

Interview of Dr. Michael C. Robinson

From the Archives of the Wyoming Department of State Parks & Cultural Resources

Transcribed and edited by Russ Sherwin, May 6, 2010, Prescott, Arizona

- Subject: Doctor Michael C. “Mike” Robinson
- Occupation: Historian
- Born: October 18, 1943 in Kingman, Kansas
- Died: 1998 in Vicksburg, Mississippi, of a heart attack.
- Interviewer: Mark Junge.
- Interview date: July 14, 1990
- Place of Interview: Salt Lake City
- Topic of interview: Life; education; the *Black Fourteen* football player protest incident at the University of Wyoming in 1969; conversion to Mormonism.
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Transcriber’s notes: I have added some reference footnotes to this transcript where I thought appropriate. In most cases I have deleted redundant ands, ers, uhs, buts, false starts, etc. If I deleted an entire phrase, I have inserted ellipses ... Where you find brackets [] I have added words for explanation or to complete an awkward sentence, or to slightly change the order of the words that were spoken. Parentheses () are used for incidental non-verbal sounds, like laughter. Words emphasized by the speaker are italicized.

Introduction: By Sue Castaneda, Program Coordinator

Welcome to this oral history of Doctor Michael C. Robinson, a public works historian who graduated from the University of Wyoming and who protested on behalf of the rights of the Black Fourteen football players. This podcast is produced by Sue Castaneda for the Wyoming State Archives on behalf of the Department of State Parks and Cultural Resources. The interviewer is Mark Junge.

On October 17, 1969, the fourteen African-American players on the University of Wyoming's then undefeated football team walked into Coach Lloyd Eaton's office wearing black arm bands. The team was preparing to play BYU at War Memorial Stadium the next day. The players had a question: Could they wear black arm bands in silent protest? The year before in their victory at BYU, they said Cougar players had taunted them with racial epithets. The Wyoming players had also learned that the Mormon Church, which BYU represents, did not allow African-Americans in the priesthood. Eaton, citing a policy against protests, a rule no player had ever heard of, said no. He then kicked all fourteen off the team for the rest of the season. Only three would play for Wyoming again.

Mike Robinson was then a young, white graduate student from Kansas in the history program at UW. He felt that the fourteen players had a right to protest against BYU. He and other history students decided to stage their own protest. In this oral history he tells the interviewer, historian Mark Junge, who also happened to be his roommate in college, not only what happened that October in 1969, but the amazing twist that followed some years later.

The Interview Begins:

Mark Junge: Today is the fourteenth of July, 1990, and my name is Mark Junge. I'm talking with Michael C. Robinson, a historian with the Lorimer City Corps of Engineers, in the home of his father-in-law, Ellis Armstrong, here in Salt Lake City. What's the address here, Mike?

Mike Robinson: 3709 Brockbank Drive.

Mark Junge: Okay, and also in the room here is Sam, right? Sam is Mike's son. Sam, what's your full name?

Sam: Samuel Clark Robinson.

Mark Junge: Clark! Who were you named for? Clark Kent?

Mike Robinson: My wife's grandfather, whose name was Sam Clark.

Mark Junge: Sam, you're going to listen in to us, and all we're going to do this morning is talk about your dad's life, where and when he was born, where he was educated, and then talk a little bit about his career, and talk about a specific incident, the Black Fourteen incident at the University of Wyoming. Okay, well Mike, what I usually do is just ask people to start out with their birthdate and birthplace.

Mike Robinson: I was born October 28, 1943 in Kingman, Kansas. That's in Kingman County about forty miles to the west of Wichita. At the time my father was serving in the military during World War II and my mother was living with her parents in a little town called Cunningham, which is about fifteen miles to the west of Kingman.

Mark Junge: How did they ever come into Kansas?

Mike Robinson: Basically, my grandparents—er, my great-grandparents—one group stemmed from my great grandfather who left Ohio as a young man when he was thirteen—

Mark Junge: On your dad's side?

Mike Robinson: —no, this was on my mother's—all of 'em on my mother's side. He ran away from home when he was thirteen and jumped on a boxcar and went as far as Wichita, Kansas. He got off there—this is my grandfather, James Gordon Gibbons—and he eventually got a job working horses and did that for a number of years on a ranch near Wichita until he accumulated enough money to get his own place. This would have been in the late nineteenth century, and from there he ended up raising horses for the army, served in the State Legislature for a couple of terms, was fairly active in Republican politics, and he lived to be very old, and I have a lot of memories of him well into his nineties.

My other side of my family came from the East and settled in western Kansas where my grandfather was born. He was Veron William Stanley, on my mother's side. They farmed in western Kansas, which was too dry, and were kind of driven back a little further to the east where there was more moisture. [They] lived on a farm near Cunningham and that's where my mother was born and raised and I spent a good deal of my childhood with my grandparents on the farm.

Mark Junge: Did—you spent some time on the farm?

Mike Robinson: Yeah, the farm was my great passion when I was a young man. I would spend almost every weekend there. My parents would usually go out about every other weekend, and [...I would spend] every summer, all summer long there—actually from the time when I was about twelve—working every day on the farm, and also enjoying the rural lifestyle.

Mark Junge: You and I were talking about this last night. I just wanted to put a little bit on tape, Mike, but I thought that it was interesting, your comments about how certain people really relate to the soil. Do you think you were a person that—was environment really affecting [you]?

Mike Robinson: I was surrounded there by a very interesting environment. There was a river that ran through the property, there was virgin grassland prairie, there was shelter belts, there were cottonwoods and hedge trees planted by the pioneers, there was

upland grass, a very mixed variety of environments. Fairly typical of the plains regions, but rarely on one farm do you have all of that. Lots of wildlife, and it was a very stimulating and captivating sort of a place to be, and also the family itself included a lot of creative people. My aunt spent all her summers there too, and she was a wonderful poet. I think there's something about rural living and relating to the environment that does tend to broaden the intellect and to some degree develop intuitive faculties that I think are somewhat ineffable; that are not well understood. I've often been impressed that how many creative people came from rural small town backgrounds. And also there was a strong intimate sense of family there with my grandparents, interrelating with my uncles as kind of older brothers. All of these I think did a lot in shaping me during my formative years in early adolescence.

Mark Junge: Now what about your dad's side?

Mike Robinson: My dad—basically his family are Irish immigrants who lived in the Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania area. He came to Kansas as a young man in his early twenties because he was an excellent football player and wanted to go to college, and went to a little college called Southwestern College, where he met my mother and where I eventually graduated from. He played football there [and] served in the army. After he got out, he went to medical school, went through medical school on a GI bill with three or four kids, and continued on as a physician and retired just a couple years ago.

Mark Junge: And how many brothers and sisters?

Mike Robinson: I have two brothers and one sister. Both of my other brothers are physicians. As my father, they were anesthesiologists. I have a sister who is unmarried and has some mental disabilities and is in an institution in Kansas, although she is able to work out in the community and function pretty well. My two brothers, John and Tim—Tim lives in Minneapolis-St. Paul area, my other brother John lives in Kansas City—and my sister, Gail—I can't remember the little town she lives in; she just moved to a new place—but she lives within sixty miles of Wichita.

Mark Junge: When you look back, do you trace your personality and your intuitions, your intuitive capability through your mom's side of the family?

Mike Robinson: Well, more so through my mom's side, because they're the ones that I had the most interaction with. My mom also was a great nature lover, came from a very strong and loving home, and just the whole mix of the farm and the people—my grandparents were marvelous people—all did a lot I think to nurture me and also to develop my intellectual faculties, because the families were inveterate readers. We always had lots of books around on the farm, and all of my uncles and aunts, all six of them, did graduate from college despite coming from a fairly impoverished rural background, and several of them have advanced degrees.

Mark Junge: Your aunt, you gave her name—

Mike Robinson: Shirley Needham.

Mark Junge: Yeah, I'd like to read her poetry someday. She sounds like a Willa Cather type.

Mike Robinson: Her poetry basically talks about the pioneers, living on the plains, the wild plum blossoms, those aspects of the rural environment. Very much in the same vein of Mari Sandoz¹ and Willa Cather². Her poetry speaks about the people and the land in that very special way, but in many respects it also transcends it.

Mark Junge: Now going back to your childhood, what was it like growing up where you grew up?

Mike Robinson: I lived in Wichita, Kansas, where my father went there to be a physician. We were not wealthy at all during most of my formative years. He was going through a long—first of all an internship and a long residency. I was very shy, very withdrawn. I didn't have a lot of peers that I had close association with well into

¹ **Mari Susette Sandoz** (May 11, 1896 - March 10, 1966) was a novelist, biographer, lecturer, and teacher. She was one of Nebraska's foremost writers, and wrote extensively about pioneer life and the Plains Indians, and has been occasionally referred to as Mari S. Sandz, Marie Sandoz, and also Maris Sandz.—Wikipedia

² **Willa Siebert Cather** (December 7, 1873^[1] – April 24, 1947) was an American author who grew up in Nebraska. She is best known for her depictions of frontier life on the Great Plains in novels such as *O Pioneers!*, *My Ántonia*, and *The Song of the Lark*.—Wikipedia

high school, probably until my senior year. And most of my, shall we say, socialization process occurred through my family—on the farm and my immediate family. I wasn't withdrawn, I had friends at school and so forth, but I didn't have kids that I palled around with or went out and did things with. I was pretty much within my family environment until my senior year in high school.

