



Hallie Q. Brown Community Archives Oral History Collection:

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September 30th, 2025

Hallie Q. Brown Community Center, St. Paul, MN

Russel Balenger Oral History

MW: Mackinnon Williams (interviewer, transcriber)

RB: Russel Balenger (interviewee)

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Subjects discussed: Being born and raised in St. Paul; living south of St. Anthony Ave, where the hole was for Interstate 94; his family's home burning down when he was 7 years old; how his parents Russel Balenger and Lillian Balenger came to St. Paul; his father's work on the railroads; lightskinned members of his family and how they navigated St. Paul; reconnecting with his cousin Nelson Balenger; memories of his father's temperament; his family being separated after the house fire, and moving into a new house on Dayton Ave; an incident with the white Kosa family who rented from his mother; his mother's jobs and temperament; his mother's political involvement with North Central Voters League, Target Area A; childhood responsibilities for maintaining the family's home; exploring the neighborhood as a child; being stopped by police as an 8 year old on Selby Ave; discovering Unity Church and House of Hope; hitchhiking to Winona, MN as a 12 year old; white flight out of Rondo; Black neighbors in the neighborhood; his mother organizing balls for Black people in the community; his uncle Gordon Parks; Black social clubs, the Sterling Club, the Cameo Club, the Regalettes, the Untouchables; his mother leaving the back door of their home unlocked in case someone needed to hide from police; police officers in Rondo back in the day mostly being Black; his family's relationship with Patricia Caponi; being the first Black camper at a youth camp in the Boundary Waters; Judge Archie Gingold paying for his youth camp fees; his mother's work ethic; his hustle in high school; getting his first job; how the North Central Voters League started; his connection to Moorhead State University; how his brothers started Inner City Youth League; talking about Black history in class at Central High School; the riot on Selby Ave in 1968; responses at Central High School to Martin Luther King Jr. being assassinated; going to the Soviet Union as an exchange student while in high school; going to Ghana in his later years; experiences in the Soviet Union as a Black person; segregation in St. Paul, Black people not being allowed in certain parts of the city.

People/organizations discussed: Thomas Hickman; Russel Balenger (father); Lillian Balenger (mother) formerly Lillian Parks and Lillian Hickman; Gordon Parks (uncle); Charles Balenger and Martha Balenger (father's parents); Laura and Nelson Balenger (father's siblings); Nelson Balenger (cousin); Kosa family; Target Area A; Ramsey Action Program; Russel (grandson); North Central Voters League; Saint Paul Police Department; Unity Church; Hallie Q. Brown Community Center; House of Hope Presbyterian Church; Esther Peake; Anderson family;

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Chester Oden; Anna (aunt); Anura Si-Asar; Jackie Balenger (brother); Sterling Club, Cameo Club, the Regalettes, the Untouchables; Officer Skelly; James Mann; Urban League Guild; Patricia Caponi, formerly Patricia (Pat) Parlin; Archie Gingold; Merle Harris; S. Edward Hall; Nancy Parlin; Moorhead State University; Black Panther Party; Bobby Hickman (brother); Eamon Peck (unconfirmed); Ted Hamm; Readus Fletcher; Mahmoud El-Kati; Martin Luther King Jr.; The Circle of Peace Movement; Artika Tyner; Ronald Reagan; Ed Sullivan.

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MW: So to start us off, today is September 30th, my name's Mackinnon Williams, I'm here with Mr. Russel Balenger to do an interview on the history of Rondo and Mr. Balenger's life. So, to start off, could you introduce yourself, talk about your connection to the Rondo neighborhood and yeah, your family's connection here?

RB: Sure. I'm Russel Balenger. I was born and raised in St. Paul, began in the Rondo neighborhood. We were on the south side of St. Anthony, which is where the hole is for I-94. Our family—our family home was burned, so we were moved out of Rondo at the beginning of the transfer of this land. We never knew how the fire started, but it was a crisp winter's morning. We were all standing outside watching as the flaming off the house—and it was a large house. It was said in the newspaper that it was the largest residential fire in St. Paul that year. It was a big home, my father rented rooms to the railroad workers that he worked with who came into town and families that were migrating north. So, at some times there would be two or three families living in that house with us—not in the same rooms but—there were three finished levels on the house.

MW: In the house at that point, it was your parents, and then did you have any siblings?

RB: Yes. I have five siblings, their father is Thomas Hickman, and I'm the youngest. And I was— my father, Russel Balenger— the only son. So, my father was 51 when I was born, my mother was 40.

MW: And how did your parents come to Rondo?

RB: My mother came— she was born in 1911— and she came to St. Paul when she was 16 years old with my uncle Gordon, who was 15 or 14. My father came to St. Paul in 1915 as a young teenager and briefly went to school and then quickly went to work. He had a career on the railroad, and he came with his mother and father, Charles Balenger and Martha. And he had a sister, Laura— who lived across the street, by the way— and a brother, Nelson. My mother had 15 brothers and sisters in Kansas, and a number of them found their way to Minnesota— but were pretty spread out.

