get them on out the basis of the diseases they bring into our community." I sat here and listened to this. They talked about awful things about black people moving into the communities, what was going to happen to their property values. So, I got up in the middle of one of the speeches and I walked up to the front. And I said, "I really feel that you need to know that I'm here, because I want to tell you that I am colored and I moved into this community two years ago or whatever that was and all these things that you are fearing are simply not true." I just took them on, one thing and another. They were also of liberals there who had come to see, as I had, what these people were going to do. There were people in the community who were not bigots at all. So when I stood up to speak, I didn't realize they were there, but I had my little say and then I got up and walked out.

As I walked out of the meeting, they got up and followed me out. And then I heard other footsteps behind me and other people walked out. The thing that was so interesting is that a newspaperman came out and I was getting ready to get in my car and he wanted to know who I was and we talked. He said, "I've got go back in, because I've got to see what happened behind your appearance." So he went in. And I had seen a guy I've been in high school with at Castlemont in the audience. This guy, after I walked out, had stood up before the people who were left and said that he knew me—apparently, I think he drove a milk truck—and that I was one of the kinds of people that was trained by the communist to do this kind of work. I had no political affiliations at all. And this guy that I had thought was my friend, he was my schoolmate from Castlemont from years before, turned out to be one of the spokesmen in their group. But what that did was it identified me to the liberal progressive element in the community who also turned out to be mostly Unitarians. So that I suddenly was in a community of people, though they were white, who politically I could identify with. And that took a couple of years to get to that place. But we worked then on all kinds of things from then on.

3-01:28:45

**Wilmot:**

I want to ask you about you about that community, the Unitarian liberal white community, but I want to first go back to two important things that came to me from what you just said. The first thing is my understanding of white flight, though in my mind it happens a little later, not in the 1950's.

3-01:29:12

**Soskin:**

Uh-uh., no, it happened before.



3-01:29:13

**Wilmot:**

I'm wondering about that. Had you moved into a community of white people who had just moved out of Oakland and Berkeley to get away from black people?

3-01:29:27

**Soskin:**

No! One would've thought that, but in the area where I was were a lot of people who lived in that unincorporated area for a long time. There were large houses, there were small houses. Because it was unincorporated there was some really—there was a family who lived in what had been a converted chicken coop that were white. There was a psychiatrist and his wife who lived about a half a block down the road from where we were. It was a very mixed community, very mixed, this was not a housing tract. Now, what was true with the other family in Pleasant Hill was that this was one of those communities where all the houses were just alike, it was a housing tract, and being different would have stood out. But not where we were. Where we were, I would have thought we would have the best chance. There was an artist and his wife who lived in the next house where we were. I later took painting lessons from {Edie Dinken?}. I mean, this was a very, very eclectic group of people.

3-01:30:28

**Wilmot:**

In the housing tract that you went to go in and kind of advocate for the young black couple who you felt a kinship with, was that a community that was kind of a repository for white flight?

3-01:30:51

**Soskin:**

Oh, yes! I think that would have been.

3-01:30:54

**Wilmot:**

I mean, especially if they had that one person from your high school from East Oakland.

3-01:30:58

**Soskin:**

Yeah. And they'd be homogenous, I mean these were people of a particular income. I mean, this was housing tract. This is not what I would've bought into for that very reason. I mean, I would've wanted to be in exactly where I was, which was a place where there was a lot of diversity, not in race but in everything else.

3-01:31:29

**Wilmot:**

That's really interesting to me because when I think about your move, and the subsequent years after your move, and I put it in conversation with that same white flight movement that happened at that same time, it just kind of heightens for me the tensions that you may have faced.

3-01:31:49

**Soskin:**

Oh sure, sure. But see California was undergoing such, you know—talk about earthquakes, the the human quakes that were going on in every way, the change from 1942 or 1941, in the beginning of the war and the sixties, that twenty years, this state's population was—how many

times did it turn over? I mean it was, we were, like, living in four different states without ever living home, because the rate of change was so great and the change in our own lives were so great.

3-01:32:23

**Wilmot:**

From Walnut Creek, did you keep a finger on the pulse in your old neighborhood, in East Oakland?

3-01:32:28

**Soskin:**

No. I became very much a part of Walnut Creek, very much.

3-01:32:32

**Wilmot:**

Did you have a sense though that East Oakland was changing where you lived?

3-01:32:37

**Soskin:**

Oh yes! My parents were still there. It was becoming more and more, very, very rapidly—this is where the realtors in the area dropped the string around the area where black folks could be. And they were putting everybody in the same areas. My parents, the entire neighborhood became black, I mean totally for blocks and blocks and blocks.

3-01:32:59

**Wilmot:**

When?

3-01:33:03

**Soskin:**

Early on, because there were already a number of family on 83<sup>rd</sup> Avenue. There were a couple of families on 87<sup>th</sup>. There was at least one family on 82<sup>nd</sup>. It was several families on 79<sup>th</sup>. This was an area where blacks had already began to move into, of the old people. So that, this was an area where people were more fed into. So, yeah. My parents became the heart of eventually—I couldn't even give their house away. I tried to sell it, and we had one buyer. The area had become so rough that was no way to—it was incredible.

3-01:33:50

**Wilmot:**

What year was that?

3-01:33:52

**Soskin:**

I sold their house in '88, '89?

3-01:33:58

**Wilmot:**

It's funny because now that neighborhood is gentrifying.

3-01:34:01

**Soskin:**  
Is it?

3-01:34:01

**Wilmot:**  
Yeah, but mostly up by MacArthur.

3-01:34:06

**Soskin:**  
Oh, up that way. So we would below East 14<sup>th</sup>.

3-01:34:08

**Wilmot:**  
83<sup>rd</sup> and MacArthur, the houses in the past six months there had increased value by about 30 percent.

3-01:34:13

**Soskin:**  
That's amazing.

3-01:34:15

**Wilmot:**  
Because all over Oakland, it's all these little craftsman bungalows, and so people are locating that as—it's one of last affordable areas. It's very interesting.

3-01:34:23

**Soskin:**  
The great first homes, sure! It's great for first home. Where are those people going that are going out of those homes?

3-01:34:31

**Wilmot:**  
I am not certain and I'm not sure—I think a lot of them are actually renter occupied, but a lot of them are also owner occupied. There was a strong tradition of home ownership in that area. It's very prevalent.

3-01:34:49

**Soskin:**  
I know that Fruitvale is largely Hispanic, but is that growing down further and further east?

3-01:34:59

**Wilmot:**  
I think that area is becoming kind of around East Mountain Mall. I would say that Fruitvale area has extended to East Mountain mall. So that area is like—.

3-01:35:12

**Soskin:**  
That's amazing! See that was largely Portuguese and Irish.

3-01:35:19

**Wilmot:**

It's not entirely—I would say it's forty-sixty or forty-forty-twenty. Forty Mexican, forty black, and twenty percent Arab and Asian.

3-01:35:36

**Soskin:**

Interesting. That's an interesting mix.

3-01:35:40

**Wilmot:**

You said that community used to be largely Portuguese and Irish?

3-01:35:44

**Soskin:**

Oh yeah! And over the years, there were number of African American families, but they all knew each other.

3-01:35:58

**Wilmot:**

That's interesting, so you watched that neighborhood really become—and you associate that with the real estate agents actively kind of moving black people into that area?

3-01:36:06

**Soskin:**

Oh yeah! Oh sure. I say that because we couldn't get a bank loan to buy outside what was prescribed black district in Berkeley. We could not buy property above Grove Street, which is why we wound up in—if we are going have to fight, we might as well fight for something we want. So we went all way to Walnut Creek. But even though we were a business, doing business with the Bank of America, in Berkeley, they wouldn't handle a loan for us.

3-01:36:38

**Wilmot:**

When you are ready to move into your second home, and your family was expanding. Were there areas that you were particularly excited and interested in?

3-01:36:46

**Soskin:**

No, Mel wanted to be like his father actually. And we knew where we were not supposed to be but we wanted to be out in the rural area and I loved it. I really did. It was really nice when we got over the shock of the first two years. It was a rich experience for all of us.

3-01:37:13

**Wilmot:**

After Rick, did you send your other children to those public schools?

3-01:37:17

**Soskin:**

They all went to those public schools until they got to high school and then I couldn't get anybody through the high school. Rick failed, he simply stopped going, it got to be just excruciating in his last year, so he wound up getting his picture taken and all that stuff and

refused to graduate. Bobby was also very bright and doing very well, except he would not bend. Rick took it all; he didn't even bring it home particularly. He absorbed it. And he was fighting being gay, being black in a white community. He had so much stuff to deal with, being adopted and the only child. [interview interruption when phone rings]

Rick, not only was he a black child in a white environment, totally, he was gay and by this time actively gay, he was the only adopted child—later I had three children. All these things were difficult that I don't think he ever really got over being separate and apart, and always a source of a lot of pain for me. Because I don't know how much of that I created for him. And when he died, it was very hard for me.

