

Recorded at lunch on January 27, 1993 attended by Harold G. Moss, Narrator, Alison H. Sonntag, interviewer and Dick Sonntag. Then later at Moss' office. Not transcribed is conversation with the wait staff and various people coming over to say hello. This transcription begins in the middle of the conversation.

[The group has been talking about the time Moss applied for a job at Valu Mart where Dick Sonntag worked at the time. Moss was gathering information for the Employment Committee, of which he was Chair, on hiring practices of area businesses. Dick has just elaborated on Moss applying for the job at Valu Mart. Moss already had a job, so when he was hired by Valu Mart he had two jobs.]

Harold: I can't remember half the stuff you can, Dick. I remember fun stuff you remember serious stuff.

Alison: That didn't sound real serious. Sort of hoisted on your own petard.

Harold: Ooh, that was fun. Yeah! I went in there, filled out the damn application, got belligerent as hell and [undecipherable] said okay. [Laughs]

...

Alison: Okay. So how many of you were going around to businesses attempting to show how racist they were?

Harold: Well, it wasn't so much show as it was to gather information and get jobs. So what we were trying to do is like we would go to -- one of the places I have mentioned is Rhodes Department Store. When Rhodes was downtown it was a big department store. And Sears when it was downtown. They had school girls, right out of school selling hosiery, gloves, what-have-you, but they couldn't see it in their minds -- you know, black girls had to have a Ph.D. to be employed, and so one of the guys said, "Well, we got these kids and they're blah, blah and they're just dumber than a box of rocks." And we said, "Well, then hire some black ones that are dumber than a box of rocks. What the hell's the difference."

...

Alison: Do you think that people in the 50's and 60's felt justified in their racist attitudes?

Harold: Oh, very much so. Yes, very much so. The attitude was: "It's my house and if I put it on the market I can sell it to anybody I want to and if I don't want to sell it to you, get the hell off my lawn." And the law supported it. You could write an ad in the newspaper that said very clearly, "Three

bedroom apartment, you know, with -- furnished, blah, blah, blah. No Negroes."

Alison: No!

Dick: Oh, yes.

Harold: Oh, yes you could. You could put it right in the newspaper.

Alison: Boy, I've lived a real naive life. I know it existed, but I didn't know it was that blatant. Do you think it is more or less dangerous now that it's become more covert. It used to be overt. Now it's still there, I mean -- Is it harder to fight?

Harold: No, no... Dangerous, yeah, in the sense that Harold would never go through that crap again. I mean you tell me that I'm less American than somebody else and I will hurt you now. Then I would rationalize and I'd talk to you, and I'd try to make it make sense. But, as the boys say, after you've been shot at a few times, Man, by people who never called you "nigger" -- Now, I'll hurt you.

Alison: So, racism was almost accepted by the victims.

Harold: Racism was accepted by the victims. No question about it.

Dick: It was normal, and every community had to have somebody or some group of people to stand out front and explain this was not normal and that it was wrong.

Harold: Uh huh

Dick: And over a period of time, once that was being explained by some element of leadership most of the population said, "Ooh, you're right." (Harold: Uh huh) You still have, I don't know if it's 5% of the population or whatever it is, you still have a certain percentage that says, "The hell with it, we were right to begin with."

Harold: Yeah.

Alison: That always amazed me... I went to school -- to one school -- and Lisa and Mitzi went to school at another school. I understood that, I mean I'm six years old and I thought "This doesn't make sense." but I didn't get incensed about it.

Harold: Uh huh

Alison: Now I would be absolutely, totally incensed.

Harold: Oh yeah.

Dick: I just talked to Marilee Scarbrough [newly appointed School Board member, the first ever African American on the board] a while ago, and her children go to Concordia Lutheran [a local private school]. Of course, now that she's on the school board, she's going to be moving them at a convenient point in time, but back in the 60's they couldn't have gone to Concordia, couldn't get in the door to the damn thing.

Alison: What does that do to somebody, to be told over and over again "You're not quite as good."?

Harold: You either fight, or you get yourself knuckled down, or you just go bad.

Alison: Do you ever believe it?

Harold: Oh yeah. Those who believe it are the ones who never challenged the system. See during the 40's you had grown black folks who would tell you they've never been discriminated against in their lives.

Alison: Not possible.

Harold: Yes it is. If you know that Stouffer's Restaurant will not serve you and you don't go in there, you haven't been discriminated against.

Alison: Okay, that's true.

Harold: If you know that the only thing you can be on the railroad is a pullman car porter and never could be a (undecipherable) or an engineer, as long as you don't apply for them jobs, you don't get discriminated against.

