Walter Gordon

ATHLETE, OFFICER IN LAW ENFORCEMENT AND ADMINISTRATION,
GOVERNOR OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS

Volume II

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Berkeley, California

Walter Gordon

ATHLETE, OFFICER IN LAW ENFORCEMENT AND ADMINISTRATION, GOVERNOR OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS

Volume II

Interviews with

Walter Gordon
Elizabeth Fisher Gordon
Walter Gordon, Jr.
Dr. and Mrs. Edwin C. Gordon
Elizabeth Gordon Dixon

Interviews Conducted by
Amelia Fry and Anne Brower
in 1971, 1978, and 1979

Copy No. 1

Errata

p. i. next to last line. The dinner for Bernice May was held in April 1971, not 1981. Bernice died about 1975.

p. 16, line 7. Haynes, not Hayes.

p. 21, fourth paragraph. Fred Guy was my successor as president of the Co-op, not my predecessor.

p. 29, fifth paragraph, third line. It was the California League, not the Berkeley League, that, it was argued, should not have taken a position by such a narrow vote. The Berkeley League did, however, support the position taken by the majority of the California League members.

p. 45, third paragraph, line six. Pat Moynihan was a luncheon speaker at the conference, not editor of the volume. I was asked to be editor of the volume, which came out under my name.

p. 67, fifth paragraph, line 10. It was Tom Watson of IBM, not the entire Commission, who wrote a wonderful letter to me after the Commission had finished its report.

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PREFACE

Because of his role in the athletic history of the University of California, his historic importance as a pioneer in achievement for his race, his leadership in the reform of correctional philosophy and practice in California, and his distinguished service as governor of the Virgin Islands and as federal judge there, Walter Gordon was frequently proposed for an oral history. The first opportunity to carry out this proposal came with the Earl Warren Project since much of Walter Gordon's career fitted within its guidelines.

The Earl Warren Project was a five-year project of the Regional Oral History Office to record interviews with men and women prominent in politics, governmental administration, and criminal justice during the Warren Era in California. Focusing on the years 1925-1953, the interviews were designed not only to document the life of Chief Justice Warren, but also to obtain new information on social and political change in the state. Walter Gordon, appointed in 1944 by Governor Warren to the newly formed California Adult Authority, was interviewed on three occasions in 1971 by Amelia R. Fry as part of this Project, funding coming from a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Walter Gordon's final illness overtook him before his own interview with Mrs. Fry could be completed, and later it was decided to interview his relatives, key friends, and colleagues in order to produce a full-scale oral history.

Funding was no longer available from the Earl Warren Project and Robert S. Johnson volunteered to undertake fund-raising for this second phase of the project. Mr. Johnson's wide acquaintance among Berkeley civic groups and University of California athletes, in addition to his energy and devotion, made him invaluable. He also contributed generously to other aspects of this memoir: in the form of his own interview, in his suggestions for possible interviewees, in proofreading much of the final manuscript, and in his thoughtful advice and counsel. The project owes him a very considerable debt.

For three decades Walter Gordon was associated with football at the University of California and a large part of the funding for this project came from former football players of that period, who responded generously to letters from their team captains. Contributions were also received from the Berkeley Breakfast Club, of which Walter Gordon was a member, and from other individuals.

Twenty-four friends and colleagues of Walter Gordon were interviewed in the course of this project in an attempt to achieve a well-rounded portrait of a significant man through the recollections of people who had known him at various periods in his life. Suggestions for who these people might be came

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*A list of donors to the Walter Gordon project has been placed at the front of Volume I.

to the Regional Oral History Office from many sources and the final names were arrived at after innumerable phone calls and much correspondence.

Interviews were held from March 1976 to November 1977 in Berkeley, San Francisco, Oakland, Walnut Creek, and Los Angeles. The interviews varied in length from three-quarters of an hour to four or five hours, but the taping time is not necessarily reflected in the page length of the interview transcript. Agnes Robb, whose interview was brief to begin with, further abbreviated her remarks in her written version. Allen Moore's interview, similarly, does not appear in its entirety; on rereading he and I felt that some of it strayed too far from the subject of Walter Gordon. Herman Selvin's interview was dual-purpose; it served not only to record his recollections of Walter Gordon, but also as the first part of an interview of Mr. Selvin himself, which was completed in later tapings and presented in June of 1979. In general, the lawyers proved to be capable of the greatest number of pages per interview hour; they organized their thoughts skillfully and spoke usually in complete sentences.

References to Walter Gordon will be found in other oral histories in the Regional Oral History Office, including those of Frances Albrier, C. L. Dellums, Clinton W. Evans, Brutus Hamilton, Winifred Heard, John Holstrom (August Vollmer volume), Karl Holton (Earl Warren and the Youth Authority volume), Harry Kingman, Bernice May, Richard McGee, Julia Morgan Volume I, Tarea Hall Pittman, Agnes Robb, William Byron Rumford, Sr., Kenyon F. Scudder (Earl Warren and the Youth Authority volume), Orland W. Wilson (August Vollmer volume).

Two minor difficulties developed in the course of preparing this oral history, one interpretive, the second organizational. First, Walter Gordon has assumed larger-than-life proportions in the memories of his friends--in the literal sense; descriptions of him as a young man paint him as a giant, although his actual height was just six feet. As General William Dean put it, "Maybe I put more stature in him because of the man he was." This phenomenon accounts, perhaps, for his being awarded three Big Cs in the memory of one of his contemporaries when in fact he received only one. The second complexity, that of organization, stemmed from the durability of Walter Gordon's friendships; they lasted for a lifetime. The young Stan Barnes whom Gordon coached back onto the Wonder Team, many years later, as assistant attorney general of the United States, helped to host the party in Washington, D.C., that inaugurated his term as governor of the Virgin Islands, and Bill Dean, the newly recruited policeman with whom he shared the midnight-to-eight shift in August Vollmer's Berkeley Police Department, as a much-decorated two-star general paid his final respects to Walter Gordon as one of his honorary pall-bearers. This continuity of friendship made it necessary to divide the oral history somewhat arbitrarily and the reader will find much that overlaps and resists chronology.

A further division of the history was made, with interviews by friends as Volume I, and the unfinished Walter Gordon interview and those by family members as Volume II. This sequence came about simply because the volumes were completed in that order.

In Mrs. Amelia Fry's interviews with Walter Gordon, abruptly terminated though they were, a context is established in which to view the man in both his public and his private aspect. We learn something of his childhood in the South and a good deal about his forebears and immediate family. This background is extended in the interviews held with his wife and his children. We see the character and strength of his mother and father through the eyes of their grandchildren. We learn how he shared his attitudes on racism and on the appropriate reaction to it from his children's description of their own family life. From Mrs. Gordon's interviews we sense the love and loyalty and fun that characterized their partnership over their more than fifty years together.

Taken together, these two volumes, in addition to Walter Gordon's achievements in the fields of athletics, law enforcement and administration, civil rights, and city, state, and federal service, present a man of courage, good humor, and integrity--the attributes of a man who values himself and therefore others; in the words of his wife, of a man who was born free.

Anne Hus Brower
Interviewer/Editor

28 May 1980
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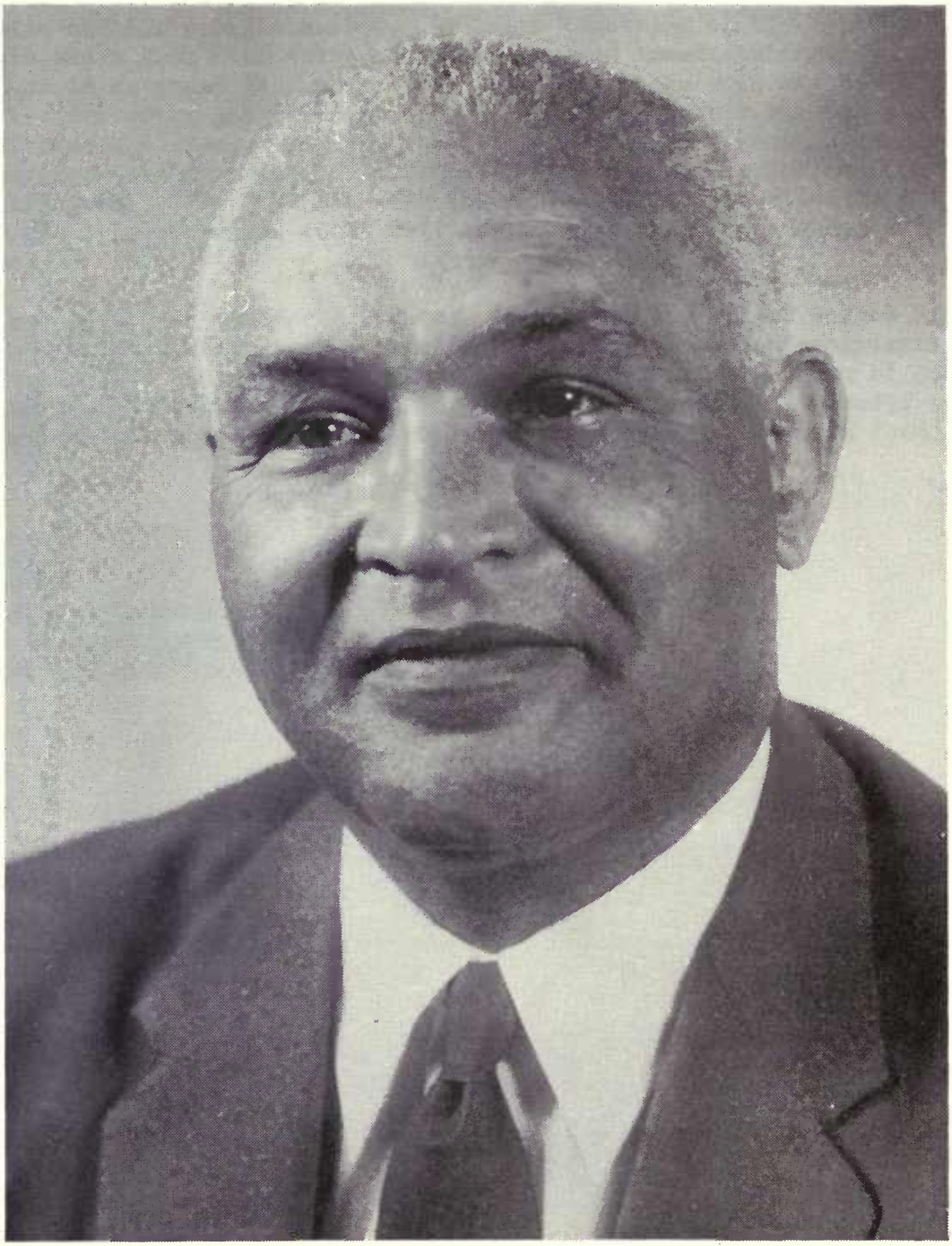

WALTER GORDON

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INTERVIEW HISTORY

Time of Interviews: 1971, on April 19, May 26, and October 27.

Place of Interviews: The offices of the Regional Oral History Office, University of California at Berkeley.

The transcript was edited in 1976 by Anne Brower.

The Interview:

Walter Gordon, the late Governor of the Virgin Islands and a federal judge, was invited in 1971 to tape his oral history shortly after he returned to Berkeley from the Virgin Islands. Initially we had in mind his part in the Earl Warren administration as chairman of the Adult Authority. His crucial role in the 1944-1955 period covered the years of correctional reform and as such was important to document as part of the Earl Warren Era Oral History Project.

It did not take long, however, once our preinterview discussions began, to expand the interview plan to preserve as much autobiographical material as possible: his roots, his public school days in Riverside, California, his college career at Berkeley, his first-rate football playing (and later, coaching) on a historically spectacular team (Gordon was the first West Coast player to be named All-American), his work at Mare Island, his busy years as a law student, football scout, and member of August Vollmer's Berkeley police force, and his years on the Virgin Islands of the United States.

In planning the interview, we accepted his strong conviction that his memoirs, like his life itself, could not be construed as a model for the then-emerging "black history" research. He had always lived an integrated life in which his color played a small part; in fact, as he points out in the interview, there is no longer any such thing as a true legal "blackness." However, his achievements merit added significance because, simply, it was more difficult and highly unusual for a member of the Negro race to win such recognition then--even in California and even at Berkeley. In every chapter resides some special difficulties that only a person with darker skin would encounter. But primarily the interviews reflect the era: mid-century Warren progressivism in California's government and culture, a sense of responsibility in correcting social ills, coupled with expectations that improvement would undoubtedly come to pass.

Governor (or Judge) Gordon was one of the few persons who preferred to tape in our office. Crowded and noisy though the office was, the staff saw each visit as a special event. His wife always drove him to the campus after lunch; then--I hoped--did her shopping errands until our break-off time at 4:00. He always came in smiling, his soft voice addressing everyone and asking, with quiet dignity, for the interviewer. Although not the carnivorous gargantuan type, like some of today's football players, he did threaten to overfill the small space as he navigated his way between desks to my small office in the rear. There the secretary defended our privacy, and he usually leaned back in the swivel chair and bent his effort on explaining, now with eyes searching the ceiling, now sparkling at me, How It Was.

Our first session, it should be noted, ended in a bit of a gaffe, if not disaster. Full of his evocations of growing up in Riverside, pursuing an education for excellence, the session was so fascinating to us both that we did not notice a carpenter working briefly on the other side of the door. Before being persuaded by a transcriber to leave us in peace, he had taken apart a vital doorknob mechanism.

At length, the Governor and I realized we had taped well past the hour to meet Mrs. Gordon. Hurriedly he grabbed his coat and reached for the door. The doorknob came off in his hand. Fingers in the hole, I yanked and jiggled the door. No response. We called for a transcriber on the other side. No answer. We poked at mysterious metal interior parts with pencils, but the door remained, staunchly and simply, latched. At length a voice like a Greek oracle intoned that nothing could be accomplished that way and that the door handles were not to be found. I attempted a shaky smile and noticed that, although the Governor should have been in a fist-clinching rage, instead the corners of his lips were twitching with an interior sense of the ridiculous. That is probably a clue to how this governor got through the day--any day. Silently I discarded the option of his using his football shoulders and police technique or ramming the door.

One alternative remained. It was out a window, onto the cat walk, around through the main office window, then out. As we tugged a window up, the oracle again spoke. "Try this screwdriver. Maybe Governor Gordon can move the latch." He did indeed, to jubilant congratulations of a secretary, and on that triumphant note of freedom our first session concluded.

Disaster breeds rapport, let future oral historians note--sometimes. At any rate, we held two more sessions after that. Between times outlines were developed, materials (such as hearings on prison reform) were collected for background study, and Professor Sheldon L. Messenger of the school of criminology advised on questions; in fact, plans were laid for him to sit in and interview the former chairman of the Adult Authority on his part in that body. Gene Carte, then Assistant Professor, Department of Criminal Justice, Trenton State College, also contributed questions about his research subject, the life of Berkeley's reformist police chief, August Vollmer.

We taped the Vollmer section, but we never reached the discussion of the Adult Authority nor the important chapter on the Virgin Island history during the Eisenhower administration. His story breaks off in middle. Although the fourth session was scheduled many times, each date was postponed as he became increasingly active in Berkeley civic matters, serving for example on the housing commission. Amid our off-tape discussions, he voiced concern that he had taped his views on legal issues before we reached the relevant section on our outline, and that he had told too many anecdotes; the structure needed to be tighter. At his urging, we gave him a roughly emended copy of the transcript so that future sessions could be planned. Suddenly his stroke essentially ended the efforts although attempts to schedule taping sessions continued, with the help of Mrs. Gordon, for some time. History will be the poorer because we could not complete the memoir.

However, the subsequent interviews with his friends and associates fill much of the gap, and here in his own words one does get a sense of the young Walter Gordon already achieving significance in sports, law enforcement, and law, with intimations of even larger contributions to society in the future. As a bonus, the narrative is suffused with commentary from a pool of wisdom that only a fully matured Walter Gordon could possess--on race relations, on capital punishment, on the meaning of being human. Like Schubert's Unfinished Symphony, his partial memoir can be enjoyed as a rich experience and stands quite well on its own.

Amelia R. Fry
Interviewer

14 March 1980
Washington, D.C.

SIGNIFICANT DATES IN WALTER GORDON'S LIFE

Born (Atlanta, Georgia)	October 10, 1894
Member, University of California varsity football team	1916-1918
A.B. degree, University of California, Berkeley	1918
Member, Berkeley Police Department	1919-1930
Assistant football coach and scout, University of California	1919-1943
Married Elizabeth Fisher	July 22, 1920
J.D. degree (Boalt Hall, University of California, Berkeley)	1922
Admitted to the California Bar	1923
President, Alameda County NAACP	ca. 1923-1933
Practiced law	1923-1944
Member, Advisory Board, Stiles Hall (University of California, Berkeley)	1934-1959
Named to board of Paroles and Prison Terms	1943
Member and chairman, California Adult Authority	1944-1955
President, National Interstate Compact Administration of Probation and Parole	1952
Governor, Virgin Islands	1955-1958
Judge, U.S. District Court, Virgin Islands	1958-1969
Member, Berkeley Housing Authority and Berkeley Redevelopment Agency	1970-1974
Named to Alameda County Grand Jury	1974
Died	April 2, 1976

HONORS AND AWARDS RECEIVED BY WALTER GORDON

Percy Hall Trophy	1918
Named All-American	1918
Honorary degree (LLD), McGeorge College of Law (now McGeorge School of Law, University of Pacific)	1949
Subject of "This is Your Life," Ralph Edwards TV	1950
University of California Alumnus of the Year	1955
Benjamin Ide Wheeler Award	1955
Honorary degree (LLD), University of California, Berkeley	1958
Citation Award, Boalt Hall Alumni Association	1964
Walter A. Gordon Award for distinguished citizen athlete established by the Berkeley Breakfast Club	1964
Made honorary member of the Order of the Coif	1969
Named to National Football Foundation's College Football Hall of Fame	1975

INTERVIEW WITH WALTER GORDON

I ANCESTORS AND FAMILY

Fry: Were you born in California?

Gordon: My birth took place in Atlanta, Georgia, on October the tenth 1894. My mother was named Georgia Bryant and my father was Henry Gordon. My mother was born in Huntsville, Alabama, and my daddy was born in Atlanta, Georgia--just out of Atlanta. My father's father was owned by General John B. Gordon; that is where we got our name.

Fry: One of the things we're trying to do is get some lineages so we can see how the migration patterns worked.

Gordon: My father told me there were about seven or eight boys in his family. There was one set of twins, younger. There was John, Sterling, Charles, my dad [Henry], then the twins, Uncle Adolphus and Uncle Dawson--Uncle Dawson was a preacher. Hugh was the youngest. There were three daughters: Aunt Nora (and I'll get the connection up for you; it is really nice, I think). Aunt Mary was the second daughter and Aunt Lizzie was the third.

Fry: Was that really "Elizabeth"?

Gordon: Yes. All three of those girls, as a result of Negro tradition in the South, finished from Spellman Seminary in Atlanta, Georgia.

Aunt Nora, I only saw once. She came to Atlanta when I was about seven or eight years old. She went to Africa to the Belgian Congo as a Baptist missionary and spent her life down there. She married--they said she never was going to change her name--she married an African who had the same name. He was the first Negro preacher to preach in Westminster Abbey.

Fry: Is that right? His name was Gordon?

Gordon: His name was Gordon. I went to Africa with Nixon, you know, when I was governor. I tried to see if I could find out about Gordon; I got a little trace.

Gordon: The interesting thing about the Gordon thing is this: when General John B. Gordon married his wife, my father's father (who was his slave) and my father's mother married at the same time in the sick room of General John B. Gordon's father, and the four of them went away on their honeymoon together.

Fry: No kidding? At the same time?

Gordon: No, I am not kidding. Well, the thing of it is this: After the Civil War, Gordon came home. General Gordon, who was governor of Georgia and so forth, you know--"Georgia's grand old chief," that is what they used to sing about him. He came back from the Civil War, and my father's father had been left in charge of the plantation. (I think his name was Henry, I wouldn't be sure. Our names run almost like the Gordon boys and girls; that's the way there.)

Fry: You mean General Gordon's boys' and girls' names run the same--

Gordon: Yes. My father's name was Henry Bradley Gordon, and the general's was John Bradley Gordon. You see they got all mixed up--I don't know.

Fry: So they are mixed up for us because they used so many of the same names?

Gordon: Well, anyway, the general told him, "Henry, you're free now and you are privileged to leave. I don't believe in slavery anyway." That's what he told him. He may have said it different, but I know what my father said he told him, and he stayed there and worked on the farm. The general said, "You can stay here and work the farm, and we'll pay divide."

Fry: Pay divide?

Gordon: He divided the income, see. So you see, my dad wasn't born in slavery, but Uncle Sterling and Uncle John and Uncle Charles were, and their names ran down. My father was born on the plantation because they stayed there.

Well, I want to tell you something about the girls; they all were teachers and were teaching in the South--graduates of Spellman University. Uncle Dawson, one of the twins (Dawson and Dolphus) was the only one of the boys who got a college education. He went to Atlanta Baptist College. The girls, as I said, were teaching. Aunt Nora died in Africa; she was the only one who went into missionary work.

Gordon: She had a run-in--I heard her talking about it and the folks told us about it--she had a run-in with King Leopold of the Belgian Congo. At that time it was a compound belonging to the king. It was called "Belgian Congo" because it belonged to King Leopold. He threatened her. She went to question him about cutting off the natives' hands and all because they didn't pay tithes or something. I've seen the papers with that in there.

She told him that he wouldn't do anything of the kind. She was a tall stately woman. (My father was 6'3" and weighed 235, and all the boys were big.)

Fry: She could draw herself up in her queenly stature and talk to a king!

Gordon: I'll bet you she was close to six feet. I saw her once in Atlanta, Georgia. She was a sweet-talking woman. She brought two African girls, Emma and Saluka, to the South. Maybe she sent them I don't know. I remember seeing them. They entered a girls' school there, I don't know whether it was Fiske or what. One became a dentist. I can remember them calling them--and my mother taught them later on.

Back in Africa, my aunt lost two girls. They jumped in swimming and a crocodile swallowed the both of them.

Fry: Oh my goodness.

Gordon: They can swallow and eat a young child.

Well, anyway, when I went down to the Virgin Islands, Uncle Dawson was the only one of the boys that had been in touch with General B. Gordon's daughters. One of them lived up in Massachusetts. He had some letters from her and so forth. When Uncle Dawson died, well, we had no more connection with them.

When we lived in the Virgin Islands, one Sunday the guard came up and told us that there was a young man, his wife, and a young girl on the second floor, which consisted of the ballroom floor; our apartment and the department offices were down on the first floor. I didn't know who it was. I asked the guard and he said I didn't know him. His name was Murphy. That didn't register with me.

So I went down. He was General John B. Gordon's daughter's son. He worked for the Labor Department in Washington and he had been down to San Juan and came over to the Virgin Islands. He knew of the connection.

Fry: Between you and his grandfather?

Gordon: The family, the name. See, because my name is Walter Gordon and he knew when he read that I had got the governorship that we were connected. While I was in the Virgin Islands he came to San Juan with some of these fellows who study preparedness for disaster, to be ready for earthquakes and everything like that. They had been meeting in Puerto Rico, and he came over there and brought about fifteen or twenty of his men. I didn't expect him.

The man who was leading them later became a governor of Georgia, S. Ernest Vandiver, Jr. I never knew him before; he seemed very nice. He came in with about fifteen or more men. My commissioner of police brought them in and he's black as spades, black as the ace of spades, and all these little fellows, of course, were white. They all talked, asked me questions. My office wasn't big enough to have such a group in it.

We were having a lot of fun. We were sitting down and Vandiver was asking all the questions about budgeting and so forth. I was more interested in talking to these fellows; some of them were young fellows, you know. Finally—we had all been telling jokes and so forth, and they were laughing—one of the fellows said, "Say, we're getting along all right here together, aren't we?"

And I pulled one. I said, "Well, why shouldn't we? We are all Georgia boys together!" [laughs] Because they always call a Negro a "boy." I just told it to them and they just laughed.

Yet when Vandiver got to be governor, by gosh, he was a strict segregationist! That was one time I wished that I had been governor of the Virgin Islands so I could go to the Governors' Conference and talk to him. I did get a chance to talk to the present governor [Lester Maddux]. Not the one who was just recently elected, the one who ran all the Negroes. Well, he came down to the Virgin Islands while he was governor. They had a Governors' Conference down there. One of the fellows, Davis, a white fellow, a contractor down there, and I know each other; he was from Atlanta and I was from Atlanta. He got ahold of this governor. I was a judge then. When they had a dinner he brought the governor over to introduce him to my wife and I. We got along all right but he was pretty rough. He tried to talk nice to me, but--

Fry: Sometimes people like that are pretty good on one-to-one relations. But when they are thinking in terms of large groups of people, why they are just murder.

Gordon: I don't condemn all Southerners, because the Southern white people have helped the American Negro all along, even through slavery.

Gordon: August Vollmer was supposed to have been born in New Orleans.

Well, anyway, I got a vist from General Gordon's grandson.

Fry: You said your father was born out of slavery but on the plantation, right?

Grodon: Yes. He worked on the plantation.

Fry: Was he still working there when you were born?

Gordon: No. I don't know. No, I don't think he was. He was working in Atlanta, I think. He was very much of a churchman; he was doing janitor work, and then he ran on the road. The reason why--

Fry: What do you mean "ran on the road"?

Gordon: He was a Pullman porter, on the railroad.

The reason why I remember my date of birth, my momma gave me an affadavit. They didn't have nurses; they didn't have doctors down there you know.

Fry: You just had a midwife attend your birth?

Gordon: Yes. When I was little Papa took me to Memphis, Tennessee, on a Pullman car that he was riding on, and I remember it because so many of the fellows I saw on there were soldiers. It was during the Spanish-American War. I was about four to five years of age. I remember that. See, I was born in 1894.

Aunt Nora's body, that's the oldest sister, was shipped from Africa to Atlanta. Her funeral was held at Spellman Seminary, the same place where Martin Luther King's funeral later was held. My mother kidded me for years afterwards, she said, "You know, you asked me a question when we were going to church and to Aunt Nora's funeral."

I said, "What was that?"

She said, "You asked me if when I died (meaning my mother) couldn't you ride closer to the hearse."

I was a little boy. [laughs]

II CHILDHOOD

Fry: So you grew up in the city of Atlanta, as a city boy?

Gordon: I went through segregated city schools--Gate City School. No kindergarten, just beginning in the first grade at six years old.

Fry: I see. May I ask you, is there any reason why the girls in your father's family all went to the seminary but the boys--

Gordon: Well, I think that is from the tradition of girls teaching and men working, so men don't need the same kind of education.

Fry: They do the hard work, you mean?

Gordon: That's it. My dad only had a second-grade education. You talk about a head!

He was working when I was a boy in Atlanta; he worked in the grocery store for a while, Campus Grocery. I remember that 'cause I was hurt once in riding on the grocery wagon. Negroes delivered groceries and all, you know, and he had me with him. It was kind of like a laundry wagon. He got on a streetcar track and his mule stopped and the streetcar hit the mule and it rolled over and over. He sent me home with a big cut on my ankle. I still have the scar. See there [showing it]. A woman took me home to my mother on Irving Street. I was a babe in arms almost. I was little. My head was all bandaged, I had scars on my head, but I wasn't hurt.

The laundry wagon has covers all over, and it just rolled over and over. You know, they have an upper tray and I was lying up there asleep. Well, my dad wasn't hurt seriously. He was bruised, you know.

That reminds me about voting. My dad went to vote once. A fellow made me mad. He wanted to know, "Who's going to vote, you or the mule?"

Fry: Oh, really? Did your dad continue to try to vote and exercise full powers of his citizenship in Atlanta?

Gordon: Whenever he could, whenever he could. But they had segregated schools. When I was ten years old we came to California. We went to Riverside, where I went to school from the fourth grade on up through high school. I think I was the first colored kid graduating from high school at that time.

Fry: In Riverside?

Gordon: I think so. I am not sure of any others.

Well, then, I went on through high school. I was a little slow in the fourth grade. I wasn't up to the fourth-grade work, coming from a segregated school. So I know what it is to have the disadvantages of a segregated school, particularly for math and stuff like that. But I caught up and I went into high school. There were 108 children in Gate City Grammar School, eighth grade. They had a first division and out of that first division, about twenty of us were admitted into high school without examination. Then I went through high school, four years. I graduated and my credentials were accepted at the University of California without any trouble. I never had any trouble with my grades.

I know what segregated schools are. I remember my school teachers in Atlanta. They were nice, but it is just a question of--so many of them don't finish college.

My Aunt Nora (she was a missionary) taught beautifully. Gee, she was a beautiful woman. I just remember her as a boy. She died from African fever.

Well, there's some other things I could tell you about politics in our family which molded things with me.

Fry: What are they?

Gordon: Well, I'm going to just tell you. My father was never anything but a Republican. My Uncle Hugh (he's dead now) was a Socialist. My dad had a little grocery store while he was working for the English-American Building in Atlanta, Georgia, as the head janitor. He had four or five Negroes under him, and he got $30 a month as head janitor. Uncle Hugh ran this little neighborhood grocery store. The kids used to steal everything because Uncle Hugh slept. [laughing]

Fry: [laughing] He was always going to sleep?

Grodon: The interesting thing was, when my father said, "I'm going to move to California," Uncle Hugh moved. Uncle Charles moved and Uncle Sterling moved--the oldest living boy. (My father's brother John was dead.) They all moved to Riverside. Uncle Dawson, the preacher, had lived in Riverside for a while and pastored a church there. He wrote my dad that, "I think Riverside is a nice little town. They have about 20,000 people in it, and it would be a good place to raise your boys." (We didn't have any sisters, see.) So we stopped in Riverside. Then Uncle Dawson went on to Los Angeles and got a call up there at the Tabernacle. He was my father's favorite brother. They just seemed to get along.

Uncle Hugh, well, he was a Socialist, then he was a Garveyite.

Fry: A what?

Gordon: A Garveyite. He believed in Marcus Garvey when he--well, you probably don't know. These are the kind of things that come up in the Negro culture.

Fry: Yes.

Gordon: Garvey, he was talking about back-to-Africa. Garvey was going to go back to Africa, you know.

Fry: Oh, is that the one?

Gordon: Yes. Uncle Hugh was talking about it, but Aunt Nora died from African fever, and he--

Fry: Sort of crumbled there, eh? Was Garvey also a Socialist?

Gordon: I don't know. No, he was one of these activists though. He was from the West Indies and they finally deported him and sent him out of here.

Fry: In the meantime, your Socialist Uncle Hugh was following him for a while?

Gordon: He followed him for a while, and Uncle Dawson did. Uncle Hugh, I think, took on Communism. Uncle Dawson didn't. Uncle Dawson got enough of Garvey and he went out preaching. He could preach; he was a good preacher and a decent man. That's why I hated to see him get involved in those--he collected money and he took it to Garvey and gave it to him.

Then he wanted some salary and traveling expenses and Garvey told him, "Well, if you didn't get your money out of that, then you're not going to get any from me." He quit the movement when

Gordon: he saw that was the way it was. It was a silly movement anyway! Negroes were propagating faster than they could be hauled on all of our boats to Africa! Airplanes hadn't come in good yet.

Well, I've always been a Republican because I am historically Republican, because everything that I saw that we needed to have support in, particularly from Congress--all the Southern congressmen voted against us. And they were for everything that closed us from citizenship. But it doesn't embitter me, and I don't condemn all Southerners. I know what politics are. I recognize what politics are. I've always been a Republican.

Well, Uncle Hugh and I used to get to arguing. I'll tell you, it's a joke the way he got mad at me. When I was out here [Berkeley] at college, a freshman and a sophomore, I was older, see. As a child I could hear him talking, but hell--pardon me!--he used to get away with some things then, but when I grew up and I went back home, we started arguing Socialism. We didn't argue Communism particularly. Every time I'd disagree with him about something, he'd say, "I can tell you have been raised in a white college!"

He finally said one day, "Do you know that a white man has never found[ed] a civilization?" And I said, "Well, what about it?"

He said, "He's never founded one! All the civilizations in the world weren't Caucasian, see."

I said, "Well, I don't know history as well as you do, but I am assuming that you know it." I said, "You try to rib me because I'm going to a white college"--the state university, and he hadn't been to any. I said, "Maybe a white man didn't found a civilization but he improved on every damn one he came in contact with." And did he get mad! He got mad. [laughs]

He was always nice to me though when I was growing up. My dad and my mother meant more to me than all these isms and so forth. Oh, I just think of them so much.

I had a brother, George. He didn't go to college. He got married. He lived in Pasadena. He's still there. He's been in the insurance business. He worked for the Golden State Company for a while. But we are just as much different as--

Fry: You don't really have a lot in common?

Gordon: Well, no--I love him. We get to fighting though.

Fry: Was he younger than you?

Gordon: No, he is two years and six months older than I am. I haven't seen him in fifteen years. (I'll have to go see him.)

III MARY ELIZABETH FISHER GORDON

Gordon: My wife is from a lovely family. You can't leave her out of this.

Fry: Now let's see. She's a Fisher, Elizabeth Fisher.

Gordon: Mary Elizabeth is her correct name. Well, don't put all this in the thing. I'm just telling you.

Fry: Well, we always do this. We try to get a line on both spouses. So go ahead.

Gordon: My father-in-law, her father, was the son of a mixed marriage--white and Negro--in Pennsylvania. He had one or two sisters. Well, his father left. You couldn't tell her dad from a white person. He married Mary Wild [Ella Mae Wilds]. I think Wild, I am not sure. She was from a family already here in California. Dad Fisher left Pennsylvania when he was nineteen years of age and moved to San Francisco. He worked at one place that I knew of, in the insurance business. He had seven children. My wife was the oldest girl.

Well, Dad Fisher joined the church in San Francisco within a week after he came here. He's been a church member all of his life.

Fry: Is that the Baptist church?

Gordon: No, Methodist. The only enjoyment he ever had was when I made him come to football games when I was playing. That's when he got started. I was going with her [Elizabeth Fisher]. I started going with her, I guess it was my second year playing.

She went to Normal. San Francisco Normal and graduated over there as a teacher.

Fry: Was that later called San Francisco State?

Gordon: Yes, only then there was just a normal school.

She was his oldest daughter. He had two boys, Carl and John. He had twins [Wallace and Wesley]. He had girls, my wife and Dot (Dorothy) and Ella. Those three daughters. They're all living. Dot was married to a singer; then they were divorced and she went on back East. She's back here now. She married a white fellow and they are divorced. [laughs] My wife and I have been married for fifty years.

Fry: You hold the record in the family, I guess, right now.

Gordon: Well, it is all the way through my family. There are a very few divorces. My mother, of course, she just idolized my dad. He died first. I was always afraid for her. He was seventy-six when he died. My mother lived to be eighty-seven and she died just before I went to the Virgin Islands. My father was in slavery (I don't know that he was ever a slave), but he looked like a white person. Straight auburn hair. Yes. He was a carpenter.

IV PUBLIC SCHOOL IN RIVERSIDE, CALIFORNIA

Fry: You graduated from--what high school?

Gordon: Polytechnic High School. They separated the boys and girls in Riverside at that time. This was the Riverside High School. I don't know why they segregated the girls and boys. They must have had a reason. [laughs]

Fry: All the boys were sent to Polytechnic?

Gordon: The high school called "Polytechnic High School" was across the arroyo at the end of Main Street. Have you ever been to Riverside?

Fry: Yes.

Gordon: We went there--the boys. That is where I graduated from.

Fry: Was the curriculum different for boys?

Gordon: No. They separated us because some girls got in trouble.

Fry: Oh. [laughing] They caused segregation for everybody!

Gordon: They sure did.

Fry: What kind of color segregation did you encounter in Riverside, if they didn't segregate by color in the schools?

Gordon: For one thing, when I was a kid in Riverside, the YMCA didn't mean anything to a Negro child. We had no connection, really.

Fry: It was all white?

Gordon: Yes. I used to go along there as a kid in grade school and just lean up against the fence on Eighth Street and look at the kids play handball and tennis and all like that.

Fry: You mean you weren't allowed in?

Gordon: [shaking head] Un-um!

Fry: Oh.

Gordon: Nobody ever said a word to us about it--we had nothing like that. When I came up as a freshman, before I got here when you once filed your credentials and you were notified you could come, they used to mail us a little book, "California," and it was through the YMCA.

Fry: A handbook for freshman?

Gordon: Yes, and I got one of those. When I got up to California--I mean the University here--I went to the University Y, Stiles Hall they called it. They had pool tables there--that was the first time I had even looked at the Y. It was from that that I met Harry Kingman.

Fry: Were you active in the Y here when you were a student?

Gordon: Not particularly. I didn't have time. I was active. I fought against a segregated Y right here in Oakland, in Berkeley.

Fry: Oakland and Berkeley?

Gordon: Yes.

Fry: Was Berkeley segregated?

Gordon: Berkeley had never bothered, one way or the other. There's a story about that that I'll tell you when we get to that section. I lived at the Berkeley Y two years before I got married.

Fry: Did you have friends in high school that you kept in touch with in subsequent years?

Gordon: There were a lot of fellows who made good. I think one was Leonard Difani, who was in my graduating class. He went to USC. He later became a state senator from Riverside.

There was a fellow who was a good polo player, Eric Pedley. He went to Stanford. He turned out to be an eight-goal polo player. At Berkeley at the time, we were boxing and we were going to box against Stanford, Jimmy Doolittle was on the Cal team and was scheduled to box Pedley. Doolittle was the middle-weight champion. I was light-heavy and heavyweight champion.

Gordon: We didn't know Doolittle could box. He was on the tumbling team. He walked into the gym. My buddy was a colored fellow named Ed Covington who had won the lightweight championship. He had gone to Atlanta University then came out to Cal. (Incidentally, Walter White played on the Atlanta University football team as a quarterback when my buddy Ed Covington was playing end. Walter White, you know, helped found the NAACP.)

Well, anyway, there is an interesting story about Pedley. Jimmy Doolittle came out to the gym one day and saw Ed Covington, my buddy, who only weighed 135 or 40 and never boxed very much. He was dancing around the gym. Doolittle came over and said, "Want to box?"

Ed said, "Sure, I'll box you."

We'd seen Jim, but we weren't in the same crowd. I didn't know if he'd ever boxed; I'd never seen him box. Anyway, Ed went in the ring with Jim, who had on a sweatshirt that had LAAC on it. Ed came over to me and he said, "Well, who is this guy?" I said, "I don't know." He said, "Well, that is Doolittle, Jimmy Doolittle. What is that initial across there?' I said, "It is the Los Angeles Athletic Club." I said, "You had better look out!"

So they started boxing, and Doolittle had an awful left hook. Ed was kind of a light Negro. Doolittle hit Ed right between the eyes and knocked him up against the wall, ten feet. If the wall hadn't been there [laughs] he would have fell down. After that Ed was like someone on a bicycle and Doolittle had to chase him all over that gymnasium floor boxing him and couldn't hit him any more.

From that day on Jimmy came out and started boxing. He knocked out every one of his opponents in the class. So he was going to fight Pedley in our bouts with Stanford. We didn't have helpers then, and I was helping our coach with the different team men. I had told Doolittle about Pedley. I said, "Pedley is a helluva polo player. I don't know anything about polo but I read it in the newspaper." He was from Riverside High School, the same as I was, see.

When Doolittle went out in the ring at the meeting, at the beginning of the intercollegiate bouts here at the gymnasium, Pedley was close to six feet tall but a middleweight--165 lbs.--and Jimmy just weighed about 160 somewhere and he was short, you know, about five feet. When he walked out in the middle of the ring and they introduced him, Pedley was craning his neck and looking all around at the crowd, see.

Gordon: Jimmy came back to the corner and said, "Walt, did you see that? What that guy did? He didn't even look at me when they introduced me."

I said, "Well, he doesn't like you, Jimmy."

He said, "Well, you watch me finish this fight!"

So he walked out in the middle of the ring and Pedley marched forward, just stuck out his left hand. That is all he ever did do because Doolittle caught him with a left hook and then hit him with a right before he could hit the floor!

We had a terrible time getting Pedley to! We finally took him out of there. We used smelling salts and all that, whatever they call it. They took him down the basement shower room, and the water was cold and we set him in a chair and turned the water on. He jumped up out of the chair and came to. He said, "When do we fight? When do we fight?" We said, "Go home and eat your steak, buddy, it's over."

After Doolittle's bout, the man who was supposed to box me was there, but he wouldn't come out and fight.

Fry: Why?

Gordon: I'd trained with a professional, and I guess he heard about it.

Jimmy was reckless. I don't mean reckless--he was rough! I used to box with him, too. He'd dig in, you know, but I was bigger and stronger and I had more experience. He would keep on boxing and I'd say, "Oh, Jimmy, you're not going to hit me with that left hook if we box all night!"

He'd say, "Well, that's all right."

I'd say, "Well, you're not going to." But I enjoyed boxing with him because he could lay out, let loose, see.

Fry: Did you keep in touch with Doolittle after you both left Cal?

Gordon: Yes, Doolittle came to my house when he returned from the war, after he had flown over Tokyo.

Fry: Oh, in World War II.

Gordon: Yes. I hadn't seen Jimmy for years. I was on the Adult Authority. He came by my house. He found out where I lived and he came by and drove up with a chauffeured car. He was working for Shell Oil then. He came in and we reminisced about training; we reminisced about football and all that, and his boxing.

Gordon: My wife had participated in launching a ship out at Richmond--Kaiser's. She had a facsimile of it--the ship, and Jimmy put his initials on it when he came to the house. My boys weren't there but my daughter was there. The kids in the neighborhood recognized Jimmy as he got out of the car and he came in.

And we reminisced. I asked him if he had seen Pedley any since the fight.

He said, "Well, he was playing polo in New York once and," he said, "I walked down on the field, and he walked out, and I said, 'Mr. Pedley, do you remember me?' And he looked at me and he said, 'Yes, I do. About fifteen seconds.'" [laughter] That was the first time they had seen each other since. Pedley was a great, great polo player.

Well, what General Doolittle wanted to see me about was about a fellow who had flown with him in the First World War and the Second too, see. This friend of his was a pilot, and he'd come to San Francisco and got to drinking. He was married and had children. He woke up in a stupor in a San Francisco hotel, and there was a dead girl beside him. He was convicted of manslaughter, and I was on the board of the Adult Authority.

Doolittle went to see him, and he came to see me about it. He came to my house. We reminisced about boxing and all. He didn't ask any special favors. He said, "I just wanted to let you know I am interested in him, and when he gets out I'll do all I can to help him. That's all.

Then, another time, shortly thereafter, our whole board was meeting in the Ferry Building. I was called to the phone in the department we were in and the secretary said, "There is a man out here named Doolittle, who would like to see you."

I said, "Let him in." I told her over the phone.

So she let him in, you know, into the parole office inside the Ferry Building. He went out the back door after he met all the other members of the board of the Adult Authority. The rest of us came out the front door, and the girl on the desk said, "By the way, that man's name was Doolittle. Was that General Jimmy Doolittle?"

I said, "Yes, that is who it was. Why?

She said, "Well, I am so dumb that I didn't even get an autograph!"

Gordon: She didn't know it was the General Jimmy Doolittle! Because he didn't have an appointment; he just knew that we were going to be there.

Fry: What was the purpose of that visit?

Gordon: Just to meet the other members of the Adult Authority and so forth. Oh, he was an affable person!

Fry: This was not then because he was still interested in this other pilot?

Gordon: Well, I don't think this fellow was out yet. It was a short time between the two visits, while he was in San Franciscop he knew we were meeting and that is the way it was.

V COLLEGE DAYS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Fry: Tell us how you chose Berkeley as the campus you wanted to attend.

Gordon: When I was about sixteen years old there was a colored fellow who visited at our house; he was president of a Negro college. My dad told him that it was about time to think of what school I'd go to. He said, "Well, if I had to say, I'd send him to a state school."

I had wanted to go to USC because USC had a great football team and I was a football player in high school. I was signed up with a Methodist school--my dad knew USC was Methodist; I didn't know it. He just didn't want me to go to a particular religious school. Not that he didn't like religion. He was a Baptist and my mother was a Methodist.

Fry: But it was sectarian?

Gordon: It was sectarian. This Negro college president told him, "Send him to a state school, a mixed school--a racially mixed school--because upon graduation, whatever field he's in, he has the same diploma and the same education that the whites have, and everybody else has.

Fry: So there would be no question about your having gone to a second-rate institution, or anything, if you were in a racially mixed school.

Gordon: I had been entered into high school in the eighth grade without an examination in Riverside, and then I finished high school down there and entered Cal without any problems.

You see, I had been in a segregated school down there in Atlanta, Georgia, until the third grade, and I know I was a little behind in mathematics and so forth. Then I came out here and went

Gordon: to the school in Riverside, which was racially mixed. It didn't bother me, but I just didn't have the arithmetic. But, I caught that up. In fact, I liked it. I liked mathematics, I don't know why.

Fry: What were some of your other favorite subjects in school?

Gordon: I liked public speaking and took that in college, even. I took languages, but I was always a linguistic pauper. I took Spanish four years--two years in high school and two years in college--because we had to have languages, you know, at that time for college. I imagine I could read Spanish, although I never tried to talk it very much.

So, there was this conversation with this college president, and he said, "You may think this is peculiar, coming from the president of a Negro college."

I know that a lot of people do go to the colored schools; that's how Booker T. Washington got started, and I have a healthy respect for him. As a boy I saw him in Riverside and I heard him talk. As I grew older, I didn't agree with some of his attitudes, like, for example, he said that the races can be as a palm of the hand in working, and so forth and so on; socially, they can be as separate as the fingers. Now that's in some of his writing. As I grew up, I never felt that there should be that social difference, and W.E. DuBois disagreed with Booker T. Washington too. (They were contemporaries, you know.)

I think Booker T. Washington did a magnificent job. First he made certain that people would feel that work is honorable, and even the whole idea of manual training started with him. Those were the things that I admire him for. But as far as his ideas on race relations as such--saying the races should be as separate as the fingers--that, to me, is not the way I like to live, to put it simply. I hate to have scrambled eggs for breakfast every morning.