Mark Junge: So now, where did you go to school?

Mike Robinson: I went to—graduated from Wichita Southeast High School in 1961 and from there—I was not a great student, I had about a C+ average when I was in high school, maybe a B— and I decided to go to my, the same college my parents had gone to, because I really didn't have any sort of mature, solid academic goal, and the fact that I could go there and play football as well. It had been a family tradition. My parents had both graduated from there, and I had an aunt and an uncle who'd graduated from there. So I went to this small, liberal arts, Methodist school in Winfield, Kansas called Southwestern College and played football, was in plays, did a lot of other things as part of my academic experience and didn't start out as a very good student at all my freshman year. But in my sophomore year, a specific professor showed some interest in me, who was a history professor, a young, dynamic history professor named Gary Hayes, and then I—it was the first time I ever had anybody express confidence, really, in my ability to be strong, a strong student. And so from then on, I made almost straight As all the way through college, and did make straight As in graduate school.

Mark Junge: Were you an example of the type of kid that was trying to live out his dad's desires?

Mike Robinson: I think a little bit of that, on the athletic side of the house. There was a lot of influence by my father to perform there. But I think—and my parents probably didn't push me academically hard enough, because I think I could have done better on an early basis, but there was something—that was a very catalyzing semester, my first semester of my sophomore year when this professor began to

take a personal interest in me and it's no doubt the reason I became an historian because of his influence.

By the second semester of my sophomore year, with him as a sort of a role model, I decided that that's what I wanted to do, and from then on pursued a history major and did very well academically in all my subjects. I became very competitive. I sort of adopted the attitude I had in athletics toward my academics, really, at first. Not so much in terms of—even though I'd always been a reader and everything—not so much in terms of learning, but just to make grades. And then later on developed a rather broader vision and appreciation of history, particularly as I got into working on my dissertation in graduate school and really found that I loved working in historical documents and writing.

Mark Junge: What sort of approach did he use with you?

Mike Robinson: I was in a class, and he took a certain group of students that became kind of an honors group, and for some reason he chose me to be one of those elite seven or eight who got extra attention and we met separately. And he basically just buoyed my confidence. He said that he thought that I had a good mind and that I needed to develop it and that I needed to have more confidence in that side of my endowments, I guess.

Mark Junge: You've—now I noticed this because you and I went to graduate school together for a while. And I noticed this about you right away, was that we'd be in Quentin Cooks class, and I would take about six or seven pages of notes; you'd take eight to ten pages of notes. You got As on the test, I got Bs on the test. (Laughs) But I noticed you had this great capacity for hard work. You're a worker.

Mike Robinson: Yeah, I think so. Initially it started out that way. I found that the only way that you could really get As was to try to, as you mentioned the note taking, to try to absorb virtually everything the professor said in his lecture. Because you never knew what was going to appear in the test, and I developed my own shorthand style. But I worked hard at it, and it really wasn't until later that I felt, in addition

to just being a digger or a worker, that I did have some qualities to myself where I could be a good writer—be a solid publishing historian. But it took a while gaining that kind of confidence.

Mark Junge: Where did this work ethic come from?

Mike Robinson: It came from my farm background. By the time I was twelve years old, I was working twelve hours a day out in hundred degree heat, throwing hay bales, driving tractors, doing all of that. And I really developed a capacity for hard work then, and I think that carried over to the academic experience. I'd learned very early how to focus on a task and complete it. And there's a lot of kids, these days especially, that don't have as many means of acquiring that kind of discipline. I had a lot of self-discipline in that sense, once I began applying those particular traits to my—first I applied them more athletically, because I was kind of a late bloomer athletically, as well as academically, and then that carried over into the academic side of my life.

Mark Junge: Let's go to this athletic thing, because that sort of dovetails into how you got to Wyoming. You were in football?

Mike Robinson: Yes, I was a big kid. I never really excelled athletically and I enjoyed playing games, but in high school I really suffered through my sophomore and junior years. I was big, slow, awkward. I was on the scrub team that got beat up by the first team in practice every day. Then between my junior and senior year—I almost forgot about this one coach named Ray Romero and a few others who encouraged me to lift weights—and they said that if I got stronger I'd become more agile and it would help me. So I did learn to lift weights in my junior and senior year, and eventually started as a—in my senior year in high school, I was not an outstanding player by any means, but I played on a good team in a tough league and was able to start in that, too.

Getting into sort of the development of the personality, when I first really began to develop any self confidence in myself, going from kind of an obscure, sensitive

somewhat aloof person without a lot of self confidence, one of the major changes I guess in my formative years was making that football team. And all the accolades and veneration of course, in those days, especially, that went with it. Even more so than today, I think.

Mark Junge: Really? All the things that went with it. The recognition from girls, and colleagues—

Mike Robinson: Well, just the student body. I can remember a moment, for example, the first pep rally, where they got the whole team together and then they introduced the starting lineup and I was the first one introduced, and I stepped out in front, you know, I was the first one, everybody screamed. I can remember that moment, what that felt like. That was a real adrenalin rush! (Both laugh)

Mark Junge: Well then from that point on did you feel like you had a football career ahead of you?

Mike Robinson: Well, I thought I could function particularly maybe at the small college level. So I had good confidence in my football ability and I could have—I actually had an offer of a scholarship to Kansas State which I turned down. I felt I could function pretty well there, but I still had a little bit of trouble struggling with my self confidence, but when I went to Southwestern as a freshman I got to play a lot and did well on a good team.

Mark Junge: Is that why you went there then, because of the confidence thing, or why didn't you go to K-State?

Mike Robinson: I think the main reason I went to Southwestern, I was a little intimidated by a large academic environment. I think that the fact there was a strong tradition in my family of attending this school, and I think a little of it was my maturity, that I wanted to be close to home. I mean, I was a home-boy, and to some degree I still am. And Winfield was only forty miles from Wichita. In my four years of college I think I spent five weekends on campus, going home every weekend. Even after football games on Saturday night, I'd still go home for Sunday.

Mark Junge: Come back and get that nourishment!

Mike Robinson: Well, you know, mom took good care of us.

Mark Junge: Okay, so you're in Southwestern now, and this professor picks up on you and you do well. What about your football career in college then?

Mike Robinson: Oh, in college I did reasonably well. In my sophomore and junior years I was hurt some, and we had a problem where the coaching wasn't very good then. But in my senior year I really blossomed I think, finally meeting sort of my expectations of what I could do as a football player. I had no visions of ever doing any football beyond this little school that I was in. So I was pretty well satisfied. We ended my senior year—we won the conference championship in the last game, and I took that uniform off and I said, well that's been a good part, but that's it! And I thought that my years as an athlete were over and I was looking forward just to going on to graduate school and again pursuing my academic career in history.

Mark Junge: I see. See, that's a little thing that I never understood about your career was why after you got done with the Rams you—well, let's go back to this—to that step now. You told an interesting story to me one time about how someone noticed you as a football player.

Mike Robinson: I think probably what I was referring to there I think—

Mark Junge: They were recruiting a black kid on campus or something?

Mike Robinson: Yeah. There was a big guy—there were two of us, we were very big and pretty good athletes on our team. His name was Larry Jordan, and he was six-five and weighed about 300 pounds and was very fast; a good athlete. He was probably a little overweight, but he was—he obviously had talent to play professional football, and so one of the scouts came. It's the first year they had one of these big

scouting combinations named BLESTO³ where they would use—teams would combine and have one group scout for several teams; Dallas was among those. So he really came to see Larry, but also the coach said, well you might want to look at this kid. And we ran some sprints and did some drills and all this and I think that this guy—his name was Vick Lencog who'd been a professional football player and worked for this BLESTO scouting combine—he noticed me and at the same time when he was looking at the film of Larry, he noticed me on there. And so eventually I was offered a free-agent contract to go and play football for the Los Angeles Rams.

Mark Junge: What did that amount to?

Mike Robinson: That's rather interesting. I think it was around \$12,000, and they offered me five-hundred dollars to sign which I thought was all the money in the world at the time, and I said no. I actually turned it down. I said—I really didn't have a great compelling desire to play professional football and then I said, "Well I usually make about a thousand dollars in a summer working construction and since I may have to go to school, I think I better do that." Well, they immediately offered me a thousand dollars to sign, so I did sign. It was kind of interesting: my father had had an opportunity to play football, professional football, but had turned it down. He really didn't encourage me too much. But once I did, I think he was very proud and very supportive that I was going to make this attempt.

Mark Junge: So you went up to LA?

Mike Robinson: Yes, went to LA. At that time the practices were held at a little place called Compton College out in Orange County.

Mark Junge: What happened out there?

