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President - 1965-67
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Interview with Father Robert McEwen (Norman Silber)
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Prof. Silber: This is an interview with Father Robert McEwen. The interview is taking place on March 17, 1983 at the Hyatt Regency Hotel. The interviewer is Dr. Norman Silber.

Father McEwen, could you first describe for me how it was that you became interested, first in the consumer movement, and then in ACCI specifically?

Father McEwen: My interest in the consumer movement stems from a joint academic interest in economics and social policy and social ethics. I have been interested in social ethical questions for a long time, and around 1949, I developed courses in social ethics and in the business codes of practice and the social responsibilities of business. Then, I did a dissertation on price justice, the requirements for a fair market with specific reference to what was known as the "Fair Trade" laws in those years, and by another term, called resale price maintenance.

In researching that subject, I came to the conclusion that the so-called fair trade laws in the United States particularly, were so one-sided as to not merit any designation as fair in an ethical sense because there was neither public participation nor government participation. It was totally one-sided on the part of the producer. In the course of that study, a subsidiary conclusion emerged that, in most of these markets, the consumer's side was so unrepresented and so weak as to make it almost impossible to have an equality of bargaining power that would anywhere approach a fair price, or a fair pricing marketing structure.

Then I began advocating the establishment of some consumer groups, consumer agencies, consumer councils that would help to strengthen the consumer side of the market. From that, I led to the formation of consumer associations, which we started in Massachusetts and to the establishment of state agencies, called in Massachusetts, the Consumer Council. I was the first chairman of that for five years in the Attorney General's office in Massachusetts.

NS: Approximately when?

RM: It started in 1958. We had filed legislation in '56 and '57 and '58 to establish such an office in the state government, and in '58 the Attorney General established it and asked me to head it. I headed that for five years in the Attorney General's office, and then in '63 it was legislatively established as an independent unit, and I headed that in Massachusetts for another year, and I've been a member of that for eight years. So that's how I got into the consumer field.

How did I get into ACCI? I think one year, either '52 or '53, I received a letter or telephone call inviting me to a meeting of some people who were interested in this consumer education, consumer economics field. The first time that invitation came, it was a financial stringency period at the college, and I inquired, "Are there any funds to pay costs of attending?" and regretfully, the answer came back, "No," so I couldn't go. But the next year, I did go, and from then on, to the annual meeting. I think that would have been around '54, '55.

NS: Do you remember where it was?

RM: I don't, offhand. Those are the kinds of things that...

NS: Here's a list of the meetings and the dates there.

RM: Maybe it's '57. Maybe it's St. Louis, Missouri. Dayton, Ohio doesn't ring any bells with me; it probably wasn't that.

NS: Dayton was the first national conference.

RM: Well, this has to have been earlier than that. My recollection of this was probably one of those informal meetings that I spoke about the other night, in Chicago or Minneapolis. That's my vague recollection of the place.

But, at any rate, I started then to go to the annual conventions. They had a habit in those years of asking representatives from the various states to report on consumer affairs and consumer interest matters in their own state, so that for several years, I think that I would have been representing Massachusetts on a panel of state people. That's how I got into it. I don't remember exactly what year.

NS: What led you to move from "mere" membership to the executive level?

RM: Oh, somebody asked me to run for some office and..

NS: I think around 1962 or '63 is when you first appear on the board of directors. You're on the board in '62 and you're not on the board in '61, so I think that's when you first joined the board of directors.

RM: That's probably true, then. One of those years I was program director in San Francisco. When was the meeting in San Francisco?

NS: The San Francisco meeting was in Berkeley, 1965.

RM: OK. I was the program chair for that meeting in Berkeley and I think the program chairman was either vice president or president elect or something like that. At any rate, that's the program I ran in '65 in San Francisco.

NS: There appears in Henry Harap's history of ACCI, really, a fairly long discussion of the innovative nature of that program that you planned in Berkeley. What do you remember about it?

RM: I remember being impressed by the fact that there were not enough men in the association and that the breadth of interests represented by the discussion and programs hadn't satisfied me, so I was trying to steer the association into an interest in anti-trust matters, into the law, into economic policy decisions, and also attempt to broaden the membership by introducing these new subject matters. And, I think Jessie Coles, who is that famous name in ACCI history, was local arrangements chairman for that meeting at Berkeley. We succeeded, if I recall correctly, in getting a fair number of prominent characters, several lawyers; I think Melvin Belli might have been one of them.

