Preserving Memory: Newark and Rutgers in the 1960’s and 1970’s

An Interview with

Richard Roper

Conducted by

Gilbert Cohen

October 30, 1991
GILBERT COHEN: Alright. This is Wednesday, October 30, 1991. This is Gil Cohen, and I’m interviewing Richard Roper in his home in Maplewood, New Jersey. Mr. Roper is currently assistant dean at the Woodrow Wilson School in Princeton, New Jersey—at Princeton University.

RICHARD ROPER: That’s right.

COHEN: Am I getting that right?

ROPER: Yes.

COHEN: Okay. And we have some questions and things to talk about. [Break in recording] Okay. We are back, and I also wanted to mention that Mr. Roper is a graduate of the Newark College of Arts and Sciences, Class of 1968. And I was asking if you could give a biographical sketch of your academic career before Rutgers, during Rutgers, after Rutgers, and help to set the stage with these things.

ROPER: I’m graduate of Ripley High School in Brunswick, Georgia. And upon completing high school in 1963, I matriculated for two years at a predominantly black college in West Virginia, West Virginia State College. And at the end of my sophomore year there, I dropped out for reasons of finances so that my brother immediately behind me could get the support of the family as he prepared for college. And in order to continue my interest in education and related affairs, I came north seeking employment. Arrived in Newark where I had relatives with the intention of moving on to Hackensack, New Jersey, where I had an aunt with whom I had arranged to live and [in] whose home I intended to spend a few months, maybe a year, and work before returning to college. Probably not West Virginia State, but I wasn’t sure at the time.

It so happened that as I was coming into Newark to visit another aunt and uncle and some cousins, I noticed that the Newark campus of Rutgers University was being constructed—and this is factual. I had come to New Jersey to visit the aunt I was about to visit in Newark over my Christmas holiday during my sophomore year at West Virginia State. And came to Newark with friends from college who were driving. And we came along—I guess it was Route 1, I suspect it was Route 1. And as we came through New Brunswick, the Rutgers campus on the banks of the Raritan was pointed out to me, and I had some sense of what Rutgers University was, but I didn’t really know. As I came into Newark, I realized that there was a Newark campus of Rutgers first, and that that campus was being developed second. So I thought that perhaps that might be something I should explore.
And having gotten settled in Newark where it turned out I would spend some time and not in Hackensack, as it turned out, I got a job at Sears & Roebuck immediately upon applying for one. And then decided that I would matriculate at the Rutgers Community College Division. That was in 1965. I arrived in Newark on September 20, 1965, my birthday, my 20th birthday. And I got a job at Sears as I was saying. And decided to enroll at Rutgers University College. And I knew that would not be competitive because it was simply a matter of paying for a set of courses. But I thought it would be a good way of finding out if the academic program at Rutgers-Newark, assuming that the University College program was comparable in some way if not a complete match with the academic program of the Newark College of Arts and Sciences. Nonetheless, I took a course in psychology and another in sociology at night. That was the fall, I suspect of 1965. And did, well, I got A’s in the two courses and decided based on that that perhaps I should apply to Rutgers-Newark. I did. Was admitted on the basis of my transcript from West Virginia State College and I guess my two courses at University College. And began the last two years of my college education, majoring in economics at Rutgers-Newark. I finished in ’68. I started matriculating at NCAS in ’66, September of ’66, and I graduated in ’68. I’ll talk a bit more about what happened while I was there later on.

But upon completing the program and getting the degree in economics, BA in economics, I decided that I would apply my skills in the world of work. I should also point out that I had applied to graduate school in the second half of the fall semester of 1968, not fully committed to graduate work, but I felt it was something that I should do—I should explore—nonetheless. And I applied to some of the top schools in the country. My academic record was not stellar, but it was good—it was better than average I should say. And it was a time when African-American college graduates were being sought by graduate schools. I applied in economics at Harvard, which was about ludicrous, but was admitted as a special student and without any financial support. I applied to the Woodrow Wilson School on the basis of a recommendation from Ralph Dungan who was then the chancellor of higher education and who was an alum of the Woodrow Wilson School program. My application was received after the deadline. It was received in February; applications were closed in early January. And I was told there was no way I could be admitted that year, but that they were interested in my application and I should apply subsequently.

I then decided to go to work. And through the good offices of Ralph Dungan, I obtained a job on staff with the chancellor of higher education, working on a project that I had helped shape as a student at Rutgers, and that was the Educational Opportunity Fund program that Governor Hughes put in place after the 1967 riots in Newark and elsewhere in the state, as a means of providing financial support for educationally and economically disadvantaged minorities who had the motivation for college but might not have had the kind of records that would make them strong college material. Anyhow, Dungan was in charge of structuring a series of support programs at colleges across the state. And a guy by the name of Richard Rettig had been recruited by Dungan. This guy Rettig was a Ph.D. I think out of the University of Chicago, but I’m not sure. A young guy. And this apparently was his first professional employment after having completed his Ph.D. in political science. Rettig was in charge of the program, and I was one of three staff people assisting him in designing the EOF program. I contributed, I think, on the margins. I had helped Dungan think through what kind of program at the college level would be most helpful to minority students. And it was my role on the staff of the EOF program to
assist the college administrators who were attempting to put a program together, discover what kind of things might be most appropriate for it in an academic environment. So I did a lot of traveling around the state to the different colleges over the first six months I worked there. After six months, Dungan asked if I’d be interested in working as a special assistant to the then vice chancellor of higher education, a fellow by the name of Dick Bjorn [sp]. Was Dick’s last name? I want to say Bjorn. He was vice chancellor, Richard Bjorn. If it’s not Bjorn, it’s pretty close to that.

