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Bridges That Carried Us Over Project

Interview Summary

Interviewee:

Willie Roberts, Laura Roberts

Interviewer:

Ratibu Jacocks

Interview Date:

July 31st, 2014

Interview Location:

Rialto, CA

Length:

00:23:31

Interview Summary completed by:

M. Camacho Nuno, 2024

Description:

Ratibu Jacocks interviews Willie Roberts, a man with a history in the Inland Empire. The interview starts with formal introductions to Roberts' talking to future generations. That is the advice to continue to go to school and get an education. The topic switched to the place and date of Roberts' birth, Mesa, Arizona in 1924. The interviewee then speaks about his parents, who were originally from Oklahoma, and the family's move from Arizona to Brawley, California in search of better opportunities. There was also another reason for the move when Roberts played as a child with the daughter of a Caucasian man. Due to the daughter's father wanting to spank Roberts as punishment and Roberts' own father not wanting to fight, it became a reason to leave Arizona. Roberts then speaks of moving from Brawley to Calipatria and going into the Civilian Conservation Corps in Brawley after graduating high school. Afterward, during the time he lived in Riverside with his mother, Roberts was drafted into a segregated unit in World War II. There is then a cut in the footage, where the topic switches to Roberts' contributions to helping minority populations get job positions. He also worked in the Chamber of Commerce in San Bernardino and other federal jobs. The footage is then about the documents that Roberts has in a file. The documents hold medical, military, political, and other historical information that serves the purpose of displaying the contributions and history that Roberts had made. Further questions involved Roberts and his time in community-based organizations, including the West Wide Action Group, the Prince Masonic Lodge, and the American Legion Post 710. After, the discussion turns to Roberts' implementation of the Scholarship Fund at San Bernardino Valley College and his membership in The Boys Club, NAACP, and other groups. The interview ends with a discussion on Jack Hill and the other people that Roberts had known, including some discussion from Laura Roberts.

Subject Topic:

- Future Generations
- Education
- Moving

- Farming
- Racism
- Forestry
- World War II
- Military Service
- Military Segregation
- Access to Jobs
- Politicians
- The Korean War
- The Berlin Crisis
- Community-Based Organizations
- Jack Hill
- College Scholarship

Spatial Coverage:

Name of Site (if relevant)	General Location/Address
Mesa	City in Arizona
Brawley	City in California
Calipatria	City in California
Prince Hall Masonic Lodge	1403 W 5th St, Santa Ana, CA 92703
American Legion Post 710	2181 W Highland Ave, San Bernardino, CA 92407
San Bernardino Valley College	701 S Mt Vernon Ave, San Bernardino, CA 92410
Swing Auditorium	San Bernardino, CA (Defunct Location)

Temporal Coverage:

1924 - 2014

Key Events:

- Willie Roberts was 2 years old when he and his family moved from Mesa, Arizona to Brawley, California for better opportunities.
- Roberts was playing with a White girl, leading to his father brawling with the daughter's father as the latter wanted to spank Roberts.
- Roberts took two years of high school, went into the Civilian Conservation Corps, and then was drafted into the military during WWII.
- Talking about helping others who were in minority groups to get jobs where they
 were denied previously.
- Roberts worked for the Chamber of Commerce.
- Parties in the interview look at the documents that Roberts had in the interview.
- Discussing the organizations that Roberts was once a part of.
- Recollections of people that Roberts remembers.

Key Organizations:

• Civilian Conservation Corps

- The Chamber of Commerce
- West Side Action Group
- The Masons
- The American Legion
- The Boys Club
- National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)
- Rialto Freedom and Cultural Society
- Black Rose Organization

Interview Index:

Media Format	Time (hh:mm:ss)	Topic Discussed
Digital Video	00:03:25 - 00:04:50	Willie Roberts details what he had done as a child for his father to get into a fight.
Digital Video	00:07:06 - 00:08:53	Roberts speaks of his military career during World War II.
Digital Video	00:09:02 - 00:11:47	Roberts and his role in getting other people hired where they were once denied.

Related Materials

Additional oral history interviews are available from the Bridges That Carried Us Over Project at CSUSB, https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/bridges/

Full interview transcript can be found below.

Interview Transcript

Start of Interview:

[00:00:00]

FLO: Okay.

