TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW
with WILLIAM N. ROBSON

by Karen Wickre
for the

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KW: I'd love to know some kind of chronology about your involvement with the Federal Theatre Radio Division or whatever else you were involved with first, I guess.

WR: I came to New York from Chicago in the spring of 1937 and it seems to me—yes, sometime in late 1937 or early 1938. It's awfully hard to remember now and I was looking at some material today, trying to refresh my memory. I can pin some dates. I know that it was in the spring of 1938 that I did the "No Help Wanted" show, the documentary.

KW: That you wrote it?

WR: I wrote it and produced it with WPA /Works Progress Administration/ actors and cast. That was a documentary on the whole WPA, a history of the WPA. But prior to that, I was called in by Douglas Coulter, who was the Assistant Program Manager for CBS /Columbia Broadcasting System/ in New York under Bill Lewis. And he said, "The Federal Theatre has organized a Radio Division and they want some time on CBS to do a program, a series." He said, "Now, I'm not taking any chances with any WPA director, and I've told them that we would do it if one of our staff directors directed it, and I want you to do it." So I said, "Fine."

KW: You were with CBS?

WR: I was a staff director at CBS, yes. I had come east from Hollywood where I had started in radio in 1933. I had come east in the summer of 1936. Bill Lewis, who had already scouted me out on the Coast, sent me to Chicago to supervise a program for the 50th Anniversary of Sears Roebuck. And I stayed on in Chicago until the spring of 1937 and then returned to New York and became a

staff director.

Now, I was looking at a picture before you arrived that stems from those days, a picture with me in a booth and three middle-aged ladies at the microphone. It seems to me that that was the first effort that we did. I can't remember anything else about it. Three middle-aged ladies. They must have been three old maids. Oh, wait a minute! Whoa! It's coming back now. Mary Roberts Rinehart's character, Tish, that was it. Tish, a very famous Saturday Evening Post continuing character that Mary Roberts Rinehart created. That was it, it was Tish, and these three middle-aged ladies were WPA, Radio Division WPA actresses. I should say Federal Theatre Radio Division actresses. That's right, that was Tish.

KW: Did you write a script or you just supervised?

WR: No, I directed in the studio. I suppose Les Roberts, who was the head of the Radio Division, considered himself the producer. I guess in a sense he was. But I represented CBS. They provided the actors and the script.

KW: Did networks buy Federal Theatre Radio Division time? Was that—did someone have to sell it to them? How did they get it?

WR: No, they contributed their own time. It was never sponsored. It was, oh, I

don't know, I can't remember now, like maybe ten o'clock at night. We didn't have the prime time concept in radio in those days, but there were slow nights where--well, Tuesday night on NBC /National Broadcasting Company/ was a block-buster because they had Benny and Hope. So that's where they put Norman Corwin, you know, and I suppose it was one of those nights when we didn't have an audience anyway. That's where they put this show.

KW: Was this syndicated nationally?

WR: Not syndicated. It was released over the CBS network.

KW: And they could do with it what they wanted locally?

WR: No, no, no. They took it. Oh, I suppose some independent owned and operated stations may have declined it. The owned and operated stations which were BBM in Chicago, WCCO Minneapolis and St. Louis--I can't remember the call letters. But I don't think it ever went to the Coast because we had a time problem there, and we did not use any recordings in those days, any delayed recordings. It had to be produced live. So I'm sure it was late evening, fairly late evening. At any rate, I know there was not a repeat to the Coast. So this then would bring it to Eastern and Central time zones.

Now, there was a spinoff program called, "The Ghost of Benjamin Sweet." Do you know anything about that?

KW: Nothing.

WR: Well, at that time I was directing the Columbia Workshop after Irving Reis, its originator, had gone to the movies. And we did a very interesting one-shot show called, "The Ghost of Benjamin Sweet." And this was a story of a guy who was damned upset about dying and went around raising hell with everybody that was still alive in his community, playing pranks and so forth.It was a very

cute idea. But what gave it its interesting impact for radio was I reversed things and all human beings were heard on filter mike. And Benjamin Sweet's ghost and his pal ghosts were heard straight. They were on full. Well, this at that time was a thing that caught the imagination of the public, and it was a very interesting one-time shot. Now, I don't know how this happened, but I imagine Les Roberts dreamed it up or maybe somebody at CBS. I just don't know how it happened but nevertheless, somebody said, "Let's do a series of 'The Ghost of Benjamin Sweet.'" And as I remember it--now, I may be wrong. I may be wrong about this, but my impression was that we used Federal Theatre people. I know this, at least I know this. Oh, I see what it is. No, we didn't in the cast. Now I remember. The star, the fellow who played the ghost of Benjamin Sweet, Ed Latimer, had come out of the Radio Division of Federal Theatre. And he was such a good actor that I used him constantly, and I finally--what was the word--returned him to private industry. That's the connection with Federal Theatre. And he was the star of the show, it was his first starring part.