COHEN: Okay.

ROPER: Anyhow, I joined his staff and worked on a range of programs that the department had responsibility for since the vice chancellor’s role was that of managing the department, the operations of—

COHEN: Of the EOF?

ROPER: No, no, no. The entire Department of Higher Education. In fact he had no responsibility for EOF in a direct sense since that was a special project of the chancellor. The vice chancellor’s role was to provide internal management for the Department of Higher Education while Dungan’s role was to be the outside person for the department in terms of relationships with the colleges. I spent the next six months working for Dick Bjorn. And at the end of that six months, I was ready to go to graduate school as I had been accepted by that time at the Woodrow Wilson School for matriculation in the MPA, Master in Public Affairs program. I got married that summer, 1969, and in September I began the two-year program at the Wilson School. I should point this out: I had an undergraduate degree in economics, but my economics at Rutgers had not been heavily quantitative, nor had it had a mathematical base. And as a consequence of that, I wasn’t prepared for the economics at the Woodrow Wilson School. Recognizing that I had a weakness in that area, I sought through the school—and the resources of that place, then as now, are enormous—they provided me with a tutor prior to coming to the program who gave me instruction in calculus. And with that I was prepared for the economics of the weaker of the two tracks of economics that was then offered, as is now the case, Track B economics.

And I got through it with a B- or C I think. The bottom line is that after two years, I got my MPA degree. I spent a summer working in London on transportation policy, my concentration in the school of Domestic Policy and Urban Affairs. And it was not inconsistent for me to work the summer between my first and second years in the program on transportation policies in London because it was a domestic issue, and I was just attempting to see how a bureaucracy, a governmental bureaucracy, in a large western nation functioned compared with similar institutions in this country. And so it was also fun.

COHEN: Yes, I’ll bet.

ROPER: All students in the Wilson School in the MPA program were required to do an internship between the first and second years, your first and second years. It’s not complete unless you do the summer internship someplace. Upon graduating the program in ’71, I was
offered a job by the school, by the dean, to head what was called the Urban Affairs program at Woodrow Wilson School. The guy who was then heading it was about to leave after having served in that capacity for two years, I think, maybe three years, to begin his real public affairs career. His name was—and is—Larry Goldman, the guy who now heads up the Cultural Arts Center, you know, that’s being constructed in Newark, both the construction …

COHEN: He’s the headman of the whole thing.

ROPER: That’s right. That’s right. That’s right. Larry was then in charge of…. Yes. An interesting little network there.

COHEN: Yes, yes.

ROPER: Then I decided I didn’t want to do that. I accepted a job working for the new, first black mayor of the City of Newark. I decided to come to Newark, to return to Newark, and to assist Ken Gibson. And I joined the staff of what was called the Office of Newark Studies, an agency that had been created a year or so earlier by a group of individuals who felt that Ken Gibson needed a staff capacity outside the city government bureaucracy that would be completely loyal to him and would bring to the city the kind of intellectual talent that the city and Ken Gibson required at the time. The people that put this office together included Paul Ivalsockel [sp] who had been the—who was then the commissioner of, who had been the commissioner of, the first commissioner, of the Department of Community Affairs. And upon a change of leadership, he then joined the faculty at Princeton at the Woodrow Wilson School. But in addition, I got the name of Bob Curvin who was instrumental in helping to design the office, and so was a fellow by the name of Gus Heningburg. Anyhow, the first director of that office, Jack Kroskoff [sp], was an alum of the Woodrow Wilson School, and Curvin recommended me to Jack as someone who might be a useful addition to the staff. To make a long story short, I joined that office and worked for a year on education policy. And after a year of Newark, I went to Trenton to work to help set up the Division of Youth and Family Services and then what was called the Department of Institutions and Agencies. Did that for a year and then returned to Newark to head something called the Education Reform Project with the Greater Newark Urban Coalition Project, funded by the Ford and Carnegie Foundations, that was designed to involve minorities and urban residents and the school finance reform debate then raging in New Jersey. This is around 1973, ’74.

COHEN: And the….

ROPER: …yea… I headed that for a year, and then was recruited back to Ken Gibson’s staff where I returned as his legislative aide and lobbyist for the city, working on the legislature and the governor’s office and the cabinet to insure that they were responsive to problems, proposals coming out of the City of Newark. After two years of that, I was asked to head the Office of Newark Studies as Jack Kroskoff had gone on to Wisconsin to become the deputy commissioner of the Department of Health and Human Services there. I succeeded Jack as the director in 1976. Headed the office for two years, until 1978, when I left to join the Carter Administration as a special assistant to the secretary of commerce, Juanita Kreps. And spent two years there before coming back to New Jersey to join Dick Nathan who had been recruited to Princeton to head the
Princeton Urban Regional Research Center and to become a full professor. And I was recruited by him to join him at the center and direct the program for New Jersey Affairs. That was in 1980. I have been the director of the program for New Jersey Affairs 1980. It is now 1991. And in 1988 I added to my responsibilities that of Graduate Career Services when I was appointed assistant dean of the school with responsibility for Graduate Career Services and Governmental Relations. That’s it up to date.

COHEN: Quite a resume. How—just going back to your days at Rutgers-Newark.

ROPER: Mm-hmm.

COHEN: How did your education at Rutgers-Newark prepare you for such a career? Let’s start with the quality of the teaching. How well, I should say.