NS: Did Jessie Coles have a stroke?

RM: Jessie died.

NS: Right around then?

RM: Yes, but she didn't die then; she died a long time later, but she did have some kind of an accident or attack or something, but it didn't prevent her from carrying through the arrangements.

NS: And so the whole thing fell into your lap?

RM: I think so.

NS: I couldn't tell from reading the Harap history.

RM: Yes. She worked from her home. Maybe she was confined to home, but my recollection is that she remained quite in control of things.

NS: You've suggested that you were concerned that there weren't enough men and that really the focus of the organization seemed to you perhaps a little bit narrow. How did you then account for that?

RM: The membership was, by that time, very predominantly home economics teachers, and I've later said in other places that, rightly or wrongly, the home economists were very much tied to agriculture and tied to land-grant schools, and my reading of the situation was... (I guess we're jumping ahead a little on this one because what I'm talking about now is more pertinent to the role I've played, and ACCI played, in the formation of the CFA, but I'll finish the thought anyway). The thought being there was a great reluctance on the part of the home economists and the land grant school people to do anything that might be viewed as activism, or lobbying, or policy decision advocacy and things like that.

If I remember correctly, there were several disputes at some of the meetings in those earlier years on that very subject. I think that was also in my mind when I scheduled this heavily anti-trust and economic policy meeting in Berkeley. I had been representing a sort of a hybrid group—the ones who were in education but also in local political action and lobbying—and being on the Attorney General's Council, we were actively up to our necks in law and policy. There were several others from the other states who shared that interest and feelings, and it was that kind of interest that led us to look for an outlet.

We understood, and I still understand, that the precarious financial footing on which ACCI rested in those years made everybody nervous about either alienating the sources of funding in Consumers Union; or in the case of land grant colleges, alienating the Department of Agriculture and the government which was supplying funds to them.

ACCI did go along with sending me as a delegate—I guess it would have been '65 or '66—to a committee of other state and local consumer people, which committee ultimately led to the foundation of the Consumer Federation. I was the chairman of this committee of the state and local people that were interested in forming some sort of a national activism group, which committee sooner or later joined with another national committee of organization people that had been sponsoring the big Washington Consumer Assembly, and that joint committee was called the Steering Committee for the Foundation of the Consumer Federation. I was the chairman of that as long as it lasted, which culminated in the drafting of the by-laws and the incorporation of the Consumer Federation. So, in a way, ACCI was a leading force in the formation of the Consumer Federation of America.

NS: That sounds as though you were, but I wonder to what degree ACCI was.

RM: Only that I was the ACCI representative at this. I'm not sure how much the rest of ACCI knew [laughter].

NS: Well, that's what I was getting at.

RM: I'm not sure. But as it turns out, I represented ACCI on that committee. I think there was a small group. I can't tell you now how big it was, but I think there was a small nucleus in ACCI that wanted more action, more outlets for action, and one of the ways of getting this was setting up this separate committee which ultimately led to the separate organization.

NS: You were the representative to the committee, right?

RM: Yes.

NS: You were the only representative of ACCI on the committee, is that right?

RM: I think so. Yes.

NS: Do you remember how it was that you were appointed the representative to the committee?

RM: I think I was the president of ACCI.

NS: What kind of sense did you get of the nature of the membership and your mandate as president? Did you have a feeling for what that mandate was?

RM: I may be reading into it, but I think that this minority was very much interested in consumer activism and wanted an outlet and it became clear that we couldn't get it in the present structure of ACCI (of CCI, in those days). We couldn't get it in that present structure, and I don't recall any... Now, if you asked me, I would have said that the membership would have been almost unanimous in saying, "Yes, go ahead. If you want activism, go form another organization."

NS: Do you think that was part of the reason you had been chosen president elect to begin with?

RM: No, I don't think that had anything to do with it. Now, maybe I'm wrong, but I don't think there was any connection—though maybe there was—I'm not sure.

NS: You have been working very hard for ACCI. You must have been, in order to be elected as the president.

RM: Yes, but I still can't get the feel of whether there was any desire on the part of any other members to achieve the activism link through this method.

NS: Did you bring the conference to Berkeley, or was that the decision of some other group?