³ The **National Invitational Camp** or **NFL Scouting Combine**, as it is more widely known, is a week-long showcase, occurring every February in Indianapolis, Indiana's Lucas Oil Stadium (and formerly at the RCA Dome until 2008), where college football players perform physical and mental tests in front of National Football League coaches, general managers and scouts. With increasing interest in the NFL Draft, the scouting combine has grown in scope and significance, allowing personnel directors to evaluate upcoming prospects in a standardized setting. Its origins have evolved from the National, BLESTO and Quadra Scouting organizations in 1977 to the media event it has become today.—Wikipedia

Mike Robinson: Well, I went out and I did very well. I was surprised at—and really, the main reason I signed probably was to—not having played football for a big university, I just wanted to go out and have an opportunity to compete against people. Not so much even at the professional level, but say people who played for big schools. Just to see if I would have had the skills to play. And I went out there and I was pretty raw talent. I'd not had the refined kind of coaching a lot of these other guys did. But I—again, a coach took an interest in me; Bill Austin⁴, who was assistant coach that built the Green Bay Packers line. [He] was now there at LA and went on to be a head coach, I think at Pittsburgh and maybe one other; Washington, maybe. Couple of places. But he took an interest in me. He kind of saw me as a project. So he kept me around a little longer than probably he would have normally. But he worked with me, and I developed a skill as an offensive lineman and did very well, and then I got hurt in practice. Hurt my shoulder. At that point I was offered the opportunity to stay there on injured reserve or perhaps, if I healed up, to maybe go play in one of the little—in the Continental League or something like that. But I decided in lieu of doing that that I'd go back to graduate school.

Mark Junge: How did you stack up against some of your peers?

Mike Robinson: I honestly did much better than I thought I would, and even against the professional players. I was very surprised that the hard part was the pass protection blocking which was very difficult to learn, but in terms of just firing out and blocking people, and even—he worked on you both ways. Just matching

⁴ **William Lee Austin** (born October 18, 1928 in San Pedro, California) is a former American football player and coach in the National Football League, having played for the New York Giants for seven seasons (1949–50, 1953–57) and served as head coach of the Pittsburgh Steelers from 1966 to 1968. Bill played for Oregon State University in college, earning All-Coast honors as a tackle in 1948. He also played in the 1949 East-West Shrine Game. Austin coached for the Green Bay Packers during their "dynasty" years of the mid 1960s before becoming the Pittsburgh Steelers head coach. During his years with the Steelers he failed in producing a winning season, going 11-28-3. He was replaced in 1969 by the legendary Hall of Fame coach Chuck Noll. Austin coached the 1970 Washington Redskins after the death of the legendary Vince Lombardi for a single season before retiring from football. He was inducted into the Oregon Sports Hall of Fame in 1982.—Wikipedia

up physically against people—like we had a guy there, he'd been second in NCAA wrestling, you know, and all of that. I was very surprised that I did as well as I did, frankly. And it was a very intense time, very difficult. They really worked you hard. You didn't have any free time; you were exhausted all the time.

Mark Junge: You were one of the fastest linemen on—

Mike Robinson: Well that was the reason I think they kept me around because I was fast. I was big and fast. I weighed about 275 and I could run about a 4.8/40 so they kept me around for that reason, I think.

Mark Junge: So you decided then that professional football wasn't where it was at?

Mike Robinson: Well, I decided then that I'd probably proved to myself what I wanted to prove. And even if they invited me back to play the next year, or to try out again, whatever—I decided that it was more appropriate for me to really pursue what I knew would be my career field anyway, which was graduate school. In fact, one of the reasons I went out there is because I said, well, I could go to USC or UCLA or one of the good schools in the area if I played there.

Mark Junge: Yeah, why didn't you?

Mike Robinson: Well, I don't really know. I can't answer that. I was hurt and I was a little discouraged, and the other thing is that once I got into graduate school I decided that I just didn't have the time that it would take to prepare myself physically and emotionally to go back and play football as well as pursue a graduate career. And so I worked a little bit at a night club and started my master's program at Wichita State. That was kind of interesting too, that decision, because my parents really wanted me to go to the University of Kansas, and I'd had—I was accepted there. I didn't have any scholarship or anything, but I didn't anywhere else either. I didn't know if I was going to be playing professional football that fall. And they really wanted me to go, but I sensed that my parents—it would have been too much of an economic sacrifice for them. And I think a little bit that I could live at home and I didn't mind that so much, you know, to go to Wichita State. So I decided I

would get a master's degree at Wichita State and from there pursue the doctorate somewhere else. And so I did very well that first—again you get into competitive environment in graduate school—but I did very well my first few months and then, I hate to say fortuitously, but one of the graduate students there who had a fellowship, committed suicide. In fact, he was a young man from Harvard. And so a position came open for a teaching assistant. Because I'd done well on my first, say, round of tests, nine weeks tests, I was asked to apply and had an interview, and because I had also been a teaching assistant during my senior year at Southwestern College, I was hired to do that. So then I was sort of in the groove and remained a teaching assistant that first year as well as the second year while I pursued my master's degree and then in preparation of moving on somewhere else to get my doctorate.

Mark Junge: So you had every intention of going out and getting your PhD?

Mike Robinson: Oh, yeah. I'd always had that as a career goal from the time I was a sophomore or junior.

Mark Junge: Wichita State is a long way from Wyoming. How can you make the transition there?

Mike Robinson: Well, it's an unusual kind of transition in a way. I'd decided that—I went ahead and made the applications for various schools, and I was accepted by most of them that I applied to, and offered money, assistantship, fellowship, whatever by several. As I recall, University of Kansas, TCU, Texas, one or two other places. But I'd always had a great desire to—I'd only visited the mountains one time but I thought it would be very good to maybe live out there in the environment, again showing that my state of mind was not all that mature. I decided that I would prefer maybe to go to school at a place in the West, in the mountains. Also I was interested at that time in the colonial history, and there was someone who knew Professor Stuckle and said he was a good professor in this field. They had a young PhD program there, and I may have thought, well a younger program, it may not

be quite as intimidating as going to another one. So I decided that I would accept Wyoming's offer of a teaching assistant and to go there to pursue my career.

Mark Junge: But you were headed to Wichita State, now.

Mike Robinson: No, this was when I *was* at Wichita State. I went to Wichita State and got my master's but while I was completing my master's I applied for graduate school at other places for my doctorate. Wichita State didn't offer a doctorate.

Mark Junge: I don't know why I was thinking you went right from LA to Wyoming.

Mike Robinson: No, I went to Wichita State for two years, completed my master's degree, then went to Wyoming to work on my doctorate. In 1967 is when I enrolled; the fall of '67.

Mark Junge: Driving your bonus car out to the—

Mike Robinson: Uh, yeah. I still had the car I got when I used my bonus money for—

Mark Junge: It was a '67 Plymouth or something, wasn't it?

Mike Robinson: Yeah, I think it was a '65 Plymouth. Then I got a new one after I'd been there for a year. A yellow one.

Mark Junge: I remember that year pretty well, 'cause that was a pretty traumatic year for me, too. And this was not exactly the program that you anticipated in which you say people entering a new program maybe had it a little bit easier, or it was less intimidating, right?

Mike Robinson: I guess—I'm not so sure I [thought it would be] easier, I just thought it might be less complicated. But when I went there, I think an experience that you and I had was that the school had a young program. They wanted to make sure it was good. They had really a very rigorous academic—in terms of the language—requirement, and in terms of the course work that you had to go through and be prepared in to take your comps for your doctoral exam.

Mark Junge: Five fields, wasn't it?

Mike Robinson: Yeah, it was four or five fields, I don't remember. Anyway, it was a very rigorous program and so we worked hard. And it was stressful, and we spent a lot of hours.

Mark Junge: Very stressful, for me. I had real psychological difficulties that first year. Tremendous difficulties. Okay, well then—let's see; where were we? We were going through your—

Mike Robinson: It was '67 and I'd just got to Wyoming.

Mark Junge: You just got to Wyoming. What was your impression of Wyoming?

Mike Robinson: Well, I loved the campus and the surroundings, the snowy range. I liked to get out and sort of interact with the elements. I liked the wind and the sagebrush and the fact that the nature was in a kind of raw force there that you had to contend with most of the year. I made good friends and I guess if there's anything about my Wyoming experiences, the most positive is the friends that I made there, and that those are the kinds of friendships that are rock-solid and lasting. Even though I may not see these people sometimes for five years or more at a time, as soon as I see them again, it's just like it was then, a close sense of bonding, almost like family among those who were in graduate school there at that time. We had, again, some very bright people there too among the students who interrelated very well, and we all became very close.

Mark Junge: Well, if you don't mind me saying so Mike, I think you are the type of person that was the cement, in a way, for a lot of people. I think that you provided the bonding for other people.

Mike Robinson: I enjoy being close to the people that I got to know there.

Mark Junge: Who were some of those people?

Mike Robinson: Yourself, of course, and Frank N. Schubert, who got his master's degree there—did some very good work on the history of Blacks in Wyoming. Doug Nelson, who was without question the brightest of any student they've ever had in history there at Wyoming, probably. He's probably, I think, the most brilliant person I've ever met, and he went on—his master's thesis was published by the University of Wisconsin Press on Heart Mountain Relocation Center. Gordon Olson, he didn't finish his PhD there, but went on to become the city historian for Grand Rapids, Michigan. [He] has published a lot, both as a contractor, as a public historian, and has done brilliant work as the city historian for the city of Grand Rapids. Those would be the principal friendships, I guess, that I established.