ROPER: Yes. I think in the main I got a solid education at Rutgers-Newark. One must keep in view the fact that my first two years of undergraduate training were at a traditionally black institution, West Virginia State. And I think the experience there, while less that satisfying intellectually, was nonetheless an introduction to higher education that made it easier for me, I think, to transition into Rutgers-Newark. I came out of the South. Remember I came from Georgia, from the public school system where we were given, I think, a pretty good basic education but not many frills. So what was needed for me to be comfortable in a Rutgers-Newark environment where most of the students were—the majority of students, not minority students—was a sense of self-confidence that it was possible to compete effectively in that environment. And my view of Rutgers-Newark as I approached it as an undergraduate student was that this was a major northeastern institution of higher education, and that my academic preparation was not adequate to insure that I would succeed, but that if I worked hard, that I could. And it was a challenge for me therefore in the classroom. And I think I accepted the kind of instruction I got on the basis that I expected it to be a good experience, a good intellectual experience. And in the main it was. Like I said, my economics training in retrospect was not as solid as it could and should have been. And the core of my major was—the core work in my major—was done at Rutgers-Newark. So that, I felt, in retrospect, was a disappointment. But yet the English, the other liberal arts and humanities courses that I took while there I thought were in the main pretty good, pretty good.

COHEN: What did you think about the standards of the faculty there, their expectations of the students? Easy markers, hard markers, push you hard, or what? Or is it impossible to judge?

ROPER: Well, yes, it is. I mean it’s not easy to generalize. I think in the main the standards were high—not very high, but they were high. There were some faculty who didn’t take their work very seriously. But that, in my view, was a very small minority of the faculty. I remember one English professor in particular who joked all the time. I couldn’t equate that with being a university professor. But he was the exception and not the rule. I had a tough time in Spanish, but I was very much impressed with my Spanish professor.

COHEN: Who was that?
ROPER: Oh, God, what was his name? He was Spanish; he was a Cuban. And I cannot remember his name. Rather interesting.

COHEN: I like to get the good guys down on tape. [Laughter]

ROPER: Yes. It will come to me.

COHEN: Okay.

ROPER: Dr. Socadas, Dr. Socadas?

COHEN: Oh, that's a familiar name. Don’t quote me on that.

ROPER: I think it was.

COHEN: S-O-C-A-.... Well, okay. Don’t quote me. [Laughs] When you came there, what was your initial perception of the admissions policy at the school, particularly in the day school?

ROPER: My sense was that it was going to be difficult for me to get admitted because the standards of Rutgers-Newark were high, is that the average student admitted to the Newark campus—to Rutgers in general and to the Newark campus to which I was applying—the standards were competitive. Let’s put it that way. That I would probably get admitted to Rutgers-Newark, but I wasn’t sure that I’d get admitted to Rutgers College in New Brunswick. But that never crossed my mind, applying there, because I was working at the time, and I saw the Newark campus as convenient and as a place I could afford and would not require me to make too major an adjustment to the environment. Remember that I had just committed myself to the North, and my entire life experience had been Southern. And I was on my own for all intents and purposes. I was living with an aunt and uncle, but I was just living there. I didn’t see that as my home. So the admissions standards, I thought, were high. I thought I was making a reach. And I was pleased when—in fact I was quite pleased—when I was admitted, accepted, for matriculation.

COHEN: And when you came on board at that time, were there any incidents of discrimination that you felt, either from the administration, faculty, students, and so on, coming in?

ROPER: I didn’t have any problems of that type that I can point to with any certainty. No, no. I was given fair treatment when my transcript from West Virginia State was reviewed. I was given credit for a goodly amount of the work I had done there. And as a consequence of that, I didn’t have to do more than two years at Rutgers-Newark. My freshman and sophomore years were considered solid and the coursework apparently was accepted as reasonable.

COHEN: Did you become politically active on campus I mean when you first got there?

ROPER: Almost immediately.

COHEN: Oh. You were the president of the NAACP?
ROPER: Yes. I became a member of the NAACP as I got involved in campus life. I think my involvement in the NAACP was very much a function of that organization being the only African-American organization of the campus with any coherence.

COHEN: Mm-hmm.

ROPER: So therefore this was a group of African-Americans—and some whites whom I could identify with in terms of social policy and social commitment. As a high school student, I’d been active in the NAACP in Brunswick where I grew up. There was no NAACP at West Virginia State, but there were a lot of black kids; I didn’t have to worry about that.

COHEN: Mm-hmm. Yes.

ROPER: At Rutgers-Newark there were very few black students, and this was a way of becoming a part of an organization. And in large measure, I identified with the goals and objectives of that organization. Once becoming a member, I became an active member. And I think [the following semester?] I was elected to be the president of the NAACP. And by that time the civil rights movement had really moved to a searing heat level. And some of us in the NAACP felt the organization’s national image was not the image that we felt young blacks should be projecting, that it was not sufficiently aggressive in its advocacy of improvement in the quality of life conditions that blacks in the nation experience. So we decided that we would strike out on our own and create something completely new. A small group of us, I can remember, Cheryl Green, Yula Penn [sp], Richard Bartell [sp].

COHEN: This was in 1967?

ROPER: This is ’67.

COHEN: Yes.

ROPER: This was ’67. Oh, my goodness, I can see his face, but I can’t remember his name.

COHEN: I’ve heard that one before. [Laughter]

ROPER: He ended up—He and Vickie Donaldson were married for a brief period.

COHEN: Oh!

ROPER: A year or two, a couple of years. But I cannot remember his name. Curtis. What was Curtis’s last name? That’ll come to me as well, I suspect. Anyhow, half of us decided that we would forge ahead to create a new organization. The first action of this group was to propose that a charter of the corporation of the Newark campus, the Newark campus branch of the NAACP, youth branch, be returned to the NAACP national headquarters in New York, which I did on behalf of this group. And subsequently within a period of several weeks to a month, a couple of months, we founded the Black Organization of Students, BOS.
COHEN: What was the BOS program? Was it laid out in a document?