RATIBU JACOCKS: You think you need to be a little closer to him?

FLO: Okay, it's recording.

RATIBU JACOCKS: A lot closer. Yeah, put it here. Yep. We want to make sure we can hear you.

WILLIE ROBERTS: What did you want me to ...?

RATIBU JACOCKS: Huh?

WILLIE ROBERTS: What is it you wanted me to speak on?

RATIBU JACOCKS:Well, I'm -- I -- I'm going to ask the questions, and we'll go from there. We're getting ready to start right now.

FLO: Okay, we're ready.

RATIBU JACOCKS:Today is July the 31st, 2014. My name is Ratibu Jacocks, and I am interviewing Willie, W-I-L-I-E, Roberts, R-O-B-E-R-T-S.

WILLIE ROBERTS: That's right.

RATIBU JACOCKS: And we're doing it here in his home in Rialto. And we want to thank you and your wife so much for letting us come in to talk to you. Mr. Roberts -- WILLIE ROBERTS: [00:01:00] Yeah?

RATIBU JACOCKS:-- first question I want to ask you: what would you say to the future generation?

WILLIE ROBERTS: Well, I don't know really what to think about what's going on right now, because I haven't been in the forefront to do it.

RATIBU JACOCKS: Okay.

WILLIE ROBERTS: But I would encourage them all to continue to go to school.

RATIBU JACOCKS: Go to school, okay.

WILLIE ROBERTS: Yes, and get their education.

RATIBU JACOCKS:Okay.

WILLIE ROBERTS: Because that's where the foundation is.

RATIBU JACOCKS: And where were you born?

WILLIE ROBERTS: I was born in Mesa, Arizona.

RATIBU JACOCKS: Mesa, Arizona.

WILLIE ROBERTS: Nineteen twenty-four.

RATIBU JACOCKS: Nineteen twenty-four. Okay. And tell me: from Mesa, Arizona,

how long do you stay there? How old were you when you left?

WILLIE ROBERTS: I was two years [00:02:00] old when I left, and I came to

Brawley, California.

RATIBU JACOCKS: And why were you moving? What was moving you?

WILLIE ROBERTS: My dad and my mother were driving from there to Brawley,

California.

RATIBU JACOCKS: They were driving some people?

WILLIE ROBERTS: Driving the car from Mesa, Arizona to --

RATIBU JACOCKS: They were driving there.

WILLIE ROBERTS: Yes.

RATIBU JACOCKS: But why were they leaving? Why -- do you know why they left,

why they didn't stay where they were?

WILLIE ROBERTS: Well, things were better in California than they were in Arizona,

because they hadn't been from Oklahoma too long, so they decided to stay there

for a couple years, and then they come home to California.

RATIBU JACOCKS: So I guess you could say they were looking for a better life.

WILLIE ROBERTS: A better life.

RATIBU JACOCKS: The -- your parents, your mom --

WILLIE ROBERTS: Yes.

RATIBU JACOCKS:-- and dad. What were their names?

WILLIE ROBERTS: My [00:03:00] dad's name was Carter Roberts, and my

mother's name was Rose J. Roberts.

RATIBU JACOCKS: Okay. And I think you said they were from Oklahoma.

WILLIE ROBERTS: Oklahoma.

RATIBU JACOCKS: They were from Oklahoma. And so your father got to

California. How old were you when you got to California?

WILLIE ROBERTS: I was three years old there in California.

RATIBU JACOCKS: (laughs) You were three, so you were a baby.

WILLIE ROBERTS: Mm-hmm.

RATIBU JACOCKS: You don't have much -- do you have many memories prior to being three years old, when you was in Arizona, or Brawley?

WILLIE ROBERTS: Well, the only thing I can remember about Arizona, and the reason we left is because my dad was a farmer. He was working on a farm. We stayed out in a country town, in a country house. And [00:04:00] my dad, he got into a -- he got into an argument, because I was out there playing with his daughter, and he wanted to spank me, and my dad said, "No, you're not going to spank him. He's just a kid." And so he got into a little brawl there, and then they finally -- we finally packed up and left.

RATIBU JACOCKS: Now, was this a white man or a Black man?

WILLIE ROBERTS: This was a white man.

RATIBU JACOCKS: This was a white man that was wanting to spank you.

