Rowena Moore
Omaha, Nebraska
Interviewed on 7/25/88

Abdul Alkalimat: What about the 1960's? After the sit-in's started. I guess first 1954 was the ground decision about integrating schools. And then in the 60's the revolution began.

Rowena Moore: Yes, well it didn't just come all at once because I know there were some sit-ins in Oklahoma and Florida. And back in the houses they were people who were really outspoken about wanting to you know...their rights you know.

Ah, there were quite a number of sit-ins and some of them were under the NAACP. We had a friend of mine who is Mrs. Calloway who has a black museum here in Omaha Mountain. And her children were kind of light-complexioned and she is one of the ones who led the fight here in Omaha to try to get some place opened up. And you know you can say whatever you want to but people who have children are interested in seeing that their children get what they need and sometimes I think it's a good thing that we have children. It gives you more energy and stimulates you to see that these things come about. I give her credit for being one of the active persons at that particular time and helping to break down the discrimination out at Peony Park in the city here.

AA: What else was segregated here?

RM: Oh, just about everything is segregated here in Omaha. With me, being a packing house employee, I worked everyday and if I didn't get out and work with other organizations I just wouldn't have known what some of the things were going. But I was active in the NAACP and I often feel hurt because the Urban League gets the credit for so many things and back during those early days I believe the Urban League was a white organization and had mostly all white people that I could hear of that could do things. And I often think about if you have people in an organization who have the education and can sit down and write articles and do different things it puts you way out in front. I mean that group of people they can say they did anything like, for example, they get the credit for having someone intercede to help the black women get into the packing house. And it kind of hurts me, to a certain extent, because they didn't have anything to do with what I was doing. It didn't come up because of any Urban League activity. But, we knew that we needed and wanted a job. But when you get down to it and start doing the research and find that the Urban League have something written up that they did. They don't know nothing about it. But I do know that long about that time, some of the ministers, tried to do something. And whatever it was that they did....sometimes nosing around in our community.

AA: I hear you. Sure we all better be.

RM: Start looking around and I want to know who you – what is your business. You know, what are you doing here.

AA: Well now, when did you acquire this land? How did you come about buying some real estate?

RM: Oh god, I always wanted to own something. You know, I bought my first house up on Grant Street.

AA: When was this?

RM: And that was back during, I can't tell you exactly what year, but after the war. Before I was able to buy any ground. And uh, you just couldn't get no $15,000 or $2,000, $5,000 to buy a house hardly. And uh, I bought a house up on Peyton Street so his family could live. They came from Detroit here and lived with me in the project for awhile is where I lived.

AA: This is his second family?

RM: Yea. He came back here, I don't know. He lost his job in Detroit I imagine. Work wasn't as good for him. So he came to Omaha and he lived with me in the project. And uh, finally he found that house out there and he was willing to buy it. And he, my dad was a working man. He worked with ah, he was a union man. And he worked with labor. Construction, demolition, that's the word I was trying to think of. Yea, demolition, I couldn't think of it. And he could tear down houses and he could do that kind of thing. He can help build them too, you know. (laughs) And ah, I was trying to think, what were we talking about?

AA: And then he bought the house up on Peyton Street?

RM: Yea, he bought a house up on Peyton Street. He lived with me in the project until he could find a house. But my mother had a apartment, a little duplex, down on Nichols and my father and this new wife rented that. He let them live in that duplex down there until he could get something by himself because he couldn't live with me too long in the project. That's where I was living when he came back to Omaha. And um, I wasn't very proud of him buying that little old house out there, it wasn't large enough for them. In fact, he bought that house and had to do a lot of work to get it so they could live in it. And I often say it ended up with him buying this place at 3448 Peyton and I bought the house much later, next door to him. And I told my brother that that was my summer house because I had a house at 2762 Grant.

AA: This was your first house?

RM: Yea, that was my first house. (laughs) And then when I wanted to do some work at Grant Street, I had a lot of furniture, like I do know, a lot of things, I moved some things out to this house next door and my brother wanted me to let him have the house. He wanted to stay there and take care of himself. He didn't have a job, he wasn't even old

enough and he wanted me to buy this other house across the street and I ended up. That's what got me into buying this property because I wanted to build a house near my father.

A: When did you buy this property? Is that in the 50's?

RM: Yes.

AA: Did you still work at Arnold's?

RM: I still worked at Arnold's. I paid on it. I paid $10 a month. And that was a lot of money.

AA: Do you remember how much it cost?

RM: No, I really don't remember how much, but my father...

AA: Do you remember who you bought it from?

RM: Yea, I have the book with me, where I paid $10 a month on the property. But my father, his health was getting bad and he wasn't able to work and I started to make the payments to hold onto the property for him because I didn't want them to take the property from him. So, he put it down in my name and I was the one paying for it.

AA: So you eventually bought all six lots?

RM: Yep.

AA: And then were keeping the taxes up on it.

RM: Right, all these years. It wasn't easy. I worked hard at it. I invested a lot of money.

AA: Now who lives in that general area?

RM: There are... no one... that part of the area that I mentioned in here, there's no one living in this area here. There's church, there's apartments in the part here and there isn't anyone else in this area. There's a bank offered to buy my part of it, they wanted to build up this area here but after I refused to sell them mine they couldn't, it wasn't big enough for them. They needed my part of the property. That was before this nursing home and this church was built. They wanted all of the properties and they couldn't build without mine. Which, I just refused to sell it because I knew that if they sold it, if I sold mine, they would build in there yes and they would probably say that there was some little place in there that Malcolm had lived in this area. Like say, 'This is where Malcolm X lived,' you know.

AA: Well let me ask you this, when did you first find out that this property you owned was Malcolm?