Alison: It kind of makes me think like that any black person, who has attained anything in life is a survivor. (Harold: Yeah) They have to have been.

Dick: The battle's a long way from over. In the Tacoma Public School District, of all children who enter the ninth grade, in other words enter high school, somewhere around 35,36% of them are not going to complete high school. Now, only about 15% of the whites. It's damn near half the blacks. Is one reason for that that you can enter the Tacoma School district in kindergarten and you can graduate 13 years later and you will have not studied any black leader. You will have looked at, reviewed and celebrated for one or two days Martin Luther King.

Harold: And that's lately. That was one of the great losses in the segregated school system. In the segregated school system,

... where they're coming up in Mineola, Texas, you got black history, because black teachers made sure you got it. But when the whole process integrated then we go back to Columbus and you know.

Alison: What do you think about this, was it Seattle or someplace -- Detroit -- that wanted to have a high school that was just for black males?

Harold: Well, it was an elementary structure. I have no problem with it, but ... I have a problem with it if it's institutionalized. I say that if you want to do that, you do it just like the Seventh Day Adventists. You do it like Catholics. You do it like --.

Alison: You make it a private school.

Harold: That's right! You gotta support the public school. You gotta support the public school, but you feel free to have any damn thing you want that you're willing to put together.

Alison: Well, it seems to me that the same logic that says women can learn to excel if they are going to school with other women and not competing with men. It just seemed to me that the same logic might apply.

Harold: Same logic. Now, if you want to do that, you have to get yourself a school.

Dick: Alison, when in this nation did we start to talk about women's rights? The right of a woman to equal pay. The right of a woman to not be sexually harassed. The right of a woman to be president of the United States. When did we start talking about that?

Alison: I don't know.

Dick: Within the last twenty years, right.

Harold: Okay

Alison: Uh huh

Dick: In the last twenty years we have done a lot. Education wise and position wise. There's a lot of women running a lot of businesses in a lot of high-faluting positions. The state of California has two female United States Senators. In terms of black people, we been working on this since World War Two and racism is alive and well.

Alison: Well, it's always been my contention, at least for the last few years of my life, that one of the problems is that white

America is afraid of black men. (Harold: Yeah) And I think that's one of the reasons that we put them in prison, that we don't employ them. I'll bet you, and I don't have any statistics, but I'll bet you that black women are making greater strides than black men.

Harold: Oh yeah, it's in the book, girl. It's in the book.

Alison: What can be done about that.

Dick: I've got inmates in the corrections system who keep going to the parole board, and they're black men and they're fairly young and healthy. There aren't too many fat black men under the age of forty. And the parole board keeps saying, "No, you've got to stay in prison another couple of years."

Harold: Uh huh

...

Dick: At any rate, when these black men come back and they've done x number of years. They have as much a right to get out as the white guys do, but they're not let out. I tell them, "The next time you go back to the board, sit down, talk like a southern slave and they'll let you out." And every damn time I tell them that, I'm right.

Harold: And look at the God-damn floor.

Dick: And do not look them in the eye and do not stand up. A standing black man intimidates the hell out of a white man.

Alison: Well, what can we ever do about that. I mean black people can't be less black.

Dick: You keep working on it. Progress has been made, progress is being made and more progress will need to be made.

Harold: Uh huh.

Dick: I'm not sure we'll ever settle the fight.

Harold: There sure is no quick fix. People, regardless of their race, they vote their fears. They still do. You make 'em nervous, they'll vote against you.

Alison: You bet. I understand that. I do think that if the economy was better, and everybody was working, and nobody had to worry where the next dollar was coming from, we could make strides quicker.

Harold: Oh yes.

Alison: Because if I'm not afraid I'm going to lose my job, I'm going to be a lot more willing to work to get you one.

Harold: There you go.

...

[Going through the Prior Learning Experience document, which is a compilation of life experiences prepared for college credit at City University]

Harold: I realize that it's a slice, but it was a good slice. It covers a bit about high school when I left there [Detroit], and as I read it last night ... it was true, and it's still true that it did shape me up a lot. The people that were sincere and up front. I couldn't put it all in there, but those men, all white, who tried to break the system -- I didn't recognize that until years later -- how absolutely bizarre those bastards were. As you will see, one of my interests lie in the technical fields. Whether it's crown & bridge, whatever it is you're doing it with your hands in a very highly technical thing, and in my youth, in high school, the emphasis was on machine shop, and I was as good a machinist as a youngster and should have been gobbled up by industry which had these big marathons, and really were out there after craftsmen, you know, for the auto industry. But they didn't take black youths, and these three, especially Donnell, went on to be school superintendent. He was my homeroom teacher, and they had, you know as you look back, they had decided, "We have got a guy here that is academically bright enough and who understands the machine trades well enough to compete with any damn body." And they submitted my stock [a piece of metal machined to exacting standards to show a student's skill]. It's a bar about that long, and it is milled to micrometer measurements. It had taper. It had to have teeth.

