

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT REDFIELD

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

MOLLY GRAHAM

EAST BRUNSWICK, NEW JERSEY

MAY 1, 2015

TRANSCRIPT BY

MOLLY GRAHAM

Molly Graham: This begins an oral history interview with Robert Redfield. This is our fourth session. The interview is taking place on May 1, 2015 in East Brunswick, New Jersey, and the interviewer is Molly Graham. Bob, before we started recording, you were telling me about your mother's property in Colts Neck. Do you want to tell me about that again?

Robert Redfield: Well, when I had gotten polio, my mother bought the farm in Colts Neck because the doctor told her that it would be a healthy place to raise me. We had about eighty acres in that area, which is a beautiful area with a of horse farms. We bought that property in 1932. And in 1944, during World War II, the Navy was building a road from Route 36 along the ocean in Leonardo, where the Navy boats land and they bring in ammunition. Then, they bring it to their other facility, which is in Colts Neck. It's called Earle Naval Weapons Station, the naval base. So, they would bring the trucks loaded with whatever ammunition they brought in from Leonardo when they landed at the naval base there. Then, they would bring it to Earle. So, what the Navy did in 1944, they were building a special road directly from Leonardo, which is the Navy base on the water in Leonardo into Earle in Colts Neck. They were building a private road for the Navy, which is called Normandy Road. Alongside of that was the track, a railway track and that came through the back of our property, which is right in Colts Neck. They were taking eighteen of our acres, which would have divided us from the back of our property, which was along Swimming River, a beautiful river that goes all the way to Red Bank and the ocean. Did I tell you this before?

MG: Yes, you did, and how you held onto one acre along the river.

RR: Yes. We held onto one acre on Swimming River. That was important because I used to go down there and fish at nighttime. I'd go with my crutches or canes until twelve o'clock at night. It's about a half a mile back behind the main house. But the Navy refused to allow us to get to that one-acre property. For years we tried to get to our property, which the Navy cut us off from. Did I mention that part?

MG: Yes.

RR: That's been ongoing through all those years. They used the fact that it was not written in the deed as the reason for not allowing us to get to that piece of property---from 1944 up until 1970 when they sent over officers to inspect the property, and still wouldn't allow us to get to it. They said we had to build a bridge, which we shouldn't have to do. The Navy has the right to do anything they want to do under what they call sovereign immunity. Did I mention that term to you?

MG: I don't think so.

RR: You can't sue the Navy. Whatever they want to do, they go ahead and do. It's very complicated and lawyers are involved. It was a scam. I feel it's unconstitutional because the Constitution allows you to get to your own property. So, we had owned that property from 1932, which we pay taxes on, all of that time. And, as I say, they used sovereign immunity to absolve them from any wrongdoing or responsibility. In 2003, we sold the property to the Monmouth Parks Department, which has all the different parks in Monmouth County. They were the only

ones that could buy it because our one acre was on that side of the tracks and was adjacent to their property. They're the only ones that could ever get to it. Monmouth parks was going to purchase the property about five or six year earlier because it was contiguous with the property they already owned. Their offer was about \$30,000. But when they walked the property, we found out that for some reason it wasn't exactly right for them and they withdrew that offer. So, time went on and we were still barred from accessing our own property, but I kept calling the Parks Department and telling them they're wrong and they should go down and walk the property again. It was a beautiful piece of property on the widest part of Swimming River. There was no property left on either side of Swimming River. The river is lined with very expensive homes and properties. Our property is a very desirable spot on the river. Finally, after three years, Monmouth County Parks agreed to survey the property again. They decided they would like to try to purchase the property. But they only had a certain amount of time left that year to spend money earmarked for buying land. At the same time, they were looking to buy another parcel of land. If the sale didn't go through that would give them enough funds to purchase our property along Swimming River. We got two different appraisals for our land and instead of the \$30,000 they originally offered me, it was \$350,000 for the one acre. We had paid \$12,000 for the seventy-five acres in 1932, for the whole farm. A realtor told us that the property was now worth a million dollars if you could get access to our property. I had that in writing. So, Monmouth County Park ended up buying our property. We had to sell it because no one else would be able to get to it. This was in 2003. Three months later, we get a certified letter from the Navy saying we can now get to the property. When they let us keep that one acre, it was obvious we would want to be able to get to it. So, it's still an ongoing conflict with the Navy. We're seeing if we can get reparations from the Navy if they allowed us access. We could have made a lot more money if we sold it to an individual and not the county. But the people from Monmouth County were very nice and good to work with. Actually, I have something I want to show you. They reached out about a year ago when that article about me in NJ.com came out.

