

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW  
OF  
REBECCA SHELLEY RATHMER  
OF THE  
FEDERAL WRITERS' PROJECT

INTERVIEWED BY  
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Oral history interview of Rebecca Shelley Rathmer of the Federal Writers' Project, interviewed by Paul Sporn of Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan on August 6, 1979.

SPORN: Do you prefer me to call you Rebecca or Shelley?

RATHMER: I prefer Shelley because my thought and my mind is more in tune with Shelley than with the biblical Rebecca.

SPORN: More in tune with the poet Shelley?

RATHMER: Oh, yes. The poet, Shelley. For years my favorite, one of my favorite poets.

SPORN: Do you have a particular poem of his which is your favorite? Or, do you like all his poetry?

RATHMER: Well, I don't say that I like all, but his ode to Keats, for example, whose title, at this moment, escapes me. Adonais. "He is a part of the loveliness which once he made more lovely." That's all I can remember at this time.

SPORN: You were in the Federal Writers' Project, how long were you in the Federal Writers' Project?

RATHMER: I think it was nearly two years. Frankly, other events have so impinged on my activity and my memory that I was hoping that your coming here, your questioning and what you already have accumulated on the Writers' Project, would help me in my autobiography. Because, it was a very intensive and emotional time in my life. Now, I am not sure that I want to recall with you some of these emotional memories because, you see, they had to do so much with my domestic life, my relationship with my husband and my relationship to the state.

(TAPE STOPPED AND STARTED AGAIN)

SPORN: Do you remember when you joined the Federal Writer's Project, was it 1936 or 1937?

RATHMER: I think it was '36. It is there that I was hoping that I might get a few exact data from you. You, of course, I see are seeing the Federal Writers' Project in its position as a part of the social attitude of the government towards writers and the interaction of writers on events. Although, we have very little influence on events I'm afraid,

SPORN: I'm also interested in what the writers had to say, what the writers thought, how the writers felt about what they were doing. I've read your things at the Bentley and I've read many, many other things

SPORN: about the Federal Writers' Project so that I do know some things and I believe I can refresh your memory. For example, in your papers you say there is information that when you joined the Federal Writers' Project you were given the responsibility of doing something with Black history, the history of slavery in the state of Michigan. You were also responsible for the folklore research of the project. Do you remember that?

RATHMER: Oh, yes. Very well. Who was that great lumberjack folk hero? I can't at this moment remember, but you surely remember his name?

SPORN: Are you speaking of Paul Bunyan?

RATHMER: Yes, Paul Bunyan. I thoroughly researched Paul Bunyan. And, of course, you know, you have read the book, I'm sure, that is the report of the Michigan Writers' Project.

SPORN: There is a Michigan guide, there is a state guide to Michigan, which is one of the works of the Federal Writers' Project, but there were many other manuscripts written, not all of them published. For example, I have uncovered some material by Elena Mitcoff.

RATHMER: Oh, yes, Elena Mitcoff. She and I were very good friends.

SPORN: So I gather from your papers. I was very impressed, first, by a short story, folk story, about her childhood in Nizhni Novgorod in Russia which she did for the Federal Writers' Project as a sort of example of folklore. Then, I was impressed by her chronicle history novel of her family which won an Avery Hopwood Award at the University of Michigan. Only two or three weeks ago while I was in Washington, I came across a number of folkstories which she had rewritten with a note, in fact, written by yourself to the Washington office recommending the way she had rewritten some of these stories. Can you tell me something about Elena Mitcoff? She was in the Federal Writers' Project for a little while, too.

RATHMER: Oh, yes, we were very good friends. In fact, she visited me for a number of weeks after she left the Writers' Project. And, I think, just previous to her getting an Avery Hopwood prize which enabled her then to go to Europe and write further. She died of some disease. I've forgotten exactly what it, well, it was a heart disease, I think. She had heart trouble of one sort or another. Her circulation didn't function. She had felt that she was condemned

RATHMER: to death by her own physical condition.