And there were some people on the faculty that I got close to socially such as John Gruenfelder and Quentin Cook, sort of drinkin' buddy type friends, and we got along real well in that regard. And then my major professor there, Al Larson—uh, not Al Larson—but Roger Daniels initially, although Al Larson helped me finish my degree 'cause Professor Daniels moved on—but it was Professor Daniels, when he arrived, that provided a role model of a historian that I really needed, who helped me to understand what I needed to prepare myself to function in the field, to learn how to progress in the field, how to meet its expectations, and all of that advice I didn't necessarily accept later on. But I really learned how to be an historian from Doctor Daniels who took great interest in me and supported me during some very trialsome periods of my life.

Mark Junge: Was this program a lot different from the Wichita State program?

Mike Robinson: Oh, yeah. Of course, Wichita State was only a master's level program. You would expect it to be different. I guess what made it a little bit difficult, it was hard sometimes to understand what the expectations were because they hadn't had but—I think I was maybe the second or third one to get a PhD there. They hadn't had many students get the—find their way through and we would—sometimes we even had candid discussions with the chairman how we would like a little more structure, a little more sort of expectation of what would be expected from us

further on down the line with regard to our exams and our doctoral dissertation. So there was a large element of frustration in that respect because again there was always hanging out there these exams that you had to take and you sort of often didn't really understand what would be expected of you when you had to take 'em.

Mark Junge: Did you feel that the work was harder at Wyoming than it was at Wichita?

Mike Robinson: Oh, not really. There was just a little more of it. It was a little more challenging. We had better students obviously there we had some really brilliant students there at the time that I was there. And I really liked that aspect of it. But it was—I felt it was a good course of study. I did well there as a student and I think I was generally felt was to be a pretty good student while I was there, although maybe not a brilliant one.

Mark Junge: What were you like, Mike, socially at that time? Socially, politically—what kind of person were you?

Mike Robinson: It was during the year of, I think, the flower power and the war in Vietnam. There was tremendous alienation among the youth of the country and of people in our age group, and particularly intellectual people, against the establishment, and by that I mean most authority figures. The disillusionment with the Federal Government in the war in Vietnam, I think, spilled over into disillusionment with all kinds of authority figures and a desire to challenge their assumptions. And there was some of that among us there, although perhaps not in the more virulent way it was expressed at places like Wisconsin or Berkeley. But we were certainly caught up in all of those emotions and feelings about our country and about a need to redirect its assumptions and values. And there were many of us who shared that point of view and particularly strong feelings about the war.

Mark Junge: How would you have classified yourself at that time, politically?

Mike Robinson: Oh, politically, I suppose I was—when I was an undergrad I kinda became a liberal democrat, a kind of JFK democrat, Great Society, the belief of the Federal

Government as a positive instrument for human good; along those lines, I think. Pretty standard stuff for students in those days.

Mark Junge: Do you think that was nurtured then at Wyoming? Got stronger?

Mike Robinson: I think it did because of the fact that at Wyoming you're in such a conservative state. You're in a state that was somewhat old fashioned and somewhat rigid in its value structure. The state was generally very supportive of the war, very conservative, very suspicious of—has a very, very strong anti-intellectual strain there within the state. So you felt all of that and resisted it and were somewhat resentful of it.

Mark Junge: Let's jump up a couple years to 1969 and the Black Fourteen incident. You were of that mind, then, when this incident took place. How did you become involved—were you involved, how deeply were you involved in that?

Mike Robinson: There were several of us there that were fairly deeply involved in all of this—

Mark Junge: Well, maybe we'd better start by explaining what it is, because somebody might not know.

Mike Robinson: Okay. The Black Fourteen incident occurred in 1969 when a group of black students—there's a lot of preliminaries to this—but basically, asked of Coach Lloyd Eaton that they be able to wear black arm bands during a game against Brigham Young University in a protest against what they felt was BYU's and the Mormon Church's racist policies when it came to black people. They went to the coach, and at that time there was a policy within the athletic department that the students could not—that athletes could not—engage in any sort of protests on campus. So what occurred was the coach, who at that time was without a doubt the most popular man in the state because of the success of his football team, kicked them off the team, precipitating this episode which acquired a great deal of national attention and raised great passion within the state. It really polarized the state and the University. Particularly the academic side of the University, and unleashed a lot of strong feelings, and in my way of thinking, probably destroyed

Wyoming's football program. Even though it had brief flourishes after that, under Fred Akers⁵ and I think once again fairly recently, the program was pretty well devastated by this episode. And football in Wyoming at that time was almost an icon. It was the one thing the state could really look to with pride, aside from its natural endowment. So when this whole episode occurred, it was striking really at the heart of the sort of Wyoming ethos, I guess, because football was absolutely an icon, and Lloyd Eaton was God to all the people of the state.

Mark Junge: Yeah, I think the image of the cowboy and the image of football somehow or other maybe in mid-century—

Mike Robinson: Yeah, they're intertwined. The fact that it is a fairly violent sport, the fact that it's a macho type sport, pitting man against man in a state where pitting man against animals and against nature is a very important part of the cultural and mindset of the people. When this occurred, any who were involved in supporting the Black Fourteen, I think, were regarded pretty much as traitors, and pariah.

Mark Junge: When did your involvement take place and how did you get involved?

Mike Robinson: Well, it kinda began this way: we monitored this very closely, a few of us, and most of us had pretty strong civil rights views. In fact, I'd done some civil rights work as an undergrad just very briefly. So we felt that something had to be done because the University—what was clear, what was being done was first of all unjust, that they didn't support the civil rights of the Black Fourteen, and their ultimate right to protest in the way that they wanted to. And also, from the standpoint of what had occurred to them, the administration was off balance. It seemed that they were trying to string this whole thing out, kind of let it blow over.

We had an episode I remember which was very telling, where one of the attorneys in the law school—the black athletes asked him to be present while they were being questioned by members of the administration of the school during that

⁵ **Fred Akers** (born c. 1938) is a former American football coach. He served as head football coach of The University of Texas Longhorns from 1977 to 1986, and the University of Wyoming in 1975-1976.—Wikipedia

famous meeting that occurred overnight in the old Main building. And he was not allowed to do that, and that I think inflamed things a bit more. And the University, of course, was asking the students and everyone to kind of sit pat and take a back seat to us, but we, some of the graduate students, most of us in the History Department, decided that something needed to be done to protest this thing formally and to focus some degree of press attention on it.

Although it was receiving a lot of press attention in the state and national press was beginning to mobilize, we felt that more needed to be done in this respect. Just a few of us, a handful of us, like five or six, made up some signs and went out and just marched between the library and the student union for a bit. And at that time that was concurrent with the arrival of some of the news organizations and tended to, I think, again, maybe inflame things a little bit more and to arouse support among more and more of the students on campus. Although the student body there was still very conservative, we did get some support.

There were some students that were critical. There was for example, a student body president—I can't remember his name—but a young man in the law school who said it first, when this occurred, that he was going to withhold all student fees from the University in support of athletic events, and then he caved in, under pressure I believe, and changed his whole position on that. And there were some who were critical of us as graduate students and we even kind of formed an ad-hoc group that was meeting on a daily basis in one of the classrooms where the history offices were.

Mark Junge: Who were these people?

Mike Robinson: Among the graduate students it was basically Doug Nelson, Bill Epstein, myself, Nicky Schubert, Phil Eidsvogue. Probably the one who was the most articulate and who was the best in terms of organizing us was Doug Nelson. If I had to point to one who was a leader it was probably him. We made up some posters and were doing that in the grad—I wasn't there when this occurred, but they were being made up in the graduate student offices and Al Larson took some

umbrage at that and asked us to leave. All in all we had pretty good support from a number of other history faculty, but they wouldn't do anything. We asked them if they would help us in the protest and all this, and they said, sure we agree with you, but I think they were concerned about their careers, and about pressures that they would receive. And so we went out and did this, and as I say, galvanized things. I think it helped to polarize things to some degree. But it helped to also focus the media attention on this event, and this was of course, billed in the days prior to the game with BYU, but we felt that we had to have some kind of a formal protest.

One aspect of it that kind of got out of hand, we had one of the graduate students who thought that we should use this as a spring board for a larger demonstration about student rights. And I disagreed with that, but he went ahead and made up a sign that said "Students are Niggers." In other words, saying that all of us are being treated like the Black Fourteen. And one of the members of the Black Fourteen saw this and didn't understand it and came out and was very angry. In fact, it was Williams, I think. Joe Williams; running back. And then we explained to him what we were doing, but then we got rid of that sign because that wasn't a very good tactic. (Laughs)

But there was great passion, great emotion. They were taking pictures of us. The FBI was taking pictures of us. We felt our home phones—we were very paranoid and very angry and, you know, very self righteous, all of those kinds of feelings. And Phil Eidsvogue was another graduate student there at that time—we only stayed there for that one year—so this all led up to the game in which, by this time, there was a pretty good group of students who were willing to go protest in support of the Black Fourteen at the University.