ROPER: There was a document—where the heck it is now…I’m sure the archives at Rutgers-Newark would not contain our initial set of issues and demands, if you will. In fact we didn’t have demands when we established BOS. We had a set of principles. And there was an overarching philosophy that was spelled out in the 1968 yearbook. If you can get your hands on the yearbook there is a student philosophy under the picture of BOS. And it says something of being able to identify ourselves for others to accept or to reject, to be perceived on terms that we defined and not terms that others define for us. Expressions of pride in our cultural, rich cultural history and a sense of our ability to contribute to the improvement of the lives of people rhetorical folderol of college students. So we didn’t have a program per se. We had an outlook on life, a philosophical framework within which we felt we should be perceived and we should operate and function on the college campus.

COHEN: What were some of the, well, ideological influences that went into the thinking—your thinking—and [of] your fellow students?

ROPER: Well, it was a combination of Malcolm X and W.E.B. Du Bois with a little Martin Luther King sprinkled along the edges. The sense of self-identification, self-worth, pride in who we were, and a desire to project a sense of pride in who we were. An almost compulsive need to assert our uniqueness. And to define that uniqueness in the most favorable terms. We were on the cusp of awakening that American consciousness of a self-worth and significance. [Break in recording]

COHEN: We are back. Okay. Influences on the thinking: What other writers were influencing your thinking? What other writers were…

ROPER: Franz Fanon, Richard Wright, James Baldwin. Hmm, James Baldwin, yes.

COHEN: What do you say it that way? In what way was Baldwin a….

ROPER: James Baldwin was very much a black writer who articulated, I think, best the sense of frustration that educated blacks felt at the time. He was able to highlight the contradictions for us, to point out the inconsistencies in the American articulated ideology and the American observable reality, especially in terms of race. He was an extremely articulate, intellectually-challenging and very sophisticated representative of black American development, culture, what have you. And he dealt with terms with which we were familiar. Richard Wright was of an earlier period. Franz Fanon was a foreigner. Harold Cruse hadn’t emerged as—I guess he had, but he was too new, and he was too intellectual for us, I suspect. So we were shaped by all of that. But I think especially by James Baldwin.

COHEN: Mm-hmm. And Baldwin—mostly the fiction, the essays, a mix of the two?

ROPER: Both, both, both. The Fire Next Time, Go Tell It on the Mountain. Yes. Another Country.
COHEN: *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, that was my introduction. What was influencing and eventually prepared BOS to—what intellectual currents—to eventually take direct action as it did? What currents were working then?

ROPER: I think the currents were as much off campus as on campus. Newark was going through a period of political turbulence. In ’66 Ken Gibson ran his first time for the office of mayor and was not successful.

COHEN: That’s right, that’s right.

ROPER: The Model Students Program was coming in to play, and the concept of Maximum Feasible Participation was just getting off the ground during the Johnson Administration. What else? There was a lot of ferment across the North, in the North, a different kind of ferment than had occurred in the South. Things like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee was beginning to have an effect on Northern campuses. Black students at college campuses around the region were being energized by the political dynamism of the larger community. All of those things helped to shape the political posturing of BOS in ’67 and ’68, leading up to ’69 when Conklin Hall was occupied. I by that time of course had left.

COHEN: That’s right. You were out by—

ROPER: I left in ’68—June of ’68.

COHEN: You left in June of ’68. I mean you graduated at the regular time in June of ’68. In talking about SNCC, how much interplay was there between the basically white left organizations, anti-Vietnam organizations, anti-war organizations such as SNCC, and the black activists?

ROPER: Okay. But remember now that SNCC was black. SNCC was Stokely Carmichael and H. Rap Brown. The white left organization was SDS.

COHEN: SDS.

ROPER: And I was a member of that.

COHEN: Yes. That’s what I really meant to say, the SDS.

ROPER: I was a member of SDS in ’67 and was not active in ’68. All of my time and energies were given over to BOS. But by my senior year I had moved into an apartment with a white classmate of mine, Larry Lorrie, the nephew of Peter Lorrie, the actor.

COHEN: In Newark?

ROPER: Yes.

COHEN: He was in—
ROPER: He was at Rutgers-Newark.

COHEN: He was at Rutgers-Newark, and he was in SDS, you’re saying?

ROPER: No.

COHEN: Oh, oh!

ROPER: He was in the NAACP. [Laughs] Larry was a member of the NAACP. But, as I was saying, I had moved into an apartment on Bridge Street—it’s no longer there now—where a lot of Rutgers undergraduate students lived. And a contingent of the SDS membership lived there. These were very left-leaning students. Left, bordering on communist, if you will. But they were amusing to me, and I didn’t take them too seriously. But because I didn’t take them seriously, I wasn’t very active, and I didn’t stay very long in SDS. I couldn’t deal with the—what’s the right word?—the lack of coherence in terms of their lives and the issues that they espoused. There was such dissonance. It wasn’t real, and I couldn’t deal with it not real.

COHEN: Mm-hmm. How did the riots in Newark in July ’67 influence the movement on campus?