Fry: [laughter] You'd hate to see only people of one color all the time, huh?

Gordon: That may be a clumsy example, but it's how I feel. That's the thing that's worrying me now about America, right now. Because when I came along, there were very few Mexicans in Riverside, and they stayed to themselves; the Negroes--even in Riverside, where they had integrated schools--they were just kind of separate, socially. But as time went on, and you got older, the YMCAs began to take Negroes and others in.

Gordon: When I came along the city Ys didn't. I held that against YMCAs. When I came in as a freshman, Stiles Hall used to send out books called The Bible for the Freshman. I got one of them when I was still in Riverside, and so when I came up here I wandered into Stiles Hall and nobody paid any attention, particularly, although I was the only Negro. Everybody spoke—there were many students there. That was my first touch with a mixed YMCA. Later on I used to go quite regularly. Harry Kingman was connected with it; Harry and I became good friends, and that started me in the YMCA.

Fry: The next question that I wanted to ask you was if you could give some examples from your undergraduate days of prejudice in campus social life, or was there any? In other words, I was wondering how really integrated the Berkeley campus was at that time, or whether there was a social stratification that functioned to keep the races apart.

Gordon: Well, the only place that I would feel it would have been in going out for football; athletics was practically the only privilege. There was no Negro fraternity.

I remember one time, I was in the shower. I had just left the gym and gone down to the shower and some tall white fellow said something like he was talking to somebody else but made a reference to me--I didn't get it. (I knew who he was later; his name was Gildersleeve.) He made a crack about me being a Negro--"Why do we have to have Negroes"—as I recall it was something like that.

There was another white fellow who heard him, and his name was Bell, he was out for football, and I think his father was a minister, I'm not sure. But anyway, he was under his shower. I said to him, "I bet I can lick the guy who said that."

And he said, "If you can't, I'll help you." I never forgot that. And I think Gildersleeve was just a freshman, I don't know why he said it—just shooting off his face I guess. But I remember that later on Gildersleeve was just as nice as he could be. He used to throw the hammer. But those kind of things pass, and I went out for football, and I didn't have any trouble with other members of the team.

Fry: Did you have any trouble with housing?

Gordon: No, no. I was living--I didn't know anybody when I came up--didn't know a soul.

Fry: And there weren't any dormitories?

Gordon: My dad was an Odd Fellow, and he knew this man named Johnson in Sacramento, and he knew a fellow by the name of Bridges who was a printer, and he had told him that I was coming up to Cal. He was in Oakland. I got off the boat and went to his printing shop in Oakland--I had his address. He sent me out to a roominghouse right across from Berkeley High on Allston Way east of Grove. And I got a room there, and then later on I got a room up on Shattuck near Allston Way. A colored woman had a rooming house upstairs over a store. I didn't know much about the school. I lived there for a while. It was pretty lonely, nobody but myself, didn't know anybody.

And then I lived for a while with a Dr. Purnell down on Woolsey and California. His boy was a year behind me; he was a freshman and I was a sophomore. He was track--he ran on the track. I stayed there one semester. Then I met Ed Covington the friend from Atlanta University I told you about who was on the team with Walter White. We moved up to a place that's a music store now, right across from the library on Shattuck Avenue--it's a music store, and we lived upstairs, there. And some woman--she was a white woman--she ran a roominghouse there. Then after I graduated I got into the Y, and I stayed in the Y for--

Fry: Was all of this housing more or less integrated?

Gordon: There were very few Negroes in Berkeley.

Fry: So you didn't have any trouble?

Gordon: No, I don't remember any.

Fry: In your social life, did you date any, and if so, were you able to date white girls as well as Negro girls?

Gordon: No.

Fry: You mean No, you didn't date any or--

Gordon: I knew some, but [laughter] I wasn't dating <u>any</u> girls.

Fry: [laughter] You just were working?

Grodon: Well, I was just going to school as a freshman and so forth. The only girl I dated up here was the one I married. She was going to State Normal when I met her. I <u>knew</u> some white girls, but I don't know-- You see, they separated us down in Riverside, too. Two or three white girls got pregnant down there in the high school in Riverside, in the senior year, and when they opened up Polytechnic High School, they made it an all boys' high school, in Riverside.

Fry: Then you didn't have much contact with the opposite sex in Riverside, and that left you unprepared for Berkeley?

Gordon: I never had any--the girls were always friendly in our classes. I don't know--I didn't notice anything. I was only eighteen or nineteen, I wasn't as old as some of these fellows are now, and it makes a difference. And then my dad, I don't know--I guess like all boys, I felt "Oh, Dad's too rough." I had a brother, and Dad was just as strict with us as though we were girls. My dad was very strict.

Fry: Oh, you mean like in letting you go out at night?

Gordon: He always appeared somewhere [laughter]. But, he's darling, bless his heart, he said to me when I was a freshman and went back home--it was the first time he talked to me like a man. And you'll pick up things yourself as a boy and your Dad don't need to tell you much. And then, of course at that time they had a course at the university for freshman--what did they call it--"hygiene."

Fry: Hygiene, probably, and it was really sex education.

Gordon: Partially, anyway. And not as outspoken as it is now. They go awfully far now, and I don't know whether they tell the truth or not, some of these guys who talk! [laughter] Anyway, that hygiene course was a must. You had to take it.

I might add that we'd go to a party (when I say "we," I mean my brother and I), Dad would always be watching us, telling us what time to get home. He rode his darn bicycle, and we could always see him.

One night my brother was going to get in a fight with somebody, and started to throw off his coat and have a fist fight. Papa showed up and said, "Put your coat on! Don't be so crazy. That man could cut your stomach up with your coat off." [laughter] And that's true.

Fry: He wasn't going to stop him from fighting, he was only saying that if he was going to do it, he'd better do it the right way. Right?

Gordon: Oh, he was so good. He was such a dandy fellow. He was about six foot two and he weighed 235. Nice looking guy. He said to me, when I went home as a freshman-- See, when you went home for Christmas, you had to worry whether you had passed or flunked out. You couldn't enjoy yourself til you got your card. And that's what worried me. Papa used to say, "Well, I was pretty strict on you boys, and I know many times you felt mad, and I thought you'd be mad at me after you got to be grown."

Gordon: I said, "No, I thank you." No telling what would have happened. Because in this small town there were not very many colored people. Some of them didn't care, and Papa did.

Coming out of a high school down in Southern California, I'd never had a lecture course. We always had classes, and we read books and so forth, but a lecture course was something new. Henry Morse Stephens was teaching history I-A and it was a very--everybody said it was an interesting course, and I found it was, too. He was an Oxford man, I think. Kind of short and fat and had a beard, you know. I was just so enthralled--just listening to him talk, that I forgot to take notes! And I darned near flunked the class. Henry Morse Stephens--oh, he was such a lecturer! I just loved sitting and listening to him. No, I didn't flunk the course or anything like that, I caught myself soon enough.

I never will forget one question—"What are some of the salient"--the word "salient" I'd never seen in my life--"What are some of the salient points changing world history?" And I had to look up what "salient" was.

Then in law school, Max Radin--I think he was from New York, from Columbia.

Fry: What was he like as a professor?

Gordon: Oh, he was one of the most erudite men I know of. We used to play on his knowledge so—he was so interesting, and he could talk on any phase of the law. I had two or three courses with him. We'd get him started talking if we didn't know our lesson and [laughter] that way we'd get by!

Fry: Oh, and you postponed his questions, I see. [laughter]

Gordon: He was one of a three-man group that gave me my oral examinations for my J.D. All of us liked Max Radin.

Fry: Were you aware when he was turned down for the State Supreme Court?

Gordon: I learned about it. If that man was radical--! He had a brother [Paul Radin] who was, I knew that. But Max never said a word about politics. I asked him to come down years later after I got out of law school, and I was president of the NAACP; I took him out and took him down and made him talk to the NAACP.

Gordon: Professor [William Carey] Jones was the dean then. He was very nice. He didn't like for you to use Latin terms; if you used a Latin term, he'd walk all the way to the front of the room and come stand beside you [imitating him]. "What did you say? I thought you used a Latin term. What does that mean?" That's what he used to do. Well, those little idiosyncracies like that I used to enjoy.

Henry Morse Stephens in speaking of great men he spoke just like they were his personal friends. [Imitating] "Julius Cae-sahh, little, dispeptic man, shaped the history of the world." Oh I just loved it.

I waited tables up at the faculty club one year to get a good meal.

Fry: I bet their food was good.

Gordon: It was. And I got acquainted with Henry Morse Stephens and had a chance to talk to him a lot of times. We talked about the race question.

Fry: Oh really, how did he feel about that?

Gordon: Oh, he couldn't understand it--he couldn't see it, couldn't see it.

Fry: What do you mean?

Gordon: Segregation of the races and prejudice and so forth. You see, we had lots of cases—like segregation in housing.

Fry: In Berkeley?

Gordon: Oh yes.

VI MARE ISLAND WORK: SWAMPER AND TRUCK DRIVER

Gordon: I was living at the "Y" when I was driving a truck up on Mare Island. I pretty near got in a fight up there, too, about this race thing.

Fry: How did you get your job at Mare Island?

Gordon: Our names were on file and we were told we could go up to Mare Island, near Vallejo, and get a job in the shipyards. Well, I had never worked in the shipyards. I did know generally what they do, but didn't know how they do it. Well, Ed and myself went up there. We caught the SP train at Berkeley that would go up. I walked into the Public Works Department. It was loaded with whites, men all getting jobs. I had my hat on. Everybody else had their hat on.

When I got to the desk, the white fellow said--he looked at me. He just looked at me, like that. He said, "Don't you take your hat off in the house?"

I said, "I see everybody else in here have their hats on. Why should I take my hat off?"

He said, "Well, you take it off."

I said, "You must be from Texas or someplace. I am not taking it off."

He said, "Well, I've got nothing for you to do but digging ditches."

I said, "I wouldn't dig a ditch for you to save your life."

Fry: This was after you had your B.A., wasn't it?

Gordon: Yes. He just gave me a look! Well, anyway, at about that time a white fellow walked in and talked to him, a Swedish fellow. He took the two of us to be swampers on a truck. That's attendents to help load and unload. I didn't even know they had trucks over there.

This fellow was in charge--Nelson was his name. He was a nice fellow. He was about middle-aged, I guess. He never said anything to us about that fellow; he just took the two of us and took us over to transportation, and we were helpers on a truck. There was a colored fellow there named Hansen who was a driver of the truck. We loaded and unloaded. We got orders from different buildings, hauling cement in 100-pound sacks and so forth. So he took the two of us out of Public Works, and I didn't see that fellow any more. Ed and myself both worked as swampers on that truck. They had big Diamond trucks that hit you back here [demonstrating]. I don't know how much they'd haul, but they used to give us orders and we'd start moving cement sacks.

It was hot and we had the lime hitting our skin from a little after 8:00 in the morning to about 4:00. I said, "Oho, they give you four dollars a day for doing this?" I could pick up 100-pound sacks and just put them in there all day. I was in good shape. About 4 o'clock I was rolling it up to the other guy and he'd get it in there. It got so heavy! [laughs] And my hands were getting sore from the cement.

Fry: Yes, because it would hit the moisture on your skin. Would it harden?

Gordon: It would harden, and you'd push the cart and it would burn you. After about two or three days, this Hansen said, "Gee, I've never done anything as hard as hauling all this cement."

I said, "Don't you know the picture?" I said, "That guy at Public Works told Nelson to give us the works. He wanted us to quit." I told Hansen, I said, "They assigned you, you're the only Negro truck driver on the Island, and they put us together and you've been doing nothing but moving cement." (We were commuting back to town here, see, to Berkeley.) I told him and Ed agreed with me, I said, "Listen, I'll move every damned sack of cement they got here on this island and he'll never hear me squawk! I wouldn't let him beat me for nothing! I wouldn't quit." In the first place it was more money than I had made in a long time--four dollars a day. So anyway, I stayed on that until I got ready to quit.

One time this fellow and Nelson was short of a truck--you see, I used to chauffeur, to drive automobiles, and he said to me, "Can you drive one of these trucks?" I said, "Certainly." He said, "All right, you can take your buddy as your swamper."

Fordon: He needed some drivers and he gave us other things to do and he took us off of that. But before that happened, we were on a truck one day and there was this white fellow by the name of Young, an old Army man, driving the truck. We worked as a swamper on his truck one time. We got away from that hauling of cement. We beat that rap. So one time we were going up in front of a place and there was a colored fellow. He cursed him. And we were sitting up on the side of the truck. Now, we knew the colored fellow by sight, working down there and everything. He threatened this white fellow and he pulled out a knife or something like that. If I can get my facts straight-- We didn't know he had a knife. He just cut across the bib of his overalls. It didn't hurt him; he knocked the knife out of his hand and started chasing him away from there.

This colored guy started hollering to us. "Aren't you going to help me?"

We said, "Help nothing! You had no business starting it. He hadn't done a thing to you."

So he ran away. This Young was standing over in the door of the building and we were still up on the truck, and out comes this colored fellow with an arm full of rocks. Of course that made us mad; we wouldn't help him to save his life. He started it. There was no occasion for it, see. He started throwing rocks and this white fellow picked a board or something--a piece of wood--and started after him. The guy dropped all the rocks and ran like hell! Well, those are the kind of things that happen to you. The other thing was--oh yes, when I first got the truck Nelson was going to show me the gears. He got in the truck. I said, "I don't need you to show me. I know the gears. I know how to drive it." So I started driving the truck, and I got Sunday work, and then I taught Ed how to drive, and he was driving a little truck around there--all because of this fellow Nelson. Now you see the taste it would leave in one's mouth?

Those are things that you are confronted with but you fight over them. The idea that a guy was so petty that he would tell me to take off my hat' It made me mad, of course, but I don't condemn everybody like that and I don't like to be condemned like every Negro. Well, anyway, that's Mare Island.

VII LAW SCHOOL AT BOALT HALL

Fry: How did you choose law as your favorite study, or did you choose something else at first?

Gordon: No, I never wanted to do anything else but be a lawyer. Now, to say what made me choose law, I don't know. I do know this. My dad drove a grocery wagon in Atlanta, Georgia. When I was a boy on the farm they had mules and they had wagons like these laundry wagons. I went with him a lot. He would be driving this wagon, and I was a little kid so I would be sleeping up on top of the shelf. One day, I think I told you, a streetcar hit the mule; my dad didn't hear the streetcar ringing or something. It turned the wagon over and over and over and I was injured. I have a scar on my ankle right here now [showing it] that still shows from that accident.

Fry: My gosh.

Gordon: It's a little chapped now from the cold weather, but you can see how it used to be. A woman took me home in her arms, my head all wrapped up--I was cut and so forth and so on. And I remember later on my dad had to go to court, and--I don't know--somehow I liked it. I was seven, eight, along there. When I came up to Riverside and went into the fourth grade on through high school, I took Latin and history, and I think I took some public speaking--things that would help me be a lawyer.

I wanted to be one. My dad wanted me to be a doctor, in fact he talked to me about being a doctor. That is probably due to the fact that in the South, Negro women who go to college down in the southern area are going to be teachers and so forth, and men who go to college become doctors. Lawyers--you wouldn't even have any Negro lawyers down there. Negroes weren't represented in court at any time. My dad asked me about being a doctor, and I told him, "I don't want to be--don't have any inclination in that direction." I used to like to read about cases and so forth and so on. I said, "I'll take it [a medical course] if you just insist on it. I'll try to be one, but I don't think I'd be much of a doctor."

Gordon: He said, "Well, no, go ahead and become a lawyer."

So that's the way I actually chose law. My dad was a janitor in Riverside when I was in high school and he'd have offices to clean up; I used to go help him sometimes. There were several offices, including MacFarlands', a couple of lawyers in the building, and I'd just browse.

Fry: You'd sit and read their books?

Gordon: That's right, yes I would, I suppose. And I came to college with nothing else in my mind.

Fry: Well, how did you like your first courses here?

Gordon: Oh, I liked them. Oh, yeah, I liked them. You entered law in your senior year at that time--you went into Boalt. I just took it for granted I was going to go into Boalt, see? And then the war broke out and SATC [Student Army Training Corps] began. In 1919 I got on the Berkeley police force. I told them I was going to law school, too, and I went on to law school. It took me three years. You have to take so many units to finish in two years, and I couldn't take that many. Well, I said, what's the use of hurrying? Being on the police force and going to law school, I took about eight units a semester, I think, and I got my J.D. in '22.

Fry: I still don't see how you did it, working full time at the police department and coaching, also!

Gordon: I didn't <u>sleep</u> very much. See, at that time, all of the law school classes were in the morning, and I'd leave the police department at eight o'clock.

Fry: A.M.?

Gordon: A.M., and just as soon as I got off, I'd leave my gun and badge and uniform, my coat would be in my locker, and I would go up to law school and by 8:30 or 8:15 I had to be there. Maybe I started at nine o'clock and I'd be in class until ten, and then I'd go home and sleep and go there again at three o'clock.

Then during football season, I'd be up on the football field at 4:00.

Fry: When did you study?

Gordon: Saturdays I'd take time off. At night I would study. I'd have a day off a week and I'd just utilize it. I'd take my vacation and spend all my time studying. I was doing criminal law all the time.

Gordon: They had the examination at law school--some of us would sit together and share our notes, and if there was something I didn't have, somebody else would help with it. I helped them with criminal law.

Fry: You could give them a lot of specific cases, I guess.

Gordon: Well, that's it. Professor Kidd was teaching criminal law. Later I worked with him on the law we had put through that says if a man commits murder, they don't sign a death warrant at the time of the verdict. I'll tell you about that.

VIII AUGUST VOLLMER'S POLICE FORCE IN BERKELEY

Grodon: On July 4th, 1919, I remember I left the Y and was going over to San Francisco to see my girl, now my wife, and Vollmer came out of the Elks Club. It was in the afternoon and he said, "Walt, I want to talk to you."

I walked across the street to meet him. He said, "What are you doing?" I told him I was working up at Mare Island driving a truck and living right here at the Y. And he said, "How'd you like to be on the police force?"

I jumped. I said, "What are you doing, kidding me?"

We were very close, you know.

I should tell another incident that happened when Ed and I were living in a hotel on Shattuck Avenue before we moved to the Y. We used to eat at a little lunch counter on University Avenue where Shattuck runs into it. It was the only place where you could get a fifteen cents dish of soup that had potatoes and vegetables, and a few slices of bread, and that was our meal. Ed and myself went in there one day, one day at noon. The place was crowded. We'd been in there before. One of the waiters came up and said, "We're not going to serve you. We're not serving Negroes in here."

God, I blew my stack. People all around--I can see how young people feel today because I was--this is an actual story. I got out of my chair. He wouldn't serve us. I asked him to go get the boss and I'd talk to him. He went away and then he came back. "He says he won't come out."

I said, "No, he is too damn much of a coward to come out." So we left. I went down to see Vollmer and told him what had happened. He said, "Why don't you get yourself a lawyer?"

Gordon: Well, I called up the only lawyer I knew of in Oakland. His name was Abraham. He looked like a white person but he was a Negro. (There again I throw out this word "black.") Well, anyway he wanted twenty-five dollars to start suit; I was going to have to sue to break it up. So I went down to see Vollmer and told him the fellow wanted twenty-five dollars, and I said, "I don't have that kind of money. I'd like to stop him from discriminating." I said, "I am going in there some night or some time, and if the joint gets torn up, you come and get Ed or myself because we are going to tear it up! We're not going to hurt anybody." I was just a young person. It just shook me up. Those are the kinds of lessons that I learned myself.

One night, in about a week or ten days--we didn't always eat in the restaurant anyway because sometimes we'd eat on the campus, or at a Greek restaurant--Ed and I put on some old clothes and went in there about midnight. We made up our minds we were going to tear up the place by taking the salt shakers and pepper and throwing them at the guy, and the glasses and sugar dishes, just break them up. That's what we planned. Well, we got in there and the guy was so damned nice to us I thought he had put poison in our food!

Fry: [laughing] What happened?

Gordon: Nothing! He was such a gentleman and solicitous, how are you going to get mad? He wasn't the owner but the fact rémains that he was in charge. And we walked out of the place. But that is what we went in for.

Fry: He was just a different man!

Gordon: I think this happened: I think the chief [Vollmer] probably told him. Because everybody knew him and he would follow through on things like that.

But coming back now to July 4, 1919, I remember working on the Island and then I was going over to see my girl, and Vollmer asked me about the police.

I said, "Well, if you think I can make a policeman, that is up to you. I'll try it."

He said, "All right, the vacancy is yours when it first comes up."

I took examinations and all, a physical and everything else. But I said, "I'm going to law school. I'm going back to school, to Boalt." You see, you get your A.B. and then you finish one year and you've got two years more for your J.D.

Gordon: He said, "Well, you can do that, too."

I went on over to San Francisco and talked to my girl. Along there in August or September he told me there was an opening. And I said, "Well, I have to go to Riverside to see my folks. I haven't seen them in quite a while."

My dad was a policeman in Riverside. He was a big fellow, six feet two, six feet three, 235 pounds--he was a swell fellow, too. (We ought to talk about him.)

Once my dad and I were talking about football; he said, "You learned how to run from me." He could run like a scared jack rabbit coot. He used to chase me to make me run my heart out. He tried to throw a dead mouse at me once! [laughing]

Fry: To make you learn how to run fast?

Gordon: No, just to tease me because I didn't like that. He was always full of devilment like that. He was a good-natured person. When he found out I was going to play football, he said to me, "Don't go out there and play football." (Because he knew I wanted to.) He said, "We've got enough musclemen in our race. We need some men with brains."

But he said, I could run because he could run. He was a coward, he said in talking. "That's where you learned how to run, from me, and you learned how to fight from your momma." Oh, he was joking. Anyway, I'll tell you about that sometime.

About the same time as the police offer, Andy Smith talked to me about coaching. I told him I was going on the police force. (I was eating in a lunch counter on Shattuck Avenue.) And he said, "Well, you can do both." Jesus! And that's the way it came out.

Fry: Do you think Vollmer asked you because he thought he needed a black man?

Gordon: No, he didn't think of that. The question never entered in--in fact, some people from Richmond wrote him and said that they were glad that he had appointed me as a Negro, and he wrote back and said that he didn't appoint me because I was a Negro. "I appointed him because I thought he would be a good policeman. " He actually wrote that to some people.

Fry How do your old friends view the "Warren Court" decisions on rights of suspects, the Miranda decision, and all that?

Gordon: When I coached at Cal, Mark Swinney attended Cal and was one of the kids on the team. Well, recently he just walked in off the street, and knocked on the door. I didn't have a telephone call

Gordon: that he was coming. I knew the face. He said, "Mark" and then-- So we talked for an hour or more. I told him about O.W. Wilson, who used to be on the police force when I was, you know. O.W. went to Chicago and was the superintendent of police. You've heard of his name. He was the kind of policeman I was.

Well, anyway, Mark wanted to talk about Warren. He was against Warren. I said, "Now why ever are you against Warren for?"

He said, "Oh, he just believes in taking care of the criminals." I said, "Oh, you don't know what you are talking about!" I said, "You know, I don't hate criminals and I don't love them; it is their conduct, see. I treat them as human beings though."

As far as Warren was concerned, as I told him, I said, "Now Warren was the best policeman that we had in Alameda County. He was a top man as attorney general and headed all police departments. He was a top-notch district attorney. You're just saying that the Supreme Court helps the criminal to get other people," I said, "but that isn't right." I said, "Our police department in Berkeley was such that we did practically everything as the law required. In other words, when you arrest me, you tell me that I don't have to talk." We always used to do that.

Fry: Oh, you did?

Gordon: Why certainly. The law man didn't want anybody to brutalize any prisoner or anything like it. He wants you to protect yourself. See?

I never hit a man with a club. I touched one on his side one night. I didn't want to. A couple of college kids were with me. I first saw him parked right on Blake Street. I just turned up that street and here was this car in the middle of the street, after midnight. He was sitting in the car.

I spoke to him. I said, "Police officer. What are you doing parked in the middle of the street?"

He said, "I forgot, officer," or something like that.

I said, "Well, you better get on to yourself and get out of here." He seemed all right. Pretty soon he passed me like a freight train passing a tramp, going so fast down San Pablo Avenue. I chased him. He was moving toward University, I guess. Well, I caught him at Ashby and San Pablo and I saw he was pretty drunk. I told him, "Come on, get out of the car." These two young fellows came. I said, "Now don't you fellows get involved at all." You see, I was in uniform, and I said, "Well, come on, let's go get in the car." I got over to the car and he said, "I'm not going."

Gordon: I said, "Oh, yes, you're going. You're under arrest. Driving while drunk."

I had my club in my hand and I didn't wave it at him. He was walking in front of my car and I just touched him in the side. I said, "Come on, I don't want to have to hit you."

"Oh, you're beating me with the club, are you?"

I said, "No, I'm not beating you with any club."

So he turned around and started toward me and I threw my club in my car and I said, "Now, I think I can handle you." So we scuffled a little bit and I still didn't hit him. He pulled my star off. It was just a rough-and-tumble fight. He tore my uniform. I finally did a head-century. Do you know what that is?

Fry: You were wrestling him. You put his head under your arms?

Gordon: He was a big guy, too. I said, "Get my cuffs off my hip." I couldn't. So he pulled them out. They were the old bottleneck cuffs, not the new cuffs that go across the wrist and lock. On these old ones you had to push the key down and push the spring, so I had to let go. Well, I knew when I let him go--I had his head through here [demonstrating] and he couldn't hit me until I pulled my hands out. I knew that was coming, I knew he was going to fall for it, see. So we were on the sidewalk and I let go but I threw my hand up here [gesturing] and sure enough, he started with a left, and when he did that I came right down on what I thought was his jaw and knocked him down. Then I walked behind him to keep his head from hitting.

Fry: Oh, you caught him before he hit the pavement?

Gordon: So I put the cuffs on him and took him in and told the sergeant, I said, "I hit this guy lightly on the chin to get him in here." Oh, he was kind of mean, you see, and called himself the "Fighting Swede from Sweden." That is what he told me. He said, "I'm a fighting Swede, right from Sweden." I said, "Here is where one gets tamed!" But anyway, I didn't have any animosity toward him. So the next morning about six o'clock the sergeant called me and said, "Where did you say you hit that fellow?"

I said, "On the chin. Why?"

He said, "Go look."

I went back there and looked, and his cheek that I hit was big as an egg! I didn't know I hit him that hard.

Gordon: Well, anyway, I said to him, "What in the world is the matter with your cheek?"

He said, "I guess you put one on me."

I said, "Oh, no. I guess the ground flew up and hit you."

"Yeah, it flew up and hit me all right!"

And we talked on it. I didn't put the charge of resisting an officer against him or anything. Just "driving while drunk." He wanted to phone to his business partner. He was captain of a sand barge, so you know how tough he was!

Well, anyway, his partner, who was a Jewish fellow, came over, about 8 o'clock that morning--I didn't call him. This fellow was there when I came up to get out at 8 o'clock. He said, "How many guys did it take to bring him in?"

"What do you mean? How many guys?"

He said, "He is a barroom fighter."

I said, "Well, I didn't recognize that he was so good. I brought him in alone. He is back there."

He said, "He gets in fights over in San Francisco all the time, drunk."

Well, he wasn't such a bad fellow and his partner took him out on bail and that was all that happened.

About two or three months later the Jewish fellow came in and he said, "I have been arrested in Oakland."

I said, "For what?"

"I broke the arm of my partner."

I said, "How did you break his arm?"

He said, "We got to fighting and I picked up an iron pipe and I hit him and it broke his arm. He put his arm up and then I broke it. I am charged with assault with a deadly weapon." And he said, "I'd like for you to go down and testify before Judge Wood."

Gordon: I said sure I would, knowing what a battler his partner was. So I went down and testified for him. Judge Wood knew I tried cases and he knew I was a police officer and he said, "If this fellow is the kind that gets drunk, what else are you going to do?" So that took care of him.

Fry: Was this a part of Vollmer's instructions to everybody? Part of his training, that you were not supposed to be too eager to use your billy club?

Gordon: He used to put it this way: he told me, "You represent the public." He used to give general lectures, but I used to have a chance to talk with him, just us talking. And he said, "You know, you've got to be boss, and if people feel that they can handle you and you are afraid," he said, "you'll get the worst of it."

He said, "I don't believe in beating people up and all like that, but I want you to take care of yourself. You are not supposed to get to use your fists. You are supposed to use the force that is necessary, with the tools that you carry to effect your arrests." That is the way he talked to us. I was always afraid of getting mad. You know if you get mad--I didn't get mad very often. I did once or twice.

You are supposed to hit them in the juncture of the neck, see.

Fry: When you use the club?

Gordon: With the club [demonstrating] right through there and it paralyzes them almost. But if you hit and he moves his head, you might crack him on his head and that is bad! That is why I'd rather hit him with my fists. I hit a couple.

With children, I was always careful with children. I enjoyed children. I made friends with them. That was Vollmer's talk, He said, "You represent all the people in the government of the city of Berkeley from the mayor on down. You represent me as the chief of police. You are representing the whole police department when you are out there pounding the beat alone. You should always be above reproach." Words to that effect. So I wasn't brutual to anybody. I'd fight--with fists.

Fry: O.W. Wilson became head of the Chicago police. Quite a number of people from the Berkeley department went to other police departments. Bill Wiltberger went to Evanston.

Gordon: Yes, he was my sergeant.

Fry: Wasn't it unusual that Vollmer encouraged his best men to seek opportunities elsewhere, when it looks like retaining them would have made it a lot easier for him? Why did he help them to get in other places, other police departments?

Gordon: Well, in the first place, he wanted you to be a college graduate so that you could go on higher if you wanted to. He wanted to improve police work from the standard that it had, down here, by getting men with intelligence, supposedly. He'd talk about that. They were capable of going beyond. He set police techniques. "Men who commit crimes are getting smarter and smarter and the day of the foot patrolman is passing." That is the way it was, because we were just starting using automobiles when I went on the police force. We got this city manager form of government right at that time. [John N.] Edy was the first man who was our city manager. Well, I'll tell you something off the record.

One day I was down in Judge Pulcifer's court. It was a justice court. The clerk in his court at that time was a fellow who is on the Superior Court now. It was about the Christmas holiday and some of them said, "Let's have a Christmas drink."

Well, I went in there and had a drink with them. I had an uncle with me, Uncle Scott from Riverside. He was a short, country fellow, scared of his own shadow, a Negro, and he was with me in my car, just riding around. He was visiting some people up here. Anyway, as I came out San Pablo Avenue, I got to Emeryville and an Emeryville policeman was standing in the place that they marked for streetcars on San Pablo at that time, when the Key System was going across. He was standing there, and he made me slow up. I slowed up. I didn't come to a stop. And I said, "You ought to come with a friend."

It was during Prohibition, see.

I said, "You promised me a drink. I'm dry. Emeryville is the only place we can get--"

He said, "I'll get it for you."

I noticed a guy was honking his horn back of me and I hadn't stopped even. I said, "Okay." Well, when I got to the corner of 58th Street, an old white fellow drove up beside me and he said, "What's the idea of blocking traffic?"

I said, "What do you mean, 'blocking traffic?'"

He said, "Down there you were blocking traffic." He said, "Pull over to the curb."

Fry: Oh, were you in uniform?

Gordon: Oh, no, I was in civilian clothes, coming from the court. I had my uncle with me. My uncle got nervous. The man said, "Pull over, pull over!" He said he'd either lick me or do something. I said to my uncle, "This is going to be good!"

Well, it was about five o'clock in the afternoon, light, and I got out of my car. I had an old Cadillac and you sit way down behind the wheel. I think I surprised him in size when I got out. But he was a big fellow, too. He was as tall as I was.

So I walked toward him, left my uncle sitting in the car. When I got close to him, he said, "Go ahead and whip me, go ahead and whip me!"

I said, "You said that you were going to whip my whatsitsname. Go ahead and start digging in!"

"Well, you knock the chip off your shoulder."

I said, "Well, knock the chip off your shoulder. You sound like a kid!" or something like that. Then we just talked on and he was fussing. So I said, "Well, listen, I'm getting a little tired of this. You don't want to fight. You want to do a lot of talking." And when I turned around he called me a--I think he said, "You black sonofabitch!"

When he said that I turned around. I said, "Now if you repeat that, I'm not going to knock a chip off your shoulder, I'm going to beat you just as long as I can!" And he didn't call it. I got mad then. So I started away and got back in my car. A little white kid was leaning on the black car. This fellow is still walking back toward me. The little kid said (a little news kid, I didn't know his name but I knew him, a newsboy) he said, "What's the matter, Officer?"

I said, "Oh, nothing."

And that fellow said, "Hey, is he a polceman?"

And the kid said, "Don't you know? Sure. His name is Gordon." [laughter]

"Well, I'll report you to the chief."

I said, "You would." So I said to my uncle in the car, "I'm going to beat him to the police station,"--because I knew shortcuts and I could get there. I got there and went in to see Chief Vollmer.

Gordon: I told him what he'd said. I don't know whether he called me a "nigger" or not, I don't remember. It doesn't make any difference, anyway. I said, "I didn't hit him. But Chief, I told him if he called me that again, I would hit him and I meant it!" I was so mad that day I--and that's the time when you're tickled to death that you don't have a gun on you. I didn't have a gun and I never carried a gun much.

So anyway, while I was in the office telling the chief I heard him outside.

I said, "There he is now."

He came in and he said, "I want to see the chief." But he didn't know I was there.

I said, "Chief, there he is."

He said, "Go out and tell him to come in."

I went to the desk right outside the chief's office, right before the desk, like the police station was at that time, and I said, "Come in, the chief is waiting for you." And he walked in and he started talking about me. He said that I was drunk and so forth and so on and so on and he was willing to walk over to me and smell my breath.

I said, "Listen, don't come near me. You contaminate me. Don't even come near me." I was mad. I never get mad like that.

Anyway, Vollmer said, "What was the trouble?"

He started telling what I did and so forth and so on. He said I was blocking traffic. So when he got through I said, "Now you've been telling him what you think of me. Now tell him what you said to me and what I said I would do. If you call me a black sonofabitch," I think it was, "if you call me that here in this office, I'll break up every chair in this office, over your head! That's how I'm feeling about it!"

He said, "See officer, see, chief!"

The chief didn't know him. Well, anyway he kept on talking. Finally I just walked out 'cause I wanted to get out of the chief's office. The chief came out and he said, "All right, Walt, use your head now."

"All right, chief. Just whatever you say. Whatever you say."

Gordon: About this time this guy came outside, too, and came on out the front door, the policeman's, over near a machine and he said, "Well, chief, whatever you say. I told you my side of it and you've got him. We'll let it go at that."

The chief said, "Well, I think both of you talk too much," or something like that, and turned around and walked into the station. This guy tried to walk down from the station door to my car and take a hold of my arm.

I said, "Listen, don't touch me. As far as I am concerned, you're dead. I don't even know you."

He said, "I hope you know me if you see me driving around in the car."

I said, "You're dead as far as I'm concerned, so just forget it!"

Well, the next day I arrived kind of worried and all that, because I was so fond of the chief. I would have quit the job before I would have hurt him. I waited until he came in at 8 o'clock or a little after nine when I got off duty. I just sat there waiting. When he walked in, he walked into his office.

He said, "You want to see me?"

I said, "Yes, I am waiting to see you, chief." I walked in.

He said, "What's the matter?"

I said, "Well, I'm kind of ashamed of myself, afterwards, to walk into your office and do all that talking in your office. You don't deserve that. You know it was very bad."

He said, "Well, I just want to know, how in the hell did you keep <u>from</u> hitting him? 'Cause I felt like hitting him myself!" That's <u>all</u> he said.

I never saw that fellow any more.

What are you going to do when you work for a man like that? You don't want to hurt him. He didn't approve of brutality, but there was no brutality in this thing, just name-calling.

See, those are the kind of things that just stick with you.

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Gordon: Say it is 4 o'clock and I've been talking up all of your time.

Fry: Well, that is what I am here for. I've been taping every word.

I've a lot more questions though, especially on Vollmer.

Gordon: Well, ask me some on him so I can get going.

Fry: Okay. Why don't you tell me how you happened to get on the police force in the first place?

Gordon: I first met Chief Vollmer when I used to go down with the students on the boxing and wrestling team to the Elks Club. That's when I first met the chief.

Fry: You were a student?

Gordon: I was a student, an undergraduate. I used to box and wrestle with Jimmy Doolittle and all the fellows who were out for boxing and wrestling, and the gymnasts. We'd all go down there for exhibitions when they'd have a smoker or something. That's when I first met him. That happened on many occasions, and many times I'd see him on the streets and talk to him and so forth. I used to see a lot of the officers around, you know, in Berkeley. Of course, the town was not like it is now, see, and he was living right at the Elks Club. That's when I got acquainted.

Fry: According to our chronology here, you went on the police force in 1919. You were a senior in 1918.

Grodon: I got my A.B. in 1918. The war was on and the SATC was started, the Student Army Training Corps. I won't tell you what we called ourselves. Oh, it wasn't vulgar or anything like that. But we just called ourselves "Slackers After Ten Commissions." Students Army Training Corps--Slackers After Ten Commissions. Well, I was in that.

See, they turned me down because of my hand. Because of my trigger finger. Well, I never shot a gun in my life--except maybe an air gun. When they turned me down--see, I'd signed up in Riverside and then I came back up to school at Berkeley in 1918. I was still going home, see. The war broke out in '17, wasn't it?

Fry: Yes.

Gordon: I went before my draft board and he said, "I'll put you in 4th class or 5th (something like that) on account of this hand."

I said, "That's not my trigger finger."

Gordon: He said, "Well, that's what I said it was."

So I went to Dr. Legge, who was in charge of Cowell Hospital, and I told him the story. I said, "Gee, I want to get in the Army. I just feel funny not being in the Army."

I kept going back to this sergeant who was in charge. He was a regular Army man. He didn't know me from Adam, other than I was a human being and so forth. He didn't know about football or anything and he wasn't interested in knowing me; he just said, "What was your draft position?" And I told him.

He said, "Oh, you can't get in."

I kept going back and going back. He finally said, "Listen, I am going to give you a certificate," or whatever they call it, a certificate, or petition, "and get rid of you."

I had already talked to Dr. Legge. He said, "You get your papers in here, you're getting in the Army." So he saw me walk in undressed. He said, "You're in the Army." After examining me, he said, "You're the first." That's how I got in the SATC. The Armistice was signed on the fifteenth day of November in 1918. I was due to go in 1918. I had passed the examination to go to Officer's Training Camp in Texas, and others had gone right from there, but when my time came Andy Smith told me, he said, "You play St. Mary's, Saturday." (This was the football team.)

I said, "St. Mary's, Saturday? I'm supposed to go down to Texas."

He said, "Well, you're not going."

I said, "What do you mean I am not going? You're not keeping me here to play?"

He said, "No, I didn't mean that." He hated to tell me because he knew my feelings about prejudice and all that. He said, "Well, I'm not going to tell you." I said, "I want you to tell me. You've always told me, spit it out."

Then he said, "They are not taking colored down in Texas." That's what we were up against. They had a Negro camp in Missouri some place for colored. A lot of fellows I knew went there. It is in the record.

He said, "No, you're going down to--" some place in California, Monterey or some place. Then the Armistice came on the fifteenth and the SATC was all shot.

Fry: It went that quickly?

Gordon: Yes. The moment that the Armistice was signed, they were going to discharge us. Finally, we didn't get out until January or February, 1919.

Fry: But you didn't continue in Officer's Training, you stayed on campus?

Gordon: We stayed on campus, in the barracks.

Fry: And you played St. Mary's? [laughing]

Gordon: Yes, we played St. Mary's. I finished that football season. Then, the last game of football I played was against the Olympic Club team. No Negro had ever played on that. I played against the Olympic team. They had a team of college men and they played against us in the regular season as one of our games.

Fry: Oh, really?

Gordon: So I played one game for them and that team that we played against was loaded with some good football players, like the Leader boys from the University of Washington--they were good crew men and good football players, two brothers. The quarterback was from Penn, and I can't think of his name now.

Fry: Well, that's all a matter of record, I guess.

Gordon: Oh, yes. We played and I met that quarterback. I was backing up during the scrimmage and I backed up a little bit too far and he caught it, came through the line and jumped up and caught a pass in our territory and I hit him just as he caught it. I knocked him out, knocked the wind out of him. But he was on the ground. I didn't do it to hurt--I had got my speed up and I just hit him, see. When he came to, he said, "Where did that guy come from?" [laughs] He said, "You sure have hit me and knocked the wind out of me!" And we became good friends.

Later on he was head of the Welfare Department under Warren. Years later I met him--

Well, anyway, on that team of the Olympic Club was Duke Morrison, who was from Oklahoma. I got acquainted with him. He was working as an assistant in the YMCA in Berkeley. I told him that I wanted to get a room there. I was staying in a place on Shattuck Avenue, a hotel, and he told me that he was assistant down there, and I got a room. Then Ed Covington moved in there.

Gordon: Duke used to come up to my room. I had a cup there, a silver cup that I had won for the "Most Valuable Player," the Percy Hall trophy, it was called.

Fry: Yes, I noticed that in the yearbook.

Grodon: Oh gosh, you haven't missed anything, have you?

Fry: Weren't you rated All-American, too?

Gordon: Yes.

Fry: You were the first colored man to be named All-American, and--

Gordon: The first Californian. I was the first colored person to make the football team at California.

IX DESEGREGATING THE OAKLAND Y

Gordon: As far as the local town YCMA, I wouldn't have anything to do with them because they were segregated. They had one down in Oakland and one of the fellows from New York, an officer in the Y, came to my office.

Fry: That was later, when you were an attorney?

Gordon: Yes. This is how late this question extends into your life, see?

He came to my office and he wanted to know why I wouldn't work with the YMCA in Oakland. I said, "I don't believe in a segregated Y," and I meant it. That started it. We kind of broke it down in the city Y, and I went on the Y board in Oakland, the general Y. And I found out that they were having separate High-Y clubs in the high schools. The secretary was a fine person. He was talking to the board one night about how the High-Y in the school were making good, and how we had a Negro High-Y in the schools, and that got my ear.

I said, "Did you say the Negro High-Y in the public schools?"

He said, "Yes."

I said, "I'm amazed at that." I said, "In the first place, our school laws say that this must be a mixed school, and I resent anybody taking any agency in there on a segregated basis."

The secretary said, "Gee, I hadn't thought of that."

I said, "Well, I'm president of the NAACP." And I said, "The YMCA should not foster segregation in the schools." I said, "If you do foster it, then take the word Christian out of your name." That's just what I said.

Gordon: They said, "Well, what are you going to do if the kids don't want to go together? And I said, "Well, all right, let them stay apart if they choose." The kids would decide. (Kids have no fear. It's the older ones that fear it.) That's how they stopped segregation in the Oakland Y.

People think that nothing has been done before just now, in race relations.

Fry: All that work by DuBois--

Gordon: DuBois--I admired him. He was an erudite person. Once he spoke in Oakland, and he came an hour late, and we were all waiting there in Oakland. And he made no excuse. I just feel that whoever a person is, the way to be a gentleman, to be decent, is to be thoughtful of other people as well as himself.

He was fighting with some of the other people. He was with the National Association movement; then he left it. He fought Booker T. Washington, of course. He wrote nice books, and so forth, but then he became a little too radical for me, and he actually went communist. He gave up his American citizenship and was in Africa some place. While I was governor of the Virgin Islands, he came down there and we were at a hotel one night, and he and his wife—this was Estelle DuBois--were there. We met them both, and we talked to him. Of course he was a much older man then, and we had a very pleasant time. We talked over in the St. Croix. After that, he moved and suddenly started forming his DuBois clubs. They were radical clubs. He's dead now, but he was a smart man.

X THE DEUEL COMMITTEE ON CORRECTIONS REFORM/CAPITAL PUNISHMENT

Gordon: Warren talked about how he was going to remodel our prisons. He said, "Well, but I'll tell you, prisons are dynamite, you know, politically."

I said, "I realize that."

He said, "But I'm going to do something and if something happens--I think then it is a good time to go into it." And sure enough it happened.

Fry: He had his plan all ready to go?

Gordon: Yes. That's when he formed this investigation that he talked about. I was on the committee and this senator from Chico, Charles Deuel, headed it.

[tape interrupted]

Gordon: Well, going along, I brought Leonard J. Difani's name in earlier; he was in school with me at Riverside. When he became a senator from Riverside I'd been practicing law. I finished law school in '22 and this was in the '30s, I think. (I had quit the police force.) A Negro had killed a person in Los Angeles. I didn't even know him. I couldn't tell you his name now.* I can't recall it. Anyway, there's something that developed in California that is being talked about right now. You may read about it in the paper. I just want to tell you to give you a little background. This Negro, along with another Negro, had held up somebody in Los Angeles, and had shot him and killed him. He was sentenced to be executed, out of Los Angeles. I wasn't connected with the

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*Rush Griffen.--Ed.

Gordon: prison system then. I was a practicing lawyer and I was president of the NAACP in Alameda County. That's when C.L. Dellums was vice-president.

Well anyway, while that fellow was in death row, his case had never been brought to the attention of anybody. He was executed after papers had been put on file in Los Angeles appealing the decision to the supreme court of California. I just happened to read it in the newspaper, and it was shocking to me, because very few persons had ever been executed while the case was on appeal. Ordinarily it was the law that if a man appealed his case, it was an automatic stay until the appellate court heard it.

So I called up the fellow who used to be United States attorney over in San Francisco, a white fellow, who ran for governor and didn't make it--George Hatfield. He was a senator from this county down in Merced or some place. I called him up and told him that this fellow was killed and executed while the case was on appeal and he said, "Well--" and I said it ought to be investigated. He called me back on the telephone and said, "I took that up and had a committee formed with Leonard Difani on it, and Bill Knowland." (A fellow from Eagle Rock, who was in the SATC when I was, was chairman, I think.) He said, "We'd like to have you act as attorney. I can't pay you anything." He said, "Well, will you go with them? We will pay transporation. Because I want him to go over the whole state. The chairman wants you to go with us, and they will take the attorney general." I went with the committee. We held hearings in Los Angeles where this man had been sent up.