And then the University did something that I felt was very clever, and I felt was designed: they put out a rumor in the press that there were thousands of blacks from Denver, radical blacks from Denver, who were going to be coming to the game to participate in this protest. This in turn gave the University the

justification for bringing in a lot of, a massive array of police and other officials to, shall we say, 'protect' I guess, the citizens of Wyoming from these protesters. We all thought this was pretty funny, of course. (Both laugh)

There were also rumors being put out in the press that many of us who were demonstrating were being paid. In fact, when I talked to an ABC news guy, he asked me if I was being paid to protest because there was being circulated—and I think these were by design, and I don't know the sources of—but basically, the way it was done, I think, was to have a massive show of force there. And what they initially tried to do was segregate the demonstration to an area, I think, that was a practice field, well away from the—what was then the old stadium. Not the football stadium, but the other building next to it where they played basketball, where the locker rooms were. Well, we wouldn't put up with that so we went ahead and occupied part of the parking lot where the VIPs—

So they put us in this—we did take over part of the parking lot and I'd been asked to kind of—from Willie Black, wasn't that his name? The organizer of the blacks on campus?—to be one of the marshals, to serve as a buffer between the protesters and the citizens and the cops. And we did some things—we did some pretty hard negotiating there. They'd put up this line of police and there may have been some Highway Patrolmen there, I don't recall, and they had 'em all facing us. As if, you know, we were the enemy and they needed to protect the citizens of Wyoming! So we went in and protested that and we said we want some of these cops turned around facing the other way, which they eventually did.

A group of black—I'm going to try to remember my recollection on this. This was either the BYU game or the one right after it when I think they played Long Beach State. I honestly can't remember. But anyway, there was only one game at which a great protest occurred, and this was it. And you could tell there [were] a lot of citizens [of the state] who would walk by and they were angry. And they were upset. And there was dialog occurring between us and them that was

provocative. I never saw any blows struck or people engaged in rageful sort of interactions, but it was a volatile situation.

Mark Junge: What were they saying? What kind of things?

Mike Robinson: Oh, there were things occurring like, some of the students were saying, you know, your taxes are paying for me to be here in school, and they were calling us communists and various other names. And the main thing wasn't so much what the people were saying, the citizenry of the state, [but] the absolute abject *hate* in their faces. That here was a state that was somewhat self conscious about its image, and they saw us as—this was like—it was as if we'd made a personal attack on their families. And they were filled with hate, they were filled with rage, and some—I can remember being called some names. I was concerned a little about some of the demonstrators who were getting very mad. There was a young man, for example, who went over and sat on one of the cars in this parking lot who kept pounding his fists against his hand and I was afraid he might do something. And there were some kinda funny episodes. There was this lady, I think she was a state treasurer, or maybe a lieutenant governor, or something, and she just roared right in there through all this, nonchalantly, and we said hi, and had a nice greeting. She wasn't up tight at all! I gave her a lot of credit for that.

Mark Junge: Thyra Thompson⁶?

Mike Robinson: I think it might have been Thyra Thompson. She came right on in the parking lot and was friendly and open, and went on into the game. But you could tell at that time that the citizens of the state were extremely provoked by what had occurred. That it was a great blow to their personal pride.

Mark Junge: Were the history department people that you were involved with sort of in the vanguard?

⁶ Thyra Thomson served as Wyoming secretary of state from 1963 to 1987, winning re-election five times.—
Wikipedia

Mike Robinson: We by that time it was a little more diffuse. We were in the vanguard of student protest earlier in the week. We were the first students to get out—the graduate students in the history department—to actually get out and actually protest, formally.

Mark Junge: Alright, why? Why was that, though. Why wouldn't the Agricultural Department—like Al Larson mentioned the Agricultural Department—

Mike Robinson: The Agricultural Department as I understand was very conservative and I don't know if this is true, but I understand a lot of the faculty members there were Mormons. I'm not sure that's true. And there were other departments, even at some of our ad hoc graduate committee meetings. I can remember there was a couple of other students there who were sort of provocateurs who would come in and say things that were obviously not consistent with our feelings. And one thing that was very helpful to us—we got a lot of criticism when we did our protest—but at our next graduate committee meeting we had a couple of leaders of the black organizations on campus, and I can't remember which one—Black Student Alliance—they came in and said that [they] were proud of what we did, that it should have been done, that they regarded it as in their best interest. See, everybody was saying well, you've hurt the blacks by doing this. But they came in and gave us a vote of confidence.

From there they went on to try—we never tried to capture control of any student protest. We kind of let them be the guides in terms of what protests occurred after that. And so all of this was more or less organized and under the auspices of the Black Student Alliance, and they brought in this fellow from the NAACP and he was there giving some counseling and so on.

And then it was interesting: About this time, I think it was after the football game, again I think kind of a shrewd move on the part of the University, that one of the deans there, and I can't remember his name. I think it was Dean of Arts and Sciences, he then of course proposed that we needed to have a formal graduate organization, organization of graduate students on campus. And we saw right

through this. What he was trying to do, of course, was to get something that would be under university charter so he could control it and monitor it. He even came to one of our ad hoc groups and made an attempt to defend the administration's position, but did so very poorly, and made this proposal. For some reason he picked me out. I guess 'cause I was so big and had been a football player he thought I was one of the major provocateurs, which in a way I really wasn't. So he asked me to make sure that I was involved in this student group and so on, and I told him, if I'm involved the first time we meet we're going to adjourn and go to my house. Because we aren't going to have any organization function under the auspices of the University in terms of trying to produce change here. And that didn't make him too happy.

But anyway, there were these little asides, and later on there was a—by the way, there was to be a protest later on, and I don't even remember, about a basketball game. And I can't even remember what the upshot of that was. But I happened to be in a store one day, and he came in and asked me how I was doing in school, and I said, "Yeah, well I'm getting ready to take my doctoral exams next fall," and he says, "Well I don't know; you know we've got a game coming up this Saturday." And what he was doing, he was threatening me. That if I participated in any protests that it possibly could result in my being censured. He was—I think he was Dean of Arts and Sciences. I honestly don't want to say. But he was one of the key actors in terms of trying to defend what the University had done, but he was basically in an indefensible position.

Mark Junge: Was there any Mormon reaction from Mormon students?

Mike Robinson: I don't remember any. You know, I'm a Mormon now, but at that time I can remember no interaction—I don't even know who the Mormon students were. I wasn't even aware of that sort of thing. The protest that I was doing wasn't—I assumed the Mormon Church was racist. And so we weren't really protesting the Mormon Church, we were protesting what the University had done to these students. And I don't think there was among even in the most casual conversation

among the students—we regarded the Mormon Church as kind of conservative, backward, racist institution, but that isn't what really our conversation was focusing on. What we were focusing on was what the University had done to these students, which was basically deny their right to free speech. That's the reason we were so aroused. Again, it was part of the generational thing that was going on. It was in the midst of the Vietnam War; it was in the midst of this whole time of challenging authority figures and all the rest. And we did it with great passion and self righteousness and with a great sense of what we had done was right.

Mark Junge: Hmm! So, you know, that's a little bit shocking to me that this in your mind was not an issue of the black athletes against the Mormon Church racial problem!

Mike Robinson: Well we knew what their issue was, and we supported them in that issue. But we weren't making—our protest was not against the Mormon Church, our protest was in support of the blacks and what the University was [doing]. We saw that as a far worse issue than anything the Mormon Church was doing. We felt they should be able to protest in any way they deemed appropriate. So we supported them unequivocally in that respect.

Mark Junge: All the stuff you're describing now is prior to the ball game?

Mike Robinson: Oh, for the most part. Except for the part where the Dean threatened me. That occurred well after the ball game, in fact months after.

Mark Junge: After the ball game occurred, then were you back to the picket lines?

Mike Robinson: No, things dissipated then, because once they decided to get things into court, and once they—I think the University agreed that the kids could stay in school, and weren't expelled, and a number of other issues. My recollection is not perfect. Things began to settle down and we were basically very hurt that the University didn't respond in a better way, and there was a professor or two that resigned and other things. But it's like a lot of these things. They arouse a great deal of passion and then they dissipate. But I guess, again, thinking in terms of that time, the

thing that was so disillusioning to us was you had the faculty senate I believe, vote to censure Coach Eaton by an enormous vote, but when it came to making any public pronouncements or getting out and protesting we didn't get much help from the faculty at all. And we felt they were somewhat hypocritical in that respect.

Mark Junge: Do you think, more than ever, that event helped you realize the situation you were in, the kind of school you were at?