SPORN: She died at a very young age, at about thirty-eight. Do you know if any of her family survived her, did she have a sister?

RATHMER: No, but she had a brother. I had lost track of her but found the telephone/address of her brother. This is a striking thing, a striking fact in my life. I asked him about Elena and this ominous voice came over the telephone, "Oh, she's dead, didn't you know it?" Now, I can't remember that date. If you would give in your story, a monograph of Elena, well, you know without my saying so, but she is very deserving. She had the real talent of writing. Now, I consider that I had no real talent in writing, that is, none of that Shelley and, oh, I will even say Elena finesse and grasp. But, I have conviction, I have ideas and conviction and, perhaps, that is why I have waited so long before putting down my thoughts and activities. You see, I am just now, at the age of ninety-two, recording my life and when I attempt to record, it runs into very prosaic poetry.

SPORN: This was a very exciting time, it seems to me, in your life. I read your papers and you mentioned how being on the project, you met all sorts of people who introduced you to activities and ideas that you felt were very exciting. For example, you mentioned in one of your letters to your husband that you met an Arthur Clifford on the project. Arthur Clifford was one of the editorial supervisors. Do you remember him?

RATHMER: Oh, very well. He was a cripple. I suppose that would have come through in some of the writing. Yes, Arthur Clifford was really a brilliant person. A writer by profession. It's very exciting to me now, to find that some of these people that you mention, especially the one who has written five novels, Falstein. I felt very much, well, artistically, as an author quite inferior. I was older than most of these young people, and, of course, I got on the Writers' Project by virtue of expressing sheer necessity because we were under foreclosure in those days. I must go back to my own records in the Bentley Library for dates before I can make a satisfactory record.

SPORN: You did a lot of writing before and during your stay on the project. Not only writing for the project but in your papers, there are many

SPORN: poems that you wrote, generally stressing the notion of brotherhood and peace. You wrote stories and you were in the process of writing a very long novel. There are many versions of this novel which apparently you were doing while you were on the project. It had to do with a young woman whose property was about to be foreclosed and so on, who went to work for Edgar A. Guest. This is some of the material from the novel and you had some notion that you could possibly get the novel published and possibly made into a movie. In fact, there is some correspondence that you had during those days with various agents, Hollywood agents and writers' agents in New York City. This was going on while you were on the project. Did you, at any time, discuss your attempts at writing fiction with the other members of the project, such as Robert Hayden, Lou Falstein, Arthur Clifford? Did you have literary discussions with the people who were on the project?

RATHMER: We didn't have, as I look back, as much literary discussion on the project as we had politics. The political struggle to keep the project going. There was one time in particular when the project was in peril, that must have been perhaps a year after we were on the project, when it appeared feasible to the powers that be that the project would be discontinued. We had an all night session with marches around the office of the head office and it was raining. But, I remember, I continued to march around this project and I was wearing a dress, a rather cheap dress, that shrank with the rain. The dress had shrunken to above my knees, at that time we didn't wear dresses above the knee, and it was really quite comical because I was right in the rain and two or three of us, I remember a big Negro brother and I, and I think he somewhat upheld me in the march around the building. I should research that because it shows the spirit. We were imperiled in our livelihood. The work we were trying to do as persons, our writings were imperiled by the fact that we were in danger of being discharged because the project was under discussion, as either unprofitable, of course, it was not financially profitable to the government at that time. Incidentally, we were called and perhaps we called ourselves, the intellectual shovel leaners. You know there were those various projects, made work, it was called. The men who had the