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RB: My aunties and uncles would come visit, and I think we had our first family reunion in 1971, which my mother put together. And I think of that first family reunion, we had almost 150 people I've never seen. And it's a good old time.

MW: And then what was your father's role, what was his position working for the railroads?

RB: I believe at first he worked in the— he was a waiter and then he was a porter. And I think it was because he was a very lightskinned man, and I think— you know, there was a lot of colorism in those days. And so my uncle worked at the capitol and I remember towards the end of her life, my aunt chose to pass as white. She never had children.

MW: What did that look like for your aunt?

RB: Well, in her last years, she lived in a nursing home, which— I think today they would call it, “Assisted living.” But at that time, she didn’t really care for us to visit because she— they didn’t know that, or she didn’t think they knew that she had this family. But when she died, they called me and told me that she needed to be buried. So, evidently they knew. Growing up, I knew there were Balengers that were family members, but many of them— there was my cousin Nelson and his family had— he was older than I was, he moved and I didn’t see them again for 50 years. And I just happened to be walking through Macy’s and I looked at a guy and I thought, “Strange.” And just— there was a connection— and I walked past him and I seen he had a name tag on, it said “N. Balenger,” on it. I said, “Nelson?” And he didn’t remember me. So those were the days when everybody was calling each other “Cuz.” And so I turned, he said, “How can I help you, sir?” And I said, “I’m your cousin, Russel.” He says, “How can I help you?” And I said, “No, I’m your cuz.” And he says, “Yes, what do you need?” And I said, “Holy smokes.” But another colored cousin that he did know let him know that we were indeed cousins. And so we’ve been golfing together for about 25 years. And the Balengers have kind of found their way to each other. So, we’re now talking about a family reunion, which probably needs to happen soon. And as I mentioned, there’s— I met a cousin in Washington State who called and said, I think I’m a Balenger.

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RB: And he had been adopted as a little boy, so as a baby, I guess. But he had found his birth mother, so he got a clue there. So I’m working on how this whole thing happened and how the

story all comes together. So there's—I was my father's only son, but I have 28 grandchildren and 21 great-grandchildren- one on the way. So it's kind of like we're back. There's a gang of us now.

MW: It sounds like you're back. Did your father talk about— did he talk about his work when you were growing up, his being in service positions, the social dynamics on the railroad?

RB: No, my father was a quiet man. You know, he might grunt or make a noise when he's bothered with something. And one of my biggest memories is— in those days, if you were— colored is what they called us then, you had a job and a hustle. So everybody had something they could do after the work. My father's was leasing the space in that house. A part of that was to make the house beautiful, so, we lived on two lots, and the lawn was always so meticulous that we were afraid to play on it. So we would go to the playground. My mother was always— had business to take care of, so my father would wear a suit under his bib overalls, and he would take the jacket off, and he'd have a white shirt and tie, and he'd have bib overalls on, and he'd be in the yard. And my mother was ready to go, she said, "Russel, we have to go." And he'd peel that off and put his jacket on. And then they'd go wherever it was that they needed to be, wherever they needed to be.

MW: Was your father involved or were you aware of any labor organizing that was happening with the railroads?

RB: You know, I can't say, I'm not sure about that. I was pretty young then when— I was about seven years old when we came out of the Rondo neighborhood. We were separated as a family

for three months, and we used to talk about it after we got back together, and we all thought that was more like three years. But I was the youngest and smartest, and I could do the math. It was three months. [Laughter] And we found a house that was four half blocks south of where we were, which was like being in another world. So we were on Dayton Avenue, I own that home now. It was a duplex and it was on the corner. It was one block north of Selby. And at that particular point, we were the first Black family that far south of Rondo. When we moved into the place, there was already a renter upstairs, and I remember the people's name was Kosa.

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RB: And in those days, you could burn the trash outside. I would go out and burn the trash with Mr. Kosa every day. He seemed to be a real great guy, real great man, and he and Mrs. Kosa were very nice people. But one Sunday— I believe it was either the first or the second month we were there— he came down on the Sunday, we were having dinner and he said, “You’re a lovely family. And we’ve enjoyed being here, but we just can’t rent from niggers.” My mother put her hands on the table, and— which meant, “Shut your mouth, I’ve got this.” And she told him that they’d been lovely tenants and if they would need a reference at any time to let her know. And that was the end of that. And I don’t think, I don’t think there was another white tenant for— maybe until I started leasing it. That was a lot of years later. The house has been, the house is now 100 years old. And it’s been in our hands for about 70 years.

MW: And what was your mother’s name?

RB: Lillian Parks. And later Hickman, and then Balenger.

MW: Okay. And she, like you said, she had a lot of business to handle. What was her work?