KW: What was his name?

WR: Ed Latimer, fine character actor, and he went on and became one of the most valuable character actors in the forties until he died, very, very fine actor.

KW: You say Les Roberts. Is he any relation to Evan Roberts? Who did Les Roberts work for, CBS?

WR: No, he was the head of the—

KW: Okay. The name I know is Evan Roberts.

WR: THat's right. He had a fancy little pinky--we all called him Les. Same fellow, that's right.

KW: That's what I need to know.

WR: For print it was Evan. I'd forgotten about that. Yeah, that's the connection. Ed Latimer came out of the project to become a star, a radio star.

Then I think the most interesting activity I had was the "No Help Wanted" caper, and caper it was. This originated with the fellow that was the head of the BBC (British Broadcasting Company). He was a friend of mine. He's over in Baltimore now. Well, it will come to mind. I think he--

KW: Was it Felix Greene?

WR: Felix Greene. Les Roberts went to Felix Greene or Felix Greene--I don't know how they got together but at any rate, it was presented to me. Would I be interested in writing and directing a documentary to be released by the BBC. And I said, "Sure." A very flattering invitation. And I automatically went to CBS about it and said, "Look, I'm going to do this thing for the Federal Theatre. Don't you want to do it on the Columbia Workshop?"

"Hell, no. It's controversial."

KW: Did you know what the subject matter was prescribed to be at that point?

WR: Oh, sure, sure. It was a history of the Works Progress Administration, sure. They wouldn't touch it. It was controversial.

KW: It was?

WR: Of course it was controversial. This was about--

KW: In 1939?

WR: But of course! "That son of a bitch in the White House that started the WPA." New York was the last bastion of Republicanism connected by a hotline to Chicago. Certainly it was controversial. Who the hell owns the airwaves, you know. (Laugh) So I said, "All right, to hell with you. I'm gonna do it because I've been invited to do it for the BBC and by WPA and so on." So I worked long and hard on it and it became a history of the Depression and the

solutions to the--are you familiar with the--

KW: I've read it.

WR: Well, you know what's in it. It sort of went downhill at the end because I catalogued it and all of the projects. It became a little dull but anyway, it was big experimental stuff at the beginning. (Laugh) And we had a WPA cast of thousands. God, there were so many parts in it! Everybody had a line, you know. Not thousands, 20 or more or 30 people. We had the Music Project Orchestra and oh, I think 25 or 30 men. Now, I protected myself by having Ed Latimer, whom I was using all the time anyway, as one of the narrators and Frank Gallup who has been very hot in radio, as the primary narrator. And then I got Leith Stevens to come over and compose, conduct the music. I don't know who paid him. I guess maybe the BBC. I didn't get paid anything either. That was just a contribution. No, I'm sure I didn't. I mean, I was on salary at CBS. They said, "All right, you can go ahead and do it but we don't want to take it on our air. You can understand." So that was it. I suppose they let me--they gave me time at any rate. And we produced it in Leiderkranz Hall on 58th Street, which had just been taken over by CBS and was the finest music studio in the world at that time. This was the old hall of the Leiderkranz Singing Society. It had all kinds of hewn oak work on the ceiling and the walls which were so resonant. The whole thing was like the inside of a violin, you know. You put an orchestra in there--so CBS had built a studio off to one side where you could run the cast separated from the orchestra. The whole orchestra was background. It was beautiful. I'll never forget, we worked all day long with the cast and the orchestra came in, I suppose, around four o'clock in the afternoon. And we worked on and on into the evening and finally Les Roberts had to declare an emergency to get--these

guys had used up a week's work. Their $23 had been earned. He had to declare an emergency to go on and get another $23. And you know, I'm holding it down to the last fine point.

And it was to be recorded on tape, mind you, the first time I ever worked with it in the Phillips Studio in New York. It was going by phone line to the film studio and recorded on metal tape, the first time that I know of tape being used so that it would be recorded in the United States to replay. The BBC had it.

KW: I wonder who decided that.

WR: BBC. And it was to be shipped on the Queen Mary sailing at noon the next day. So as far as I was concerned, I had until noon the next day to get this thing right, you know. And I am a perfectionist in my work so that given that kind of freedom, you know, I don't have to go on the air two hours from now. I've got all night. And I'll never forget, it was about half past two or three o'clock in the morning. I had no regard for the fact that everybody is going to pieces. We're going downhill from now on. And at one point along about here, the engineer sitting here reaches right across me and hits the talk-back switch. He said, "Hello, Phillips. Hello, Phillips. Can you hear me?" Some voice says, "Yeah."He said, "We go in 30 seconds." I looked at this guy and I wanted to kill him for an instant. I thought, "My God, if we don't go in 30 seconds, we won't go at all." I hit the switch. I said, "Leith, did you get that?" He said, "Yeah." I said, "Well, it's 18 seconds now. Stand by." And here some of the people were out in the hall having a cigarette. There's a guy on that tape that chokes up on the word "Atlantic City" because he had come in with a mouthful of cigarette smoke and went right on the mike. So there it was, without editing. We didn't think of editing tape. It was time to air. It was a 45-minute show.