RATHMER: work, well, didn't necessarily apply themselves with all of their physical capacities. Well, anyhow, we were called the intellectual shovel leaners. It was a phrase and we would call ourselves that, in a kind of derision because, of course, we didn't mean it. We considered that what we were doing was of value. I wonder where I could find that? Now that comes to my memory, at this time. You can understand that in my autobiography, essentially the pivot of my autobiography is the "quest for peace," the "struggle for peace." (TAPE STOPPED AND RESTARTED AFTER PAUSE). To me, it was saving my home and my marriage because the industrial, the impact of the Depression was such that, well, my husband felt the only thing for him to do, he had skill with his hands, he was an electrical engineer, and he felt the only thing for him to do was just to — we had a car, an old Ford — just to go. Battle Creek was a small town and our industry was virtually at a standstill. He felt that he could go into any town and get a job or at least do piecework because he had had his apprenticeship in Germany and it was a very thorough apprenticeship. He not only could take a motor apart but he could put it together again. He was the best motor man in town. But, there just wasn't work. I want at some time or other in my writing to picture that part of the industrial area. As far as we were concerned, there just was not work. I think I can record this, of course, my husband repaired both small and large motors. He had repaired or serviced a motor in a little bakery. It was not a large bakery and they owed us some money. I think it was less than ten dollars. I was my husband's "maid of all work," and I was the one who went out to collect. Of course, a woman supposedly could collect more easily than a man. I went to this place where my husband's motor was in service and, naturally, if the people didn't pay, the motor could be taken out and so I was instructed, "Well, if you can't pay, let's take the motor out." I, with all my background and my own social, intellectual convictions, I threatened to take the motor out.

SPORN: Was this threat, sort of, counter to your attitudes toward your intellectual, cultural background? Did you feel you were doing something...?

RATHMER: Well, of course, because the motor was necessary to this little bakery

RATHMER: and if I took the motor out, the bakery stopped in one way or another. So, I remember saying, "Well, we will have to take the motor out if you can't pay." It was a woman, also a young wife, who had charge of the front office of the business, she reached into the drawer and took out two dollars and handed me two dollars in response to this threat. Well, she said, "That's all we can pay." So, I took the two dollars and I went back to the office and I said to my husband, "I will not go threatening again, I just won't do it." It was such a dreadful thing and, of course, it was contrary to both my emotion and to my general social belief because it was a small business. He of course, had some.... The Michigan Carton was the larger business and they did go on, for whatever reason. They were always able to pay their bills and the Michigan Carton was really our sustenance and life because they could pay in ten days. I mean, they always paid. I went there once or twice to ask them if they couldn't pay short of the ten days because the landlord or someone was threatening and we simply felt our heads were on the block and the sword was about to descend. It was what we would call a small business in a small town, the Rathmer Electric Company. When we were married, he was employed by a larger firm in Cleveland, Ohio and I had a little poultry magazine, here in Battle Creek.

SPORN: Do you remember the name of that magazine?

RATHMER: Oh, yes. The Modern Poultry Breeder. Well, I wanted to keep the Breeder. I wanted to keep this poultry journal because I could see a future if I could just hang on until the Depression was over, or until I could sell, because I had the patronage of the Dutch poultry breeders in one of the counties.

SPORN: What was the name of that magazine again?

RATHMER: The Modern Poultry Breeder.

SPORN: Poultry?

RATHMER: P-o-u-l-t-r-y. A chicken, a chicken paper! You see, after the war, I couldn't go back to teaching because teachers, at that time, who opposed the war had lost their jobs. I had some very good friends who lost their jobs, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow Dana, he was called the grandson of Longfellow. He was at Columbia University as a younger teacher. He was not reappointed. This was true of many

RATHMER: teachers, and I was, of course, by profession, a teacher.

SPORN: So, you couldn't get your teaching job anymore? This was in the 1920's?

RATHMER: Yes.

SPORN: And, you began this Modern Poultry Breeder in the 1920's?

RATHMER: Well, it was approximately 1919. Well, it was an old paper, a paper that was on its last legs that I bought for five hundred dollars. My father loaned me the money, that is, my father signed the note that brought me the money. So, I had this as my means of livelihood after the war.

SPORN: How long did this magazine last, until the 1930's?

RATHMER: It was about the 1930's but then I sold it in order to help my husband start his business and then....