Mike Robinson: I think the episode really didn't surprise me. I think we all felt that sense of alienation at that time. Again, speaking in terms of the point of view I had at that time. Oh, we knew Wyoming was racist, that it was conservative, that it was, to some degree, not within the mainstream of American society, that it was intensely agrarian. We knew the attitudes. We weren't so much surprised about it, but I think that it really—particularly I guess what fixes in my mind are those looks on those people's faces who went to that game. Because honestly, I felt if they got—you know, these were hate—absolute—people consumed in their rage against us for what they regarded as an assault upon their state, on their university and upon them personally. And I guess that is what I'd never had an appreciation [for] was how these kinds of episodes could arouse such passion. Even though we were very passionate about this, I never—I don't recall any episodes of us saying we're going to go blow something up or we're going to go beat up some conservative student or anything. There was none of that in any of our comments. But you could see within them the fact that they were angry people, and were people that were prone to violence and prone when somebody did something wrong to them to react in a physical way.

Mark Junge: Did you continue on then with your protest or did things—

Mike Robinson: Things pretty well petered out after things reached this crescendo and after things got into the courts. But a lot of us still speak of this episode whenever we get together. In fact, my friend Mickey Schubert—his wife has a host of—there was a little ad hoc newspaper that was published by some students at this time and

she still has copies of that—she may even have some tapes of some of these meetings that we had that she taped. So we always talk about, well you have your little archive—[she] was Irene Shubert. Whether she does or not—I think she still does have most of this material. The thing that you remember from this in looking back from the perspective of your middle age is just how passionate people were in that period about these kinds of issues.

Mark Junge: Did you have friends among the blacks then?

Mike Robinson: Uh, yes. I think his name was Dwight James, who was a black student. He was a history student and we were very close to him. I don't think I had any of the black football players in class. I got to know some of them informally. But honestly, I didn't have close personal relationships. I remember we were—all of us who'd kind of been in the vanguard were invited to this special dinner that they put on, and to sit at the head table or something. I had a conflict and wasn't able to go, but you could see on the part of the black community the great appreciation toward those students who had been—who had done their part to try to help them.

Mark Junge: Now looking back, Mike, you talk about this whole thing with pride, but still with vehemence, obviously.

Mike Robinson: It's trying to go back, and trying to, in this conversation, to evoke, shall we say, the feeling of the time. My feelings and those of others. And it was something that was passionate, something that was handled very maladroitly by the University.

Mark Junge: Could you go back today and do that same thing?

Mike Robinson: I guess my only hope would be, even though I'm an official in the Mormon Church now, that I would still have enough commitment to the constitution of this country that I would defend the rights of those black students to protest. And I think I would still do that. I would defend that right. I may not participate directly in it because other people in the church or people who may—my own family or somebody—may not understand what I was doing. It was a little different then when you don't have other responsibilities, you know. I would still defend their

right to do what they did even now. And even though they may have misunderstood to some degree the Mormon Church's positions on things and so forth, that's all in retrospect. And again, our focus was not that. Our focus was what the University did.

Mark Junge: Interesting. What—boy, we could go through another tape just talking about your conversion and everything. But it just seems to me—and you mentioned this; you used this word—it seems to me to be *ironic*, your position now.

Mike Robinson: Okay, well, I guess you want me to go through all that kinda from the beginning?

Mark Junge: Yeah, without too much detail. I mean, I'd still like to have some detail. You're back in the program now, and it was a very tumultuous time for you psychologically as well as—

Mike Robinson: Yeah. I did. I went through some very difficult times emotionally that required professional care, I don't mind mentioning that. But I did eventually finish and finish my degree and went out—

Mark Junge: Well, you had a marriage that failed?

Mike Robinson: That's right. I had a marriage that failed. As a consequence, I think, of the pressures of graduate school. Then after finishing graduate school there, my first job was with—doing a bi-centennial project for the American Public Works Association which was a history of public works in the United States. Since we'll focus on the irony, the man who hired me was Ellis Armstrong, whose home we are sitting in right now, and I didn't know him prior to this. I happened to be in Washington DC doing some more work on my dissertation in hopes of getting it published, and I really didn't have a job. It was right at the dead bottom of the job market for historians. But through Roger Daniels I found out this position was open and I was able to be interviewed face to face which I felt was key, and I was hired by Ellis in 1973, and came to Washington in November of '73 and began

working on this project which I worked on for three years, which was a history of public works in the United States.

Ellis Armstrong is a life-long Mormon. We got to know him very well. Did a lot of work on the weekends and was often invited to his home where I met his daughter. We eventually got married and concurrently—their daughter, Diane, I should mention—and concurrently she introduced me to the Mormon Church and its precepts and concepts and I took the missionary discussions and had a very intense conversion experience where the spiritual side of myself was truly opened and began to develop. I've worked as a devout Mormon for the past almost sixteen years now. And for the past five years I've been serving as a bishop in the Mormon Church in Vicksburg, Mississippi. I'm Bishop of the Vicksburg Ward and have been for the past five years. I'm totally committed to the Mormon Church and its programs and the belief that it is *the* true church. That Jesus Christ stands at the head of it, and that its programs and activities express the wishes of our Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ.

Mark Junge: Very good. It's a great summary. But I want to step back now, in time, because I cannot understand where you were intellectually, emotionally. It was a chaotic time for you at graduation time, I assume, about that time in your life. It seems to me in our discussion last night, that the conversion experience was something that you said you couldn't explain. And yet it seems to me that, Mike, that you were ready—psychologically, emotionally, intellectually—you were ready for something.

Mike Robinson: Okay. I'll say this about it. I think that every person ... needs to have their spiritual needs met in whatever way that they deem appropriate. I've always felt I had a void in my life in that respect. I had developed my intellectual faculties and at least at that time had acquired journeyman skills [as an] historian. It's true I'd gone through some traumas and all, but when I got my job in Washington, completing graduate school, to me was a great bench mark. And I really didn't feel desperate or lonely or depressed and was no longer manifesting some of these

psychological symptoms that I had been during graduate school. So I don't really feel that Mormonism so much filled a great void that had to do with the particular timing in my life. I think that Mormonism came in and filled a void that everyone has in their life. What that was basically was to be in tune with my Heavenly Father to learn what His expectations are of me upon this earth, and then what will occur if I meet those expectations. But a conversion experience, having the Holy Ghost bear witness to you of the truthfulness of the church, is a different kind of understanding. It's a kind of understanding that is ineffable. It is a way of arriving at truth that has nothing to do with the way you learned to arrive at truth as an historian. So I can just say that my conversion experience, as for the three hundred thousand other people who join the church every year, was intense. It was, I would say, perfect in terms of being manifest in me of the truthfulness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ as I understood it, and from then on I knew that my life would change. There was something that was going to be fundamentally different about me. Of course that has been carried on and nurtured by a wife who's also a devout LDS person and by my experiences as a bishop in the Mormon Church. We have so much intense spiritual enrichment on almost a daily basis that it does carry on through into other areas of your life.

Mark Junge: You know, I look at your life and I compare it in a way to the life of Martin Luther. He had an intense conversion experience too, I guess if you want to call it conversion. Were you religious? Did you have a faith? Did you have any kind of religious training?

Mike Robinson: No, I had none. I went to a Methodist school, in fact Southwestern College is a Methodist college. At that time of my life I can say I was probably very much—probably an agnostic or something. I was intensely negative toward religions. In some of the religion courses that I experienced I expressed that. And I remained very negative to neutral about religions for all of my life up until the time that I joined the Mormon Church. I wasn't a searcher of light and truth in that regard. I wasn't casting about trying to find the right church or anything like that. I was pretty well satisfied with myself. After getting through these traumas I

experienced in graduate school I really felt pretty good, about as good about myself as I had in many years. So this conversion experience came at a very timely period, when I was young enough to continue to grow and to understand, but then since that time through the service that I've rendered, my faith has been strengthened and is now unshakable.

Mark Junge: What about your wife? What role—I mean, meeting her, was she sort of a rock for you at that time?

Mike Robinson: No, I didn't really—it's interesting that I did—it was a concurrent thing. I [had] my conversion and my relationship that I developed with Diane. But they were separate. It wasn't like, I have to become a Mormon to marry Diane. There was none of that in it. The personal experience that I had with the Holy Ghost and under the instruction of the missionaries was something that was, needless to say, concurrent and parallel, and symbiotic, maybe, but it was not—it had nothing to do with the fact that I'd found a woman that I wanted to marry and was intensely in love with her, and felt that I had to join the same church she did. There was not any of that in it. It was a very personal, intense experience that I had and, as I say, has been reinforced so many times since in so many different ways that I have continued on and will continue for the balance of my life to be a very devout member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints.

Mark Junge: How long was this conversion experience?

Mike Robinson: It occurred in about two days. It was literally kind of like on the road to Damascus. The Mormon Church, when it presents its gospel plan to people, it does not try to sort of brain wash them or argue them into it. They just simply—the plan is offered, and you're asked to go pray about it and to read the scriptures and decide for yourself whether or not you think what you're being taught is true. If you get a strong prompting from the Holy Ghost that you will know that it's true. And that's what happened to me is that I humbled myself, and I knelt down in prayer and I asked that it was true and I got the kind of—again, it's a feeling, an ineffable feeling that divinity was talking to me and telling me that it's true.

Mark Junge: Did you have a physical or just an emotional experience? Was it an emotional experience?