KW: I was going to say it looked like there was a fair amount of music in its first--

WR: Yeah, it was.

KW: --10 minutes on.

WR: So we did it, one tape, and off it went. Now, about two weeks later, 10 days, two weeks, at ten o'clock in the morning the day the show is scheduled to be released on the BBC in London, I get a call from Les Roberts. I'm in my apartment in New York and Roberts is down here in Washington. He says, "Bill, you gotta scratch 'No Help Wanted.' Get in touch with Felix Greene."

I said, "Wait a minute. Why?"

He said, "Look Bill, don't ask."

I said, "I will ask why."

He said, "Well, I'm in General Somervell's office and he says the show should be scratched. Get in touch with Felix and tell him to get in touch with London and cut it."

I said, "Well, why?"

"All right. They're afraid it'll give the Germans a false impression of the American economy."

I said, "Hell, it tells it just exactly the way the American economy was in 1933 and how it's--"

He said, "Bill, these are orders from General Somervell. Get Felix Greene and cut it."

I said, "Okay, Les." I called the BBC office. Felix didn't get in early. So I knew if he wasn't in the office, he was in bed. So I called him at home and got him. I said, "Felix, get lost."

He said, "What do you mean? What's the matter, Bill?"

I said, "Don't go near the office and get out of your apartment now. Don't answer your phone. Get lost for four hours. Call me after two o'clock and I'll tell you." And then I sat there and every 15 minutes Les would say, "Well, did you get him?"

I said, "I can't reach him, Les. I don't know." But two o'clock was seven o'clock London time when the show went on.

KW: So it did go?

WR: And it did go but I'm the fellow with the finger in the dike for those four hours. (Laugh)

KW: How did you think Felix Greene would go along with all this? Or had he agreed to?

WR: He didn't know. He didn't know why. And after two o'clock he got on the phone and I said, "Well, they tried to kill the goddamned thing." Of course, Felix, his heart was in the right place. He was on the side of the angels, too, you know. But I didn't even know that at the time. This was a matter of damned nonsense on the part of the bureaucracy here in Washington and of course, my cockamamie juvenile interest in my own creation. I wanted my show to go on and of course it got tremendous reviews in London. It was very successful.

KW: So it never played here then after that?

WR: Hah! Once. / Once. In 1939, I was out in California and some one of my left-wing friends approached me and asked me if I would update it for Christmas Eve or Christmas Day on the labor station in Los Angeles. I can't remember what the call letters were. So I added 15 minutes to it, updated it in terms of the economy, in terms of the war, the war industry, in terms also of the Finland adventure. I can't remember now, what was it? Oh, Mannerheim. Anyway, it was updated and played one time only locally in Los Angeles. I did it/without

asking permission. I just thought they wouldn't care.

KW: Over that station?

WR: Yeah.

KW: Well, that's probably /the best place/.

WR: Well, that was enough to stamp me for a Communist in those days and did.

KW: Well, the first thing I thought when I read it is how similar it seemed to me to a Living Newspaper script.

WR: Oh, yes, of course. Well, I was terribly influenced by, you know, up to here, Living Newspapers. Oh, sure, I was translating that kind of technique.

KW: It was really similar. Did you dig up your own statistics and facts and that kind of thing?

WR: Oh, sure, I did all the research.

KW: As opposed to the Living Newspaper where go-fers were out--

WR: No, I did all my research. Well now, wait a minute. Eve Merriam may have helped me. I think she did.

KW: Eve Merriam?

WR: Eve Merriam was around at that time. She was a girlfriend of Arthur Laurents and Arthur Laurents had written a couple of scripts for me at the Workshop. I believe I had Eve on to do some research for me. But that was very personal. I said, "Well, you go find such-and-such."

KW: But you sort of knew what you wanted.

WR: Yeah, I knew how I wanted to handle it.

KW: Did you consider it then, I mean, gung-ho WPA. Were you personally, were you in love with the WPA? It just doesn't strike me as being that, you know, pro-. It seems fairly objective.

WR: Well, that's what I was trying to make it. No, I wasn't in love with the WPA.

I was in love with the Democratic Party. I was in love with Franklin D. Roosevelt. You know, I was never a Communist, and when it hit the fan and everybody was being exposed, I was shocked to discover how many very close friends of mine were named, two or three very close friends. But nobody in all those connections and all the H.I.C.C.A.S.P. /Hollywood Independent Citizens Committee for the Arts, Sciences, and Professions/ and all the committees, not a single one ever approached me. Nobody ever asked me. I think I know why. I'd mean too much trouble for them. Because my position was, "Mean what you say and say what you mean."