RM: I didn't find that out until 1970.

AA: In the 70's?

RM: Yes, my sister, she was an avid reader. She read a lot of things. And she was the one who first told me, she says, 'Sis, you know, that house out where daddy live is where Malcolm X family lived when he was born.' And I didn't think all that much about it. Then the Negro Historical Society, which Burton Calloway was part of and Bill Phillips was President of it they told me that he and his family lived there. That still didn't really do anything for me. I just owned the property you know. The house, we had torn the house down because we couldn't fix it up it just wasn't...

AA: Do you have any pictures of the...?

RM: I have one picture of that area where we tore the house down and I'll show you that. You know I've never been the type of person, grandma, to carry baby pictures around showing them to everybody and grandchildren. I have never been a person to carry pictures of my grandchildren and my family pictures around. But I carry Malcolm X around in my pocket. This is a picture of where the house stood. This is after we tore it down. I'm kind of proud of finding this picture among some of my things. I didn't really know anything about Malcolm X at that time. That's one of the pictures of the ceremony. Of course you know who that that is, and you know who that is.

AA: Where was that picture taken?

RM: That was taken the early part of this year. Jesse Jackson was here in Omaha. They invited me out too, that was taken out at, it used to be a cemetery here in – Johnny Gavanah...

AA: So, after the second time that Mrs. Calloway told you about....

RM: Yes, she came out on the... people began to celebrate Malcolm X, and they came up on the birth site up there, Wesley House, they had a big parade. She came up on the birth site and talked with me – interviewed me. She was working for one of the radio stations. And ah, I don't know (laughs) they said quite a number of people were interested in Malcolm back in the 70's. We had found out about this Malcolm X foundation and she was part of it. She joined with me to celebrate the organizing. But she wasn't active in it. She was busy in her own business.

AA: When did you first get the idea or how did or how did you come about saying, 'Well if you own this property and you learn about Malcolm how did you come to say well we need to organize a foundation it and do something regular, or when did you...do you see what I'm getting at? How did you come into consciousness of what you're doing now?

RM: Well, I was dating back years when my son was young. There was a Senator Bilbot. And I would lay up at night and hear him – I would listen to my radio and I heard him talk about his innocence. And I said, well he can talk about his innocence; he's a congressman or whatever, a senator why should people feel so bad about Malcolm X. So, that made me feel that what Malcolm was saying. It's not bad. So I supported Malcolm.

AA: When he was alive?

RM: Yea. I felt that Malcolm had a right to speak up. Although I never met Malcolm, I'm not a Muslim.

AA: Was there a mosque here in Omaha?

RM: Ah, there have been some good off shoots. In fact, we have one of the brothers – you know, after Malcolm was killed, I think it kind of split the Muslim people up, you know. I guess there were people who wanted to support him and were really afraid to support him. And I think that ah, I feel like the people that I meet, were people that were split up you know, after Malcolm's death. And ah, they were just not brave enough to say that they were supporters of his. And I guess that they were just, like a lot of other things, you know in life, and it seems like I have always been a controversial person. You know, it seems like people at times - I worked with the women's organization and ah, it just seems like anything you do to help yourself, people talk against it. So I just didn't let that hardly bother me, you know, what people said. Being against this group or that group, and I work if anybody is willing to work with me. Cause they call them whatever they want to call them, call me too you know. So I didn't let that bother me. That's healthy. All down through life always been people that had bad thoughts, I call them, about somebody.

AA: But when did you first – when did the foundation get formed?

RM: I think the first time we incorporate was about 1971. But um, Mr. Philip was a lawyer and he helped me to incorporate it and ah, but he didn't really dedicate himself to it, you know, to doing anything. I mean in my way of doing, you know, these professional people they know these things they can tell you what ought to be done but…

AA: They don't roll their sleeves up?

RM: No, no.

AA: Perhaps you could get those documents you were going to get on the board?

RM: Oh, yea, yea.

AA: And then we can go over them. Maybe I'll turn this off until you…

AA: I guess we're going to end this phase of our interview and I was wondering if you could describe what you'd like to see as the end result of your work with the foundation. Both in terms of the site as well as just in terms of your vision for this work.

RM: I would like to see a building on that site. And I think it should be a building that could house several different things. I'm greatly concerned with education. I feel that there will be many young people who want to be able to go to college and finish up doing different things. Yet I think it's important that we keep things going where they use their hands also. I feel that, ah, many older people are still around who would be able and willing to do something that would be entertaining to them to help teach people how to do different things. For example, my father used to take a steak bone and grind it and file it out and when it get to be a beautiful ring, look like ivory you know, pearl, whatever you call it. Ivory I guess it is. And ah, you can make a walking cane. I just think that – I know that years ago when I was young, I have seen old men sit out front of a grocery store. They didn't have stores like they have now. They'd sit out front of the store, on a bench, these five or six men, and they'd be whittling on a stick or something. You know whittling, (laughs) that sounds like a very unusual word. But ah, anyway they'd make a walking cane or whatever. And I think about teaching these young kids how to work on radios, or televisions, or whatever. Something they can do to use their hands and to keep them out of being idle, not doing anything at all. I…but the most interesting part, I would like to see some of the latest electronic equipment in that building. I realize that electronic equipment is probably the growing thing, and will be much greater in the future. And I think they would have the opportunity to be prepared for it. And I would like to have equipment that we could pick up. In fact, when I first got this idea in my mind, I didn't know that it was developed as far as long as it is that you could pick up other places. You know you can turn your television on and pick up something in some other country, you know. But I want something that we don't have to go through everybody else to get it. And I want so that if we want to send our message we can do it, you know. But I realize now that their improving television and you can almost do that now. But I want it so that it will be available to be at hand's reach, you don't have to go get it, or go someplace and find it or develop it.