RM: The location of the CCI has always been a problem, and it's very seldom that it's gone to the coasts. I can't remember without going into more research, what went into the decision for the location.

NS: Berkeley must have been a very exciting place in 1960.

RM: It was, and the conference itself...Incidentally, I have that whole conference on tape somewhere, because I'm a squirrel that saves everything. That's why I needed a month to get to the root of the documents that you needed to answer some of these questions. But I have that whole conference, every speech, everything.

NS: I would be interested in seeing it. Part of the *Proceedings* have been transcribed?

RM: Yes, the *Proceedings* are transcribed and published, but I'm not sure how.

NS: Do you have a recollection as to where the ACCI stood in relation to other consumer interest organizations in the early years in which you were president? I have in mind some of the very ones that you have mentioned: the cooperative movement, the labor movement.

RM: I would think that there was a heavy coop interest among the early CCI members. I doubt that there was any union involvement at all. Apart from some of the state and local groups who would send a representative to the meetings, I can't recall any links CCI had with any other consumer groups.

NS: When you entered, I gathered there was some question about the mission in ACCI, or what was then CCI.

RM: When I entered?

NS: About the time in the late '50s and up until the mid '60s, there was question as to whether or not the organization was an organization of professionals or whether it ought to serve ultimate consumers or the grass roots or give service to all consumers.

RM: I guess that kind of questioning about who it was serving and who it was aimed at did go on quite a bit. I'm not sure in my own mind whether I had any doubts that it should be a professional organization and was not really equipped to serve the general public—though as has been mentioned—the publishing program that it had underway was theoretically justified as aimed at the general public. I don't think it ever did get to the general public. I guess that's the way it was for the first few years. There was an ambivalence present in the membership concerning who was serving what audience.

NS: You served as president in 1965, I think—'65-'66 and '66-'67. Reading through the board minutes I get the feeling that that's a period in which there was a great deal of searching and trying to find an identity for ACCI. What do you remember of that?

RM: Well, only as a general impression, similar to what I said about the Berkeley conference. The image that I wanted to create and encourage was that of a broadly representative consumer interest that went beyond narrow home economic interests into what could logically be called the whole consumer field, and I guess I had no problem about that being an objective all through that period.

NS: Were you concerned about changing the name of the organization from CCI to ACCI?

RM: Well, the name change—I forget the year it was—but the name change I associate with the conscious expansion of its stated field. "Information" was a very restricted field, and I interpret the words "consumer interests" to be a much broader charter for the organization.

The whole information idea was allied to this neutrality that the land grant agricultural background had encouraged—that there was to be no activism, no advocacy, no lobbying, but it would be pure information—so I interpret the name change as signifying a broadening of the scope.

NS: Was that something that you actively sought?

RM: The name change? I can honestly say I don't remember. In retrospect, it was something I see as necessary and useful in order to make it clear that all these other things were pertinent subjects for ACCI involvement.

Incidentally, it's the same thinking that's involved in the name of the *Journal of Consumer Affairs*, because we deliberately chose the word "Affairs" to be as broad a word designating the wide sweep of consumer interests.

I sometimes worry that the *Journal* developed too narrowly, and in some respects, doesn't live up to the name; that's one of my concerns. But my recollections of the choice of the name were the word "Affairs" was deliberately chosen to make anything in the consumer field a fit subject.

NS: When I read that, I wondered whether "Affairs" was a way out of a problem that some may have had with the word "Interests."

RM: I may be wrong, but I don't think so. I think we chose the word "Interests" in order to keep CCI; all we did was add an "A" to CCI. I think that it was an endeavor to keep the identity of CCI close by just adding an "A". In my view, "Interest" and "Affairs" was almost synonymous, and the reason for keeping "Interest" in the name was to keep CCI's initials the same—try to keep the identity allied. But we didn't call it consumer economics, and we didn't call it.... I don't know what the other choices were; I don't know whether the records show any other choices, do they?

NS: Yes, they do. They show a number of words: Information, Interests... I have them here somewhere. There were a number of different permutations that were passed around about what the proper name should be [laughter].