RB: My mother. My mother was a— she was like a boss. She would, she was always kind of pushing the line and finding— if she could find a job. She wanted to work downtown, but she didn't do cleaning and she didn't do menial jobs. It was a time when, if you were of color, you would be the last hired and the first fired. So I'd see her come home and she had lost her job. It had been taken from her, but I never seen her cry or seem upset. And I think it was because perhaps we didn't really need the money. She loved to dress. I never saw her in a house dress— they were called. When she would go shopping, she would take me with her, and the saleswomen would come up and say, "I've got a beautiful house dress over here." And she'd ignore 'em. She liked designer fashion, and our home was always beautiful. There were six of us with my brothers and sisters, and we each had a job. My job was to take care of the outside of the house. I had a sister that had to do the glass in the house, and a sister that did the furniture. And my brother was— my oldest brother made sure everything was as it should be. She kind of ran us like a business. We called her, "Mother." She didn't promote "Mom," or "Mama." And it was, "Mother would like you to do somethin'." So after North Central Voters League, she decided she was going to start an agency called Target Area A, and that was on Central, close off of Dale Street, and it was to help people find assistance and jobs and—whatever the need was, she was on it.

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RB: I suppose it was a nonprofit then, I'm not sure, but she had built it up to her— she had a pretty good sized staff. She started a program to help people who were up in their age get food

on a regular basis. So, Target Area A became Ramsey Action Program, and now it's called CASH. And when she turned to them, it was really being— business was happening in three different counties. She was— she took over the congregate dining program, she had eight professional women on her staff and a secretary that was a white fellow named Bob. I've always kind of felt— I'd like to watch her do business, and when I'd come in, she'd say, "Bob, would you get us some coffee?" I always kind of felt like she was getting back, and she was a real character. So, at that point, my father had— after the fire, he was never quite the same, and he had a series of strokes when I was around 12 years old and ended up in a nursing home. Then it was really on my mother to see about those of us that relied on her for support. So, I was pretty good at— I'd gotten pretty good about how to shovel the snow and cut the grass. I was kind of particular, so that everything was perfect- and then the neighbors began to ask if they could pay me to do their yard. I remember my mother telling me once that I was making more money than she was. And so— I have a grandson, Russel, who's eight years old, and we're working on his first project, there's a neighbor that they will be in Europe for the next three months, so we'll keep their surroundings beautiful. They're right across the street. So it's nice because it kind of tightens up the block. And we're still kind of fussy about the yard. Yeah, I can just take off on some things so you gotta kind of pull me back.

MW: Sounds good. I had a couple other questions about the neighborhood as you were growing up, and then I'm curious about your mom's more political life, because that sounds pretty extensive. So in this second house that's on Dayton, on the southern periphery of Rondo. You moved there when you were how old?

RB: Seven years old.

MW: Seven years old. And then this is when your family is in a— you're the only Black family, surrounded by white people. What were the interactions like with the other families around you? Was there a police presence in that neighborhood at the time?

RB: Well, as long as we stayed in that house, everything seemed to be fine.

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RB: I was young, so I didn't know what to be looking for, but I was also the youngest in my family, and my next sibling was eight years older. So, she was kind of at an age— and the next one— they didn't have time to really watch me, "Watch me" watch me. So, I was very independent and my mother would leave. She had this job she was putting together. She was working and doing some work for North Central Voters League and another job. And she would say to me, "Don't leave the yard." And of course that sent me exploring the block. And the next day or a week later, she would say, "Don't leave the yard, don't leave the block." And I'd say, "Mm-hmm." So I'd go a little further. I remember taking her finger and saying, "Don't go up on Selby." And so I had to go see what Selby looked like. When I got up on Selby, the police did come up and they had me put my hands up against the wall. They went through my pockets— and I was a pretty skinny kid. I can remember now that they could only get two fingers in my pocket. I didn't have anything. My mother died never knowing I went up on Selby. I never told her, because she told me not to go up there. I want to say that— you know, you hear the stories, particularly a lot of— I've heard a lot of Black folks say, "And then my mother made me go out

and pick that switch and she gave me that whoopin’.” My mother never whooped me and my father didn’t either. So— but she could look at me in a way that I could see she was ashamed and that hurt more. But I had that job at about eight years old of tidying the outside of that house. My brother Jackie [Hickman] would come and tell me, “You need to do this and you need to clean this up.” And then, as I said, at 12 years old, my father went into this nursing home. He just couldn’t— he was bedridden, really, until he died. So, at eight years old, after I got tired of being mad about the police, I crossed over Selby and headed on up the street and found myself at- there was a big church, looked like a castle. It was Unity Church, Unitarian, were big supporters of Hallie Q. Brown [Community Center] and the food assistance, and they were warm and friendly. Then maybe a few days later, I’d go a little further and I went to House of Hope. And little by little, I’d go further. I had a nephew who was four months younger than me and he lived a block away and he began to follow me or go with me. That made me a little nervous because I didn’t know if I was gonna get found out because of him. Eventually, I think before I was nine years old, we’d gotten— walked as far as we’d run into the river. That was a good walk. I remember us hustling back because we wanted to get home before my mother got home from work. So that was, I think I’ve kind of always been that way. At 12 years old, I saw on TV, I saw somebody put their thumb out to get a ride.