And I want to have a building that's going to be large enough that we can invite professional people to come to Omaha and do entertainment in our community. We don't have to go downtown to the auditorium or go out to the Peony Park or whatever other kinds of places they have. I think we should have that in our own community. And we will only be about seven minutes from the airport. I would like to see that building so that we could get a good audience in that place and we have plans for building it in phases. And these one will be what we're doing now, the development of the park. And once we get the park, we can go right on into building the building. But I want a good strong building. I'd like to go into the ground and come up. I don't mean just one foundation, I mean one little floor, a basement; I wish it was so we could go two stories in the ground. I know when we have a tornado that siren goes off and they tell you to go to the basement. But if you don't have one you need to go to a pullout shelter. I think when war really come if they get excited they gonna get us anyway. But I don't think it would hurt us to have a building that would be as secure as possible. And I would like to see this

building so well built that in years to come, it will still be there. Not one that you have to tear down. You know now they build buildings that are supposed to last five years and in ten years you tear it down. I don't want one of those buildings. I want something that will be historical in itself. That building will be historical. You know so many times we take the first little cheap something that somebody offer. I want to put something up for Malcolm X. That's the reason I turned down selling those lots to that bank. Because I thought we should have something that really represented Malcolm and represent some of those things that we know that he stood for that is black people owning some ground. And as long as we have this ground I feel we should put it to the best advantage we can. And I feel that if we don't use it for furthering the education, making an opportunity for, ah, we're not doing all we possibly can. So I feel – I just have so many ideas about what I think ought to be in. I just hope I can convey my ideas and younger people can add theirs. And we can come up with a good substantial, and enjoyable… I often say, 'I don't want a building up that with a lot of wheels on it.' I want a good, strong, sturdy, attractive looking building. I also feel that the interstate comes right from Iowa over this to the west and down to Interstate 80. Lots of people don't know where Omaha, Nebraska is. They have to look at the map to see, because it's not some place that you go through here going to something else. When you come to Omaha, you're coming to Omaha. (laughs) And so I want to have it so that people are going to have no trouble at all finding it.

I think that we should have a _____. I think that's the way you pronounce it - that stands tall. Something similar to these lights, radio towers and things. And I want something that is going to blink or attract attention. For example, if a bus was passing through here, the driver would probably say, 'When you cross the bridge here at – we'd be crossing then – if you look toward the west and you see an object up there, that is the Malcolm X Bird sight in Omaha, Nebraska.' And I feel like, I hope, the joy that I feel now in just saying it and realizing that it can happen. And it may not happen in my lifetime, but I hope it will happen. That they're going to have that object up there and it will be here and people will be coming from other places. I often use the expression - we offer charter memberships at $12.00 a year - and I'm hoping… think I put it in one of my letters here maybe I might take it out and do a real draft and asking for help. And I say that the people when they go back home after I send out this invitation yea all come, you know like President Carter, southern expression, you know yea all come. That's what I'd like to do. And maybe I had hoped to do it before 1990. But if I don't do it until then I think it would be a good time to do it. Yea all come. And everybody come. And I want people to come before then and they say you must come to Omaha, Nebraska and see what they did with our money. Because we can't build it alone. It's going to take the money of people have that's out there who are friends and cares about black people. And they'll be so proud of it the fact that they are a part of it, they'll say yea all come. That's what I'll be saying. Yea all come. So that's my strong, film desire.

AA: Well thank you very much and I hope that this is but the first of several interviews. Thank you very much.

AA: This is July 26th, and we are continuing our interview from yesterday. You were talking about the Malcolm X Foundation Board and you were saying you were expanding it from the local members to a national membership.

RM: I feel that it is very important that we have people outside of the city of Omaha to work with us on this because Malcolm didn't belong to just Omaha, he belonged to a lot of people. And it seems to me those people are interested and we want them to be a part of what we're doing. So we have people in Kansas City, in Saint Paul, in Denver, Milwaukee and in Detroit.

AA: I noticed that on your card that Ruford Little, Malcolm's brother, ah...how did you get in touch with Ruford or how did that relationship develop?

RM: Let me see, how did I happen to get his telephone number? I have to think about it, it's been quite some time. Um, I think, Malcolm has some relative here in the city. In fact he has several relatives here.

AA: Are these the Little's?

RM: Yea, but their not Little's. (phone rings) You know it's funny how you cannot remember.

AA: But you've talked to him several times?

RM: Oh god, I talk to him often. I talk to him often. I call him and tell him what we're doing. Because I think he called me once. But whenever something's going I always talk to him and let him know what it is.

AA: So has he been to Omaha yet?

RM: He's been to Omaha. He's made financial contributions to the foundation. So that shows me that he is concerned about what we're doing. And ah, his...Malcolm's younger sister...son, he came to visit me. And ah, it made me feel good to know that they're interested and according to Will Wilford (?), that's what I call him, the family is getting together and talking about it. They plan to do something themselves in honoring Malcolm. And it's a possibility that they're going to associate that to what we're doing here in Omaha. I understand that a number of people have used Malcolm's name to do different things and uh they weren't particularly happy about it. But he said that he feel that this is something that they can agree with and they're willing to support. So, I'm waiting for that day to come that they will announce, you know, what it is. Because he came here and he stayed and we offered to put him in a hotel and he said no, I'd just as soon stay here. We had an office in this house next door over here. And we had a bedroom there and he stayed here with us.

AA: Have you been in touch with Ella Collin?

RM: His sister?

AA Um hum, in Washington.