David, I finally, after two kids not being able to get through that system—Bob fought back, he fought back hard and it was okay. David, I sent him to live with a friend in Berkeley, to finish school in Berkeley High School. I gave up on that system. At that point, I was ready to move back into the area. My marriage had pretty much ended and I gave up the house and came to live in Berkeley and went to work at the university. That was you know, Dori—now see, David, I took out of the public school all together and put him in private school when he was in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. And he stayed in that 3<sup>rd</sup> grade until he went to high school. Then he went to high school for two years.

3-01:39:58

**Wilmot:**

Which private school did you put him into?

3-01:39:59

**Soskin:**

{Pinell?}, which was a school out in the Alhambra Valley. It was wonderful. It was a school that was patterned after {summary?} and kids would learn at their own pace and do what they wanted to do. In fact, that's where Dori went until she was ready for school and that worked for her, too. So, I gave up on the schools, because by that time, the area I thought was really—it was too much to ask children to go through the system.

3-01:40:26

**Wilmot:**

An all white environment?

3-01:40:27

**Soskin:**

Yeah. I couldn't do it.

3-01:40:29

**Wilmot:**

Did you ever follow the story of what happened to that young black couple out in Pleasanton?

3-01:40:35

**Soskin:**

They did move in. I don't know if they stayed. I hadn't met them before that evening; I did go out to meet them. I think she was a nurse or studying to be a nurse and he was truck driver, I

think. They were much, much younger than I was; they were young. I think they may have had one child at the time. But that was the beginning of my activism, I think.

3-01:41:11

**Wilmot:**

Can you describe that community of the Unitarian liberals? Who were they and what were they like? What kinds of activities?

3-01:41:14

**Soskin**

Oh it was pretty fantastic. Yeah, very much so. There was an attorney, his name was David {Borton?} who was at that meeting of the Improvement Association in Pleasant Hill, who came up and made himself known to me that evening. We became pretty good friends. Then I began to attend—there was no Unitarian church at the time. There was a group of Unitarians who used to meet in private homes. And when I had discovered that this was non-Creole, and had no dogma, and was absolutely a group of searchers who were willing to come together and agree there were no answers but that we would explore the questions, that this fit philosophically where I was in my own life. But when I found that their politics was as open as it was, equally as much as the spiritual lives, then this became a group that was important to me. I became very active in that group, which eventually became a small fellowship that rented space and now has a beautiful church in the center of Walnut Creek.

The minister that we finally called to serve that congregation—I think we were at that time something like maybe a hundred families—was Aaron Gilmartin and we brought him there, because of his Civil Rights record actually. He was just a phenomenal man and became my mentor and dearest, dearest friend for years and years, Aaron Gilmartin and his wife.

3-01:42:59

**Wilmot:**

Was he African American?

3-01:43:00

**Soskin:**

No. He wasn't. But he was out of Boston but had come in through Ethical Culture, I think at one point, or the Fellowship for Reconciliation and was a close associate of A.J. {Musby?} who was a very well known civil rights advocate at the time. Gil did fantastic work in that community and as Walnut Creek was growing, the people who were the movers and shakers when that city was forming were members of that church. The mayor was Doug {Page?} who was a member of the church; Howard {Diller?} who was head of pediatrics with Kaiser which was very small; the head of the Heart Association was—I mean, all the people who were the movers and shakers of that area were coming pretty much out of that church. Kim Kimble, who was one of the founders of the BART system, he was the first general manager, came out of that church.

So these were very effective people and I became one of them, and this was where I was able to test my metal against a lot of things. In fact, when the Black Caucus formed in that denomination nationally, I wasn't sure whether it was a step forward or a step backward. Because I worked toward integration for so long, and here were black intellectuals in New York who were stepping out of the Unitarian Church and forming a black caucus, which looked like a step backward to

me. But our minister, who was Aaron Gilmartin, attended that New York meeting when the blacks walked out. He came back and convinced me that this was something that I needed to know about, that there was something new going on in the denomination, and it was important, it was a very important move, and it was something that we had to go through together. So that church supported me in exploring the black movement nationally. They sent me back to Chicago to the first Black Conference. With a silent vote as to whether or not that church would support the Black Caucus, they were only two people who voted against it. This was a secret ballot. And they were both people not who were against the Black Caucus but who were afraid they would { \_\_\_\_\_?} if they supported it. So it was { \_\_\_\_\_?} all the way around. And it was out of that my working for the Panthers came directly out of my association with that church.

I was going into town because my feeling was that there was a role for a middle class black, and that was to be a conduit to power and that no one was going to hand power to a guy standing on the corner with a brick in his hand. That wasn't going to happen during that time. But I was choking on power. I could've parked my car in the middle of City Hall lawn and nobody would say anything, because at that point I was black and had a strong liberal community supporting me. So my duty I thought was to go into town and to be active in the Black Movement and to be a conduit to power into that community. So I was collecting money and taking it in to support black causes, but doing that as an individual in the white community.

3-01:47:15

**Wilmot:**

You collected money from Unitarian—your other congregation members, and you moved that to Black Panthers?

3-01:47:24

**Soskin:**

Yeah! Money that people wanted to support that cause. You never know, but out of that Black Caucus—I wasn't ever sure what the aim of the Black Caucus was. The kinds of people who were there—Henry Hampton, for instance, was one of the leaders, he was the guy who put together “Eyes on the Prize.” Henry was out of Boston, he had Blackside Production Company. Henry was one of the leaders in that group and it was that group that I later connected with nationally. They caused me to rethink my position totally. I attended three Black Caucus meetings, one in Chicago, one in Detroit, and one in Cleveland. The people who were involved were Lerone Bennett who worked with Ebony Magazine.

3-01:48:41

**Wilmot:**

*[Before the] Mayflower.*

3-01:48:41

**Soskin:**

Yeah, Mayflower. That's where I met Jesse Jackson; he was a speaker at the Chicago caucus, fiery guy. Hayward Henry, who changed his name, he's now what? [Mtongolese?]. Do you know him?

3-01:49:00

**Wilmot:**

No.

3-01:49:02

**Soskin:**

Okay. He was out of Boston U. But this was now another group, there was this small in group of transported Creoles that I grew with. Then there was the huge in-migration of fundamentalist African-Americans who became the war generation. Then there was this third group of black intellectuals that I was involved with nationally that was an entirely different group of people. This had nothing to do with color, but was thoroughly political during a time of great change. So that these worlds of—I mean they were all very different.

3-01:49:48

**Wilmot:**

What year were those Black Caucus meetings? The three you mentioned Boston, New York? I'm not sure if I ever asked.

3-01:49:59

**Soskin:**

I'm not very good on dates. Late sixties and seventies.

3-01:50:11

**Wilmot:**

How did you go and locate and cultivate a connection with the Black Panthers?

3-01:50:17

**Soskin:**

How did I even meet up with the Panthers? I'm trying to think. This was when they were demonstrating down at the courthouse and I would drive in from Walnut Creek and march with them. That's the way I met Catherine Cleaver and Eldridge. I didn't ever meet Huey, because he was at that time already in jail. And it was the protest against his being in jail, because that was the whole Free Huey movement. So that's when I connected with them.

I remember collecting moneys at one point, and Aaron Gilmartin drove me to San Francisco in his little Volkswagen and we went up to their apartment, to the Cleavers and dropped off checks. I met at one time at someone's house on Tunnel Road, there was a meeting of the Panther group. I went that night to bring money. Never great amounts, but people who wanted to connect with them.

But these were the same people who wanted to—when something would happen in the Bay Area, like the hosing down of the people, the HUAC demonstrations and then the House Un-American Activities Committee, they would ask me about that stuff. And I would say, "I don't know. I mean what do I know about that?"

3-01:51:43

**Wilmot:**

They, meaning the liberals?

3-01:51:46

**Soskin:**

Yeah. And for a while there, this felt like this was an okay thing to say, "I mean I don't know, why should I know any more than you do. I'm just the suburban housewife too."



3-01:51:58

**Wilmot:**

But you came to represent for them in some —

3-01:51:58

**Soskin:**

The point was that I finally decided that they were asking me, and therefore I had to somehow involve myself enough to be able to answer those questions. Because that's the only way they were going to know. So that sometimes that's what I would do. I remember calling Gil one day and saying, "I'm going over to San Francisco and you need to know that I'm there in case I get put in jail, because I'm going get arrested."

But I went out and walked those tracks at Port Chicago around the Peace Movement, standing on the side of the road with the Friends who were protesting. That was the time when I really discovered something about myself. I had gotten used to acting independently and that felt good. I mean, I was able to take stands and initiate actions because I was so isolated out there. But one day I heard about a demonstration out on the road out to Port Chicago where the American Friends were stopping munitions trucks that were going in to be unloaded. So I drove out there and went out and stood on the side of the road.

And for the first time, I realized that I could protest a war, because I didn't really know what a war was, but that I knew what a truck was. And I was standing here and those trucks would come and they would drive just close enough so that we would have to back up to keep from being run over. There were cars were passing us filled with families who would hold up their middle finger as they passed us with their children in the car. And the feeling that I was causing those people to do that, that somehow because I was standing there—I had never been so confused. That's the first time I really felt thoroughly confused.