MG: This letter is from Fran Martone.

RR: Yes. She's the head of the Parks Department.

MG: In 2013 she wrote you and said, "Hello, Robert. What a handsome young man you were in your day."

RR: She saw that picture.

MG: "And what a talent you have for finding talent. Love the article. I forwarded it on to our publication editor. If it makes it into our own employee or other newsletters, I'll forward them to you. I found it interesting to learn and to know about you, the person, your work and your musical influence on someone like me with the artists, entertainment and music you brought forward to my generation and to many others. Remarkable. Behind the land we purchased for conservation is a rich heritage of the founding families' love of entertainment and the riches it brings to the world and to each of us in our daily lives. Music and entertainment plays a large part in what we do here in Parks and Recreation, and all for the benefit and betterment of the wellbeing of us all. A music teacher and nun at St. Cecilia's grammar school once said, 'A world without music would be most sad, which is why God gave birds a song to sing, which tender

notes can soothe the beast and lift our hearts and souls to a happier place every day we can hear music' or something like that. Anyway, thank you for sharing your life story. I am happy I had the opportunity to know you and work with you regarding land preservation, and to know you were the one to bring me the music of my generation, as well as many generations of music throughout your life. I think the sister, the music teacher, would love you and pray for you and bless you. Thank you. You are a special soul."

RR: Well, that's very nice.

MM: It's very nice.

RR: I thought you might like to see that. That's who I worked with through all those years with Monmouth County Parks Department.

MG: You made quite an impression.

RR: Yes. On Monday, I've got a real important message on the phone. Someone just wrote a book regarding the mob in New Jersey. The book just came out. The people who wrote it called me. It's really a heck of a story. I know more than they know about the mob, etc. So, they want to call and talk to me about it on Monday.

MG: Tell me again what you know.

RR: Well, I did so much work in entertainment. The clubs where I booked acts were mostly controlled and owned by the mob. I never got involved or became part of the mob. I was never obligated to them. I also managed a number of boxers and the mob was connected to fighters as well, not to mention Max Baer, who was the champion of the world. I managed him for entertainment, not for boxing. I had a couple boxers that I did manage personally as boxers. In those years, boxing was also controlled by the mob. I was called in on federal investigations when the FBI was looking into the mafia, who controlled boxing, but I was cleared because I wasn't criminally involved with the mob. I just worked with them because they controlled boxing at that time. I mentioned the legal battle I had with the Navy over our property in Colts Neck and I also have a lawsuit against someone who worked for me. I didn't normally have people work with me. I liked to do everything myself. But my phobias kept me from traveling and so I had to do everything from one room at home. Looking back, it's amazing I was able to accomplish everything I did. To do what I do, you need a big staff and you need to do a lot of traveling. I didn't have either.

MG: One thing we talked about last time, but you might want to say more about is your involvement in horse racing.

RR: Yes. New Jersey had legal horse racing back in the 1800s, early 1900s, and after that, it became not legal and not allowed in New Jersey. My mother and I worked on a bill with (Theresa Mahoney?), who was a congresswoman involved in politics in New Jersey, to try to bring racing back into New Jersey. They did have legal dog racing; that was allowed. I think I mentioned our dog, Gloomy Gloom, was a former racing dog. We worked really hard to bring

horse racing back. I even wrote articles for the papers. Eventually, racing became legally approved through (Theresa Mahoney?) and also with our helping it along and bringing in some other people. So, it was reestablished in the 1940s, brought back through our efforts and other important groups, and made legal. When that did become legal, we were one of the first people to get a box in the grandstand at the Monmouth Park track and season passes. We had a box, for several years, in the clubhouse. We were one of the original people to bring racing to New Jersey. Today, racing is in bad shape. Tracks can no longer sustain themselves. The Monmouth Park Racetrack, where we were involved, is still running. Speaking of racing, very good friends of ours that we were involved with was the Wolfsons, Cecil and Louie Wolfson. They were the last ones to win the Triple Crown with their horse Affirmed. Next week, you may see the next Triple Crown winner, which I think will happen with American Pharaoh. [Editor's Note: At the 147th Belmont Stakes on June 6, 2015, American Pharaoh won the first Triple Crown since Affirmed in 1978.] But we were very close with the Wolfsons. I don't know if I got into that. They were a very powerful family in this country. They made their money after the war buying a lot of the old naval vessels and then selling the steel. They became very domineering, wealthy and dominant in different areas. They ended up owning all the surface transportation in Washington, DC, meaning all the cabs and trolleys, etc.. I met Joe DiMaggio through them and came to know him fairly well. Joe worked for them doing public relations. They made him a very big part of the insurance company they owned. Getting into more humorous items, I had to go to Somerville, which is up on Route 22, maybe fifteen or twenty miles from here. I had to see an insurance doctor. He was in high hills of Somerville. These were like mountains to me and I dreaded going up because of my phobias. But when I got there and got to the area that started to go into the mountains, I was terrified. I would do anything to delay the visit. As you go up to this area, there were platforms to pull off the road and for scenic views. There was a group up there looking through viewing scopes. So, I get off at that platform to buy me a little time before I get to the next area, where the doctor's office was. I figured I needed to have a reason for pulling over to kill time, so I asked the group for directions. There were about six people in the group, all wearing kilts. They were all from Scotland sightseeing. I knew where I was going, but felt I needed to have a reason for pulling over. It's obvious these are tourists--they're all wearing kilts and doing some sightseeing--and I'm asking them for directions. I thought that was a little humorous.