RM: I don't know whether this is reading something into it, but I facetiously say that the only way we ever got the *Journal (Journal of Consumer Affairs)* started—because there was a lot of fear on the part of the board at that time, and I suppose, on the part of the membership—there was a lot of fear and timidity about this venture: whether we were biting off more than we could chew and whether it would work, etc. I facetiously say that I locked the board into the meeting room with a fifth of bourbon and said, "We're going to stay here starving until you vote it out" [laughter].

NS: Were you really pushing for this journal?

RM: Yes. I wanted the *Journal* because I figured if it was going to be a professional association, it had to have an outlet; it had to have a journal; it had to have a vehicle.

We had been getting out these little pamphlets on various subjects at intermittent intervals, and the money that would have been spent on those could well have been put into a journal.

No, I was convinced that if it was to be a professional association, that it had to adopt a journal.

NS: You were trying to think about how to expand the organization. Who did you think belonged in ACCI who wasn't in it?

RM: Anybody with any of the disciplines: law, economics, psychology, sociology, political science—you name it—even social work to a large extent, or journalism. Any one of those disciplines that had a facet of their interest or work touching on consumer matters, I thought, should have been logical membership potential for the *Journal* and the association.

NS: Incidentally, Ralph Nader wrote *Unsafe at Any Speed* in 1966, I think. Did he join ACCI?

RM: No. Ralph never joined anything to my knowledge.

NS: Except the board of Consumers Union.

RM: Yes, that's right, and I don't think he lasted very long on that. No, Ralph's not a joiner of other things.

NS: What I'm asking, I guess, is whether you feel that the non-advocacy position of the organization deterred those grass roots consumer organizers who were rising and growing up in the '50s from joining ACCI?

RM: Yes. I guess I did feel, in those years, that any one of them who came would get turned off by the neutrality position that they encountered, the lack of enthusiasm for action and for involvement. I guess I did feel that, but it was that group that I thought should be represented in the *Journal* and in the association if we were to grow correctly.

I was never worried about Ralph. I don't remember whether he came to any meetings or not, but I was never concerned that he didn't come because he was a lone wolf who didn't enlist in any other organizations.

NS: Did you ever attempt to get the organization involved in advocacy to a degree that the other members of the board or membership found objectionable?

RM: Oh, yes.

NS: Could you tell me about some of those?

RM: I don't know whether I was directly involved, but I could have been. My recollection is that at several of those early meetings, resolutions were proposed. I suspect one of them might have been on the formation of consumer offices in the federal government—something like that.

At any rate, policy resolutions were brought up at some annual meetings and created a big fight. I can't give you the details now without checking through the minutes, or the recollections, but I think there were several incidents at those early conferences.

NS: There was a question about whether or not to recommend Persia Campbell for the presidential post of consumer advisor. I know that came before, at some point.

RM: I don't know whether that was just her, or whether it was recommended that the post be created also. Maybe that was it. At any rate, that's a sample of the type of policy resolution that created a fight.

NS: Didn't Mr. Morse at one point try to get truth-in-lending endorsed?

RM: Yes, that's possible, too. There were a few of those things that we thought were rather unanimously approved consumer positions that would have been logical candidates for approval by a group such as ACCI or CCI. Frequently they would provoke a fight. It was from that fight that this desire to have an outlet broader than CCI grew.

Once the CFA was formed, I never went so far as to want ACCI to risk taking a policy commitment on controversial matters because that would risk fights and divisions inside the organization that I didn't think were healthy. That doesn't mean—and I have a certain amount of criticism of the recent past on this score—that the conferences and programs shouldn't address these controversial issues, perhaps even with both sides represented.

One of the problems that the so-called activists would have—and I think some of them probably did express this—was a feeling that the organization was irrelevant if you judged it by what it discussed and wrote about, etc. That's the fear that I have now—that the really big consumer issues of today are nowhere represented on the previous programs or present programs of the ACCI, and that, I think, was a mistake. I regret that development. I think it's true that we have largely failed to keep the attention of the membership focused on the most pressing of the consumer problems.

NS: The program that you planned—regulation and utility rates, quality of products and services, cooperative organizations, anti-trust, the stimulation of consumer research in the universities—were these the burning issues of the day?

RM: Yes, as we saw them at that time.

NS: Were there blacks in the organization at that time?

RM: Yes, a president was a black around that time (Myers).

NS: I'm thinking that the civil rights movement and concern about low income consumers would have been important. This was the heyday of the civil rights movement.