And then, there was a young African American kid who looked like a teenager who came and was not a part of—there weren't anymore than ten or maybe twelve of us standing here, me and people I didn't know, just American Friends. And this kid who was behind us, maybe a few feet, not really part of us, but not not one of us. He was by himself. At one point, I saw him pull out a knife. I didn't have the feeling that he wasn't one of us. But the Friends I knew were going to not fight back, they were going to be peaceful demonstrators. But I didn't know what this kid was going to do if somebody attacked us in any way. I mean, I felt like he was not a part of the philosophy of the Friends and that he was coming from some place else.

I remember becoming so confused that I picked up my skirts and I ran and got in my car and drove home feeling thoroughly disgraced, because I had been great around war, but I was terrified of trucks and I wasn't able to do what I wanted to do. I remember going to church and explaining to Gil that I had failed, that I couldn't live up to my expectations for myself and his telling me we can only do what we can do and I must not do that and that the opportunity would rise again to do something else. And I did. And I was able some years later, to go back to Port Chicago and be on the tracks with a guy who had his legs run over. But I wasn't there when that happened, but he actually lost his leg. That's when I became a real activist, during those years, because I learned in Walnut Creek that there was no such thing as a middle class black except in the minds of a middle class black.

3-01:56:21

**Wilmot:**

I was just struck when you told me you went to the Cleavers' house, or the apartment—where did they live?

3-01:56:26

**Soskin:**

They lived up in the Fillmore District. They lived in a flat not far off, I don't think I can find it now, but it wasn't that far up—what's the street you come in when you get off at Franklin? Is it Oak?

3-01:56:49

**Wilmot:**

Oak.

3-01:56:49

**Soskin:**

It's not far from Oak, either one or two blocks north of there but in the Fillmore area.

3-01:56:59

**Wilmot:**

You said you drove to town to pick up people to come and speak to the congregation. Did I misunderstand you?

3-01:57:07

**Soskin:**

Oh yeah. The days came when we actually did a fundraiser in Walnut Creek, in which we brought a black dance company—my church sponsored it—Danny Duncan who eventually died of AIDS, but we brought performers out there into Walnut Creek and did things.

3-01:57:30

**Wilmot:**

What was your children's relationship with your activism at this point?

3-01:57:33

**Soskin:**

I think I was an embarrassment to Rick, maybe, because he wanted everything to be quiet. He couldn't afford to have—I don't remember Rick's ever participating. I remember Bob as being pretty much on the edge of the crowd, but I remember taking them with me one day at the annual Walnut Festival every year in the fall. That year was right after the bombing of the church in Birmingham.

Our church got one of the dealerships to give us a convertible and I rode and sat in the back of the convertible in black with the black thing over my head and my children in the car. And a Japanese member of our church, the only Japanese member was driving, I think. Anyway, our church—Robin was Jewish, our church was pretty well integrated to the extent we could be out there, but we did represent and we had signs on the side of our car saying, "Our community cares." Trying to bring people's attention to the bombing of that children, and it was just a week or so after it happened.

I remembered that they kept—two or three hours went by and they wouldn't let our convertible in. We just didn't know why we weren't—units were getting together, they were on the high school football field and all the cars and floats getting ready to get in. They kept putting us back and putting us back and putting us back and they finally allowed us in. But only our convertible was allowed to ride in, there was almost a block between the unit ahead of us and unit behind us. And as we were going down the street, it was very quiet except occasional hiss. I remembered thinking about my children in the car and knowing that they couldn't possibly understand what was happening. Now there were people who put up their hands and waved, but you know they were largely people who I already knew. But testing the metal of that community, which I found myself doing every now and then, as often as not disappointed me. I thought we were making progress when we really weren't.

3-02:00:23

**Wilmot:**

What was your husband's relationship with your activism?

3-02:00:27

**Soskin:**

My husband and I were living very separate lives. We were very active parents, but he was involved in the children's lives to the extent that he could be. But he was very much involved in Berkeley, that's when he was doing all the promoting, and he and Paul were putting together those concerts and bringing in Marvin Gaye and Shirley Caesar and R&B people as well as gospel people. They had a very separate life, and I was not a part of that.

3-02:00:55

**Wilmot:**

That must've been so amazing, considering that you had been such a close part of it in the beginning. How did this store and by extension your husband's life, how was it impacted by black power and black consciousness?

3-02:01:16

**Soskin:**

He was identifying very strongly with the black church movements. And he was peripherally involved in my church life. We really lived different lives at that period and there were years when that was so. We were being financially supported very well. We were taking the kids on trips together when he took the time. But our daily lives were not connected. He would leave at seven in the morning and come back at twelve or midnight and day after day after day. The kids knew him as the guy who shaved in the morning in the bathroom. I mean, he was just not a part of our lives. He was not around to be the disciplinarian, so he was Santa Claus and the kids adored him. But there was very little companionship between the two of us. We lived very separate lives.

3-02:02:14

**Wilmot:**

Do you remember when JFK was shot and Martin Luther King was assassinated and Malcolm X?

3-02:02:23

**Soskin:**

Yeah. I was already in therapy at the time, because I was already assessing this life that I was living, you know, where we were. All the black stuff was going on, I was very much a part of all that. When JFK was killed, I was at home and I think I had a therapy session at twelve o'clock. And my sister was dying. My sister died and Kennedy died within hours. That assassination and Margie's life ended about the same time. She was four years older than I was. So in that period, it all sort of runs together, because within hours, I was on the train with my kids heading for Los Angeles to bury my sister. And the entire train was in mourning for Kennedy so that it was all one piece for me.

3-02:03:33

**Wilmot:**

Okay, would you stop for one second? Okay we are going to pause. We are at a two hour mark, so what I like to do is just take a quick break and then come back and talk about Martin Luther King, if you have a memory of that happening, and Malcolm X, if you have a memory of that. And then I have a question for you about—I guess I should just ask the question but I'm supposed to telling you about it, but I had this question about communism. Because my understanding was that communism was actually very common, people were communist and it was common in the black community in the 1940s.

3-02:04:14

**Soskin:**

I was never communist, but it was mostly because I was never a joiner. But I had been told that I'm a Marxist, though I've never read Karl Marx. So that I think it would be easy for someone to assume that I had at some point been involved in the Communist Party.

3-02:04:33

**Wilmot:**

Plus it was just during that time in West Oakland.

3-02:04:35

**Soskin:**

But the communists were doing all the best stuff. [laughs]

3-02:04:37

**Wilmot:**

Yeah, we have to talk about that. Let see, do you want to take a break and stretch.

3-02:04:40

**Soskin:**

I am. It's true that most of the exciting people that I knew were communist! Really! I think that Gil was at least a socialist, Aaron Gilmartin. I'm sure he was a socialist. And I'm not even sure that I understand the difference between all of those things. [interview interruption]

3-02:05:04

**Soskin:**

I was saying that Margie had died the same that Kennedy did. Those two deaths are so blended in my mind that I had hard time separate them out. In fact, I don't think I ever really was allowed

to grieve for Margery, because everything was in grief mode, everything, the whole country and the world was. Marge's death got lost in it.

3-02:05:47

**Wilmot:**

What did she end up doing with her life in L.A?

3-02:05:54

**Soskin:**

We were separated for many years. I didn't know her very much after she moved to Southern California. She lived in Kansas City before then. So we weren't particularly close, but I feel her loss.

3-02:06:17

**Wilmot:**

Yeah. She's your sister. You were companions when you were little. Do you remember when Martin Luther King was assassinated?

3-02:06:36

**Soskin:**

Yes. That was an awful time. I think I felt more hopeless when he was killed than when Kennedy was killed, because by that time, I was firmly, firmly black identified and had been active politically throughout that whole period. And his loss, I felt that it was the prelude to the kind of anger that I really expected. There was some writing, but I had looked at it and thought it was going to be even more. But that was an awful time.

3-02:07:28

**Wilmot:**

When Malcolm X was assassinated?

3-02:07:35

**Soskin:**

I had begun to see Malcolm X and Martin Luther King pretty much as one in that because of what I knew of white racism, because I had lived so much of it leading up to that period. I was under the impression that Malcolm X was making possible the work of Martin Luther King. Even though they appeared to be two very separate approaches, I felt they really weren't at all.

3-02:08:14

**Wilmot:**

When you say that, what do you mean?

3-02:08:20

**Soskin:**

That the threat of a Malcolm X was making possible the kind of non-violence that Martin Luther King was preaching. And that King's work would not have been nearly as possible as it was and he would not have appealed as across race line to the extent that he did without of the threat of Malcolm X.

3-02:08:41

**Wilmot:**

How did your congregation receive the messages of the two men? How receptive were they to—?

3-02:08:47

**Soskin:**

I think that they were as devastated by both those deaths. I think that we shared that. At least I was under the impression that there may have been those who weren't as touched as I thought they were. But I was so much a part of that group and was expressing that belonging-ness so inclusively. All of that was being played out, I was even in the pulpit from time to time. I mean it was very participatory; the congregation was often speaking as the minister was. So I think that we were universally affected.

3-02:09:31

**Wilmot:**

Did you feel like your congregation was more receptive to one message over the other?