KW: Yeah, you'd have been too feisty, probably.

WR: Sure. I remember one night going into the apartment of a very fine man who was my wife's uncle, and he was a stockbroker on Wall Street. He lived at 475 Park Avenue, the same building that Arlene Francis lived in, I think, at that time. But it was a midtown Manhattan swank apartment. This was a duplex or something like that. And this guy goes on about that man in the White House and what is the world coming to. And I said, "I'll tell you what it's coming to, Uncle John. One of these days people like Irving Reis here and me and Mary, if she wants to come along, are gonna walk into this building and take over. And you and Mamie will have a room to sleep in and a room to cook in and a room to entertain your friends in, not three stories in a goddamned Park Avenue duplex. You don't deserve it. That's what the world's coming to, Uncle John." And this poor guy, you know, got terrified. He was looking at the face of the proletariat. He'd never heard it said before. I had a great time. (Laugh)

WR: One time--this was 1941--I was going around Florida and driving up to New York with a gal who became my next wife. I mean, Vero Beach at the Driftwood Lodge, a lovely honeymoon type spot, and the phone rings one afternoon and it's Phil Lennen in New York, President of Lennen and Mitchell. And he said, "Bill, for Chrissake, where are you?"

I said, "I'm in Vero Beach."

And he said, "Well, Andrew wants you for dinner."

I said, "Come on!" Andrew Jergens, Jergens soap.

He said, "Yeah. Bill, I've been trying to get you and you've been lost."

I said, "Come on, Phil, I'm 90 miles north of Palm Beach. I don't want to go down there for dinner."

He said, "Bill, I'm afraid you gotta go. You know, this is the advertising business." So of course I couldn't tell him I was traveling with a gal. So I got myself into my dinner jacket and drove 90 miles to Palm Beach, left poor June alone in this hotel. And I had never been in such a place in my whole life.

KW: As Jergens' home?

WR: Yes. The elegance-not elegance, bad taste, but lush, you know. And here was Jergens and a woman--I guess his companion--and one of the executives from the soap company and I think there were three or four couples. You know, patio, all Spanish and so forth. And then, by God, after dinner the ladies rose and left the room. That's the only time this has happened to me. And the cigars were passed and the brandy. And now the guys get down to tearing the Roosevelts apart.

KW: Was this the purpose of the dinner?

WR: No, no. This is just what you got to talk about if you're from Cincinnati.

And Andrew Jergens said, "Well, it's all out in the clear now. Everybody knows that Franklin's a goddamned Communist and it seems now that Eleanor's acting like a Fascist."

And I said, "Well, they make pretty interesting bedfellows, those two, don't they?" (Laugh) And they all looked askance at me and I got in the car and drove 90 miles back to Vero Beach. (Laugh) I've never taken this kind of thing seriously.

KW: Well, it's hard to imagine that a firm that--I mean, I've read about it, you know, how people felt about things or about politics in those days anyway. It's hard to imagine.

WR: I don't think we have its kind today except in the Nixon days. There was another time earlier than that in 1932 when Upton Sinclair was running for governor of California. What the hell was that? EPIC, End Poverty in California. That year, just before the election, was the end of the first year of my first radio success, "Calling All Cars," which was on for the Rio Grande Oil Company tied up with the Police Department of Los Angeles and they used Rio Grande gas. It was the first dramatization of crime shows in radio. And they had a party thrown by the Rio Grande Oil Company, the agency, for the police officials at the police pistol range, a kind of a low-grade country club type of place. And I am wearing an EPIC button in my lapel and Bob Hixon who was scared of his shadow, the head of the agency, took me to one side and he said, "Bill, take that off."

"Why?"

"Don't you know that if Sinclair was elected Governor of California, there'd be no more advertising?"

I said, "Jesus, what a wonderful thought! That's a great idea, Bob,"

He said, "It's your business."

I said, "No, uh-uh. You're only buying a little bit of my time."

We're way off the subject but one more for you.

KW: They're great.

WR: Now in the year 1945 I was out in California doing. . . .

(End of side 1, continued on side 2)

WR: . . . Wheelock, L. Ward Wheelock, who then liked the sobriquet "Colonel" Wheelock, was in town checking things out before we started this big, new show and asked me to have lunch with him at the Brown Derby. So I did and he unfolds a copy of Hollywood Reporter and says, "What's this mean?" And I read here that last night in New York the Radio Directors' Guild voted to join AFL-CIO (American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organization) according to its president, William N. Robson. I said, "Gee, that's great."

He said, "What do you know about it?"

I said, "Nothing. This is the first time—"

He said, "Well, are you the president?"