...

[Going through the Prior Learning Experience notebook]

Harold: [Pointing to a letter] And that's when I worked for the school district on Title VI, believe it or not I brought in Title VI. And they paid me. I love that part. They paid me \$75 bucks a pop. This is the letter from UPS denying me -- They said, "I'm sorry, you don't need to be trained academically." This is when they hired me as one of the first black lectures in that series, and I love it ... And this was the course evaluation, and the judges [including] Judge Charles V. Smith [currently member of the Washington State Supreme Court] took my course --

...

Harold: My first campaign -- Yeah, my first wife, Bil Moss ... That was the motley crew that finally ran [looking at copy of photo], and that was the motley crew that was finally picked.

Alison: Geez, you know, you look so different, but I didn't remember you looking any different.

Harold: This is Dan Evans [referring to a letter of appointment]. Really, big love affair, Dan appointed me to three or four different state-wide conference committees, etc., and that was fun. And this was the African-American Pavilion that we worked on, the first one in the state, etc. And this is all the development of the Urban League building. But there are three humongous volumes that go into that, 'cause it was redone.

Alison: You have all that?

Harold: Oh, yeah. As I say, you can tell I just dug that sucker out last night.

...

Harold: Anyway I found it interesting. Maybe you will too.

Alison: Oh, I know I'll find it interesting. ... I feel like as a white person... there's no way I can understand, totally how it felt. There's no way, and I don't think being a woman, being a white woman in any way compares, and I don't care what women say. We've never had it that bad, clearly, no.

Harold: No, no, because the protective cluster is not there. A black woman ...

...

[Taping resumes and we continue going through notebook]

Harold: The point is that on August 20, 1957 when Mr. Wilson was being kicked silly [referring to a picture of a black man attempting to escort a black child to school being kicked by a white crowd], I was writing letters [referring to a letter to the editor answering a previous letter] and I had already built that house. Twenty-four, twenty-five years old and I had built me a house, but on the back of this [article] you see how this little piece comes out here. On the back of that was this, and that was my installation, [as President of the local chapter of the NAACP] Mrs. Clara Goering, who was a female city council woman ... installed the new officers of the chapter. And the people like Bob Haugland, who is the minister of the Unitarian Church and Bobby Gene Dadell, further on over in here where -- Oh, this case, where we brought suit against Alibi Tavern on 21st, what is it, 21st and Tacoma Avenue, [Richard] Fox and I. Jack Tanner was

our attorney. Clara Goering, Bob Haugland they were really involved in the community. Wing Luke also was Tanner's assistant trial lawyer. Wing Luke was Chinese. You hear about the Wing Luke Museum in Seattle? He was killed in a light plane accident. And this was the suit. Jack Tanner was cc'd [carbon copied] as the attorney. He and I are going to go out and have a few pops tomorrow night and commemorate Thurgood Marshall. So this was just things that were going on almost simultaneously. You being jerked around. I mean I'm going into office at the time that folk were just doing some absolutely brutal things to one another.

Alison: [Pointing to picture of whites kicking Mr. Wilson] Now these were frightened people. They were really frightened people.

Harold: Oh, yes. Later [Ernest] Green [one of the Little Rock Nine (black children who began integration)] became good friends. We were both running programs [Labor education programs, Green in New York and Moss in Tacoma].

...

Harold: I have a son who flatters me by writing exactly as I do. I mean I look at his handwriting when he sends a letter or something and the first thing is "When did I do this?"

Alison: You just have one boy and two girls.

Harold: Two boys. It's just a lot of fun. It was a lot of fun [completing and now re-reading the notebook], and I'm glad I've gotten away from it, because at the time I completed it one day I thought of it as an obituary. And I said "Shit, if I die it's all down."

Alison: Well, 1976, so you've come a ways since then.

Harold: Thank you. Thank you.

Alison: Well, I really ... I think this is going to be my favorite thing I think I've ever done. The writing it isn't going to be that much fun, but just the idea that I get to do something. And I know you don't think that it's that monumental, but it is. I mean this is somebody that ... I'm real lucky. I'm the only one in the class who's doing a friend. I mean they're talking about how you build rapport, and I said, "Oh, that's not going to be a problem."