3-02:09:37

**Soskin:**

I supposed as the country was. I think that the country was a little bit afraid of Malcolm X and was not as afraid of—I think that fear was a big factor there. And I think that they would've had to be more touched by the loss of King, because they saw him as a savior and they weren't sure what Malcolm X meant.

3-02:10:02

**Wilmot:**

How in your communication in the late 60s as you got more connected to the Black Caucus or experienced—how did the Black Caucus of the Unitarian Church place itself when or negotiate those two different—Malcolm versus Martin Luther, or was there that kind of tension?

3-02:10:30

**Soskin:**

My involvement was largely before the assassination of King. The Black Caucus preceded that. In fact, I was in Detroit at a Black Caucus meeting annual, it was the second or third of them. It was in February before the spring assassination of King. I remember someone saying to me there, "Watch the Poor People's March." And that has haunted me, because I didn't know what that meant then. I don't know what that means now. It was as if someone knew that there was going to be an attempt on Martin Luther King's life. Still, I've never figured that out.

3-02:11:22

**Wilmot:**

What context was this said to you in?

3-02:11:24

**Soskin:**

I was having lunch with one of the officers in the caucus and I was talking about Dr. King at the time. I can't remember what had happened recently with him, but I remember those words. There's this guy saying—oh, we were talking about Malcolm X and Martin Luther King actually, the conversation was about the two of them. And this guy said, "Watch the Poor

People's March. Just watch the Poor People's March." Now he had gone to demonstrate with the garbage workers, wasn't it? This was preliminary to the Poor People's March. It was that spring that he was killed. This person was from another part of the country, it wasn't someone that I knew locally. But I always felt that there was a lot of going on that I didn't know about and there probably was, that I wasn't even aware.

3-02:12:28

**Wilmot:**

Were you the only black person involved in your congregation member?

3-02:12:32

**Soskin:**

Actually there was one other couple who were part of the church, but they didn't get passed—integration was their goal and this was a step back for them. And it would've been mine had it not been for Aaron Gilmartin who said, "Go and see. Go and experience this. You've got to see what this is, because maybe we have to move separately in order to move together."

3-02:13:02

**Wilmot:**

That must've been such a powerful experience.

3-02:13:04

**Soskin:**

Oh, he was so empowering! I mean I cannot tell you how empowering this man was. Because I went reluctantly. And he was right, he was absolutely right that we had to move and find ourselves before we have anything to negotiate. And that's what the caucus was about. And ultimately that's what served me; it gave me a sense of my own identity and what there was to be negotiated that I wouldn't have had otherwise.

3-02:13:48

**Wilmot:**

I wonder also about—you became very involved in this congregation at the same time that you had this other strong connections to the black churches through your race music and gospel music store.

3-02:14:03

**Soskin:**

That was an experience that Mel was having. That wasn't one I was having at the time. I didn't get that connection until after he moved out and I moved in and it became my world then. But it certainly influenced the way I dealt with that world, and it also made me comfortable in that world in ways I couldn't have been had not gone through the whole political thing, because I moved into it pretty whole.

3-02:14:33

**Wilmot:**

I wanted to backtrack. I had this question which I hadn't asked you that I've been meaning to ask you. As someone who was in Oakland and the Bay Area during the late 30s, 40s, 50s—I always hear stories about this very kind of active communist community that included people like Matt Crawford and others, Joseph Johnson—

3-02:15:06

**Soskin:**

Mel's uncle, he was William Patterson, he was a part of that.

3-02:15:11

**Wilmot:**

I just want to ask you what was that like for you? How in the air, how common was it that people were part of the communist party?

3-02:15:22

**Soskin:**

I think I probably had the same reaction to it as any other ordinary little person that didn't have much exposure to anything would have. I didn't know what a communist was. There were people like Matt Crawford that I certainly knew, I remember being at Matt Crawford's house at a party one Sunday afternoon with a group of young people when Paul Robeson was in town. The reason we were there was because we were going to picket with Paul Robeson at the Paramount Theater, where Song of the South was being played and was being shown.

3-02:15:54

**Wilmot:**

When was this?

3-02:15:58

**Soskin:**

Oh, I don't remember now. It must've been—

3-02:15:59

**Wilmot:**

Is this after your marriage or—?

3-02:16:00

**Soskin:**

I think I was married. But we played spin the bottle at Matt Crawford's house and I got kissed on cheek by Paul Robeson.[laughing] I think about that now, and think, wow, I was a part of history. I knew that Matt Crawford was something called a communist. I knew when I first joined the Berkeley Co-op when I was within the first thousand people who joined, which later was a huge operation.

But the first people who had founded that pretty much, I had been told, were communists. And I hesitated to join in the beginning because Matt Crawford was on that board. There were other people that I knew. But in time, the most active people that I knew—the most interesting people that I knew were people who were involved in the Communist Party though I've never been one. I don't think it ever came to me to make that decision. I mean, I don't remember ever being asked to join the communist party. And I'm not sure that I knew then or that I know now what that meant, except that the people I knew who were such great people who were doing all kinds of wonderful things.



3-02:17:17

**Wilmot:**

Were they kind of very central in the black community or were they very kind of comfortably part of the black community?

3-02:17:22

**Soskin:**

I think so. But the communist group was a well-integrated group, I'm sure. Because the people that I knew were not—I wouldn't have thought of them as a black group by any means. I know that as I say, Aaron Gilmartin who was such a strong mentor in my life was certainly a socialist. I'm not sure what the differences between socialism and communism. It all sort of blends for me, but it's also true that the most politically active people that I know who'd been labeled as such had been people who'd impressed me.

3-02:18:15

**Wilmot:**

Do you want to say who they were?

3-02:18:19

**Soskin:**

Oh heavens, who would they be? First, they'd be Matt, and some early co-op members that I don't know if I would mention names of. {Geb?} who I suspect—I guess I have a feeling that even among communists, that it's easier to say that you are a socialist than to say that you are a communist. I think that these people when I think of them, I think them as one group of people and there were a number of them in the Unitarian Church, but they were among the most politically active that I knew.

3-02:19:03

**Wilmot:**

Did you know someone named Walter Green?

3-02:19:04

**Soskin:**

That sounds familiar.

3-02:19:07

**Wilmot:**

He was a boxer, I believe and became a reporter in Richmond.

3-02:19:12

**Soskin:**

No, I don't know.

3-02:19:14

**Wilmot:**

He was a reporter for *People's World*.

3-02:19:17

**Soskin:**

No, I guess not.

3-02:19:18

**Wilmot:**

Okay. Well, let's see. I want to move on to Berkeley Co-op. You haven't told me very much about what that meant for you?

3-02:19:36

**Soskin:**

It was just a store for me. I was never involved. Mel was on the board of the credit union for a short period.

3-02:19:43

**Wilmot:**

There was a credit union in a grocery store?

3-02:19:46

**Soskin:**

Yeah. It was Twin Pines Savings and Loan and a credit union and there was a consumers co-op, which was a grocery store. We did attend the summer camp at Camp Sierra with co-op people two or three times. But it was not all so social. It was a social life for a lot of people but this was not something that I was involved in socially. I didn't buy into that much of it.

3-02:20:14

**Wilmot:**

Can you tell me a little bit, I want to shift gears now and move to your move out of Walnut Creek back to Berkeley. I want to know what precipitated that and then also about your work at UC Berkeley? But first I ask how did that move come? How did that happen and where did you move to?

3-02:20:33

**Soskin:**

I don't know what some of that would've been. I guess I always envisioned that when I would hit fifty or whatever that age is that magic age of forty-eight, forty-nine, that I'd be going to be an older lady and I would get out my purple shawl and collect my social security check. And my kids would all leave home at different times because they were spread out, they were not all bunched up age wise. But I found myself one summer living in a four bedroom, two bathroom house out in the suburbs with a swimming pool in the backyard and I was all by myself.

That summer, Rick had taken a—I guess he just turned twenty or twenty-one, he'd taken an apartment in Oakland, in town. David was work-study in Switzerland. He'd gone with a young friend from Berkeley High School and they had done the exchange student thing, so they were gone. Bob had gone with me to a Unitarian convention back in Cleveland and it was his last year of high school. And because he was not going to graduate, he had decided that—he had gone into a real run-in with the school, standing on principle, and I backed him—I took him with me to Cleveland. So when we left there, he had decided that he wanted to hitch hike home across Canada and he was seventeen and I said yes. [chuckles] And Dori was in a boarding school; she was over in Marin. Mel, of course, we had grown apart pretty much and he was in town doing his thing. And here I was all by myself.

That was the year when I was elected by the people in my congressional district to serve as a McGovern delegate to Miami to the convention. So that I went to Miami and the house was empty and I came back and I didn't know what I was going to do. Because here I was, I didn't have any models ahead of me for what was life like for older women. I was still relatively young and active, but I was supposed to be, you know, when the kids go away from home, you are supposed to be an older lady, I thought.

3-02:23:32

**Wilmot:**

Your mother's life wasn't the model?

3-02:23:35

**Soskin:**

No. That wasn't a model, for my mother had never really been out of the house, she was just home. But when I got back from Miami, I went to one of those life-changing seminars. What are they called? When you re-entering the work force. And I had not been in the work force actually; I've been raising kids all those years after we moved to the country.