WILLIE ROBERTS: And his daughter... Hmm?

RATIBU JACOCKS: That wanted to spank you.

WILLIE ROBERTS: Yeah.

RATIBU JACOCKS:'Cause you were playing with his daughter.

WILLIE ROBERTS: Right.

RATIBU JACOCKS:Okay, just trying to understand. So your father left, and did he come to California -- I mean, out this area, or what part of California did you stay before you came to [the IE?]?

WILLIE ROBERTS: [00:05:00] Well, that was where we ended up, right there in Brawley.

RATIBU JACOCKS:Oh, in Brawley. And how long do you stay there?

WILLIE ROBERTS: I stayed there until I was about 12 years old, and then we moved to Calipatria.

RATIBU JACOCKS:Oh, where is that?

WILLIE ROBERTS: It's about 14 miles from Brawley.

RATIBU JACOCKS:Oh, okay.

WILLIE ROBERTS: And I went to school at Brawley, but the last two years I went to Calipatria, where I graduated. And then I came back to Brawley to live with my cousin, and I lived with him about, oh, I guess until I was -- I went into the CC camp.

RATIBU JACOCKS:[00:06:00] You went where?

WILLIE ROBERTS: Into Civilian Conservation Corps.

RATIBU JACOCKS: Oh, okay.

WILLIE ROBERTS: I went to -- I went to Brawley High School in one year, and that's when I left, in my junior year, and I went to Calipatria, to a CC camp later for a year. And I became a forestry clerk there, in the CC camp. And then I made a sergeant while I was there, and then after that I moved back -- after my year was up, I moved back to West Riverside, with my mother.

RATIBU JACOCKS: Riverside.

WILLIE ROBERTS: In West Riverside.

RATIBU JACOCKS: West Riverside.

WILLIE ROBERTS: Yeah.

RATIBU JACOCKS: Okay.

WILLIE ROBERTS: And 'cause they had -- she had a two-acre farm there.

[00:07:00] And I stayed there until I was 19, and then I went into the military. I got drafted at military.

RATIBU JACOCKS: What period was that? What year was that, you went in the mil--

WILLIE ROBERTS: It was in 1943.

RATIBU JACOCKS: Nineteen forty-three. What was going on at that time?

WILLIE ROBERTS: World War II.

RATIBU JACOCKS: World War II, okay. And you were drafted. Were you in an integrated or segregated unit.

WILLIE ROBERTS: I was in a segregated unit.

RATIBU JACOCKS: You were in a segregated unit.

WILLIE ROBERTS: Yes. (picks up piece of paper) (pause) You want me to read this? (hands paper to interviewer)

RATIBU JACOCKS:Oh, okay. So what I have here is "World War II contributions [00:08:00] by African American veterans." Now, this is one of five pages. I don't -- I don't want to read it now, but what I would like to do is if I can have a copy of it -- WILLIE ROBERTS: Yes.

RATIBU JACOCKS:-- and take it for your record.

WILLIE ROBERTS: Mm-hmm.

RATIBU JACOCKS: Can I do that?

WILLIE ROBERTS: Yeah.

RATIBU JACOCKS:Okay. Good. So you're in the military, and what countries were you stationed at?

WILLIE ROBERTS: I was in Louisiana for about five months, for basic training, and then I left there and went to a camp in Jersey. And then we left from there and went overseas to North Africa.

RATIBU JACOCKS: In North Africa.

WILLIE ROBERTS: And then we stayed (break in video) [all of the?] different counties.

RATIBU JACOCKS:[00:09:00] So you helped a lot of African American get jobs.

WILLIE ROBERTS: Mm-hmm. Oh, yes.

RATIBU JACOCKS: And what types of jobs were these that you were --

WILLIE ROBERTS: Whatever positions that they were not being hired in. I was trying to get minorities hired into the different departments.

RATIBU JACOCKS: How do you feel you did?

WILLIE ROBERTS: Well, I must have done pretty good, (laughter) because when Governor Reagan went for Presidency, I had a chance to go there, but I didn't want to leave my wife. And so I stayed here, and that's when I went in to work for the Chamber of Commerce, and to work for that. And then I wet --

RATIBU JACOCKS: You were working for the Chamber. You had a job --

WILLIE ROBERTS: Yeah, mm-hmm.