RM: That was always an interest, and I think you'll find that spread through programs—the interest in the low-income consumer.

NS: Was there discussion about providing better access to the organization for members of minorities and low income groups?

RM: I think that's always been discussed, and if I'm not mistaken, conscious efforts were made to recruit students in attendance and representatives of these groups. Some cities better than others, but I think conscious efforts were made to get them in attendance.

What I'm referring to in my previous remark is things like the exclusive soft drink and beer franchise laws that have quietly been slipped through Congress—laws that will stifle price competition in beer and soft drinks at the local level.

Another example is the issue that I'm raising this year, and last year, on the copyright laws and the efforts of the copyright owners and producers to attach conditions to the sale of their product so that it can't be rented without their permission. I felt that, if we didn't get into those early--and we haven't, except for the panel that we scheduled last year—it's all over by the time we wake up to the fact that it's a consumer issue. I wish I knew how to prevent that, but that's a deficiency that I see.

Another example is the whole field of banking, which is in a terrible state of confusion and flux at the moment and probably presents more consumer confusion than anything on the horizon today. That's something that we haven't paid enough attention to.

NS: In a sense, is your concern that consumer educators will not be aware of the problem? I mean, what is it that discussion at ACCI that inclusion on the program accomplishes?

RM: If this is a professional association of those primarily in the education field, or allied fields, then presumably the inculcation of attitudes and information to the students and the general public is dependent upon what this group does. If this group is ignoring an issue, I can't expect the student bodies or the general public to be abreast of them.

NS: Let's turn that around. What would you consider to be the major accomplishments of ACCI as you see them?

RM: The major accomplishments, I guess, relate to making the field of consumer interest and studies a respectable professional field that has its own association, journal, and substantial groups of professors and students. That is, I think, its major accomplishment.

NS: You're just talking about filtering down from the professions to the population at large—I guess, the general public eventually. Are there situations that you can say, "My gosh, this profession did that?"

RM: Yes, to the extent that consumer consciousness in the general population has been enormously raised in the last ten years, I would have to say yes, I think the profession has had a large bit to do with that.

The general public media, of course, is also involved, but I think it's fair to say that the members of this association and profession have been very largely influential in developing those attitudes and information. That's why, if this group doesn't attack on an intellectual level

the problems that I think are important, then I see the solution of those problems being made totally independent of the consumer opinion—which is what happened in the beer case and the soft drink case. That went through without a voice being raised.

I'm happy to see some international consumer developments on the program this year. But things like that—domestic content and automobiles, which has badly split some of the consumer movement in the United States particularly—that's something that we should have been on top of a long time ago.

NS: Did you face this problem of the land grant colleges and the home economics groups feeling reluctant to get involved in—I don't know how you would phrase it—political advocacy, I guess you could say. Do you find that that stemmed as much from a regard for a need to maintain harmonious relationships with business groups or commercial groups?

RM: I think that's secondary, if at all. I think that was more a fear of funding losses—either the government's or the Consumers Union. The Consumers Union was the major funder in the early years, and they of course, are a non-profit organization. There was some concern that too much advocacy would have jeopardized them putting any money in, you see. That may have been true. No, I don't think it was fear of offending business groups as much, though there were always some in the field of home economics that were closer to business than they were to the consumer, and that was one of our problems.

NS: How did that manifest itself?

RM: I can't give you any concrete example of that. Inside the organization, I don't think it did manifest itself, except in the prevention of any activist positions.

NS: Wouldn't the non-voting status given to business or commercially affiliated members have solved that problem?

RM: Yes, but I'm talking about way back before that; this thing is relatively recent.

NS: If anything, then, one would assume that, given a certain amount of liberty to the organization subsequent to that...

RM: Well, don't forget, in the former years there were no business representatives in membership. I don't rightly know when they allowed business representatives to actually register and participate and join, but it was after they allowed them to register, participate and join that they got worried about being dominated by business representatives. That's when they put in this non-voting status. In the early years, it wasn't a question.

What I was referring to was that some home economists, some agricultural economists, were heavily dependent on business research money for their own projects and their own support, and in some cases, the support of the university department where they were. It was that link that would have made some of them cautious. But I haven't got the faintest idea what the dimensions of that problem were.

NS: Was the IRS status ever of concern to you?