So I took this course at the church and one of the people giving the seminar had just been hired as a supervisor on a research project at the University of California, and we were in this course for a couple of weeks. And he came to me one day and said that he had just accepted this job as a supervisor on a project called, Project Community at University of California in Berkeley. He wondered if I'd liked to come on and be a part of his staff. And I said, "Well, I don't know, I'll come and see if I like it." I mean, I know that's not the way you get jobs, you know. But I said, "I tell you what, I'll come to work for you for two weeks, you don't have to pay me. And if I like it, I'll stay and if I don't like, I won't." I mean, that's not the way you get a job, but he accepted that. And I went. The man that I married was the principle investigator of this research project.

3-02:25:08

**Wilmot:**

Is that where you met?

3-02:25:09

**Soskin:**

That's when I met Bill. I went there as an assistant to the director of that program. And within a matter of few weeks, Bill and I were an item. It was quick, and it was an answer. I didn't ever go back home to that empty house. I began to stay in Berkeley and I entered a whole new life at the University of California and I didn't re-connect with my old life on this side of the hills. I started a whole brand new life; it was like he was a new page. And in time, we were married and I became a faculty wife. And it was ten years and fascinating. So where are we now?

3-02:26:19

**Wilmot:**

I'm going to need to take a quick pause and change this disc here.

[interview interruption while recording media are exchanged]

4-00:00:03

**Wilmot:**

Okay. So we are on again.

4-00:00:08

**Soskin:**

So where were we?

4-00:00:10

**Wilmot:**

You were talking about how your new life with Bill Soskin kind of unfolded out of your—what was that project that you were working on?

4-00:00:19

**Soskin:**

That was called Project Community. It was fascinating. My son David had been in that program when he was in Berkeley High School, the year before, and knew Bill as a director of that program. A principal investigator with that program was Dr. Shelly Korchin out of Tolman Hall at UC Berkeley. The program was studying the drug culture or at least developing drug prevention program for teens that grew out of his study of the Haight. He came out from Washington on a grant to study the Haight-Ashbury phenomenon—the “flower child” thing.

4-00:01:13

**Wilmot:**

Professor Soskin?

4-00:01:15

**Soskin:**

Yeah. Out of that grew—he came up with some answers to the drug problem and he was testing out his hypothesis through this program, which was called Project Community.

4-00:01:28

**Wilmot:**

He was a psychologist?

4-00:01:29

**Soskin:**

Yes, he was a research psychologist. His program--[phone rings]

4-00:01:35

**Wilmot:**

Hold on one second. [interview interruption]

4-00:02:00

**Soskin:**

Oh, he developed this prevention program and they worked on five high school sites. They were a group of doctoral students, candidates out of UC psych [Psychology] department. He combined them with a group of artists to work with children in these special programs. I started out in the administration and wound up, before it was over, working with other people, co-leading groups actually in the schools, which was a real learning experience for me.

So I got to do the kinds of things that—it's interesting, some of the people who were involved in that, to enrich this courses, one was {Terry Sandgraft?}. She does area work too. She still works with dance. He had a fascinating group of artists who worked in that—I think that's when my art became prominent in my life, too. Is through Bill. And music had been a part of it for much longer than that, but I got to know more dancers and people who were doing visual arts. But that whole experience was completely different from anything that I'd ever lived with in my entire my life, because Bill's world was a very different one.

4-00:03:35

**Wilmot:**

How was it different?

4-00:03:37

**Soskin:**

It was different in that—how is it different? It's different and it's the same. I saw a lot of hypocrisy that was not unlike what I knew outside in other contexts. I think I had rather naively believed that the greater the intelligence the greater the ethical sense and that turned out to not bear up. I saw tremendous amounts—the competition in that world is just huge, which was new for me. I don't know, it just gave me a whole new way to look at life. I embraced a lot of it and I also had enough outside experience to measure it by—pretty objectively. So it didn't do any harm to me at all.

But, coupled with being on the campus as a part of academic life, the opportunity to go back into the ghetto, to go back to South Berkeley was thrust upon me, because Mel's health went out and the business was in failure. I was living a life of an academic wife, while I was going down trying also to be a businesswoman in the black community. And that truth eventually became impossible. I had lived most of my life on a bridge interpreting one side for the other side. The whole time I was in Walnut Creek, I was telling the white folks what the black folks meant, and the black folks what the white folks meant and I was doing this bridge thing. And that's the way I sensed my role and I'd accepted that and it had worked for me for a while.

When I was in Berkeley, when I came back, I found myself more and more and more using what I found in the white community to make things work in the black community. Eventually I couldn't do both, I had to make a choice. I had to decide which side of that line I was going to be on and that's when I really became black. I mean, the role of the black merchant got bigger for me. The work to be done in the black community was facilitated by my other life, but I couldn't stay there and do it. I had to be in the black community and that worked for me. I mean that's what really meant the most for me.

4-00:06:47

**Wilmot:**

What is the life of an academic wife? What does that mean?

4-00:06:52

**Soskin:**

I think it can best be described by my first academic dinner parties in Orinda. There was this very well known psychologist visiting—he was the visiting professor from University of Michigan, had a beautiful wife. We were invited to dinner with two other couples and that was

the evening I sat and listened and saw the game, where the wife's role was to maneuver the conversation around to her husband's latest theory. And I could tell when it would almost get there, and somebody else would cut it off, and then she'd wait until it got—and I got to recognizing, because I knew Bill's theories, and I knew how to get there. Because almost every Sunday morning when we'd have breakfast, Bill would pontificate on his latest—and they were brilliant theories. I mean he was brilliant man; his theories were great. But I always could recognize them; I could recognize when the changes came and when they were really innovative. And I would know when he would toss me lines at these parties what I was to say in order to move it around to where it was supposed to go. It was like, scripted, and I wasn't sure if anybody else was seeing the pattern that I was seeing. I remember stubbornly not participating and Bill becoming more and more irritated, because I wouldn't move the conversation.

On the way home, I told him I would never go to another one. And he admitted that's really what was going on. That's the first time I began see a whole level of interplay that I had no way to even be aware of before I became an academic wife. There really was a prescribed role, very, very prescribed. Now that might not be true in all places, and it's probably true of a particular age group and we were older. I don't that can be true anymore; I think the woman has blown that one off.[laughs] But at the time, that was true.

4-00:09:19

**Wilmot:**

What year were you married to Bill Soskin?

4-00:09:23

**Soskin:**

Well. What would that have been? Seventies? It was the year after the McGovern convention. I don't know. Seventy-six? Somewhere around there.

4-00:09:41

**Wilmot:**

You are married for ten years, you were together for ten years?

4-00:09:44

**Soskin:**

Yeah.

4-00:09:47

**Wilmot:**

I'm wondering in the time you were at Berkeley as an academic wife, did you stay employed at that time on his project?

4-00:10:02

**Soskin:**

Yeah. I stayed on his project for five years and then the next five years I was working down the hill.

4-00:10:11

**Wilmot:**

Did you encounter other black people who were faculty members during that time?

4-00:10:21

**Soskin:**

Yeah. There were a few. I don't remember them now. I remember different faculty people at different times, but I don't know if they were—. Was there anybody in my own social life? I'm trying to think. I can't remember. There were others that I met on campus, afterward, because I worked at city hall right after, I went to city hall, I worked as Don's aide, so I knew other people later. But I was not a part of a black life on campus by any means.

4-00:10:58

**Wilmot:**

But you were part of the academic circles of your husband?

4-00:11:02

**Soskin:**

Yeah. I was part of his circle of friends. There were largely in public health and in—oh! The human potential movement, that was, you know, during the seventies and eighties. That was such a big thing. So many of our friends were involved in the human potential movement, Esalen and all that stuff.

4-00:11:23

**Wilmot:**

What is the human potential movement?

4-00:11:24

**Soskin:**

Oh God, you are young! [laughs] The human potential movement? It's the new tooth period, as I say. You don't know about the Esalen Institute? Or Werner Erhard and his group

4-00:11:37

**Wilmot:**

I do know about Esalen.

4-00:11:39

**Soskin:**

Yeah, well, Bill went after all those things. I didn't. I refused. But, yeah. That was the human potential movement. He knew Timothy Leary and the physicists who were making all the noise. He was very deeply involved in Tibetan Buddhism, which I also did not get into. My life during that period was also full of poets and I knew poets and performed with poets. That was before Bill. That wasn't the same period. That was a wonderful period. That bookshelf over with all the books—a lot of them were given to me by poets that I've performed with in one place or another.

4-00:12:46

**Wilmot:**

Well, what was that time in your life about, performing with the poets?

4-00:12:50

**Soskin:**

Oh, that was wonderful! That was wonderful. I would go in and sing my songs as a poet. I could accept being a poet, where I couldn't accept being a singer. So I often worked with other poets. So when it come to my turn, I would sing my poetry. It was a wonderful period.

4-00:13:07

**Wilmot:**

What were you writing poems about then?

4-00:13:18

**Soskin:**

Pretty much introspective things as I was working my way through my own life.