I said, "Yes."

He said, "Did you make that statement?"

I said, "I couldn't. I was here in Hollywood. You know I've been here for six weeks working for you."

He said, "You have to resign."

I said, "For what?"

He said, "This organization."

I said, "What are you talking about?"

He said, "Campbell's Soup cannot have a labor leader working for it."

I said, "Campbell's Soup can stick it, Ward. You're buying my talent, not my convictions. Of course I won't resign as president. I won't resign from the Guild." So I continued and he paid me $1,000 a week for 26 weeks. No, they fall apart, you know. Hell, if Paley* had had the guts the whole Red Channels thing would have fallen apart. It only takes some guts.

KW: Yeah. Nobody seemed to have them at the time they needed them.

WR: No, they ran scared. They lost control.

KW: Tell me about Norman Corwin. We've been unable to find him anywhere.

WR: Oh, I know where to find him.

KW: Great.

WR: Sure.

KW: They keep sending back his letters.

WR: Really? Perhaps you have the wrong address.

KW: You were his teacher, is that right?

WR: No, no, no. Norman and I were parallel. I can't say we're colleagues. We never worked together. We were on a staff together. I can give you his address. I got a lovely telegram from him last fall on the event of my 70th birthday. He lives in Studio City. Now, I don't know whether Norman had any connection with the Federal Theatre.

KW: It seems, like you, he might have written one or two things. That's my impression.

WR: It's possible.

KW: It seems to me that's why he was on the list. I don't know for sure.

WR: It's strange. I think he's lived in this place at this same address for years.

KW: I looked it up in a sort of biographical dictionary and it was last year's

*William S. Paley.

edition and they sent it back. So I didn't know anything about him. Do you remember a man named Rayness Copeland?

WR: No.

KW: His name keeps popping up and working somehow with Roberts but where and when I don't know. It may have been earlier.

WR: Now, Ivan Black. Have you talked to him?

KW: I didn't but someone else met with him. He was in New York then as I understand it.

WR: He's a con man.

KW: That's not very strange.

WR: I shouldn't say that. He's a press agent.

KW: Yeah.

WR: And he's the same now as he was 40 years ago. Anybody he represents is just the greatest there is. He had absolutely no perspective on a client. If it's his client, it's the greatest. (Laugh)

KW: Until they end their association with him?

WR: That's right. Oh, he's a nice guy, also a pretty good painter.

KW: Is that right? I didn't know that. Oh, I know. It must have been Ivan Black who told us that Betsy Tuthill was your sister.

WR: Sister-in-law.

KW: Sister-in-law?

WR: Yes.

KW: Because she's someone else that we're interested in.

WR: She's great. You'd love to talk to her. She lives on Martha's Vineyard now.

KW: That's nice.

WR: Nice this time of year, sure. She's a charming person, charming.

KW: She worked in what, the research?

WR: She was a director.

KW: Was she? I didn't know that.

WR: She was one of the first women directors in radio.

KW: I know we've got her name in some of our research files.

WR: Well, she was my assistant on Tish. I'm sure she was my assistant on everything I did in those days. We lived together. I mean, she lived with her sister and me at that time. And it seems to me she directed something for the Federal Theatre Project. I think she did.

KW: Was this Radio Division going at full strength for, would you say, the life of the Project, which was 1935-1939? Do you have any idea?

WR: First came into my ken, as I said, in 1937. But it was a going operation then.

KW: Based in New York?

WR: Yes, at the corner of one of those buildings at 57th and Broadway, the same building I think OWI (Office of War Information) was in for a long time.

KW: I was wondering if it was the address that I saw at 1697 Broadway, which was the FTP (Federal Theatre Project) administration headquarters, too.

WR: That's right. That's probably 56th Street, yes. It's right up there and they had a big floor.

KW: Did you ever have any dealings with any of the rest of the Federal Theatre types, administrators?

WR: No, I was strictly radio in those days. I've always been strictly radio. Of course, I knew John Houseman and Orson but not in their capacity on the Federal Theatre.

KW: Later you met them?

WR: No, Orson was working radio at the time. And I knew John not much later when he got the Mercury Theatre going. That career of Houseman's is remarkable.

KW: Well, really, both of them.

WR: Well, no. I think Orson's a fool.

KW: It's interesting what happened to him,though.

WR: Yes. But Houseman having accomplished this distinguished career as an educator teaching at the Juilliard and so forth, suddenly hitting him with that small bit—I can't remember what the picture was. And now his performance last week in doing John Mitchell is incredible. This guy is 76, I think. I think it's just wonderful!