SPORN: Then, because of the Depression, you and your husband fell on hard times?

RATHMER: We were in very hard times. Industry had virtually stopped. Of course, Kellogg was going on. But, Kellogg had its own electric repair department so we didn't have the patronage of Kellogg. The Michigan Carton Company was the largest company that had its electrical work done externally. We were always afraid that they might set up their own electric repair department. But, they didn't, they really kept us going although we did go into bankruptcy. The same as many other small businesses did. It was then, you see, that I got on the Writers' Project.

SPORN: You got on the Writers' Project because you needed the help that that could give you in terms of income?

RATHMER: It's a question and I discussed a little of it with Jeff here. Of course, you are interested in more than simply the literary implications, so, I will tell you how I got on the Writers' Project. I made the application through someone here and was turned down. I understood that I was turned down because, after all, I had a husband to support me. We were very much on the verge of separation and my husband was talking of — he had the car, free and clear — of just going.... He felt, this is repetitious, he felt that if he left this small town of Battle Creek and just went on his own, he could get work. That is, he could just go into an electric shop and offer him-



RATHMER: self and say, "Just let me see what you can do. If you have motors that you think are not repairable, I can take a motor apart and put it together again and it will run." He was thinking very seriously of just leaving Battle Creek. Well, in the sense of the word, that would have disjointed our marriage. Our marriage was in a very critical condition. I could not get a job on the Federal Writers' Project as long as I had a husband to support me. Of course, those were many, many years ago. I had a very good and understanding friend in town and I set up my residence in her home and applied for a job on the Writers' Project as a separated woman and I got a job as a separated woman. (PAUSE). I couldn't get the job as a married woman.

SPORN: Yes, I understand. And then, you moved to Detroit when you got the job?

RATHMER: Then, of course, I went to Detroit. I found a rooming place in a very lovely home, husband and wife, who had come from the South. Many people came to Detroit because Detroit, after all, had the automotive industry. Ford was still turning out automobiles and was employing people and that kept up the flow of money and these good friends of mine, with whom I boarded, with whom I roomed and had the privilege of doing my own cooking for four dollars a week. But, they were Southerners. We had a union of other writers.

SPORN: You were in that union and for awhile you were its secretary or...?

RATHMER: I was, of course, in the union. For a while I was secretary, but at this particular moment of which I'm speaking, a Negro was secretary of the union.

SPORN: Do you remember his or her name?

RATHMER: I can't remember at this moment.

SPORN: Was it someone from the Writers' Project?

RATHMER: Yes, he was a member of the Writers' Union. You see, he was a member of our branch. At that time, it was considered a very great advance, very bold to have Negroes and white people in the same union or on the same level of equality. Now, these people with whom I roomed, they had an apartment and an extra room, they were what you would call upper middle class in their general attitude towards life. She was really a beautiful woman. She was employed in the hospital as a

RATHMER: sewer, she took charge of all the sewing that needed to be done in the hospital. And, our Writers' Union met at various places, and I asked, if I might have — they had a large living room — I asked if I might have the union at my rooming place. I first asked her and she said, "Ask him." So, I can't remember the name, I asked him whether I could have the union in his place in the parlor. I felt obliged, of course, to say that the secretary of the union was a Negro. He shook his head. A Negro, the secretary of a Writers' Union, was refused a place in just an ordinary home. Of course, they were Southerners and they had come and many people came to Detroit because the automobile industry was still going and they thought, well, they could find work. Detroit wasn't quite as badly hit as some of the other places. He was an architect. He built houses, he called himself both an architect and a contractor. That, of course, goes into my autobiography, and since it does indicate the almost electrically rapid change in, of course, it's now two generations. That this, I was refused the privilege of having the Writers' Club, the Writers' Union Club, it was a union, because I felt obliged to tell them the secretary was a Negro. And there was another element in the circle of the writers on our project. We were all, I'm sure there was no exception, we were all for equality of race, as well as, we were all for the fairness of wage and all of that. It was really an expansive and growing time in my life, although it was a time when I was up in my forties then. Because, in this group, there were thirty or forty of us all told, I would say, in this project, in the Writers' Project, and I am certain, without exception, or if there was an exception, he or she was silent because there was complete equality of races, at that time. But, in my rooming house, my landlord would not have a Negro on terms of equality. He shook his head, of course, I didn't pursue it. They were very fine people and she was a lovely person, but there was this question of race at that time.