4-00:13:21

**Wilmot:**

As poets often do.

4-00:13:23

**Soskin:**

Yeah.

4-00:13:35

**Wilmot:**

[pause] We are really moving really rapidly through my outline right now. I want to ask you a little bit about your political—you currently work for Assemblywoman Dion Aroner and I want to ask you what the trajectory was like for you? How did you get to be—you said you were working for Don Perata?

4-00:14:00

**Soskin:**

No, Don Jelinik.

4-00:14:03

**Wilmot:**

Sorry, Don Jelinik. Excuse me.

4-00:14:07

**Soskin:**

Well, I've been political pretty much without intending to be political. The thing is that I'm convinced that politics is just a part of life and for me it's really integrated. I can after the fact say that was political, but in the process, it doesn't mean very much. When I took over the store, because I knew it could never be financially successful and had to have another goal, then I went about the job of seeing what I needed to do to make it that. I often say that when I was much younger I had visions of changing the world, that's the poet side of me—or the state, but I finally got so, I broke it down to five hundred feet and everything within my five hundred feet was going to have to shape up, and that's really kind of the way it was for me. I would have a problem and try to figure it out how it gets solved. And I would go to city hall and see whom I had to see and get it change. So my work politically was very much integrated with that store.

When I first went down there, it was approaching election time. The tenants in my building, the second floor was rented out to people who were giving me a great deal trouble, and who I suspected were not honest people, and might be contributing to what was going on the street. Because remember now, this was all a drug infested area. I went to one of my husband's close friends and a shaker and mover in the city, it was Miss Carol Sibley, who sort of ushered in the



program that integrated the Berkeley schools, the head of the whole busing thing. She was a very strong, very powerful leader.

I went to her and I said, “You know, this is what’s going on here and I’m in the heart of it and I need help.” And she called in someone, naming names again, but it’s true, so I’m going to name her anyway, Shirley Dean, who later became the most recent mayor of Berkeley. And she had the two of us to lunch one day, and said, “We’ll just talk with Shirley about it.” Because Shirley was one of her closest friend, and she said, “I’m sure that Shirley can help you.” So the three of us had lunch together, and Shirley said that she’s sorry that the guy that I was mentioning was someone that she felt —anybody that could deliver the votes in South Berkeley that she couldn’t afford to, you know, truck with. So she refused to help me. And I was in a really dangerous situation down there.

So I went back to my store, and she was in this race against who was to be our first black mayor, who is Gus Newport. No, I guess he followed Warren Widener. Anyway, Gus Newport was running against her for mayor. So in the community where I was, which was supposed to be her territory, I plastered my building with Gus Newport signs. I guess, you know, every place I found, I filled that building up. Then I went up and down the street to all other merchants and delivered Gus Newport signs. Just that simplistic, I figured that, you know, I need help and she’s not going to give to me, so I’m going to stop this.

But the next day, when I looked up and drove down from Grizzly Peak into South Berkeley and looked, the signs were all turned around, and Shirley Dean’s signs are up on their places. And I realized that this man had gone behind me and apparently had harassed the other owners and they didn’t care much who was elected. But they were not going to confront him. He’d been around a long time. He was another African American. And I got into a real battle with this guy. And eventually evicted him from my building, just had him out.

This was the first time I began to see how I could move politically because Gus Newport was actually elected mayor. And that’s the first time I flexed my political muscles and something happened. And then he appointed me to this task force for these homes through out the city, the scattered site housing, HUD housing. And out of that grew the complete changeover at the block where I was, all because I had decided that I could address whatever this political system was. I learned how to play that game. Every day I would go to City Hall to put in my time, in Don’s office. I would sit with the people, all the aides for the other—I had never been an aide before, but I would sit in the staff meetings, planning for the city council meetings and the agendas, and learned all about that process. In the process, I could sit in on any other kind of meetings I wanted to and I attended city council meetings and really begin to learn how the process works. Since then, when I want change, I know that’s the way things get changed in a democracy.

It was fascinating to me, too, that during the time when I took over the building and the whole street had been torn up—I guess I mentioned this—there were nothing but mud out in front of the building. The street, they were taking up the tracks, the Santa Fe railroads tracks. While they were doing that, they were under grounding the utilities, along Sacramento Street from Oregon to Alcatraz. So, everything up to the building including the sidewalk was gone. Everything, there’s nothing but sawhorses and the street was closed. That’s when I went back and Mel’s health had

failed and I took over this business and that was the state it was in. It stayed that way for a year and half, it was just awful until they got it all put back together again.

But during that process when they put it all back together, they put the sidewalks in and then they put in a bus bench that was about eighteen inches from an eight foot plate glass window in my store, just my window. And the drug dealers—these were kids, I mean they were kids—would sit with their feet on the seat and sit on the backs of this bus bench, which was made of wood but set in concrete—they were iron pipes set in concrete. But they'd sit here and they'd wrestle and I kept waiting for one of them to come crashing through that eight foot plate glass window. And it terrified me! Day after day after day, I would try to get the kids to stay away, and I couldn't. I had to confront the dealers and, you know, raise their ire.

I kept sending letters to the city council and sending letters to the planning commission and sending letters downtown saying, “You've got to change this. You've got to take that bench out, because some kids are going to be hurt.” Every time I would do that, the answer I would get back would be, “These benches were put in at the will of the community. And the only way they can come out, because they are part of the beautification project, is if the community comes together and says, ‘Take them out.’ We cannot do that.” So this went on and went on and went on. It took five years. One day—and I'm struggling with all kinds of things in the meantime—but this bus bench became symbolic for me. One day, I came into work and somebody had skipped the curve and hit this bench in their car, and the bench was broken. So I picked up the phone, I called the public service department and said, “You know, I don't want it fixed, just take it away. I don't want it fixed.”

I was amazed! because what I found—in my letters I had said, “All the bus benches between Alcatraz and Oregon had become offices, nobody was really getting a bus could use those benches, because they were all offices for the drug dealers.” So within the next three days, I got up looked out and went to work, and every bench between Alcatraz and Oregon was gone. And I suddenly learned that I had been publicly putting the city in this position of having to tell me no and giving up their argument about, you know—but if I had quietly allowed them to do it, it could've happened. So the public service just dealt with it, and they came in didn't only take my bus bench out, but they had heard what I was saying all that time. They came in and just took them all out at the same. So that's when I began to learn how things really happen politically and how one has to be strategic.

So that little shop and working in that part of town and having a political agenda, because what I really wanted was social change—financial independence for me was not going to come out of that shop and I knew that—but because I was using it for social change, my eyes and ears were tuned to finding out what were the strategies and which ones worked. So I learned over a long time.

So when political opportunities came up, which was the same way it was with—I volunteered to work for Keith Carson. I sent him a letter when I decided I was going to retire and I didn't get a response, because that's who I would have been working for. I actually simply wanted to volunteer, but nobody answered my letter. In the meantime, Tom Bates, had an opening as a staff person with the {court report?} partnership opened up and I was able to go and work with Tom Bates on outreach in Oakland in the 14<sup>th</sup> District, after he term-limited out. And out of that grew

the opportunity to work for Dion. But even when I went to work for Dion, she interviewed me—I was a friend of an African American woman who was a member of her staff, who was sharing my home in El Cerrito. She told me to apply and I did, but Dion was looking for a young African American male to school and she wanted someone out of Richmond to do that. So she interviewed the two of us and she hired him. That was okay with me, because as I told her, “I would have hired him too.” That was what I wanted to do too. But then he didn’t work out eventually—I think he was with her for a couple of years. And when she had to let him go, then she hired me to come in and sort of fill in. I thought I was a placeholder. I really thought that I’d come in as a placeholder until we could find someone else to train for that position, because I saw myself in my retirement years actually. But instead, I got fired up again and off I went. So that was three years.

4-00:26:32

**Wilmot:**

What fired you up?

4-00:26:33

**Soskin:**

Just the work, feeling effective, being able to—as I tell people that my job description was that I get to ask very embarrassing questions at a very high level. I don’t have the answers to anything, but I get to sit in on corporate boardrooms and commissions and all kinds of non-profits and county stuff. I get to sit in and analyze what I see and then go back to Dion and say, “This is what’s gone on.” And I’ve been able to initiate at least one bill that went through and got signed by the governor.

4-00:27:07

**Wilmot:**

Which one?

4-00:27:07

**Soskin:**

It was the one on transportation of perishables. There was no legislation to govern that, so that food was being carted around that was perishable at very high temperatures. There were trucks that originated in Reno or in L.A. carrying perishables to the Bay Area, which means those things were on the road for five or six hours. So the more deeply involved—and now I’m at the same place where Dion’s going out, and I’m having to decide, am I really going to retire. In preparation for that, I’ve gotten myself appointed to the arts commission, because what I want to do now, is to use the juice that I’ve been able put together from being with Dion for three years and learning Richmond politics as well as I have. And work—I’d like to help develop something here in the arts.

4-00:28:12

**Wilmot:**

What’s your dream for the arts?