MG: Yes.

RR: Did I tell you about the school bus?

MG: I'm not sure you have.

RR: When I was swimming at the YMCA in Highland Park, I got locked out of my car. So, the school bus brought me home, like a kid. So funny.

MG: [laughter] You did tell me.

RR: I told you about managing Jack Hammer, who wrote "Great Balls of Fire."

MG: Yes.

RR: I told you about Joe Pesci who did a lot of work for me.

MG: What was your relationship with him?

RR: Well, he used to work with some of my groups. Pesci worked with other groups, not The Four Seasons, but this was when The Four Seasons were called The Four Lovers.

MG: Joe Pesci?

RR: He was a musician, front man, and played the sax. He ended up getting a call from some big name producers. They called him and he was working in Long Island, hosting at a bar. He was in a lot of movies after that point, including *Raging Bull*.

MG: He was great in *Goodfellas*.

RR: Is that the one where he is a lawyer?

MG: No, that's *My Cousin Vinny*.

RR: Yes. You know that one?

MG: Yes, I love that one. *Goodfellas* is the movie about the mob, with Ray Liotta.

RR: *Raging Bull* was another one. That was the Jake LaMotta story. I managed Jake LaMotta's wife, Vickie LaMotta. She did commercials for a short while. She died relatively young. She was very lovely, very beautiful. I also did work with Jayne Mansfield. That's Mariska Hargitay's mother.

MG: Yes.

RR: I have pictures of her here that I took with one of her daughters in the backseat of my car. I was taking Jayne to go do a commercial with my champion standard white poodle.

MG: Can you tell me more about the process of discovering, managing and booking talent?

RR: It's hard to explain. Meeting and working with talent came naturally; it's how I grew up. From 1935 when I was backstage with the Ziegfeld Follies with Bob Hope, Will Rogers, Jay C. Flippen, Gypsy Rose Lee, and others. I was just always around people in show business through my mother. Max Baer was very friendly with us and I started by managing him for movies. It evolved. I was born into entertainment. I became actively involved through people we knew. It started small with some commercials and then putting people into clubs that we were familiar with. Eventually, we were managing people locally and nationally.

MG: You have mentioned before that the drinking and driving laws really impacted your work.

RR: Yes. That was around 1987, 1988, somewhere around there. Before that, I was so busy on a local level doing lounges, etc. that I didn't have time to get involved in major international acts. The drinking and driving laws made it much harder for people to go out and so bars and clubs weren't getting enough business to continue.

MG: Did your mother stay in touch with the people she knew in show business throughout her life?

RR: Yes. Did I show you my autograph book?

MG: Yes.

RR: That was one year of autographs from people who came to visit us in Colts Neck mainly.

MG: Later in life, did she stay in touch with those people?

RR: Yes. She stayed active in the business until she passed away in 1979. She was in the office three or four days a week. For the last two or three years, she would work from here and be on the phones. She was always there. I was very active then, going into the office, being on the road and working from home. I say I worked eight days a week. It was continuous, around the clock work. My light was always on. Once driving and drinking laws were passed, it did away with all the lounges, which is a big part of our business. The lounges survive mainly on selling liquor and people weren't drinking as much. They couldn't survive. People were afraid to go out because driving and drinking was heavily monitored and people couldn't afford to lose their license and not go to work. So, that did away with lounge. Lounges and restaurants became more of a weekend thing. It was then obvious that I had to do something different quickly. It seemed like things changed overnight in New Jersey. It was also around then that the Temptations were inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in a ceremony at the Waldorf.