SPORN: When you came on the Writers' Project, you record in one of your writings, in the papers at the Bentley, that you were given the assignment of reediting and revising and rewriting the history of Black people in the state of Michigan. Do you recall that? And,

SPORN: you were working, you said in the paper, at a desk, right directly across from some Black person who had had that job before. Do you recall who that person is?

RATHMER: I am sorry that I don't recall the name and I'm asking you, if in the records, are there records, authentic office records of the Writers' Project in Detroit? I must go back because, now, you notice, when you mentioned those names I immediately remember them but....

SPORN: There are such records. But, most of them are at the National Archives in Washington, D.C. The administrative records, the administrative correspondence, the literary records are in the Library of Congress for the most part and elsewhere, scattered.

RATHMER: In Ann Arbor or in Detroit?

SPORN: In the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., but some are also in the state of Michigan.

RATHMER: Where would they be, where would I find them?

SPORN: That's one of the things that I'm trying to uncover. I keep discovering more and more manuscripts, here, there and the other place and sometimes they are in the possession of private persons. I don't know whether you have any of those manuscripts in your papers or whether you've given all your papers already to the Bentley Library. But, I keep trying to discover where those records are so that we have as complete a set of records as possible. The Library of Congress has many manuscripts but there obviously are gaps in the manuscript record. But, the administrative records are fairly complete in the National Archives and I've had the opportunity to see some of those. That's a separate institution in Washington, D.C. So, I've seen some of those but they don't always have records such as this, whom did you work next to, say, when you got on the project. There are such records. Another name that comes to mind is a man by the name of Henry Becker, who wrote a history of the German people in the state of Michigan.

RATHMER: Oh, yes, Henry Becker. I remember him also, very well. In a sense of the word, all of those writings were somewhat under my direction because I was, in a particular sense at least, the head of the racial elements in Michigan. I don't know whether it was so recorded but I was supposedly responsible. Oh, yes, I remember Becker

RATHMER: and his personal history. He was married with two children, he had come from Germany under not the best of circumstances.

END OF TAPE, SIDE A. BEGINNING OF TAPE, SIDE B.

RATHMER: You are interested in how my struggle for citizenship impinged upon my writing in Detroit.

SPORN: I'm very interested in getting to that, but before we do that, we were talking about going to the theatre. You said that the various projects were linked to each other and you were expected to attend the production of the other groups. You believe you attended a performance of Doctor Faustus.

RATHMER: I remember that.

SPORN: The Federal Theatre Project did put on a performance of Doctor Faustus, do you recall any other performances that you may have attended?

RATHMER: I don't recall any other performances. After all, I was very straightened financially and there was a slight fee, a slight admission fee and I seem to remember that financial limitations prevented me from attending as many as I would have liked.

SPORN: The Federal Theatre Project put on its performances in places like Belle Isle Park and there was no admission to those performances. Did you attend any of those performances?

RATHMER: No, I did not. I distinctly remember the performance of Faust and I can't seem to remember others.

SPORN: Do you remember any of the people on the Federal Theatre Project?

RATHMER: At this moment, I cannot remember. Now, just think when I was contemplating your arrival, I couldn't remember any of the names, but the moment you mention the names I have vivid recollection. Like the first time Arthur Clifford and....

SPORN: You were talking about Henry Becker before. The fact that he came over not under the best of circumstances, that his wife had given him a dowry, you mentioned, and some linens when he came to this country, again he found that he was in dire straights and finally got a job on the Writers' Project. Do you recall anything more about Henry Becker?