4-00:28:14

**Soskin:**

I want to create a home in the Bay Area for East Bay black performing artists. I mean, I want to do that and there’s a chance to possibly do that with that wonderful [J.C.] Penney’s building

between 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> on Macdonald Avenue—it's now vacant. Oh, it's a whole block, and it's a huge place. I'm working with Don Gilmore, who is the head of the housing development corporation, the Richmond Housing Development Corporation. And Jennifer Ross, who's a consultant out of Oakland—Jennifer and I worked at the Upper Room together. So what we both would like to see is not only performance space, rehearsal space, and storage space, but live-work space for artists. We'd like to see—as dealing with artists as a category of people who don't have a designated housing place.

4-00:29:21

**Wilmot:**

Where did your commitment to the arts come from, Betty?

4-00:29:25

**Soskin:**

I think it grew. It's always been there, because I think underneath the layers, there's an artist that lives in me, she's not a performing artist, but someone certainly—I refer to that as the Betty-behind-my-eyes. I mean that's there, but on top of that, the experience at the Upper Room marked me forever. It's being able to see and appreciate art for what it is, and particularly the art that I saw there, which somehow—it's amazing, at the same time that I am attending political meetings in Berkeley, or even Walnut Creek, where my old church membership is still there and working, I see them reaching for things that when I went to the Upper Room had already been arrived at. It was amazing, things that at the Upper Room with a younger generation of people, you didn't ever hear words like diversity. People assumed certain things. It's as if your generation has always worked through that you are the inheritors of the work that my generation tried to do. And to a large extent the things that you are still working on are different things but a lot of that stuff when I was at the Upper Room, I felt had been accomplished.

I sat one night and watched a young guy from India in what looked like Punjab dress playing a piano and he was playing *Round Midnight*. I guess Mohammed Bilal was doing something, and there were about three kids dancing to the music. And I'm sitting in this room and looking around it, and realizing that there was no effort involved in creating racial equality. That group in that room worked together around art. They were not together around race or trying to rise out of race or to compensate in some way for their differences. That same night, a young Native American rapped the story of his people. The things that I saw in that building, my age didn't even matter. And I was certainly not trying to be young; I've never tried to be young as such. But age wasn't even a problem. There were people there, certainly not as old as I was, but certainly in their forties and fifties, who were there as artists. I saw the last poets come to perform. Amiri Baraka was there one evening doing his stuff. I saw young rap artists that were just phenomenal but they weren't there because they were black or white, they were there because they were artists. And trying to put that together, these kids, they've accomplished something that the people across town were still working hard without realizing it had already happened.

I don't know if I'm making any sense to you, but it's having the opportunity just to watch those levels of social development simultaneously and to know that that group which later—because now that old Masonic Building was taken over for the Transit Village, it's not even quite finished yet—but we had to move on, because we were pretty much squatters while we were there. But I saw pieces of it go into La Pena, and I saw pieces of it going into San Francisco, and I saw Nevin [Norling] go to New York, and Keba [Konte] went to Sweden or wherever he went.

And I saw, you know, all these people breaking off. And I tried hard to secure, at one point the Black Rep Theater in Berkeley to try and house them, because I kept thinking somebody's got to drop a building around this magical thing that I see happening, because it really was and is a magical thing that was there. Jennifer Ross, who at that time was a consultant to San Francisco and she was at the Bayview Opera House where she was doing work. Shakiri, who was with Zaccho, with Joanna Haigood's company. We all recognized what was there and recognized what a magnificent thing this was. And just as movements move out of the Bay Area into the rest of the country, here was this new special thing that was fragile and it had to be housed and we couldn't do it.

What happened was, the same Mayor Dean who had refused to help me out early on years ago when I went to them to try—I tried to get on the board of the Berkeley Rep Theater first of all. Because I went to them and I said to the family that runs it, "What are your dark nights?" I wanted to get on the board and to use it on the nights that it wasn't in use. In that way, I would drop a building around this group of people to give them a home and a hold in the universe. And they became very, very upset and angry and wouldn't accept me on the board. So then I decided, okay, this is a community facility and it's in the hands of this family and we can't get it any other way. So I tried to get the council members that I knew to help me to do that. Mayor Dean went to them and said—it was just before another election, she was running against Don Jelinik who was running for mayor too—and she told the family that if she could be elected, if they would help her get elected, deliver the votes in South Berkeley, that she would sell them the building for a dollar a year. What she did was she eventually found a clause in the lease and she permitted them twenty five more years at no cost to the city to sit in that building and hold it down. And Black Rep does not produce anything for anybody of any worth. So then, I gave that up, because there was no way to do it. Now, the group from the Upper Room—well, Kimiko [Joy] who called today, she was working out at Black Dot—you know, there are different kids doing places. But there is no home for the black performing arts community.

4-00:36:36

**Wilmot:**

I think Black Dot is starting to become a home.

4-00:36:39

**Soskin:**

I hope so.

4-00:36:39

**Wilmot:**

Also Alice Arts has been—

4-00:36:42

**Soskin:**

Well, except that Alice Arts—Mayor Brown wants that for his school and so even that's going to go. So what I'm saying is that if I can get Richmond to use some of its redevelopment monies to refurbish that place down there, that's what I'd like to do for the next five years if I've got five more. Because there's nothing that I think is more important in the Bay Area than that. And I'd like to see black performing arts at the same level as Berkeley Rep Theater is at some point and Richmond could do that.

4-00:37:26

**Wilmot:**

How did you get involved with the Upper Room and Rafiq Bilal?

4-00:37:30

**Soskin:**

Because Rafiq was one of my customers in the record shop. I had made a collection of videos of every black film or any film that any black people had ever been a part of or anybody was in the cast. So when I got into videos, I began to collect, out of every catalogue of every place, black film. I had a tremendous collection, which eventually I turned over to the Upper Room. I don't even know where it is now. It's a tremendous collection, and he needed some money. This is when the Upper Room was in San Francisco.

[interview interruption for phone]

Yeah, Rafiq Bilal, he was running at that time the Upper Room in San Francisco down south of Market, and things were not going well and he came over to the shop with some videos that he had of Africa, and wanted to sell them to me for my collection. I didn't need them, but obviously he needed the money, so that I bought them from him. We became friends at that point. He was about to go and transition—he about being run out of San Francisco pretty much, the police were giving him so much trouble.

Because what happened was that he started the Upper Room as a program out of Glide Memorial and it was a program that was designed for the recovery community that had nowhere to go socially that didn't provide temptation. But what had happened was young people began to come there realizing it was also safe for them. So they establish the first no alcohol, no nicotine club. And that remained an important facet of the Upper Room, even when they moved across the bay. At one point when they discovered that wonderful old building out in Fruitvale, he called me one day and said, "You have to come here and I can't tell you about it on the phone, you have to come." I jumped in my car in front of the shop and I drove out to Fruitvale and saw this incredible building that had what they actually what they called the Upper Room, the secret room upstairs, way upstairs on the third floor that you had to look through a peep hole and they slide back the thing to let you in. Oh it was wonderful! And that day, I saw against the walls, these huge murals that the young people did. One of Nevin's was hanging there.

They invited me to come back the next weekend for an event and it became the place that I lived. I mean, I spent all my time there doing whatever I could to try to keep it going and to try to do what we could. I met other women who were there, Shakiri, that's where I met Jennifer, that's where I met other people, dancers and all kinds of people. This was the place to be. So on Saturday evenings, I would take my grandkids out there. That's when I met Robert Henry [Johnson], the dancer, and playwrights, young people doing all kinds of important things.

The other thing that was fascinating about the Upper Room was that here was a place that was built on black culture. Everyone who was involved did not have to be black, that wasn't the point. But black culture was the base of everything that was going on there. So that the people who came there, the white people who came there, the Indian people who came there, the Native Americans, the Latinos, the Filipino people who came there, came there to participate in black culture. It was just amazing, because it was clearly identified. The gurus were largely black

people. They were musicians and artists and poets and dancers but they were coming out of the black tradition. There would be four and five hundred people there on a Saturday night of every color of the rainbow, all relating to black culture. It was just amazing. That's when I began to see black performing arts as needing its own home. And I saw it being a tragedy when that home was pulled out from under them.

Rafiq and I became very close friends, Mohammed, all the kids were all there. I'm still in touch with a number of them. And, you know, Betty's still trying to find a home. [chuckles]

4-00:42:38

**Wilmot:**

I also wonder about since your time when you were in Walnut Creek, you've been very oriented toward the, I wouldn't call it service, but very much towards social change. You've expressed that it seems to me in a number of different ways through the kinds of work you choose to do. And I just wanted to ask you why do you what you do? Why do you do the work you do for Assemblywoman Aroner? Why did you do the work that your do?