ROPER: I suspect it had a profound but subtle impact. There was no way the campus could have been unaffected by those several days in ’67. I know that I was because while my aunt and uncle lived on South Tenth Street, I was in an apartment on Bridge Street when this was occurring, when the riots took place. And in order to get to their house, I had to travel along Central Avenue where the tanks were present and the soldiers. The military presence was obvious and jarring. So sure, that had an impact on us as students and our need to be relevant beyond the college campus, our need to have an involvement in some meaningful way in the life of the people who were struggling in Newark to become part of the political and economic fabric of the city. As a consequence of that, several of us, and I in particular, got involved with something called NAPA, the Newark Area Planning Association, created by a young black Yale Law School student, Junius Williams.

COHEN: The name ….he’s still in Newark?

ROPER: He’s practicing in Raleigh. Junius set up a little office to help the Central Ward residents deal with the proposed development of a University of Medicine and Dentistry in Newark that would gobble up a goodly amount of land. I worked with him and with—what was this guy’s name? Oh! His name is—He’s the ex-husband of the woman who is now engaged to Ted Turner. Sure you know. Sure you know. Fonda. Jane Fonda’s ex-husband.

COHEN: Oh, oh, oh. You mean Hayden.

ROPER: Tom Hayden.

COHEN: Tom Hayden. Oh, yes.
ROPER: Yes, Tom was active in Newark for a while.

COHEN: And SDS, right?

ROPER: And SDS.

COHEN: I’m confusing SDS with SNCC.

ROPER: He was helpful with the NAPA office. He worked in Newark. He wasn’t with SDS. He was with VISTA; he was involved in VISTA. So there was a lot going on.

COHEN: A lot going on, yes.

ROPER: It was an exciting time, great ferment, social ferment, and social experimentation. And all of that of course would intrigue college students and especially African-American, black college students, who saw themselves on the cutting edge of social change.

COHEN: When did BOS start formulating its demands to the administration?

ROPER: In ’68.

COHEN: In ’68.

ROPER: In ’68.

COHEN: And at what point did that crystallize? You’re still on board?

ROPER: I’m still on board.

COHEN: You’re still on board.

ROPER: I’m the president.

COHEN: Okay, what’s happening at that point? What was the first move?

ROPER: We developed a...we were concerned about the small number of black students at the Rutgers-Newark campus, given that this campus was located in the heart of Newark. With all these black people, how could there be so few students from the public schools of the city who were qualified to attend that campus? That was our first concern. We were equally concerned about the failure of the university to be relevant to the lives of the people surrounding the campus. We were concerned about the lack of minority faculty and administrators at Rutgers-Newark. We felt that these were things that the university should attend to, should address. So we put together a set of—I’m not sure if we called them demands. We were not very—initially we were not very radical, if you will.
COHEN: Oh!

ROPER: We wore dashikis and we had afros. But in terms of what was going on at Cornell or what was going on to a lesser extent at Rutgers-New Brunswick, about which we knew very little at the time, we were moderate; we really were moderates. We made a set of proposals that were submitted to Malcolm Talbott, and he set up a meeting to talk with us. We met with him, and he was sensitive to our demands. And with his gracious smile and savvy, political skills, he listened and told us that he wanted to work on these things as well. And he thought that there was an opportunity for us to make our case before the board of governors. And I think it was he who proposed that we take our case to the board of governors. And indeed that was the high watermark in terms of my involvement with BOS before graduating. In April of ’68 we made a presentation before the board of governors at Rutgers-New Brunswick, along with the black students from Rutgers-New Brunswick. I’ll always remember that because two things happened: One, I made the presentation on behalf of BOS, read our list of demands. I think they’d become demands by then. And then the paper was shaking as I spoke. And the second thing I remember is that one of the students from the Rutgers-New Brunswick group, the Black Student Organization, I think, their organization was called, grammatically incorrect, made the point of responding…. One of their demands was that the campus center at Rutgers-New Brunswick be named after Paul Robeson. And I think it was Malcolm—not Malcolm Talbott. But Mason Gross, who was then the president, who said that it was not possible to name a building after someone who was a Communist.

COHEN: He said that?!

ROPER: It was something to that effect? The link between Robeson and the Communist Party. And one of the students—I do not remember this guy’s name; I do remember his first name was Bruce.

COHEN: A student from Newark or—

ROPER: Rutgers-New Brunswick. “Well, I don’t see why that’s such a big deal. After all, the vice president of this university, Dr. Slater, was a member of the Communist Party. And all hell broke loose! Oh, my God! Slater was secretary to the board of governors. [Laughter] Mason Gross said, “How dare you …..!” I thought he was going to have a heart attack. It was unbelievable! First I was stunned that this black cat would actually say this. And second, impressed and overwhelmed by the confusion he had caused. [Laughter]

COHEN: Was this covered by the press, by the way? I don’t remember.

ROPER: I don’t know if the press was there. [Laughter] I will always remember that evening and that development. Ralph Dungan was there on the board. He was ex officio of the board of governors. I noticed even he smiled.

COHEN: He what?

ROPER: He smiled.
COHEN: He smiled?

ROPER: Say whoops! They got you. [Laughter]

COHEN: Oh, well!

ROPER: Mason Gross did not like that in the least.

COHEN: Oh!

ROPER: Anyhow, shades of McCarthyism. After all, he brought up the subject.

COHEN: He brought it up. Oh, boy!

ROPER: And that was a high watermark for me. The day after...we continued to meet with Malcolm and with a woman by the name of Bessie Hill, who was the first black—

COHEN: I was going to ask you about Bessie Hill.

ROPER: —woman to serve on the board of governors, the Rutgers Board of Governors. And we would go to her apartment at the Colonnade, as a matter of fact, to talk about the issues that we were concerned about. And Curvin was not very...he didn’t think very much of Mrs. Hill. He didn’t think she was sufficiently supportive and assertive. And I can understand why. She was an Old-School lady. She was from the Old School. She had been the first guidance counselor in the Trenton Public Schools—the first black guidance counselor in the Trenton Public Schools. And she had had a successful educational career to the extent that a black could in this state at that time.