MG: Yes. We talked a lot about David Ruffin.

RR: He was magic. Ruffin, Kendricks and Edwards, the former lead singers of The Temptations, never went out of business because they continued to perform all their hits, but under a different name. Their show was billed as former leads of "The Temptations." Ruffin, Kendricks and Edwards had all twenty main hit songs of the Temptations.

[Tape paused.]

MG: We're back on. And tell me again about your connection with Paul Winchell?

RR: I used to have a room at the Piccadilly Hotel in New York. A lot of theatrical people stay there. So, if I wasn't down at the shore, I would have a room at the Piccadilly. Paul Winchell would stay there also. It was a very important location on 45th Street. Show people would meet and say hello. You'd always see one of the top ticket brokers, a guy named Broadway Sam, who had his office there. There was also a drugstore where everyone would meet. I was the same age as Paul Winchell. He was just starting to get recognition with his Jerry Mahoney

ventriloquism. Edgar Bergen was the top in the world. His daughter is Candice Bergen. She's a big star. This was around 1944 when I was working for the Asbury Park Press. I was thinking about what I wanted after that because I wanted to get away from journalism. I ended up getting my license to sell insurance and worked for New York Life Insurance. So, Paul became a friend of mine being at the same hotel. We would meet in the drugstore. The first life insurance policy I ever sold was to Paul Winchell and the first insurance policy he ever got was from me. It was also the last insurance policy I sold because I knew I wanted to be doing something else. Around this time, Paul was very worried because he had a very hoarse throat and he had a special showing at the White House. [Franklin D. Roosevelt] was President then. That's about when it was. He was supposed to go to the White House. He was really concerned because you need your voice for ventriloquism. Actually, twice as much of your voice. I remember that took place. We talked about it at the drugstore. What he did and he accomplished in his life is almost insurmountable. Certainly unbelievable, even beyond his ventriloquism career. When I sold him the insurance policy, he had just gotten married. Her name was Dorothy or Dottie. She was real nice.

MG: I think he was married a number of times.

RR: That was his first marriage. This was around when he was twenty-two or twenty-three.

MG: He was born in 1922.

RR: I was too. Let's take a quick look at his bio. "Most beloved ventriloquist of American children." He first got recognized on the Major Bowes Amateur Hour, which was well-known. A lot of big stars, at that point, got their start there. Major Bowes was a place to be screened and approved because you were good at what you did. Generally, it was amateur entertainers, who weren't professionals yet, but gave them great exposure. Paul was first exposed on Major Bowes. This biography we're looking at says he got his start in television around 1948, which is four years later than I thought. I think this site is wrong. His ventriloquist dummies were Jerry Mahoney, who was well-known and another called Knucklehead Smiff. He was well known for the Jerry Mahoney dummy. I want to tell you more about what he accomplished. Winchell went to Columbia University and graduated pre-med. He probably wanted to be a doctor, but didn't have the money for that. He couldn't pursue that career. [Robert reads from the internet,] "He is one of the original inventors of an artificial heart - years before the first successful transplant with such of a device, an automobile that runs on battery power, [also] a method for breeding tilapia fish, and many other inventions that are still around today." [Editor's Note: Paul Winchell and Henry Heimlich patented the first artificial heart. The first successful artificial heart transplant was with the Jarvik 7 developed by Willem Johan Kolff and Robert Jarvik.]

MG: He was very talented in a number of fields.

RR: I couldn't believe some of the things I read about him. Can you turn it off for a minute?

MG: Yes.

[Tape paused.]

MG: We've jumped ahead to talking about your work in meat distribution. Were you using the connections you made previously in New York and in entertainment in this position?

RR: Yes. I did. Same with the trucking outfit I had when I was twenty-two.

MG: What made you get into these different businesses?

RR: My connections in entertainment brought me into contact with different people, plus the clubs and restaurants. It evolved that way. When I worked as a meat distributor, most of my accounts were in the clubs, restaurants and hotels where I would book acts. The firm I worked with served all the Catholic camps and charities as well. We were a high end meat company and so we also served the better restaurants and hotels. This is where I would sometimes encounter the mob, but I never was obligated to them. When you're obligated to them, you're at their mercy.

MG: Tell me more about the Piccadilly Hotel. It sounds like an exciting place.