RM: No, I haven't been in touch with her. But the younger sister is the one I've been in touch with. She's in Michigan. She's not too far up. Anyway I talk with her and she was pleased and she gave me the assurance that they were going to do something - that made me feel good. And I've talked to Betty. And uh, she seemed to be pleased with what we were doing and she gave me some instructions about some people – not to let them get involved – she didn't feel they were the right kind of people. In fact, we sent for her to come here once. And it was at the time when her daughter was graduating but during our conversation leading up to the date, I think it was in 85.

AA: Yea.

RM: The date of our affair I thought that she didn't seem to realize that the graduation was gonna be coming. And right up until the last date, I called her and she says, "I can't come." I was hurt and shocked and I said, 'Well, can you please, please, please find somebody to come instead?' So she said, "I'll see what I can do." I said please do. So she called President Briggs (?) in Chicago, President of the Malcolm X College. And she called me back and she suggested I call him and invite him and I did. And he came. And we had a nice program. That's the nearest we've come to getting her here. And I talked to, Atallah , Malcolm's oldest daughter. And uh, she is willing to come sometime but she didn't offer any conversation of any curiosity or anything you know about what we're doing. But she's willing to come.

AA: Well the kid was so young; that's one aspect of it you know. They don't remember much of it; it's more what they learn afterwards than what they remember.

RM: Um hum. Well, one of the things so far we claimed two holidays that May 19th his birthday and Feb 21st his death. And ah, we haven't picked another day to celebrate anything. It's been just a task, for me, to plan something on those two days and carry it out for a successful event. And since they as a family choose to not participate in things on those two days, I guess the family kind of pick those two days for themselves, so it means that we will have to find another day to invite them here for something. That's what we're looking forward to do. And I had thought about maybe, you hate to take somebody's else's day – like the Fourth of July – to do it, you know I kind of like a day all on its own. You know, and I've also thought about myself. My birthday is September the 10th. All of the days that we have for planning have been days where the weather's been bad in February. And at May 19th it rains! You can't get on that site. Even if I had it someplace, it rains. And September 10th, everybody's broke, that have money, because they're sending their kids back to college, they're taking them away, so my birthday wouldn't be any good. So we don't know what date we're going to find that seems to be good. So we can use my birthday to do something. September 10th, everybody just broke, tired, the kids are going back to college, they had it rough. So, um, but I hope we can find

a date that we can – hopefully it don't conflict too much with some of the other organizations that do their things annually.

AA: How often does the board meet or what's the organization like?

RM: Our organization, we try to meet once a month, but many times we have to meet twice a month because of the different things we're trying to do, and ah, the attendance of our board – sometimes it's kind of hard to get them all together now – we have a new board and we have four people out of five. One board member is a minister and he'd have to go out of town to preach and we couldn't meet on no Saturday. So he's not available. We have another one who is under the care of his doctor - but he's not confined to bed or anything – but he's going through a lawsuit trying to get his disability. And he is busy seeing his doctor so something. This last week one of our other board member's was out of town for a family reunion. And it just seem like every week, somebody have or two, you know, have something. But we have a joint meeting of advisory board members and um, I go. And of course, the advisory board can always make suggestions but they're not really an official body to make changes or anything like that. So we have operated under that particular kind of situation and I do not release people from our organization because their term runs out. They are automatically transferred to the advisory board. So you don't get rid of us. (laughs) By saying that you have some other kind of something to do so you stay right with us and continue whatever interest and guidelines that you can have to help us keep going.

AA: (couldn't hear)

RM: We have several people throughout the city, professional people, and they're too busy along with people I talk to from day to day, They're all on so many boards - but I know the feeling – I used to be on two, three or five....

AA: Is it generally the case that the more established main stream black leadership, has not been willing to go against...

RM: I think that's it because their jobs; they have to work for a living. They want to stay available.

Jeff Patterson: At the same time they be...

AA: Just for the record, why don't you introduce yourself as...

JP: Ok, my name is Jeff Patterson and I'm a host/friend/ally of Miss Rowena Moore. I've been working with her since 1976. I'm basically an artist and designer professionally and I'm activist in the community. But, I just want to make a statement saying, that so many of the people that Miss Moore talked to and asked to sit on the board, alot of them have stated that they for Malcolm but the whole aspect of sitting on the board, working on behalf of Miss Moore is been very difficult. And then all the times they state that they're

doing things for the black community, and we don't really see that in actually in action. They might say verbally that they support the community but they're not in action.

AA: What about black labor leaders?

RM: We don't have any black labor leaders, anymore. We have one person, and I can hardly ever catch up with him. Too many places are on strike. Packing houses places – I don't see those people. Until election time come, so something happen and then they want me to come. But ah, you just don't see them. You see the top people like ah, what is his name, I can't even think of his name. But anyway, that's not unusual. But anyway, there's not too much labor activity. Once a year they have September 5th and sometime they have Labor Day kind of a thing during election year. They're not too active.

AA: Do black people here celebrate June Teen Day (?)

RM: No.

JP: Well, very little. There are a couple of organizations that have been doing it the past few years, but nothing on scale of like your bigger cities.

AA: I just suspect that Texas and places out west would provide it more. But in Chicago, I mean people I know growing up, people didn't hardly know about it. Or, I'm sure they knew about it but they just didn't do anything. Everything is February. Cause Wilson founded the association in Chicago and so that was always the focus, yea, yea.

RM: I was invited to Kansas City last year for June Teen, I was there, one of their special guests. They gave a couple of awards, treated me very nice. They haven't going through that here in Omaha. And you see, to take on another day, would be a little bit strenuous for our foundation because February 19th is coming… (tape ran out)

AA: Ok, this is July 25th, 1988, in Omaha, Nebraska and I am interviewing Miss Rowena Moore. Miss Moore, I wonder, could you start out by describing your personal family background in your early years. Where were you born?