COHEN: Mm-hmm.

ROPER: And she had risen to the point where she was a member of the Rutgers University Board of Governors.

COHEN: Board of governors, yes.

ROPER: That’s a big deal.

COHEN: Yes.

ROPER: She was sympathetic, and she was supportive. But she was also of the Old School, and there was just so much pushing she considered appropriate. But she gave us advice, and she counseled us. And I must say I liked her, I respected her. I identified with the difficulties she faced, and I think she helped in important ways. And that’s that.

COHEN: That’s quite a story.
ROPER: Interesting.

COHEN: Yes, to say the least. The man. Okay, we’re getting closer to the time when you’re graduating, and we’re going into the fall of 1968. Eventually the Conklin Hall action occurred in February of 1969.

ROPER: Mm-hmm.

COHEN: How were the demands, when they became demands, originally the 12 demands if you remember.

ROPER: Mm-hmm.

COHEN: I guess McCormick includes in the book. How were they hammered out, do you recall?

ROPER: No.

COHEN: No? Okay. How were the— Alright, let’s just go back. The “demands” that were presented to the board of governors—

ROPER: Right.

COHEN: —how were they hammered out?

ROPER: In a very rational way. A group of us sitting around the table determining what issues ought to be presented to the university. Because our initial contact was with Malcolm Talbott. We presented our concerns to the vice president of the Newark campus. And not being able to get the satisfaction that we sought, the next step was a higher level of officiadom. But we skipped over the president of Rutgers and went directly to the board of governors…at the suggestions of either Malcolm or Bessie Hill. I’m not sure which of the two.

COHEN: What satisfaction were you seeking?

ROPER: A response from the university that it would, one, make a concerted effort to enlarge the number of minorities—African-American students, black students—at the Rutgers-Newark campus. That there would be an aggressive recruiting posture assumed by the university to attract X numbers of students. That there would be black administrators appointed to the university staff, that black faculty would be sought. The traditional things.

COHEN: Yes. At that point, first step—

ROPER: The big issue was—

COHEN: At that point…. I’m sorry.
ROPER: The big issue was student recruitment.

COHEN: Okay. At that point were you talking numbers?

ROPER: No. I don’t think so.

COHEN: Okay.

ROPER: I don’t think we had any numbers.

COHEN: Because later on numbers were in….

ROPER: That’s correct.

COHEN: Okay. At that point were you also talking to the admissions officers who then became involved in accusations about not doing a good enough job?

ROPER: Yes.

COHEN: It was Carleton Miller and Swab in the middle of it.

ROPER: Swab I remember. Miller….

COHEN: C.T. Miller and Robert Swab who were the—

ROPER: Yes. Robert Swab was the admissions director.

COHEN: At the time that—

ROPER: They were a bone of contention, yes.

COHEN: Were you talking to them at the same time that you were talking to Malcolm Talbott?

ROPER: I’m not sure if we talked to them independent of Malcolm. I think we talked to them through Malcolm. I don’t think we had direct contact with Swab.

COHEN: Because the press reports were that accusations made that they were not sympathetic and not responsive and so on. So your recollection is that there was as far as you were concerned...

ROPER: I don’t think we had direct contact. We knew who they were, and we saw them as stumbling blocks. But I don’t recall us having a meeting at which they were present and we were present and we sort of created charges. This has been a long time ago, a long time. But that doesn’t ring a bell as a high watermark in the course of the development, yes.
COHEN: Do you recall…. Alright, so you’re out by the fall of ’68.

ROPER: Mm-hmm.

COHEN: Do you have any recollection, any knowledge of what actually precipitated the decision on the part of BOS to take direct action?

ROPER: I’m trying to remember. If there was any one thing…the person you should chat with about that, the persons you should chat with about that, are Vickie Donaldson and Joe Browne. Joe would be a better source of information on that than I. Because by this time I’m working in Trenton in the Department of Higher Education.

COHEN: Did you have any contacts at all with the people after—I mean as far as the actual….

ROPER: Takeover?

COHEN: Takeover and what was going on, the negotiations?

ROPER: My wife was a student there, but she wasn’t active in that. She was a member of BOS, but she didn’t participate in the takeover. No, I got involved, as McCormick indicates in his book, through my work in the Department of Higher Education. When the building was taken over, Dungan asked me if I would serve as his contact at the campus. Would I come to Newark, the new campus, and serve as his observer, official observer, keeping him informed as to what was going on. And I did. I said sure. I’ll do it. So I came down and was a part of the little group at Ackerson Hall, the law school, monitoring things, monitoring developments at Conklin. Yes, Ackerson was the law school, and Conklin was the building they occupied.

COHEN: Right. Can you recall what you were finding out at that time in that capacity?

ROPER: It was chaotic. Poor Malcolm was at his wit’s end. [Laughs] He was getting pressure from New Brunswick. He was getting pressure from his faculty. He was getting pressure from the business community. He was getting pressure from everybody to do something, to fix this. Mason, I don’t think, was really helpful—Mason Gross. He had his own problems because the black students at Rutgers-New Brunswick were quite antsy as well. They didn’t take over a building, but he had to—the Newark thing had to be handled in such a way as to hopefully preclude the New Brunswick students to try to copy it. So he couldn’t allow Malcolm to give in; but at the same time, he wanted it resolved, he wanted it over. Bob Curvin was on site as was as was [?] Byrd. But they were rational participants in the process of solving this problem. The Black Panthers were on hand as well, marching in front of Conklin Hall, and that of course attracted people like the guy from the North Ward.