In the meantime California had put in the gas chamber. They may have torn down the gallows, the hanging ropes and so forth and so on--they had stopped stretching ropes, which they had to do to execute a man. You know how they hang them, don't you? Anyway--I'll get to that.

We found out this: that the custom for twenty-five or thirty years before this happened was that the moment the papers went on file in the supreme court, the clerk of the supreme court would call the warden up and say, "Don't execute this man. This case is on appeal." Now, their practice was that when a man was sentenced to die they would send the death warrant along with him to the prison where he was to go to be executed. (Duffy was a clerk over there at San Quentin at this time.) Then they put the death warrant in the safe, and the other papers, the appeal papers,were just put in the files. You see, when a man was executed, the warden would have to take the death warrant which said he should be executed from the safe, and he would fill in when he was executed to show that the court order was carried out. That had been the policy.

Gordon: I am just giving you the history; it would be interesting to read something about it now, because they are talking about the constitutionality of capital punishment, see.

Well, anyway, we held a hearing in San Quentin, and we held them in Folsom, and we held them in Los Angeles in the state building down there, and we had the people connected with the supreme court testify and found out exactly what had happened. They had separated the papers, and the public defender never did push the boy's case.

Well, there was no question about it. We were thinking that we should change things so it wouldn't happen again. So after the hearings, I met with the committees and they all agreed, after we'd gathered our facts, that we ought to have an automatic appeal when we'd get a murder case. I wrote the law and talked it over with the committee. So we had to go about seeing what we could do and how we would do it. We got everything cleared. But the last thing was, when a man is sent to prison and the death warrant goes up there and a date is set and something happens, like an appeal, and he is not executed on that given date, what happens? That was the point involved. What happens?

Well, we had no precedent that we knew of, so I came up to the law school. Professor Kidd had been my law prof in law school. We spent hours trying to run down something on that question that was relevant--because it had to be analogous all the way through before we could get the legislation through. Anyway, we found a case in about 160 Cal Report (I don't remember the name of the case now) where a man was sentenced to be executed and the executioner forgot to hang him or [laughs] something like that, so they went back to the court; he was trying to escape being executed. But the pertinent thing was that the court held that the date set for execution is not a part of the judgment to execute for punishment for the crime. So that established the final point for our bill and cleared that particular point in our thinking.

Fry: In other words, as I understand it, the question was, if stay of execution is granted automatically, then how do you get him back on the calendar?

Gordon: That was the point that we had to make clear. So what we did was this: We said in the law, in substance, that upon the conviction of murder in the first degree, when the defendent is to be executed, at that point the court would just automatically send him to San Quentin (where they were executing everybody) but that the court would not make out the death warrant. No death warrant accompanied him. And in the interim, the lawyer representing him

Gordon: would have to ask for a preparation of the records--transcript of testimony and so forth and so on--and the case would be filed in the supreme court. No death warrant was entered. The only thing that would accompany the man to San Quentin were orders that he is to be held in San Quentin until a remittitur comes down from the supreme court.

Now if the lawyer doesn't take the man's case, the judge has the responsibility, within ten days, to order a transcript of the testimony in the case and send it in to the supreme court.

That's the law now. A man cannot, with automatic procedures, assume that the transcript has been made when the man is in San Quentin. The supreme court has to go over the case, whether it helps the defendant or not, and make a determination as to whether or not the judgment should be carried out. When they make out in the supreme court a remittitur, that is the document that they set up to prove that they have heard the case and the judgment, the execution shall be the order of this court.

Fry: I see.

Gordon: Then it is sent with that remittitur back down to the superior court where he was convicted, and the judge for the first time (with the information in front of him that the appellate court has upheld the judgment, whether it was by court or jury, and the remittitur says the court must fix a date for execution)--that is when the death warrant is made out for the first time and the date set by the judge. That's sent to the prison, and the prison carries it out. Now subsequent to that everybody was all clear about it, and we went in and got it through the senate, and that became the law in the state of California.

What does it mean if the man is going to be eventually executed? This Los Angeles case was one that indicated that the other fellow who was with him was so drunk he didn't even know his buddy had killed this man; he was lying against the wall, the records show. He was in San Quentin on a life sentence. They didn't say he should be executed because he did not shoot the gun. And that was all in the record in that particular case, so we felt that there were two people--two or more involved, and that they should keep a man alive until every other suspect in the whole picture is cleared, one way or the other, or until guilt is determined one way or the other.

So that was what the bill defined. Bill Knowland and this fellow from Eagle Rock, that was their work, not mine. They were the senators on the committee. A lot of people don't even know that.

Gordon: Then some things came out of that. Oh, I forget how long afterward--it is a matter of record anyway--a Mexican killed a policeman down in Orange County, The senator from Orange was sitting on the judiciary, and he put in a bill to delete the automatic appeal from the death penalty.

Fry: To delete your bill?

Grodon: Yes, after it had been in power for months! His argument was that it cost the county of Orange $750 to make out the transcript of testimony. George Hatfield called me on the phone to tell me this was on the judiciary calendar. He said, "Walt, you'd better get your banners and your books and notes and come on up here." (Hatfield had become a United States district judge in the southern part of the state. He's retired now, like I am.)

So I went. I'd get no pay out of it. I wasn't thinking about pay. I want to point out that when you do things because of an interest in people, you don't think about pay. I'm a softie when it comes to police work or anything like that, but I do believe in right and wrong, the way you do a thing.

Well, anyway, I went up before the judiciary committee and I went through the whole procedure that's required to testify, and I closed off by saying that if Orange County kicks on this transcript costing seven hundred and some dollars because of the automatic appeal, it is not correct thinking. In the first place the automatic appeal had nothing to do with preparation of the transcript of testimony because the law prescribed before that when a person is convicted of murder, a transcript of the testimony shall be made and given to the governor because he may want to use executive clemency. This Orange County fellow said, "Well, I give up. I withdraw the bill."

And our bill stays on.

Now you can understand when they talk about doing away with the death penalty, it involves an awful lot. I--well, the way I feel about death penalties--I don't know if I ever mentioned it to you before.

Fry: No, I'd like to know.

Gordon: Well, I have been close to men who were on death row; I've talked to them, and I have mixed feelings. I have a basic feeling that we may not be justified in taking human life, either the state or another man. Now the only few instances that would justify it, in our society, is if a man kills another person and it is not in self-defense; he is committing a crime and kills a man, so we say

Gordon: it is all right to execute him. But we go to war and kill, even though we don't necessarily feel that wars have settled very many human problems with any degree of certainty and forever. I have to admit that the Civil War eliminated slavery in the United States of America. No question about that. But a lot of the other wars are still going on. Now, the death penalty does not deter anybody from committing murder. I think it is so obvious. If a man is a gibbering idiot, what do we say? We can't execute a crazy man. Now a gibbering idiot is not going to be anything unless he can recover and re-enter society as such. Yet our human instincts and feelings make us think that we shouldn't execute him and we don't. I am not kidding about it. But I do have mixed feelings about it.

As judge, there were occasions in the Virgin Islands when I would sentence men to death. Down there, which is interesting, they were qualifying the code when I was sent down there as governor. Our congress had passed the Organic Act of 1954, and I went down there in 1955. That question arose because St. Croix had the death penalty but they never executed anybody. It was carried under the old Danish law. It was done in the local council in St. Croix. Now St. Thomas didn't have any death penalty law. So the question arose in council, in making new laws to cover what we were doing, including whether or not we were going to have the death penalty in the Virgin Islands. Judge Biggs was the chief judge of the Third Circuit at that time. (That's the circuit the judgeship in the Virgin Islands is under.) Well, I knew Judge Biggs, and he had invited me to some of the judicial hearings because I was a lawyer. So I discussed it with him, and I went along with him and I said, "Well, let's cut out the death penalty." So we don't have a death penalty in the Virgin Islands.

There were two cases that I would have given the sentence of death, instead of life in prison (you can't say life in prison without possibility of parole). Two colored fellows, in fact, separate cases. One of them was from New York and he had been in the Virgin Islands about maybe a year over in St. Croix; there was no trouble from him. A white fellow in St. Croix went into the Golden Cow Ice Cream Parlor one Sunday, I think, in broad daytime, and with two little kids. And this tall Negro, a black Negro, just walked in that drugstore and pulled out a sharp knife and cut that white fellow's throat. I don't know whether he said anything to him; I don't know whether he was under dope or drunk or what, but he wouldn't talk very much. When he came before me he said he didn't want an attorney but I appointed an attorney for him, Isherwood, a white fellow. He argued against the death penalty, against killing him, see; he didn't have to because we didn't do it down there. But that was the case where I would have sent him to the death chair.

Gordon: I asked this Negro, I said, "Do you know what the penalty is?"

"Yes, I know what the penalty is."

"Well, why did you do this? You've never made any explanation." And he said, "I don't know why I did it, but I did it, though. I killed the man," and he says, "Does it mean that I'll be sent to prison for life?"

I said, "You understand it clearly that that is what is going to happen to you." So I sentenced him to life.

The other one was--(Now I can think of three cases but this one comes to my mind.) I don't know whether you saw it in the newspaper over here, about a fellow named Ed Rutledge, a white fellow from Washington, D.C. He was interested in the hiring of men in the building trades. Now I had known Ed Rutledge for years. He had worked in the NAACP out here.

Ed was married twice and both girls died. Poor fellow, two wives died, and he had boys and girls. He's a nice person. (Clean-cut! Well, I was surprised when I saw his picture on the television. He had a beard. I told my wife, "I wish I could see Ed cut that beard off!") [laughs]

Well, anyway, I mention him because of this murder case down in the Virgin Islands. The man involved was a little short Negro from the British islands; he was quiet, and he had worked around for different white people doing garden work and so forth. There was an elderly white woman who lived alone and had a home and she hired him for a gardener. Some of her friends, going by her house and seeing smoke, discovered that something was wrong. Some white lady went by there and didn't know her but she went to take her to town to get her groceries and could smell the burning and so forth. They were able to get the fire out and put beautiful testimony on of the doctor down there that the pelvic area was undisturbed and not destroyed. He said that he couldn't tell that she was a female, that certain portions were almost just ashes. It turned out that she was the mother-in-law of Ed Rutledge. In the end this Negro was tried for killing her, for saturating her body with gasoline or something. He pretty nearly got away with it because the body had almost burned up such that you couldn't hardly identify it. This Negro was convicted of murder in the first degree. I sent him to the penitentiary.

Ed came down. I don't think he ever remembered that I was down there until he got there. That was his mother-in-law.

Fry: Had he been in school with you?

Gordon: No, he'd been here in California. I don't know whether you know Harry Kingman or not.

Fry: Oh, yes.

Gordon: Well, he was a great friend of Harry Kingman's. Harry is a great friend of mine. In fact, I got interested in the Y because of Harry, as I told you.

Fry: Well, your views on capital punishment are based on whether the murder is premeditated or not? Or whether it is a crime of passion?

Gordon: You know, you say premeditation. But premeditation can be as quick as a thought in the mind. It doesn't have to be long. It's a legal saying. In talking to the jury and giving the law, I always stressed that premeditation does not mean or entail a long period of time of planning. It can be, but it can be also as fast as thoughts. It is always murder in the first degree when you commit this thing premeditated. You plan it. Take the Rutledge murder case--when that fellow killed that lady and burned the body up, she had money in that place, you know, and that is what we think he got ahold of. Poor thing. She was eighty-seven or eighty-two; she was out there by herself living in that big-sized home. She had money left.

If they are mentally unbalanced--well, our definition in the Virgin Islands is if a person commits an act at a time when his thoughts were affected, his judgment was affected or his reasoning, and it is due to mental illness, something like that. He doesn't have to be a gibbering idiot--that's the way.

Fry: Well, may I ask you one more thing, because I think it is relevant to the whole issue of parole too, which we'll be talking about later on. Is it true what I've heard that the people who are up for murder are usually more trustworthy as prisoners?

Gordon: In other words, you are asking essentially this question: men who commit murder aren't necessarily the worst prisoners in the way they act in prison--

Fry: That somehow his total personality is not as involved in crime as other types of people who commit other types of crime?

Gordon: I've always stuck to the statement that was made, oh, I don't remember when it was, the act that we call "crime" is the result of the emotions of a person which cause him or her to commit a crime. It is more of an emotional something than literal. Now if a person is actually crazy--we don't say crazy, we just say

Gordon: mentally ill or something like that--it is emotional. That's why so many of your prisoners give themselves an answer not because of their intelligence but because of their emotions. We do a lot of things and do it emotionally and we are regarded as sane. Now I don't think any man is mentally ill.

Fry: Are you referring only to murderers?

Gordon: No, for the spur-of-the moment crime. They are giving in to their emotions, their madness. Being mad is not only being somebody else necessarily--

Fry: Yes, anger.

Gordon: It is anger, and you do a lot of things under the stress of that that you wouldn't do at all.

Fry: That's true.

Gordon: I think crime itself is more emotion than intellect. I remember one case of a young fellow. He was in all kinds of crimes. He'd steal and he'd fight. He'd raise Cain. A white kid. His brother played football for UCLA; I didn't know him. He was playing at the time his younger brother was sitting up in Folsom. The day that we went up to Folsom they brought him down out of solitary--a big husky guy, very intelligent. I think his IQ was just as high as his brother's. He walked into the Adult Authority hearing, and everyone said to him, what in the world happened to you, that you tore up the plumbing fixtures in your cell and everything like that?

"Well, they wouldn't let me hear my brother play football over the radio." At that time it wasn't over the television.

And I said, "Will tearing up the plumbing make you see it or hear it?"

"No. It didn't."

I said, "In other words, your judgment wasn't very good, was it?"

And he said, "No, I guess it wasn't."

I said, "Listen, you have an IQ probably just as high as your brother. I don't know what his is. I <u>do</u> know what yours is and it is a whole lot higher than what I would call a meathead or something," [laughs] I said to him. I said, "But you don't use your head for anything but a hatrack. Just something to put your hat on, because you <u>don't</u> use it as far as your judgment is concerned."

Gordon: So he said, "Nobody has talked to me like that before."

I said, "You need somebody to do something to you. You haven't got judgment enough to take care of yourself. Here you are in solitary. You wanted to hear your brother; you tore your toilet up, and here you are in front of us and what the hell--what the heck--do you expect us to do?"

He said, "Well, what are you going to do with me?"

I said, "We are willing to help you. But you've got to help yourself first."

"By that what do you mean?"

I said, "You haven't been working at all."

He said, "Can you get me a job?"

I said, "Well, I'm not going to promise you. That's the warden's business and that's it. You have to earn an opportunity." The warden was sitting right there, see. When he went out we talked to the warden, of course. We said, "Give the guy a chance."

He said, "Well, I can't put him in the yard because he is quick-tempered," and so forth and so on.

"Well, put him in the hospital. Let him work in the hospital. Stay on his tail. Make him work!" And they did. And that guy straightened himself out.

That was just pure emotions! Now a lot of people kill in an emotional binge. They give themselves a lot of answers of wanting to do this and wanting to do that, and they don't think about other people. It is only themselves.

I knew Caryl Chessman well. You heard of his case? He sent me one of his books autographed. I met him the first couple of days I ever--well, I think it was the first time I went to San Quentin as a member of the board. He was a top-notch stenographer--shorthand, typing. He had a good mind and he got along in the prison. In fact, he was working in the warden's office. At that time the prisoners handled all the records. There were other prisoners in the warden's office until Earl Warren got in there. When he got in there that was one of the first things we stopped. I say "we" because I was one of the Warren men in the prison system. When he became governor, I was on the Board of Prison Terms and Paroles.

XI COLOR AS LEGAL IDENTIFICATION OF RACE

Gordon: We're so damned mixed up about color. It makes me mad when these Negroes get to talking about "blacks"! It is not descriptive of the American Negro! I've tried too many cases on this question of segregation in housing for white people who sign up and then want to get out of it. I've always made people prove that non-Caucasians were living in the house in the first place!

There are not many agreements you put in the deeds or anything like that--it wouldn't do any good anyway. But white people put in these deeds, see, that these properties shall not be sold or occupied by any person who is not Caucasian. Well, then they've got to prove that person a Negro. Well, when a fellow gets up on the witness stand--the last one I was trying, he got up and he couldn't talk good English, a white fellow right in Berkeley.

The lawyer asked him, "Was that a Negro living in that house?"

I said, "I object to it on the grounds it is calling for the conclusion of the witness. He hadn't been qualified as an anthropologist or an expert in race of any kind. All he can do is describe him."

The case was twenty-twenty-five years ago. Well, before the judge started ruling, I said, "Now judge, if you have any doubts, I have three cases: In the South, if you've got a drop of Negro blood, you are considered a Negro. In Illinois, if you've got a little more than 50 percent, you are a Negro. Texas held that a white man was a Negro because he associated with Negroes." So I said, "Let him describe him."

Then the judge called on the fellow to question him. (Gerber was the lawyer's name.) He asked him, "Will you describe the color of the man living in the house?"

He said, "He was black."

Gordon: I knew he wasn't black because I knew the man. His mother was a Frenchwoman, and she was sitting right in the court. A Frenchwoman from New Orleans.

Fry: A white Frenchwoman?

Gordon: [amused] Yes.

Well, anyway he dropped the questioning, see. He said, "Well, that's all."

I said, "You said he was black."

"Yes."

"What color shoes do you happen to have on?"

"Black." (I knew he had on black shoes; I looked.)

I said, "Was his color the color of your shoes?"

He said, "No."

I said, "Well, he wasn't black then, was he?"

"No."

"That's all." I just let him go.

Well, I've had some cases where a white fellow called me up once, a lawyer, and wanted my legal citations. I gave them to him and I'll tell you who--do you know this fellow who used to be head of Tuskegee. He is a preacher now. He was here and preached recently. He was president of a New York College and came out here.

Fry: Oh, really?

Gordon: Yes. We used to speak around different places. He was here recently. He's asked me for those citations because he really wants to use them, see.

But you see, that is not a correct description of a Negro. It isn't a matter of whether you are black, white, brown or blue!

Fry: Yes, and both you and your wife have a lot of white mixed in.

Gordon: Yes. Irish--my wife's father's mother was from Ireland, born in Ireland.

Gordon: My dad looked more like an Indian, with high cheekbones.

Fry: You have a little Indian appearance, too.

Gordon: Yes. I've got Negro, white, and Indian blood. Now, what am I?

Fry: Yes. [laughs]

Gordon: Some people were occupying a house that had a non-Caucasian convenant on it, a man and a woman. The man said in testifying he didn't know what blood he had in him, and the woman said that she was a mulatto, she knew. She doesn't know, but they both looked white. They were both from New Orleans. In court they asked the man who his father was, and he said, "I didn't know who my father was, other than he was a captain in the Confederate Army." So they got to scrapping about it, and they brought an anthropologist in from the university here. The anthropologist looked at both of them.

He said, "The only one who looks like he might have some colored blood in him is the man."

And the man didn't have any colored blood in him! The woman said she was mulatto! So you see how racial skin colors are mixed up.

Fry: Very mixed up! Well, I guess the whole idea of tracing black history is also difficult for this same reason. You can't draw a line around it.

Gordon: This history is--to me it is terrible!

Fry: You mean this new push for black history?

Gordon: Yes. We get some of the history beginning with the National Association--I fought in those kind of cases--

Fry: The NAACP.

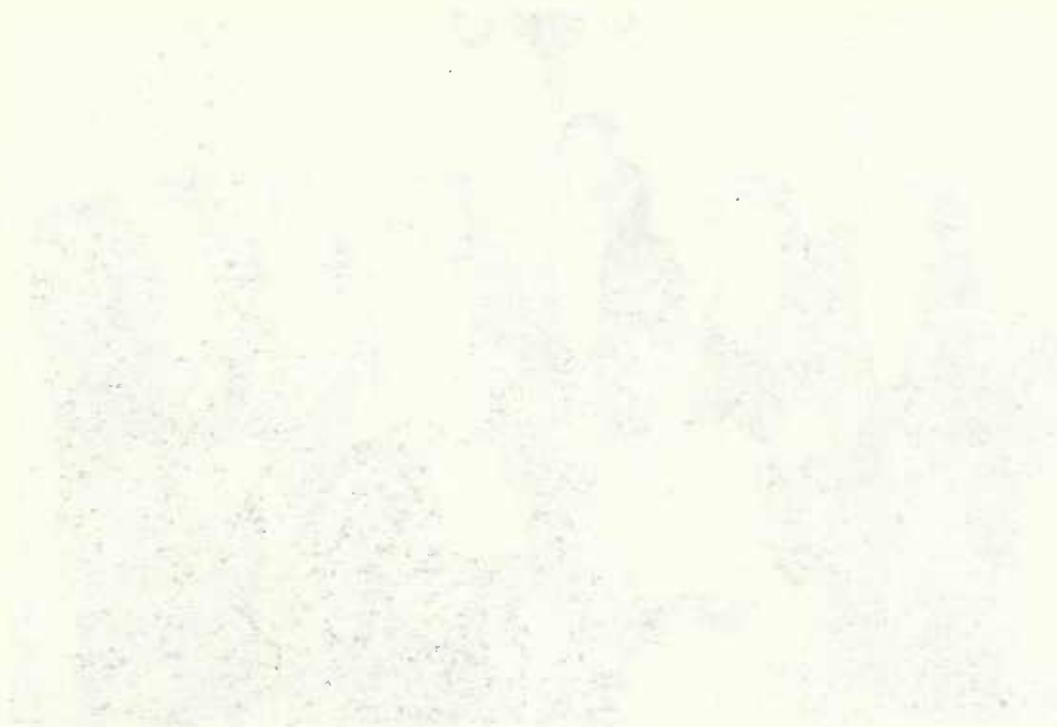
Gordon: The NAACP. That organization was started by whites and Negroes together!

Fry: Yes, you and I are both members of that.

Gordon: I am going to have to leave. It is four o'clock, isn't it?

Fry: Oh, yes. It sure is.

[Editor's note: Subsequent planned interviews were precluded by Walter Gordon's failing health, and his oral history ends here.]



Elizabeth and Walter Gordon (1955)

Photo by E. F. Joseph

Gordon Family, *seated:* Elizabeth Gordon and Walter Gordon; *standing (left to right):* Walter Gordon, Jr., Joyce Gordon, Leonard Dixon, Betty Gordon Dixon, Elise Gordon, Edwin Gordon.

Photo by ASUC

AN INTERVIEW WITH ELIZABETH FISHER GORDON

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INTERVIEW HISTORY

Dates of Interview: September 1, 1978, March 23, 1979, and March 26, 1979

Place of Interviews: Mrs. Gordon's rooms in a motel on University Avenue near San Pablo, where the Gordons moved in 1969 on their return to Berkeley from the Virgin Islands. This location was to have been temporary; perhaps Mrs. Gordon continues to live there on the same grounds that she keeps her old car against the advice of her children: "I can still see Walter sitting beside me."

Conduct of the Interview: If the interview had been held in the reception room of the Governor's Palace in Charlotte Amalie, V.I., Mrs. Gordon could not have been more warm and gracious. And I am sure that there, as in the Berkeley setting, there would have been numerous photographs of family and friends, with special emphasis on great-grandchildren. The happy relations that Mrs. Gordon enjoys with her young relatives is obvious—one piece of evidence being the signed football and Berkeley High football jersey reading "Grandma Sis," presented on her latest birthday, in part in recognition of her attendance at every game of Berkeley High's last football season.

The chief problem the interviews presented was Mrs. Gordon's great diffidence in speaking about herself and matters she felt were of only family interest. Indeed, she was so apprehensive about possible indiscretion, that she asked to listen to the first taped interview before we continued. Happily, she found nothing in it that violated her sense of decorum.

She was reluctant to talk about herself on the ground that the subject of the oral history was her husband and not herself. However, in the course of preparing the volume of interviews of Walter Gordon's friends and colleagues, it became very clear that during their fifty-six years together the Gordons were a team, and almost every contributor to that volume spoke of Mrs. Gordon's role in her husband's career and in his happiness.

Another small difficulty, and a delightful one, was the use of photograph albums as an aid to recollection. These did indeed stimulate memories, but quite often would take us away from the chronology we had established in the interview.

Mrs. Gordon's editing consisted chiefly in the addition of dates and names and other facts she had looked up after the interviews were concluded. Also, out of her strong sense of privacy, she removed one section that she felt was too personal.

For the interviewer the sessions were delightful visits with a beautiful, wise, and warm lady.

Anne Brower
Interviewer

15 March 1980
Regional Oral History Office
486 The Bancroft Library
University of California at Berkeley

INTERVIEW WITH ELIZABETH FISHER GORDON

I FAMILY AND EARLY LIFE

[Interview 1: September 1, 1978]##

Brower: Mrs. Gordon, I wanted to know a little bit more about you. I know that your father came to San Francisco in 1892, didn't he?

Gordon: Well, it could be about that time. I'd have to look that up really.

Brower: Were you born in San Francisco?

Gordon: Yes, I was born in San Francisco. My father, John Henry Fisher, came out here from Carlisle, Pennsylvania. He left his mother and two sisters, Rachel and Elizabeth, at home.

Brower: He married your mother in Carlisle?

Gordon: No, he came out here as a young man, one week before his nineteenth birthday. Two other boys came with him. One, by the name of Jordan, was seventeen and the other one was eighteen and his name was McCard. My father joined the church the Sunday after he arrived.

Brower: That was the Methodist church?

Gordon: Yes, Bethel African Methodist Episcopal in San Francisco. They had a celebration at the time he was a member for sixty-four years.

##This symbol indicates that a tape or a segment of a tape has begun or ended. For a guide to the tapes see page 134.

Brower: Your mother's name was Mary Wilds?

Gordon: Ella Mae Wilds. She played the piano and had a beautiful voice, contralto. Before she married she had a recital and at one concert she performed on the same program with Carrie Jacobs Bond. She also sang in the church choir. Her father's name was John Andrew Wilds and her mother's name was Elizabeth.

Brower: Is that why you were named--?

Gordon: That was one of the reasons. My father's mother's name was also Elizabeth, her name was Mary Elizabeth.

Brower: Your name is really Mary Elizabeth, isn't it? [pause to check tape recorder] I know you had four brothers and two sisters, right?

Gordon: There were seven of us.

Brower: Seven Fishers?

Gordon: From John Henry Fisher and my mother. There was my brother Carlisle; he was named after the city of Carlisle my father came from. We called him Carl. His name was Andrew Carlisle because my mother's father's name was John Andrew Wilds. Then I came along.

Brower: You were the oldest of the girls?

Gordon: That's right, I was Mary Elizabeth. They called me Sister and Sis. Then I had a brother by the name of John. He was named John Henry, my father's name. Then I had a sister by the name of Dorothy.

Brower: Whom you called Dot?

Gordon: That's right. Then I had twin brothers, Wallace and Wesley, born the year of the earthquake, 1906. In fact, at the time of the earthquake--it was during Easter vacation--my grandmother had come to San Francisco and picked me up to take me to Oakland to stay with her, and my mother came over at the end of the week.and brought the other children.

Brower: Did your grandmother live in the East Bay?

Gordon: She lived on Tenth Avenue and Tenth Street. She and my grandfather came to California in 1872 with two children and my grandfather said, "I carried a boy under one arm and a girl under the other." The boy, was Horace, their first child, and the girl was Ella, their second child (my mother). My mother and father lived in San Francisco from the time they had married, April 3, 1895.

Brower: Oakland had its earthquake troubles too. Do you remember what it was like?

Gordon: My grandmother had a three-story house and there were three bedrooms on the top floor and that's where I was sleeping, in my grandmother's room. Incidentally, on the second floor hallway I would always say a part of the Twenty-Third Psalm: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I shall fear no evil"--I would always say that when I got to that floor! [laughs]

Brower: Something about that dark stairway!

Gordon: I was thinking about it, because it was a curved stairway and up high and I'd just say that to myself. [chuckles] The night of the earthquake it was cold; the fireplaces were all on the second floor and the first floor. There were no fireplaces on that top floor and it was cold. So instead of saying my prayers on my knees I got in the bed and pulled the covers over me and said my prayers from there. When that earthquake hit in the morning I knew I was the cause!

Brower: Because you hadn't prayed properly?

Gordon [I thought] it was all my fault because I hadn't said my prayers on my knees by the side of the bed, and I didn't tell anybody. At the time the noise from the chimney falling was what you heard and it sounded terrible along with the shaking. But I never told anybody I was the cause.

Brower: That's a wonderful story.

Gordon: My mother was pregnant. She didn't know it then but she was pregnant with twins who were born in June, Wallace and Wesley. Then after Wallace and Wesley I had another sister, the baby, she was Ella.

Brower: I'm glad to know about Wallace and Wesley because I thought that Carl and John were the twins.

Gordon: No, no. I split them up. [laughs] I was in the middle between the two of them and my sister Dot was between John and the twins who came at the time of the earthquake. Wesley died at nine and to this day I don't know from what, but I just remember going through the trauma of his being ill and being taken care of and the neighbor next door being sweet enough to come over and help. I was conscious of that. It was at the time I was in high school.

Brower: What happened to your house at the time of the earthquake?

Gordon: Oh, that burned to the ground. It was on Jones Street between Pacific and Broadway and the fire swept all the way to Van Ness Avenue. My father went back over to the city to see about the house. He got a permit, through my grandfather, to go over across the bay. They wouldn't let anyone from Oakland go to San Francisco without a permit because everybody was trying to get over here.

Brower: How did your grandfather happen to be in a position to--

Gordon: Because of the fact he worked at the Oakland city hall as a janitor. He laughed and said, "They call it a custodian." [laughs] He was the head janitor. His name was John Andrew Wilds. Before he retired to the "custodian position," he owned a team of horses and was in the trucking business. He and my grandmother also owned cows and sold milk. My mother had a sister, Henrietta, and three brothers, Horace, Joe, and James.

Brower: The Wilds family came to Oakland in 1872? That was pretty early.

Gordon: They were both slaves.

Brower: Really?

Gordon: Oh, yes. Slavery was over in '65.

Brower: They left the South then and came to California?

Gordon: Yes.

Brower: What do you suppose brought them out here?

Gordon: "Go west, young man; go west." That's what my father said his mother said to him; that's what they said in Pennsylvania at my father's age. But with my grandfather, I'm sure it was that they felt they had a better chance, to leave the South, that's all. He was brave enough to do it, and my grandmother along with him. She was adorable.

Brower: Do you remember her?

Gordon: Oh, I loved her to death. I always wanted to be a grandmother. I never thought you had to be a mother in between. [laughter] If only I could be a grandmother, that's what I wanted to be. She was adorable.

Brower: How was she adorable? What sorts of things did she do?

Gordon: I think it was because she spoiled me. I think that's what it was. I was always right! [laughs] She was soft spoken. I never heard her raise her voice.

Brower: Did she teach you things? My grandmother taught me to make French knots and things that I never used again. I wonder if yours did?

Gordon: No, usually I didn't have that much time with her. I'd only have weekends or vacations. Whenever I'd come over for the weekend when I grew older, after I'd learned how to sew, I'd come over and I'd have so much sewing to do and my grandmother would just shake her head and she'd say, "Why does Ella make you do all that sewing?" (She was talking about my mother.) But what she didn't know was that by me saying, "Well, I'll do this sewing" I'd get to go to Grandma's; that's how I got to Grandma's. [laughter] So I used sewing as an excuse. [pause] She was adorable.

Brower: Did all of your brothers and sisters go to school in San Francisco?

Gordon: Yes.

Brower: What high school did you go to?

Gordon: I went to Cogswell.

Brower: There was a reunion at Cogswell in '54, wasn't there, that you went to?

Grodon: Yes. How did you hear about that?

Brower: I think you told me.

Gordon: Did I? I forget what I've told you and what I didn't tell. That was the time, I guess, that I told you the story, didn't I, about this friend of mine? We were the tennis team [chuckles] and she came up to me that night (we hadn't seen each other for 38 years) and she said, "Elizabeth, I knew we were good, but I didn't know we were that good!" She was referring to an article she had read in a magazine about our tennis playing. (It shows you how reporters do; they'll either build you up or pull you down.) A reporter came to the house to interview Walter. (The article was printed in the June 30, 1951, issue of the Saturday Evening Post.) After he finished interrogating Walter about football, he turned to me and said, "Did you like sports?" Walter said, "Oh, yes, she likes football." I said, "Yes, I do like football." Walt would add to it, "And she played tennis." I said, "Yes, I played tennis. I was a member of the team, and I played basketball and I was captain for three years of the basketball team." Well, he didn't say one word about it. I don't know that he ever said anything about basketball or anything else, but he built up the tennis! [laughs]

Brower: You were Helen Wills!

Gordon: My friend read the article and she laughed about it at the Cogswell reunion. I'll never forget that.

Brower: I never heard of Cogswell, to tell the truth.

Gordon: Cogswell Technical College was founded in the Mission district in 1887 by a forty-niner pioneer, Dr. Henry D. Cogswell, a dentist who migrated from the East to San Francisco during Gold Rush days. He set up a dental practice, which flourished. He is best remembered for "filling an education gap."

You'll hear about Cogswell now because they've turned it into a four-year college, awarding associate and bachelor degrees.

Brower: It wasn't just girls?

Gordon: Oh, no. But my father picked it out, I'm sure, because of the fact that they had vocational training and girls were taught sewing as well as cooking, Domestic Science (so called). It was an endowed school; the tuition was very small. He sent my brothers to Mission High, which was only a couple of blocks from where we lived.

Brower: Cogswell was farther away?

Gordon: Oh, my, yes. Cogswell was at Twenty-Sixth and below Mission.

Brower: Whatever you learned there, it prepared you so that you were able to go to San Francisco State?

Gordon: Oh, yes. You could qualify for college from there, yes. This is what you did. I can't help but think of some of the funny things that happened.

Brower: Tell me about them.

Gordon: Well, to begin with I did so well in chemistry--wrong, I just enjoyed it because I liked the professor, Dr. Dodd. I did well in physics. Report card grades were "S," satisfactory; "S-," satisfactory minues; or "F," failure; and they had "S+," satisfactory plus, and one mark that was seldom ever used and that was an "H" (that was "honor"). The "Hs" I got were in physics and the teacher's name was Mr. Bliss. I never will forget when I wanted to take advanced physics--I did so well in it I wanted to keep going--and he called me in and he said, "Miss Fisher, I would love to have you in my class, but it's all boys. There are no girls in that class. I think it would be just a little bit too much." So I didn't take it.

Brower: Probably you could have been heaven-knows-what; you might have been an engineer!

Gordon: Oh, no! [laughs] I only thought that the Hs would help me make sure of my grades to get into college. But I'll never forget it. He was a nice person. I thought it over and I said, "Well, I guess the guys get kind of rough in their talking." He said, "Yes," and this is what he meant.

Brower: One girl would have kind of a hard time?

Gordon: Yes, because all the rough talking would still go on because they'd forget you were there. [laughs] When I graduated there were only six girls in the graduating class. A friend of mine, a darling lady by the name of Mrs. Jackson, also a friend of my mother's, had saved this little newspaper clipping and she gave it to me.

EIGHTEEN GRADUATED BY COGSWELL COLLEGE

Eighteen students were awarded diplomas in closing exercises of Cogswell Polytechnical College held last Thursday evening. President George B. Miller presided.

Mary Elizabeth Fisher	Alice Raymond	Leonard Henry Knittel
Walter Bonheim	Grace Schilling	Nicholas Valencia
Victor Baloun	Hulda Florence Haun	Sylvio Sorocco
Spiro Mandish	Arthur A. Charlson	John J. Torre
Dorothy Hampton MacMurray	Robert M. Eschen	John Joseph Shannon
Ruby McClernon	Arthur J. Furderer	Martin Debenham

(List of graduates as printed in newspaper article. Note six girls, twelve boys.)

Brower: What year did you graduate?

Gordon: Nineteen-sixteen. Oh, yes, I'll never forget!

Brower: I wanted to ask you about Cogswell. You said there were very few minority children in that school--one Chinese boy.

Gordon: In the whole school.

Brower: Was that difficult in any way?

Gordon: Not at all. I never thought anything about it because when I was in grammar school I was the only one in the class. When I was in primary school there were no other minorities of any kind in any class I was in.

Brower: Did this reflect the population percentages?

Gordon: It was the area we lived, it could have been, because after the fire my father bought a lot out on Twenty-first Street, which was out in the Mission area, and before then we were right close to Van Ness Avenue (it was about three blocks away) and close to Chinatown before the fire. The church that we went to and the Sunday School that we went to and the church I was married in was near Chinatown. It was on Powell Street between Jackson and Pacific.

Brower: It's interesting to me that that was such a comfortable situation for you, such an easy acceptance.

Gordon: Very easy, and I just often wonder how did it happen?

Brower: In a way it must not have prepared you for what you confronted later.

Gordon: No, there was nothing to be prepared about because of the fact that I just felt, well, you were there and that was it. There was always somebody that you could depend upon that liked you, so you don't have to go in with your fists up because of the fact there are people there who like you. But this happened all the way through. I thought, well, maybe it was because of what you went through when you were growing up. You never were exposed to anything, you never even thought about color; you actually didn't think about it. It is hard for some to believe, but I have to say it because I know how it was.

Brower: In a way, Walter Gordon's experience was similar in Riverside, wasn't it?

Gordon: No, it was different. In Riverside he got the first breakthrough, but he came into Riverside with Southern segregation exposure, and believe it or not he actually had to grow out of it because I would notice, if it meant going to a restaurant or meant going to an ice cream parlor there would be a hesitancy on his part and I couldn't understand why. Then afterwards I thought, well, it was because he had grown up in Georgia until he was nine years old.

Brower: When did you meet Walter Gordon?

Gordon: I met him when he came up to Cal. I either met him the first year he came, in 1914, or I met him in 1915.

Brower: Was one of your brothers at Cal?

Gordon: No. I met him through a boy that I knew by the name of Lee Purnell.

Brower: Didn't they room together later?

Gordon: That's right. He lived with him at his home.

Brower: He came to the Virgin Island party in Washington, didn't he?

Gordon: Yes, he did. Bless his heart, friends of ours who were living in Washington, a girl and her sister, when Walter passed on, they went to Lee's and Lee wasn't so well. They went to him and they had to decide whether they'd tell him about Walt or not and they decided to tell him. They went to Lee's and had a quiet session in honor of him. Wasn't that nice? I'd never heard of that, for three people to do something like that for an old friend. But these two girls were nieces of my mother's maid of honor who later married the best man, George McCard, one of the three who had come to California from Pennsylvania with my father.

Brower: So it was a long friendship.

Gordon: Yes, it goes way back.

Brower: You were in San Francisco and he was in Berkeley. It must have made courtship a little bit difficult.

Gordon: Because I was in San Francisco and he was over here? But, of course, we didn't start going together really until I guess 1919 or 1918.

Brower: He must have been a pretty glamorous beau to have, an All-American football player!

Gordon: But all the other boys were doing something too I suppose. Lee was a track man. He entered college after Walter entered college, but I knew him before, and he was a track man.

Brower: [looking through photograph album] What house is this?

Grodon: That's next door to my grandmother's, at 19th Avenue and 10th Street.

Brower: They are wonderful old houses.

Gordon: Yes.

Brower: Who is this?

Gordon: That's Johnny Colescott. He came from New Orleans with his sister and another brother--his sister was a piano teacher and I took lessons from her after I was making my own money.

Brower: Tell me about making your own money. Did you teach after you got out of San Francisco State?

Gordon: What happened was I finished all of my work for graduation. I had done all my practice teaching and I had taken all of my examinations and everything except graduate, the graduation itself, and that was to be in May. It meant that you couldn't teach until you were a graduate. Then when you taught I think you were paid one dollar and a half a day and carfare for substitute teaching, if that's what you would be doing. You had to take an examination for regular teaching and it wouldn't come up until June. The war was on. There were vacancies in the insurance office where my father worked. I went down and applied for a job and they accepted me and I went in as a file clerk. Instead of making fifty dollars a month, which was the starting salary for teachers, I made eighty-five dollars a month.

Brower: That was really great. I made sixty dollars a month ten years or so later.

Gordon: I made eighty-five dollars a month and I went to school at night and took up shorthand and typewriting because I felt I didn't want to be a file clerk forever. After I was there a year I had the nerve to go and ask the manager for a raise.

Brower: After you learned the shorthand and typing?

Gordon: Yes, and then maybe turning my desk into a re-insurance desk, and evidently I did it as it should be done. When I found that out, that was when I went to the manager.

Brower: Did you get the raise?

Gordon: Oh, yes, I got a raise. [chuckles] To one hundred dollars a month.

Brower: That was really very good money for that time.

Gordon: Well, I thought it was because I was comparing it with what a teacher would make.

Brower: So did you ever go into teaching?

Gordon: No, the only thing I taught was sewing and knitting as a volunteer--that was in 1919. In the Virgin Islands I would substitute in the Lutheran School without pay if a teacher was ill. Walter did not believe in a lady working. He did not believe in it so I knew that if I married, that meant the end of teaching as I had planned. So I stayed with the insurance, thinking I would save the money I could make and maybe take a trip to Europe. But Walter just didn't believe in a wife working.

Brower: Was it disappointing to you since you seemed to have been sort of embarked on a career?

Gordon: I was disappointed because I wanted to make my own money. I just wanted to be independent, I guess that's what you'd call it and I guess this is what made me go outside and give time to the YWCA.

Brower: When did you get into the Y work? Was it very early?

Gordon: It was after the children. I guess the boys had started school. Betty I know was just in my arms when I first went up to the U.C. Y "Cottage." She was in my arms because I could go to a meeting and just put her on the couch and she'd sleep until the meeting was over and I would bring her home.

Brower: How did you happen to pick the YWCA?

Gordon: Because I had been asked to go to the Linden branch and serve on the board. That's where I first started, at the Linden branch. Luly Chapman was the secretary at the time.

Brower: Was that Linden branch in Berkeley?

Gordon: No, no. That's down in Oakland.

Then I became chairman of the board. If you're a chairman at Linden branch you also meet with the control board up on Webster Street.

Brower: So you just sort of gravitated to the Berkeley campus?

Gordon: I was invited by a lady by the name of Mary Bentley. She came to the house and asked me would I consider becoming a member of the University Y. I told her that I would if I was free to express myself and she said, "Yes, you would be." I asked this because I had an experience when I automatically became a member of the board at the Central YWCA. I had spoken out and was told that I should never say anything in front of the board meeting unless I had talked it over with the secretary. It kind of upset me. I wanted to join the U.C. YWCA only if it was perfectly clear that I could express myself if I wanted to without clearing it with the secretary before I ever spoke to tell them I was going to say so-and-so. To me that was cramping. [laughs] But Mary Bentley said that would never happen, and it never did.

Brower: This picture, is this Walter Gordon in uniform?

Gordon: No.

Brower: Walter Gordon was in the SATC, the Student Army Training Corps. Did you know him at that time?

Gordon: Yes, I knew him.

Brower: He expected to go to officer's candidate school?

Gordon: He was due to go in November and at that time peace was declared. But he was withheld for a while, I think, on account of his finger. He had a trigger finger that wouldn't work. I can't tell you which finger it was, but that prevented him.

Brower: So that had nothing to do with race, that he was not going to officer's candidate school?

Gordon: Oh, no, becuase he was going to be right out here. He was going to be in California I think. Lee Purnell was already an officer and another fellow, Norman Houston, and others from the Bay Area.

Brower: [Pointing to picture] What a pretty dress.

Gordon: Oh, my mother used to get so upset. She said, "Sister, why do you have to have all of those gathers--and taffeta too! Why do you have to have all of those gathers?" I said, "Well, I feel like this. I'm fat underneath and everybody knows I'm fat, so why can't I wear the style of dress I want to?" [laughs]

Brower: But you weren't fat.

Gordon: I weighed 168 pounds.

Brower: I know you did, but you don't look fat.

Gordon: I weighed 168. [continues to look through photographs] Now, there's Lee Purnell again. That was before he went on to war and this is Norman Houston and Norman did go away and became an officer in the army. He was the head of the Golden State Life Insurance Company that you heard Walt talk about.

Brower: Yes, because Walter Gordon was their attorney.

Gordon: That's right and he was their attorney through Norman. [finding photograph] Here's my father. That's my father.

Brower: My goodness, how tall and thin.

Gordon: That's my brother; that's the oldest one, Carl. This is Carlisle too when he was in the Army. This is Walt, Jr.

Brower: That's Walt, Jr. too?

Gordon: Yes, that's Walt, Jr. You can tell by the way his Daddy holds him that he's proud of him. There he is. That's my mother.

Brower: In that picture Walter Gordon and your brother were pulling weeds for the city of Berkeley?

Gordon: That's right. But in addition, Walt was still in school.

Brower: This was before your marriage though?

Gordon: No, we were married. He was still in school. He was still coaching.

Brower: You married a law student, a coach, a policeman, and now weeds on top of that!

Gordon: The weeds came at a time that football season hadn't started; something hadn't started when he was able to do weeds and he got hold of my brother and they pulled weeds.

Brower: Then they sent the bill to the owner of the lot, the city did?

Gordon: It was a city job, yes, a city job. [looking at photographs] This is my cousin in San Francisco. He's Robert Fisher and he came out here and lived with us when he came from Carlisle, Pennsylvania. He lived with us until he married and he had one son, Robert, who was adorable. He had a lovely wife, Gladsome, who's gone now. He's gone too. But the son is so lovely. He is a principal in the school department in San Francisco. This year he had the assignment of school for retarded children, which is a good assignment, but it's a heavy assignment.

Brower: Yes, isn't it?

Gordon: He's also worked with the Scouts.

[speaking of a photograph] That's my grandmother's house, a part of it. This is the second floor and it had a porch all around it. I wish I had a picture of the whole house.

Brower: Do you suppose that house is still there?

Gordon: Oh, they tore it down to build the highway through there, the Nimitz Freeway. [pointing to picture] This is my first classroom that I taught in and these are the two girls I taught with, Ruth Gleason and I forget what [the other's] name was, but this is the first classroom that we did our teaching in. It was the Frederick Burke [Elementary] School. It's a school attached to the San Franciso State Normal School.

Brower: I don't know that school.