RM: I was born in Regan, Oklahoma on September 10, 1910. I am a twin. My twin sister died at 11 months old. And I have another full sister. I say full because my father married later and he had a second family. Their are about five boys and one girl in that group.

AA: Now, ah, what did your father do for a living?

RM: My father was a mechanic. I often say that with pride, because back in those days my father, they had cotton gins, and ah, we lived in the country. And my father used to work in the gin and they told me about how the gins would break down, something would break down on it and they had to send over on the city which was probably a good number of miles from where we lived out there in Regan. And finally my father learned how to do little jobs.

AA: And you were born around 1911.

RM: 1910.

AA: 1910.

RM: Um, hum. So but anyway, my father was a mechanic, as I often say, and he worked in a division of the Ford factory in Detroit during the Word War II. And ah, he also had a little bit of work of his own where he ah, where he tore down houses. And ah, he was just a handy man, he could just do so many things as my brothers often say. And I say too cause…

AA: Now what about your mother where was she from?

RM: My mother was from Tennessee, and ah….she was quite a little lady that wanted to be close to her children and she went back to school and went to school with my sister and I. I guess we must have been about vice hall. But ah, I'm proud of her. People just now begin try to go to school and further their education.

AA: And she went back?

RM: Yea, she went to school every day with us - to try to further her education. And she did quite well, she opened a business, a grocery cafeteria (restaurant) here in Omaha across from the packing houses.

AA: Now, before we do this, when did you come to Omaha?

RM: On June the 1st, 19 and 24.

AA: And what was life like when you got here?

RM: Well, when we arrived here we lived here at 5617 S. 30th St. and ah, there were a group of house there that was very much alike and ah, one man owned most of the ones in the neighborhood. And there were quite a number of black people that lived in the neighborhood but they were houses that were owned by white. And I can recall that this young fellow, who was around about my age, being around and he and his father were cursing each other. And I was oh, that just sounded so terrible to us because you know, we just don't curse and talk back at our parents. And that was the worst thing that I found that shocked me coming here and then here this boy talk back to his daddy and call him all kinds of names.

AA: Well what about the relationships between blacks and whites in Omaha when you were a little girl?

RM: Well, that relationship was good. There wasn't very much – there was no problem hardly - but I can tell you that there was a riot in South Omaha. But, that was probably 1920's. We came here in 1924.

AA: So it was after you…

RM: Yes, so it must have been ah, my sister and I graduated from Westside, which is called Indian Hill now, and it was during the time…

AA: These are elementary schools?

RM: Ah huh. But anyway, there were swimming pools out on South 27th Street, and I don't recall what it was about but I remember we had a black senator by the name of Singleton, it was the only one we had at that time. Seemed like in Omaha we were never able to have more than one.

AA: But that's pretty early date to have a black senator.

RM: Yea. But anyway, we had one, and I remember him having an office at 24th & Lake Streets. And I remember that people were asking him to come out and cool the kids and the people. And it didn't get to be too big, but it was quite a sight.

AA: Now let me ask, what did most black people do for a living?

RM: In those days, most people – women – worked in someone's house. And uh, of course for men, my father worked in the packing house.

AA: Which company?

RM: Uh, he worked for most of them, you know, from time to time.

AA: Arma?

RM: Arma, Swiff, and ? they were the main ones. And the few black men who were able to get in there, that's were they worked. But most women worked in somebody's house. I often think about it, where I live today, black people didn't live out here in this area until, oh I'd say it must have been about….early 50's, late 40's. Jewish people lived in the state hood. And in those days they had mostly hardwood floors, no carpets on them. And of course the Jewish people that I knew worked and they wanted the house clean. And it kept the floors just so nice. Of course now that's all they do is lift up the carpeting and look at the floors. But that's what happened.

AA: Did your mother work in a cafeteria?

RM: Yes, but mother didn't open the cafeteria until late. She opened the cafeteria I would say in the end of 50's.

AA: In the 20's and 30's did she work?

RM: She worked in the packing house a little bit. There just wasn't much work for black women, unless they go work in somebody's house.

AA: So did she do any domestic work?

RM: No, no. I don't remember her ever working for a private family. But she was a good provider and to help in keeping things going in the house.

AA: Now, what about church life - were you active church people?

RM: Yes, I was and my mother, she was active. She originally was a Church of Christ – something like that. But uh, that was when we were in Oklahoma. And as far as church activity, I didn't start that until, I was a youngster walking around in bare feet and my mother would get us ready for holidays she'd take some lard, after she give us our bath, keep our legs and feet smooth and clean. And take a flat iron, that you iron your clothes with, and kind of press our hair out, get it to comb it and look decent and nice. So, I was one of the active little church girls. I have said, got up on the platform, said my speeches bare feet on Easter Sunday and I often think about that. I'd get up and help deliver the offer. You know I just did it because no one would do it. So, I was an active little girl in church. And as I grew older and after we came to Omaha my church life was, I was a member of the Church of God and Christ – holy church, and I believe in guitar.

AA: Now who taught you to play the guitar?

RM: My father taught me to play the guitar and piano. I was a leader in that. I put on programs and I remember a poem that Roberts wrote. The Church of God and Christ dear friends is spreading over the land. And the bishop – this was their congregation – I gave that speech and they applauded be back. And they just thought I was the most wonderful little girl. And the next year the bishop took his sermon from my forum. And then the next year or two, I did another one. And it's just too fast for me. And my life was kind of fitted into it. And many of the people knew me from seeing the other forum and active in the church you know. And they just loved to hear me speak. They did the same thing, they gave me a standing – which was new and outstanding in those days you know – they just applauded me and thought I was such a wonderful little girl. And I appreciated it. And I set up what you call sewing circles. I talked to little girls and boys – both of them – I even worked with boys then, I didn't just learn to do that in late years. But anyway, I taught the boys how to knit and crochet.