COHEN: Imperiale?

ROPER: Imperiale and his boys came right in through the campus to lend support to those who would not give in to the rule of the mob. Irony of ironies. I was there for all—I don’t know if it was the first day or the second day—I was there for the duration of the occupation. And I kept in
constant touch with Dungan. I was also a source of support, I think, to the students because they knew I was there representing Dungan, and reporting back so like there protector to the chancellor of higher education, whom they considered to be a friend.

COHEN: Oh, did they?

ROPER: Oh, yes. Dungan ingratiated himself quite nicely. He was a very political guy.

COHEN: How did he manage that?

ROPER: Well, the EOF program helped a lot.

COHEN: The EOF program. Mm-hmm

ROPER: His articulation of a pro-black student position on the board of governors in New Brunswick the previous year. The board of governors meeting at which we had made our presentation, he was there, and he in large measure supported our call for greater minority enrollment at the colleges. He could not understand how the state system of public higher education had less than 3 percent black student enrollment which, of course, you can understand because they hadn’t been admitted. So of course. But he gave every indication of being supportive of increasing the numbers. And he was perceived by us to be a Kennedy Man. Remember, he had been a recruiter for Jack Kennedy. He’d served on Jack Kennedy’s staff in the White House. In fact he recruited Blumenthal to the White House. He and Blumenthal were classmates at Princeton at the Woodrow Wilson School.

COHEN: Blumenthal?

ROPER: Secretary of the treasury in the Kennedy Administration.

COHEN: Oh, oh, oh, oh, oh! You’re bringing me back. [Laughs] That’s the whole purpose of this.

ROPER: Yes, that’s right. That’s right. But Dungan had the Kennedy aura, and he operated as the Kennedys did: fast of foot and very smart and very articulate. The Irish Mafia type guy. So the bottom line is that we saw him as a friend in the main.

COHEN: So you’re on campus.

ROPER: Mm-hmm.

COHEN: Everybody’s milling around, and you mentioned people who are very well known like Gus Heningburg. But was there any, at that time, any liaison with the faculty on the campus at that time, between the students or between people like yourself who were working as a liaison?
ROPER: We didn’t have any contact with the faculty then. The sole faculty contact person, the only contact person was Mason. Whatever dialog that was taking place with the faculty was a dialog in which he was the sole participant.

COHEN: Mm-hmm.

ROPER: Outside participant, non-faculty participant. And that became an important issue after the occupation was settled, because the faculty, who had to ratify the terms of the agreement that Malcolm entered into with the students; and they were not, as I recall, willing to accept much of what he had acceded to. And that produced the threat of a subsequent—of a second—occupation, building occupation. There were threats by Joe Browne and others—I think he would say this, too: to re-occupied the building because the faculty was not forthcoming in terms of support for the recommendation for the actions taken by Malcolm.

COHEN: Well, do you remember what the issue was after the students left the building between them and the faculty?

ROPER: No. There were a couple of them.

COHEN: Yes, if you have any recollections.

ROPER: No.

COHEN: It’s part of the record. But then different people have different perceptions. What—do you recall if you had any contact at the time, again, that the BOS students had a demonstration of March 13th and then called for the campus be shut down the following day. It was a Friday, March 14th. Were you there at any time in the role of liaison or anything like that?

ROPER: Mm-mmm. I, subsequently, returned to the campus with a guy by the name of Alexander Sharp who was working for Dungan at the time. He had, I think, just gotten his MPA at the Woodrow Wilson School. And Dungan assigned him the task of writing a summary of the developments at Rutgers-Newark, what had happened and the chronology of events, if you will. And I was assigned to go with Shaw to help him pull this together, to make sure that he talked to the right people and to give him some guidance in terms of Newark terrain. And I did.

COHEN: Was that the report then that Dungan issued over his signature?

ROPER: Based on that. That’s correct.

COHEN: The chronology and the recommendations.

ROPER: That’s correct.

COHEN: Statements and recommendations.

ROPER: Right.
COHEN: So you and—what’s his name again?

ROPER: Alexander Sharp.

COHEN: Alexander Shaw.

ROPER: Sharp, S-H-A-R-P. Who is now the vice president of the University of Chicago, vice president for finance at the University of Chicago. In fact he came by to see me about two months ago.

COHEN: Were there any other…. Who were the chief players in the whole action? I mean—

ROPER: Which action?

COHEN: The taking over of Conklin Hall, in your recollection.

ROPER: Joe Browne was the central player. [End of Tape #1]

COHEN: Chief players.

ROPER: Yes. He was carried along by the momentum of the moment, if you will. There was a guy by the name of Jackson.

COHEN: Peter.


COHEN: The name of Vivian King comes to my mind.

ROPER: Vivian was active. I’m not sure that she was in the occupation. I don’t know if she was in the building or not. But she was an active player. Doug Morgan was an active player, but I’m not sure if he was in the building either. He could have been. George Hampton was there. He, too, may have been in the middle, but again…. Who else? Yula Penn [sp] had graduated by this time. I think she had graduated. Yes, she was in my class. Cheryl Green graduated, and Bartells had graduated.

COHEN: Okay. Who in the administration, other than Malcolm Talbott, were the students talking to?

ROPER: The dean of students whose name escapes me at the moment, who was a male.

COHEN: The dean of students….

ROPER: A tall guy.
COHEN: Oh, the dean of students. Oh….

ROPER: McGuire.

COHEN: Oh, yes, yes. Okay. So they were talking to McGuire, Dean McGuire.