Gordon: At any rate, it's a school connected with the normal school. Dr. Burke was the president of the San Francisco State Normal School. When I first registered at the school, Dr. Burke called me in. I didn't know why, but they put a notice on the bulletin board, "Miss Fisher, see Dr. Burke," and the girls would tell you, "Betty, your name is on the board." I went to him and he said, "I had you come in because I want to ask you why you're coming here?" I said, "Because I want to be a teacher." [He said] "Well, where do you expect to teach?" Of course, I'm gasping for breath and I said, "Right here in San Francisco." But before he got that from me he had said, "Where do you expect to teach? We had a Chinese girl and she had to go back to China to teach, so where do you expect to teach?" I said, of course, "I thought I would be teaching in San Francisco." [He said], "Well, where are you going to do your practice teaching?" I said, "Where do the other girls do theirs?" They start right here. He said, "I worked eleven years to built this school and I'm not going to have it torn down by one person." He was referring to the Frederick Burke Elementary School.

I was about to cry, but I didn't. So I left and went home and when I got home my mother was at the front door letting out guests that were there, Mrs. Tombs and her daughter Laura, who lives in Berkeley now.

I couldn't get all the way in without running in and breaking down. My cry came. I couldn't hold it back. I held it all the way up the Castro Street cable. I held it in until I reached the front door, then I just had to pop out; I didn't know there was company there. Otherwise, I'd probably have held it a little longer.

Anyway, when my father came home (of course, my mother told him) and my father went down to see Dr. Burke the next day. But he didn't take me in with him. I don't even know when he came to the school, but I know what happened. He told us that he went in and he said to Dr. Burke, "How do you do?" He told him how much he enjoyed a talk Dr. Burke had given at the church, and I guess Dr. Burke forgot what church, but it was Bethel AMC. My father said, "My name is Fisher." "Oh," Dr. Burke said, "Margaret's father." My father said, "No, Elizabeth's father." [laughs]

Brower: There was a Margaret Fisher there too?

Gordon: Oh, yes, there was a Margaret. Margaret had blue eyes and red hair.

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Brower: Let's finish the story about Dr. Burke and where you were going to do your practice teaching.

Gordon: My father said, "Where do all of the other girls do their practice teaching?" That's when Dr. Burke said, "In the school here." My father said, "Then that's where she'll do hers." Dr. Burke repeated to him what he said to me and my father said, "I pay taxes and as long as I pay taxes, then she will get her training where the other girls get their training." Dr. Burke said, "What about city schools. No principal will take her." My father said, "We'll see about that." Mr. Burke said, "I wouldn't want to send her over to Oakland"--to some school in West Oakland. I don't know what school it was, but he said, "I wouldn't want to send her over there." Papa said, "She'll get her training where the other girls get theirs in San Francisco. I'm sure a principal will take her." And that ended it. So my father got me and we went to see Miss Saunders. He told Miss Saunders what Dr. Burke had said. Miss Saunders was the principal. [She said], "When she finishes I'd be happy to have her."

Brower: She was the principal of the school you attended?

Gordon: That's right. She was the principal at Edison. She said, "I'd be happy to have her." Of course, that's where I went and I went to Miss Kelly. [She] was the teacher I taught under when I went to get my public school training. She had been my fifth grade teacher. I guess I made a good impression because I was #3 the first month and #1 the rest of the term.

Brower: So in spite of Dr. Burke it all worked out?

Gordon: Yes, in spite of Dr. Burke. I don't know what happened to the girls who came after me. I'm sure they didn't go through the same thing.

Brower: Your father must not have been a man to be trifled with.

Gordon: No, he was pretty straight talking and yet I never heard him really fuss or argue or get into a rough conversation and, of course, I never heard him swear. That was just out. [chuckles]

Brower: You say he joined the Methodist Church when he was only nineteen, when he first came to the city?

Gordon: He had already belonged in Carlisle and then when he came here, the first Sunday he was here, he went to church and immediately joined.

Brower: Was he a very devout person? How did religion figure in your family life?

Gordon: In the beginning, I can remember praying.

Brower: All of the family together?

Gordon: Yes. Well, there weren't that many. This was before the fire and there weren't that many that were that big and I can't tell you how often it was, but I remember kneeling in the living room and having prayers. I remember that. I don't remember it after the earthquake and fire, but I remember it before. We always went to church, and I always went to Sunday school. It was just automatic.

Brower: That was on Sunday. You didn't go to church on weekdays?

Gordon: My father went to Wednesday night prayer meeting but we didn't and my mother didn't. But they went to church on Sunday and we went to Sunday school on Sunday.

Brower: Did you have problems with dancing and card playing or was it not that sort of church?

Gordon: Oh, yes. You didn't play cards and you weren't supposed to go to the theater and you weren't supposed to dance. But [chuckles] I learned how to play cards and when I started playing cards I finally said, "I'm not going to sneak and play cards. I'm going to play cards out in the open. I'm not going to sneak." I was playing solitaire! [laughter] To me sneaking was wrong. You're really breaking a commandment if you sneak; but I didn't see anything in the commandments that said you shouldn't play cards, so I played cards. My father didn't say anything, but I don't remember ever having girls over or fellows over and playing cards. We just didn't do it.

Brower: Cards became quite a part of your life later on, didn't they?

Gordon: Oh, yes.

Brower: Was Walter Gordon--?

Gordon: Oh, he loved to play cards and men would come in to play, but they never played for money. I guess they couldn't afford it maybe. [chuckles]

Brower: It doesn't sound like a very oppressive religion. I mean somehow you must have danced and gone to the theater.

Gordon: Oh, yes, and he knew I danced because the Episcopal church had dances in their church and I would go. My brother would take me there or if there was a dance at some friend's house, because it was after I was old enough to go out. I could go maybe to a dance,

Gordon: but they were always private dances, never a public dance. That was not allowed, but I never had any desire to go anyway.

Brower: It sounds pleasantly easy-going, not so rigid that you didn't have any fun.

Gordon: Oh, my, no, no.

Brower: How did your two families feel, the Fishers and the Gordons, when you decided you were going to be married?

Gordon: They just accepted it; I mean, if we were in love that was it.

Brower: By that time they must have known Walter Gordon quite well because he had been in your life for some time.

Gordon: Well, he had been to the house often enough, goodness knows. [chuckles] They would always see him when he came to pick me up or bring me home. I don't know whether they came up with any firm opinions about him one way or the other. It was the matter of the fact that we were in love and that was it. I don't even think they thought in terms of what his future would be or anything like that. It was never discussed so I don't know. And I don't know about his mother but I'm pretty sure she loved me dearly. She left this ring for me [showing ring she is wearing]. She left this ring and told Walter's sister, Ella Mae, that I was to have it. Ella Mae was really his cousin but she was raised as a sister. When her mother died she was quite small, and Walter's mother, who was her mother's sister, went back to Georgia and brought her out to Riverside to raise her with her own. She gave this ring to Ella Mae to give to me because she wanted me to have it. Walter's mother was so cute. [chuckles] We went down there for our honeymoon.

Brower: Down to Pasadena?

Gordon: Down to Riverside and I don't know what prompted it or how it came out about marrying, but I remember her saying, "Well, I wouldn't care if he never got married!" [laughter] She was adorable--"I wouldn't care if he never got married"--in other words, if she could just have him for herself. But she was darling though and this is what she sent to me. It had been diamond pierced earrings and she had them made into a ring and added a ruby to it.

Brower: It's a very handsome ring.

Gordon: [indicating another ring] That's my mother's wedding ring; my father gave me that and it has a wedding date on the inside, April 3, 1895 inscribed, and then it says "Mizpah."

Brower: Oh, yes, that's from the Bible.

Gordon: "Until death do us part." It's partly Jewish too. "Mizpah" is Jewish. It's one of their rituals. But in this instance it meant, "til death do us part."

Brower: I somehow associate it with that thing in the Bible about Ruth when she goes with her mother-in-law and says, "Thy people shall be my people."

Gordon: It seems to me a part of church ritual. In the Methodist church it's, "We'll repeat the Mizpah," when the service is closing.

Brower: You really became more associated with the Episocopal church later, didn't you? No? Perhaps I thought that because the minister at Walter Gordon's funeral was an Episcopalian.

Gordon: That was because of his association with Walter and Rotary and the fact that he came to see Walter so much and the comfort that he gave Walter.

Brower: His name is Griffiths?

Gordon: Yes. During the period that was hard for Walter he gave him so much attention. It was so beautiful. I never forgot it and I'll never forget it.

Brower: Your children were born fairly soon after your marriage?

Gordon: Yes. It was quite a surprise too. [laughs] That was quite true. But after the second one, after Ed, I remember the doctor, Dr. Boone, coming to the car as we left and telling Walter when we were coming home, he said, "Now, listen. You had her up here last year and you had her up here this year, if you have her up here next year you won't have any wife." So that was quite--

Brower: --Direct, wasn't it? I didn't realize your boys were quite that close together.

Gordon: Walter was born April 23 and Ed was born the next August.

Brower: August of the same year?

Gordon: No. Not quite! April, May, June, July, August--that would be four months later; no! No, it was the next year in August.

Gordon: Dr. Boone said, "I'm just telling you," because I guess it was a highly difficult birth, but I thought it was difficult for everybody, that everybody was sick, because I'd be sick the whole time.

Brower: Really? What year was Walter, Jr. born?

Gordon: Nineteen twenty-one, and Ed in 1922. Then I have to count up with Betty because she was six and a half years after Ed or five and a half years after Walter; she was born on March 25.

Brower: Was the delivery difficult or was it just the period preceding it?

Gordon: I don't know, but I didn't think the delivery was difficult. One time I do remember this. I remember the doctor--oh, that's one thing, I always asked to have my husband be in the room.

Brower: Oh, really?

Gordon: Yes, I asked.

Brower: That was long before people did that.

Gordon: Yes. So Walt was there, and my mother too for that matter at the time Walt, Jr. was born. Walt was studying for a final and I might say he flunked that final too. [laughs] He had to take it over again. But I was so conscious of my mother that that ended my mother being with me at the time of delivery because every time I'd either flinch or scream or did whatever I did my mother would look at Walter and shake her head.

Brower: Oh, dear, poor Walter! No wonder he flunked that test.

Gordon: Never again was it necessary for her to be in the room, but Walter was there.

Brower: Was this in a hospital?

Gordon: Oh, yes, up here at Herrick. I said, "Can Walter be with me?" and Dr. Boone was nice enough to say yes.

[tape interruption]

Brower: Can you tell me how "This is Your Life" happened? You didn't know about it in advance?

Gordon: He was named to be the man of the year for the Urban League. He was to go to Los Angeles to receive the award and that's how that started. That's the initial thing--he was called up to Portland to talk at Lewis and Clark by the president who wanted him to address the student body. Betty was attending at that time.

Brower: She went to Lewis and Clark?

Gordon: Yes, she went to Cal first and then Dean [Lucy Ward] Stebbens called me and she said she felt she should be in a smaller school because she was so young. Betty told me herself that "I should just be starting college now" and that's when she was eighteen and had already been in for two years, I think.

But anyway, we went up to Lewis and Clark for Walt to give this talk. After the talk, we left and flew down to Los Angeles--

Brower: Not stopping off at Berkeley?

Gordon: No, we didn't stop off at Berkeley. But the week before, or two weeks before, I had been up to Lewis and Clark for a mother's day weekend and on my way to the banquet they had for the mothers a phone call came in for me from Hollywood. The lady on the phone said that I didn't know her but she was calling for a program that Ralph Edwards was putting on. She had called my children in Berkeley and they told her that telling anything to me was like putting it in a well, that their mother could keep a secret. So she said, "I didn't tell them what the secret was, but I'm telling you that your husband is going to be on this show. There are some things about his life that you are the only one who can tell us, so we'd like to be able to have a conversation with you when you get back to Berkeley or if you are not able to have it privately there, if you get off of the train any place along the road, call and we will get the information." I said, "It's all right because my husband won't be home anyway." That's when they called to tell me they were having him on "This is Your Life."

Brower: You never let him know?

Gordon: No. Well, all you have to do is listen to the record and you know. You know; there's no question. They almost made the mistake of putting Betty on our plane when they brought her down and that would have been terrible. But they found out their error, so she came down afterwards.

Brower: She was the only one of the children there?

Gordon: Yes, and I often think about it when I hear it. But Ed was still in the Air Force I think.

Brower: In Idaho I suppose?

Gordon: Where is Camp Lewis?

Brower: In Washington.

Gordon: Walt, Jr., I don't know where Walter was, but I often thought about that too. But it could be that they had limited time for the program. They also had limited funds, I have a feeling. They included the boys, in some way they brought them in. They had Betty because I guess--

Brower: She was right there and didn't have to be brought in from somewhere else.

Gordon: The same way with Walter's mother. His mother was there. She cried when she kissed him, and said, "I wish your papa was here."

Brower: It must have been an awfully exciting moment.

Gordon: It was, it was, and I think about the men that were on there, like Brick Muller. Governor Earl Warren said, "You can't have been a part of Walt Gordon's life without having your own life enriched in some way."

Brower: The man who was interviewed about Walter Gordon's police experience was present at "This is Your Life."

Gordon: Yes, Wiltberger. Wiltberger was also one who was listening I think at the time they took the record. I think he was one. I wrote his name down on it. Because Walt could recognize his voice right away.

Brower: He could?

Gordon: Oh, yes, and I recognized his voice too.

Brower: I didn't talk to him because Edward Farris did that interview; he was in the Southwest, where Wiltberger lives.

[tape interruption]

Brower: You were telling me a story about when you were both going to New York.

Gordon: Yes, we wanted to see the World Series. Walt had to go to a prison conference and, of course, I was going to go with him too, after I went to my own meeting.

Brower: What was your own meeting?

Gordon: They had made me the YWCA regional person in charge of the western area for these ladies of foreign countries who were coming in on a nine-month stay under a grant from the Ford Foundation for the national YWCA International leadership Training Program. I was

Gordon: in charge of the western region and the national committee called a meeting to decide on just what we were going to do. It was in New York that the meeting would take place and that's why Walt decided we'd get tickets for the World Series. Walt sent a telegram to Billy Martin and asked for series tickets. When we walked into the hotel in New York, the phone rang and I answered the phone and the fellow on the other end said, "Is this the Walter Gordon I know in Berkeley?" and I said, "Yes." He said, "This is Billy Martin. The tickets will be at the office because I have to go out to practice." Sure enough he had the tickets there for us. We went to the game and after the game Walter wanted to get hold of him to see him and take him to dinner and Billy was so darling. He said, "My real father never cared anything about me until I began playing baseball and then he paid attention to me."

When it was announced that Billy Martin was fired from the Yanks, I felt badly and my heart went out to his mother. I called her to tell her about how I felt and about the last time we had seen Billy. She was happy to hear me and she said she wanted to know about Walter. She didn't know Walter had passed. She said she always was so fond of him because he was so nice to her. I think he got her divorce. I don't know. She didn't say. I guess she thought I knew.

II WIFE, MOTHER, YWCA OFFICER, AND CRAFTSWOMAN

[Interview 2: March 23, 1979]##

Brower: Mrs. Gordon, I think we might start this section with your wedding.

Gordon: Well, we were married on July 22, 1920, at Bethel AME Church in San Francisco on Powell Street, between Jackson and Pacific.

Brower: Is it still there?

Gordon: The Chinese bought it and turned it into a mortuary. They have rebuilt the church.

Brower: Where is the new church built?

Gordon: [At] 916 Laguna in San Francisco. My father was a member for sixty-four years.

Brower: That was the church he joined when he first came to San Francisco?

Gordon: Yes.

Brower: I think you spoke earlier of a celebration honoring your father for his long membership in the church.

Gordon: That was when he had been there for sixty-four years. Of course, he was there longer than that, but they celebrated his sixty-fourth year.

Brower: Do you remember what you wore at your wedding? Did you have a veil and everything?

Gordon: Oh, yes, I had a veil and everything. The best man was Beverly McCard, the son of George McCard, one of the men who came to California with my father.

Brower: Did you have time for a honeymoon?

Gordon: Our honeymoon we spent in the Stewart Hotel in downtown San Francisco because Walter hadn't gotten his vacation from the police department and we had to wait until time for his vacation.

Brower: Wasn't that too bad. You'd think the department could have arranged it.

Gordon: Well, no. We had set the date but Walter couldn't get his vacation. But it turned out all right because we planned to go to Riverside for our honeymoon; we went down in the Ford.

Brower: Had his parents come up for the wedding?

Gordon: No, they didn't come up for the wedding and that's why Walter insisted that we go to Riverside for the honeymoon; I really wanted to go to Yosemite. [laughter] But because his relatives didn't come up this is what happened.

Brower: Was that the first time you met his mother?

Gordon: No, I had met her before. In 1919, the year before, I had gone to Los Angeles on a trip, a vacation. I met a girl that was the sister to his brother's wife, and she took me down to Riverside to meet his family and we rode down, I guess, on a train and then rode back to Los Angeles.

Brower: So Walter Gordon was not with you when you met his parents the first time?

Gordon: No, no, he wasn't with me when I met them the first time.

Brower: Then, when you got back from Riverside to Berkeley--

Gordon: After the honeymoon--[pauses to recollect]--we came back. I was trying to think when we set up in Berkeley, in the house in Berkeley.

Brower: You had a house there?

Gordon: Yes. Before that we had stayed at my grandfather's house.

Brower: In Oakland?

Gordon: In Oakland, for about a month.

Brower: At that time were you house hunting?

Gordon: Yes. I wasn't house hunting. We were hunting for a place, not a house. We were looking for an apartment, but it ended up that we went into a house.

Brower: How did that happen? Was it a particularly good buy?

Gordon: I had nothing to do with it. Walter did it all. I didn't even know until the house was bought and he showed me the house that he had bought. [laughter]

Brower: Were you happy with it?

Gordon: Well, it was better than the apartments that we had looked at, and I felt that a house isn't forever anyhow. And it was better than living way out in East Oakland, where Walter couldn't easily come back and forth to college and his job on the police force.

Brower: Where was this house located?

Gordon: The same place that it is right now on Acton--2734 Acton. It's right there.

Brower: Buying a house was a big decision and I would think he would have wanted you to participate in it.

Gordon: Yes, but you see [laughs] he was southern born and bred! That's the only way I see to explain it.

Brower: And ladies were to be taken care of?

Gordon: Yes, and ladies were not supposed to work. That was quite definite, and for a while ladies didn't buy the groceries either.

Brower: Was that the tradition in your family as well?

Gordon: No, ma'am.

Brower: Wasn't it rather hard to adjust?

Gordon: Well, what happened was I think that the adjusting came--

Brower: The other way?

Gordon: The other way! [laughs]

Brower: It was a slow process of education?

Gordon: I think there was a gentle turning by persuasion and in some instances it was by a friend. They were always the male friends who would say, "Walter, do you mean to tell me that your wife

Gordon: doesn't buy groceries? You don't let her buy her groceries?" This is what they would tell [him] and they would needle him so that finally it was gently turned over to me and I did do all the buying.

Brower: And you accepted the earlier situation?

Gordon: No. I guess I had other things to think about at that time, and the fact is if you don't feel well, you don't care so much. At the time that he was really insisting on doing his buying and what have you, I didn't feel so well and it wasn't worth it to push for it.

Brower: Was this because you were pregnant?

Gordon: Yes.

Brower: And you were really not well the whole time?

Gordon: That's right, the entire time. So it wasn't too bad and I let it go as it was going.

Brower: Well, it certainly must have been a successful educational program on your part because everyone who speaks of the two of you, speaks of you as equal partners.

Gordon: Well, I laughed at him so when they began talking about women's lib [laughs] and I said, "I got mine so long ago I didn't know there was such a thing!" [pause] But the schedule was not easy. I don't think it was easy for him, although I never ever heard him say he was tired. I can never remember him complaining about it.

Brower: He was doing an extraordinary number of things. He was working for the police department, he was going to law schoool, he was president of the local NAACP, and he was coaching. I keep wondering when he ever saw you, with a schedule like that?

Gordon: He came home at 12:00 noon from law school and he had lunch. He went to bed and he stayed in bed until 3:30, and he got up and dressed and got to the football field by four.

Brower: That gave him about two and a half hours sleep.

Gordon: And he stayed there until he'd come home around 7:00 or 7:30. He'd get home about 7:00 and we'd have dinner. I'd always have dinner ready for him when he came and he had his dinner and went to bed at half past seven and stay in bed until 11:30 and then he'd get up and report on duty at twelve midnight. At 2:00 A.M. they would have their break. It would be either 2:00 or 2:30 and

Gordon: he would always come home at that time. If he didn't come home, I would worry because automatically I would look for him to come. Before the baby was born it was maybe a little harder to look for him at the right time, but after the baby came that was the baby's feeding time.

Brower: The 2:00 A.M. feeding!

Gordon: The 2:00 A.M. feeding, and he'd always be there to heat the bottle for that feeding.

Brower: Before he came would you just go to bed, or would you try to stay up and wait for him?

Gordon: Oh, no, no. I would go to bed before he left at 12:00. Well, it depended on whether I was doing anything that I wanted to get through with--something with my hands that I might be sewing or knitting. But I would go to bed and then, of course, I'd get up when he left. Then I'd go back to sleep. But I was always awake when he left and I was always awake at 2:00 when he came in. Then at 6:00 sometimes he would come in for the baby's 6:00 A.M. feeding--sometimes--but he wasn't supposed to.

Brower: So he'd go to law school right from--

Gordon: Straight from police duty. He got off at eight and you're not late if you get there by 8:10. He could be there by 8:10 and he'd stay there until twelve. Then Friday was his day off at the police, so that was our night out and as a rule we went to the Fulton Theater.

Brower: Oh, wasn't that fun?

Gordon: Do you remember the Fulton?

Brower: Yes, they had a repertory theater.

Gordon: Plays that we always saw. We just loved it and that's what we did on Friday night. That was our night out!

Brower: That was wonderful entertainment.

Gordon: He would study on the day that he was off from the police department and the next day he could study.

Brower: Do you mean Saturday?

Gordon: In the morning. Then, when it wasn't football season, he could really put in time with his studying.

Gordon: When he would scout, and sometimes I went with him, he would make notes but also he would draw the places. He'd tell me to watch and see how many steps the kicker takes before he kicks. He'd tell me, watch where the ends go when the team we were playing have the ball. I could do that, I could watch the ends and then I'd know if they went down straight or if they crossed. I could see that. But he, with his pencil and his paper, would move every single man on both teams: in which direction they went and how they went. This is what he did, and I never could understand how he did it. As far as my job went, taking down how many steps the kicker takes before he kicks was so simple.

Brower: Well, it must have helped. With an extra pair of eyes watching that he could give his attention to other things.

Gordon: Even now I watch the fellows and seldom do they take less than two steps. But there was one fellow on last year that just took one step and I said, "That's the shortest one I ever did see."

Brower: All your life you will never see a football game without watching that!

Gordon: It was easy to do. There was only one other lady that I saw in the press box who was scouting and that was Alonzo Stagg's wife, but she never spoke to me. She would sit there and do all of the writing. Now, whether she was watching the mistakes Stagg's team were making or whether she was watching what the other team was doing I don't know, but she had a pencil and paper and I judged she was scouting.

Brower: After the children were born, you probably didn't get to go to games very much.

Gordon: I took the children.

Brower: Oh, you did?

Gordon: When they were babies I did not. I had a friend who would keep the babies while I'd go to the football game, but I had no compunction about going up and carrying the baby with me. When they were little I took them and I often wondered if maybe I overdid it, maybe I ruined them for football. Maybe they don't like it because I took them.

Brower: But that didn't happen, did it?

Gordon: It didn't happen, no. But I was afraid it might. Betty tells me she just doesn't like symphonies and I feel I must have pushed her and I feel it's my fault.

Brower: Well, sometimes I think parents do push too hard.

Gordon: I must have pushed her, but if I did push her it was because I wanted to go and I couldn't leave her by herself! [laughs]

Brower: So you hauled her along!

Gordon: So I hauled her along. It wasn't that I was trying to make her like it, but I guess--

Brower: Then you kept up with music as well as football in the early years of your marriage?

Gordon: I didn't have as much opportunity then as I did later because I wouldn't go out at night with the children there with Walter. He'd have to get up and go to work.

Brower: So music really came later?

Gordon: That came later.

Brower: Those Berkeley Police Department years covered a long period, didn't they?

Gordon: Eleven years.

Brower: You once said that you knew Walter Gordon had left the force before Christmas, and then you told me a story. I wondered if that event had anything to do with his leaving the police department?

Gordon: No. You're talking about the killing?

Brower: Yes, I am.

Gordon: No, it had nothing to do with [that]. Walter had already decided to leave. In fact, it was Vollmer who had really pushed him.

Brower: Oh, really? He felt that the time had come for him to--

Gordon: He said, "It's time for you to give full time to your law," because Walter was only giving part time to law.

Brower: Was this after he had graduated from law school?

Gordon: Oh, after he graduated. But he never let law interfere with his football! [laughs] Vollmer told him it was time to leave, because he was curtailed about the kind of practice he could do as long as he was on the police force.

Brower: Of course, a great deal of it would involve a conflict of interest.

Gordon: That's right, so he couldn't. So that's why Vollmer told him.

Brower: Would you mind repeating that story? It's such a sad little story about the pre-Christmas shooting.

Gordon: Well, I told you that I always listened at 2:00 A.M. automatically, and if I wasn't awake and I awakened suddenly and it was past 2:00 I would be very much concerned. I'd be so concerned sometimes that I'd call the police department and they were nice enough about it. I never heard them complain. Maybe they did complain, but not to me.

But Walter decided to retire. Christmas or New Year's was his last day. I awakened one night shortly before that; it was after 2:00 and there was no Walter, and then I heard these shots. Well, that's very easy because it was so quiet in Berkeley I could hear his car coming. If I was awake and he wasn't there, I could hear when his car was coming up the street. This night I heard these shots, and he didn't come. I waited and he still didn't come. I don't know whether I called the police department then or not. I don't remember. But I do know that when he did come he told me what had happened, and that was that a man they had caught evidently had fired at one of the policemen. I don't know, but he ran and he jumped the fence and one of the officers shot at him when he jumped the fence and hit him and killed him. They asked Walter if he would be the one to go and tell the wife and so Walter went to the wife and he was heartbroken because their two children were decorating the Christmas tree and their two children were the same age as our two boys and it did upset Walter.

Brower: Why did they ask Walter to go and talk to her?

Gordon: I wonder whether this might have been a fellow that had been in trouble before and Walter had gone to the wife. I don't know. I can't say.

Brower: Was it a white man who was shot?

Gordon: Oh, yes.

Brower: What a terrible job, to have to tell his wife.

Gordon: And right at Christmas.

Brower: It must have been terrifying to you to hear those shots.

Gordon: Yes, in the dead of night, and they'd come out clear as a bell. I do the same thing even now. It may be nothing but an engine's backfire, but it comes out so clear.

Brower: Can you think of occasions when Walter Gordon was shot at?

Gordon: Yes. Of course, I didn't know it until afterwards. But it was down on San Pablo, if I remember correctly. He had gone to the back of a store and the fellow evidently went to the front. He came around to the front.

Brower: Was there a burglar alarm that had--

Gordon: No, no, I don't know how he knew the fellow was there. I haven't any idea. It was too long ago, so I can't remember. All I remember is this, that Walter said that when he took out his gun he dropped the clips and he said the fellow was no better aim than he was! [laughs] The man tried to kill him, and he didn't get hit. But he had been fired at. Another time he was in his car with another policeman and a fellow shot at them. He didn't get away.

Brower: It's not an occupation that makes it easy for a wife.

Gordon: No, not at all.

Brower: You have to learn to live with that kind of anxiety.

Gordon: That's right. [pause] And your prayers. But he was very fortunate.

Brower: During those years a good deal of the childrearing must have been your responsibility. Were you the disciplinarian in the family?

Gordon: I guess I didn't do any more disciplining than the father would do. I mean he or I would check them if they needed checking. I don't feel that I was any disciplinarian. [pause] I'm trying to think of all the arguments. We would be the ones who would be scolded because we hadn't given them enough liberty--

Brower: They felt that you were too strict?

Gordon: They weren't always free to go places. I think I've said that before, didn't I?

Brower: I'm not sure that you said it but I remember that Dr. Gordon said that the family had too high standards, higher than others.

Gordon: They couldn't go to the park like the other guys did. Ed liked music and it was bad then, I guess. Maybe it would be rock now, I don't know. But at any rate, public dance halls were just out. Ed loved that music though! He asked why couldn't he go and so we had to say to him, "Well, if you come home by 11:00 you can go." He didn't care anything about the dancing but he'd go and listen to the bands. Well, he went and we'd hear him come in pitty-pat-pitty-pat-pitty-pat. [laughs] At 11:00 he was home. But the boys were out of high school then. I don't know. Maybe we were too strict. I don't know. I think Ed and Walter feel that we were too strict. I told Ed, "Well, now, Ed, let me tell you something. When you get yours you raise them just like you wanted me to raise you!" His answer was, "Well, I'm going to raise them just like you did me!"

Brower: I was going to ask you about that. Did you impose your notions of how your children should bring up their children?

Gordon: No, no.

Brower: You never had a temptation to do that?

Gordon: I never had a temptation to open my mouth about what they did or didn't do.

Brower: No wonder you're such a favorite with your daughters-in-law.

Gordon: They just seem to be everything that's right to me.

Brower: That's nice. It would be hard if you felt--

Gordon: No, in fact, I don't know what they could do to change what their children do any more than I could have done anything to make my children do different. I don't know, but basically--maybe I learned that.

Brower: During the law practice years things must have eased off a little bit, didn't they?

Gordon: Not much, no, because Walter would still go to football.

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Brower: --he continued his coaching?

Gordon: Yes. Even though he had stopped the police force and was doing full-time practice in the law, he always managed to get off and be coaching. He never left that until he went on the board, on the parole board. Then he had to. But up until that time he stayed with the coaching.

Brower: How did that affect your children's lives?

Gordon: Well, they went along with him because they were interested in football. Now the one that was the biggest (the second son) did not play football except in a lightweight manner I'll have to say because I can remember them talking at the dinner table and Walt Jr., who really played in earnest, would complain about the fact that whenever he came around end Ed would tackle him--he'd never tackle the other fellows but he'd tackle him! He complained about it and his father wanted to know, well, why is that? Ed said, "Because I know him!" [laughs] Evidently Ed was playing on the second team while Walt,Jr. was playing on the first team and this is what was taking place.

Brower: Actually Ed played before that, didn't he?

Gordon: Walt,Jr. played in high school.

Brower: What about the Lumpy Lions? Was that baseball?

Gordon: No, that was football. I just saw a picture of the Lumpy Lions. I just saw a picture of the coach talking to the team. It was football because they played in intermission time at one of the Rose Bowl games.

Brower: Oh, really? That must have been quite a feather in the cap of the Lumpy Lions.

Gordon: Yes, it was. Ed didn't play football, but he carried the sticks on the sideline. But that was a trip, that was really a trip if you remember.

Brower: So your whole family must have gone down to the Rose Bowl?

Gordon: Well, we were going anyhow. Cal played. I forget who they played that year, but Cal was playing in the Rose Bowl that year so that's why we went.

Brower: Then Walt, Jr. was more of an athlete than his brother?

Gordon: Well, Ed went out for crew and the reason he went out for crew he told me was becuase if you make a mistake nobody will see you! [laughs] You're out in the middle of the estuary nobody can see you. So this is why Ed went out for crew.

Brower: Perhaps he suffered a little from having a brother who was a better athlete. But they worked this out somehow I guess.

Gordon: It wasn't that Walt was a better athlete but that Ed didn't like being out and being seen if he made a mistake. I said, "Ed, you're so tall why don't you play basketball?"

Brower: The same thing?

Gordon: He said, "Everybody can see you if you make a mistake." So he didn't like that idea.

Brower: Both boys went to Cal?

Gordon: Yes, they went to Cal, and Ed went on in dentistry. Betty went to Cal for a year or two years, and then I sent her to Lewis and Clark because we knew the Scotts and they were up there. Ralph Scott had been down here in the Y at the University of California and that's where we knew him. Ed was somebody that was near there that I knew and who Betty knew too, and that was a real help, although when she got up there she wanted to come home.

Brower: But she stuck it out and graduated?

Gordon: Oh, yes, but she wanted to come home and I'll never forget. There was a psychiatrist that was working with the board, working with the prison, Dr. Norman Fenton. I talked with him and I said, "She wants to come home." He said, "Well, is she in love?" I said, "She may be." He said, "I don't think there's anything you can do about it."

When Betty called me and said, "I'm coming home," I said, "Stay. I'll come up there"—but before I did anything or called her again, she called me back and said, "I've decided to stay" and she stayed. Did I tell you that before?

Brower: I don't think you've told me on tape. She had to make a decision about her dancing about then, didn't she?

Gordon: No, no, because when she left here she left dancing.

Brower: I see. She had already made that decision.

Gordon: Yes. That was nothing.

Brower: The boys' education was interrupted by their marriages--or was it? Did they marry before the finished school?

Gordon: Oh, yes. Well, Walter had to go to war. Then when he came back he picked it up and went on and the same way with Ed. But Ed, I'm trying to think how Ed went into--

Brower: He went into the Navy, didn't he?

Gordon: The Air Force later.

Brower: Those must have been awfully anxious times for you.

Gordon: It seems to me that when Ed went into the Air Force--oh, I don't know. I'd have to find out from the girls because it seems to me that he had already received his dentist [degree]. Had he finished dentistry then?

Brower: I think he acted as a dentist in the Navy if I remember correctly. Yes, he must have finished.

Gordon: He must have finished before he went in or because he was--I don't know.

Brower: Or maybe he took his training as a part of his military duty and then continued to practice. Did he go overseas too?

Gordon: No. Oh, I know. During the war he didn't want to go in the Army so what he did was to work on these ships. What are they called? That carry?

Brower: Oh, you don't mean that carry aircraft?

Gordon: No, they carry troops, heavy things.

Brower: Freighters?

Gordon: No. It's something that they carry and they are attached, but I don't know that they have anything to protect themselves with. If you are working for them it's the same as being in the war. It's equivalent to the military only you don't carry a gun. Ed always said, "I couldn't kill anybody." He went from here to the Orient and came back. It was torture every time he left here because of the fact that from time to time you read in the paper where one of them had been sunk, and I didn't know whether it was the ship Ed was on or not.

Brower: You must have followed the news very closely during that time.

Gordon: It was kind of torturous because of the girls--because of Joyce and because of Elise. Elise was in school but then she became pregnant.

Brower: [tape interruption] Walter Gordon, Jr. was in the Army, wasn't he?

Gordon: Yes, he was in the Army.

Brower: He was in the infantry?

Gordon: Yes.

Brower: And he was an officer, wasn't he?

Gordon: Yes, he got to be an officer even.

Brower: He was given his commission in the field, I believe.

Gordon: He was in the Battle of the Bulge and I remember one fellow that served with him coming to our house after the war was over and he asked could he speak with me alone in the front room instead of with the rest who were there. Then he told me the story about Walter, at the time of the Battle of the Bulge, they had found this nest of snipers and when he started out to get them Walter pushed him back and said, "You've got a child. Stay where you are." And Walter went out and did the job. The soldier said to me, "I just want you to know that I'll never forget it the rest of my life." Well, Walter himself had a child. Whether this boy had two or not I don't know.

Brower: That was an extraordinarily brave thing to do.

Gordon: We were so grateful that neither one was hurt.

Brower: They must have been very anxious times for both of you. Did you share your anxiety?

Gordon: I wouldn't voice mine. If I went to anybody, I went to God. I mean this is where I would go, and I would assume that Walt did the same thing because he wouldn't talk too much out loud either. I think the reason would be because you didn't want to worry the other fellow about what you were worrying about.

Brower: We knew so little. It was so hard to follow what was happening in Europe at that time.

Gordon: And you didn't get correspondence.

Brower: It must have been a happy day for you when the war was over in Europe.

Gordon: Oh, when Walter, Jr. came in—I'll never forget--I went over (it was over in San Francisco) and I was so afraid of being too much of a mama, you know, and interfering—too much of a mother-in-law--so I stayed in the background while they greeted each other. It was such a wonderful time to be there. But since then I think about what <u>they</u> went through. I think about what Joyce went through and her mother and then I think in terms of Walter, even after he came home. He saw Karen, Ed's little girl, and she was just walking. I was shocked to hear Walt, Jr. say, "I missed all that."

Brower: Yes, of course, all the growing up.

Gordon: He missed all that when she was walking, when she first started walking. He said, "I missed all that." Isn't that funny? I wouldn't have thought that he would be thinking about that. Because big Walter said that he didn't feel comfortable holding--

Brower: A little baby?

Gordon: No, he didn't feel comfortable.

Brower: When Walter, Jr. came home did they send him to the Pacific?

Gordon: It seems to me that they didn't send him to the Pacific but what did happen. After he came home, he didn't serve so many years or months or what have you and one of the men that worked in the parole office, Walter Stone, said, "Why don't you belong to the reserves? Join the reserves." Walter, Jr. joined the reserves and then what happened was war broke out.

Brower: Oh, in Korea.

Gordon: Right, and he had to go to Korea.

Brower: During all of this time, what kinds of things did you do for your own self expression. When the children were little was that when you first did Y work? It must have been because you took Betty when she was a baby.

Gordon: Yes, but Betty came some six years after the boys. So the boys were up and in school.

Brower: Before you started working with the Y?

Gordon: Before I actually went in and became involved in the Y. When I first became involved in the Y it was down at the Linden branch, and then by the time I got out to the University Y, Betty was born. The lady next door would keep her, but if it wasn't convenient, I would take her with me. But she was very good and she just slept until the meeting was over. It was her sleeping time.

Brower: You found that Y work very satisfactory, I know. What made it so good? Was it the people you worked with?

Gordon: I think that the people that I worked with was the thing that motivated [me], and what they were trying to do.

Brower: What were the main drives of the Y at that time?

Gordon: Well, the one that interested me the most was the fact they were trying to get all people to work together.

Brower: The whole campus community, you mean?

Gordon: The different groups on the campus, I mean the different racial groups. They wanted to bring them together so they wouldn't stay separate. They didn't want them to be in segregated groups. That's what they didn't want. I think the YM had the same idea and that helped.

Brower: That was a departure from an earlier period, at least for the Oakland Y, the Oakland YMCA. Do you recall that?

Gordon: Yes, they set up a separate group--well, actually, the YW did too. They had to set up a separate YWCA, the Linden branch. They called it a branch.

Brower: But the University Y never did that, from the very beginning?

Gordon: From the very beginning they never did. The only thing that they had in the group itself was what they called the interracial committee. But my feeling was the main reason for that was so that eventually, if you got them working, got them into the Y and got them working together, that that would dissolve and that was the main objective I thought.

Brower: Of course, the city of Berkeley had an interracial committee, didn't it?

Gordon: I don't remember the Berkeley Interracial Committee. Do you know what period that was?

Brower: It would have been the fifties.

Gordon: We were gone.

Brower: Oh, of course.

When your husband was named to the Adult Authority, how did your life change or did it very much?

Gordon: It didn't change very much except, of course, I was alone more because he would have to go and he'd stay away. I mean they would go to different parts of the state.

Brower: They visited the various prisons, didn't they?

Gordon: That's right and they would stay. So I was alone because--

Brower: How did you manage that?

Gordon: Well, one of the ways I would manage would be that I had one friend whose husband worked on a night shift and we'd go out to dinner at 5:00 while it's still light, we'd go out to dinner a lot. I'd take her home and I'd come home myself. I had a bridge club that I would play at but that was always in the daytime, nothing at night, and I guess I filled it in by sewing or knitting or reading.

Brower: You went along when you could, didn't you, because I know you visited at San Quentin when he went there.

Gordon: Not very often. I mean the wives did not travel with the men to the prison. If I went to San Quentin it was because the Riggses were over there and I went to see Louise.

Brower: Warden Duffy spoke of having you there as a guest and how much he enjoyed you. It was not a regular occurrence then?

Gordon: No, we would go for a party, if the warden gave a party, but it was never when they were on business. Then of course, they had their prison conferences, or congresses they called them.

Brower: You did go to those?

Gordon: I did go to the prison congresses and met the people there and enjoyed them. I met so many lovely people that you don't forget.

Brower: This would be on a national scale?

Gordon: This is national, and one of the people I remember meeting was Roger Hines's mother. Her husband was the head of a prison (don't ask me where). But I remember he was president of the congress one year that we went.

Brower: In all this, did you entertain a good deal when he was in law practice and also later? [Mrs. Gordon shakes her head] Not very much?

Gordon: No.

Brower: But you did have your bridge club, didn't you? Didn't you have a bridge group that met fairly often?

Gordon: Yes, a women's group.

Brower: Oh, but I thought there was also a mixed group.

Gordon: The men would meet and play but they did that while Walt was still on the police force.

Brower: Oh, really? That was a Friday-night affair then, I expect.

Gordon: No. Friday night was ours! [laughs] No, this would be on Saturday when it wasn't football season.

Brower: Those were all men?

Gordon: All men. Well, if I happened to be there and they needed a fourth I'd fill in [for a] foursome. But it wasn't an organized group at all. It was just a drop-in and maybe there was more than one table.

Brower: But it seemed that the dropping in was at your house?

Gordon: Yes. Well, they called it "the house by the side of the road." I will never forget—and I just saw him at my sister's fiftieth anniversary and I hadn't seen him for a long time--a fellow by the name of Ken Johnson. He's so darling. He's a doctor. He's retired now.

Brower: Does he live in Sacramento?

Gordon: Yes.

Brower: His brother George was interviewed in Hawaii for the oral history and he spoke of the bridge games too.

Gordon: He did?

Brower: Yes.

Gordon: The last time we'd seen Ken, someone came down and took Walter up to talk before some board in Sacramento and the gentleman said, did we want to go see anybody? Then we told him, yes, we wanted to go see Ken Johnson. Ken said, "You should never have to buy another meal as long as you live!" [laughter] He said, "The way we drop in and have dinner at your house, you never should have to buy another meal." [more laughter]

Brower: His brother spoke of how often you had him to dinner and he knew that it was when you knew that he didn't have money enough to get himself a good dinner, so you would invite him.

Gordon: [laughs] George said the same thing! But all of the boys used our house as a place to stop by. One of the fellows [Chuck] Matthews came up to a trackmeet. I think he'd finished school. I'm not sure. But at any rate, we were coming from the trackmeet

Gordon: and Betty was in the car with us and we were on our way home. Walter got out to do some shopping and I was sitting in the car and I heard Betty tell Chuck, "Do you like ravioli?" He said, "Why?" She said, "If you don't, that's what you're going to get because that's what Daddy's buying!" [laughter]

Brower: So what entertaining you did was very informal at that time?

Gordon: Always.

Brower: Did that change when you went to the Virgin Islands? That required a different kind of entertaining, didn't it?

Gordon: Yes. Well, if we wanted to entertain here, as a rule, we took our guests out. Of course, I did have some dinners but they were always for close friends and we would go to each other's houses, like Bill Davis and his wife, Jane, and Harry and Ruth Kingman, from Stiles Hall, and Kenny and Peggy Hayes from rugby at Cal. I don't know how many times Peggy came down to my house.

Brower: All the people who served with your husband on the Adult Authority board were such good friends.

Gordon: Yes, but you see it wasn't--we didn't call it formal dining.

Brower: You got along well with those other wives, didn't you?

Gordon: They were all so wonderful, all of them, every one of them.

Brower: You and your husband were able to share football because you had an interest in it too. Did you share the Adult Authority interest? Did you become interested in that too?

Gordon: That's right, because of the fact that it was Walter's work, and I thought I'd better learn something about it. [laughs]

Brower: Did you find that other people talked more freely in front of you than your husband did about things like that?

Gordon: No.

Brower: I thought perhaps he tended to keep his business separate from his home experience.

Gordon: No, no, he was vocal about that. No, he would reach out. I mean I would know what was going on as far as Adult Authority was concerned--not individual cases, I don't mean that--but I mean the general--

Brower: Subject of criminology? I know that he was anti-capital punishment.

Brower: He did some remarkable things when he was on the NAACP in persuading people to take a chance on ending discrimination in their restaurant or their store.

Gordon: It wasn't necessarily through court cases, but it was by persuasion.

Brower: What were some of the cases or situations that you remember particularly?

Gordon: Well, I remember one place down on San Pablo Avenue. They had a sign up, "No Negroes Served." He knew the sign was there so he went in anyhow and ordered something and the gentleman said, "Don't you see the sign?" My husband said, "Yes, I saw the sign." So he gave him his order and the man served it in the pan that it was cooked in. My husband said, "How much is it?" He told him and my husband said, "Does that include the price of a pan? I'm taking it with me." The fellow said, "I feel like a heel!" He took it back and then Walter told him who he was and he said, "Oh, do you mean So-and-So? Are you the one who's down there on the other side of University Avenue?" My husband said, "Yes, I am." He said, "I feel ashamed." And that ended that.

When he was with the National Association he had an incident where a man refused to sell clothes to Negroes or let them try on clothes. Did he tell that story?

Brower: No, he did not. I think that Mr. Lester tells about that.

Gordon: Well, if Ervis told the story then it's told well.

Brower: If these incidents were discussed at home and at the dining table, it's hard for me to understand why there wasn't an awful lot of bitterness and anger and yet there doesn't seem to have been.

Gordon: No, do you know why? Because of the fact there were so many people that you knew who were so wonderful to you that you wouldn't let one upset you in life and you figured they'll outgrow it and there's always another place where there'll be lovely people and just the opposite. I think that's what does it. Of course, with me I feel it's because of coming up like I did, and I didn't have all this pressure and it never made a bit of difference and I never heard anything anti-Negro until the incident I told you about with Dr. Burke. I never even heard the word "nigger" used in calling me a name. Maybe it was just as well, I don't know, but not even in an aside or anything.

The worst thing that ever happened to me was a friend of mine, Mary Muzio, that called me "Liz" and I had to check her and say, "Call me "Miss Fisher," if you can't call me Elizabeth or Betty." [laughs] But in looking back I think about the different girls I

Gordon: knew and most all of them were first generation from another country. The mother in this girl's case was from Italy. Another girl, Agnes O'Leary, her people were from Ireland. Another girl, her name was Gene Miller and her people were from Scotland. Olga Iton and her mother--and I knew all the mothers because the girls would take me to their homes, so I got to know the mothers.