Now, Orson I saw the other night on with Johnny Carson. And I had seen him narrating during the summer the Moiseyev Ballet. I thought he was simply dreadful. You know, by what criterion is he an authority? And he's reading the idiot cards and giving you the knowing nod. This is not the Orson Welles of 40 years ago who was all promise and great talent. Although I must say he was awfully good in the Tutankhamen sequence. But the other night, being a foil for Johnny Carson, this man must weigh 300 pounds. He has double-breasted suits that are like tents. His neck is open because he can't stand constriction around the throat, I'm sure. I mean, it's sad and, you know, the hair is carefully slicked with pomade to make it look brown, a color that his hair never was. His hair was dark, dark brown, nearly black when he was a kid.

KW: A lot perhaps was his voice, I think. A lot of people are still in love with it.

WR: Yes. Well, that he still has and that is unique. Oh, his arrogance as a young man was remarkable. I remember I was directing "Living Stories of the Bible once," and he was 23 and I was 30 maybe or 29. So to me he was a kid and he had no respect for anybody evidently, not old men of 29 at least. "Living Dramas of the Bible." He was playing some biblical character and I said, "Orson, I'd like you to do so and so." And he didn't do it. He did it his way. I again gave the direction and he looked up at the booth and

he says, "Bill, even God can make a mistake."

Then another time I was doing one of those charity performances for the New York Hospital, which Paley* was interested in so he gave them time and gave them me. It was one of those mishmash put-togethers and I just went in to direct the thing. And the narrator was Orson. The rehearsal was called for two o'clock in the afternoon from the stage in the ballroom of the Waldorf Astoria and no Orson. The rehearsals finished, dress rehearsal and no Orson. We break for dinner, I go in about 30 minutes before the air; 15 minutes before air Orson walks in. "Well, Bill, what do you want me to do?" I said, "Orson, here's the script. What can I tell you?"

He said, "Don't worry." And I want you to know he was magnificent. (Laugh) He just turned on that beautiful instrument, that voice of his. (Laugh)

KW: Oh, I can believe it. I can believe it.

WR: He has great talent but I think it vitiated after Citizen Kane.

KW: Which is still very--

WR: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

KW: He was still very young.

WR: Oh, sure. Good heavens, he was not yet 30, about 26, something like that.

KW: What happened after that? I don't know either. Were you a theatre buff? I mean, did you have theatre connections at the time or go to theatre productions and all that kind of thing, since you were in New York?

WR: Well, yes. I went to a lot of--sure.

KW: Did you see him or any of the other notables of the time then?

WR: Where? In Federal Theatre?

KW: Yes.

WR: Certainly. I saw--

*William S. Paley.

KW: Oh, you must have. You said you saw the Living Newspapers.

WR: Yes, and Julius Caesar. Jesus, the concept of playing it in modern dress was fantastic. What the hell was the show—I can associate this with Orson—where the curtain is, where it comes down at the footlights and shoots a gun right at the audience? Or was that a black show?

KW: Well, I don't know. I was going to say it could be both because he and Houseman directed the Lafayette Theatre unit, which was the black unit.

WR: It may have been something that wasn't his. Oh, yes, at that time the Federal Theatre was the most exciting theatre in New York, no question about it.

KW: Were the Living Newspapers effective to you when you saw them?

WR: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

KW: Some more than others? Do you remember any in particular?

WR: I don't remember any in detail, but they were terribly effective.

KW: Did you see scripts? I mean, I'm really surprised at the similarity of style. I was wondering if just by going to see one of those, for example—

WR: If I was influenced by them, it was by going to see them. You must realize, too, that at that time, it was ferment. Jesus, it was great, because there were political cabarets that were also contributing to/and taking from Living Newspaper. It wasn't a subculture, but it wasn't any—it wasn't respectable. It just involved the people. It was terribly exciting. Everybody was boiling over with ideas and then got slapped 15 years later and called Communists for doing what you do when you're 25 years old. But the talent, Christ, we were talented! Everybody at CBS, not at NBC. (Laugh) No, Erik Barnouw came out of NBC, but Erik used to envy us. Everybody envied us at CBS. You know, in the radio business—Paley let us alone—that was the place to be. And there were things happening at WOR, too, but mostly it

was--in the radio section it was at CBS. I mean, things like MacLeish's "Fall of a City." My God, what a project to be involved in! Orson was the narrator in that, too, beautiful job.

KW: What kind of publicity was there for radio in those days? Standard, you know--I don't know--newspaper shots and--what did people do?

WR: Just the way television is handled now. Ads. Not the preview because there weren't recordings, never the preview. Always the review afterwards, and given a great deal of attention. I mean, a thing like "Fall of a City" had a tremendous amount of after-the-fact press. They treated it like theatre, I mean seriously. Oh, Variety and so on treated it regularly also that way. I can't get accustomed still to reading the review before I see the television show because there, of course, you have some idiot who's not dry behind the ears yet being profound about the dramatic forces. My God, this Tom Shales, you know, he was not born the day before yesterday but he's the one who tells you all about it. But of course, that's the complaint of a man who won't admit that he's an old man but I have been around in this business now 43 years. No, wait a minute, wait a minute. I went to Hollywood in 1928 in the pictures so that's 49 years ago.