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RB: So I went out and I put my thumb out and a truck driver picked me up and took me four hours away from here to Winona [Minnesota] and dropped me. Luckily, this white family came up and said, “What are you doing here?” and I told them the story. They took me home with

them and had me sleep in their house and called my mother and told her that they would get me back to her the next day. The next year, when the weather broke, she sent me to the Boundary Waters [Minnesota], to a camp that was, I'd spend 30 days in the wilderness. She'd tell me to watch out for those bears. [Laughter] And I did, I was good at it too.

MW: Mmm. So you were traveling.

RB: By that time, it was, they called it, "White flight." People began— "For Sale" signs started coming up. People were moving out. But just as quick as people were moving out, Black folks were moving in. And there was a lady named Esther Peake who bought two houses next to us. She was a society columnist for the Sun newspaper. The Andersons moved across the street, he was a railroad man. Chester Oden, who owned Road Buddies restaurant on University, was a Black restaurateur, bought a house across the street. My cousins— some Balengers moved over on the other side, and pretty soon the neighborhood had gone from white to black. And the houses were— the house that burned— the insurance company, I remember my mother saying the insurance company gave us \$4,000 for- the house was built for \$6,000. My father put an addition on the house in 1948. And then they gave him four grand for it. And I think that's what really was— was really a hardship for him. My mother was kind of a tougher bird and she just didn't dwell on what happened. She was more about what was going to happen next. She was just tough, and by that time, my uncle Gordon [Parks] had built a pretty good career and was a photographer for Life Magazine and would come and see her. And my Aunt Anna lived not too far from us. And by that time, Anura's [Anura Si-Asar] grandmother had moved to St. Paul, Aunt Mary. She was my brother Jackie's godmother also. She was a tough old bird too. You didn't

give her any lip. So in those days, it was difficult for Black folks, other people of color, to be able to rent a room at a hotel or tha— like a ballroom where they could have a large party.

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RB: My mother was, she had grown up seeing white people have these large gatherings, formal balls. She began to make that happen. My uncle [Gordon Parks] had gotten a start taking some photographs at a store called Mrs. Frank Murphy downtown. So then he— his career blew up and they, they like taking credit for that, so they had pictures of my uncle in his, in their store and my mother liked to shop there. It was probably the ritziest store in the region, I would say. And they would [Inaudible] came with a crowd of these women that were all getting dialed up, men all had tuxes of their own and tails and that's how they would party. They had a place called the Sterling Club, which I've been a member of— at one point, chairman of the board. They've been around for over a hundred years and still have a house about three blocks from here. And that's where they would have their parties and they would get together, and then pretty soon the hotels began to rent to them in the prom ballroom and that type of thing. They had social clubs and there was the Cameo Club, which my mother was president of at one point. And the Regalettes, the Untouchables, there became a number of these clubs, and each of them was beginning to have their party over here. They could do the bum's ball, and everyone would dress up like a bum would in formal attire, and then they'd party! And cotillions, my sisters would be debutants, and I would have a job to roll down the white carpet for them to come down on. She always had work for me. I don't ever remember having a babysitter. If my sisters couldn't do it, then I had to take care of myself. As a kid going to school, I stood in the window and watched the other kids

headed to school and I'd let myself out. We didn't lock the door in those days. At night, my mother would always say, "Make sure the back door is unlocked in case someone needs to get in."

MW: Why was that?

RB: Because there could be trouble. There could be— there was a, in those days, there was the police presence, but for the most part, the police officers were Black in the Rondo neighborhood. There was one police officer, his name was Skelly. He was white and he was big and tall. But unlike now, if the police were looking for you, they'd come knock on the door. They didn't bust in your house. And for the most part, at a very young age, you would learn that when the police, when you opened the door and the police were standing there, you would say, "So and so's not here." And I know I learned it.

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RB: I probably had it when I was in kindergarten. Because I had, it was a big house and police would come rarely, but on occasion. So, and they knew you. So, as I got older and strayed further, and I remember Mr. Mann [James Mann], who before he died I called Uncle Jim, and his oldest son is like a brother to me. He would see me, and he could tell by the look on my face, "You look like you're about to get in trouble. Go home." And the first time when I got home, he was already there, I guess, to see if I went. I remember his wife was a real good cook. They lived in the neighborhood too. And I, for a while, I would show up over there around six. I knew that's

when dinner was served. Yeah, I remember him saying, “Does he live here now?” No. I’m straying, I know so—

MW: No, that’s good. These are all interesting stories.

RB: You’ll edit this stuff.