RATIBU JACOCKS:-- working for the Chamber.

WILLIE ROBERTS: Yeah, I was working for the Chamber.

RATIBU JACOCKS: Okay.

WILLIE ROBERTS: In San Bernardino. [00:10:00] And then, after that, I had different jobs. After I retired from there, I didn't do anything after that, but I was working for the OJT program, on the job training program, with the County, getting

minorities hired in different jobs. And I got 'em hired there, and when I went to Lockheed, I got some of them hired outside of Phoenix, because they had a plant there, too.

RATIBU JACOCKS: These were federal con-- federal jobs.

WILLIE ROBERTS: Into Lockheed --

RATIBU JACOCKS: Well, the County.

WILLIE ROBERTS: Lockheed jobs.

RATIBU JACOCKS:Lockheed, okay.

WILLIE ROBERTS: [00:11:00] Into Lockheed, but I was getting them into any jobs that I could find where they weren't hiring minorities.

RATIBU JACOCKS: So who had a job like you had, before you had it?

WILLIE ROBERTS: It was a federal job.

RATIBU JACOCKS: They had had it all the time?

WILLIE ROBERTS: Yeah.

RATIBU JACOCKS: Okay. So you weren't the first one to do that kind of work.

WILLIE ROBERTS: No. I had... (flips through documents)

RATIBU JACOCKS:[He has a lot of documents?]. We may need to come over here, [Flo?], and put them in --

LAURA ROBERTS: [Yeah, order?].

RATIBU JACOCKS:-- a different order. Okay, this is a person -- a picture of Hillary and Bill. [See you?].

LAURA ROBERTS: [00:12:00] (inaudible) organizations. He can't remember all his organizations.

RATIBU JACOCKS:But they were young and happy. [Willie Rogers?]... But this is a certificate... Were you an after-hour nurse?

WILLIE ROBERTS: Hmm?

RATIBU JACOCKS:Were you -- is this...? No, this is... What is this one here that I'm looking at now? This is (inaudible), a veteran...

WILLIE ROBERTS: I was working for the... (pause)

RATIBU JACOCKS: Will you look at this, please?

LAURA ROBERTS: Yes.

RATIBU JACOCKS: And maybe she can tell her what that one on the top, what is that one right there. I couldn't -- I didn't know if that was a [00:13:00] medical record, or...

LAURA ROBERTS: I think so.

RATIBU JACOCKS: Yeah.

LAURA ROBERTS: I think so.

RATIBU JACOCKS: That may be a medical record.

LAURA ROBERTS: Mm-hmm. That's what this is.

RATIBU JACOCKS:But what I would like to do, Mr. -- Dr. Will Roberts, here's what I would like to do: I would like to go through your papers, and see what [it is?], and log 'em, and then come back and talk to you more about different things that I'm discovering. Because I know that you have -- you've done a lot of things (laughs) -- LAURA ROBERTS: Lot of history.

RATIBU JACOCKS:-- in your life, and we're not going to cover everything in this one hour that we're talking about. This is a certificate of participation for the Civilian Conservation Corps, 50-year anniversary, in 1983. So you had all [00:14:00] types of certificates, and recognition, and is this from -- who is this from here? Oh, I see one from Assembly Member Wilmer Amina Carter. (laughter) And this was given in 2010, and he gave just Veteran of the Year, Certificate of Special Congressional Recognition from Congressman Joe Baca to Willie Roberts, [in 2010?]. That's

another one from Joe Baca, and this is a Certificate of Special Congressional Recognition, Chief Warrant Officer. That was your title? Chief Warrant Officer? WILLIE ROBERTS: Chief Warrant Officer.

RATIBU JACOCKS:Okay. And here's one from Nell Soto, Senator Nell Soto. Chief Warrant Officer Willie Roberts, Army, World War II, Korea, [00:15:00] and the Berlin crisis.

WILLIE ROBERTS: Mm-hmm.

RATIBU JACOCKS: You've been fighting a long time --

LAURA ROBERTS: Tell him about... Yeah, a long time.