4-00:43:16

**Soskin:**

I wish there was a simple answer to that. I don't know that there is. I found along the way that there's a difference between black people and the black agenda and I find myself at odds with myself sometime around that. Some of the people who have best supported the black agenda have not been black people. So I come at my political work from a different place than I did in the sixties. Then, the black cause in itself was enough. And I crossed some of kind of threshold, I don't know when that was, or where that was, where I separated out the black agenda from blackness. I separated out black culture. [laughs] It reminds me that I was at an arts commission meeting, my first one, the other night, when I found myself saying that, "I had never heard a symphony that I didn't think could be improved with a little Charlie Mingus on bass." I mean, there's that thing about me that knows—that doesn't relate to white culture in the same way that I do to black culture. It is the same with politics. I had no problem supporting Dion Aroner over a black candidate. Because now I've lived long enough to see the Ward Connerlys and the Clarence Thomases, and the Condoleeza Rices. I've lived long enough to know that you've got to keep your eye on what you have decided is the agenda. And that is guiding me now politically, and the things that I do come out of that—always looking for the black agenda and where it ought to be and not letting the cast of characters govern that.

4-00:45:36

**Wilmot:**

What does that meant o you, what is the black agenda?

4-00:45:38

**Soskin:**

The black agenda is creating freeness in all things, in not allowing discrimination to be legislated into law. I mean it's that kind of thing. You have a right to not want to live next door to me, that's absolutely your right. But I have a right to be there and you have no right to stop me from doing that. It's seeing where those lines are and honoring them and in settling for no less. I mean, that's where I am.

4-00:46:12

**Wilmot:**

In doing your work currently, who are your partners? Who are the people that you call up when you are just thinking about moving things forward, and who do you strategize with and who are your—?

4-00:46:24

**Soskin:**

At this point, it's Dion's staff, it's a couple of members of Dion's staff, a couple of people in politics in Richmond that I've been able to connect with. It's Barbara Becnel at Neighborhood House who comes out of journalism. She did her graduate work on the justice system and African Americans and is working very, very hard on the anti-death penalty stuff. She's the one that single handedly got two Nobel Prize nominations for Stanley "Tookie" Williams over on death on row, who is now scheduled to be executed next year. She's working hard on that and I worked on that with her. Barbara is certainly one of them. She doesn't come out of the Bay Area; she comes out of L.A. and the East Coast. Barbara, I'm very close to.

Yeah, there's a critical mass of people that I feel like I can reach to that resonate with the things I'm thinking. Yeah, they're here.

4-00:47:47

**Wilmot:**

Now you are here meaning in some ways while you've been in the Bay Area your whole life, in some ways you are in this new place just in that you are really—. Let me rephrase that, you've been in the Bay Area your whole life, but it's really in the past several years that you really put down roots in Richmond.

4-00:48:08

**Soskin:**

Only in the past three years. That came with my work with Dion.

4-00:48:15

**Wilmot:**

So, tell me what kind of community you are finding here and how are you finding this work in this community?

4-00:48:22

**Soskin:**

I think that under it all, I'm Berkeleyite. And for a long time, I was sleeping in West County, but living in Berkeley. It took me several years to even to change my voter reg[istration], I wouldn't change my registration because I saw myself as a Berkeley person. When I was living in El Cerrito, you know, I wouldn't go. Somewhere along the line, partly out of that experience of that crazy little record shop on Sacramento Street, where so many of my customers came out Richmond. I can't walk down the street in Richmond without people recognizing me from there. So that my world was bigger than I knew it was.

That base of Richmond church people—you have to understand that along the way, when I stopped selling jazz and R&B and went exclusively into Gospel, I also moved into church supplies and became eventually the largest supplier of Gospel robes and choir robes, choir robes



and pulpit robes in the state. Out of that little shop. My son David goes out and measures everybody on a Wednesday night and then the church gets together for two or three months and makes chicken dinners and then they get the money together and they place the order. We probably outfitted most of the churches in the area with their choir robes. And that's what's kept us alive all these years. So the people in this community know me better than I know them.

But it empowered me. In addition, they attribute Charlie Reid to me. I'm Mel Reid's wife, and Mel Reid is Charlie's nephew. So the people in North Richmond empowered me in ways that I could not have been empowered otherwise. So all those things together provided a base from which to work. So it made my work in Richmond maybe more productive than my work in Berkeley. And now, I'm at home here.

And the other piece is that I'm watching Oakland under Jerry Brown losing its black base over time, and we still have about a three year window here, I think. We have a black city manager, we have a black mayor, we have four members of the city council, we have heavy involvement in all the boards and commissions. The neighborhood council—because we have a neighborhood council set up—there are like thirty-nine neighborhood councils and they all express, you know, whatever the community is like. There is still a forty percent black population. There are things possible here in a black context that are not possible anywhere else in the Bay Area now. So I see it as a frontier. I see it as a cutting edge if we can take advantage of that. And I'd like to be able to give some strength to that by leaning in the direction of constructive change with other people to try to make that more solid. So, I guess I'm home, though when I go to Berkeley, I'm nostalgic.

4-00:51:58

**Wilmot:**

You have home in different places.

4-00:51:59

**Soskin:**

Yeah. Yeah.

4-00:52:03

**Wilmot:**

Your son David now runs that record store?

4-00:52:05

**Soskin:**

Oh yeah, he's been there over ten years. I have to stay all the way out. There's nothing I can do part way. So he runs it and he's the Reid.

4-00:52:25

**Wilmot:**

Well, let's see. I have one quick question to ask you. [interview interruption]

4-00:52:39

**Soskin:**

When I went to that first black power conference in Chicago, I experienced what was then a sort of political black birth.

4-00:52:50

**Wilmot:**

What year was that?

4-00:52:51

**Soskin:**

I cannot remember the exact year, but it was certainly before I went to Miami. It must've been late sixties. Anyway, I found myself so excited by what I found where I had gone there somewhat resistant to the Black Movement, as I told you, and was encouraged to participate in this. But I found myself seated next to Mrs. Countee Cullen, his widow. These were black intellectuals from all over the country and I came back feeling so high from that experience that I wrote something called, *Ebony the Night*. It was the experience of blackness as a positive force for the first time. Up to then, it had always been defensive. We are just as good as—that sort of thing. Only for the first time, I came from the other side, which was wow, you know. I wrote this, if I can put it to you all without losing it. It's a song. The verse is,

“As I lie ‘neath the stars on this night of my day,

playing the game that some poets play,

find synonyms for black both poetic and good.

Sounds simple? You try. I do wish you would.

The world made the rules and established the ante.

Proclaimed white is sinless and black straight from Dante.

Ebony the night, ebony satin right.

Star jewels held in black velvet hands of ebony the night.

Onyx, set with a dream that weaves through my mind ‘til I seem

black born and kiss warm, black jet jazz of love, onyx the dream.

Black image cries behind shuttered eyes trying so hard to be good.

Glaciers in skies of ebony lies,

I sing them away if I could.

Ebony the night, cradle me, the night.

Black chin cupped closed in black velvet hands of ebony the night.

Ebony, ebony the night.”

It's a beautiful song.

4-00:56:03

**Wilmot:**

It's a beautiful song. How does the tune go?

4-00:56:07

**Soskin:**

At some point, I'll give you the tape. I have one somewhere that has it. I don't know where to find it now. I think I wrote that on the plane coming home, but that's when I came home really high. And if there's anything wonderful about my life is that each of these places that I've moved in and out of had been so complete that none of them are half steps. I really was black, I really felt the victory of being that, of reaching that, and realizing it at some point that that was half of the trip, that if I push past that. If everybody went through whatever their revolution was, whether it's gay or brown or yellow or whatever it is, but if you go into it and get stuck, you only made half of the trip. If you really simply proud of that, then you've only made half the trip. But if you go through it all the way and come out the other side, you come out at a place of universality. That's what was incredible for me—to recognize that place. But at the same time, to come at it wholly with my blackness, not Creole, not half way, not light skinned and good haired. None of that stuff. But going through the whole black trip and coming out of that on the other side and finally getting to the place where I wrote to each of me, where I then took back all the parts. And now I have this sense of working out of all of the parts of me but unified. And that whole thing worked itself out through my music. That's how it got worked out, because I wrote everything whole. I never wrote anything that took more than ten minutes. It would simply move out at some point as I was working through something.

To have that factor in my life and I think that's what I watch, that's why I connect with artists. I see artists working those things through. I see them working it out in the same kind of way and it didn't matter to me whether it was on stage, on a mike, on anything, but the process itself. I feel so grateful for having been able to live all of those pieces fully.

4-00:58:47

**Wilmot:**

Betty, what you are saying is so rich.

4-00:58:52

**Soskin:**

You hear me. But that's the foundation, that make sense, that's where the sense is for me. It ties all the pieces together and you can call them political or art or whatever you are, but that ties the pieces together. You live long enough and deeply enough to have gone through the whole thing completely. So now what do you with that, what do I do now? And I'm still for some reason waiting for what's the next five years look like, because my experience tells me that it's cyclic, and that I've got to watch for what the next moves are, because they are going to become obvious to me at some point. I'm thinking it's going to be creating now that home for black performing artists. That's where I want it to go. If I can do that—.

4-00:59:44

**Wilmot:**

I'm sure I'll see it happen. I'll see you do it.

4-00:59:47

**Soskin:**

I hope so. That's where my heart is

4-00:59:49

**Wilmot:**

Well, on that note, let's close for today.

4-00:59:52

**Soskin:**

Okay, that's good.

4-00:59:53

**Wilmot:**

Good.

[End of interview]