MW: Yeah, of course. I’m curious, I’m curious about your introductions to Black political organizing and movement building here. And maybe to start, you could talk about your mom’s work, since it sounds like that might have been an introduction.

RB: It was. My mother was on the Urban League Guild, who worked with the Urban League. And I didn’t say, but my first grade teacher was a little white woman with blue eyes. Her name was Pat Parlin. [Patricia Parlin Caponi] And my mother was very forward thinking. She went over to the school and met this woman, invited her to the house. We lived across the street from the school, and I’ve got pictures of her over at our home having cocktails. Mrs. Parlin married an artist, and his name’s Caponi so she’s Pat Caponi now, and she’s 95 years old, and I talk to her every month. Growing up— so my mother died 50 years ago— but Mrs. Caponi’s been there. I think for a while, her children wondered why I was always talking to their mother. But— and she always had something for me to do. She would show up at anything I was doing— there she would be! And I watched this little white woman fight for people’s rights. And she at one point was vice president of the Urban League Guild. She thought she was a token, but she wasn’t. My mother, she always made friends with the— whoever was running the St. Paul and Minneapolis newspapers, and she would invite them to her house, to meetings and other prominent people. So

she was building a network. I would watch this when she worked for North Central Voters League. She was having conversations with people that had political endeavors that— they were trying to make some moves. She was very opinionated about who we should vote for and she was very good about getting that word out, so the politicians would find their way to our home. They would come and she would— she didn't go to them, they would come to our home and one of us was to answer the door. She wasn't doing that. One of us would go get coffee and cookies or whatever she had in there. She would have a meeting that included Hubert Humphrey and Fritz Mondale.

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RB: I was told at one point that that camp she sent me to in the Boundary Waters, it was a very— it was for rich kids. I didn't know, I was the first Black camper, but I was really good about it. I knew how to read a map and how to use a compass. I had been in the Boy Scouts and been on a number of two day camping trips when I went to do that. And she told me that Judge Archie Gingold had paid for my trips to the Boundary Waters, which— I had to go each summer for three summers. One day I was taking my daughter to the hospital to get— she broke her arm and I had to get the pins out of her arm, and the nurse said, "Judge Gingold's in the other room, he's going to need such and such." And I said, "Can I talk to him?" And they said, "Yeah." So I went and went to thank him for sending me to that camp that changed my life. He said, "Oh, you don't owe me any thanks." He said, "I made a call to your mother because I wanted to become a judge. And she made some calls for me and here I am." And I thought, "I never heard that part of the story." So my mother would do that job and then she would come home. She would cook dinner

and then she would start on the telephone. I never knew exactly what all she would be talking about for most of the evening but many times I would walk in and she'd fallen asleep with that phone in her hand, and I'd take the phone out of her hand and help her get to her room to go to sleep. That's just how she worked. She was tireless, she always made happen what she planned to make happen. I told her once that I wanted something, but I didn't get it. She told me, "You didn't want it bad enough," and I went back and got it. So that's— in a lot of ways, she built me. The expectation was for me to always have A's in school, and I did. My hustle in high school was looking at people's homework and telling them where they were wrong. I built that into a business where I had a team working with me in my homeroom class to look over that paper. I got a quarter for making sure your homework was right and my team got free lunch every day. I paid for it. What it did for me was it prepared me for college because a lot of us weren't going to college then. So not only did I decide to go to college, but I had to figure out how to pay for it. And I did. I'd like to say that I was— my first job was at 10 years old, and there was a little department store on Selby Avenue. The first time I walked in there and asked them do they have a job? They told me to get out. And the next week I'd come again and say, "Do you have any jobs yet?" And they'd tell me, "I told you to stay away from here." Third week, they said, "Listen, kid," in the fourth week, they said, "What is it you can do?" And I had a job. Then I found a place that would let me wash some of their windows. I had a job and a hustle, and I had to go to school. And I played baseball. And I could swim.

MW: You could read maps, it sounds like.

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RB: I could read maps. I was so good with that map. Here's what happened, is the white kids were all buying candy and treats for their self to go on this 30-day trip. And something inside of me said, "You're not gonna get left behind anywhere on this trip. You need a map and a compass of your own." And that's what I spent my money on. So the guide we had wasn't as good as I was reading that map. There was a point where I had to take part of the trip forward and meet the other part later. I was 15 years old and seven days later, I met him many miles from where I left him, where I left the other group. So, you couldn't tell me much in those days. But as I got older and looked back on it, I thought, "Why would they let me do that?" [Laughter] At one point we were on the lake when it got dark and you can't see where you're going. I hadn't thought that far ahead, but we got there.

MW: And could you give an overview of the North Central Voters League, just what that was and how that came about?