RR: Yes. We knew the owners. My mother was friendly with the owner. He was big in construction. It was right on 45th Street in the heart of Manhattan. It was frequented and used by a lot of professional people. I saw so many people come and go--a lot of the big bands, a lot of big band leaders. Some of them I was close to. One of the people I knew very well was Tino Barzie. He was the manager for a number of big bands, such as Glenn Miller. Eventually, he was the road manager for Frank Sinatra and Frank Sinatra Jr. I also worked with both of them. Tino Barzie was someone else who stayed at the Piccadilly. The Three Suns often performed there. Their hit was "Twilight Time." I was in that lounge quite often. It was in the heart of the music industry. During the mid-break in the Broadway shows, people would come into the lounge at the Piccadilly Hotel for a quick drink. It was Morty and Al Nevins of The Three Suns appearing at the Piccadilly Lounge. The other member of the group was a relative, Artie Dunn, and he played keyboard. When Al Nevins left the band, he got involved in publishing music in New York and cofounded Aldon Music with Don Kirshner. It was a very big publishing house. Carol King was signed to Aldon Music. She has a very popular show on Broadway right now. Other musicians they signed were Neil Sedaka, Carole King, Barry Manilow, Neil Diamond, and many others. They were all giants in the music industry. Al Nevins died relatively young. He died in 1965 at the age of forty-nine.

MG: When was it that you were hanging out in the Piccadilly?

RR: From around 1945 to 1955. I always had a place there.

MG: Did the introduction of television change the nature of your work?

RR: I saw the transition to television. We knew David Sarnoff from RCA [Radio Corporation of America]. [Robert reads from the internet.] "David Sarnoff was an American businessman and pioneer of American radio and television. Throughout most of his career he led the Radio Corporation of America (RCA) in various capacities from shortly after its founding in 1919 until his retirement in 1970." He gave my mother one of the first televisions. It was in a big console

with a television in the middle. It had compartments on both sides. The television itself was probably nineteen inches. This would have been around 1945 or 1950. Prior to that, I was listening to baseball and music on the radio. You would hear the click of the bat over the radio. I remember some of the early programs, such as Milton Berle's *Texaco Star Theatre*. Everybody watched him weekly. Later, on Sundays, everyone would watch Ed Sullivan.

MG: Did you ever want to be famous yourself?

RR: Well, not famous. I just hope that a few people will remember me because I knew a lot of people. And when I look back, I accomplished a lot over these years. I had one of the top ten acts of all time, the Temptations. That was a big accomplishment for me. Physically, I accomplished a lot, despite getting hit pretty hard with polio. I also have a very famous godmother, Fanny Brice. She was depicted in *Funny Girl* by Barbara Streisand. I also met people like the Shah of Iran. I met him at the Waldorf. This was when Iran and the United States were closely knit, in the 1940s. That relationship has changed. Another close friend was Jimmy Durante. I don't know if I mentioned this, but I also managed Victor Willis, the lead singer of the Village People.

MG: What was he like?

RR: He was the one that rode the bicycle. He was the only straight one in the group. I managed him for a year, but he didn't want to listen to me. This was after he left the group. He had lost his voice by then and he wouldn't take directions. I also had a good working partnership with the Imperial Palace in Las Vegas [now the Linq] which was owned by Harrah's Entertainment. I mentioned I booked the Four Lovers with Frankie Valli before they were the Four Seasons and hugely popular. Now they have *Jersey Boys*, the biggest Broadway show of all time, which is based on their lives. I have contracts downstairs that they signed saying they'd work for eight bucks a night. I know I mentioned this the first time we met, but my mother took me to Paris when I was five years old. We went to the airport and were there when Lindbergh landed. I don't think you'll find too many people who have had the same experiences that I've had. There was an article I wanted to show you from just the other day about Sophie Tucker. She was also in the Ziegfeld Follies, like my mother. She was a one-of-a-kind entertainer; no one like her. She had a very unique demeanor and delivery. She was one of my mother's best friends and so I spent a lot of time with her. You can take this article home. She performed with my mother and the Follies. She was also at the Round Table in New York doing a show for my mother and raising money for Ziegfeld Alumnae Association that my mother was a main founder.

MG: What was your impression or memory of Sophie Tucker?

RR: She was very nice. They made a documentary about her life. I think I forgot to mention that I booked the Main Ingredient on *Good Morning America* twice in one week. Most people are lucky to ever get on it at all. Everybody remembers the Peppermint Lounge in New York. It's a bar where the dance, the Twist, originated. There are so many little stories. There's a lot here. Those are just some highlights.

MG: I will send you the CDs from our last few sessions.

RR: Great.

MG: Than you, again.

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Reviewed by Molly Graham 11/27/2018

Reviewed by Robert Redfield 1/15/2019