Brower: What was Olga's last name?

Gordon: Olga Iton. [spells name] She was from Switzerland.

Brower: Are you suggesting that their tolerance came because they were first generation?

Gordon: No, I don't think that. I don't think it. No, the richness was for me to think that I knew these people who were from all over--

Brower: All over the world?

Gordon: Yes, or their children. Now, these people are from all over and they aren't in one little niche and I think that that makes you grow free.

Brower: That's interesting, that there should happen to have been so many first-generation people in that group.

Gordon: Adelle Lemoins' parents were from France and Grace Schilling, the Schilling people of San Francisco whose people were from Germany. Maybe I was conscious of it because I always had planned to travel around the world. [laughs]

Brower: So you felt this added a richness to your experience, that these people had all of these different traditions?

Gordon: That they all came together and they all seemed to care about each other.

Brower: It must have been a very nice community.

Gordon: I just loved it and as I make the fabric over then I appreciate it all the more. When Cogswell had that thirty-eighth reunion and I went back and met this girl on the tennis team I told you about (I hadn't seen her since 1916), the manner in which she received me, and the same way with Walter because I had Walter with me. Of course, they didn't know Walter but all of us, all of them, were just so nice.

Brower: Of course, he was a very handsome man to show off. [laughter] It must have been fun taking him!

Gordon: Well, a lot of them were older too, of course, and they had gone through college at Cal and knew him.

Brower: We were talking about the Y as part of your expression of yourself, but you also made jewelry, didn't you? Wasn't that a kind of creative outlet for you?

Gordon: Well, I made it one of my side issues.

Brower: [laughs] Maybe we should have a whole little talk about side issues.

Gordon: Well, I did go to Studio Number One first. I went to Studio Number One and I learned how to do pottery.

Brower: Where is that?

Gordon: It's down--don't ask me!

Brower: Is it in Berkeley?

Gordon: No, it isn't.

Brower: In Oakland?

Gordon: It's over the line. But I did take up pottery and I did take up weaving and I did take up jewelry making.

Brower: At what point in your life did you do this. Were the children grown up?

Gordon: The children were up and in school. But I could go and still come back, get home [before they got home from school]. When I went to Mills, the summer I went to Mills, Betty was away and the boys were already in the war.

Brower: How did you happen to go to Mills?

Gordon: I wanted to improve my pottery and my weaving and they had both. [laughs] The nice thing, when I went to fill out the application they would [ask] what your age was, but they were kind enough to say, "Are you over 45?" [laughter] You didn't have to say how much over, but I laughed! Another thing they said, "Do you want credit? Do you want to know your credit?" I was bold enough to say I did because I said, "Well, why not. I want to find out." So I did and I didn't do too bad!

Brower: Are you going to tell me what you got? What your grade was?

Gordon: Yes, I got a "B."

Brower: You must be awfully good with your hands to do those things.

Gordon: I don't know whether it's so much with your hands or if it's patience. I think it takes more patience. It takes forever to polish a piece of silver.

Brower: Did you enjoy the jewelry making the most?

Gordon: That's what I mean. I loved it. I loved to make the jewelry. When I went to the islands, one of the consuls there, the gentleman who was the Danish consul said, when he found out--someone told him I had made the jewelry I had on (I don't know what it was)--he said, "I will buy all of the jewelry that you make for the store." They have a store there. He said, "I'll buy any jewelry you make."

Brower: I think that's an extraordinary compliment because I've never known people with better taste than Danes.

Gordon: Well, I wondered afterwards. I thought, "Well, I don't make that good jewelry," but it's the fact that he can say to customers, "This was made by the governor's wife," and that he would use that as a selling point.

Brower: Well, I doubt that. I'll bet it was beautiful.

Gordon: "I'll buy everything you make," he said.

Brower: Did you actually do it commercially?

Gordon: No, and I haven't.

One of the ladies in the islands tells me, and I forget I ever gave it to her, she said, "I still wear some jewelry that [you] made; I bring them out every Christmas." (I made her earrings.) She said, "Everybody talks about it." I don't know what it is. I don't think it was any that I made. I probably bought something and made it into an earring. That's what I think it is.

Brower: But it was fun and you enjoyed doing it. For the weaving--did you have your own loom?

Gordon: I bought a loom after I had taken weaving at Mills. I bought myself a loom, but we left shortly and I left my loom here because I was afraid to take it in the heat.

Brower: It might have fallen apart?

Gordon: Yes, the rust, so I didn't take it. But I still have a suit that I made from material that I wove. Do you want to see it?

Brower: I'd love to see it.

III GOVERNOR'S LADY, "MRS. JUDGE," RETURNED BERKELEY RESIDENT

[Interview 3: March 26, 1979]

Brower: I'd like today to talk about the Virgin Islands. I'd like to know in what ways they were different from Berkeley--I mean the climate, the kinds of weather, and the ways the houses were built. How did it differ? It was much warmer, of course.

Gordon: Yes, it was warmer and you had to learn how to live with that heat, although it never got higher than say eighty. At least I don't remember it getting higher than that because there was always a cool breeze. Remember, you're on an island and water is all around you and that helped to keep it cooler. Of course, what happens is at nighttime when I thought you had to wear a coat because the sun went down, that isn't necessary. [laughs] You don't have to.

Brower: You don't have to?

Gordon: No, you don't.

Brower: I noticed the heavy shutters on the houses in the pictures and you said it was not for heat control, but for a hurricane.

Gordon: That's true, because they had had some very severe hurricanes down there and they were prepared for it. This is why they had the shutters. Only once did we have a hurricane warning. That means that they close all of the shutters. The noise you hear is eerie. You have a feeling that it's going in a circle.

But that hurricane didn't hit. It passed to the north from where we were, according to the accounts in the newspapers.

Brower: I think it would be a very terrifying experience.

Gordon: And it didn't hit anything.

Brower: Was this when you were in the governor's mansion?

Gordon: Yes.

Brower: What was that house like?

Gordon: It is a three-story building of brick-faced masonry with reenforced concrete floors. Most of the furniture and fixtures and the interior ornamental woodwork are of mahogany. The cornerstone was laid April 8, 1865 and the building was completed September 1867 at a cost of $33,605.79.

The first floor was used for offices of the governor, his private secretary, the administrative assistant, the military aide and the clerical staff. A ballroom, a reception room, a kitchen, a dining room were on the second floor. On the third floor were the living quarters, bedrooms and also a living room and a kitchen, and a dining area off the kitchen but not a full dining room.

Brower: Was the downstairs kitchen used only for big parties and things?

Gordon: For luncheons and for dinners but not for breakfast. Of course, if we had guests for breakfast, if we had too many guests, we would have to use the dining facilities downstairs, but with just a couple we would use the area upstairs if they stayed all night. We didn't have too many overnight guests--men from the Department of Interior. Chief Justice Earl Warren and his wife stayed with us on a visit to the Islands.

Brower: Did you use the kitchen upstairs yourself? Did you cook yourself?

Gordon: No.

Brower: Even when there were just the two of you?

Gordon: No. I had a cook and a butler and three maids and a laundress and a gardener. Then there were guards who were on duty for twenty-four hours. I can never forget Heidman, the chauffeur. He was always so kind and patient.

Brower: That was quite a staff to handle. Were they cooperative?

Gordon: Very, very. They were very cooperative and the butler really took on and did little things, like the cook didn't come on to serve me tea or coffee in the afternoons. If guests came and I served them coffee, the butler did it with no fuss at all because he did it for me--I had coffee at 4:00 every day. If I was there, I'd have coffee. At any rate, he always took care of that. There was nothing that I can ever remember their being disgruntled about. If they were, they didn't show it.

Brower: Were your social obligations very heavy. Did you have to give a great many parties and luncheons?

Gordon: When it was a government visitor, then it was essential. That meant an open house, practically an open house, which meant a lot of work. There were certain dignitaries that came that you did this for. If it were the military, whenever a military came, if a ship came in and they entertained you aboard, you in turn returned it. Sometimes it wasn't a big reception. Other times it could be a dinner. It would all depend. When they had entertainment aboard, if it was for the entire government personnel like the cabinet and the judiciary, you name it, they had this list. They invited all of those. Then when they came you invited the same group.

Brower: You were required to invite the whole bunch?

Gordon: You weren't to leave them out and sometimes--I'm trying to think what the occasion would be--where you just had open house, period, and that meant everybody could come. But even at that, they didn't mob the place. They would come and [laughs] the only thing they would do would be to call it "freebies" and this meant that when they went into the dining room for their freebies they would stack up as much as they could stack up! [laughter]

Brower: It must have been hard to provide food and to estimate how much food was required, and you hadn't had much experience with that sort of thing before, had you?

Gordon: No.

Brower: Was the butler helpful in helping you plan things like that or did you just have to figure it out?

Gordon: I think that the cook and the butler both helped in that. The things that I had learned and the things that I did at home were not things that they were doing down there and sometimes I would be quite embarrassed because I didn't know that they didn't know, and I had to, by experience, find that out and then I had to talk to them afterwards because I would be pretty embarrassed.

Brower: Can you remember specifically?

Gordon: Yes, I remember one case where the supply was running out or it needed to be replaced and the cook--why I don't know--came in with a great big tray that she had taken out of the oven; she just brought the tray in onto the table instead of waiting. The butler would have put it on silver trays and brought it in but she didn't wait for him. She came in with her apron on and everything else

Gordon: and I mean it was a great big tray. It would fill a great big oven shelf and she walked in and brought it in. I didn't say anything to her, but I was a wee bit embarrassed. But evidently she had done it before and no one had ever said anything.

Brower: Do I remember that Mrs. Warren gave you good advice for a governor's wife?

Gordon: Oh, yes, she was lovely. I was so pleased. (I had written about it to Elise and Elise later showed me the letter I had written to her and it refreshed my mind.) When I got to Washington on our way down to the Islands, Nina Warren called me and said, "Elizabeth, I want to talk to you and see if I can help give you some pointers. I'll send a car over for you." So she sent a car over for me and we had lunch together. I think one of the girls had lunch with us also. It wasn't Virginia--I'm trying to think. It was Honey Bear who had lunch with us. But after lunch we went to Mrs. Warren's room and she told me certain things. You do not have to say yes to every invitation. Another thing, if they call and want to talk to Walter on the phone, you can say that he's not available. You don't have to say he can't talk or anything like that; all you say is he's not available.

Brower: No explanation is required?

Gordon: You do not have to explain and you do not have to accept every invitation.

Brower: That's good advice.

Gordon: That was very helpful, and not to have to call him to the telephone every time the phone rings, especially after he's gone to his room away from the office.

Brower: When you arrived in the Virgin Islands you came by plane. There was a group to receive you, I suppose?

Gordon: Yes, there was a waiting line when we got off the plane and there was a question mark in Walter's eyes [laughs] and a question mark in my eyes as we stepped off the plane, clearly shown in pictures taken on our arrival. One of the gentlemen afterwards told us about how he watched us when we got off and how he said his heart went out to us. [laughter] He said, "My heart went out to you," because he knew what we were running into.

Brower: What did you run into--immediately?

Gordon: We thought everything was just lovely until, bit by bit--it wouldn't be done personally. It would come in the paper, little bites in the paper that would hurt. But I guess that happens to

Gordon: anyone in public office because I remember Chief Justice Warren talking about Mrs. Warren getting so upset because of signs--"Recall Warren"--just bitter signboards that she had to pass and it disturbed her but it didn't bother him. He could pass over it.

Brower: Was that true in your relationship? Did you mind more than Walter Gordon did?

Gordon: Oh, I'm sure, because I wouldn't say anything but I would be so hurt inside and he didn't do too much complaining out loud. If he had that would have helped me because I could say, "Well, that's right." He didn't say too much out loud so I wouldn't say out loud what I was feeling because I didn't want him to hurt any more.

Brower: Were all the newspapers hostile?

Gordon: Oh, no. There was just a certain group that was anti, and we learned later they'd be anti about anything. I mean it was just their nature, and some of those were heads of departments. I know one in particular who was a head of one of the departments (I won't name which one because you'd know exactly who he was). He was talking to me and saying something about who belongs to the Unity Party and I asked him, "Well, is that person a member of the Unity Party?" (The Unity Party didn't mean a thing to me.) He said, "No." I said, "Can anyone belong to the Unity Party?" He said, "Only if they follow the party line." So, of course, that opened a great big book for me.

Brower: So the Unity Party was the opposition party?

Gordon: Yes, the others were the Republicans and Democrats.

Brower: What was the composition of the Unity Party? I know there was a French group that lived on the islands that seemed to be fairly critical of everything.

Gordon: The French group were not very vocal.

Brower: They weren't? They weren't identified with the Unity Party particularly?

Gordon: No, no. In fact, I have a feeling they probably were members of all three parties. [tape interruption: telephone rings]

Brower: Did the various political parties divide along racial lines at all?

Gordon: I don't believe they did. I couldn't say that. I know definitely that the Republicans and the Democrats were very definitely racially mixed. But the Unity Party, whether they held out against other than Negroes I don't know.

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Brower: When the tape went off you were just getting into the Unity Party. That was the party that was most hostile.

Gordon: Yes, they were most hostile maybe to any governor coming in, to anyone in position maybe. I don't know. Probably to anyone in position and authority, unless it was one of their members.

Brower: As I remember, there were a few old island families that had a lot of power in the islands. Were they part of the Unity Party? There were the Paiewonskys, for example.

Gordon: I don't believe they were, but they were conscious of the Unity Party. They probably knew how to get along with them or handle them.

Brower: Would you tell the story of the legislation that the Unity Party was opposing, a bill that they were opposing, and how it was passed?

Gordon: [laughs] How they whipped them! What happened was they knew they had so much opposition they were afraid they weren't going to get the opportunity of killing the bill. For that reason they had decided they would not have a quorum and they left in a body at the time it was to be voted on. They stood up and left in a body (or eased out the door I'll say), and planned to get on a boat and go on to St. John.

Brower: Thereby leaving the bill—

Gordon: Lacking a quorum--except one of their members didn't get the message and he was still sitting and he hadn't made it to the door when the call for the vote [came] so he wasn't allowed to leave the room and he had to stay there and they put it to a vote.

Brower: Of course, the bill passed.

Gordon: Of course. He was caught just before he could get out the door. I forget what they call the person who is in charge.

Brower: The sergeant-at-arms?

Gordon: Yes. Once they had called for the vote, he wasn't allowed to leave.

Brower: That's a marvelous story.

Brower: How was the hostility against Walter Gordon's administration expressed?

Gordon: In the paper mostly. In the paper they would do it. Then they did have illustrations that were--you saw articles that would deviate maybe from the truth, the real truth. They gathered once I know to march on the governor's house. They did it against the governor previous to Walter, and then they did it with Walter. They sent a notice to Walter telling him that they were marching on Government House and wanted to see him. Walter had an engagement that night. I think it was the Bar Association [that] was meeting and [I don't know] whether he was speaking or what, but at any rate he didn't wait to see them. But someone met the man and let him read his message to him. The chief of police was the one who stayed on duty and he took us up to the meeting of the Bar Association, which was a dinner meeting at a hotel. He had the Government House covered and had it covered that night. He didn't go off duty (which the chief of police does but he didn't), and he took over himself.

Brower: So the relation with the local police was a friendly one?

Gordon: Oh, yes, you could count on them, definitely—at that time, because the man that was in charge was definitely not a Unity Party person. Maybe that didn't hold all of the time, I don't know, but I know that he definitely was very conscious of—

Brower: Was this distressing to you? You never really had come into the public eye before had you?

Gordon: Well, I really worried more for Walter than for myself.

Brower: He was the target?

Gordon: He was the one that I was worried about. But those that were with us were so definitely with us that it made it easy.

Brower: I'd like to talk about those people, the friends that you made in the islands and the kind of support that you got from them when you first came. The people in the office, the staff people, were very helpful, weren't they?

Gordon: They were. The person, I guess, who helped the most was the man we had met in the receiving line when we arrived, who was the government secretary. They let him stay on even though the other governor left. They allowed, or asked, the government secretary to remain and he accepted to remain.

Brower: Now, who would have the power to ask him? The Department of Interior?

Gordon: Yes, they would probably make the suggestion and it would come from the president to ask him to stay.

Brower: What was his name?

Gordon: His name was Charles Claunch.

Brower: Did they meet you when you got off the plane?

Gordon: Yes, when we got off the plane. Oh, before we got off the plane at St. Thomas, I didn't tell you, we landed in Puerto Rico. When we landed in Puerto Rico the governor of Puerto Rico had a military gentleman at the plane to escort us to a reception that he was having for the Queen of the Netherlands whom he was expecting. Since we were passing through he wanted us to come and we went to this reception. There was also [Douglas] McKay, Secretary of the Interior, and the assistant secretary, Tony Lausi, was there too.

Brower: I can't imagine getting to the end of a flight and then discovering that I had to go off to a reception for a queen! It must have been a hard introduction.

Gordon: She wasn't there and we didn't wait for her to get there. She was due but she wasn't there yet. We had to leave because they were waiting for us on St. Thomas. When we got off there was this reception line at the plane.

Brower: On St. Thomas?

Gordon: On St. Thomas. That was nice to me.

Brower: Now, is Charlotte Amalie on St. Thomas?

Gordon: Yes. At the end of that line, when we got to Government House, Mary Claunch and Charles had set up this dinner party for us. We became so close, and it started that night, the night we arrived.

Brower: That must have helped a great deal in a new situation.

Gordon: Oh, to have someone, because we knew no one on that island--except for this: When we were in Washington we got a letter that was sent to the Department of Interior (because he didn't know where we were staying in Washington) and we got it. The writer was in the Virgin Islands and he said, "After you finish with all the formal receptions, we would like you to have a quiet evening with us." Then he enclosed a clipping and a letter, which was how he knew we were coming down there, and the letter was from General Doolittle and he had enclosed the clipping of Walter being appointed governor

Gordon: and he had written to Major Humphrey and told him that he'd like him to meet us. It was on the strength of that that he had sent us this letter to save him a night the first time we were free. He also asked us to return that letter that General Doolittle had written to him. We learned later that General Doolittle used to go down to the islands and used to stay with them.

Brower: The man's name was Humphrey?

Gordon: Yes. I can't give him a first name.

Brower: It must have been very nice to get an invitation like that, just a friendly one.

Gordon: "After everything is over we can both have a quiet evening." And we did. During the inaugural parade we had made a slow turn and he was standing on a little high elevation and he waved and said, "I'm the one that wrote you, I'm the one that wrote you!" [laughter] "I'm the one that sent you the letter from Doolittle." But we did have a lovely, quiet evening with them, but it was not lovely because it was so sad. We had just heard over the air that Vollmer had committed suicide, and that was a shock that we had to have that night.

Brower: You had seen Vollmer just before you left had you not?

Gordon: We went by to tell him good-bye. When we went to him I'll never forget because of the fact he had to move his chair and sit close to Walter because he said he was hard of hearing, he couldn't hear. He fixed a drink for Walter and he said, "You see, I don't need a shaker," because his hands were shaking. But he said (the thing I remembered so well) "Of the ten million, they picked the right one." At that time, there were supposedly ten million Negroes in the United States and for him to make that remark I thought was just like him.

Brower: For the governor of the Virgin Islands?

Gordon: Yes—"They picked the right one." He didn't say governor or anything, he didn't use any name, but "out of the ten million they picked the right one."

Brower: That was the last time you saw him?

Gordon: That was the last time we saw him. Then to hear that, that came afterwards.

Brower: That must have shattered that first evening.

Gordon: Yes, it did, but the Humphreys were very lovely to us all the time. They were very nice.

Brower: Tell me about some of the other friends you had on the islands.

Gordon: Well, when I think about Humphrey I think about other military and one of the military would have an Army-Navy game party. No one down there knew much about football. That wasn't one of their real big sports.

Brower: Did they play soccer?

Gordon: Yes, and they played tennis and baseball but not too much [football]. It was too warm, I guess, to do much moving around. I guess that's the reason. But he would have a party the day of the Army-Navy game. We would go to his house. He would send an invitation and his invitation was so unique because it would read like this: [reads] "The arch rivals, the football team representing the Naval Academy and the Military Academy, will meet in deadly combat on the 2nd of December 1967 at Manpoo Stadium." Manpoo was his house and he called it Manpoo Stadium! [continues reading] "Tickets will be available at the stadium one-half hour before game time. Game starts at 14:00 hours. You and any military guest are cordially invited to attend. No likker, beer or peanuts will be bootlegged into the stadium as Perry Mason is expected as guest of honor. Respectfully, John H. Jewett, stadium janitor." Now, Jewett is the man who owned this mansion and that's where we had it. Yes, that's Manpoo [showing picture].

Brower: Oh, that was Manpoo Stadium.

Gordon: Yes, that's Manpoo Stadium. [laughs]

Brower: Was he a nondrinker?

Gordon: Oh, no, it wasn't that. No, no, no. They served drinks. He was just being funny. Because they always had a luncheon, but I don't know what hour.

Brower: Was this just for the men?

Gordon: Oh, no, ladies and men. Oh, no, and it wasn't very large, but they were mostly military people who were there.

Brower: Things like that must have been fun.

Gordon: Oh, it was fun. But I was looking at this card today and it's so beautiful and I thought to myself, "My word, how on earth did they ever get it done?" And the cost of it. That's their note paper with a picture of their house.

Brower: On the staff, were there other people beside the Claunches who were friendly and became friends? The Merwins were on the staff, weren't they?

Gordon: Not at that time. [John] Merwin was in the senate. He lived on St. Croix but he was a member of the senate and that's how we knew him. He was lovely from the time we first saw him. He was one of the first to send a telegram of congratulation, before we left California. He was separated from his wife when we first knew him. Later, after he became governor, he married the lady who had been Walter's secretary. Walter's first secretary had been removed for some reason, and Dadja became his secretary and she was just lovely. She was just marvelous. She had been married to an American officer and he was killed in the war, but she was just lovely. Later on, I guess that's where John met her.

Brower: Do you mean in Walter Gordon's office?

Gordon: I guess that's where he met her. I don't know that but that's where I just assumed he met her.

Brower: She became Mrs. Merwin after that?

Gordon: Yes, but she didn't become Mrs. Merwin until after he was governor. John Merwin was government secretary while Walter was still governor. When Walter retired from the governorship, he was named governor.

Brower: Oh, I see. So at the time she was Walter Gordon's secretary she was Dadja Something-else.

Gordon: Yes, what was her last name? I just knew her by Dadja.

Brower: She must also have been a resident of the island?

Gordon: Not before. She came from Washington. She evidently got her appointment through Washington. I think they named the earlier secretary the same way. I do know that she was named from Washington.

Brower: So there was the official social life and there was the pleasant social life that you and Walter Gordon had just with friends.

Gordon: Well, we could separate that. We could keep that kind of separate which made it nice. Of course, with Mary and Charlie that was just a place to go when everything needed a little arm-testing. [laughter] I always think about the time that Walter accepted a resignation. Didn't I tell that before?

Brower: Not on tape you didn't.

Gordon: I thought I had said that. Well, at any rate, the gentleman came in and had given his resignation.

Brower: He was the head of one of the departments?

Gordon: Yes.

Brower: He was in the habit of doing this, was he not?

Gordon: Well, we didn't know that. Walter never functioned in any place where people sent in their resignations and did not mean it. So when he sent it to Walter, Walter accepted it. When Walter told Charlie Claunch what had happened Charlie just howled because Charlie had been there before Walter and he knew this was a pattern. So Charlie said, "You weren't supposed to accept it!" And immediately he got on the phone and called Mary and then Walter called me and said, "We're going to Charlie's tonight for dinner." So we went out to Charlie's for dinner and evidently Charlie had told Mary what had happened. We laughed when we got there. She said, "And Walter accepted the resignation!" She knew, because Charlie had told her, how many times he had put in his resignation. The next day I told her on the telephone when I talked to her, "Mary, I've never seen a ballerina kick as high as you kicked last night!" [laughter]

Brower: I gather nobody cared terribly to keep this man?

Gordon: Well, he wanted to run things one way I guess; he's the one that had told me that the Unity Party only took those who followed the party line.

Brower: So he was a Unity Party member?

Gordon: Evidently something had gone wrong and he was putting in his resignation.

Brower: The dinner party turned out to be a celebration, didn't it?

Gordon: [laughter] It really was! But that happened often--Mary, if she had pot roast (she cooked a delicious pot roast), or Charlie would call us to come over for dinner. It was so delightful to have privacy.

Brower: What about your own dining table? Was it a good cook you had?

Gordon: Yes, I thought she was good. There were things that they had down there that I wasn't familiar with, but she knew how to handle it.

Brower: What plans did Walter Gordon have when he came to the islands?

Gordon: His first priority was that they should be allowed to elect their own governor. His second was to take care of the water problem. The water was a concern because they had no water supply except the rain and if the rains did not come, then they had to bring water in by boat and the Navy was called upon to do that. They'd bring it from Puerto Rico. When the Navy got kind of provoked about having to come and bring the water, Walter bought a tug to bring water over from Puerto Rico. (They wouldn't like it if I called it a boat. [laughter] The captain of the Danmark when I used the word in reference to the Danmark straightened his big shoulders up and said, "It's a ship.")

Admiral Strauss came down aboard the aircraft carrier Leyte. His wife was with him and she had us aboard the Leyte for lunch. During lunch Walter was talking with him, I guess, about the water shortage, or Admiral Strauss knew about it anyway through the Navy, and he suggested a pipeline from Puerto Rico to the Virgin Islands. It was rather costly.

Brower: Did that ever materialize?

Gordon: No, because what happened was they installed a desalting system, and that was the first thing that they did after they had to supply their own tanks. The only water the islanders stored was from the catchments and into cisterns all over the island, so that if they had a shortage or if they needed a supply for public services they got it from the cisterns. But the rule for building was that you had to have a cistern built with every house, so you could build a cistern as large as you wanted or as large as you could afford. When your cistern went dry, then you had to depend upon the public water supply and get it from there. But after they installed the desalination plants the problem was ended as far as having to haul water by boat from Puerto Rico.

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Brower: Why didn't they have seafood in the Virgin Islands?

Gordon: I don't know. Most of the food that I got that was home food would be brought in, shipped in from the states. Now, that surprised me but that is where you got it. I mean a supermarket was just something you didn't see.

Brower: Do you suppose that the poorer people--

Gordon: I don't remember seeing a bakery as such, but I learned about Morton's Donuts down there. I also learned about rum babas; I thought rum babas must come from some place close to the island but they were brought down from New York.

Brower: In cans?

Gordon: I read the can after I came home. I happened to be up at Hink's and I saw rum babas and they were in a can. They're little round balls [gesturing]. That's a rum baba. I found out that they were made in Salinas, California.

Brower: Oh, really? You had an island dessert though that was an island dessert. It was described by Mr. Schottland. It was Tia Maria...

Gordon: Tia Maria is a drink, a liqueur.

Brower: Yes, it is but he said it was poured over ice cream.

Gordon: Well, it could be.

Brower: Mr. Schottland still remembers it.

Gordon: A Tia Maria? A Tia Maria is really a coffee liqueur.

Brower: Well, it was Tia Maria poured over some kind of ice cream and it is a dessert that Mr. Schottland still remembers and uses. But you don't remember that?

Gordon: I don't remember. But I do remember one time, and I don't know who I was entertaining at dinner that night, but that was a big blunder that happened out in the open! I wanted to do a flaming something and I had simply told Raymond [the butler] that this is what I wanted and I thought he knew. What happened was that instead of pouring the liquor on the pudding, or whatever it was that I was to serve or I was to cut and then light, he didn't do that. He had it all in one little container and struck a match and lit it.

Brower: Did you have an explosion?

Gordon: It didn't explode, but I was trying to pour it out onto what it was supposed to be on and I couldn't. I had to just tablespoon it out [laughs] and let him pass it, but he didn't know, or maybe that's how he had always been doing it. I don't know.

Brower: On these private social evenings you never played bridge in the Virgin Islands?

Gordon: We never once played bridge.

Brower: Although it was a large part of your life in this country?

Gordon: Yes, but it was not there. When we first arrived, a lady called, and I had fresh in my mind what Nina Warren had said.

Brower: "You don't have to accept every invitation."

Gordon: She called up and said, "How about coming over and playing some bridge? Shall we play some bridge? We used to play with the Alexanders all the time. We used to play with them. How about us playing some bridge?" But I "no thank you"d it—you know, saying that we were too busy and didn't have time and it rested that way. I found out afterwards that was a very good move [laughs] because what would have developed would have been how much information they could have acquired and they would use it to their own advantage.

Brower: You must have sensed that.

Gordon: No, though I was very glad that I had made that decision.

Brower: Speaking of information and getting information, you told me your house was under close surveillance all the time?

Gordon: Always. What happened would be that if the phone rang on my floor and I went to answer the phone, immediately the maid came to the area where the phone was and began polishing the door knob there, and it happened so often that I was conscious of it. I never said anything, but I was conscious of it. Then I found out there was a phone on the second floor and you could take the phone off the hook on the second floor and hear what conversation was going on on the upper floor.

Brower: And that did happen?

Gordon: Well, I'm sure it did, because of what happened. A gentleman phoned asking me to work with the March of Dimes and I said that I would love to, but I'd have to be at the closing as well as at the beginning of the drive and I was not sure I could be because I thought we might have to go to Washington in January. Later Walter came upstairs and said, "Did you tell anybody we were going to Washington?" [laughs]

Brower: Was this the same evening?

Gordon: The same day. My phone call was in the morning, and it was 12:00 noon when Walter came upstairs for lunch. He said, "Ottley came into my office this morning and said 'I understand you're going to Washington.' Who did you tell I was going to Washington?" I had just said over the telephone that we might not be here.

Brower: Who was Ottley?

Gordon: He was head of Unity Party.

Brower: Did you ever know who in the household was doing this?

Gordon: All of them had a chance to hear and would evidently report to somebody and we judged it was to the Unity Party; here was Ottley right away so evidently he got the information or someone in the Unity Party gave it to him.

Brower: With this exception they were apparently a loyal and good staff, the servants you had?

Gordon: The staff itself?

Brower: The servants you had in the house, the domestic servants.

Gordon: Well, as far as I know. I never questioned it. I don't even know whether they belonged to the Unity Party or where they belonged. That never came up.

But what did come up was the fact that a gentleman who was in charge of one of the public utilities on the island and because of this also had connections, in Washington happened to be in the main office when a phone call came through for Government House. While he was there talking to the manager of the telephone system a phone call came in to him telling him that a call was coming in from Washington to Government House. He immediately picked up the phone and listened the entire time to the whole conversation. The gentleman who was standing there waiting to talk to him came and told Walter and he said, "I'm having your phone put on a direct wire to Washington after what I saw and heard today."

Brower: That must have eased things a bit. Walter Gordon didn't finish out his whole term, did he?

Gordon: Well, when you're appointed governor you are appointed not for a definite time but at the--what is it?

Brower: At the pleasure of the Secretary?

Gordon: No, no, of the President, the governor serves at the wish of the President. Now, when a President moves out you probably automatically would move out if he had appointed you, but in our case they appointed Walter to a judgeship.

Brower: I thought he might have himself requested that he leave the governorship?

Gordon: No, no, because I had always hoped (and I thought he was thinking too) that we would be coming home right after the governorship, because when we left, we left with the idea that probably it

Gordon: wouldn't last any longer than Eisenhower's term. Eisenhower was re-elected, so then that made it go over, but we thought when we left that maybe it would only be for a short time. I didn't even do anything about my house. I thought it might only be a year and that would be it.

Brower: So with Kennedy's becoming president and a new party in power I guess the assumption was that you would not continue under the new administration. But in Walter Gordon's case he did go on but in a different office, in the office of judge.

Gordon: But Eisenhower was the one who had appointed him originally to the judgeship. And at the time that he appointed him, Walt was surprised because he was thinking that we would be coming on home, after finishing out the term as governor.

Brower: So what Eisenhower must have done was as the end of his administration approached, he must have made the appointment.

Gordon: No, he had two more years. What happened was there was a vacancy in the judgeship. The man who held the judgeship had retired, or his time ran out; I think he retired. When that happened, when they asked Walt to take it, they told him the reason they were asking him [was] that they felt he would make a good judge, that he was a good choice, but in addition to that, they were being pressured by fifty-two others who wanted it, and that's why it would ease it for them if he'd take it. It would make it easier.

Brower: Was it an office he liked? Did he prefer it to being governor?

Gordon: Oh, it was much easier than being governor. He didn't mind it a bit.

Brower: He had, after all, a lot of legal background to make it easier.

Gordon: When he was home he had thought in terms of maybe being a judge eventually, that this was what would be. He never dreamed of a governorship, but he did think maybe he would be a judge. The only thing I wished [was] that it had been here instead of in the Virgin Islands. It would have been closer to the children and we would have had a chance to see them [the grandchildren] grow, and you missed that. [pause] You missed that.

Brower: What do you feel was your contribution to your husband's career? How did you help?

Gordon: I don't know how I helped.

Brower: Of course, I know from listening to you, I know you helped by not complaining and adapting to the new situations as they came up.

Gordon: I think that this was the best that I could do because of the fact that, especially there [in the Virgin Islands], they accused me of a lot of things, mainly that he was listening to me on decisions he made--which was not true--but they would say that. Even when he got the judgeship they'd call me "Mrs. Judge," which was unkind. But I feel honest in saying that I did keep my mouth shut and I know he must have appreciated it because of the fact that whenever I expressed myself at a decision that he had made and I hugged him for it, he'd be so tickled that he had made this decision that I went along with.

Brower: But not before.

Gordon: No, no, without me saying one word.

Brower: Did he discuss cases with you and things that concerned you?

Gordon: No, very little. And never with a question.

Brower: He never sought your advice on any issue?

Gordon: Never wondering should I do this or should I do that. There was never that. He would just come out and tell both sides, especially something that was going on in the legislature. (This was the one that he hugged me about where they came out with something and he came out with something else. I don't know whether it was the legislature or what, but at any rate I remember this happened and I was glad he made the decision that he made.

Brower: For me it would be very hard to hold my tongue, but you did. You just didn't allow yourself to--

Gordon: I had my views.

Brower: But you didn't thrust them on him?

Gordon: I didn't like them accusing him of me making the decision. I didn't like that.

Brower: Especially when it wasn't true. But you must have been an enormous comfort and help. Picking up and going, you never questioned that did you?

Gordon: What?

Brower: Picking up and going to the Virgin Islands.

Gordon: Oh, that was a story! [laughs]

Brower: Oh, really? You didn't do it very gladly then?

Gordon: I don't know that I was so nice about that because of the fact that when I first knew about his being offered the job of governorship, he called me on the telephone from San Luis Obispo, because that's where the board was meeting, and he told me, "I've had a call from McGee and he wants to know if I want to be governor of the Virgin Islands." I didn't say anything. I just listened. "He said if I didn't want it, he'd take it." (McGee was the head of the prisons in Sacramento.) I still didn't say anything yet. He said, "You don't sound very enthusiastic!" [laughter]

Brower: Were you?

Gordon: I said, "I don't know enough about it." He said, "I have to call Washington and I'll be home tomorrow." He was coming in the next day and I was leaving the next day for Asilomar. So we didn't get to see each other when he first came in because when I'd go to Asilomar I'd stay all night. Our meetings were all day and the next night and we stayed all night. So when we got together and talked then he still had another place to go. He had to go up and give a talk, in Nevada, I think.

Brower: So you never had any chance to get together and talk about this.

Gordon: To really talk about the yays and the nays. He said, "I have to give them some kind of an answer." I said, "Well, that's up to you." "In the meantime," he said, "it's supposed to be kept quiet." There was no trouble for me of keeping it quiet. But I got a call from a newsman and he said, "Is Mr. Gordon there?" I said, "No, he's not." He said, "Do you know when he'll be home?" I said, "No, I don't." He said, "I understand he's been asked to be governor of the Virgin Islands." [I said], "I don't know about it." "When will he be back?" I said, "He'll be back probably Sunday." [He said], "Well, where is he now?" I said, "He's away on a lecture trip."

Do you know, some way or other they found out where he was. They got to him and they got everything out of him!

Brower: Nothing out of you, not a word! [laughter]

Gordon: They just got him and I think what they did, they told him they had talked to me and that's how they got it out of him. I think that's how it happened because I saw it in the newspaper. By the time he got home I saw this article in the newspaper and they had gotten the material from him out there. They mentioned the fact that he was up at such and such giving a lecture.

Brower: You hadn't even told them where he was! It's amazing how they get those things.

I suppose the hardest thing about being in the Virgin Islands was being away from the children.

Gordon: That's it. The growing part of the children; the fact that you're just away from them is one thing, but the fact of what you're missing, especially with the little ones, because the little ones get to be big ones so fast, and that's the thing that we missed.

Brower: What sort of vacations did you have?

Gordon: Well, it would be for two weeks or three weeks.

Brower: That's all?

Gordon: Yes.

Brower: The fact that you always came home meant that the opportunity for travel that you otherwise would have had in that area--

Gordon: Yes, I missed that and then even when he got into the judgeship we would have to go to government conferences. We would go to government conferenees and we'd go to judicial conferences. We actually only went to three or two governors' conferences. One was in New Jersey and one that was supposed to have been in Williamsport, Virginia--is it Williamsport?

Brower: Williamsburg?

Gordon: Williamburg, Virginia. Rockefeller wrote to Walter telling him that he would have a place for him [and] not to worry. I guess because he had the picture of the experience he had had in St. Louis.

Brower: That's where the difficulty about the hotel occurred?

Gordon: Yes, in St. Louis. He evidently knew of that experience and he felt Walt was staying away from Virginia [laughs] and he wrote and told him.

Brower: That was very thoughtful.

Gordon: Wasn't that nice? Then we went to the one in Florida, which was lovely. The governor of Florida was really lovely and he went all out.

Brower: Didn't you have a visit in the Virgin Islands from the governor of Georgia?

Gordon: He didn't come to see us directly. There were some Georgians that came to the islands. It wasn't the governor of Georgia. What are you thinking of?

Brower: I thought I remembered that in Walter Gordon's own oral history he speaks of a governor coming and it was a very congenial group. I think the man who subsequently became governor was in this group of Georgians who came and they were chatting--they were a bunch of "Southern boys" together, in a sense.

Gordon: Someone made the comment that this was pretty unusual, and Walter said, "Well, why not? We're all Georgia boys together." This is what Walter said. Walter was using the word "boys" in a little underhanded way, but I'll never forget that. I don't know whether that's the same group or not. But my tongue was a little loose with this group and they were from the South, and I was angry with myself because I didn't mean anything by it. But when the lady took me up on it then I knew I shouldn't have said it. I said, "You can take the Southerner out of the South, but you can't take the South out of the Southerner." I was really referring to Walter as much as I was talking about anybody else! Her stiff reply was, "What's wrong with that?"

Brower: I didn't realize that their wives had come too.

Gordon: What happened in this case, a friend of Charlie's had been with an actor; I can't recall his name, but he was Charlie Claunch's friend who knew this gentleman who was coming down to check for oil. He had his own plane and he was flying him down with his wife and before he got off the ground at home, his wife had told her sister and her sister said she'd come and called another sister and she would come. So they had a full plane by the time they got there.

Brower: Full of all these Georgia ladies who decided to come along too.

Gordon: They were coming too. I think there were two ladies. Anyway, Charlie called Walter to tell him that this fellow was here and he told me and I said, "Well, bring them over at 4:00. That's okay." "They're downtown now," he said "They're downtown shopping." I said, "Well, come on by at 4:00 o'clock. We'll have a cocktail." So they came by and this was when I opened my mouth. I guess the reception room was where they were at the time that I made that remark, but I was thinking about Walter.

Brower: It didn't turn into any great incident though?

Gordon: Oh, no. I laughed afterwards and I'm sure she felt that way. She was able to take it after that, but the gentleman who owned the plane said that any time we came to the states if we'd let him know, he'd have the plane meet us and take us anyplace we wanted to go.

Brower: Wouldn't that have been fun?

Gordon: But I thought, coming from a person who evidently hadn't had all that contact with Negroes, it was a big, big gesture. I wish I knew who that actor was. If I recalled his name you would have known him. But Charlie knew him and he knew Charlie. That's why he looked Charlie up when he came to the islands.

Brower: Perhaps we should talk about when you came back to Berkeley and picked up your life here again.

Gordon: Immediately, of course, you try to pick up with the family. And because I always felt that it's hard for a man to give up doing things and then do nothing I encouraged Walter to go into Rotary (he hadn't been a member before), and then he became a member of the Berkeley City Commons Club, which made another meeting available and made him see friends that he hadn't seen for some time. Then what he actually worked at was the Redevelopment Agency.

Brower: Before we leave the clubs, though, there was the Breakfast Club too, wasn't there?

Gordon: Oh, yes, the Breakfast Club. I didn't want to leave any out! There were those three. I'll think about whether I left out any or not, but I know there were those three. And there was the Commonwealth Club of San Francisco. That was very nice because he had a friend who would take him over to San Francisco. After he came home to Berkeley, he didn't drive his car; I had to drive it. This gentleman, by the name of Rogers, would take him to San Francisco to the Commonwealth Club. Walter had belonged to the Commonwealth Club for years, since 1938.

The Redevelopment Agency was his workshop. [laughs] That was his workshop. Then he was called on jury duty.

Brower: There was the Housing Authority as well as the--

Gordon: I said both; there were two. I forgot. They met--

Brower: That was a very turbulent time for them too because there was the Ocean View housing problem then.

Gordon: The housing and the redevelopment, I think they both came under the same head.

Brower: Did he enjoy that, do you know? Did he enjoy that work?

Gordon: I think he enjoyed working with the people. I think this is the thing that held him up, the people he was working with.

Brower: Because there was a certain amount of harrassment during that time.

Gordon: But I don't think they felt it so. I don't think it touched them. They may have heard it and had it thrown at them, but I don't think it bothered them.

Brower: You were just going on to say he was asked to serve on the Grand Jury.

Gordon: Yes and it was Judge Polsdorffer, who asked him, and she asked him one or two times to swear in aliens. Is that what you do? I don't know.

Brower: Oh, when they are being naturalized?

Gordon: Yes.

Brower: She asked him to preside over that?

Gordon: Yes, to do the--

Brower: The swearing in or whatever it is when they take the oath of citizenship.

Gordon: Yes, he did that a couple of times and then he served on the Grand Jury.

Brower: The Grand Jury came quite late. When he was coming home from a briefing there was when he first became ill.

Gordon: When he first had this problem about eyes, and he never went back after that. I'll never forget when he came to the door and he said he'd gotton on the wrong bus and he said, "I thought I was getting on a 51"--which comes right down here.

Brower: Had he ever had trouble with his eyes before this time?

Gordon: When he got his first glasses he went to Dr. Albert Boles. (Walter was coaching at Cal when Boles came as an assistant coach under Andy Smith.) He was our eye doctor--he was our eye, ear, nose, and throat man, and he was the only one we ever went to.

Brower: Where was his office?

Gordon: Down in Oakland, and his wife worked with him a while too.

Brower: How long a period of good health did Walter Gordon enjoy after you got back to Berkeley before he became really too ill to enjoy life, or at least to do the things he had been doing?

Gordon: We came back the Christmas of '68. So he had '69 and '70 and '71. [pause] What could have happened, and I don't know whether or not that was the beginning, was we were at Rotary at Christmas, and he collapsed. They had him taken to the hospital and he stayed, I guess he stayed there for two weeks. Now, they didn't label it. Whether it was a slight stroke or not I don't know, but I know I rode in the ambulance with him. They kept him in intensive care. He was under the heart doctor, Dr. Pate Thompson. His father at one time was on the police force with Walter. But he seemed to get out of that and be okay after that; he never complained.

Brower: It must have startled you very much. You were there with him?

Gordon: It was hard coming back here alone. I was driving the car, of course. He wasn't driving. But he picked up after that and he went on with what he was doing, until he lost his sight and he lost his sight in '74 in June--the end of May or June of '74 was when he lost his sight. Then he had to give up.

Brower: That must have been awfully hard for him.

Gordon: But yet he never complained. He didn't complain. What would happen would be, I think sometimes he would get so down he'd just want to throw everything. Once I called the doctor and told him and I think the doctor prescribed a sedative for him, and he would take that--but he never complained actually. I think he must have held it all inside and then he let it out. But I don't remember him ever complaining.

The thing was that anything that would come on the air (this is what I remember) he could hear, which was good, so I could pick up and ask, "What about So-and-So? Wasn't that So-and-So?"

Brower: Things that you knew he heard?

Gordon: Yes. I took him to hear Ted Kennedy, Charter Day 1975, and I wanted to hear him comment pro and con about it, but he didn't say much until the next day. The next day they gave the whole speech that Kennedy gave and Walt commented on it all the way through--those things that he agreed with him on and those things he disagreed with him on--the whole speech.

Brower: He had taken it all in and was perfectly alert.

Gordon: I didn't know whether he heard him out there, although the acoustics were marvelous where we were sitting. You could hear as clear as a bell, but he never commented until the next day when it came on T.V. This was the reminder and then he came out with everything. He and Hutchinson were laughing about something up there. I don't know what the joke was. I guess I heard it too, but I think he must have been teasing Hutchinson about helping him instead of him helping Hutchinson because Hutchinson had just had his ninetieth birthday party. We hadn't gone. We'd been invited but we didn't go. But I think he was teasing him about him helping him to his car. Hutchinson was helping Walter to his car. We didn't go in the procession that day.

Brower: The academic procession?

Gordon: Well, he always used to go in the procession on Charter Day but that time he didn't. But I was glad I took him. I was very glad that I took him, and especially after he really heard it because I wondered, "Am I doing this just for myself?" because I wanted to go. I was anxious to hear Ted Kennedy and I thought maybe I was selfish to take him, but I wouldn't have gone without him. I wanted to take him up to meet Ted Kennedy because I wanted him to know that we knew people in the islands that the Kennedys knew, and I thought maybe it would bring it back to him. But I didn't get to go.