Mike Robinson: It's mainly, I guess—again, it's ineffable. It's a way of understanding things that so far transcends reason that it's very difficult to explain. But no, I didn't see any angels come down or any visions, or anything like that. (Laughs) It was simply an understanding in that very quiet moment that I knew I was communicating with the Holy Ghost and with my Heavenly Father and they were telling me what I should do and what was expected of me. And I'm a person who knew my emotions pretty well, 'cause I'd had a lot of time to look at those objectively. But I knew that this was something—this was like, you know, a whole new window being opened up on a new landscape in my soul. It was something entirely unique and different and not at all tied to any kind of other emotion that I'd ever experienced.

Mark Junge: Did you have a guide in this respect? How did you go through the experience without the information?

Mike Robinson: The information is conveyed in thoughts and feelings. It's just, it's not so much that you sit down and look at a scripture and say, hey that sounds neat. What you do is you begin reading the Book of Mormon, the Bible, other scriptures and simply do what the missionary asks. The missionary will tell you, I cannot convert you to the Mormon Church. All I can do is teach you what we believe. If you are to be truly converted it will be the Holy Ghost that will do that. That can only be done personally in a direct way through your own prayers and pondering. And that's basically what I did and that was the answer that I received, and it in no way has ever gotten in the way of my intellectual development ... or made me more narrow, or unfocused, or less creative. In fact, I believe it has actually enhanced my creative faculties, just having that now more balanced life in terms of my own perspective on mortality.

Mark Junge: Where was the actual start, though? Did somebody come to you and say—

Mike Robinson: Yeah, I got interested in Diane and the church and we fell in love and she, I think very appropriately, gave me a Book of Mormon, like we Mormons do when somebody shows a little interest, and wrote a little something in it and gave it to me and I agreed to have the missionary discussions. I never even received all of 'em. I just got two or three of 'em and I decided. It was like one and one is two. It was absolutely that firm. Even more than that. It was absolutely firm and sure that I had an experience over a period of several days when I knew my Father in Heaven was telling me, directly, what I should do. That He had expectations of me and that He wanted me to become Mormon. I had never had anything like that before. From that day on that's been one of the major pillars of my belief, but again it's been reinforced so many times, particularly in terms of my role as a bishop where I have a very special access to the Holy Ghost in helping others. After you go through and witness miracle after miracle in helping others and in your own life, you understand that indeed, divinity governs the affairs of this church and works through its officers and the priesthood of this church to carry out the wishes and intents of our Father in Heaven. That has continued on to this day.

Mark Junge: You've become stronger as a result—

Mike Robinson: Oh, absolutely! Never really had my faith in any way shaken by anything.

Mark Junge: What did your parents and your family think?

Mike Robinson: I think my parents, in some respects, didn't understand; were a little shocked. We'd not been an intensively religious family 'cause my mother had been raised as a Methodist and my father as Catholic. We didn't go to church. Wonderful people, though. I think my parents did a lot to prepare me for the gospel in terms of my ethical upbringing and the example that they set. But I think now my parents may be just a little bit negative 'cause they see that I spend so many hours being Bishop and they see that as taking away from my family. I try to reassure them that that's not the case.

Mark Junge: One thing that I thought was sort of interesting. I invited you out when I took over Bob Rider's class, one fall, to make a talk on water in the west; water for the west, which was something that you were really good at and had done some work on, and you talked to the class. We went out afterwards for a drink at the Buckhorn. I had a beer, I think you had a lemonade, or a ginger-ale, I'm not sure which. And I sat there, I'll never forget this; I asked you—and I'm paraphrasing everything here, of course—I remember having this conversation with you. I remember saying, "Mike, you know, here you were this intellectual historian, this man who was taught to be a critical thinker, to analyze human events in sort of an objective manner." I said, "Did you really"—thinking about the church dogma, church doctrine and all of its manifestations, all of its many facets, I said something like, "Did you really swallow all the dogma?" And you looked at me and smiled and said, "Hook, line and sinker!"

Mike Robinson: Well that's the truth!

Mark Junge: And I said at that time: It seems to me that what you've done here is made a great leap of faith. You've jumped across the chasm. And in a way you've said, look: my rational faculties tell me one thing, but I've got to disregard them.

Mike Robinson: Well, even in my rational faculties, as I've gotten—known the church—I don't really have an intellectual testimony of the church. I don't really test it. But I've never found anything in the church that would challenge my other ethical beliefs or my understanding of things. I mean, I'm not going to say that in the past in the church there've been some things that have been controversial and have occurred and so forth. But in terms of the way as I've gotten to know intimately how the church operates and is governed, and have met leading officials in the church, that it's basically governed by very selfless devoted people. Sometimes people make mistakes, but the institution of the church itself, and the way that it goes forth in the world is about as close to perfection as you can get.

Mark Junge: Well, I don't question the integrity of the church. That's not what I'm here to question. I'm here to say, look, your training as a historian—does the historical development of Mormonism square with your ideas as a historian?

Mike Robinson: Yes it does. I guess it does. In one sense it squares with my religious beliefs. I can look back in the church and say the church in 1850 was less perfect than it is today. But we in our church believe in change and progression. We don't believe that Joseph Smith said something and then that's it. We have prophecy that is ongoing that is shaping and refining the church and adjusting and the advice and counsel from a prophet of God that helps us to adjust to the society that we're living in on a daily basis. The church is changing all the time. Its fundamental doctrines and gospel do not change very much, but our practices do, and our ways of doing things change. In that respect I'd say we're more radical, probably, than any religious organization in this country, in terms of what I've witnessed over the last ten or fifteen years that I've been in the church. The church is flexible; it grows, it changes. It responds to conditions in society and we feel that it's becoming more and more perfect as we get closer and closer to that point in time when Jesus Christ will reappear, because we believe we're preparing the earth for the return of Jesus Christ. That's our job. That's why we have missionaries now going into places like Russia where we never would have dreamed ten years ago that that could have occurred.

Mark Junge: But do you ever go back, as a historian, and look at the development of the church? Obviously, as a historian people are going to ask you questions about the development of Mormonism. And can you go back and feel pretty confident—

Mike Robinson: Well, I feel pretty well at ease. I think that, sure, there are church leaders that in the past and even now—I can't really think of anything—but today who maybe didn't interpret the will of the Heavenly Father in a perfect way. You have to go back and look at the church in its early days and the type of environment—hostile, both in terms of physical environment, but also the general climate of society and its attitude toward Mormonism—and how the church reacted to those

kinds of situations. I just see within the church a continuing, shall we say, perfecting process going on. And we are getting stronger, and we are getting more perfect. I just fundamentally know that we have divine resources at our disposal within this organization, out at the end of the hose where I am, as well as here at its headquarters here in Salt Lake City that help us to manifest Heavenly Father's will. And I find no hypocrisy in the church, and I don't find, shall we say, anything that would disillusion me or make me feel any less confidence that I'm in the place where my Heavenly Father wants me to be.

Mark Junge: Have you become, do you think, since those days of the Greek fishing hat and the mutton chops and so forth, have you become more conservative?

Mike Robinson: I think most people do as they become older. As you have your own children you tend to become a little more conservative. But I haven't changed any in terms of my views on civil rights and things like that. I think I'm every bit as—my feelings are every bit as strong about people having an opportunity to express themselves in any way that they deem appropriate. There are some extreme limits. But I don't think my general views on government and society have changed too much. They may be a little bit more moderate, but I still think that I'm as critical and as observant and as supportive of things as I need to be.

Mark Junge: Now that you are a Mormon, converted and steadfast in your faith, and you are a bishop, do you look back any differently now on this Black Fourteen incident?

Mike Robinson: No, not whatsoever.

Mark Junge: Do you look back and say to yourself, you know, I really didn't understand what the church's position was?

Mike Robinson: Well, I didn't understand what the church's position was at the time. And I'll be—the church didn't change its position on blacks until I'd been in it for a while. And I'll admit I was a little uncomfortable with that, and I don't totally understand its position, but of course, all of that has been swept away, you know, in 1979.

Mark Junge: What was the occurrence?

Mike Robinson: Well, that was Spencer W. Kimball⁷—who was the prophet at the time, who by the way, was a great humanitarian and did a lot for Indians and other people—under inspiration and the guidance from our Heavenly Father, said that the priesthood and the advantages of the temple should be extended to *all* worthy members of the church, [regardless] of their race or whatever. And I don't understand why the restriction occurred in the past, and I'm even willing to admit—who knows—that may have been an error that occurred in our history for a period of time. But we do know now that it makes no difference. There in the heart of Mississippi we have black converts to the church, attending my church. They are fellowshipped and loved and given opportunities for leadership in our church as much as anyone else. In fact we are one of the very few churches in the community that I live in that's integrated. Most of the churches in Vicksburg—there's over a hundred—most of those are either white or black. And there's only a handful that are truly integrated churches. And ours happens to be one of those.

Mark Junge: So his revelation really squares with his feelings toward internationalism. You said, when you were in the car the other day, that he was a person who really felt that the church ought to expand into the world.