ROPER: Yes, Dean McGuire. And his assistant dean who was very, very supportive. She died of cancer about in her forties.

COHEN: Inga Gandy [sp]?

ROPER: Inga Gandy.

COHEN: Oh, what was her role in that thing?

ROPER: Well, she was supportive. They critiqued [laughs] the original BOS statement of principles. They advised us that BOS was not grammatical, and we told them we knew it. [Laughter]

COHEN: You were taking poetic license, weren’t you?

ROPER: Right, right.

COHEN: …. [Laughs]

ROPER: That’s right. That’s right. Bos is black idiom. And something is good, it’s “bos.”

COHEN: Yes. Oh, that’s the—it was consciously contrived.

ROPER: This is a bos event. Terrific!

COHEN: This is a bos event. I’m missing…

ROPER: Right, right, right, right. But she was very helpful. And any assistance she could provide to us she was more than happy to in terms of counsel and contacts and things of that nature. Dean McGuire was inclined to be helpful. But I’m trying to remember if he left not long after that. I think he did.

COHEN: I think so, too. Yes.

ROPER: So I’m not sure that he was really into what was going on because I think his mind was on his next job. Other members of the faculty, other members of the administration? No, it was primarily Malcolm. Malcolm was…. The dean of the faculty, who was that? Was it Blumenthal at the time?
COHEN: Well, Blumenthal came in in 1969. Actually Talbott would—Well, the former dean was Gilligan who had left.

ROPER: But he wasn’t there.

COHEN: No, he wasn’t because he was out….

ROPER: It was vacant. It was vacant.

COHEN: Right. The position—during that period Talbott was the acting dean and the vice president actually. That was the title then.

ROPER: Oh, fine, he was the acting dean.

COHEN: A little confusion there. Then Blumenthal came on, but that was ’69 to ’71.

ROPER: Uh-huh.

COHEN: After you left.

ROPER: Mm-hmm.

COHEN: You’ve mentioned—any number of people have mentioned—Malcolm Talbott’s role in…and you yourself have. But if you could just sort of recap: How do you view his overall contribution to that episode on campus and the developments after that?

ROPER: How shall I phrase this? Malcolm was a key player. He was also a player who was very much caught in the middle. He was caught in the middle in the following way: He had to keep on board a faculty that was really one not that interested in Rutgers-Newark. Most of the people who were on the faculty at that time would have preferred to be working in New York at NYU or Columbia. Rutgers-Newark was a fallback academic appointment. They weren’t that interested in what was going on. But they were still a faculty, and had prerogatives that they thought should be protected, and Malcolm had to help in doing that, protecting those prerogatives. He was also having to march to the New Brunswick tune. Newark, then as now, was the tail on the dog, and the dog happened to be New Brunswick, the New Brunswick campus—campsuses. It was not clear that Mason was supportive. I suspect in retrospect that he was as stressed as Malcolm and responsible for a much larger organization than was Malcolm. But then again, Malcolm had this piece that he had to deal with, and he had to deal with Mason, and he had to deal with his faculty. And the third leg in this triad was Ralph Dungan. Malcolm had to be responsive to Dungan’s whims as well. And he had to be responsive to the students. So there was a fourth leg to the table. The black students and the white students. The white students who were, in the main, confused by all of what was going on, probably pissed off, but still aware of the dynamic that was occurring in the country and saw themselves sort of caught up in them. So he had five constituencies with which he had to contend. And in the main I think he did a terrific job. He was the man for the times. Fortunately he was very close to Gus Heningburg. I think Gus gave him good counsel. I suspect Bob Curvin gave him good counsel. I suspect even
Steve Atabato [sp], who was on the staff of the university then, gave him reasonable good counsel. And Bessie Hill was someone with whom he had a close working relationship, all of which resulted in him navigating those turbulent times reasonably well.

COHEN: Is there anything that we’ve talked about that you’d like to go back to and elaborate, or a footnote or something else?

ROPER: I can’t think of anything.

COHEN: Anything we haven’t talked about? Any questions I haven’t asked I should have asked?

ROPER: One question that you didn’t raise, and that was what the larger Newark community was seeing, doing as all this happened.

COHEN: Okay.

ROPER: And I guess having raised the question, I’m not sure to answer it because it wasn’t very clear. I don’t know what the Star-Ledger and the Newark Evening News said about what was going on on the campus. It would be interesting to….

COHEN: You’ve got the clippings in there. They reported on what this side said and what that side said. And what I saw of the clippings….

ROPER: What about the chamber of commerce?

COHEN: I can’t remember that one. But just as far as the actual reporting.

ROPER: And what was the mayor doing? I don’t remember whatAddonizio was saying.

COHEN: No. I couldn’t say.

ROPER: The police director or the police chief—

COHEN: Was there ever any fear of police action?


COHEN: At the time that you were on board as an observer and go-between. Is that right? I mean was it specific? Was there just a vague fear?

ROPER: A vague fear.

COHEN: Huh?

ROPER: A vague fear.
COHEN: I mean you didn’t have any direct—

ROPER: We had no reason to anticipate it, but there was a concern because the police department was white, all white. Largely white. Overwhelmingly white. There were concerns that if the students were attacked by Imperiale and his crew, that the police department wouldn’t protect them. There were concerns that there might be snipers in the area. All kinds of fears were rampant.

COHEN: Were you on board when the telephone pole episode occurred?

ROPER: Uh-uh.

COHEN: Okay. Anything else that I should have asked?

ROPER: I can’t think of a thing.

COHEN: Good. Thank you very much.

ROPER: Sure. My pleasure. [End of Tape #2]

[End of Interview]

Edited by Gideon Thompson