The gentleman who lived next to us in one of the houses that we moved into in the Virgin Islands, already had planned a neighborhood party when he heard we were moving in. He called and said, "Aren't you the ones moving in?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Well, we're having a party. Please come." This fellow next door had been either best man or one of the groomsmen in a Kennedy wedding, in John Kennedy's wedding I guess it was. The man who lived next door to us was Kramer, Bob Kramer and his wife. Bob was one of the men in the [wedding] party for John Kennedy and when John was assassinated they went up to the funeral. He had a silver cigarette box, the groom's present to his groomsmen. I never forgot it. It was a good-sized box.

Brower: I forgot that you were there in the islands at the time of the assassination.

Gordon: We were, and the Kramers left. They left and went up to the funeral. I felt so sorry for them.

Brower: How was the news received there in the islands? As it was everywhere, I suppose.

Gordon: Oh yes. It was a shock, just a shock.

Brower: Before we end, I would like to go way back to the campus days because you told me once two very nice Walter Gordon-President Wheeler stories, and I'd like to get those on tapes if I could.

Gordon: Do you mean the one when he came to him after the Oregon State game?

Brower: Yes.

Gordon: I saw that Oregon State game and I was mortified! [laughs]

Brower: I guess you were harsher than President Wheeler was about that episode!

Gordon: [laughs] I was really horrified when I saw this fist go out.

Brower: Tell us how it happened. Whose fist went out?

Gordon: [more laughter] I think it was Walter's fist that went out. You couldn't hide it because it was so straight. Afterwards I wondered what had happened and he told me that the Oregon man had just called him a name and [laughs] he didn't take it. After he was in the lockerroom lying down, I guess getting a rub or what have you, then Benjamin Ide Wheeler came in and he said, "What happened, Gordon?" And Walter told him, "Well, he called me a name I didn't like." Wheeler said, "I guess I would have done the same thing."

Brower: And that was the end of the episode?

Gordon: That was the end of the episode.

Brower: No punishment or anything?

Gordon: Oh no, oh no. I don't remember that he was put out of the game at the time it happened; ordinarily if you do something like that you get thrown out of the game.

Brower: And you saw this from the stands?

Gordon: I saw it, yes! I was there, and with my father. That's what made me embarrassed. If I wasn't with my father I would have taken it, but I was with my father. I thought he was going to be kicked out.

Brower: This was before you were married?

Gordon: Oh, yes. He was through playing football when we married.

Brower: That's one of the good Wheeler stories. The other is the time Walter Gordon was a policeman.

Gordon: Yes. At first he was down in West Berkeley and then they moved him up to campus. I don't know whether they moved him up permanently or not, but anyway he was up at the campus and these boys were rolling beer (a barrel of beer) across campus.

Brower: This was during prohibition, I suppose.

Gordon: Yes, I'm sure it was. Well, it was prohibition for campus anyhow.

Brower: Yes, of course.

Gordon: So Walt went to Wheeler and said that he saw these boys rolling a barrel of beer across the campus and he said, "I don't like to see that and I don't like to make an arrest on that." Wheeler told him, "Well, just leave them alone, Gordon. By the time they get to the other side there will be no beer." [laughter]

Brower: Those are two great stories!

Gordon: "When they reach the other side of campus there will be no beer." President Wheeler was wonderful. Just to see him on that horse!

Brower: Yes, when people talk about the California spirit they all mention Wheeler; apparently he was sort of the father of the "indefinable California spirit."

Gordon: Yes, it's the way he rode that horse.

Brower: Then you saw him too.

Gordon: Oh, yes.

Brower: Can you think of other things you would especially like to talk about that we haven't touched upon about your life with Walter Gordon or anything at all?

Gordon: I don't know. What happens, if I see a picture then a million things come back.

Brower: I wish we had time to talk about all those million things! It has been lovely for me to have this opportunity to talk with you, Mrs. Gordon. Thank you very much.

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AN INTERVIEW WITH WALTER GORDON, JR.

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INTERVIEW HISTORY

Place: The large, attractively furnished and landscaped, Moraga home of Walter Gordon, Jr.

Date: May 6, 1979

Conduct of Interview: The interview, which lasted about two hours, took place on a Sunday morning, culminating months of attempts to find a hole in Mr. Gordon's very heavy schedule. Once the time of the interview arrived, there was no suggestion of haste or divided attention. Walter Gordon, Jr., is a large, apparently relaxed man, probably much like his father, and he devoted himself seriously to the business at hand. He has the reticence of all his family members I have met, but he answered questions fully and thoughtfully. His wife, Joyce Gordon, joined us toward the end of the interview and assisted him once or twice in recalling some incident.

The transcript was sent to Mr. Gordon and returned with only minor corrections, but with the request that five pages be omitted. These pages dealt with the Adult Authority, which he serves as a staff member. The omission is an unfortunate one, I think; the material described the working of the Authority and shed light on its mechanisms in his father's time as well as in his own. There was no criticism of the board in his account nor any material that could be regarded as sensitive, and I could see no reason for its elimination.

The interview is particularly valuable for the evidence it presents that Walter Gordon, Sr.'s unimbittered view of racial injustice was a genuine one, held in his own home, as well as in public, and that it served his son well, when, as a Northern soldier, he was quartered in Mississippi in World War II. Walter Gordon, Jr., also communicates his sense of the warmth and strength that was his father's heritage from his parents, which has come down to their grandchildren as well.

Anne Brower
Interviewer

10 March 1980
Regional Oral History Office
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University of California at Berkeley

INTERVIEW WITH WALTER GORDON, JR.

[Interview 1: May 6, 1979]##

Brower: You were born in 1921?

Gordon: Correct.

Brower: Your mother told me something and I wonder if you knew it yourself. Did you know that your father used to come home for your 2 A.M. and 6 A.M. feedings?

Gordon: No, he never said anything about that!

Brower: I thought that was a nice story because he was supposed to be afraid of little babies--didn't like to hold them.

Gordon: Yes, he always said that, because he didn't have control--his strength.

Brower: I wanted to ask you what your household was like when you were growing up. I've asked your brother and sister but I suppose it was different for each of you. Did you have your dinners all together?

Gordon: Yes, we always ate together.

Brower: What did you talk about at the dinner table? Do you remember?

Gordon: Oh, a lot of it centered around Daddy and law cases that he would have and what not. He would talk about that, incidents that would come up. There again, Daddy was always a strict disciplinarian so it was always the proper thing, number one, to eat and don't talk, and go into these different things. He puts [it] on your plate. It was just general kind of small talk.

##This symbol indicates that a tape or a segment of a tape has begun or ended. For a guide to the tapes see page 148.

Brower: Of your two parents, who was the disciplinarian--your father or mother or both?

Gordon: No, I think as far as the ground rules went, my Dad was the strict disciplinarian.

Brower: Do your memories go back to when he was in the police department?

Gordon: Some of them. Well, I can remember the times I used to ride with him. If my mother was away, many times he'd put me in the car and I'd be asleep in the car. He'd carry us around. I can remember stopping--in fact, what I always think about in terms of Spenger's is that he used to stop by there and meet Frank Spenger when he would get ready to go out to his boat. He'd always fix the coffee and he and Daddy would sit down and talk and we'd be in the car with him.

Brower: When you say "we" do you mean you and your brother Ed?

Gordon: No, I don't remember Ed so much. It was just me; I could remember that the two of them used to chat and talk just before he'd go out on his boat.

Brower: He'd take the car down there--

Gordon: And stop. In other words, that was part of his beat. So he would just--

Brower: Just stop for a little while, before Mr. Spenger went off on his boat to do his fishing?

Gordon: That's right, he was fishing. But that was early in the morning so he was about the only one who would be up around at that time.

Brower: Did you ever get to go out on the boat?

Gordon: No, never did.

Brower: The other thing I wondered was if you ever got to visit the police department?

Gordon: Yes, we'd go. Most of the time we'd stay outside, but every now and then he'd carry us, or at least I would go with him.

Brower: He was there until 1930, so you would remember it. You were about eight or nine.

Gordon: Yes.

Brower: Did having a father who was a policeman and an All-American football player and all that add to your status at school or was it kind of a problem? How did it work?

Gordon: No, I don't think it was a problem because Daddy always had a tendency to, well, not say that you had to be the same as he. He had certain goals for us as far as going to school and all, but as far as the rest of the students or anybody else at school at that particular time, it didn't present any problems.

Brower: It didn't make you sort of local heroes?

Gordon: No, it didn't.

Brower: I wonder when you ever saw him with a schedule as tight as his was?

Gordon: There was a lot of vacancy as far as contacts with him because it meant when he was doing all of these things that he would naturally many times only take time to come home and eat, but there was a lot of absenteeism.

Brower: As a father?

Gordon: As a father, the fact that he was on the go all the time.

Brower: Ed said something about seeing him after school--you'd go down to practice sessions at Cal.

Gordon: I would, yes. I would go. I guess Ed would go too, but I'd always go. We'd go after school (this was when we were in junior high school) and stay around there and then come home in the evenings when he'd get through.

Brower: So you had that much opportunity to be with him.

Gordon: Yes, we'd have that.

Brower: You'd watch him coaching?

Gordon: Yes, so we got to know quite a few of the students and the players because we were always around.

Brower: That must have been the period of the Lumpy Lions, or was that later?

Gordon: Lumpy Lions came just about in that same area.

Brower: Was that the team you played on?

Gordon: Yes, the Lumpy Lions and the McKevitt Lions. They had two.

Brower: They're now the Volvo people. They didn't have Volvoes here then, did they?

Gordon: That's the father. His son played on the McKevitt Lions and I played on the Lumpy Lions. They were two teams that were sponsored by the Lion's Club. McKevitt, the father, he sponsored the McKevitt Lions and it's his son who is running the Volvo place.

Brower: What did the father do then?

Gordon: If I'm not mistaken I think he had some kind of automobile agency at that time.

Brower: The Lumpy Lions played before the Rose Bowl game once, didn't they?

Gordon: One time, yes.

Borwer: That must have been a great thrill.

Gordon: It was. What they did, they carried both teams together. The team that I was playing on, the Lumpy Lions, was Japanese and the McKevitt Lions were white. So I was the only non-Oriental on the Lumpy Lions. There was one other fellow who came on the Lumpy Lions too by the name of Bayles. He was the only other person besides myself who was non-Japanese.

Brower: Did Ed play on that team too?

Gordon: No, he didn't play.

Brower: When your father was working for the NAACP, did he talk with you at home about the problems that he was looking into and things that he was doing?

Gordon: Yes, he would do that. As far as the discussion on racial discrimination and everything else, I think one of the factors that stuck with me in terms of his relationship with people is that he was more concerned with trying to help people achieve something than to gain status or money or anything like that for himself because he always said that as long as he could make a sufficient income to take care of his family that was the height as far as he was concerned. But he enjoyed it and that's why he was so active with the NAACP. I guess from the time he finished school and had started practice he became active in the NAACP.

Brower: I wondered how that worked. There was a restaurant, for instance, that refused to serve Negroes and there was a clothing store also, and at both those places he managed, with very low-key

Brower: methods, to get the people not to discriminate any more. But wasn't there anger connected with that? I would think there would be so much anger at this kind of injustice.

Gordon: There was with him, but he—I don't know.

Brower: He channeled it?

Gordon: I think he channeled it, but he was able pretty much to control--place controls on--his true feelings. When he was a little younger he would maybe attempt to make a physical threat if necessary, but he just always felt competent enough that he could match or he could equal any person physically as well as mentally. I think he worked on it from that premise, knowing that the physical things was not the answer and that the best method was to work through it.

Brower: But how do you prepare children for a world where they are going to meet that kind of racism? How do you prepare them in their attitude?

Gordon: I think he did. At least I'm just thinking for myself that he always instilled in me, compete with others, whether they're going to be against you or for you or whatever it is, by qualifying yourself first so that you feel confident that you can compete with anybody. Then somehow, I guess, these sort of things start falling into place where the people respect you. He always said, "If they respect you and you're honest and you're sincere"--he didn't believe in phonyism at all—"you can make it and you break through to people that ordinarily would discriminate against you." Plus the fact he always worked from the premise that, one, you have to find out why it is that the person is prejudiced, and if you try to find that first and you work on the idea that [with] a lot of people it's not necessarily built in, but because they don't know any better—they had never had the association with minorities.

Brower: A lack of contact?

Gordon: Yes, then the only ways they could possibly get it [prejudice] would be from the radio or the regular stereotype, not as an ongoing thing where you'd know the person. Now, they may not like it but if they found that you did have qualities that were similar to theirs, you could work from there, and then [with] many of them you could break down these prejudices without going into that thing where "you're different," because people always say that. That isn't the answer—that I'm different from the others--because there are many of us who are black who are different in many respects from other blacks. But I think the

Gordon: main thing he kept pointing out to both Ed and me is that if you want equal treatment then you're going to face prejudice but by the same token you want to be prepared.

Brower: Well, it seems to have worked with all of you certainly. You anticipated, you were ahead of your time, in being able to do the things that you wanted to do successfully and maybe exactly because of that attitude.

Allen Moore once said that your styles differed, yours and your father's, and I wondered how your own style was different.

Gordon: I don't know what he would mean by that. [laughs] I don't know. I couldn't answer. [tape interruption]

Brower: I learned from your brother and sister that you went to Riverside often for your vacations. Would you tell me a little bit about your grandmother and grandfather down there?

Gordon: For me, a lot of things that we could see in my dad and the reasons that he reacted and acted the way he did was built not only on his mother but also on his dad, because both of them had a combination of the same strength. Their dealings with people and the things that we were learning from him, the summer with them just built more and more on his attitudes and everything else as far as direction.

Brower: Your grandfather was a big man?

Gordon: He was a big man and he was a policeman too.

Brower: That's interesting.

Gordon: Yes, he was a policeman and he believed in the right things, plus the fact that Daddy had a lot of the same sort of strengths that he did. He was strict, but yet he was still well liked--even in the position of being a policeman because he was also fair.

Brower: That was certainly true for your father too.

Gordon: It's the same thing with his mother. His mother, my grandmother, was a real sweet person.

Brower: She was a small woman, wasn't she?

Gordon: Not particularly, she wasn't particularly small.

Brower: You had a great grandmother down there too?

Gordon: Yes, I can remember her. That's Grandma Bryant.

Brower: What about the other set of grandparents, the Fishers, in San Francisco. Do you remember going to visit them?

Gordon: True, but they were in the area, the locale with us here, so it wasn't the same. The summers in Riverside actually meant not only that my sister, brother, and I were together, but it also meant that my dad's brother's children were all there too. So it was all of us there during the summer period.

Brower: It must have been a big house, the one in Riverside.

Gordon: It was fairly large.

Brower: Your sister remembers watching you all swim at a swimming pool that was near the house and she would watch you over the fence apparently.

Gordon: She was a lot younger. Well, it used to be the biggest thing that we'd have would be the swimming--all day. And then with my grandfather, the fact that he was on the police force, it meant that his beat was around the house too so that when he would have his midnight supper we'd all be there for that.

Brower: Really, even though it was that late at night?

Gordon: Correct.

Brower: Even the little kids?

Gordon: Yes, see we'd had our meals earlier in the afternoon, but then he would come by at about eight or nine o'clock to have his supper.

Brower: I see, and then you would all join him at that?

Gordon: Yes, join him with that. I think it brought all of us pretty close together, as far as my cousins and all.

Brower: All that leans heavily on the Gordon side and yet the attitudes of the Fishers seem to have fitted very well into your father's philosophy. I think your mother, even as a young woman, did what she wanted to do and she didn't make race a consideration in it, she just went ahead and did what she wanted to do and it usually worked out.

Gordon: Well, I think that was the thing with Daddy. Daddy just knew that prejudice was there but he would only hit it when it would hit him. He didn't go out looking for it. He would always just act as if it wasn't there.

Brower: Did you have an opportunity to meet some of his famous friends like Governor Warren and General Doolittle and people like that?

Gordon: I can remember Doolittle at one time at the house. I guess the one time that I really met Warren was when one of his sons was on the football team with me at Cal. This was when Warren was governor and Warren came to watch us play in Sacramento one time.

Brower: Did your father coach Warren's son?

Gordon: Yes.

Brower: He must have coached you too, of course.

Gordon: Yes, one season, so I had a chance to have contact with him daily at practice.

Brower: Did that mean you were on the Ramblers then; he coached Ramblers, didn't he?

Gordon: Yes, I started off on the Ramblers I guess in my sophomore year.

Brower: You were on varsity?

Gordon: After that. [laughs] But that was always awkward too with Daddy because he would never discuss football with me away from the team--in other words, at home.

Brower: You were just part of the team.

Gordon: Part of the team and that was it. He would give me fine points. But he would watch but not say anything, and this was true even after I was playing with the varsity. He could see me in practice but he was scouting most of the time Cal games were being played, so that the only time he'd see me play was at the big games at Stanford.

Brower: He must have been a very good scout from all I've heard.

Gordon: He was. To me, he was a student of football.

Brower: They said that he was like instant replay.

Gordon: Yes, he had quick mind for spotting a whole field, in comparison to now where they have televisions, they have replays, and they have photos.

Brower: But he had to do it all in his head.

Gordon: He had to do it in his head, and I don't know, I can't do it, where if a play developed he could tell you pretty much what every person did on that particular play. If the ends went down he could tell and he'd pick up on what direction they were coming from, where they cut, which is not easy to do.

Brower: No, it's just amazing. But apparently that's exactly what he did, though when he took your mother along she was supposed to count how many steps a kicker took before he kicked, things like that. So she watched that one thing.

Gordon: Yes, well, he would get back to it. He'd watch one player because that was part of scouting--to evaluate the players either as far as their weak points or their strong points, so he'd move across the line as he would scout and he'd watch a player maybe two or three plays in a row to see what he'd do--to get some evaluation of the person.

Brower: Was he pleased that you were in football? Did he tell you he was pleased?

Gordon: He did after I got older. No, he told me then. He would tell me, "I'm happy you're playing." But he kind of always would say, "You make your own decision about it."

Brower: Well, when you made your own decision to get married he thought you made it too early! [laughter]

Gordon: Right! We remind him of that quite often. I guess the biggest fear he had on that was that I wouldn't finish school. I think that was the strongest thing.

Brower: Ed said that once your marriage was an accomplished fact your parents were as helpful as they could be.

Gordon: They were still watching us and I think as far as I was concerned, and I know it was the same way with Joyce, it gave us all the more reason to make it work. It was based on the fact that "we're going to make it" in spite of their feelings at first. So as things went along--the fact that he saw I was still going to school and Joyce helped the situation by going to work--so it worked out. Then the older I got the more he would say as far as praise; he would kind of leave it open one way or the other in terms of that.

Brower: Only later, when you were older, he was more generous with his praise?

Gordon: Yes.

Brower: You were married just about the time of the war, weren't you?

Gordon: Correct.

Brower: So you hadn't had a chance to do any work other than just go to school.

Gordon: That's right. Well, that was one of the bones of contention too--the fact that the first job I ever had ended up with my getting married. I was working and going to school. I was working full time in the shipyards and going to school full time, and especially right after I got married it wasn't easy then to carry a full load. After I was called into the service I had one year to go to graduate.

Brower: Oh, you hadn't finished school?

Gordon: I hadn't finished school. I joined what they call the Enlisted Reserve Corps at the university and about six months after I was in there they called up all the enlisted reserves.

Brower: Why didn't you go into R.O.T.C.?

Gordon: I was in R.O.T.C. I did the two years. But then I didn't continue and when I tried to get into it for the upper division it was closed. They just had too many applicants.

Brower: By that time the war was really--

Gordon: Yes, it was moving at that time so I couldn't--I could have been exempt because I was working full time in the shipyard. But after I had made the decision to go into the Enlisted Reserve Corps, I pulled out because I would have been classified as something else. I forget what they call it—deferred.

Brower: Deferred because of--?

Gordon: The school and the industry.

Brower: How long was it after your marriage that you were formally in the Army?

Gordon: Let's see, [pause] we got married when I was a sophomore. So I guess we had about a year before I went into the service.

Brower: Then were you able to be together or were you away?

Gordon: I was gone for almost four years. My first assignment was in Mississippi. I went in with the E.R.C. (which is the Enlisted Reserve Corps). I was called up with about 700 out of California

Gordon: at Cal—but the Army was still segregated and they separated me and sent me down to a unit in Mississippi. We didn't really entertain the idea of Joyce going down so we never had the opportunity to be together. I stayed in the states about a year and then I went overseas and I stayed overseas.

Brower: I don't want to dwell all the time on the racial aspect of things, but wasn't it sort of hard to be in Mississippi after having grown up in California?

Gordon: Oh yes, oh yes, but this was universal. It was hard for me as well as others because at that time the Army had the policy of sending the southern blacks to northern states and the northern blacks to the southern states.

Brower: What do you think they thought they were accomplishing by that?

Gordon: I don't know. In fact, nobody's really been able to answer what the ramifications were. I know that they had an awful lot of trouble because--

Brower: Unnecessary trouble, one would think.

Gordon: Yes. In fact, in the nine months that I was down in Mississippi I only went out of camp one time because of not wanting to face the segregation.

Brower: It was certainly no place for Joyce to be with you.

Gordon: That was the thing. There was one occasion--I didn't know whether we were going to be there that much longer, but a family I met in a city in Mississippi (I can't think of the name) about a hundred or some miles from camp, said that they would be willing to have Joyce come down and stay, but it would mean my commuting back and forth.

Brower: And you never knew how long you were going to be there.

Gordon: How long we were going to be there, plus the fact of commuting and I didn't know how Joyce would handle it. The one advantage that we did have in terms of the race thing was that all the black soldiers there were from the north. But it caused conflict. I know several times I wrote home and I said, "I don't even know whether I'm going to get out of Mississippi," because the units were always in trouble fighting the race issue. The men just fought it [prejudice] all the time, not only in camp but also in town. The blacks who were there already were still kept down.

Brower: But they had adjusted to it?

Gordon: Yes, they could adjust to it.

Brower: It seems to me the Army was asking for trouble for itself when it sent northern blacks to southern states and vice versa.

Gordon: It was. I don't know how they resolved that. I've seen excerpts as time went along and in the service, even though the service itself was segregated--

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Gordon: As I grew up, and the older I got, I was able to look at some of the things my Dad had tried to teach me early, and he'd never say too much about it. Then, as he got older, things that he would see in me, he would come out with it and say, "I'm really proud of you for it." [tape interruption]

Brower: You were talking about your father's attidues and the way he came to express them later on.

Gordon: I think it carried through on everything, everything that he did. This is one of the reasons that he enjoyed working with football, with the human aspect of it—working with different personalities and trying to work through them. I think it's the same thing with people with whom he had to associate, for example, on the board [of the Adult Authority], and I experienced some of that too. With the different personalities and the give and take that you have.

Brower: Are there any final thoughts you have about your father that you would like to express? You just did--you spoke of his warmth and how that affected you and I guess other members of your family in their choices.

Gordon: [pause] I think he was a great person as an individual, to me.

Brower: One thing I wanted to ask you, did he seem very, very large to you when you were a little boy?

Gordon: Physically?

Brower: Yes.

Gordon: He was! He and I never mixed--physically, the two of us never took off too much because he would always say, "Look, I know you're just like me. You're going to fight to the bitter end whether it hurts you or not." So even with just normal scuffling or anything like that, he and I never paired off--not too often.

Brower: Well, it never would have been serious, would it? You never seriously--

Gordon: Oh, no, I was just talking about playing. In play we just never did. Now, my brother was a little different.

Brower: Do you think that the relationship that he had with your brother was different from his relationship [with you]?

Gordon: No.

Brower: Are you more like him in personality?

Gordon: No.

Brower: Well, thank you very much. I know it was hard for you to set aside this time, and I'm glad you managed to.

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AN INTERVIEW WITH DR. AND MRS. EDWIN C. GORDON

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INTERVIEW HISTORY

Place: Dr. and Mrs. Edwin C. Gordon

Dates: September 27 and October 4, 1976

Conduct of the Interview: Dr. Gordon was the first member of his family to respond to my request for an interview about his father and to come into the office for taping. Dr. Gordon is a large man, with a very relaxed manner, and the pace of the interviews was slow, with numerous thoughtful pauses. In some fashion the tempo itself seemed to contribute to the picture of the family life in the Gordon household, the long summers in Riverside with grandparents and cousins, the Thanksgiving holidays, and above all the central figure of the family, Walter Gordon. On the second interview session Mrs. Gordon accompanied her husband. Her contribution was particularly valuable in communicating the sense of warmth and acceptance that she met as a newcomer to the family and that persisted throughout her relation with her father- and mother-in-law.

Although they were the first of the Gordon family to be interviewed, the Edwin Gordons were the last to return their transcript. I feared this might mean that major changes were being undertaken, but happily the transcript was returned with little editing.

Anne Brower
Interviewer

INTERVIEW WITH DR. AND MRS. EDWIN C. GORDON

[Interview 1: September 27, 1976]##

Brower: My first question usually is: "When did you first meet Walter Gordon?" But that won't make much sense, so I'll ask you, were you born in Berkeley?

E. Gordon: Yes. I was born in Berkeley, at Herrick Memorial Hospital--then, I guess, it was Berkeley General--on August 29, 1922.

Brower: So, by the time your father was on the Adult Authority you were grown up?

E. Gordon: Yes, that was in 1945.

Brower: By that time you were married, and away from home?

E. Gordon: Oh yes, I was married in 1943

Brower: So you didn't share that part of his life?

E. Gordon: No.

Brower: I was thinking that it would have been difficult for you as a child, because he was away so much for the Adult Authority.

E. Gordon: He was away quite a bit of the time before that, at night time on the police force and then during the day time he was at law practice, and then after that he'd go to football practice. On weekends usually he would be out of town as a scout.

Brower: He worked as a policeman until 1930, until you were seven or eight years old?

E. Gordon: Something like that.

##This symbol indicates that a tape or a segment of a tape has begun or ended. For a guide to the tapes see page 189.

Brower: So all the time you were little he had this tremendous schedule.

E. Gordon: Right. The thing I remember, I guess, particularly was going to football practice with him. That's what we would do. In grammar school and junior high school I was on the junior traffic patrol, so therefore we had these theater passes. I'd come up during the week to the Fox California, some place like that. After that I'd go up to football practice and get a ride home with him.

Brower: So you had a chance to watch him coach the team at practice?

E. Gordon: Oh, as far as football, yes, from the time my brother and I were very small.

Brower: One of those players wrote recently that they didn't ever fight as hard on Saturday as they did on those afternoon scrimmages.

E. Gordon: When they had the Goofs. As I remember that's what they called them then.

Brower: He coached the Goofs?

E. Gordon: Yes, then they changed the name to the Ramblers.

Brower: Did you take an interest in football?

E. Gordon: As a spectator. I couldn't play it in high school. I had bands on my teeth. I had orthodontic bands on from the time I was in grammar school until I was a freshman at Cal, I guess that was in 1940. The first year I went out for freshman crew. Next year I was a sophomore. I went out for football but I didn't do too much. [laughter]

Brower: Did your father urge you to go into athletics?

E. Gordon: Not really, no. My brother, Walt, Jr. (he's eighteen months older than I am), was in football from--I'd say from junior high school, when he used to play on the Lumpy Lions, when they had the Lions Club team. And then he played in high school and of course he played up here at Cal, my brother did.

Brower: But it wasn't a big thing? I mean, you weren't considered out of it because you didn't play?

E. Gordon: No, not really.

Brower: What about your father's status as a big football player and coach and everything? It must have done something to you?

E. Gordon: I felt I had a lot of pressure to succeed.

Brower: But what about with other kids? Were you kind of a local hero?

E. Gordon: No, not really. I was a very quiet type, so they didn't, you know--I guess my Daddy wasn't particularly famous then anyhow.

Brower: Well, he really was.

E. Gordon: There were quite a few people who knew his name. That was for sure. Especially in Berkeley, with being on the police force and everything.

I had hoped to continue in athletics, but I just didn't get a start.

Brower: No, that was pretty late to start.

E. Gordon: And I wasn't very big, about the same size I am now. I only weigh 175 pounds, which wasn't--that's not too much for football.

Brower: No, I guess that's not too much.

Who was the disciplinarian in the family?

E. Gordon: Well, I would say Mama was because the majority of the time we'd see her the most. But when Daddy was there she would just add up those things that we didn't do. [laughter] So we knew we were going to get it. I'd say he was the disciplinarian. He would be doing the actual disciplining. If we needed a spanking, we'd wait until he got home, then we'd get it. He used to keep a pretty tight rein on us, as a child, I can remember that.

Brower: He seemed to expect so much of himself. I wondered if he expected an awful lot of you?

E. Gordon: He expected us to be pretty straight, I'd say that. I can remember one of the times, we had a family discussion in the living room, and it was about going to public dances. At that time these dances were held down in Oakland at Sweet's Ballroom. Of course, they had only certain days when the Negroes could go. There was only one day, one particular night that they'd go.

E. Gordon: I remember as an attorney Daddy used to see quite a few of these people. They were pretty rough, and they'd end up in a few fights and things of that sort. And, of course, as an attorney, a lot of times he had to appear in court to defend some of these people. These were the ones he would come in contact with.

So when we mentioned about going to public dances (I mainly wanted to go to hear the bands. I was interested in listening to the music), he said no, that was too rough for us. One time I told him we were getting to be known as the goody-goody boys, or something like that. I said, "I want to be bad," and he said, "Well, if you want to be bad," he said, "I hope you get out there and somebody fills you full of lead." I said, "I don't want to be that bad, Daddy!" [laughter]

Brower: This was the impression he'd gotten from the contact he'd had with public dances?

E. Gordon: Yes. And I would say that as far as going to public dances, that's the way he felt about it. Aside from the fact that it was segregated, too; he didn't appreciate that at all.

One of the biggest things I can remember, or say one of the outstanding things, as far as family is concerned, is this was the topic of conversation almost every night at dinner when he was there, about some of the things that he had to go against working with the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People].

Brower: I was going to say, besides all these other things he was doing, he was the president at that time of the NAACP for Alameda County. And I wondered about Sweet's Ballroom, for instance. Was integrating it one of the things that he attempted to do?

E. Gordon: One of the projects? I would say he did.

He was definitely against any violence, and he felt most things could be worked out through negotiations.

Brower: And apparently he did succeed.

E. Gordon: And this is where he did so many things as a president, as I can remember. But certainly he didn't appreciate anything of that sort.

Brower: It's interesting that this was a topic of family discussion and he talked about things like that at home.

E. Gordon: Yes, when he was talking with Mama particularly. He wasn't necessarily talking to us. Or when he was talking to the people that came to see him. I remember some of the people coming; Walter White came to the house, and of course he was there for dinner and we were there. But I would say he didn't emphasize it necessarily.

Brower: Are you saying that his NAACP work wasn't all he thought about?

E. Gordon: No, it wasn't all he thought about, but I was remembering this was the time we'd hear about it. He'd read the papers all the time. He'd read all the papers. If he weren't reading the papers he was doing his law work and at the same time keeping up with what was on the radio.

Brower: He was a terribly busy man. I don't see how you ever had time to see him because you didn't get your weekends together, did you? He was scouting on weekends.

E. Gordon: I would say the times we would see him for the longest length of time would be going to athletic events. We would come up here and go to the trackmeet and go to the baseball game afterwards. And the same with basketball games. So this was the most time I'd say we had a chance to spend with him was attending these different athletic events.

Brower: That was probably you and your brother more than your sister too. Or did she go along?

E. Gordon: Right. She didn't. No, she didn't go with us that much, at that time.

Brower: I got the impression that your father had a very good sense of humor. Did you see much of that as a child?

E. Gordon: No, I can't say I did, no. [laughter]

Brower: I guess nobody thinks his father's very funny, especially your father's jokes.

E. Gordon: I really didn't hear him make that many speeches, but I can remember that the enjoyable part of his talks was I'd hear him tell his jokes at the beginning of it, which I guess every speaker is supposed to be doing--does, anyhow. That was about the only time I noticed him being humorous.

Brower: Did you think his speeches were good?

E. Gordon: I thought they were. I thought he got his point across, eloquently, I'd say.

Brower: Do you have children?

E. Gordon: Yes, I have two children.

Brower: Did your father enjoy his grandchildren?

E. Gordon: I would say he did, yes. Every time they had a chance to come back from the Virgin Islands, instead of doing any traveling on their own, they usually came back to the Bay Area, always to see his kids--his children, and his grandchildren.

Brower: Did you ever visit them in the Virgin Islands?

E. Gordon: We visited them once, yes. This was about 1958, '59, I'd say. This was when he was a judge. He wasn't the governor at that time.

Borwer: Right. That was the year he went from governor to judge.

E. Gordon: I think that was about the same year, yes.

Brower: The impression I get is that that wasn't at all a happy time for your mother and father.

E. Gordon: Well, the thing was, they were away from their family and that's the first time they'd ever really been away. We've always been close together, even my sister. We're in the same area, even though we haven't seen each other a lot. We don't see each other as often as you might think, but we've always been close by.

Brower: I'm sure that was hard, but I gather the conditions in the Virgin Islands were pretty difficult, in addition to their being away from home.

E. Gordon: Well, I would say so. Frustrating as far as trying to be the governor and do what he felt was right, and it was kind of futile with the way some of the things were already outlined, as far as them wanting their independence and things of that sort. They were not too cooperative. As far as his being appointed from the United States, they wanted somebody on their own, and to elect their own governor. I don't think they have that yet, but I think that's what they want. Like

E. Gordon: the Puerto Ricans they wanted their independence. But at the time I don't think it was possible because of the economics. They couldn't do it, be independent.

Brower: They didn't own boats, I understand, or own land.

E. Gordon: No, as I say, most of the islanders and the natives don't have that much. Most of the people who have anything down there, you find are the wealthy, people who came in from either the United States or even from Europe. They're the ones that own most of the things down there. There are very few things left I think for the Virgin Islanders, except to be taxi drivers. And there are a few real wealthy families. The Lockharts were one of them I can remember.

Brower: Was that a black or a white family, the Lockharts?

E. Gordon: A black family. They owned property there for years. Judge Hastie married one of the daughters.

Brower: Were the Lockharts cooperative and friendly, do you know?

E. Gordon: I don't know. Mama can tell you better than I could about that; because of the short time we were down there, maybe about ten days, we didn't meet them. We spent more time just visiting the other islands. We did get a chance to do that, St. Croix and St. John.

Brower: Did your parents go with you?

E. Gordon: Yes, they went with us to the other islands. We got a chance to take a boat and also an airplane. The Commissioner of Traffic, he went with us.

Brower: That was handy. [laughter]

When we spoke of your father's relation with <u>his</u> grandchildren it reminded me that I wanted to ask you, did you know your grandfather, your father's father?

E. Gordon: I knew him for a while because we used to go down to Riverside. He was also a policeman. I can remember those things.

Brower: That's interesting to know because I've had various jobs ascribed to him. I heard that he was a Pullman porter. He may have been all these things.

E. Gordon: I think he was, originally, when he came from Georgia, when Daddy was three, from what I understand. That's when they came to California. Big Dad, as we called him, was on the railroad then. That's how they happened to come to Riverside.

E. Gordon: We used to go down and spend our summers there. And we had our other cousins which would be my father's brother's (George's) children. They used to come down from Pasadena. That's where they lived. They're our first cousins. So we'd spend maybe two months with Grandmother and Big Dad.

Brower: Did you like them?

E. Gordon: Oh yes, I liked them. We had a good time when we were down there, for sure, [laughter] being with our cousins. Their house was right in the middle of the park and right next door across the dirt road was the swimming pool. So that's where I learned how to swim. It was very, very good. And of course Big Dad, he'd take us, in fact we learned how to drive when we were down there because he'd take us on these back roads, and we'd learn how to drive with this old Packard he had at that time. Most time they'd drive their own cars too. It wasn't a new one, but it was nice to drive. We learned how to drive that way. I can remember his taking us to the bakery shops and things like that.

Brower: Was he a big, literally big, man?

E. Gordon: He was good sized. He was bigger than Daddy, because Daddy was about 6'1". I'm larger than Daddy. Big Dad was probably about as tall as I am, 6'2". He was a good-sized man.

Brower: So he really <u>was</u> Big Dad.

E. Gordon: Yes. I also remember, going there, because of the fact that they had their own chickens and everything.

Brower: Wonderful place for kids.

E. Gordon: All we could eat. There was fried chicken, and we'd go out to the part of town--I guess they called it Casa Blanca. It was where the Mexicans lived, and they had all the watermelon patches there at that time. He would go out there and they'd just give him a dozen watermelons. We'd take them back to the house, and they'd be there for three or four weeks anyhow. We didn't run out of them!

Brower: Did he ever visit you in Berkeley?

E. Gordon: Big Dad? Not that I can remember. Very seldom did they ever come up here. Maybe because they didn't have the transportation, I don't know.

Brower: Were he and your father close?

E. Gordon: Oh, I'd say so. But Daddy was so busy too. He'd go down there when he could, as far as his travels are concerned.

Brower: When it was time for you to go to college did you ever think of anywhere but U.C. Berkeley?

E. Gordon: No, not really. No, in fact I didn't really start exerting myself in college until I got married and then I had to buckle down. I went to University High in Oakland. I had just a straight B average except for a couple of low grades which I had to make up. So I had to go six months, at that time they'd let you go to high school. So I went to Tech High and then got the grades so I could get into Cal. But, I didn't think of any other school other than Cal.

Brower: Did you ever contemplate going into the ministry?

E. Gordon: No, I never thought about that.

Brower: Did your brother?

E. Gordon: No, not that I know of.

Brower: Well, isn't that funny. Warren Olney remembers a conversation with your father, going down to Los Angeles on the Lark, when he was talking about his sons and one of them wanted to be a minister.

E. Gordon: If I said it, I forgot it. [laughter] At one time I said I wanted to be a policeman, I remember that. I thought about going into law, because when I first started I was in political science. It wasn't until after the war that I decided to switch to dentistry, because I have an uncle who's a dentist. He graduated from Cal Dental School, 1931, Uncle George.

Brower: That was your mother's brother?

E. Gordon: He's married to my mother's sister. He was down in Santa Monica. They still are.

Brower: Maybe it was those bands on your teeth that decided you to be a dentist.

E. Gordon: Well, no, that was the last thing I'd say after seven years of bands. I didn't think I'd want to be a dentist.

Brower: How did you feel about your father being a policeman?

E. Gordon: Well, at that time it wasn't...

Brower: Berkeley had a marvelous police force then.

E. Gordon: Right. So, I didn't think of anything contrary. I guess I was just used to being around policemen from my grandfather.

Brower: Did you go down to the police department very often? Did you know other policemen on the force?

E. Gordon: Not that I can remember offhand. I remember Jack Fisher. I think he was on the police force and he used to live right across the street on Acton Street.

Brower: You lived on Acton Street?

E. Gordon: Yes, Acton.

Brower: Did you live there for a long time?

E. Gordon: All my life, until we moved, and Mama still had the house. Sometime when they were down in the Virgin Islands they sold it. But until then there was always somebody in the family living there. We lived in it or my sister lived in it.

Brower: Did your parents leave Acton Street before they went to the Virgin Islands? Leave the house?

E. Gordon: [hesitates] I think they were there until they left to go to the Virgin Islands, and then he had this property on Parker Street. I'd say he was in the house until he left to go to the Virgin islands.

Brower: Did they live on Parker Street?

E. Gordon: Only visiting. That's when they would stay with my sister. There were two houses on a corner lot. So when they'd come back, they'd usually stay with her.

Grower: But then when they came back finally they moved into a motel?

E. Gordon: Right.

Brower: Instead of going to Parker Street. I always wondered about that.

E. Gordon: There's two houses there and my sister's there, but they said they were looking for a place, you know, they just didn't get around to it. I don't know what Mama's going to do now. I think she's going to try and find a place once she gets things settled.

E. Gordon: Daddy really was never one, as far as the house and things like that. Mama would've loved to had a house on the hill long time ago. But Daddy wasn't pushing it at that time, because they did have some difficulty with friends we did know who moved up into the Kensington area.

Brower: I heard about that.

E. Gordon: Yws, this was the Newman's that we knew, Dr. Newman, and he had to defend himself with a rifle or something of that sort. So, Daddy wasn't for us being subjected to it. He was that protective as far as the family was concerned. That was his feeling about it, rather than cause any disturbance or something of that sort, or put us in jeopardy, I think he felt he'd rather just go on as he had. I guess just because of the fact that we were growing up and he wasn't home. Mama was home, true, because she was always home.

Brower: He didn't want the burden to fall on her.

E. Gordon: I guess they just didn't move, that's all.

Brower: Who did make the final decisions, do you think, in your household?

E. Gordon: In the family?

Brower: Your father or your mother?

E. Gordon: I've heard a lot of people say Mama made a lot of them, but I don't agree with that [laughter]. I think she could make them as long as he didn't care. A lot of times he just went along with what she said. I think that.

Brower: But in this matter of the house, for instance, she might have preferred to move and he never wanted to?

E. Gordon: Yes, but he would have the final say-so. With automobiles and things like that, he was the one who made the decision on it. He always had all the checkbooks. He handled that all the time.

Brower: But she's very much a person in her own right, isn't she?

E. Gordon: Oh, yes. She's independent all right. I think that's a trait of the family, the Fisher family. The girls are that way. She has about four or five brothers, I guess. Can't think of how many altogether. I think about all the brothers are dead. There was at least four. Except one brother's still alive, the youngest one. But the three sisters are still alive: my mother and Aunt Dot and Auntie Ella.

Brower: They were the independent, strong ones?

E. Gordon: Yes. My grandfather made them that way. That'd be her father.

Brower: What about him?

E. Gordon: He ruled his house. But I'd say he made them that way. To me, they followed just like he was.

Brower: It was the girls who took after their father more than the boys?

E. Gordon: Yes.

Brower: What did you do about family holidays and things?

E. Gordon: Usually, particularly during Christmas time, we'd go over to Grandmother's in San Francisco. Christmas Eve, we'd have it at our house for our immediate family. But then the next day we'd usually go to San Francisco which would be where her parents were.

Brower: That would be your Grandmother Fisher.

E. Gordon: Right. We had cousins too on that side of the family. That's about the one time we'd get together; it would usually be about once a year, where all of the family get together like that. And we used to spend some of our summers too over there with our grandparents in San Francisco. My brother and I. Don't remember too much about whether Betty did or not, since she's six years younger than I am. My brother and I were so close together, it was more or less, not quite, like twins. We looked like twins for a while, no differences in sizes.

Brower: Which one of you got ahead in size?

E. Gordon: I did. Junior high school was when I caught up with my brother sizewise.

Brower: I remember my younger son always inherited the older one's clothes, and then that reversed and the older one inherited the younger's clothes.

E. Gordon: We inherited bicycles. That was about it. One bicycle was split between us. One car split between us. [laughter]

Brower: That must have made for difficulties.

E. Gordon: It did! Especially going out at the same time.

Brower: You'd have to double date?

E. Gordon: Yes. It would either be his time to drive the car or mine, one or the other. A lot of times we did double date. In fact we both married girls from San Francisco.

Brower: That was convenient.

E. Gordon: Yes. They were going to the same high school. He married one year earlier than we got married.

Brower: That's Joyce?

E. Gordon: That's Joyce, yes. My wife is Elise.

Brower: All this was before you were nineteen?

E. Gordon: Right. Daddy had to go down to get the marriage license in San Francisco. I was older than my wife, but she was eighteen, and for girls they didn't require the family's permission.

Brower: How did your father feel about your marrying that young?

E. Gordon: Well, he'd gone through my brother getting married, so it wasn't as difficult for me. Although they both, Mama and Daddy, objected to us; they felt we were too young to get married.

Brower: So your brother had gotten married that young too?

E. Gordon: Yes, he got married the year before. So Daddy wasn't as hard on me as he was on my brother. He tried to dissuade us, but when they found out they couldn't, they just changed, and they were for us. They did everything they could wherever possible as far as helping us.

In my case, now, we were in school, my wife was already in Cal too. She had a scholarship to go the first year, and then when we got married, she continued on until graduation. I quit school and went to work in the shipyards. They told me I'd either have to work in the shipyards or come back to school. At that time the reserves were called up. My brother went in the reserves.

Brower: When you say "they," who do you mean?

E. Gordon: The University. I was on probation, because of the fact that my grades were suffering from working in the shipyards.

Brower: So you had to make a choice between the two?

E. Gordon: One or the other. They felt that I just couldn't do both, and my grades were suffering from it. So, since my brother went in the reserves and they called him up within six months, I said well, if I went in the service, I had to be in the quartermaster corps, or a messman, or something. Anyhow, that's what they did with him. He'd had two years of college and they put them all in the quartermaster corps and he was in a laundry outfit. So, I said, well, if I'm going to be a messman, I might as well be a civilian. I knew somebody who was on the ships, over at Fort Mason on troop transports. But at least I was a civilian, I was an employee of the army, but I could come back to Fort Mason.

Brower: At night?

E. Gordon: No, at the end of a trip.

Brower: Oh, yes, of course, you were on a ship.

E. Gordon: But the longest I was gone was about three months.

Brower: Where did you go?

E. Gordon: South Pacific. To Australia.

Brower: That's wasn't a very good time to be going to the South Pacific!

E. Gordon: No. Eniwetok, Guam, and all those places. I went to New Guinea. I can remember that. But most of the time we went in there, where there was a troop transport, we went in after most of the action, I'm happy to say. And we'd bring back prisoners of war, military personnel coming back (there were a few), and I guess we brought back some of those who were hospitalized, hospital cases, things of that sort.

Brower: Japanese prisoners?

E. Gordon: No, ours.

Brower: Your own people.

E. Gordon: Yes.

Brower: You didn't bring POWs?

E. Gordon: No, I'm thinking about the POWs we picked up who were in the Philippines, who were interned in the Philippines.

Brower: Oh, American POWs.

E. Gordon: American POWs, and we brought them back. We were one of the first ships. We went to Leyte and picked them up. They were coming down from Manila. Outside of that we didn't see any action. I was fortunate not to see too much. We were there after it all happened.

Brower: Was it because your brother was a Negro that he was put into a laundry outfit?

E. Gordon: Oh yes. There were still segregated services at that time. The armed serves were segregated.

Brower: In spite of two years of college?

E. Gordon: Yes. He stayed in though because he got a promotion in the field. He was over in France, and he got promoted at the Battle of the Bulge.