RATIBU JACOCKS:-- [young man?]. I didn't thought you -- I didn't know you were a fighter. (laughter) Thought you were a lover. Certificate of Special Congressional Recognition, and this is by Joe Baca, for 2002. Two-oh-two. This is one from John Longville. He was in the Assembly. And this is 2002. So you just have a lot of -- I'm not gonna read all these things right now. (laughter) See, there are a lot of 'em. This is from the City. You got Joe Sampson, you got Winnie Hanson, you got Grace Vargas, you got Kurt Wilson, and you got Deborah Robertson, all here. Man.

LAURA ROBERTS: He's been here a long time. (laughter)

RATIBU JACOCKS: That's it. That's it. That's enough.

LAURA ROBERTS: He's 90 years old. He's been here --

RATIBU JACOCKS:Nah, nah, nah, [00:16:00] that's not... What I read is not even a tenth of what I see, so it's a lot. And I am not going to take my time now and read all of those (laughs) certificates, but just -- I got a couple more questions I'm going to ask you, Mr. Roberts. Let me ask you a couple more questions -- WILLIE ROBERTS: Mm-hmm.

RATIBU JACOCKS:-- about you, the man. I had asked the question earlier about different organizations that you were involved in, and can you go over those again for me.

WILLIE ROBERTS: (inaudible) --

RATIBU JACOCKS: Community-based organizations, that you -- really stand out in your mind, that you really have...

WILLIE ROBERTS: Mm... (pause)

RATIBU JACOCKS: Were you involved with the West Side Action Group?

WILLIE ROBERTS: Yeah. [00:17:00] Yep, I was with the West Side Action Group.

RATIBU JACOCKS: And were you involved with the Masons? Which lodge was

that?

WILLIE ROBERTS: Yeah, Prince Hall Masonic Lodge.

RATIBU JACOCKS: Prince Hall Masonic Lodge.

WILLIE ROBERTS: Mm-hmm.

RATIBU JACOCKS: Were you involved with the Elks?

WILLIE ROBERTS: Hmm?

RATIBU JACOCKS: The Elks Lodge?

WILLIE ROBERTS: No.

RATIBU JACOCKS: You weren't involved with the Elks.

WILLIE ROBERTS: American Legion.

RATIBU JACOCKS: American Legion.

WILLIE ROBERTS: Yeah.

RATIBU JACOCKS: Which post was that?

WILLIE ROBERTS: Post 710.

RATIBU JACOCKS: Post 710.

WILLIE ROBERTS: Yes, (inaudible) post. Jack and I -- Jack Hill and I started the post.

RATIBU JACOCKS: You started that post.

WILLIE ROBERTS: Yeah.

RATIBU JACOCKS: So you're one of the founders. You remember --

WILLIE ROBERTS: Yeah.

RATIBU JACOCKS:-- how long ago -- what year that was in? When?

WILLIE ROBERTS: In '45.

RATIBU JACOCKS: Forty-five.

WILLIE ROBERTS: Mm-hmm.

RATIBU JACOCKS: And what were you -- where were y'all meeting in '45?

WILLIE ROBERTS: [00:18:00] (pause) We were meeting at Eighth and Perris.

RATIBU JACOCKS: Eighth and Perris.

WILLIE ROBERTS: Yeah, in San Bernardino, in the alley there, right by the alley there.

RATIBU JACOCKS: And the Masons were over in that area, too, right?

WILLIE ROBERTS: Yeah, but it was [native reservations?] in Riverside.

RATIBU JACOCKS:Oh, okay.

WILLIE ROBERTS: That's when I joined the Masons, when I first got out in '45, and became a Shriner, 32nd degree.

RATIBU JACOCKS: In Riverside or San Bernardino?

WILLIE ROBERTS: In Riverside.

RATIBU JACOCKS: In Riverside.

WILLIE ROBERTS: Yeah.

RATIBU JACOCKS:Okay. And I'm just trying to remember: were you in any organization with Valley College that they had? [00:19:00] Were you there when Lois Carson was on the board?

WILLIE ROBERTS: Yeah. Yeah, I was there when she was on the board.

RATIBU JACOCKS:Oh, (inaudible).

LAURA ROBERTS: He established the (inaudible) Scholarship Fund at Valley College.

RATIBU JACOCKS: You established a scholarship at Valley College?

WILLIE ROBERTS: Yeah.

RATIBU JACOCKS: All right. What --

LAURA ROBERTS: (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) member of the Boys Club --

RATIBU JACOCKS: Huh?