AA: When was this?

RM: This was about 19…this was the early years around 27, 28. I was a teenager.

AA: Well now, let me ask you this, when did you get married?

RM: Oh, I didn't get married until I was seventeen years old.

AA: That's late or early…

RM: Well, they got married around 18, 19, 20… I got married – I was such an old-fashioned little girl – everybody admired me. I worked with older people. I was always teaching the other kids how to do something. I put on sponsored programs at the church and the other people would take the programs home at night and do it. And my mother would feel quite hurt about it and some of the other people cause they know how hard I work. Yea, they'd take the program. That didn't bother me too much, I was always easy to get along with.

AA: Now when did you have children?

RM: Uh, my son was born in 1930. So, I had been a married lady a good while. My son, he and I lived in one of the first housing projects. We were one of the families in there. But he was quite a youngster at that time. When that was built because I'm getting up to the point where…

AA: You're in your 40's now right?

RM: Yes.

AA: Now what about your husband, what happened?

RM: My husband and I separated. I raised my son alone.

AA: Was he a working man?

RM: Yes, he worked the packing house. And I was very proud of him too. But most of my life, I've been a single mother.

AA: Well now, when did you work in the packing house?

RM: I worked the packing house after World War II.

AA: I guess a lot of the plant opened up because the men went out to fight the war.

RM: A lot of people like to believe that.

AA: Is that what happened?

RM: No, I don't think it happened exactly like that. There was no boom to put people to work. They had – packing house work is seasonal anyway – this one time we get a lot of hogs and a lot of cows – that period is over then they have to cook again, they don't have

anymore for the next few months. You know until the same time next year. There were quite a few men and a few old ladies who were friends of mine. One was Mrs. Labetta Bush, and I always like to keep her name going because she made such an impression in my life and Mrs. Bearcat Right who was the wife of Bearcat - who was a big prize fighter back in those days - and I served as his Secretary. I had a chance to meet some of these big fighters and I talked to Smelling and these different other people who come through Omaha going to jobs…

AA: Joe Louis right?

RM: Joe Louis? I haven't gotten to Joe Louis. I would answer the phones and take his calls for him. That gave me the opportunity to talk to these prize fighters and I really appreciated that. Bearcat's son is still living. I think the last time I saw him on television he was refereeing a wrestling match. He wrestles some himself. Mrs. Bush and Mrs. Right were members of the workman's club in South Omaha. And they're the ones who stimulated the interest in me to organize these first black women who went to work in the packing house. I lived across the street in the project from where their business was. And I'd go over there and sit and talk to them and run back home – I know they got tired of me, they said 'I've got to find some work for this girl to do, she worrying me to death coming back and forth over here and talking to me.' I didn't have anything to do, and my son was in school, and I made a thousand trips a day over there. And they said, we just need to find some work for these young women. So finally, they suggested that I get some women together and they would come over and talk to them. And that's what I did. My mother had a car and she would let me use it sometimes. And I'd drive over to the North side – cause we lived in South Omaha, that's where the packing houses are. And I'd go and talk to people I didn't even know them and asked them if they'd be interested in working in the packing house. "Yes, I'd like to have a job anyplace." And I'd tell them to be over at the packing house tomorrow at 6:00. I'd come over to meet after they'd go there and come across the street where we gonna meet and talk about what we're gonna try to do. So we... I started gathering these women together and these ladies came and talked to them and after we got a group together – my little voice is so low…there was a young lady there – she had a loud voice and she said "Yes!" you know, she talked loud. So we elected her President and I was the contact person. I was the one who got the women together. I'm the one who went and got the packing house men and talked to them about helping us. We wanted to set up a picket line in front of the packing house but we chose Armors because I lived near there. And these men came over – they were friends of my father's - we knew them well – and they came over and talked to us. And they said, 'Well, Rowena, we can't just support you just because you want to put up a picket line. Now we want to support you but you have to give us some time. We have to write to Chicago and to Washington and see what they have on the books." I really didn't understand that too much, because we wanted the job now. So anyway, we go there every day and sit there from 6:00 until 8:30 or 9:00 and the man would say, "That's all for today." And then we'd go across the street and they'd talk. I'd give these ladies high praise. I believe that our black children don't get enough counseling, how to wear your clothes, you know, that you have to go there day after day. You don't expect to get hired the first time you walk in the door, you need to go there neat and clean and don't go doing

things like chewing gum and talking loud and being boisterous. And that's what these women would talk to us about. And I noticed that the Catholic people they had mass at 5:00 every morning. When we get to the packing house, those people would have been to mass and be sitting there ready to go to work. I don't think that made a difference in the hiring because we didn't get hired. There's no reason that they should just have to hire them. But they were hiring the white women. I would keep a record of how many people were hired, how long they stayed there. Then I would come back tomorrow, how many people stayed there, how many were hired. Cause this was help to the union. To let them know that they are hiring white women but they was not hiring any black women. So, that made posting folks in the streets and I say in the streets because the packing house in South Omaha. They thought that I had a lot to do with getting them hired. I really didn't have all that much to do with it and I didn't realize that it was important then as it is today to meet. I was doing what was necessary so that we could get these jobs, I wasn't thinking about in 1980 or 88 people would be giving me praise for having gotten out and done all the leg work for trying to get these women hired. And for months, I didn't take a job myself because…

AA: Who did they first hire?

RM: First hired was – in fact in was March of 1943…

AA: How long had you been going each morning?