RATHMER: At this moment, I can only remember that the Writers' Project as he explained it to me saved his marriage and saved him as a future

RATHMER: citizen. I am willing to vouch for the fact that the Writers' Project, for one, only for one, of the government's projects performed a great social service for the country. For example, in saving homes. I feel that it saved my home and there was Becker. Of course, he was a man and he could simply walk off and leave the wife and children but he remained with his family. Of course, that would only be, perhaps, a gesture in your report. That there were people in dire straights, that had no industrial skill, that is, that weren't carpenters or physical laborers, they were sort of inbetween. The writers and these other cultural institutions or efforts kept them, and I didn't know about Falstein but that he had actually had published a number of novels. I would like to read some of them, it would be very interesting. Of course, he was brilliant. You see, these young people, in the main, they were young people of real capability. Except for the Writers' Project, they were on the streets - begging. So, I'm sure you will, in whatever report you make.... Is this for a thesis?

SPORN: This is for a book.

RATHMER: Oh, for a book. Yes, well, that's also good. You have your doctoral thesis at this time?

SPORN: Oh, yes, many years ago. Did it ever occur to you that the kind of thing you were doing when you went to that small bakery to collect what they owed you.... Did a similarity occur to you between threatening the small bakery with the removal of its machine, if the bakery did not pay your bill, did that situation ever occur to you as similar to the threat by the Congress to do away with the appropriations for the Federal Writers' Project?

RATHMER: Well, of course, we heard of the threat to do away with the Writers' Project and that was one reason for this procession all night when my dress shrunk. We could do nothing much about it excepting protest because we had no economic influence like the workers of the automobile factories.

SPORN: In one of your papers, you mentioned that you took a ride out to Flint, Michigan when the sit-down strike was on.

RATHMER: Oh, yes. I took a ride to Pontiac when the sit-down strike was on. The building in which the meeting was held was so crowded that I

RATHMER: couldn't have gotten in except that I got in on the coattails of Maurice Sugar. Do you know the name, Maurice Sugar? I wonder if he is still living?

SPORN: No, he is dead but his wife is still alive.

RATHMER: Jane is....

SPORN: Jane Sugar, you know them?

RATHMER: Oh, I knew them very well because, for one thing, Jane and my sister were roommates in college. When I went abroad, when I went to the Womens' Congress at the Hague, I had Jane substitute for me for the remainder of my teaching contract at Freeport, Illinois. And otherwise, well, they were very good friends. Not so much on the economic base because at that time I didn't have much knowledge of the economic implications of all the things that were happening to me. I was more of a pacifist, I was not considered quite the intellectual equal, I think, of many of my colleagues because my efforts were concentrated on my struggle for citizenship. But, I found great sympathy on the Writers' Project. I was dismissed from the Writers' Project when it was determined that only American citizens should have this privilege, and of course, I can understand that they felt that those who were non-citizens should not, had no right to demand this particular advantage. So, I was dismissed, but I appealed and I was reinstated. I didn't lose any salary, I mean, perhaps I might have lost a week or two, but I was reinstated. Of course, that was the occasion for a great uprising among feminists in Detroit because I already was in the process of fighting for my citizenship. As you may know, I was completely reinstated as a citizen by the same judge who first denied me. Of course, that is one of the high points in my story.

SPORN: Yes, I read about that. Your papers deal with a good deal of that fight to get back your citizenship and I read about it. The workers on the Writers' Project supported you, too? The workers supported you in this fight?

RATHMER: Oh, yes, very much and it was a worker in behalf of the others who did the paperwork for my appeal.

SPORN: A Federal Writers' Project worker?

RATHMER: Yes, well, I mean, it was informal but I remember when I appealed or

RATHMER: when it was necessary for me to write letters it was someone on the Writers' Project who wrote the letters in my behalf. I wish I could remember her name, maybe it will come to me. And, of course, as I said at the beginning of our colloquia here, I was hoping to receive from you as much or more information as to names and dates, but you are still on the search for dates and names.