Harold: Well, you know my wife who is ... I'm very, very fortunate to have a woman that really gives a damn about me. She, when I told her, was just absolutely elated.

Alison: Well, sure, 'cause she's real proud of you, and she should be.

Harold: I tell you sometimes it's unnerving, and that's very good. I'm very pleased. I couldn't ask for a better person to do it.

...

[Talking about a proposed open housing ordinance]

Harold: We were fighting to get the ordinance directed so that the police were the investigators, so that when you go out and if the police find discrimination, it goes directly to the court. It doesn't go to some housing committee and get lost. It would provide folk with court action.

Alison: Make it a crime.

Harold: The law was pretty clear about anti-discrimination since about 1948, but the practice was an every day occurrence. We still had newspaper ads that said, "No colored," you know, "No Negroes, period." and my wife and I had gone through that process to the point where she cried so bad one night I promised God I'd never go through that again, and that's a story in itself. Remind me to tell you about South 64th and about Ainsworth or Cushman and a ministers house we tried to buy, and how the neighbors treated us. We all met at this minister's house and how those neighbors treated us. Boy, that will --

Alison: Now, that still hurts.

Harold: Yeah, I will not -- I will hurt somebody first before I go through that again, but -- because it emasculates you. You can't even protect your own wife and your own children. The police were absolutely adamant that they were not going to be a part of this making white folks sell their houses to blacks, so when the little apartment burned -- I owned a house where the Urban League's parking lot is now. The upper parking lot. And when that thing burned, and it was burned by a group of kids that I had rented the damn place out to and they just tore it all to hell and I tried to nail 'em out of there and throw 'em out and they came back and took my cleaning fluid and all the rest of it and set the son of a bitch on fire. Captain Church of the Tacoma Fire Department went out and investigated the damn thing and came by my house and suggested to me at the time, "You ought to get a lawyer." and I said, "For what?" He said, "You might be in a bit of trouble." I called Jack Tanner, and Jack said, "Well, if you didn't do it, tell 'em to go to Hell." I said, "Well, I'm sorry, but I'm not going to get a lawyer." Next thing I know they arrested me and that went all over the country. People as far as San Francisco read, "President of NAACP torches his house."

Alison: Oh, sure, you bet!

Harold: And so that was part of that and it did have an effect on what we were doing. I forget what year that was, whether it was '68⁶⁶ somewhere around in there. We finally got it passed. Made a deal with Slim Rasmussen [former Mayor of Tacoma], bless his heart. He kept his word.

Alison: I think he was good at that.

Harold: Yeah, he kept his word. We set up a tribunal that was composed of, of all people, Tony Zatkovich, Cvitanich [see Page 54] and somebody else, and they were to hear housing discrimination complaints. You know how far that was going to go, but at least we got it on the books. And our goal was to strip respectability off of discrimination in housing. So, whether or not we ever used the tribunal, which we didn't, that was immaterial. We wanted the law to say that discrimination in the City of Tacoma was a misdemeanor, was outlawed.

Alison: I like your phrase, "strip respectability from discrimination."

Harold: That's right. That was what we were trying to do with all of those Jim Crow laws, with all the public accommodation laws. We had to make it illegal to do those things, because people felt absolutely respectable in saying, "I'm sorry, but you can't eat here." They felt okay.

Alison: You know, that I will never understand. When we lived in Hannibal, Missouri we moved from the house we lived in because I played with those kids [the black children two doors down] and the owner of our home said to my dad, "That's not going to happen in my house." And Dad said, "Then we won't be living in your house." How could people ever have thought that was right? Did they think it was right?

Harold: Yes, and they felt quite self-righteous. There's a little piece that says I took the youth council [of the NAACP] on church tours. We must have done thirty, forty churches with a youth group that I had worked with and trained. And we would go and occupy Sunday morning services by design and by invitation from the pastors, and he would give a short sermon on equal opportunity or on racial whatever and then we would sit there, and each one of my kids would make a statement and then we would take questions from the audience and discuss. And I swear to God Sunday morning in America was still a son of a bitch. People would tell you things like, "I don't want you marrying my daughter. I don't want you living in my neighborhood. I don't

⁶⁶ Actually arrested September 1963.

want you around me. I don't like you people. Why can't you stay over on your part of town. How come you gotta move into my part of town. Why do you want to go to school with us. We don't want to go to school with you."

Alison: My dad was raised by fairly racist parents, he was raised by a real racist man and my grandfather said to my brother, when we were moving to California from Missouri, California was, of course, integrated. And my grandfather says to my brother, "You want your sister going to school sitting next to a big, black buck." and Homer and I were, kind of like, "What are you talking about?"