KW: Where did you come from to go to Hollywood?

WR: Show business. My father was a press agent. (Laugh) I trod the boards when I was nine years old in amateur theatricals, studied with George Pierce Baker at Yale.

KW: You did? That's interesting. You and a lot of other people, huh?

WR: Yes. I was selected out of that by a couple of executives, Walter Winchell one of them, from Paramount and whisked right out of New Haven to Hollywood. My father had been in publicity for Paramount and I knew people and--not a

lot of people but I knew the business from the exhibition and local end. I wasn't a stranger to it in other words.

KW: And what happened? Did you stay with CBS then in the forties?

WR: Yes, principally. During the--well, from 1933 to 1958--how many years is that?

KW: 25.

WR: 25. Well all right, a quarter of a century at least. (Laugh). I was always in and out of CBS because when I went to work in 1933, when I went into radio in 1933, I went to work at KHJ, which was the Don Lee Broadcasting System on the Coast but was the CBS outlet. So to that extent I was associated with CBS. Then as I said, I went on to New York in 1936. Then I was away from CBS for a couple of years and a couple of advertising agencies/ came back at the beginning of the war in 1942 and stayed with them until 1948. There was a hiatus of about a year there when I was in Europe and I came back to them again in 1950 or 1949. Then they chucked me out because I was a goddamned Communist or so they said.

KW: Was that in the early fifties?

WR: Red Channels. I was a political exile in Paris, the only place I could work.

KW: Were you in a community there? I mean, there were others who were in the same situation?

WR: Yes. Most of them were in London but I guess there were two or three of us in Paris. Then I came back the day the vice president in charge of treason at CBS left.

KW: Was that his title?

WR: That was my title for him. The day he left I was reemployed. That was in 1955 or 1956. Then I stayed with them until they moved the "Suspense" to

New York to save $80. (Laugh) I stood all alone while radio eroded around me. Then God love him, Ed Murrow became head of USIA /United States Information Agency/ and called me and said, "How about it?" That's how I came here. I was with the Voice of America for the statutory 15 years.

KW: What did you do for the Voice of America?

WR: Well, I was their senior documentary producer writing all kinds of things, always documentaries. The most notable, I guess, were two series, one called "More Perfect Union," the Constitutional Convention. Then I did six called "Two Hundred Years Ago Tonight" on the Bicentennial, starting on the 16th of December 1973 we recreated the Boston Tea Party 200 years ago that night. Then it was the First Continental Congress and the Battle of Lexington, Battle of Bunker Hill, Guns of Ticonderoga, the Evacuation of Boston by the British, and Fourth of July. So for a period from 1973 to 1976 it was scheduled day and date.

KW: By this time I assume you did have a group of people doing research for you. No?

WR: No. I did all my own research and in the process I became somewhat of a historian because I found great interest in going back to primary materials and then seeing how they had been used by the secondary people, very, very interesting. I don't know any of the disciplines of historians, but I can see, you know, I'd love to be able to continue. But I have to have an assignment. If somebody asks me to do Pericles or the death of Socrates and I'll go, but I sit here with all these books and I won't open them. But while all this was going on for some seven or eight years, I did a show called "New York, New York," which involved interviews with the great, the famous, the humble, the nobodies, anything that has to do with New York

because everything happens there was the philosophy of the show.

KW: A la Studs Terkel?

WR: Don't mention that name in the same breath as this. (Laugh) Well, that's another subject. But Garry Moore was the first MC and then Garry decided that he had too much to do at "To Tell the Truth." He left the show and Ben Grauer took it over and Ben Grauer had a different kind of slant. He's a very knowledgeable musicologist. He's an opera lover, he's a philosopher and the show became tremendously interesting. You'd have Jonas Salk, you'd have Michael de Bakey, you know, it just went on and on. Every week was a feast, an intellectual feast. I'd go to New York and there'd always be four or five people and the most interesting one we'd take to lunch. It was a great time and my great regret was when I had to leave the show and had to be retired last October. But still there was Ben and still we saw each other occasionally, but Ben died. And that was a great loss because a whole period of my life stopped. There wasn't Ben to turn to for solace, for inspiration and what-not. But my successor who is carrying on the show now has persuaded Arlene Francis to do it. (Laugh)

KW: Is that right? She's the one I'm trying hard to reach.

WR: Oh, she's in the Ritz Tower at 57th and Park Avenue.

KW: We contacted her ex-husband, Martin Gabel.

WR: Are they divorced?

KW: I think so, at least separated. I'm not sure. *

WR: Are they? Well, it could be.

KW: And he, well, you know, he sort of-"I can't deliver."