Brower: He took charge of a machine gun nest?

E. Gordon: Yes, over there in the Battle of the Bulge, because all the other officers were killed.

Brower: And he got a field commission?

E. Gordon: Right. And then he stayed in. He had to go from there to Okinawa without coming home. There were some troops they picked up in France. And he didn't come home at all. He went to Okinawa.

Brower: Usually there was a leave in the United States between one theater and the other.

E. Gordon: There were some they didn't do that to. They didn't get the opportunity to do that, and he was one of them.

Brower: Did he see action in Okinawa too?

E. Gordon: Oh, yes, I'd say he saw a lot of action there. He stayed in the National Guard. I guess he can tell you better than I can.

Brower: Your father never seemed to be bitter about this kind of thing?

E. Gordon: No, I don't think he did. Most of the time he seemed to be pretty easy going.

Brower: He did what he could with the NAACP. Discrimination doesn't seem to have embittered him.

E. Gordon: Right. No.

Brower: Well, how about you?

E. Gordon: It didn't embitter me either. I think we heard about it in such a way that we wouldn't be bitter. That's what I would say.

Brower: I don't see how he presented it to you in such a way that you would fight it without being bitter.

E. Gordon: At that time I probably wasn't thinking too much about it either. Most of the time we were going to school.

We saw it, that's for sure. Like down in Riverside. Everything was segregated down in Riverside, including the theaters. There was one place you had to sit upstairs in the theater.

Brower: That's one thing that wasn't true here.

E. Gordon: No, it wasn't true right here in Berkeley. No. But there were a number of places we couldn't go. We'd know that. You just didn't go there. Even my brother had an incident right here in Berkeley at the Golden Bear. He was a lieutenant, so that was '42 or '43.

Brower: The Golden Bear what? What is it?

E. Gordon: It was the motel. Still called the Golden Bear. It's down at Cedar and San Pablo.

I can remember, like when we'd go from here to Los Angeles we'd drive, and we wouldn't stop any place. There was one place, I know, we could stop in Fresno.

Brower: Is that the restaurant that your father always stopped in?

E. Gordon: The Goodfellows Restaurant, as I remember.

Brower: And the man who ran it was an Armenian, I think?

E. Gordon: I think so.

Brower: Did you know that your father had an unpleasant incident with him many years before?

E. Gordon: He may have. I know he had some incident with some people down in Bakersfield.

Brower: This restaurant was in Fresno, and it was one that he patronized afterwards.

E. Gordon: That could be. Could be. Yes. Well, they accepted us afterward. That was the only place that we could always stop, either coming or going, that would be in Fresno. Then we'd stop in Bakersfield just to get gas. I remember he had some incident; I think it was one time during the time that Governor Warren was running for election, and Daddy was down there in one of those areas, a ghetto place, outside of Bakersfield. I can remember he used to talk about the squalor that was there, things of that sort, and how the people were living outside of Bakersfield, and I guess most of them were farm laborers.

Brower: It was probably the place they called Weedpatch outside of Bakersfield where all the migrant workers were.

E. Gordon: Yes, Weedpatch or Cottonpatch. Something like that. But, as I say, we weren't exposed to these things. I knew they existed. But the fact that we were going to school all the time, too, and we got married, as young as we did. We didn't leave California till about '49--the first time I left California, other than on the ships. We went from here to Denver with another couple. And of course you couldn't stop places between here and Denver at that time in an automobile.

We stopped to eat in Nevada. It so happened my wife and the other lady with me are very fair, so they could go any place. So we'd send them in and get something to eat, for the children. We had three small children with us, our daughter and this other couple had two boys. They had to be five or six, something like that.

Brower: So we're talking about almost 1950?

E. Gordon: This was '49 or '50, yes. Our daughter's almost thirty now. There was no place to eat and we stopped in this place in Elko. It was a little place, downtown, I forget. We went in there and got seated and the children were with us. The lady said, "I'm sorry I can't serve you." So then all we had to do was to leave. And of course the children couldn't understand it. We thought it might happen. This couple from Denver, they'd driven it, and so they knew what we could expect or not expect. It so happened we went down the street to a larger place, to the El Rancho, I remember. We asked a fellow outside who was

E. Gordon: cleaning up whether it was possible to find a place to eat. He said, "Well, as far as I know, you can eat in here." That's one of the bigger places in Elko at that time and we didn't have any problem. We went in there and ate.

Brower: When your father was in the Adult Authority did he talk to you much about his job or about his cases?

E. Gordon: No, not really. I think I only went to see him once during the time he was in the Adult Authority.

Brower: He had been so successful himself, I wondered if he expected that kind of success from others?

E. Gordon: From everyone he met, you mean?

Brower: Yes, especially from other Negroes. Was he sympathetic to their problems?

E. Gordon: I think he was. I think he'd be fair about it. I think with the experience he had in law, plus his police work, it gave him quite a background, which was to his advantage as far as being on the Adult Authority. My brother was on the Adult Authority too, after Daddy was on there.

Brower: And still is, I guess?

E. Gordon: No, he's not on there now. He went in under a different administration. He went in under Governor Reagan.

Brower: Well, when I call him I call him at the Adult Authority in San Francisco.

E. Gordon: Yes, well, he's a hearing representative for the Adult Authority now. He was a parole officer before he got appointed. I guess that was almost fifteen years ago. Something like that. But anyhow, as a hearing representative he does work similar to what they would do as Adult Authority. They're just one step below the Adult Authority. They do preliminary hearings.

Brower: And that department has grown so much since your father's time. First there were three men and then five.

E. Gordon: Yes. Now I think they've extended it to maybe about twelve. It's much larger than what it was. Daddy and them used to travel throughout the state. Just three men and they had to be there all the time, most of the time. Now they can split it up. The schedule's not quite as heavy.

Brower: He must have been traveling a great deal during that period.

E. Gordon: Yes. He didn't particularly like to fly. That was one thing. I remember during football season, all the time he'd take the train. Some of the other coaches when they'd go some place they'd fly, but we'd have to take him down to the Berkeley station and pick him up at the Berkeley station.

Brower: When he went places in Oregon and to Seattle?

E. Gordon: Yes, he'd still take the train. On the Adult Authority he had to do some flying but most of the time he had his own car and he'd do his own driving.

Brower: It's not very easy, I guess, to fly to Chino and some of those places.

E. Gordon: No, some of those places are difficult to get to flying. During that time they didn't have that many small airports for them to fly into. When he had to go to some national meetings and things like that he'd have to fly.

Brower: But otherwise he'd take the train?

E. Gordon: We never got to take any family vacations to speak of, other than when we'd go to stay with our grandparents in San Francisco and Riverside. They very seldom took any real vacations for themselves, other than that, because of his duties that kept him that busy. When he had a chance to, he just really wanted to relax at home. That's what he said. He wasn't particularly interested in doing much visiting with people, because I guess he saw enough people all the time.

I can remember as a youngster, the most activity it seemed that they had, would be playing bridge with a certain number of friends, close friends that they had. That's one time we'd go with them too, when they were going to play bridge at somebody's house, or something of that sort, or the people would come over to our house.

Those would be the closest contacts, some of the people in the immediate area that Daddy would really see. Otherwise he was so busy he didn't see many people. Well, I can remember Harry and Ruth Kingman. I can remember them. And also there was Bill Davis and his wife. They were very friendly. They used to play bridge quite a bit, I think.

Brower: Who was Bill Davis?

E. Gordon: He was the one who was the secretary of the Stiles YMCA [Young Men's Christian Association]. Stiles Hall.

Brower: That's what Kingman was too.

E. Gordon: I think Kingman was before him. Bill Davis was under him.

Brower: What do you like to remember best about your father?

E. Gordon: He was a happy person, most of the time. He was only mad at us if he really had some good reason to be mad at us.

When we were small, one thing I didn't like was the fact that if we said something about liking a certain type of food, he would just keep bringing that same food back until we were just filled up to here with it! [laughter] You didn't even want to see it any more.

Brower: So you didn't dare say you liked carrots or something or you'd have nothing else?

E. Gordon: Something from the bakery, that's what he would usually get. I can remember there was a Danish bakery down in Berkeley, and he'd go down and get some apple turnovers, or something of that sort. He would bring that continuously until we'd just tell him, "Daddy, don't bring any more." [laughter]

I can appreciate the discipline that he did have. As far as myself. Whether my brother agrees with me or not, I think it was a good thing for us. I can appreciate it now. After I got older I definitely appreciated the discipline that they had for us. I think we needed a little guidance, which they realized. I guess most youngsters are that way. They need to be pushed a little bit. Otherwise, it's too easy to take an easier road.

Brower: Your getting married at nineteen had nothing to do with wanting to leave the house?

E. Gordon: No. No.

Brower: You just found the right girl early?

E. Gordon: I found I had the right girl. I said I'm ready to get married, and I know it's the best thing for me.

Brower: Had your mother and father married young too?

E. Gordon: Well, I'd have to think.

Brower: It was 1920, so your father would have been twenty-six.

E. Gordon: He was pretty old. Well, he was old compared to us. That's probably what he was thinking about when we wanted to get married so young. But even then he hadn't quite settled down either. He had just gotten through college, I guess, because he graduated in '18 originally. And from law, I guess, in '21?

Brower: No, it was '22. So he still had two years of law school after his marriage.

What was he like when he came back from the Virgin Islands?

E. Gordon: He was just happy to be back in Berkeley.

Brower: Did he pick up with his old friends where he left off pretty well?

E. Gordon: Well, with those who were still living, quite a few of them. Yes, I can think of General Dean. He'd go to these meetings with him, which he enjoyed. That was one of his things he was doing. That Berkeley Breakfast Club, Berkeley Commons. These were long-time friends that he did enjoy seeing and talking to.

Brower: Then he was in civic activities, too. He was a member of the Housing Authority and the Redevelopment Agency in Berkeley.

E. Gordon: Also at the very end he was on the grand jury in Alameda County.

Brower: Was he? I didn't know that. Perhaps I can ask you more about that next time.

Thank you very much for coming today.

[Interview 2: October 4, 1976
With Dr. Edwin C. Gordon and Mrs. Edwin C. Gordon (Elise)]##

Brower: Will you tell me a little about your father's scouting?

E. Gordon: As far as the reports that he had to make? He would sit in the press-box with his field glasses. He was able to diagram their offensive plays as well as their defensive plays, and then he'd come back and typewrite a written report. He'd have all these diagrammed out, and then he'd teach the Goofs and later the Ramblers these plays. Then they'd scrimmage against the varsity with these plays. So the varsity fellows would have seen the same plays and then when they'd finally meet the opponent--

Brower: They'd already done it.

E. Gordon: They'd already seen it before! Yes.

Brower: I think that's very neat.

Well, when we stopped last time you were just telling me about your father's having been on the Alameda County Grand Jury, which I hadn't known about.

E. Gordon: After he came back, had retired, he was on the county grand jury.

Brower: Did he ever have an opportunity to really serve on that grand jury? Or was he too ill? You spoke of his having become ill on the way back from a jury meeting.

E. Gordon: Yes, from attending a grand jury meeting. My sister had taken him down to work, and then he'd usually catch the bus and come home. And he just managed to get home. He got off at the wrong stop, and somehow or other he managed to get back to the motel where they were living.

Brower: Was this the first indication of his illness?

E. Gordon: As far as Mama knew. As far as his blindness, Mama didn't recognized that he was blind at <u>that</u> time until he mentioned something about, "Why are you working in the dark?" and then she realized that he couldn't see. But if he had other indications prior to this, at least he didn't express them.

Mrs. Gordon: I remember he had complained about headaches there for a while.

E. Gordon: He had had a doctor's appointment, I believe, two or three days prior to this. It so happened the doctor was out of town at that time. Possibly if they had seen him earlier, they might have been able to do something for the blindness. Sometimes they say it's reversible.

Brower: Was it total blindness?

E. Gordon: Yes. I think it was within a day. It was a type of blindness they say that they do see images. This made it doubly difficult. I'd say for the last two years he was blind.

Brower: But he did have an opportunity before that to serve on the grand jury?

E. Gordon: Right.

Mrs. Gordon: I would say for at least a year. There were committees within the framework of the grand jury, so I'm not sure where Daddy served at that time. They had smaller meetings.

Brower: [to Mrs. Gordon] I wanted to ask you a little bit about when you first came into the family. When you first met your father-in-law how did you feel about him?

Mrs. Gordon: I can't remember. No. [laughter] Ed must have taken me to a football game. That would've been the first indication. Then we probably came back by the house.

Brower: I just wondered if he overawed you, or if you got along right away. I noticed that you called him Daddy.

Mrs. Gordon: Well, we always got along beautifully.

E. Gordon: Yes, he said that they were his daughters and if we did anything wrong, we'd have to come to him. [laughter]

Mrs. Gordon: And there would be no divorces in the family! [laughter]

Brower: So, that got established early.

E. Gordon: Elise and Joyce, he told them both the same thing. And I guess we followed him, because we're still together. [laughter]

Brower: Did you have a long engagement?

E. Gordon: Let's see. We went together about three years, didn't we?

Mrs. Gordon: Yes.

E. Gordon: Then we got engaged.

Mrs. Gordon: Yes.

E. Gordon: And we were going to wait.

Mrs. Gordon: That would have been September. We got married in February.

E. Gordon: Yes.

Mrs. Gordon: And of course that was during wartime.

Brower: That was '42?

Mrs. Gordon: '43.

E. Gordon: '43 we got married. Then I went on the ships in November, 1944. That's when we decided not to wait till after. That's why we got married.

Brower: A lot of us reasoned that way, I think.

E. Gordon: Yes. I thought I was nineteen when we got married. I was twenty. She corrected me.

Mrs. Gordon: Yes, he was.

Brower: [to Mrs. Gordon] Did you celebrate holidays with the Gordons?

Mrs. Gordon: Always. Yes. It was mostly Thanksgiving. Mama would have the entire family, including Grandmother and Grandfather from San Francisco and if Auntie Ella and Uncle George were up from Santa Monica they would be there too. It was a big occasion. I don't think the house was large enough, really, for the number.

E. Gordon: Christmas time was also when we would celebrate too.

Mrs. Gordon: Yes. You all would celebrate it on Christmas Eve. That was before we married. I guess he told you about the fact that they would go over to the Fishers on Christmas Day.

Brower: Did your father-in-law have ideas about how your children should be raised?

Mrs. Gordon: I don't think Daddy ever really expressed himself about that. I know he was very proud when Ed had a son, because he wanted someone to carry on the Gordon name.

Brower: That was the first grandson?

E. Gordon: Right.

Mrs. Gordon: Yes.

E. Gordon: At least on his side. Daddy's brother had two sons, Jack and Henry, who died.

Mrs. Gordon: Yes. So there's only one really, one on our side.

Brower: You had the only grandson?

E. Gordon: That's right. The only grandson is my son.

Mrs. Gordon: Yes.

E. Gordon: On Daddy's side, because Walt has a daughter.

Mrs. Gordon: So far our son has not come up with a son.

E. Gordon: He has a girl. [laughter]

Brower: Girls seem to run in that family!

I know that your father was close to Earl Warren and I wondered if politics played a big part in your family life. Did you get involved in political campaigns and ring doorbells and pass leaflets?

E. Gordon: I didn't get involved at all.

Mrs. Gordon: I don't think Daddy ever did, do you?

E. Gordon: He always said he wasn't a politician, but I happen to remember him supporting different candidates, like Earl Warren, but he didn't do very much. He did some campaigning, but it wan't like they do today, I guess. It wasn't that apparent to me.

Brower: I guess he did make speeches in favor of Warren and Warren's various positions.

E. Gordon: I can remember that. Yes.

Brower: But it wasn't a thing the whole family went out for?

E. Gordon: No, I didn't participate at all.

Mrs. Gordon: I think he did more as far as NAACP. He had these speaking engagements in connection with the NAACP.

E. Gordon: That was when he did most of his speaking.

Mrs. Gordon: Yes. Now, when he came up to Washington to visit us when you were in the service, what was that for?

E. Gordon: That would be in connection with prison work. Something important was coming up. I was in the Air Force in the state of Washington at that time. This would be in 1953.

Mrs. Gordon: No, how about '54.

E. Gordon: Well, I was in the Air Force from '53 to 1956. Now when Daddy came up there, it could have been 1954. He visited us once while we were there.

Brower: After the war you went into the Air Force?

E. Gordon: Right. I was in prelegal before the war. After the war I went into predental. We lived in San Francisco for nine years. During that time I was going through predental and dental school.

Brower: This was actually in the Air Force?

E. Gordon: No. I was still a civilian then. After I got my degree in dentistry I was still eligible for the medical draft because they didn't count the time I was in the Merchant Marine. So then I volunteered when I graduated in '53.

Brower: If you had worked it right couldn't you have gotten your dental education as a member of the Air Force?

E. Gordon: Not at that time. They were doing that right at the beginning. Although if you did it you'd have to spend at least a couple of years. As it was, you had to spend the two years anyhow. They didn't have as much of that reserve program at that time. They had it during the war. There were a number of fellows doing it then. All of them were paid employees of the army or the navy or something of that sort.

At the time I went through they didn't have that. There were one or two at the most, as I remember, out of maybe, oh, sixty in the class.

Brower: I thought you'd overlooked a great opportunity!

E. Gordon: No. It wasn't forced on me. [laughter] It was really the two of us working that did it. She was working. She graduated from Cal, in '47?

Mrs. Gordon: No, '46. I was in the class of '46, but actually, that was wartime too and we got out in October '45.

Brower: I'd forgotten that the semesters were different.

Mrs. Gordon: We went around the year. Karen was born January '46.

E. Gordon: Just after you graduated. Three months.

Mrs. Gordon: Just after I graduated. I was just determined that I was going to get up there and get that degree!

E. Gordon: This was one of the things we had told Daddy, that we were going to finish our schooling. He was happy about that. He didn't care whether I became a professional man or not. He said at least get your education, which was the way his father told him.

Brower: I wondered if he'd put any pressure on you to go in one direction or another, or opposed your going into dentistry or approved of it or what.

E. Gordon: He didn't oppose it at all. The main thing he was concerned about was that we were going to school.

Mrs. Gordon: Get that education.

E. Gordon: Get a degree. He said that was one thing they could never take away from you. That's what he said his father told him. Whether I became a professional man or whatever, just go ahead, at least go through school. So he was happy with us, because of the fact that my wife finished school too after we got married, plus we had the one daughter then.

Brower: It must have taken a little bit of doing.

E. Gordon: We had our schedule too. [laughter]

Mrs. Gordon: Everyone cooperated.

E. Gordon: She worked on the swing shift at the Bank of America. I'd go to school during the daytime. Her mother would take care of our daughter for the period that she'd go to work. Then I'd pick her up, and I'd take care of our daughter during the evening hours. So that's plenty of time to do nothing but study, which I needed. I needed it anyhow, yes. That's how I managed to do it.

E. Gordon: During the summer I'd work in construction work as a laborer over in San Francisco. I did that all through the time I was in predent and through dental school till I graduated. I had time in the shipyards too, before that, before I got into the Merchant Marine, I got army transport service.

Brower: The only thing you had going for you was that there were jobs. It was a period when you could get jobs, unlike the 30s.

E. Gordon: It wasn't easy getting part-time jobs. And at that time you still could only get in the laborers' union. My father was responsible. He just happened to know somebody over in San Francisco who was connected with the labor union.

Brower: You mean to help you get access to any labor union at all?

E. Gordon: Well, particularly in construction, where that's all it was, labor, because Negroes weren't in the crafts. And I wasn't skilled anyhow. I couldn't have gone in to be a carpenter or plumber or anything of that sort.

At that time there were very few Negroes, if any, in them at all. Just like it was in the shipyards. There were none in the shipyards until they put in the auxiliary. You couldn't get in the boilermakers even. Then they set up an auxiliary boilermakers, which took in minority, blacks, as well as me.

Brower: Is this one of the things your father took on at all or was he no longer active?

E. Gordon: He objected as much as he could about it, about them not accepting Negroes, I can remember.

Mrs. Gordon: He objected to a separate union.

E. Gordon: Right, which was what they did. Then, as soon as they wanted to, all they'd do was to eliminate the auxiliaries, which was what they did after the war. That's how they could eliminate the women as well as the blacks.

Brower: So the auxiliary unions were open to blacks and women and then after the war they just--

E. Gordon: They could just do away with them.

Brower: I wondered if you and he ever had any serious disagreements about the most effective ways to cope with the problems of racial discrimination?

E. Gordon: No. I wouldn't say we did.

Brower: Because the younger generation is usually more militant than the older one, I guess.

E. Gordon: He was involved in that the part of the time when we were away. When I got old enough I was more or less not at home, since we lived in San Francisco for that nine-year period.

Brower: So there really wasn't the occasion for any disagreement.

E. Gordon: I'm sure we had discussions, but there was no disagreement. I think we'd agree with what he felt.

Mrs. Gordon: I think all of us did.

E. Gordon: Agreed with what he felt.

Mrs. Gordon: Which was to do the best you can in a peaceful fashion, rather than going out being militant.

Brower: Certainly, for that time, nothing else would have worked, it seems to me.

E. Gordon: Right. Even if how futile it may have seemed, because you may be just a few doing this. At that time there weren't really that many blacks in the area, either, on this side of the Bay.

Brower: Not until after the war.

E. Gordon: Right. On this side of the Bay or in San Francisco.

Brower: You wouldn't have any idea of the numbers, would you?

E. Gordon: Well, there weren't very many. I can remember that. Even in San Francisco there weren't more than a couple of thousand, before the war and the influx. Even in San Francisco, so, I don't think there were that many over here.

Brower: I'm pretty sure not. People have said two or three hundred in Berkeley in the 30s, and I'm inclined to believe that's pretty close.

E. Gordon: I would believe that too, because most Negroes were confined to very small areas, as far as Berkeley was concerned. We lived more or less in the center of the San Pablo Park area. We lived on Acton Street all my life. That area was about the only area with any population of blacks in it, and that didn't extend much further than on the west to San Pablo and on the east much above Sacramento.

Brower: This group was associated with Pullman trains, wasn't it?

E. Gordon: I guess quite a few of the blacks who were here maybe were working on the railroads.

Brower: I didn't ask you anything about religion last time. I wondered if religion played a big part in your family or not a very big part.

E. Gordon: Well, I know we believed in the Lord, but I wouldn't say that we were very religious.

Brower: Did you go to church on Sundays?

E. Gordon: I went to Christian Science Sunday school.

Mrs. Gordon: Until you were--

E. Gordon: Eighteen, nineteen.

Mrs. Gordon: Yes. I can remember your taking me there.

E. Gordon: Yes. Mama and Daddy didn't go. I don't know how I happened to. It was my mother, particularly. She knew somebody in the Christian Science church and she would go herself. It was the one here in Berkeley, up on Dwight Way. It's still there.

Brower: It's a beautiful church, lovely architecture.

Mrs. Gordon: Yes. That would be a Maybeck, I believe. Yes, a Maybeck.

E. Gordon: So this would be mainly for my brother and myself, and I guess my sister too, that we would go to Sunday school.

Brower: But it was not your parents' church, especially?

E. Gordon: No, not necessarily. I can remember Daddy was a Baptist, but he didn't spent much time going to church. He didn't have much time to go to church.

Mrs. Gordon: He certainly didn't.

E. Gordon: When he didn't have to be going around making speeches, traveling here, traveling there, he was happy to be just home, and being with his family and being able to just relax.

Brower: But it wasn't a family that had evening prayers together and that sort of thing.

E. Gordon: No. Nothing like that.

Mrs. Gordon: No.

Brower: Did you say grace?

E. Gordon: We did say grace, yes.

Mrs. Gordon: It was usually the Christian Science grace, wasn't it?

E. Gordon: [recites the grace] "Divine Love always has met, always will meet every human need."

Mrs. Gordon: We've carried it on as far as our kids are concerned.

E. Gordon: It covers just about everything, when you think about it.

Brower: When I spoke on the phone to Tarea Hall Pittman, she said she thought your father was very active in a Negro fraternity.

Mrs. Gordon: Yes.

E. Gordon: He was very active with the Alpha Phi Alpha.

Brower: She said he particularly loved the initiations. Do you remember anything about that?

E. Gordon: Yes. I remember the initiations, all right. Because they had the meetings quite often at our house. At that time they didn't have their own fraternity house. I know that the chapter that was organized in connection with the University of California was organized at our house. They did try to get a house later on on campus, but financially it wasn't a success and they didn't continue it. They would have these meetings quite often.

I can remember the initiations. We were small, but there was one time they were initiating my uncle, George Hurd, the one we were talking about, and they'd put him in a chair. (I don't know if I should be telling this about the Alphas.) [laughter] They put him in this chair and he was blindfolded. I can remember being in our bunk beds, my brother and I. We just couldn't understand what they were doing to our Uncle George! [laughter] I know it was frightening, I'll tell you.

Brower: I asked Mrs. Pittman if your father had a sense of humor and she said, "Oh, my yes!"

E. Gordon: Oh, yes. I think he took care of a lot of those fellows. I can remember them talking about it, because I went into the same fraternity myself. A number of them were just waiting for me to come through because they could remember Daddy taking care of them' [laughter]

Brower: And they'd take it out on you?

E. Gordon: Yes.

Brower: Did they?

E. Gordon: I think they did, a little bit. I know my brother didn't go in because of the fact that they harrassed him too much.

Brower: He was probably affected by what they'd done to your Uncle George.

E. Gordon: No, it was something else. [laughter] I don't want to say anything against the fraternity.

Mrs. Gordon: How about a personality conflict, perhaps?

E. Gordon: No, I think that one of the biggest things was the fact that there would be what they call hazing. They were doing it here on the campus when there were very few blacks on the campus to start with. And when they have you dress up.

Mrs. Gordon: And it wouldn't be at the time when the other fraternities were going through their hazing procedures. So, you stood out!

E. Gordon: You already stood out in the first place on the campus, right here at Berkeley. My brother just didn't like to be subjected to something like that. That was the thing that he objected to.

Mrs. Gordon: I think both of you are very shy, really.

E. Gordon: Well, kind of quiet.

Mrs. Gordon: Very quiet.

Brower: It doesn't seem awfully characteristice of your father either.

E. Gordon: Yes, I thought he was really pretty quiet himself.

Mrs. Gordon: I think so, too.

E. Gordon: I guess he'd impress other people in different ways than he would impress us. But he was still not the, the overwhelming type of politician that you would think about. But he managed to get over.

Brower: But apparently something about this initiation thing really appealed to him quite a bit.

E. Gordon: Well, maybe he liked to put out a little punishment now and then. [laughter]

Brower: Apparently he did have a kind of mischievous streak.

E. Gordon: He was a boxer and a wrestler, so, evidently he liked to have a little bodily contact. In football too. He said you had to be a little mean to play football. They said I wasn't mean enough.

Mrs. Gordon: Yes. You weren't. No, definitely not.

E. Gordon: The only time I made a tackle, I can remember, it was in scrimmage and it was with my brother. I was on the Ramblers and he was on the varsity. I think I was playing right end. Everybody else was running around there. One time my brother, he came around. Every time he'd come around, I'd stop him. My brother wondered: "Why do you get me and all the other times, the fellows they go all the way around you?" I said, "Well, I know you!" [laughter] We used to get into scuffles a little bit around the house. So I knew him and I was a little larger than he was too. All the other fellows I didn't know so [laughter]. Daddy said I was like directing traffic out there.

Brower: You didn't really get into it?

E. Gordon: No. Well, they just got around me, that's all. I wasn't really that fast either.

Brower: But your poor brother got it.

E. Gordon: He played football in high school, so he'd had experience in football.

Brower: [to Mrs. Gordon] Did you think your father-in-law had a sense of humor?

Mrs. Gordon: Oh, yes. Yes.

Brower: Because I asked your husband if he thought his father was funny and he said he didn't think so. Maybe that was the wrong way to ask it.

Mrs. Gordon: No. I would say that Daddy wasn't the comedian type of individual. I guess it was the way he said things. He would joke. I think he's impressed our kids with his sense of humor.

Brower: Did your children have a nice relationship with their grandfather?

Mrs. Gordon: Oh, yes. They love him dearly, loved him dearly, I should say.

E. Gordon: Although they didn't see too much of him because he was down in the Islands.

Mrs. Gordon: Yes. But they would come back and stay with us. We had the house on Acton Street, from I guess, '59 to '62. They would always stay with us--perhaps a month and a half or two months while they were here, and the kids got to know him during that time.

Brower: Did they get that kind of leave every year?

Mrs. Gordon: Yes, and Daddy would never take a vacation. He would never take Mama traveling anywhere. He'd head right back to Berkeley.

E. Gordon: It seemed more like a month and a half. It wasn't two months, I'd say.

Mrs. Gordon: Yes.

E. Gordon: They'd always come back here. That would be the only time our children were able to get a chance to see him for any length of time.

Mrs. Gordon: And, of course, they weren't in school at that time.

E. Gordon: No. It would be in summer. When we went down to the Islands in 1958, Ed was only--

Mrs. Gordon: I'd say he was seven. He was born in '51.

E. Gordon: We didn't visit until about '58. Daddy had been down there at least three years before we went down there.

Mrs. Gordon: Yes.

E. Gordon: Our son may have been. You say six?

Mrs. Gordon: I'd say six. Yes, he was closer to seven.

E. Gordon: He was very small, in the slides we have when we went down to the Islands. Our daughter would be twelve, I guess--she was six or seven years older--at the time when we visited down in the Islands.

Brower: Did you enjoy that visit?

Mrs. Gordon: It was great. He was a judge at that particular time, so he was no longer in government house. They took the kids visiting and let us relax because we were so exhausted from flying.

E. Gordon: From the trip down.

Mrs. Gordon: In that prop plane, and he hates to fly. So did Daddy. Daddy hated to fly too. But we were just exhausted.

E. Gordon: We went into New York first and then changed planes there. Then we flew from there down to San Juan, and then over to Saint Thomas. It took all night and I didn't sleep at all on the plane, for that matter.

Brower: There's a reference I didn't quite understand in one of these letters. A man named Benny Evans says, "As you probably know, I attended his court in Charlotte Amalie, Puerto Rico."

Mrs. Gordon: No, that's not correct. No.

E. Gordon: Charlotte Amalie would be—

Mrs. Gordon: In the Virgin Islands.

E. Gordon: Saint Thomas.

Mrs. Gordon: Yes.

Brower: I wonder how he happened to attend that court.

Mrs. Gordon: Perhaps he was visiting. He might've known Daddy.

E. Gordon: Quite a few people who knew him from around here came down there and visited him, in court or otherwise.

Mrs. Gordon: Yes. I don't think they were ever at a loss for people, because so many different people came to see them or stopped en route.

E. Gordon: There were always friends of friends who stopped by too.

Mrs. Gordon: Yes. Right.

Brower: Several people speak of visiting, so it must have been a steady procession, I think.

Mrs. Gordon: It was. I thought Mama was doing a good job as a travel, a touring lady. And she loved it! She loved it. She'd take someone out every day. She'd come down and meet the plane.

E. Gordon: And friends would be on the cruise ships that would come in there too.

Mrs. Gordon: Yes.

E. Gordon: Some of the friends that they'd known over the years.

Have you talked to Mama at all?

Brower: Not really. I'm still going to try to work on it.

Mrs. Gordon: She will have much more information. Probably she would remember the names, remember those people.

Brower: Well, I'm still hoping she'll feel up to it later on. I guess she has an awful lot of stuff to go through.

E. Grodon: Yes. She feels she wants to answer all these letters that people have sent since Daddy died. She feels she's got to do it herself and no one else can do it. Since they took the time to sit down and write her personally, she feels she has to respond to every one of them. She just does it by herself. You can't object to it.

Brower: She's a very determined lady.

Mrs. Gordon: And an independent one.

E. Gordon: Yes.

Brower: It's interesting because you might think that somebody of your father's prominence would have sort of dominated her, but I don't get that feeling at all.

E. Gordon: No.

Mrs. Gordon: I don't think so at all. No.

E. Gordon: No, I don't think he was that way. Even though out in public, as far as other people are concerned, they might get that feeling. As I said, on my mother's side of the family the women are very independent. And she played her part as far as any positions that he had. He needed someone like Mama to take care of those things, I think. And she would do that. She would take care of the social aspects more than I think Daddy would even be concerned about.

Mrs. Gordon: I don't think he really was.

Brower: Probably he didn't think much about it.

E. Gordon: No. If it happened, it happened. Mama would be the one.

Mrs. Gordon: Mama would plan.

E. Gordon: Right.

Mrs. Gordon: She'd say, "Well, no, we're going to this at such and such a date." And that was it.

As far as the YWCA [Young Women's Christian Association], she was very active in that, and she had her ceramics and her jewelry making.

E. Gordon: She always had some kind of hobby. She didn't work, but she had the YWCA and she worked with that for a number of years.

Mrs. Gordon: Then she was down at Oakland.

E. Gordon: On the Y Board of Directors. And also down at Asilomar.

Brower: She never worked after she was married?

E. Gordon: No.

Brower: Or before?

E. Gordon: I can't remember her ever working. No, I don't think she did. I don't remember hearing of her working before.

Mrs. Gordon: She didn't teach?

Brower: She got her teaching credential, didn't she?

Mrs. Gordon: Yes. I have a feeling maybe it was practice teaching or maybe it was substitute teaching. I sort of thought that she taught for a while.

E. Gordon: I'm not sure.

Mrs. Gordon: But it might have been before you were born.

E. Gordon: I would say so.

Brower: There seems to be a good deal of interest in questions like: Who really was the head of the family? Were the decisions mutal? Did they both have a hand in deciding things?

E. Gordon: I think they both had a hand in deciding some of the things. And remembering back as far as childhood, I think they did most of their discussing behind closed doors, so we weren't left in a quandary as to what we were going to be doing. I just feel that way.

Brower: And somebody came out with a decision?

E. Gordon: That's right. Then they came out, this was unanimous that this was the way it was going to be.

Brower: There are lots of references in letters to your father and General James Doolittle. Did your father ever talk about him?

E. Gordon: Yes. I can remember him talking about him. He was boxing here about the same time as Daddy. That's what I can remember particularly about him. I can't remember the stories that Daddy would tell in detail, but I remember that for the size that Jimmy Doolittle was, he was quite a boxer. Daddy was a light heavyweight or something like that. I can remember that.

Mrs. Gordon: General Doolittle also came by the house.

E. Gordon: One time after the war. Yes.

Mrs. Gordon: After the war. Mama had him autograph one of the children's books for our daughter. He personally signed it.

E. Gordon: He also autographed a replica of one of the liberty ships that Mama launched.

Mrs. Gordon: Christened. Yes.

E. Gordon: The Hope. I remember him signing that. But we didn't meet him that day, I don't think.

Mrs. Gordon: No, no. I think we must have been in San Francisco at that time or perhaps away. We may've been in Washington, the state of Washington.

Brower: [to Mrs. Gordon] What do you like to remember best about your father-in-law?

Mrs. Gordon: I don't know. I guess his warmth. He had to put his arms around you. He always had to kiss you. He was just a warm, loving, loving individual. I think he more or less lived for his children. When they didn't come to see him, he wondered why, [raised voice] Why hadn't they been to see him? in his gruff voice, but it was still—

E. Gordon: Gentle. You wouldn't think that he would be gentle, but I'd say he was gentle toward them.

Mrs. Gordon: Oh, indeed he was!

E. Gordon: Yes.

Brower: Lots of people commented on that, that he was a gentle man, in the real sense.

E. Gordon: Size and strength, he still had that. As I can remember, he'd grab us to just to let us know he was still as strong, even after he was sick.

Mrs. Gordon: On the knee.

E. Gordon: He'd do that. He'd squeeze you hard. Just a gentle squeeze, that's what it was supposed to be. [laughter] But it was still quite a grip.

Mrs. Gordon: [imitating a response to a squeeze] "Oh, Daddy!" [laughter]

E. Gordon: Or slap you on the back.

Brower: Can you think of things that you'd like to talk about that I haven't brought out?

Mrs. Gordon: I don't think so.

E. Gordon: I can't think of anything.

Brower: Well, I was interested in the political thing and the religious thing, and we got that covered. They must've been liberal Baptists to let you go to a Christian Science Sunday school.

E. Gordon: Well, I guess so. I can't remember my mother going to church that much either, although she'd go occasionally to the Christian Science church. Let's see, her father, I think he was a Baptist. His name was John Fisher.

Mrs. Gordon: Methodist.

E. Gordon: Methodist. So we would go to that church when we were in the city staying with our grandparents in San Francisco.

Mrs. Gordon: Yes. He was one of the deacons in Bethel.

Brower: Thank you both very much. It was good of you to help.

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AN INTERVIEW WITH ELIZABETH GORDON DIXON

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INTERVIEW HISTORY

Place: Seminar Room, Bancroft Library

Date: March 15, 1979

Conduct of Interview: Mrs. Dixon was good enough to come to the campus for her interview, which took about two hours and a half, after which she went on to her work. Mrs. Dixon is employed in the Alameda County Probation Department, making three members of her family who have been associated with Corrections.

Her recollections of her childhood, as the baby sister of two much older brothers, and of her vacations in Riverside with her father's parents are vivid. Her parents gave her a secure vantage point from which to view racial prejudice and she was able to select compatible friends and to pursue her interests--chiefly in the dance. Later, as a divorced woman with a small child, she was able to exploit that interest and her skill and ultimately it enabled her to get into the field of correction through "the back door." Her memories of her father are full of pride and warmth.

The transcript was edited chiefly to delete questions of the interviewer that proved unproductive and occasionally to bring the discussion back to Walter Gordon when it had wandered. Mrs. Dixon's changes in the transcript were thoughtful and clarifying.

Anne Brower
Interviewer

INTERVIEW WITH ELIZABETH GORDON DIXON

[Interview 1: March 15, 1979]##

Brower: Mrs. Dixon, as the only girl in your family did you have a special relationship with your father?

Dixon: This, I think, is often thought, that being the girl I would have special privileges. This was not the case. The specific responsibilities were divided among the three of us and the distinction would be (based on the way he was raised within his family) that there's a difference between the male and the female.

Brower: How did that difference show itself?

Dixon: Only in terms of playing with each other. When I was real small, yes, but as you can tell by the difference in ages I was just a baby sister.

Brower: Six years younger than your younger brother?

Dixon: And that's how I was treated: this is your baby sister, you protect her. Yes, she can be a nuisance [laughs] because I'd get into their special things. But then that was also taught us--you were to respect each other's property. If one of us gives permission, that's okay.

Brower: The boys saw their father by going off to football practices and things, but how did you manage it? Did you go off to football practices too?

Dixon: No, that was not acceptable. That was boy's stuff. See, there was a definite line.

##This symbol indicates that a tape or a segment of a tape has begun or ended. For a guide to the tapes see page 220.

Brower: But as I remember what your father said, that didn't extend to education. In fact, the women in his family had been better educated than the men in his family. Was that also true in your family? The idea wasn't that because you were a girl you didn't go to school or to college?

Dixon: Oh, no, no, no. That was beside the point. At that point, it was very definite: education and the importance of having an education primarily to be self-reliant and self-sufficient. If you were to choose not to go as far as the college level, then that would mean an alternate profession. But you would still have to prepare. Either way, there would have to be some skill that we'd have to develop--whatever. Naturally, he would stress college for his love of it and the experience.

Brower: You went to Oregon to school?

Dixon: I went two years here and then to Lewis and Clark in Portland, Oregon.

Brower: Was that hard for you, to go away from home?

Dixon: Oh, very definitely. That was the first time I had ever been away per se that distance. I had been to relatives right here in the state of California, but not clear out of the state. [laughs]

Brower: And not to stay for that long a period.

Dixon: Yes, it was two years.

Brower: I bet it was hard on your mother and father too.

Dixon: Yes. They were used to still having me around because by then my brothers were up and out--had been away from home.

Brower: I know that your mother went up on a couple of occasions.

Dixon: Yes, there were special events. One was actually shortly after I had arrived, my first semester; my father spoke at the convocation for the graduating class. They kept that as a surprise. I didn't know about it. I received a typewritten note signed by the president to come to his office at a specific time. I thought, "My word, I hadn't been here long enough to get in trouble." I just couldn't imagine what it would be and then he said he wished to let me know my father was coming up. But they hadn't told me. They had kept it a surprise.

Brower: They were pretty good at keeping secrets—like "This is Your Life."

Dixon: Oh, yes.

Brower: That occurred when you were up in Oregon too, didn't it?

Dixon: That occurred right after the convocation. Mother knew before she came up to [see] me and I was alerted to what was going on. She had already called me. What was funny at that particular time: My father was saying, "Gee, I wish it was a school break now so you could come back with us." I said, "Yes, that would be kind of fun, wouldn't it?" He said, "Gee, too bad it wasn't even a weekend," because then I could fly down to Berkeley where we lived. But they still had to go to Los Angeles--he thought--because he had a meeting down there and had been asked to speak. He said he didn't know too much about the group and all of this kind of thing. So as I kissed him good-by, I said I'd see him at Easter time--no, summer. It would be summer before I'd see him. I was already packed, ready to fly, because I had to catch the next bus leaving campus to get to my flight on time.

Brower: Didn't they almost put you on the same flight out of Portland by accident?

Dixon: Yes. I said, "No, that won't do," because that's what I understood his flight to be. I said, "That won't do. That's too close." So he was <u>really</u> surprised.

Brower: That must have been very exciting.

Dixon: Yes, because when I went down we didn't stay with any relatives. I didn't stay with any relatives and I went to my friend's house.

Brower: So there was no way of his--

Dixon: --Catching up with us.

Brower: Your brothers didn't come down for that?

Dixon: No, they were away in the service. So you see at that point I was the only one who could come down there.

Brower: Could we go back a little. We've already got you in college and I didn't ask you much about your childhood. You spoke about the responsibilities that the three children had. Were those determined by your father or your mother? Who was the disciplinarian in the family?

Dixon: They were united and it was just presented that these were the rules of living in this house together as a family and each of us had our special responsibilities--starting with the basic one--your ownself. You keep up and pick up with your items. If you lose them or misplace them, that's your problem and you will have

Dixon: to look for them. If it's lost, it's lost. Then as far as just basic learning--washing, ironing--the basic things of life were learned by all of us including my brothers. At that point, it wasn't a matter that, well, men don't do this and this is the men's job and this is the women's job. They learned the basics and I had my chores too as I can remember. I know I had mine also.

Then as we grew older I became more aware that the distinction became in terms of my helping my mother more within the house and my brothers helping my father outside in the yard. I wasn't out in the yard--maybe to water the lawn, but as far as keeping the garden and the flowers, no, that was not my responsibility; that was my brothers'. The dusting of furniture and this type of thing, these were mine. As far as washing dishes, that was rotated between my brothers. I remember at one point that I wasn't yet old enough to wash the dishes--or I did certain utensils only. But as far as setting the table, it became my job solely, whereas at one time that rotated also. But clearing the table--

Brower: But eventually it became your job?

Dixon: Yes, at the time when they went out. It had to do with our ages and I can't remember the exact teen-age. It was [as] a teenager. At that point, the rules were reevaluated. When my brother reached that age he would no longer be obligated to wash the dishes. Then it was my next brother and myself until he reached the given age and then he no longer was responsible for doing the dishes. Then I had that job solely. There was still the same basic rule that if you came home and decided to fix a snack for yourself you cleared that snack away and rinsed off the dishes. It wasn't that you were obligated to wash them, but you certainly didn't come home and just leave them there knowing at the same time dinner was going to be prepared.

Brower: Was this united front characteristic of other aspects of your family life? How do you think decisions were made about jobs and housing and all that sort of thing? Was it a joint thing? Do you think your mother participated fully in those decisions?

Dixon: Yes, I do. As far as I know. As far as that type of thing, that wasn't discussed with us as children. So we would only know what was to occur after the decision had been made. If you are referring like to a vacation or something, then we would know we were going down to our grandparents. But that was established.

Brower: Do you remember your grandparents?

Dixon: Oh, yes.

Brower: All four of them?

Dixon: Oh, very definitely.

Brower: Were you fond of them?

Dixon: Yes, I had a good time in both homes. With my father's parents, it was going to their house every summer.

Brower: In Southern California?

Dixon: In Southern California in Riverside, at which time that's the hottest place, in Riverside. I can still remember going there at the time when the age discrepancy was still important and I was not yet in kindergarten. I can envision this on the basis-- I remember that they lived in several houses. I remember both houses that they were in. The first one in which they lived (I think it's the first one, it might have been the second one) but at any rate it was directly across from the swimming pool in the park. One swimming pool was directly across. I could see it from my grandfather's porch. Okay, since my brothers were older, my father and my mother didn't place the responsibility of my care when they were socializing with friends their age. So then I would stand and watch them as they went with their friends.

Brower: Oh, you poor thing!

Dixon: I watched. However, there would be other times when they would be obligated to take me for a little while. But no one expected them to watch me all day long. No, my parents did not do that. They said that's not their responsibility. I just happened to be a girl and I just happened to be so much younger.

Brower: Did you learn to swim down there?

Dixon: No, I didn't. I did not learn how to swim until I was an adult, because I had a terrible fear of it. You know how kids think it's fun to pull somebody under the water, and then they would hold me under longer so I was really gasping, before I could get air. And they would just laugh and say, "Well, that's the way you learn." I said, "No, I cannot learn when you're pulling me like that."

As to what a day in my grandfather's house was like. Okay, in my vision, to me, both my father and grandfather (my father's father, Big Dad) were just huge men. To me they looked like they were six feet ten inches. But then, as I say, age-wise I was still in kindergarten. My grandfather would take time to talk with me.

Brower: He was a very tall man?

Dixon: Yes, he was six feet four inches and he did weigh about 275. I remember he would talk to me or call me. I remember in the morning I'd usually follow my grandmother around, who was very short. She was about four feet eleven inches. She looked like what you'd envision as a typical grandmother. She was round and jolly, and she'd be cooking all the stuff for breakfast. To me, it would look like dinner because you would have hot cereal, you'd have cold cereal, you'd have eggs, you'd have two kinds of meat (either bacon and ham or sausage and a combination), and naturally they'd have to have their hominy grits (which I can't stand), and then hot biscuits or hot cornbread. That was just breakfast and everyone must eat breakfast.