RB: The North Central Voters League started, I remember my mother taking me to Merle Harris. He was a Black businessman in St. Paul, and he owned the meat market on Iglehart and Grotto. She went there and they had a conversation with— and Mr. Hall was there. [S. Edward Hall] Mr. Hall was a Black— had a barbershop downtown, and I'm told it had 12 chairs in this barbershop, but only white men and the bankers and that would be getting their hair cut there. It wasn't a place for us to go get our hair cut. But it was the bankers, and all the rollers would be in that barbershop, and Mr. Hall could tell you what was going on in the city. And so they began to plan who would represent us best in the political scene and what was necessary for us to move forward. And a lot of that came from being able to know what was going on. So, I don't know if

you know this, but straight up Marshall, a block past Western, that's four or five blocks, there's a bust in the park of Mr. Hall, because he was so well respected. That's when the planning— and people were really working. I'll dig through my stuff— Mrs. Caponi would send me pictures, copies of different events that my mother had gotten her involved in. And it's very interesting to see back in the '50s and them working together to try to change things. Mrs. Caponi is a beautiful lady, and she's really a tough bird, too. I would ask her, "How did she end up having this class of Black kids?" She said, "I thought you were all special." She made us read. And she had a farm in Roberts, Wisconsin. That's a long way if you don't have the freeway. And there wasn't a freeway then. She would tell me the stories about how when her kids were born, nobody would drive out there and see them except my mother. She said, "She would come around the corner in that great big Cadillac of hers. I didn't know how she found me. And she would hold my children." So they were real friends.

00:55:27

RB: When I went away to college, it turned out Mrs. Caponi's sister [Nancy Parlin] was a professor there at Moorhead [Moorhead State University]. So, I had somebody kind of watching. In those days, it would cost nine grand to go to school. That was a lot of money. They were very strategic. And this North Central Voters League was— it grew, but things were changing fairly rapidly. Pretty soon, Mr. Harris had a shoeshine stand on Selby and Dale that had sort of a roof on it and maybe six chairs, and in those days everybody got their shoes shined. It was— nobody was wearing tennis shoes, everybody had some leather shoes on. There was a restaurant right behind it called Louisiana, which there is now, but this, the Louisiana that's there now on Dale

and Selby is the new structure, but it used to be an old, very nice restaurant. And my mother would take us there about once a year. And I remember the food was good. I don't remember what we were eating, but I knew it was good. And there was— down on Victoria and Selby— my brother had gotten beaten up by the police pretty badly. It was not too long after he'd gotten out of the Air Force. He thought he was going to come out of the Air Force and be an airplane mechanic like he had been in the Air Force, but they wouldn't hire him. Then he had bought this car and he was doing work that was not what he wanted to do and got stopped by the police and they gave him a bad beating and he was bloodied up in the hospital. When he came out, my brother Jackie [Hickman] was at his side for a long time. Then it was right at that time, there was some noise about the Black Panthers [Black Panther Party] in California. My brother Jackie and my brother Bobby [Bobby Hickman] went out there and met with Huey Newton and some of the other folks that were getting the work going in California and came home. By that time there was one club, I think it was Celebrity Lounge— maybe it hadn't started yet, but there was a pool hall up there and there— Eamon Peck [Inaudible] had started a boxing gym up there. But I think it was, I'm going to say, I think it was 1965.

01:00:01

RB: Mr. Harris had identified the building on the corner of Victoria and Selby and said it was going to be— the people that were in there had now gotten out because of the white flight. And so that building would be vacant. It belonged to Ted Hamm. Ted Hamm was owner of Hamm's Brewing Company. My brothers went down there— and I think they pretty much just, I think my brother Jackie pretty much just promised that that building would remain in good shape if he

would rent it to them. And he did for a dollar a year, they'd take care of the building. So I and my friend Readus [Fletcher] were recruited to come in there and clean out all the debris. It began to do a photo group and an art group and then there was a boxing gym put in and offices upstairs. There was a house behind it that had been boarded up all my life. I would pass it going to school— grade school. And when we were cleaning up Inner City Youth League, I was 15, and Mahmoud El-Kati had shown up, and he was giving us history lessons. While we were sittin' around doing nothing, he'd start telling us about all the things we'd never heard. I and a friend began to— it was, my mother made it my job if I was going anywhere on the weekend or during the week, I had to go to the library first on Saturday morning. First I'd go swimming at the Wilder Pool downtown— had to walk down there— and then get over to the library and get some books. I usually went to the Science Museum [Science Museum of Minnesota] because I liked seeing the mummy and all that. And I had a few friends that would go with me after a while. Then we'd come back and study and read. At that point, I was mainly getting the Black authors that I could find. It really had a very overwhelming effect. But as I was in high school, when the history teacher would say "What happened on such and such date?" I could tell him what happened that I'd read in that Black history.

MW: Can you give an example?