RM: Oh god, I'd been going a good while. I didn't get hired myself until August, something like that. But you see, what shortened it up was the union wrote this letter and got in touch with Chicago and Washington and they came back to us in probably about two weeks – we couldn't wait to hear from them. Here we was I was selling bonds for the war, I had a group of little kids, because my son was a little boy, and we'd go down the streets in a parade and say, "Buy bonds", a parade right by the packing house and where I lived and around the community. And the kids would bring a dime and we had 10¢ for stamps and we give them for the kids the money helping them learn how to save their money. And I call that little group of commandos, that's my little group of young kids. My son was a little boy and I felt that if I didn't help his friends – the boys he's growing up with – to be the kind of boys I wanted my son to be, I wasn't helping my son. So, I had club meetings at my house for these kids to come there cause I didn't want my son to have to go to somebody else's house to learn how to respect other people and associate with them. You know, I knew what he was doing if he was in my apartment. So I organized these little commandos and I think I still may have some of the material and maybe a cap that I made. I made these army caps that service soldiers were wearing back then. And I made some of those for them. And it so happen that I met a young man who was stationed off of air base. And he would come over and work with those boys. And the packing house shoot – where they would send the cattle down to one of the other plants – you could hear the men out in the cattle shoot and they had a tune. And we just – kids would get an enjoyment out of hearing that every morning, early in the morning, when you haven't gotten out of bed almost – driving the cattle down to the packing house. These kids would play around with my son and this soldier would come and would teach

them how to drill. And these kids, mostly boys, they got a real bang out of it. They were soldiers. They wanted to be soldiers you know. And I made these little caps for them and they enjoyed that. And I think that mothers have to be interested and concerned about the other person's time.

AA: When you got hired did you join the union?

RM: Did I join a union? I was part of the union before I got in the packing house. I'm telling you…

AA: Well you were working with the union.

RM: That's what I mean, and I considered myself part of the union. I talk to the union, I talk to these men after we – I, got the first ones hired. I said, now what do we owe you? And they said, 'Ah, Rowena, you don't owe us anything. All I want you all to do is join the union, support the union. That's all we want.' And that was good enough for me. So I was working already for the union. Of course you know, they passed a law that you had to work 30 days before you could be a union member. After I – I don't think they bothered these first girls any about no problems about them – but, I do say this, that when the first two were hired…Now let me back up a bit. When the union talked to me, they said, 'Rowena, we gotta order back that something is on the books about no discrimination. And we gotta wait until we hear from Washington and we'll see, it should come through within the next two or three or four weeks you know.' Oh! Four weeks, that's too long you know. We want that picket line out there you know. We thought all we had to do was make the signs and go out there and just picket. And get the job. And we were willing to do that. And the more we waited, and the more these ladies talked to us about what to expect when you go to work and those things the more we were willing and ready. Because we realized that people were working in other places and there were no jobs for us, you know. And all these years we made it - existed. Now we had an opportunity to try to demand that they hire us too because they had other women in there and we are products of this city and just felt that we needed a job and was willing to fight for it. So that takes up to the hiring part, but the bad part is they used women when they found out that the black women were going to be hired in to the plant – or trying to get in – the white women said they would work with them. And I often tell this when I go to talk to people about – I'll always love the union for this – they told those women, if you walk out, we can't support you. Now see, if they hadn't told them that, or you see then they probably would have been walking out and not being willing to work with black women. So they ended up where they did not walk out but they acted pretty selfish, that first few days that they worked. And they ended up with it working out all right.

AA: Now, so you did join the union eventually?

RM: I finally got hired. In order to get hired you have to put your name on the list. Well, I didn't sign when I go in, I was just there, overseeing what was happening.

AA: You didn't put yourself first?

RM: No, no. I let the others get hired. And the other thing is that I felt that they may not want to hire me cause you did have to have a physical, at least the men did. And having not had any women work there, I didn't know whether they would have to have a physical or not. So, I had bad feet – my feet are still bad. Seem like my foot is breaking down again, not holding up, but it's better than what it used to be. And I've had surgery back in 1953 to try to correct my feet. And I'm glad that I had the opportunity to be in the packing house because I had insurance too. And they paid for it. Otherwise, I wouldn't have been to…

AA: How long did you work in the packing house?

RM: I call it twenty years. It wasn't quite twenty years because they took some time off and they did it because they could do it. I came out of the plant, I was strong union person. I was stewardess on the job – I took care of other people's problems. And many times the things that I would do, I was right on the borderline of being fired, you know.

AA: Like what, give me an example?

RM: Oh, for an example, if somebody had a problem, I would go to that person – see what the problem is.

AA: You mean you would go to their work station?

RM: Yea. And of course if I didn't have cooperation from somebody in that booth, I was working for myself. I had to keep my own job up.

AA: Like, what job did you have?

RM: Well, I was a, I pulled these large ? I showed these men how to pull these large ? because that was my job.

AA: Now, what was that?

RM: That is the thin fat that is around the kidney of a hog, and when they get that hog opened up, and he comes past me, that fat has to be caught a hold of and you catch it a certain way and you pull it up and that pulls it off. Then you got to throw it down the shoot.

AA: Did you have a glove on?

RM: Oh, you can't do it with gloves on.

AA: With your bare hands?

RM: With your bare hands. And ah, I was cutting out the kidneys see after they pulled that fat out, then the kidney was hanging down there. You see, I had to put the kidney in a different place. See, that's what I was doing.

AA: Now ah, so approximately when did you leave the plant?

RM: 1959.

AA: And then what happened?

RM: After I left the plant, I was crippled. I came out on disability. But it took me a long time to get my disability cause technically I wasn't ?