RM: For a long time we couldn't get it. I forget what year we finally did, but it was very late that we finally broke through with the IRS tax exempt status.

NS: But were you trying, were you searching to be certified "non-partisan"?

RM: We were always trying and getting refused, apparently.

NS: Were the postage rates an important consideration in this?

RM: I think so, yes. But we never did have the postal status in the early years. I know we tried and tried and tried and got refused. I'm pretty sure they tried out of Colorado.

NS: I spoke to Ed Metzen.

RM: Yes.

NS: He said that they had tried at Colorado, and they tried again in Missouri, and they were...

RM: Yes, they got refused. It's much harder than you think.

NS: Can I ask you about the relationship of politicians to ACCI and their efforts to either have their policies endorsed by the organization or actually to appear at the convention itself?

RM: I never found any problem in getting politicians to appear. As a matter of fact, I think you'll find a fair number of them appeared on that program in Berkeley. They were quite willing to come, and in many cases, without being paid any expenses or anything. Only rarely did we ever pay anybody's expenses in those years.

I can't remember. There probably were one or two efforts, but I don't think it was a serious problem of a politician trying to get us to endorse something. In my memory, it doesn't ring any bells as important.

NS: I was thinking it fell apart, specifically the...

RM: Oh, in the St. Louis business with Senator Phil Hart.

NS: Yes.

RM: Well, he really didn't. As I recall, he just took the position that, "I've got some ideas I'd like to hear your reaction to..." I don't think he asked us to endorse anything. He was the last guy in the world who would have pushed for an endorsement of any sort. I guess there have been about a couple—I can't remember which ones they were—of somebody trying to get an endorsement, but they were so isolated that it doesn't matter.

NS: We talked a little bit before about the Consumers Union situation. How restrictive were the financial problems of the organization during the period you served on the board, in terms of its goals and objectives?

RM: Extraordinarily restrictive. You may or may not have heard if you were here yesterday. Ed said last night he paid a bill to the printer or somebody, and there was 38 cents left in the treasury.

In the years that I had, for instance, I remember one rather touchy board session because we didn't have any money to pay anybody's board expenses. Anybody who attended the board meeting had to come at his own expense, literally.

NS: It's a good thing it wasn't in San Francisco or Alaska or something like that.

RM: Well, you know, I had people on that program in San Francisco who paid their own way to come. There was one lawyer in Boston who was on that anti-trust panel who paid his own way to come, and as far as I know, practically everybody on that program paid their own way.

NS: Wow!

RM: And, while I felt bad about it because board members, particularly, are giving up extra days and so forth, there just was no money to pay their expenses at least one of those years.

NS: Do you remember any of the sessions where you tried to figure out how to increase revenues?

RM: They always talked about how to increase membership. I'm not sure membership would have been enough to...there was always discussion of how to increase revenues, and always some plan or scheme or something was proposed, but nothing much ever materialized. I can't recall honestly any suggestions for increasing revenue that ever was advanced and adopted and succeeded.

NS: What about the problem or the question of taking grants?

RM: Well, I think we would have taken them if they had been offered [laughter], but we couldn't even get a grant offered. That's a relatively recent phenomenon. I think we talked about how we could get a grant, but we never did get any that I can recall.

NS: I know, eventually, that in '69 and '70 there was a real effort using a development grant from Consumers Union to boost membership.

RM: Yes. But earlier on...

NS: How were you trying to spread the gospel to those people you thought would take to ACCI?

RM: By mail, just a mailing, that's all. They tried to make a mailing soliciting membership on....I think there was a time when they tried to set up state or local membership chairmen. That's always been a desire, but it never really caught on. The membership is and was rather closely linked to the schools where there's a fairly big consumer economics or home economics program in the universities. That's where the biggest membership totals came from. I don't remember anything except a few sporadic mailings that didn't succeed in doing much.

NS: Maybe I could turn the situation around and ask whether or not the existence of ACCI may have helped boost—and create even—some college programs in consumer education.

RM: Yes, I would hope it did. I can't give you any evidence that it did—and it should have. And, in time, I guess the existence of the association led to colleges being willing to fund attendance by some of those teachers, which is the only way most of them were going to get there. I don't know how much of that went on in the early years. I think practically everyone who came in the early years would have had to get it out of the college or university, or themselves, one or the other.

NS: When would you have said that membership in ACCI was your primary identification or chief association?