WR: Yes. You can't pin Martin down on anything. No, that's where she is, the Ritz Towers, 57th and Park Avenue. And call her on the number of the Ritz Towers,

*Gabel and Francis are still married, mid-1978.

whatever that is, get it from Information. That's how Sam reached her last week. John Daly suggested Arlene to Sam. They were ready to stop the show and John said, "She's at that place at 57th and Park. I don't remember the number." Then Sam called me and I said, "Yes, that's right." He said, "Do you have her number?"

I said, "Yes, I've got it. Wait a minute." I gave him the number and it worked. Here we are under "Casting," Arlene Francis: Plaza 5-5000. Who else do you want? Joan Lovejoy?

KW: Tell me who he is. Anybody who had--

WR: Joan Lovejoy is "she." She's Frank Lovejoy's widow. Jackson Beck?

KW: Anybody that you know who was connected in any way to the Federal Theatre that you know of.

WR: I don't think these people were. Bob Dryden. I don't think he was around then. No, I don't see any.

KW: Oh, I know. I have one question before I forget that I wanted to ask. We have research files and one of them was a little essay on the whole Federal Theatre Radio Division, and it mentioned a show that they were planning called "Work Pays America." It's description was: "It's the achievements of the Works Progress Administration now awaiting official approval." Does that ring a bell at all? I don't know if they meant that that was supposed to be the same thing.

WR: The same thing as what?

KW: As "No Help Wanted."

WR: Maybe.

KW: But you never heard of "Work Pays America?"

WR: That's a lousy title. It sounds like the same thing. You know, the end of

the script is just the list of all of these projects.

KW: I thought it was interesting that they said, "Now awaiting official approval" because it indicates that there's some—this Somervell business that you mentioned. I don't know what side he was on. Since you told that story, it's very confusing to me about—I mean, he was an administrative person. I mean, he was the head of the WPA at the end.

WR: That's right.

KW: So if he was calling it off, there was either pressure from above him or maybe—

WR: No, he was a bureaucrat playing it safe. He was a military man. I mean, look, these generals, you know, they're not such hot material. He was a military man and he said, "Let's play it safe. Let's not antagonize the Germans. Let's be nice to the Germans." Hell, the day, the morning after Vienna fell, I went to Bill Lewis and said, "Look, I want to do 'The Fall of a City' on Saturday night on the Workshop, which was the next night. I'll get the people. We won't go to the Armory this time, we'll do it." He said, "Well, wait a minute. I've got to clear that upstairs." And the word came back, No, from Ed Klauber, the vice president. "It's too controversial." You have no idea what a—remember the America Firsters, "Keep Us Out of the War;" poor, befuddled Colonel Lindbergh bought the medal and the whole thing. And General Wood, general again, head of Sears Roebuck, head of America First. Why, for Chrissake, these people were only one point better than native-born Fascists in those days. That's what we were all talking about. We were, you know, feeling our oats and saying, "Come on." Not that we wanted to get into a war but God knows, we don't want to identify with the Fascist bastards. The worst crime you could commit later was to have been a "premature anti-Fascist." Then they knew you were a

Commie.

KW: Right. You had to do it at the right time.

WR: Right! When it was fashionable. But for Chrissake, don't give five bucks to the Abraham Lincoln Brigade. Oh, boy! I'm beyond being bitter about it. I think it's funny now, and I really have no enmity to any of these people, including Mr. Paley and Mr. Stanton who treated me rather shabbily. Because I was caught up in history, I was part of history. And for a while there, I stood up and said what I wanted to say. And I got slapped down in the reaction. That's part of life.

KW: But fortunately you were able to come back up, too. That's another thing.

WR: Yes. But thanks to a man who also wouldn't be pushed around, Edward R. Murrow. I was finished. He tried to get me reestablished and I was washed up by the late fifties. And when he got this job, he got in touch with me.

KW: How long were you in Paris?

WR: Almost a year before the government--even then, that was in 1948/1949, the first intimation I had of it in 1949, we'd been there a year doing a show with Maurice Chevalier. And the Marshall Plan had set up a big radio operation in Paris. So they had me do a couple of programs, one monstrous special with Eddie Cantor, who happened to be in Paris at the time and so on. And the guy who was running the thing wanted me to stay over when the Chevalier show was over and we were going home. He said, "Let's get the paper work started, you stay here."

I said, "I'd love to." And I had to go see a young man in striped pants at the Palais Talleyrand next to the Crillon, part of our setup in Paris. And he said, "Would you look over this list of organizations. Did you ever belong to any of them?"

So I saw an organization there: Hollywood Mobilization to End the War. I said, "This sounds familiar. Everybody in Hollywood who was in pictures or radio in those days belonged to this. And I was a member of a guild. Every member of the guild automatically belonged to the Hollywood Mobilization. . . .

(End of Tape - End of Interview)