AA: I can imagine

RM: And ah, back in those days, really truly some of the union men – black men who was on the board – they didn't really go out of their way they didn't want to get their ? messed up or something. You know, I got two more years to say here, you know. They kind of went along with the powers that be, you know. But there was a white fellow there – I can't think of his name – but if it hadn't have been for him, I wouldn't have even gotten a pension. He's the only person who I could find out that spoke up for me.

AA: Now did you know people in the national structure like Charlie Hayes?

RM: Sure, I did. Sure, I know Charlie Hayes. You ask him if he don't know Rowena. You met him?

AA: Sure, I know him.

RM: Do yea? Oh, I just love to see him. Yea, last time I saw him, he was here in Omaha, and we were all up at the Elks club room up here. Yea, I know Charlie. I knew all of them. And if I hadn't have known some of them – I've got what you call automatic kind of firing – you know, where they didn't want to take me back after I had my operation on my feet? I had a hard time getting back in the plant, and if I hadn't have known Russell Lassley – you know him?

AA: Um, hum.

RM: Do yea? Yes in deed, it just thrills me to think about these people that I've known, and I went to....

AA: Now, how many - what percentage of the workers in the Armer plant were black?

RM: It wasn't quite half. But a lot of them.

AA: What about the other packing houses?

RM: All had a lot of blacks. All had a lot of blacks.

AA: So when did blacks move to Nebraska in large numbers?

RM: Oh, that had to have been about 19… before the dust bowl. You've heard of the dust bowl?

AA: Sure.

RM: Migrated from South up North and they went and came to different places some of them. If you had family and people in Nebraska, you went to Nebraska. If you had family and people in Chicago, you went to Chicago.

AA: So, where are people usually from, you know, like when people like you were born?

RM: We born in Oklahoma and came here in 1924. And it wasn't any kind of struggle particularly, cause was to migrate here was because my father was working a job here. And he and my mother had been living apart, separated like, and ah, we came to Omaha in 1924. So I think that all during that period 24 on up to 1940 there were people. Naturally, the packing house began to open up because of the war too. I don't remember and I wasn't involved enough to know that there was a particular boom. And then another thing that made this place convenient for employment here was the air base – Martin. Martin had some kind of consignment for making planes or something and that opened up here in Omaha. And that brought a lot of people in and it made it convenient for getting a lot of black people hired. Because see, that's a government project.

AA: Now what about the political aspect of the black community, what were the politics? I mean was there an NAACP here?

RM: The NAACP was here, but there was very few members. That's the same Mrs. Bush I mentioned, took me to my first NAACP meeting and they elected me as Secretary.

AA: First meeting you attended?

RM: First meeting I attended.

AA: Well then you must have known the people there, they knew you were a good worker.

RM: Yea, I was a good worker. I've always been a good worker. And then later on, this is several years later, when I was working in the packing house, and had been working there and we getting ready to go to Atlantic City National Convention of the NAACP and ah,

like a lot of other things you never know what it's going to cost you and those kind of things. That's one thing that was good about the union, they usually gave you money - $20 a day to take care of yourself and pay your expense there. I worked at the NAACP offered a $150 reward to the one who brings in the most memberships. And I brought in more memberships than the whole NAACP. And Michael Pedacis got up and said, let's cut that back and give – I don't know if it is $100, I think it was $100 that they finally gave me – changed it after saying that they would give $150. And I didn't argue, I didn't argue, I let it go, you know, the union did help.

AA: Well what about the guard movement or black nationals, anything like that?

RM: Not too much, not too much. Ah, I didn't hear anything about it here in Omaha here. But, I do know that back during those days there was a lot of tension about communists.

AA: Were they in the union?

RM: Yea, how you know what somebody is?

AA: They might tell you.

RM: No. The way they talked about communists, that was a closed subject, you know.

AA: But in World War II, the Soviet Union, they were allies against Hitler.

RM: Yea, but because you was a communist didn't mean that you were in the war situation. They were not talk about it. And fighting in the war, you know, anything you do to try to help other people is branded as communist. And it was a real witch hunt during those days.

AA: You're talking now about the 50's?

RM: Yea, yea.

AA: Did anybody ever accuse you of that?

RM: Oh, yea, yea. In fact a lot of men they fought me in the union just like I was - I don't know what. In other words, for eight years I served as a Secretary for the union, and I got elected every year until I refused.

RM: Now, was this a local at your plant?

AA: Yea, at my plant. Just at my plant. And they were quite interested in following people around and see who they talked to, see if they had any meetings or things. I get elected and go to a convention and I get to the convention, I wouldn't be surprised if they had people watching seeing who talked to who and who associated with who. And they didn't want the blacks to have a meeting.

AA: Like a black caucus?

RM: Yea. They didn't want us to have a meeting. They called that communist.

AA: And there were people who would be afraid?

RM: Yea. They were afraid to get together they didn't want the blacks to get together without them being in on it. So, ah, yea, I've been called everything. In fact to show you how stupid people are about that, one of my good friends, one of the girls that I first met when I came to Omaha lived right in the neighborhood where I lived. We were on the streetcar – they had streetcars then where two people maybe three sat in a seat – and this lady was sitting up there like this was a window, she sit up there in front of us with her head turned and sitting over to the edge of the seat like you know. And I came over and said, "May I sit here?" She looked at me, 'Oh! Yea, you can sit here.' And I sat down, and she moved over so I could sit down and she said I thought you was one of these old communists. In other words, if it had been a white person, they would have thought they were communist.

AA: Because they were around black people?

RM: No, no, no. She just thought that all white people were probably communists.

AA: Is that right?

RM: And she said, oh ok, I thought you might be one of these communists.

AA: Now what year was this about?

RM: Oh, this was back in the 40's, 50's. I left the plant in 1959.

AA: Now, did the McCarthy, you know all that business, impact the union here?

RM: Oh, yea, yea.