RM: I'm not sure I know what you mean by "chief association."

NS: In research that I've done, I found some people saying that one of the problems ACCI had was that for too many people, it was a secondary association in the sense that they were members of this activist group first, and also members of ACCI. Or they were members of a government group and also members of ACCI. Was that true for you?

RM: I think that's been true right from the beginning. You see, most of us would have been primarily members of, say, the American Economics Association or the American Political Science Association so that if you said, "What's your primary membership," that's probably

what it would have been, so that ACCI would have been second or third. But I didn't see any problem with that. It never occurred to me as a problem.

NS: It might appear as a problem in terms of your ability to commit time and personal resources to the organization itself.

RM: No, I didn't see any connection between the two. Most of the people in the early years committed enormous time and personal effort to the organization.

NS: In their efforts to get members for the group, the ACCI officers, I gather, combed through lists of the AEA or the AHEA or whatever; political scientists, I don't think, really played a role. I guess I'm asking if, in retrospect, ACCI's accomplishment was to create at least a nucleus or a growing number of people for whom there was a primary identification. In other words, did that change over time, in a sense, where it became a move from being just another organization?

RM: Yes. I think you're right. In time, the membership, in what had been the first organization, became then subordinate—yes, that is true. I think that did happen, and in time, this became the primary professional association of most of the people.

NS: Some people have said to me they stopped going to the American Economics Association convention, and after a while, just went to the ACCI group.

RM: Yes, I did!

NS: Do you remember when?

RM: For thirteen years I was chairman of the department, so I had no choice; I had to go.

NS: Coercion.

RM: I had to go to recruit and so forth. And I transferred that office in 1970. I think I stopped going around then. I went to ACCI in '70.

Part of it also, was what I actually referred to in the beginning, that increasingly, it became clear that the primary association didn't have any interest in the field of consumer affairs, so less and less we were getting any materials discussed or presented that touched on the field. So, in one sense, the remark I made earlier (and it was true), it was becoming irrelevant to your work and your interests. That's what I don't want to see happen to ACCI. That, I think, explains the proliferation of all these other splinter professional groups that have sprung up. There's an association for everything under the sun right now.

NS: What do you think would have prevented that?

RM: The only way it could have been prevented was if the primary association paid enough attention to all the specific interest groupings of its members. The fact, I think, that these little associations formed, means that they weren't getting something out of the primary association.

NS: Can you give me some concrete examples of the splinter groups?

RM: In the economic field you have them by the dozens: the Association of Black Economists, the Association for African Studies, the Association for...I can't even....

NS: I thought that you were saying that they splintered off and they could have been part of ACCI.

RM: Oh, no, no, no.

NS: You're talking about the AEA.

RM: I'm talking about the AEA, yes. As far as I know nothing has splintered off of ACCI. There may have been people who didn't come any longer because they didn't find their interests met. I can't honestly say that. I don't see any evidence that they went out and formed anything new to supplant us or take its place.

NS: Do you think the environmental movement, for example, or people that you might consider appropriate to be members of ACCI who are in the environmental movement, went out and formed their own organizations because ACCI didn't seem to provide a comfortable home?

RM: The environmental movement presents a very serious problem to ACCI and the whole consumer field. I remember looking at a program recently of a big environmental conference in Massachusetts. In looking carefully over the program and the participants, the subject matters—and very little of it, I thought—would have been a strictly consumer interest session or approach for a consumer person, and I've had very mixed feelings about the relationships between environmentalists and the consumer movement.

In fact, I wrote a bitter letter to the *Washington Post* about a year ago when they had published a letter from the Wildlife Foundation in Washington and it happened to be the same day that the consumer groups were picketing one of the supermarkets for taking item pricing—I believe it was—off the goods. The Wildlife writer said, "Well, we have nothing to say about this item pricing thing, but we do want (some other cause they were interested in at the moment)...we do want to emphasize the importance of litter control (or something like that).

I wrote a letter and I called them up and told them off in no uncertain terms. I said, "You want us to support you, and when one of our prime goals is on the fire, you say you have no interest in it?" And I said, "We support you on the bottle bill and similar legislation; why can't you support us?"

So, I've got mixed emotions about the environmental business. I think it was environmentalists' excesses that pulled the consumer movement down with it in the past few years.