LAURA ROBERTS: -- after. Boys Club, the NAACP --

RATIBU JACOCKS: The Boys Club, NAACP.

LAURA ROBERTS: -- Rialto Freedom and Cultural Society.

RATIBU JACOCKS: Rialto Freedom and Cultural Society. (laughs)

LAURA ROBERTS: Yeah. Black Rose Organization, yeah.

RATIBU JACOCKS: Yeah, so Laura remembered a lot of... And a lot of them we'll find in these papers that we have here.

LAURA ROBERTS: Yes.

RATIBU JACOCKS: Do you think we'll find...?

LAURA ROBERTS: Yes, (inaudible). [Is that the back door?]?

RATIBU JACOCKS: Somebody trying to call me.

LAURA ROBERTS: He didn't get [out?], did he?

FLO: No.

RATIBU JACOCKS:Okay, what we're going to do, Flo, we're going to [00:20:00] stop the interview now and come back at a different time to do this. We want to thank you, Dr. Willie Roberts, for this interview, and we really want to thank not only you but coming into your home, and Laura welcome us here, and I'm not finished, not finished. I like to do about an hour at a time, and then I come back and do some more, if that's all right with you.

WILLIE ROBERTS: That's all right. (inaudible).

RATIBU JACOCKS:All right, thank you. (break in video) put 'em in order. And then we'll come back and... This is good, though.

LAURA ROBERTS: This is good, yeah.

RATIBU JACOCKS: It was a lot. You have done a lot, young man.

LAURA ROBERTS: Well, he has quite a history. He has quite a history.

RATIBU JACOCKS: That generation have some good history.

LAURA ROBERTS: Yes.

RATIBU JACOCKS: We mentioned --

LAURA ROBERTS: Yes.

RATIBU JACOCKS:-- Jack Hill, but he didn't mention [Carl Clemons?], and I'll [00:21:00] bet you Clemons was in that same gang --

LAURA ROBERTS: Mm-hmm.

RATIBU JACOCKS:-- that he was in.

LAURA ROBERTS: Mm-hmm.

WILLIE ROBERTS: Yeah. Carl Clemons and I -- he was the first -- well, I guess about the first person that I met at school --

RATIBU JACOCKS: Is that right?

WILLIE ROBERTS: -- when I came here. I came here as a junior, when I left Valley. I came here as a junior, and I met Carl Clemons at school --

RATIBU JACOCKS: You got that working? Yeah. Yeah, yeah. And you met him in school?

WILLIE ROBERTS: Yeah.

RATIBU JACOCKS: So did you know him before Jack Hill?

WILLIE ROBERTS: No. Well... No.

LAURA ROBERTS: No.

WILLIE ROBERTS: No, no, I met him here in '43 or '44.

RATIBU JACOCKS: So did you know Johnnie Epps?

WILLIE ROBERTS: Yeah, I knew Johnnie Epps.

RATIBU JACOCKS: And you were here when [00:22:00] he was hired.

WILLIE ROBERTS: Yeah.

RATIBU JACOCKS: And you were here when he got killed.

WILLIE ROBERTS: Mm-hmm.

RATIBU JACOCKS: Were you here when he had the incident at the Swing

Auditorium?

WILLIE ROBERTS: Yeah.

RATIBU JACOCKS: And do you remember what was going on then? Can you

describe that incident?

WILLIE ROBERTS: I don't know. It was between him and a white person. 'Cause

he was acting cop then. But I don't remember --

RATIBU JACOCKS:[About that?]?

WILLIE ROBERTS: Yeah.

RATIBU JACOCKS:But you remember the incident.

WILLIE ROBERTS: Mm-hmm.

RATIBU JACOCKS: Seem like everybody in the community knew about the

incident?

WILLIE ROBERTS: Mm-hmm.

RATIBU JACOCKS:And they were talking about it, like when we do when [little?] things happen? Okay. Do you remember any other events like that, [00:23:00] where there was a buzz in the community about something, like what -- Mr. Epps? Any other events?

WILLIE ROBERTS: Not offhand.

RATIBU JACOCKS:Not right offhand? Okay. All right. Well, again, thank you, and I can talk to him all day, I know that. So thank you. Flo, you can...

End of Interview:

[00:23:31]