SPORN: Well, I've given you some of the names. The dates are 1937 and a little bit of 1938.

RATHMER: In writing an autobiography, dates are also important.

SPORN: Very important, very important.

RATHMER: Oh, I have still so much to do, although I have completed this story. I did dictate to a friend, who was interested, from the beginning of my life to a disarmament conference in New York. I have that in my manuscript at this moment.

SPORN: Does the name Mary Barrett mean anything to you?

RATHMER: I think that will come to me. Mary Barrett. She was on the administration?

SPORN: She was on the Federal Writers' Project in Michigan for awhile and then transferred to the Washington office. There seems to have been some controversy between her and Mrs. Chittendon, who was one of the first state administrators of the Federal Writers' Project. After Mrs. Chittendon, Egbert Isbell was the state administrator and then after Egbert Isbell, William Young was the state administrator. I believe William Young was the state administrator when you were on the project.

RATHMER: Yes.

SPORN: Can you tell me something more about Anteo J. Tarini? Do you remember anything more about him?

RATHMER: Tarini. Well, I have the vivid impression that he was quite young, that is, he probably wasn't more than twenty-one or twenty-two. The thing I remember most about Tarini (laughs) was that he was in love with the girl who married someone else on the project.

SPORN: He was in love with a woman who worked on the project....

RATHMER: Yes, a young woman, a girl.

SPORN: .... who then married somebody else on the project?

RATHMER: Yes. I can't quite remember her name, but I very well remember

RATHMER: Tarini. He was, oh, such a genial, attractive young man. I don't remember his exact function but he was right there, worked on the same table or in the same environment as I did. He was quite radical, if I remember correctly. When I say radical there is a difference, the people that really want to do something about their circumstance and the people that simply theorize about it. Of course, the young people are always active.

SPORN: He wanted to do something or theorize?

RATHMER: Oh, he wanted to do something about it. I mean like demonstrations.

SPORN: He was president of the union you were in for a short period, after Arthur Clifford.

RATHMER: Yes. Yes, he was president of the union.

SPORN: Do you remember a publication called American Stuff. It was a publication put out by the Federal Writers' Project to provide an outlet for the creative work of people on the project, people who were writing poems and short stories on their own time, but while they were members of the Federal Writers' Project. The Federal Writers' Project collected many of these poems and short stories and published it in a book called American Stuff. Do you remember anything about that? Tarini was the local, that is, the Detroit editor for that American Stuff.

RATHMER: Well, I have a vague recollection, but somehow... I only have a vague recollection of that. Apparently, I didn't contribute to that. My husband finally got a good job in Texas and, therefore, I was not eligible. So, I was on the project less than two years, I think. I resigned or was removed because it was unethical to be on the project if you had another means of livelihood or your husband. Gradually, the technical separation under which I first obtained my employment on the Writers' Project just didn't last. Although, in one sense of the word, it was actual because there was no employment, there was no work in Battle Creek for my husband. There just wasn't enough work. He had had a prosperous business, electric motor repair and, you see, so many of the shops, of the factories were shut down and there was just no way of his getting a job. So, he advertised with my little money that I got from the Writers' Project that enabled him to advertise in a national agency. So, then he got a job as



RATHMER: foreman in San Antonio, Texas. Then, I went, I joined him in Texas. That also was an enlightening experience.

SPORN: Robert Hayden published a poem in that American Stuff, do you remember anything about that or about any of the work that Robert Hayden was doing at that time?

RATHMER: The poem of Robert's, of Bob's, that I most remember begins, it's to a woman, an African: "You should be happy and free under the greenwood tree" or something like that. Maybe, it wasn't the greenwood tree.

SPORN: That poem was published. Yes, indeed. (Pause). You were going to say something?

RATHMER: Whatever I was going to say - I'm getting a little tired.

SPORN: I think we'll stop here and if possible, I can come back some other time. This has proved to be most interesting.

END OF TAPE, SIDE B.