Brower: You didn't eat that way in Berkeley?

Dixon: No, there it would be usually just a hot cereal; that was enough for me. I didn't like breakfast anyway and I wasn't at all particular about eggs. But for Grandma everybody sat down and this was the breakfast you ate--a little bit of something of everything. So I remember her always cooking.

Brower: She must have been always cooking! If lunch and dinner were on that same scale, she must have been cooking all day long.

Dixon: Lunch was the same way, and with her it was homemade pies and cakes and all this type of thing. Then my grandfather, I remember he would take us to get watermelon. He would drive to the field where they were grown, and then he'd let us out of the car. We could go look and pick out one. He'd let each one of us pick out one and then he'd cart us on back to the house. But that was a special treat.

Brower: Part of going to Riverside.

Dixon: The second house had a porch all the way around it, so you could go out and sit. Again, I remember standing on the porch, watching my brothers play down at the bottom or around the house. Around this house, there was a huge yard of grass. I remember my great-grandmother's house, which was at the end on the same property too. I believe she was my great-grandmother.

Brower: This was your father's grandmother?

Dixon: Yes, I believe she was my father's mother's mother. I'm not too sure, but I remember my "treat" was to visit my grandmother. They had chickens in the back; I never fed them because I didn't like them. I remember my grandmother taking me with her to go see "Grandma" [great-grandmother]; I remember walking to Grandma's. Grandma seemed very small. She was small like my grandmother, but

Dixon: much more slender. I just remember she was by herself and had this house that was next to Big Dad's and Grandma's. I remember cousins that would come over. They'd introduce me and say, "This is Elizabeth."

Brower: Did your mother enjoy visiting her parents-in-law, do you think, when she went down to Riverside?

DixonL Yes.

Brower: She was very fond of them, wasn't she?

Dixon: Yes.

Brower: That's nice because that doesn't always happen.

Dixon: Yes, if there were frictions we as children didn't hear. We were taught to respect the household—the respect that my father held for his father--because if Big Dad said [it] that was it.

Brower: He laid down the law.

Dixon: But I didn't hear a bunch of arguing or this type of thing, so I would have to assume that whatever was set down in the house, that was it. Naturally as children you don't stand up and talk back to an adult. That is a no-no, definitely! You may ask. What the adults tell you to do, you do. The same expectations that were in our own immediate household here in Berkeley were carried to Riverside. We were not guests.

Brower: You were part of that household?

Dixon: We were visiting, yes, but we were not guests--where Grandma and Big Dad took care of us while we sat.

Brower: Did your father come along on those vacations?

Dixon: Oh, yes, that was our vacation.

Brower: You must have seen quite a bit more of him there than you did at home, judging from his Berkeley schedule.

Dixon: Yes. That's true.

Brower: What about the San Francisco grandparents?

Dixon: Both of them were tall and slender. They were about five feet nine inches--my grandmother, Nanna, and Granddad, who was just about an inch taller, and their build was very slender. Going to

Dixon: their house it was like going to the top of the mountain in that they lived on a very steep hill which you walked up. I learned a lot about walking. I also learned about the streetcars. Again, I recall my going over and staying by myself with them as well as going with my brothers. All three of us went over for a couple of days or a week by ourselves without our parents. We would go over for a Sunday dinner. That was an outing, to go over to San Francisco to the big city, to go up this very steep hill. You couldn't roller skate on it at all. That was out of the question. It was that steep. In going to their house you again had to go up a steep stairway. But right in the front of their house they had a cemented area which would be comparable to a patio with a garden inside. We could carry our skates. I remember I could carry my skates to entertain myself out there, outside.

Brower: But not on that hill!

Dixon: But not on the hill. Then in going into the house—both grandparents' houses had a formal dining room with a circular table. I hadn't even thought of that until now. Both of them had circular tables, those huge oak tables. That was a central gathering [place] for eating and conversation.

Brower: The family ate together?

Dixon: Oh, yes.

Brower: Was that true of Berkeley too?

Dixon: Yes, as much as we could. My father would stay long enough to eat and go back out. We all knew what time dinner was scheduled, at a certain time based around my father's schedule—and everybody was to be there. Unless--as we got older, then our activities didn't get us back there at that time always.

Brower: What did you talk about around that dinner table? Do you remember? Was the conversation centered on your activities, what you children were doing or was it more your parents' or was it both?

Dixon: I think it was some of both, but not that much conversation was held during the dinner hour.

Brower: It wasn't the time for that?

Dixon: No, it would be more after dinner, when the table was cleared. I don't remember too much deep conversation, lingering at the dinner table, per se. It was to get in and get the dinner things out of the way, and then sit down leisurely, when no one had anything left to do afterwards. After dishes were done, it was time for homework. My father had to go on with his schedule.

Brower: But you had a little time together before you scattered?

Dixon: Yes.

Brower: I wondered how that worked and what things you talked about.

Dixon: At breakfast time, we'd all be there. Whatever we ate, we were there at that time and then each went to their own schedule. And we were together at dinner, unless Daddy had a dinner meeting.

Brower: Do you remember the time when your father was still in the police department?

Dixon: Only as far as the uniform, that's all, and very vaguely.

Brower: At that time his schedule was such that I don't see how he saw anybody! He was also in law school, and coaching, and was working for the NAACP.

Dixon: I think I saw him once in uniform. It might have been just my imagination. I don't know. I don't remember. But as far as the time he was coaching, I knew he worked somewhere in that big school up there and we'd go to the Campanile. They'd drive up there and I thought, "Oh, is that where you are teaching the students or playing football?" But it was the fact that he was my daddy and that happened to be his job. [laughs]

Brower: When you finally did get to school, did his status reflect on you? Did you share in his glory as an all-American football player and everything?

Dixon: Usually it came up from others other than myself because it was a matter of: This is my name--I am Betty. [laughs] Then it would come out, the next step [Gordon], am I related--who is my father? Then it would come up. But as far as just going and bringing up myself, "Well, guess who my father is?"--no. [laughter] Particularly with children, they envision all these things--"Oh, gee, that must be tremendous." Still, my first relationship was with my father, he's my daddy, and he has some jobs. It just so happened with his job you would see his name in print or something. But kids, on the basis that they had not experienced it, they couldn't quite understand me. They said, "Well, how come you don't talk more about your family?" I said, "In what way do you mean? I have a mother and father and two brothers. What are you talking about?" And then they would begin to talk, "If it were my father, I would say—" I felt I would become the braggart. I was proud of my father, yes, indeed; but he was still first my Daddy.

Brower: Your big interest was dancing, wasn't it?

Dixon: Oh, yes, ballet. Yes, it started, I think, when I was about three. I remember my first costume was green. I was a fairy and I had sparkle all on the top. I remember dancing by myself with the big girls, so I was in seventh heaven! The "big" girls may have been no more than seven!

Brower: Did your mother make your costume?

Gordon: She made all my costumes and she sews beautifully. She made them all as if they were dresses to the extent that the seams were finished. If the thinner material were satin, then she would line them, also, any laces or things were all sewed on by hand. She made many a costume--for each recital--the teacher had one yearly; therefore a new set of costumes was needed each year. There might be one or three costumes, or there might be four, depending upon how many dances there were.

Brower: Was your father proud of your dancing ability?

Dixon: Oh, yes. Oh, he came to every recital. I have to give patience to my father. He sat through all my dancing recitals.

Brower: It must have been hard to manage with his schedule.

Dixon: They were held on Sunday and he sat through my piano recitals as well. He sat through both recitals. You know how it is, parents love to sit to hear a child plunking or to see a child dancing.

Brower: How long did you keep up your dancing? Through college?

Dixon: Yes, through college. I did not take dancing classes per se in Oregon. There weren't many studios. At that time, Oregon was still very prejudiced; this I was aware of before I went up. The prejudice there wasn't to the extent it was in the South.

Brower: Oregon is redneck in many ways.

Dixon: You see, when I went there it was in the fifties. You would think some of the prejudice would have been gone, but it wasn't. It was interesting as far as my roommates--

But let's get back to my Dad. He would come to all my recitals and graduations. I remember him coming to all graduations. In school, he came when we graduated, that was a definite committment--whoever else or wherever he was wanted, that had to go by the wayside because he set priorities for our special events.

Brower: So you didn't feel any resentment that he was away so much?

Dixon: Oh, yes, I missed him. I'd say, "What kind of job do you have?"

Brower: Other fathers would come home!

Dixon: Yes, and I'd say, "Do you have to go again?" For him to sit up and play cards with us--that wasn't my father. He'd talk with us, yes, or reason with us, yes.

Brower: But it was not a palsy-walsy kind of relationship?

Dixon: No, and it wouldn't be with me because I was a girl--only lady-type activities. He would enjoy through the dancing performances. As I said, I didn't take dancing in Oregon--I did not dance up there until a particular event. My roommates knew of my interest in dance. Three of them were very musical. They knew I danced and they talked me into dancing. I said, "I don't want to dance. I haven't practiced. I'd be stiff." So I did dance once in a special May Day affair up there. Then I came back [to Berkeley] and I resumed taking from a teacher from whom I had always taken [dancing] from age three. I danced with the old graduate girls. There were about eight of us who were still dancing for our own enjoyment. I wasn't teaching any dancing. Several of them were dancing professionally and teaching. So it was just fun for us and also I had no doubt about it, my teacher was pleased that we were all proficient dancers. She had done her job, she could see her work, with the teaching of youngsters over and over again, she could see her work paid off--just like a coming back. Then after while we ceased the classes because of conflicts.

Brower: Was it family responsibilities for you that kept you from going on with it? You married.

Dixon: Yes, I married. Well, after I gave my concert, that was before I went away to Oregon. I gave a concert and I was thinking about it then—whether or not to go professionally. There were some persons my father had met in Hollywood whom I had not known.

##

Dixon: I had no idea he knew these persons and I had no idea they were even in the audience.

Brower: Oh, they were at the concert?

Dixon: They were at the concert, but I wasn't told until after the concert. As friends of the family, my father introduced me. The gentleman (I wish I could remember his name; his first name was Aaron, I believe) began to explain his responsibilities down in Hollywood. Of course, naturally, I said, "Ooh, Hollywood, a professional dancer!" He said he believed that I had the ability, there was no

Dixon: question that I had the ability, and he asked whether or not I would consider it. At that point, my father said it was up to me--what did I think about it?--and to think on it.

Of course, my heart was pulled because at that time I was in love for the first time, with my former husband. I was thinking, "Boy, to go out there and dance all the time." I knew I loved to dance; there was no question. By then I knew I just enjoyed it myself, and I enjoyed that other people enjoyed watching me as much as I enjoyed dancing. Another factor, it came back in terms of college because this would mean an interruption, for what length of time it would be unknown. And I had enough knowledge about show business to know that you may make it "big" or you don't. There would be a lot of competition, more competition than ever.

I also had to bring it into focus in terms of my age at that particular time, and in terms of society's age. At that point, they didn't think anyone other than Caucasians could do a classical ballet, period. That was a no-no. The only type of dancing that was prevalent at that time was either modern dance or African. My teacher had taught me primarily ballet with basics in modern. In addition, I went to other teachers who gave me the broader aspects of dancing: modern, Spanish, Hawaiian, and ballroom dancing--all different aspects. So it meant either modern dancing or what I called assimilated African dancing.

Brower: But what you were chiefly interested in was ballet really, wasn't it?

Dixon: My chief [interest] was Spanish dancing or--and see, that's another no-no. I don't look like I'm Spanish obviously [laughs] and I couldn't pass as Spanish, even if I were far away on the screen. I just felt that I would have to give up too much of my personal principle to go into it professionally, that I would then have to concede my principles.

Brower: You'd have to be a second-class citizen in the dancing world?

Dixon: Yes.

Brower: I'd like to ask you a little bit about that, about how your father and how your family prepared you for racism in the world. Do you remember at all what attitudes you were taught at home to enable you to live with that kind of thing?

Dixon: Yes, this started very young. This would be like my dancing, because at that time that was still a no-no. You're not to have any Negroes. That's just unheard of, to take a dancing class? But

Dixon: my mother had other ideas [laughter] because she loved dancing and loved music. She thought, "Oh, that would be kind of nice to have a daughter dance." So that's what we did. Very early we were taught that each of us is different, starting first within the family nucleus. We are individuals, but we're in the same family. When color came up, naturally starting with the name-calling--

Brower: When you came home from school--

Dixon: We came home from school--why did they want to call us a name? Okay, we were taught, names are names regardless of what color you put them on. It just so happens that "nigger" is used with Negro or anyone whom they think might be a Negro. We were taught the old childhood thing: "sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me," saying for the most part those people or other persons don't know you as a person. They see you from a distance. They may want to get to know you but since they don't, the only thing they can think of is to call you names to see what happens. On the other side, we were taught you respect a human being, they are human beings first. If for no other reason, you respect them as a human being. As children, we must make a choice as to which human being to whom we can relate and have enjoyment or is it another human being with whom you have friction and it's best not to stay with them. But you don't harm them; I didn't hear anything about this "when somebody hits you, you hit them back" or "if they call you a name, you call them a name back." It was on the basis that "the person" did not have any understanding or someone didn't teach them that there are different people. The neighborhood we had was integrated, so it would be kind of silly for us to go around and say, "Well, you're so-and-so." We all knew what we were. We all knew we were different, but it was a totally interracial neighborhood when we were growing up. Naturally it changed as people moved out, but basically it was mixed.

It was the same when we went to school. It was mixed. Our home teaching remained: other persons not having an understanding or they've never met a person of any other race, so they don't know you. They only know what they have been taught as they were growing up, and there are some people who just don't know about different races. They haven't had the opportunity. Along with it, our parents said, "Yes, there are certain prejudices"--and then we got the historical background from our father, who had lived in the South. We learned about Southern living, prejudice, and slaves. This was not stressed too much, because of living in California. But I believe the preparation was there: you go anywhere that you feel you have the interest to go--that's your purpose for going, the interest is drawing you to that particular place, not in terms of color or you're going to try to "break down" a barrier of color.

Brower: But it must have been kind of bitter in the matter of your dancing. By the time you were that old you must have felt bitterly, I should think, to be deprived of something that you enjoyed doing and have all those extra hurdles thrown at you.

Dixon: Interesting enough, with the dancing teacher I had, evidently she could be broad to take me--because it was a risk. My mother told me, when I was grown, that she took the risk of losing her other pupils. But she said, "No, I am going to take her." Now, it's true; I was the only one. But then I had been the only Negro in a lot of other places so this was not so different, so special. With the other races and nationalities--Italians, Orientals, all mixture of Caucasians, it was the same environment in school, in playing with the kids on the neighborhood block. So I didn't feel, hey, "I was the only one." It was more like the difference in color of skin tone. No doubt you've heard there's prejudice within each race. At an early age, there was comparison of skin color. It was taught basically, as I recall it, the same as you would take your primary colors. This is white. Now, you put your hand next to it--no, I'm not white. This is black--is my skin black? No, it's not black. Here's brown--well, I kind of blend in there. [laughs] It's just a mixture.

Brower: Every time I use the term "black" I think of your father because I know it's a word that he didn't like. Now it's more acceptable, I guess.

Dixon: Yes, it is. But that was my attitude toward color--because color tones begin within your own family circle.

Brower: But the generations feel differently about these things. Did you find yourself in disagreement with your father's low-keyed attack on prejudice? Did you feel he wasn't sufficiently militant?

Dixon: No, because within myself I feel that violence does not solve the problem. I take that back to the question of name-calling. I would think, "Well, why would I hit somebody because they called me a name?" Because I would think, if I were to hit them, "Afterwards they can call me that name again." To me this becomes ridiculous, to either fight or argue where you totally disagree with the person; that's hitting your head against a stone wall.

Brower: So you just avoid the people that you aren't going to enjoy being with anyhow?

Dixon: Yes, I don't take out extended time and effort to sit down and really become acquainted with them, to know how they are as a person, and not on a superficial first impression--hello, how

Dixon: do you do, and keep on going [laughter] because there are some personalities that are more interested in general controversy anyway.

Brower: Yes, there are people who like argument and those who don't.

Dixon: Yes, and I don't per se. If you want to sit down and discuss the specific topic, then I'm ready and I'm accessible. But to sit down and do what I call "gossiping of personalities," no, that I abhor because nine times out of ten to me that's like judging a person that you don't know.

Brower: I thought because you were of a different generation, there might be some difference with your parents in your feelings about that.

Dixon: I wasn't that conscious of prejudices. As I said, I would go into any store, any restaurant, as a teenager and I didn't stop to think, well, am I supposed to go in here or am I not supposed to go in here? There are certain places not mentioned, but you sensed. You might not be too sure about this place, but who knows? You went to the activity anyway--rather than hold back and try and second-guess how the other person is going to react to your presence. The "interest" prevailed.

So the fact that my father would talk and try to get understanding with another person and bring about a change of attitude. To me, that's better than punching somebody in the mouth--they get up and do the same thing--one proves one can hit better than another one. Where there is no communication, the problem stays unresolved. It wasn't, I'm sure, until I was almost a teenager that my father imparted to me some of the things he was doing--like having to go to department stores to break down that thing [discrimination].

But my father just did not discuss his business, per se, in front of us as children, as to the conflict and turmoil he was going through in carrying out his job. All we knew was that this was Daddy's job.

Brower: It's interesting that two of you chose to go into his profession. You're in corrections, as your father was, and your brother is too.

Dixon: Yes. I would say I came in the back door. [laughter] I would say the back door on the basis [that] after I married I still loved dancing and I was still dancing myself. After my divorce I thought, "Well, now how can I use the dancing?" By then I had to look at the realism of first maintaining a family--that was one thing. Also, I knew that in the dance field again, it's a selling job, and even though I had grown up in this area with people I've

Dixon: known, it's a lot of work to develop a studio and maintain it. Among your students, you might only receive one out of a thousand who's interested in becoming a professional and/or a professional teacher, which means approximately every two years you're starting over again to go back out and recruit, and I thought, "No, that's not my personality."

Brower: The selling aspect?

Dixon: The selling aspect is not my personality. They know I can dance. Yes, I can ask them if they want their child to learn. They may say yes, but I'm not one to keep selling it year after year. So the next closest field at that time was recreation, where I could use my dancing if the opportunity arose. I liked sports, which is completely at the opposite end of dancing. When first married, I worked for the recreation department, whereby I had the opportunity to use both skills (dance/games). Also, I picked up part-time jobs teaching folk-dance at the Catholic schools in Oakland, which I enjoyed tremendously. We'd have a big festival at the end of the year, and the parents would come. The sisters were so nice to my daughter; to save babysitting money they arranged that both boys and girls would take turns babysitting her during the period I would be teaching, three hours in the morning.

Brower: Do you mean the students in the school baby sat?

Dixon: Yes, I would bring her to the school itself, and if it were too cold, they would keep her inside in their office. The children would alternate when they were not out dancing their particular period. They were just tremendous and the sisters were tremendous.

Brower: What school was this?

Dixon: St. Elizabeth and St. Francis in Oakland. So then I was in recreation and then--

Brower: This was obviously after your marriage?

Dixon: After I was married, through my twenties.

Brower: Were you married when you were still in school?

Dixon: No, I had completed my education before I got married.

Brower: Your brothers didn't. They married, didn't they, while they were in school and initially ran into some static from your parents. Did your parents approve of your marriage?

Dixon: Yes, mine was okay. See, it was a matter of timing. Yes, you're right. I had completed my education and, of course, I'm a female--I think that was one aspect. With my brothers, my father just said, "You're just too young"--twenty, nineteen--"how are you going to take care of a wife?" Then it became, if you are old enough to be married, then you're old enough to assume the responsibility. But most important, how are you going to assume that responsibility? Another factor at that time was the war.

Brower: Your brother Ed told me that after the marriage your parents were very supportive and helpful in every way. Once it was accomplished, they didn't any longer make it difficult.

Dixon: No, they didn't. But my father talked before. Now, I remember those talks. They'd say, "I want to get married." "You're not old enough." "Yes, I am." This type of thing and this is how my father would sit down with them. "How do you propose to manage it? Where are you going to live?" All basic things, but all very real, all very real. Reality is what it was. They said, "No, we can manage." He said, "Well, you think on it some more." My father would still be shaking his head: "I don't know about that. You're just too young." Pretty soon they did get married and as I say, that was it.

Brower: By the time you were ready to marry, they felt that was okay?

Dixon: Yes, well, I had completed my education because I'm sure that was in the back of their minds. It was also practical in the back of my mind that I best have it; if I need to go to work, what could I do? At that point, you needed a degree. This comes back to knowing you're a minority. You've got to be better, so first you've got to have a degree because at that time one degree was fine. Not now, because so many more--all races have that opportunity.

Brower: Now no matter how many degrees you have--

Dixon: Yes, it doesn't matter; but <u>then</u> definitely. A high school diploma wouldn't get it. Also, I knew at that time, although having my dancing skill and in working at recreation, I had no alternate profession if I did not continue with the college--because I thought midway through, "Let me get out of here and get to work," just get going so to speak. I'd stop and think and I said, "Well, I can't be a secretary. There's more to being a secretary than answering the phones. I knew I could answer the phone and file. But as far as what a secretary does--type, shorthand--I had none of that. During the high school time, I was taking all college prep, so I didn't have anything left over, or too much room left, for electives. Because that was definite, that I should be preparing for college. That was established when I was back at the beginning, as a teenager: "You must go to high

Dixon: school. That's clear, right? As far as the academic studies, definitely college preparatory. Maybe you don't want to go to college, but this is the way you're going to be prepared, because I'm not going to have you repeating high school." So that was established. So there would be like one subject which I could elect.

Brower: This was Berkeley High?

Dixon: No, I went to Willard Junior High and then I went to University High in Oakland, which closed the year I graduated in '46.

Brower: It was the university's practice-teaching school and it was a very good school.

Dixon: Yes, we constantly had student teachers coming down from the University of California. So that was established.

Brower: I don't know how many children you have?

Dixon: I have only one daughter, Debbie.

Brower: Did your father enjoy his grandchildren?

Dixon: With him and very small children, it was like he's sit in awe. They're little people. There becomes the distinction: they're little people; aren't they cute? But that's it, they're children. There's the thing between adults and the children. "Yes, I'm your grandfather." Daddy would hug and kiss in greeting or leaving any of us: grandchildren, children, relatives, and friends. In respect to grandchildren, each one wanted his undivided attention; however my father believed in sharing with all the ones there--each one had his turn. At the point where it became a friction between two, my father's method was, "I suggest the two of you stop playing with each other for a while and each of you go to different areas." He would not get into [it], in terms of who was right, who was wrong. More often, "the interrupter" was competing with the other one, who already had my mother's or my father's undivided attention. You just aren't rude, and a child--it doesn't matter which age he is—you don't interrupt the other persons who are talking; you wait your turn. You might say, "Excuse me," and say what you have to say, but one did not just blast in. That my father didn't like. He didn't go for rudeness at all; he'd stop us in a minute. [laughter]

Brower: For those years they were in the Virgin Islands you must not have seen very much of them.

Dixon: No, I didn't. I only had the opportunity once, as far as going to the Islands. Debbie and I went.

Brower: Were you the only ones who did?

Dixon: No, all three of us did. Each one went in a different year. They were home every summer.

Brower: Do you think those were happy years for your father? I'm sure they missed Berkeley.

Dixon: Yes, also they missed us kids because they'd say, "I miss my family, I miss my family." But there was the other side. One of the main motivations, I believe, with my father was to achieve. Whatever he did, he wanted to do well. Whatever would present itself as an opportunity he would weigh it. Not that he discussed it with me, you understand, though I was an adult. But I just had the feeling, he would go through the pros and cons and weigh it. Okay, if I go here--automatically he knows he won't be around us kids. At that particular time my brothers were still in the Army. We weren't all living right here in Berkeley at that time.

Brower: In '55?

Dixon: Yes, I think one might have been in school in San Francisco.

Brower: It was pretty long after the war.

Dixon: Yes, but my older brother was called up for the Korean War. My other brother was going to school.

Brower: Did you go into corrections when your father was still alive?

Dixon: Oh, yes. I came in through the "back door," starting at Juvenile Hall in San Leandro. I already had the experience of planning recreation programs for kids, which could be adapted for the teenage girls.

Brower: That must have been pretty much a new world to you.

Dixon: Oh, completely, completely. It meant walking through the corridors with a key, being the adult authority!

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Brower: It didn't turn you off? It didn't turn you away from that as a profession?

Dixon: No, as I was able to set aside the physical setting itself and focus on the individual or group, some of the trauma was relieved. "This hall was a physical cocoon, but it was only temporary; this

Dixon: wasn't the rest of any of those individuals' lives. This was only a passing phase in which they had become involved in a mistake. Now, we all make mistakes. It just so happens that their particular mistake involved law enforcement."

Brower: Don't you think that your father's attitude might have been summarized in very much the same way? Especially the focus on the individual.

Dixon: Yes. This happens to be the person who had the finger placed on them because of the law. He'd always say by the same token it could be either you or I that "the law" would put their finger on our shoulder.

Brower: Was it pleasant for you when your parents picked up their life again in Berkeley?

Dixon: Oh, yes, it was wonderful, because that was a long time and many changes had occurred, naturally, in that wide a span, when they were over there in the Virgin Islands [laughs] and we were still back over here in the Bay Area.

Brower: Was it fun when you went to visit them in the Islands?

Dixon: Oh, yes. It was hot. Oh, it was hot! I had the opportunity to meet some of the persons with whom they became very close. In some ways you don't on the basis—because, see, again, that becomes the demarcation purely on your job alone.

Brower: Everybody who visited them talks about what good times they had.

Dixon: It's just a beautiful resort setting. I know of no other way to describe it. It's a resort setting.

Brower: That's a hard kind of setting to live in, to have a real life in.

Dixon: Yes, because it is hot, hot, hot. But they both seemed to adapt to it. The house had a breeze from off the water, as much of a breeze that would come. [laughs] But I believe that they enjoyed it and had no regrets of having made that [decision]. Yes, as far as I think--the only thing they would talk about is [about the grandchildren], well, gee, they have grown, like they'd go from year to year when they'd come back. But that aspect was also very nice, the fact that my father had a job at that point which allowed him sufficient time to come back here and just have a good visit.

Brower: Although it would have been easy for them to do all sorts of exciting things, they always came back here on vacations, didn't they?

Dixon: That's my daddy; see, that's my daddy.

Brower: Your mother would have been more inclined to--

Dixon: --To swing as you make the circle, Mama would say. I said to Daddy, because I knew Mom would like to see certain places along the same route, "It just means stay over night some place," and see the friends whom they'd known for years and years and years through the states.

Brower: But he wanted to make a beeline--

Dixon: He said, "Oh, no." I said, "What difference does it make? Just one day, twelve hours. You get on the plane at night." But see he would think, there's a whole twenty-four hours lost. I said, "But you sleep at night anyway, Daddy, or what's even four hours or six hours between planes?" Because they would have a changeover anyway, based on time changing between coasts--three hours, four hours, or whatever. I said, "You might as well take the next flight. Then you could see so-and-so." Because people, I knew, would meet them at the airport just to say hi during the time they waited for the plane. So I know we tried to get Daddy to "take Mama this way this time, one stop, one day."

Brower: How did you feel about their living arrangements at the Bel Air Motel when they got back to Berkeley? Do you think your father wanted to stay in the community where he began his law practice?

Dixon: Well, this area is just Daddy's home.

Brower: It changed so much though. It seemed a strange choice to me.

Dixon: Your guess would be about as good as mine.

Brower: I wonder about your mother too. Possibly she stays there because she and your father lived there together.

Dixon: Yes, they were there together. Any one of our homes, that's not the same. That is not Daddy and Mama. I know Daddy was tickled. He'd say, "Isn't this nice?" I'd say, "You enjoy it Daddy?" [laughter] Because, see, I would tease him too. I'd say, "If you're comfortable, that's all that counts; it's what makes you comfortable."

Brower: Apparently everybody on earth was trying to pry them out of there.

Dixon: But I'm sure they knew my Daddy, and they knew my mother. They're both very independent people. Some still have yet to understand their being individuals--

Brower: You don't push them around?

Dixon: Uh-huh, no indeed. [laughs]

Brower: How did you feel about the years after he returned to Berkeley?

Dixon: I think they were as Daddy liked them. Daddy is educational; he always has been. His greatest enjoyment was being with other people and his enjoyment at being with other people was related to a specific interest or topic of conversation. So he would enjoy any clubs in which he participated--the Breakfast Club, Rotary Club--any groups here on campus, or the housing commission. He would enjoy that because, number one, it was people and people of all different ages which involved all different ideas. He might have said, "I don't understand some of these." You know how he'd shake his head. I'd say, "Well, Daddy, things have changed." "Well, I know they've changed." This he would sometimes humorously talk about. He'd say, "My goodness, I don't understand these--" You see, invariably it would come out that "these young kids just don't want to listen." I said, "Daddy, how old is that young kid?" He said, "Oh, well, I guess, maybe thirty." I said, "Daddy, that's not a young kid." Anybody younger than Daddy's a kid. [laughter]

Brower: He didn't have much sympathy with the rebellious young, I guess.

Dixon? No, not on the basis when they were being disrespectful toward other people as human beings, and additionally would damage property. Those actions, really he could not fathom or understand and particularly on campus, on Telegraph, [the property belonged to] persons whom he had known and who had had their business there for so many years. Just think, now here is a group of people, students, that's why they're here. Then you go back to his logic. Here we have a group of people who come from all over; therefore their ideas are all different, which is acceptable. Daddy's very tolerant of different ideas, that's fine. Their main purpose was to attend school for a better education. It was not understandable for these persons to completely disregard what is already here without suggestions for alternate courses which you substitute before you throw out everything. Then for that same group of young people to go down onto the business community [and damage the property of] a person who has no connection with them other than [to] provide a business service to make it convenient, he really couldn't understand that. Where was their thinking and their human respect for each other?

He said, "This is where they contradict their philosophy. One minute they're saying to me, 'Hey, let's all be equal, let's all have equal opportunity.' Yet they turn around and say, 'You don't agree with me.' 'No.' 'I'm going to trash you.'" He couldn't understand that. He said, "You cannot resolve differences on violence."

Brower: Was yours a politically active household? Did you go passing leaflets out when people were running for office?

Dixon: No. None. That was, I believe, inherent with his particular job more than anything. He could not be politically active at any time, and I believe all the persons who knew him well respected him for that.

Brower: They didn't expect him to go out and speak for them for political office or anything. Did he also feel his family shouldn't be prominent in a political role.

Dixon: No, he still left it up [to us]. He gave us the background as far as why he didn't do it, on the basis it was not that he didn't lack the interest by any means. That was farthest from it. But, based on the particular type of job that he had, it would not have been appropriate, because there's no way to choose and you can't satisfy or participate [for] every single person. So he said, "This is the way I handle it with the responsibility of this job. At the point where I did not hold the principle of this job and the integrity then that would be an entirely different matter. But I am as I am."

Brower: In those last years when he could have been politically free I guess there was no issue that greatly attracted him?

Dixon: No.

Brower: What about religion in your household?

Dixon: I would say it was interdenominational.

Brower: It looked that way. Somebody went to the Christian Science Church and somebody went to the Baptist Sunday school.

Dixon: Yes, we've been to several because each of my parents were from different churches and that was part of Grandma's and Grandpa's trip, in San Francisco—the Fishers, Grandad and Nanna on my mother's side. They were very active in the church there. We too, when we'd go to visit. I remember going to their church on Sunday. It was different naturally from what I had been raised on in attending at that time. But again, [in our family] religion is a personal thing. You believe as you want; you don't tear down. The same as in politics; you believe what you want, but you don't tear down.

We went to a different church entirely when we were at Big Daddy's and Grandma's in Riverside. I think in each case both my parents pretty much remained in the same church. They didn't go

Dixon: because they'd say, "Well, why go if I'm satisfied?" So what can you say to a person who says that? As for myself I would go to different churches purely to hear the speaker, because I had read about him some place and they just interested me, so I went.

Brower: But you didn't say grace and that sort of thing?

Dixon: Yes.

Brower: You did?

Dixon: Yes, we said grace.

Brower: An interdenominational grace, I guess?

Dixon: Yes, we just said one basic one. [repeats grace softly]

Brower: You're going to have to say that again because I know the recorder didn't pick it up.

Dixon: Oh! [laughs] I was trying to keep it quiet, that's why.

Brower: We don't have to have it, but it would be sort of nice.

Dixon: [reciting] Divine love always has met and always will meet every human need.

Brower: That's a beautiful grace.

Dixon: I cannot tell you from whence it came—but that's the one we said.

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Brower: Can you tell me about the sort of rules you had in your family?

Dixon: When I talk about "rules" in our family, I'm referring to the [fact that] specific expectations are clear cut. Some were very basic and you can't change it. For example, if your coat belongs on a hanger in the closet, that's where it goes. There's no room for deviation, discussion, or anything else. [laughs] But if one of us wanted to participate in a particular activity, then it becomes a sit-down-and-discuss-it matter. "What are your reasons for wanting to go?" Most of the time, we just learned to present, "I want to do such-and-such and these are the reasons." We'd do that. Any time that my father or mother had misgivings, then it was pointing out another viewpoint. We were keenly aware, this is a parent first and foremost, and then listen to what they are saying." [laughs] You can't divorce the parent role. At the same time we had to use self-reliance and independence. I'm talking about an

Dixon: activity maybe no more than, a kid wants to participate in "a club," whatever the club is. So in going into a club, we would then have to do the ground work and the research to find out what's this club about? We knew we would get that. So this geared us how to function for the independence and self-reliance. You just don't jump off into a deep ocean.

Brower: You must have reasons for what you do?

Dixon: You have reasons for what you do. Whatever your reasons are, those are your reasons and you're behind it. For example, we couldn't just run up and say, "I want 50 cents." "Why do you want fifty cents?" "I want to buy some candy." "Why do you want to buy some candy? What happened to your allowance?" See, this is the other part of the responsibility built in--allowances.

Brower: You did get allowances?

Dixon: We got allowances according to our age. The allowance was to spend as you wished.

Brower: No strings!

Dixon: No strings because their belief was (which I think is tremendous): We are parents. We live in a house. We have food, the basics--food, shelter, clothing. You don't have to worry about that because we're your parents. We're here. We'll take care of that. But as for the other extra things that kids want, or "I wish"--you know, "buy me, buy me, buy me." We were taught the responsibility of money through allowances. You could spend it all in one day if you wanted or you could save it; that was your decision. However, it was made clear that there was no advance on your allowance. If I or my brothers chose to spend it the day after we received it and then four days later some friend will come up and say, "Let's go do so-and-so"--something that's really super special, our allowance would be gone, and that was it.

Now, because of my difference in age to my brothers I had heard all of this discussion. (People say my father didn't get upset. My father did get upset. He got angry like anybody else. You could tell by the tone of his voice. He would take a different tone. His voice was very deep and resonant. So naturally if he spoke one-half a key higher to somebody else they'd say, "My gosh, he's screaming." But as kids we knew, no, he wasn't screaming. Daddy just had a booming voice. But we knew by the tone.) I learned early. I'd say, well, gee, it doesn't make sense. If I want to go to something special three days later and I know I can't get an advance, then I have to make my decision, because I didn't want to go through--

Brower: You had figured this all out just by watching your brothers? You spoke of wanting to join a club, what kind of club was it?

Dixon: That wasn't until high school and it was purely for sports. They didn't want me to go into it. It so happened the members were kids that we went with as a group, male-female. We used to have females. If we did that now, they would call us some awful label, but there were about fifteen or twenty of us, male and female, that would throw parties or picnics. We were all there at each other's homes or whatever. Now, today they'd probably say, "Whew, what rebels!"

Now, as far as my sports my father let me play sports. His schedule was such he couldn't see me participate after school in intramurals. That was not [done] and probably part of it was the fact that, "Oh, yes, I know she likes sports like me, but she's a girl." He didn't phrase it, you know. I said, "Well, I might teach, Daddy," because he'd say, "Do you really like that?" I'd say, "Oh, yes." He'd say, "Well, what do you think you want to do with it?" He'd do it this way, subtle, but I knew what he was saying. I said, "Well, I like sports like you." So he couldn't say anything. I said, "I want to do it well because I may teach it, I don't know," because I was going to get a teaching credential with P.E. as a major and dancing as a minor. So I <u>had</u> to. I had no choice.

Brower: Did you actually get that?

Dixon: No, not in the state of Oregon. There you have to go a fifth year and that I wasn't ready to do. I also had investigated it beforehand, and I would have had to take additional courses when I came back into the state of California to qualify for a California credential. One does not apply to the other and I thought, "My gracious!" I would end up spending another year anyway, so I decided, well, no, I won't stay up there another year.

Brower: This was a sports club that you wanted to join in high school?

Dixon: Yes, and what it was, there was a group of boys (I happened to be going with one then) who played basketball. They played against other boy's clubs. No big thing, other than sports through YMCA groups. Some YMCAs were still very much segregated. With this club it was a matter that as the girls, we were the "half-time entertainment." Now, in that connotation, that's not dancing as far as on the stage, and I debated and debated to even ask because I knew it was something first to go to the facility. Now, it was right at my own school. Don't misunderstand. It wasn't that I was going down to San Jose like the kids do now. All of our things were very local and my own high school was going. It was just a matter of, well, we girls are going to do this, you

Dixon: know, half-time. "Well, I don't know. Who's going to be there?" [laughter] You know, twenty questions father would have. "The same kids that go to school will be there." "Well, aren't there going to be other kids there?" "Well, certainly, the kids from the schools with whom we compete all the time." "Then there might be some strangers there." This was Daddy. I said, "Yes, but Daddy that's anywhere you go."

Brower: Did you get to go?

Dixon: I did. I went and played and I don't think he came to that one. He didn't because right behind it, too, we also had a dance right there at the campus. We may have put up a jukebox. [laughs] We couldn't afford anything else.

Brower: But there were no objections to ballroom dancing in your family? Even your grandparents didn't object to that?

Dixon: Oh, no. You see, that was an art--no, there's a distinction.

Brower: Did you have to wait until you were a certain age to wear lipstick?

Dixon: I had to wait until a certain age to wear it and then I had to check it out with him--not my mother. You see, my mother said, "Just what looks tasteful. We know you have on lipstick." You see, they were subtle, but they were clever. "We know it's lipstick and there are all different shades." So you tried different ones and I'd tease her. I said, "Boy, talk about tact and diplomacy!" But, see, they still laid it out for the choices. So naturally I was going to take the darkest red. My mother would say, "That's the color you've chosen?" But you just know by your parent's response, "Well, I'm not too enthused, but you chose it. I told you you could choose it." I thought to myself--now, this is where I learned earlier from my father knowing what he liked and disliked, and I thought to myself, "He's not going to like this lipstick, I <u>know</u> it," because I could sound my mother out.

Brower: Just from her tone of voice?

Dixon: Just the tone of voice. Then I would start--you know how kids just start by [saying], "Well, everybody else does."

Daddy said, "What's that mess on your mouth?" I said, "That's my new lipstick." "Hmmm." He'd just look. Not that he'd raise his voice and rant and scream and such. That seldom occurred. It would be no more than two or three words.

Brower: But just sort of quiet disapproval.

Dixon: I knew. I said, "You don't like this one, huh?" He said, "Well, what do you think about it?" I said, "That's what everybody else is wearing." He said, "Do you like it?" Then I'd become the reticent one, thinking, well, my daddy doesn't like it and my mother's not too enthused!

Brower: What about smoking and drinking?

Dixon: Oh, that's a no-no. That was a no-no. Again agewise--as to when my brothers did I couldn't say. All I know is what the rules were as far as in the house. This is for adults--and some of the reasons why adults do.

As I remember it, again, it was as socialization begins. You come and say hello to the adults, but it's just an adult gathering. You go do what you were going to do and they socialize. Then as you see the mixture of these pretty different drinks. "Oh, would you like a sip?" "Oh, yes, let me have a sip. Ooh, that's nasty!" Or whatever, and they'd go on. I'd say, "Oh, so that's what it's like." It's like you hear a name of a drink but you didn't know what it was until you tasted it and it was no big deal.

With smoking, my father smoked. [pause] You see, this is where the other part--I have to laugh! I have to explain my laugh to you because I didn't carry it out when I said we were taught the responsibility of money and what we want. Okay, along with this, coming to this age, [laughs] you want cigarettes, you want liquor. "Can you buy them? Can you personally afford them because I'm not going to buy them." Then it would be, "That means you've got to save your quarters or whatever if you want to have your cigarettes."

This is the way I viewed it. I can't speak for my brothers. I said, "Oh, yes, I can get cigarettes in a machine. I could go to the grocery store but then at the corner grocery store I know the owner. The owner knows me. His father knows my father, he knows where we live." You see, all this would still fit into our growing up in our family. Everybody knew everybody around the block, including parents--specific homes, addresses, phone numbers. There was no vagueness--"Well, I think that child is two blocks from here." So it was the same as having my father right there. That would be like going to my father and saying, "May I have a pack of cigarettes?"

##

Dixon: There's a period in my life that my father is so busy, he's always going some place, he's always seeing somebody, or people are coming in. He's just active with many, many people. I used to wonder, how could he see everybody and still see us? Naturally, we'd

Dixon: like to have him there [at home] twenty-four hours. Who doesn't? [laughs] But that's unrealistic. Knowing he had all these different interests it used to amaze me how he could keep all those things going, because I'd be exhausted thinking about all of the different things he would do. For me there was dancing. I'm totally lost. I'm not talking to anybody. I'm talking only to myself and expressing to the music. The music and I are dancing.

Brower: He had no outlet like that, did he?

Dixon: No. For him it was people, being with people, not just sitting across the table from them or sitting side by side. It was talking to that person, discovering the many interesting facets of their life and what they were doing--which might have been similar to his or completely the opposite. But it was new. It was a new experience.

He gave us some very basic lessons in whatever kind of world we live in, whatever street we live on, whoever our next door neighbor is. It really doesn't matter. What is important is individuals, how many other human beings we encompass into our lives—and whom we choose. His ideas and beliefs to me have remained unchanged, that we help each other to make things better, not worse, that we help the development of achievement. There were certain goals he set in his life. He fulfilled those and I think it's amazing that whatever opportunities were afforded to him he took.

Brower: He didn't actively seek them. They came to him. People sought him out for tasks and he accepted the challenge.

Dixon: Each one was a responsibility, new territory, a new group of people. In the way he lived his life I believe he imparted, "No, we are not all identical." There are basic underlying principles that are the same. They don't change from generation to generation. There are certain basic things. We still all need shelter, we all need food--and then you go from there.

Brower: Have you any thoughts about his public accomplishments? Could you say what you feel is the most important thing he did?

Dixon: It is my feeling that it is the way he lived. He had many obstacles. Many people saying no, no, no, in his childhood, again and again. Another person would stop right there. They wouldn't even try. But whatever it was, the quality within my father, I believe he lived as he desired most.

Dixon: I believe a lot of his willingness and motivation rests with my mother; he had a helpmate whose temperament was accommodating. As you mentioned, in the beginning years he was away more than he was home. It was Mama who was there while he went out to do for his family.

Brower: You all worked out your own identities pretty satisfactorily. I suspect your parents' attitudes as parents had a lot to do with that.

Dixon: Yes, because there would be their individuality. We could laugh humorously with each other.

Brower: Have you remained a close family?

Dixon: Yes, we go from house to house. Our family has spread out to encompass so many people I'd have to hire a hall to have all the close family together.

Brower: You and your brothers have remained good friends?

Dixon: Oh, yes. We have our differences of opinion, quite naturally.

Brower: In general do you still subscribe to your father's Republican politics?

Dixon: I've never really gone any other way.

Brower: Is that true of your brothers too?

Dixon: That I don't know. Knowing each other, I don't go into politics! I don't get into the discussion of politics. To me that's a personal choice and I just don't happen to be one who will sit up and go into debate about it. I will if the person asks as to a particular candidate and why. I'll say what I have to say and then that's about it. But I don't go into a national debate trying to persuade them to change their view or vice versa. Naturally they'll say what they have to say, and I'll listen. They'll say, "What do you think?" I'll say, "That's fine. You may vote as you wish; I will vote as I have decided, thank you." [laughter] And just keep on.

Brower: From your account of your childhood it sounds like a pretty nice way to grow up.

Dixon: It was.

Brower: Thank you very much for sharing it.

Dixon: Oh, you're welcome.

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December 9, 1977

TO: Estelle Rebec
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FROM: Amelia Fry
ROHO

The attached note was jotted down during my lunch conversation with Chief Justice (retired) Earl Warren on November 17, 1972, in his chambers in the Supreme Court Building in Washington, D.C. It can be deposited with Walter Gordon's papers now. Warren asked that I keep it confidential during our interviewing for the Earl Warren Oral History Project; he did not want to risk embarrassing his good friend, who at that time was a retired federal judge enjoying an active part in community affairs of Berkeley.

To clarify my handwriting, here is a typed and somewhat annotated version of the note:

When Walter Gordon was in the Virgin Islands, he was in a most unhappy situation-- both as governor and judge-- the 10% white population was cause of his misery. (Earl Warren never spelled out what.) They intended to appoint someone else to his judgeship when [Lyndon B.] Johnson came in--were getting [Gordon] out using his Republican party attachment as a reason. Territorial federal judges have limited terms of 8 years. Gordon may not know that Earl Warren [then Chief Justice] would call [the U.S.]Attorney General -?- (not Clark - the other one) [I guess Warren was referring to Nicholas de B. Katzenbach, who followed Robert Kennedy as soon as Johnson won election to the presidency--January 28, 1965] and simply inquire if Gordon's tenure was being threatened. Attorney General [Katzenbach?] would take care of it. In this way, Gordon got to stay on 2 more years, until his [normal] retirement time came. [or until he was eligible for retirement pay?]

Also: A Berkeley friend of Gordon's wrote to Warren once to ask [the Chief Justice] to write to Gordon under an assumed name, since all of Gordon's mail was censored, he thought. Earl Warren refused, of course, and never knew if Gordon has inspired the [Berkeley] friend to write [to Warren].

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Confidential from EW - "Do not share with associates" (White)
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