RB: Well, they were talking about something about the summer of 1919. It was— I think they were talking something about, he wanted something about the automobile industry, and I told him it was the Red Summer and more Black people were lynched than any other time. It may seem hard to believe because his hair is thinning, but I had the first afro at Central High School

back in 1966. And the teachers— one teacher, he was, he just kind of lost himself and would lean over and whisper “Nappy head” in my ear. I knew I was getting the best of him. I was the only one that would— the rest of the students would put their heads down and go to sleep, and he permitted that, but I had to engage him. He gave me the only “D” I ever got. My mother came up, mink coat, man tailored suit, and said, “You’re not the teacher.”

01:05:00

RB: I went to what was supposed to be an accelerated class and did extra credit work and actually got an “A+” from that teacher and that other one was dismissed. I guess I wanted it bad enough. There were, there were a lot of difficult times. At a point, there was a riot on Selby Avenue.

MW: In ‘68, right?

RB: Yeah.

MW: What do you remember about that?

RB: I remember a lot of the buildings were burned.

MW: How did it start?

RB: There was an event downtown, and the police beat up this pregnant woman, Black woman. And I just remember everybody. It went up. By that point, we all were walking around fancying ourselves as Black Panthers. We all had a black leather jacket and beret. We were gettin’ our history down. We were becoming— militant, is what they called us.

MW: King had been killed at that point, right?

RB: Yes. And that was— I believe that was April of '68. [Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated on April 4th, 1968] I'd shot my mouth off so much at school by then that they came and got me and said, "King's killed. What should we do?" This was the administration. I said, "We'll have an assembly and then let everybody go home." And we did just that. They let me say a few words, and things were changing at that point. It was that fall that I left for school. And just prior to that, because of that camp in the Boundary Waters, I heard some of the guys talking about an exchange program with the USSR [Union of Soviet Socialist Republics]. And I said, "How do you do that?" And they said, "Oh, you gotta make an application, nana naanaa yenea" I'd make sure I had everything. As soon as I got back, I got hold of those people and I said, "I'm gonna go." And I remember telling my mother, "I'm going to Russia." She just patted me on the arm and said, "Of course you are." So I did everything they asked. It was almost a year in the process. One day I got the letter and it said I've been chosen. I was, out of 16, I was the Black kid. I remember telling my mother that I was chosen and it was \$4,300 and change to go. You could almost buy a house for that. My mother said, "Oh my God, we don't have any money." I said, "I'll get it. I'll get it." She was— I don't know how it all happened [Laughter], but I was able to go. I was a kid, I had that wanderlust and I liked to— I was only going to be gone 8 weeks. The other kids, when we all came together and met at this airport, they were all crying and they were afraid. I was like, "Hey, it's only 8 weeks." My mother started crying. Because she said, "Please stay with the group, please." And I was like, "Okay! I'll be fine." Do you know, when I got there, when we finally got there, they all got together and they were gonna— there

were Russian people said, “You’re to be in your hotel by 9 o’clock.” I told him, “My mother doesn’t tell me when to come and go to bed.” So they said, “Okay, you can go out.” And there was this big tall guy named Tofik that followed me everywhere I went. There was this white kid who said, “I’m rooming with Russ,” and his folks own billboards in Rochester or somewhere. I would come back and tell him what happened— for about three days. Then I went and said, “He’s coming with me.” They said, “Okay.” And we had a great time.

01:11:00

RB: I don’t know. I think, uh, my kids are like that now and my grandkids are pretty— no telling what they’re gonna do next. I had this group come to my circle [The Circle of Peace Movement] and they said, “We don’t know why you call yourselves African Americans. You’ve never been to Africa.” I was caught off guard on that one. So I went to Africa. [Inaudible] I got a ticket. There was this woman. Have you met Artika Tyner?

MW: Yeah.

RB: Artika said she was going to Africa on Facebook and I said, “Me too.”

MW: Ghana?

RB: Ghana. Then everybody behind it started saying, “Me too, I’m going, I’m going.” I think there were 16 of us by the time. When I got there, I posted something on Facebook. Oh my God. My grandkids started calling, “Stay with the group, grandpa, stay with them! Don’t go off.” I said, “Ehhh. Please.” I did pretty good.

MW: Let me ask one question about the USSR trip, and then I think we could wrap up this session, schedule another one down the line. This has been great. I'm curious, so the Soviet Union trip, that was in '67?

RB: I'll get clarity on that.

MW: We'll say '67. What was the—I assume that was your first time out of the U.S. What was the experience like being a Black person in the Soviet Union? Or visiting.

RB: Well, on the way to the Soviet Union. I had to go to Nova Scotia— first to New York, then to Nova Scotia, then to Amsterdam— England, and then Amsterdam. But when I got to England, was it Amsterdam? In the gift shop, they had Black dolls, never seen one before. So I bought a couple for my niece, nieces.