Mike Robinson: That's right. He had a very cosmopolitan outlook. And he—but pretty much, Spencer W. Kimball, what makes him so great, he just loved people so much. And he really was—he was a very simple man, and he really loved people and he couldn't stand human suffering and pain. Coming from Arizona he did a lot for the Indians in terms of getting church programs mobilized on behalf of the Indian people and that sort of thing. In terms of any sort of misgiving I ever had, that was probably the only one, and now of course that was swept away more than a decade ago and we find black people in leadership positions. We just had a black general authority called to the church, I believe he was from Brazil, and so there's

⁷ **Spencer Woolley Kimball** (March 28, 1895 – November 5, 1985) was the twelfth president of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church) from 1973 until his death in 1985.—Wikipedia

no—and among the membership, even in the heart of the South, my membership there is as warm and supportive of those new converts as they are of any new converts that we have.

Mark Junge: Well, I think that the Mormon religion—you wear it well, you know what I mean? I think there are certain things in the Mormon religion that are very compatible with you as an individual.

Mike Robinson: That's an interesting statement.

Mark Junge: I think so. Because I think that, for one thing, Mormons are hard workers. They created a garden out of the desert, essentially. And they're doing that in other parts of the world. They've got their act together in many ways, and they have to do hard work. But you, yourself, are a hard worker. I mean, the work ethic—it seems to me, looking at you, Mike—and I've thought about this more than once—seems to me that the work ethic of the Mormon Church fits very well with your own sort of personality. I mean, there are certain things in this religion that are—that you just fit into like a hand in a glove.

Mike Robinson: Well, you may be right about that. I hope that's true in a way. I think that it helped me to sort of—a lot of members do struggle with the fact that you do have to work very hard in the church. You're expected to have a calling and do things, and I appreciate that. I consider that a compliment.

Mark Junge: I'm just trying to analyze some of these things. But I think you're one of the hardest working people. I don't understand how you do it. I don't understand how you conduct your Bishopric at the same time you're working a full time job.

Mike Robinson: Well, one of the interesting things about that is that we feel that if we are in a heavy calling in the church, whatever that may be, for a period of time, that the Lord blesses us in many ways. He blesses us physically, he blesses our families, and he also blesses us to perform in our occupations at levels maybe that we couldn't if we didn't have the calling.

Mark Junge: This is like the parable of the fishes and the bread?

Mike Robinson: Yeah, maybe to some degree. That's an interesting metaphor. I've done things in my work that—I can say this: I've been out 'til two o'clock in the morning and I've had to come in to work and do three day's work the next day in order to get caught up on things, and it just happens. I can cite many instances where I can just say that I—particularly in a craft that I have, where you have to be very careful about writing and thinking and being accurate and making sure that the conclusions you draw are consistent with the evidence that you have—is that there have been times that—where I know I've had to invest myself heavily in the church and I may have been exhausted emotionally and physically, but I was still able to perform at a high level in my profession because of the promises that come with me when I accept—that come with this office. Promises that come to me personally.

Mark Junge: Do you think that you're creative juices in any way have been stifled?

Mike Robinson: They've been enhanced, definitely. I've been opened up. I think the intuitive side of myself has been increased as well as my self confidence and self esteem as a consequence. I'm more bold and willing to tackle difficult challenges in my work and to do new and innovative things, I think, because of the confidence, the more balanced approach to life that I have now. I would say in the past I would have been much more reluctant to do some of the kinds of projects that I've undertaken were I not for the stability that my—the spiritual side of my live gives me.

Mark Junge: And also, you're a loving person. And it seems to me that the church sort of envelops or wraps you up in love and you fit very well in that.

Mike Robinson: I enjoy the fact that as a bishop that I'm able to extend a lot of love to people and to see that way that love can nurture and help, particularly when it's divinely inspired through the office that I hold.

Mark Junge: Where do you think you're headed from here?

Mike Robinson: Well it's interesting. I don't have any specific career goals right now. I do like my job very much, where I'm working. And I like the community that I'm in. I have a job where I'm able to some degree set my own agenda and have a lot of resources. I'm working in a lot of resource development, which is my first love. I enjoy working in the church, and as far as what I will do in the future there, we believe in our church that you are not entitled to inspiration in terms of what callings you receive or what Heavenly Father wants you to do, and I'll wait until I'm released as bishop and advised to what my next assignment is. (Laughs)

Mark Junge: Very good! We haven't very many minutes left in this, but I want to find out, what's the church's image in Vicksburg, Mississippi?

Mike Robinson: Oh, it's increased dramatically in the last few years. I think, when I went there seven years ago, the church was regarded as some kind of weird cult group. Now I think, due to a lot of things, I think because of the more positive image of the church in the press generally, the fact that we've built this new great church in the community, the fact that we have some of us in the community in sort of leadership positions where we interact with a lot of people, have overcome a lot of the negative propaganda that has been elicited. Films such as the Godmakers, and other sorts of anti-Mormon literature which demeans, and I guess what bothers me the most, is not accurately describe what we believe and what our practices are.

I don't care if people think Mormons are crazy and all of the rest. It does bother me somewhat that we are misrepresented *all* the time by other parties. But we now find on TV and newspapers and magazines and just within the little community that I am [in] the members of my church are highly respected and therefore the church is much more respected. We have for example, we support a Cub Scout program with over fifty boys in it, and only about four of those are Mormons. These Cub Scouts come and participate in activities in our church and we don't do that to try to get 'em into the Mormon Church. We're just there providing a service to the community. And that service is accepted.

Mark Junge: Well you can't deny though that you'd love to see those kids—

Mike Robinson: Oh, yeah, we'd love everybody to join the church, but I'm saying there's no ulterior motive. We do not use this as an active proselytizing tool. We don't bring them to church and have the missionaries begin interacting with 'em. We just try to be an asset to the community, just like any other group like Lions, Kiwanis, Rotary, Presbyterian Church or whatever.

Mark Junge: Is there any misconceptions about the role of blacks down there in Mississippi?

Mike Robinson: No, I don't think so. That really never has come up. It is difficult sometimes to hold our black members because of countervailing factors, because of familial pressures. The Mormon Church, I think, [like] most other churches in the community, is seen as a white church, more so than just the Mormon Church. So sometimes it's difficult for some of our newer converts to resist the pressures from family and so forth and they kind of fall into inactivity. But we find in our area and in our mission that well over fifty percent of the convert to the church are black. And there was a period of time in my ward when we had like twenty-four baptisms in one year and I think eighteen of those were black people. So we find the missionary effort going forth among the black people, in fact from my ward, the very first black woman missionary ever to go into the mission field from the state of Mississippi went from my ward—a girl we'd converted to the church about a year before.

Mark Junge: There's about a hundred percent humidity with hundred degree temperatures down there in the summer time, and Mike, you're a person that doesn't care for the heat. What do you think about living down there permanently? Would you like to go back there?

Mike Robinson: Well, I have to admit if there's anything that would drive me out of Mississippi it probably would be the climate in the summer. But I have lived in Chicago in the winter and I'll take Mississippi in the summer over Chicago in the winter any time. But I have to admit, I wouldn't mind coming back to the West to be closer

to where the church is larger and there's more resources, more programs for my children, and things such as that. But right now, because of the current ecclesiastical position that I have, as well as the great job satisfaction that I have, I'm really not sort of gearing up to make any kind of move. Nor am I really casting about for alternatives in an active way.

Mark Junge: But have you ever felt that you were sort of a child of the Midwest, a child of the West?

Mike Robinson: Mmm, I really feel because of my intense—and we could talk about this—but when I went to Wyoming, I fell in love with the West. I like the West very much. I would love to live here. That's true. If I had a place to pick it would probably be someplace like Fort Collins or someplace like that to live.

Mark Junge: What is it about the West that you love so much?

Mike Robinson: I like the openness of its people, but the main thing is the sort of intimate relationship you can have with the topography, with the climate, with the wildlife. That's very important to me. I like the varied landscape and I like the opportunity to get out and be in a natural setting, shall we say, which is—where opportunities for that are not as great in the part of the country where I live now.

Mark Junge: You've got four kids—

Mike Robinson: Megan and Sam, and Gwen and Sean. Well, they range from—well, there's some having birthdays shortly—so I have a fifteen, thirteen, nine and four.

Mark Junge: Great family! And your wife is Diane. Well I appreciate this, Mike. This has been great.

Mike Robinson: Well, we've had fun!

Mark Junge: I've enjoyed it. Enjoyed it a lot.

End of interview

Wrapup by Sue Castaneda:

Doctor Michael C. Robinson was a pioneering public works historian who tirelessly promoted historical research as a component of policy formation. He was Associate Editor of the American Public Works Association's Bi-Centennial History of Public Works in the United States and wrote Water for the West, the Bureau of Reclamation, 1902 to 1977. Robinson served as research coordinator for the Public Works Historical Society; as the first historian of the Corps of Engineers Mississippi Commission, Lower Mississippi Valley Division; and until his death in 1998, was the division's Chief of Public Affairs.

We hope you've enjoyed this oral history podcast. It was produced by the Wyoming State Archives for the Department of State Parks and Cultural Resources. You can hear [and read] more of Wyoming Stories at wyoarchives.org.