NS: This is going back a bit, but do you remember when you first were conscious of leading something that could be called the consumer movement?

RM: When?

NS: I mean, does it predate ACCI, and if not, about when would you place it?

RM: I think we sort of sensed an identity somewhere in the mid '50s. That's when I would first begin to sense that there was the possibility of an organized movement of people more or less on the same wave length. The reason I say the mid '50s is that I know that our Massachusetts experience was conditioned to a large extent on imitating the New York experience which took place in 1954 and...

NS: That was the Campbell...

RM: Yes. And Persia, as a matter of fact, was my very great advisor and helper in setting up Massachusetts, so we really imitated and followed that. But around that time, I would say, the notion of a group movement began to take shape.

NS: And ACCI was...

RM: ...was just about at the same time; I think that all coincided. As a matter of fact, I suspect, if you ask all those people who were at the original meetings, did they think they were forming a movement, I think they'd all say yes. I've been using the term for a long time.

NS: You've been using the term "consumer movement" for as long as you can remember?

RM: Yes.

NS: When would you say the consumer movement acquired political recognition and political force?

RM: I think that time is when it started. It certainly got political force in New York in '54; it got political force in Massachusetts in '57 and '58; and Washington in '61, maybe.

NS: Would you place the availability of career opportunities in consumer professional endeavors along the same time period?

RM: No, that was later, I think. With the proliferation of consumer offices, career opportunities began to open up, but more so with the development of consumer divisions and offices in business, and that didn't take place until very late, I would say. I'm not sure when to put a time period on that one, but its proliferation, I'm sure, didn't take place until late in the '60s, maybe even early '70s. That's when the career opportunities started to open up, when there were places in business, places in government. In the early years, there were very few places in government because there would only be one state agency. The proliferation of county agencies, city agencies hadn't taken place.

NS: Would you say that the creation of a job followed the recognition on the part of political leaders that there was mileage to be made by defending the consumer interest?

RM: Yes.

NS: And to what degree would that have depended on the sort of intellectual underpinnings that would establish a concrete consumer interest, and to what degree does ACCI bear any credit for that?

RM: That's a hard question to answer because there's two paths there. I remember giving a speech in California—Association of Consumers meeting in California. I think it was about '65 or '66 and I called that speech "The Consumer Movement at the Crossroads," because California was an early example of a state that jumped out and set up a state council, and they set it up in '59. I used to say one method of setting things up is to do what you said—wait for the groundswell or support to grow, and have the demand come from below and then have the politicians respond to it.

California was just the opposite. The governor got the brainstorm, "This is a good idea," Bang! and he put it in. There was no groundswell yet, and there was probably not even a ground appreciation for what he had done. I always feared (and that's what I told them in California at that time) that they had it too easy in California the way they had it set up, because it was set from above.

NS: A structure without a base.

RM: That's right. It was put in place, and when a hostile governor came along, he could wipe it out like that, and nobody said "Boo!" That's what happened when Brown got out of office; the other guy wiped it out like that.

NS: The other guy was Ronald Reagan.

RM: Yes. Now, in our case in Massachusetts, we went the opposite direction. We went through the groundswell first, and my five years in the Attorney General's Office in the Advisory Consumer Council was spent in sort of building the groundswell that later led to the legislative adoption of it. Once in, that lasted through Republican, and Democrat, and Republican, and so forth. So I don't think there's one answer to what you said. The politician who was wise waited for the groundswell to develop and then jumped on it, or acted on it.

NS: Today in his speech, Anwar Fazal called ACCI the "intellectual bloodbank for the consumer movement." I guess what I was asking was, to what degree that was really essential for the existence for this intellectual foundation; was it really necessary for what happened in the '60s and '70s to take place?

RM: I guess what I'd have to say in answer to that is, obviously ACCI wasn't the intellectual factor in those days, because it hadn't even started, and while I think he's right—it is the intellectual bloodbank right now, at least a major part of it—it was in the beginning. I think whatever intellectual support there was for it in the beginning—which was kind of skimpy—came from individuals like myself and the others in the various states who just did what we could with what we had. If we didn't have enough research, we'd go without it. But now, it is a bloodbank of research.

NS: Did you have anything that you wanted to talk about particularly?

RM: No.

NS: Well then, thank you very much, and we'll send this to you.

RM: Good, OK.