01:15:02

RB: And then coming from Amsterdam into Moscow, one of the first things I saw was a billboard with the Statue of Liberty holding an assault rifle on Black folks and an American flag. I was in that frame of mind by that point after everything that I'd read— was like "Right on." [RB holds up the Black Power salute] For the most part, people were very friendly. I moved differently than the other kids because they had come from privilege. I knew we weren't in America anymore. I had been in neighborhoods where I knew, you better be careful. I had friends that lived in St. Anthony Park, and people might try to run you over when you're crossing the street. It was a different time. You could be explained away at any time. We weren't shooting each other. We didn't have guns back then. If you got caught out here on Rice Street up the way,

if a white group caught you, you could take a pretty bad beating. You knew where not to go when it got dark. In those days, we had teenage nightclubs where you would go have a “coketail”—not a cocktail, but it was off Lake Street, kind of where the neighborhoods kind of blended. I’ll give you more as I think about it, but it was a different time. When Selby burned, it was like those people got out of there and never came back. Selby looked like a war zone at a point. There was still the hole where the freeway would be. That stayed like that for 10 years. You could cross the bridges, but it was sand down there. There was no road yet. So when that riot happened— or it wasn’t quite a riot, Selby got burned down. If you got caught on the other side of the freeway— is where I was— the police were sitting on all the bridges, so we wouldn’t be able to go back and forth. My friend, who was in the documentary [*The Brothers of Rondo*] lived on the other side of the bridge and picked me up. So after that, it was a lot of vacant lots where some buildings had been. And my brothers and some of us began to plant food in them. We thought it was a revolutionary thing to do. Wait a minute, so you were asking me—

MW: I was curious about the Soviet Union.

RB: Yeah. Because—

MW: You said that you were moving differently out there from the other kids.

01:20:17

RB: Because the people were very warm. They were very interested. They wanted to know who I were. There were a number of Africans there. You’d see one every now and again. Okay. They didn’t speak to you because they saw us as different. But I’m a people person. I’d go for my

walks. People would say, “Hi.” I think the first week— I’d already been taking Russian lessons here, but it wasn’t sticking. But when I got over there in the first week, I’d picked up enough Russian to kind of say, “I’m sorry”, “Hi,” and, you know, “Goodbye.” They had this song they would like to sing called Midnight in Moscow. And I could sing that with them. And over there, you can drink if you can hold a glass. And they’d invite you up on the porch or in the yard. And I’d go kick it with them. It was— they didn’t like Americans, but it really meant white Americans. But they were okay with my friend Wes, ‘cause we were hanging out together. There were all negative images of America. So it wasn’t— they didn’t have any problem with Black folks. But, they weren’t fond of the white Americans, and they really needed to be careful. Now I did kind of— with Wes— put together a little party, and we had invited the nurses from the medical school to come up. They came and made us pack our junk and get on a plane and go to the next city. [Laughter] I don’t know what they thought was going to happen. But other than that, they were just lovely. We had to come through Checkpoint Charlie. You know what that is?

MW: I don’t know.

RB: Okay. We went to Germany and West Berlin. And you had to go to East Berlin, which was communist, to get to go to Russia. And to come back, You had to come through East Berlin to West Berlin, and they called it Checkpoint Charlie. You heard Reagan [Ronald Reagan] say, “Tear down that wall.” It was a wall there. And me and Wes were sitting together and we exchanged passports as a joke and they didn’t think it was funny. They were like, got really all wound up in there. I was quick, “We’re sorry, we’re sorry.” And they let it slide. [Laughter] Geez. I was so glad when we got to— we got to West Berlin coming home. Those other kids that

were with me, they were crying and they went to their rooms and they were just like decompressing and I was like, “I’m getting ready to party.” I was leaving the hotel and “Wait a minute, wait a minute. Can we come with you?” I said, “Come on.” Because we were— you know, they didn’t carry on like I did. And we went to this club and I saw Black folks coming in and they’d disappear. And when I first got there and I was walking down the street, I could hear Aretha Franklin coming out of the pizza shop.

01:25:13

RB: And I said, I’d never heard that here. Our music, it was a different time. Our music wasn’t on the radio. It wasn’t, at that point.

MW: That was in East Berlin?

RB: That was in West Berlin. But in America? You might see it on TV, in The Ed Sullivan Show. The plane— when I came into Moscow, Ed Sullivan was on the plane. I started kicking it with him. And pretty soon we leave [Inaudible] In the bathroom. So I go in the bathroom and I go in this room where I seen them slip into— it was a whole ‘nother club attached to this club.

Wandering around, I had a good time. But it was, sort of, it was liberating in a lot of ways. But I did feel like— a lot of the white kids that I went with kind of felt a little different about me after that. We had a few reunions, but I met with Wes maybe about eight years ago. And his brother’s president of the country club. I showed up. I didn’t know— I said to him, “I don’t know, how am I going to recognize them?” And sure enough, our hair was all white. And Wes and I, we just

hugged and hugged and hugged. And his brother was like— he was so stuck up. It was just, but I haven't seen him since. I haven't seen any of them. So, yeah.

MW: That's quite a story. That's quite a trip.

RB: Yeah.

MW: I think we could wrap up there.