Harold: Yeah, "What are you saying?"

Alison: That they would say that in the presence of young people. I find --

Harold: Well, see you do have to appreciate the times, and the times allowed that. That was, you know -- the Ku Klux Klan is a Christian organization. See it's not my Christianity, but it is an acceptable Christian belief. Foundation slavery, you know, first we raise the Bible and get them to lower their heads and we take their land and chain up their bodies. That was no problem.

Alison: I just don't understand how any of that -- How you could ever rationalize that in your mind. I understand why you would say, "I don't like this person or that person." But I don't understand how you could say that's right.

Harold: Well, you see it's like trying to fathom how the Irish can be fighting for years between Catholic and Protestant.

Alison: That's true, I don't understand that either.

Harold: Or the Bosnians. How can you -- You were neighbors right up until you got independence and now he who has the biggest sword is killing the rest. You put an Arab and a Jew in the same room, it's hard to tell who is what unless they open their mouth. You know they share food laws together. They share more together than they do apart, and yet they're going to kill each other. So, it's that kind of... How can you rationalize that? I don't know, but people do. They have that capacity to think in herd mental blocks.

Alison: But it never holds when you're one to one, does it?

Harold: No, it doesn't. And that is the strange mission that we involved ourselves in. And we learned as a group. I'm talking about Bob Lassley, there were a couple of girls, Marie and her sister -- I see these kids every now and then. They were from my NAACP youth group. But we would go to those churches,

all white churches and we would get invited in and treated nice, and we had to learn how to say "son of a bitch" in good Christian form. We had to learn that. "I don't like the way them boys do so and so." And they would say, "Well, I don't recall that they put boys in prison, Ma'am." "Well, I suppose --they -- " and you would force them to acknowledge that that's a man. That's not a boy. That's a man, and I used to watch those kids and they could work that thing. Funny thing was there was a fellow whose name escapes me now. He used to follow us, and we used to get so angry. The church bulletins or it would be in the Saturday newspaper where we were going to be. "NAACP Youth Council will be so and so." He would show up. His issue was. "There are Italian Americans, there are Irish Americans and blacks and that's not right. They are Afro-Americans." And we used to say, "Man, don't be equating us with that shit." And it's come full circle. At that point we had passed the point of being colored, we were just getting comfortable with being Negro, and he used to stand up there and say, "How in the world can you say, 'Italian-Americans and Irish-Americans'", you know we could almost sing the song with him. "'Indian-Americans' we are African-Americans."

Alison: That's one thing that I -- Now, I'm stuck in the 60's. To me the term is black, you know, and that's -- I'm stuck there, and whatever happens that's where I am.

Harold: You know, it took me the longest -- I recall when Stokely first started hollering black power, and I got pissed, because Malcolm X and I had long ago parted waters [ways]. There was no mid-ground when Malcolm and Martin roamed the Earth. There was no mid-ground. You were on one side or the other, and I just couldn't see that [referring to African-American's as Blacks]. One day, it just knocks the Hell out of you, you can't be red and brown and yellow and colored.

Alison: Now there is "persons of color". I took a class in Cultural Awareness --

Harold: We have an excellent class in cultural diversity, here.

Alison: Do ya, well I didn't like this class at all. I felt like the gentleman who was leading it thought he was teaching a class to racists. You know I kind of took exception to that. You got no right to assume you know where I'm coming from.

Harold: That's right. Our diversity class is a fun class. It has more to do with poking and jibing and getting you to come around to a new way of thinking.

Alison: And that's the idea, too. That's what I wanted pointed out to me. I want to know the areas where I've got blind spots. That's what I want to know. 'Cause, I mean you always think you're doing all right, but you don't know.

Harold: You don't know. The other day I was sitting in here and I was talking about two women who were after the same job, and right off the bat I said, "Why doesn't he take the girl that can do the --" and I thought, "Oh, shit, who the Hell are you." Lord, I'm saying this to women.

Alison: Somehow that doesn't bother me as much from a guy as from another woman. When a woman walks in and says, "Well, girls" I feel like "I passed eighteen some time ago ..."

Harold: Well, I don't know. We're getting there. I think the main thing ... It's like half the folks nowadays they're scared to touch one another. I'll be damned if I'll ever let that bother me. I think people discern the difference between a sexual advance and affection.

Alison: I think they do.

Harold: Without a doubt. I've always been affectionate and I plan to stay that way. People I care about, I care about.

Alison: It'd be too bad if we got to the point where people were -- I think we sometimes we get a little carried away with political correctness, and we should be more interested in what we are doing to each other as human beings.