

Interview with Vera Shorter by Jacob Barry for Historic New England's 100 Years—100 Communities Oral History Project, Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, July 15, 2011.

JACOB BARRY: This is Jacob Barry interviewing Vera Shorter at her home in Vineyard Haven on Martha's Vineyard, for Historic New England's 100 Years—100 Communities project, on the history of African American vacationers and tourism in New England. The interview is taking place on July 15th, 2011. So Vera, where are you from originally?

VERA SHORTER: I'm from Huntington and Northport, Long Island. Northport was a very beautiful place. Huntington was more town-like. In Northport I really had a little bit of beautiful country life. I went to high school in Northport and our high school, I think, we had four hundred students. So, everybody really knew everybody and everything. And of course, I really feel that that was one of my best experiences, because we had very modern teaching methods. If you were an academic student, and you wanted to learn business, you could. If your marks were high enough, you could take most courses. I'm only telling you this to lead up to something which I didn't realize. I had not known, except for one incident when I was very young, I had never known overt discrimination.

When I graduated –You know, I wrote in the school's paper. I was on the editorial staff. And I went for a job, and that was the—really, first real slap in my face! And I realized. But of course, I did understand a little bit about it (discrimination), because when I was young, and we would go to visit my grandmother, who was a member of the Phyllis Wheatley Society—Phyllis Wheatley was a black slave

who was adopted by a white family in Boston. You must know about her?

JB: I've heard of her, yeah.

VS: Anyhow, she was a poet, and she was raised with privileges. And the Phyllis Wheatley Society, they were the kind of people that liked the refinement of life, and so Phyllis Wheatley, appealed to them, even though they really did discuss race issues. So I did grow up hearing that.

JB: Yeah.

VS: But it seemed far-fetched for me to understand - something off in the horizon somewhere. After I finished high school, I went (for an interview) to the newspaper office. And they said, "Oh no, Vera. But if you want a job, Mrs. So-and-so needs somebody to clean." Well, that turned me off. So that started me thinking much more actively about fighting for civil rights, right then and there.

JB: Yeah, yeah.

VS: So that's why I told you all that background. [laughs]

JB: Well yeah, that's important stuff.

VS: Okay.

JB: So when—and we'll come back to that. But when did you first come to Oak Bluffs, or to Martha's Vineyard?

VS: Well I think it must have been in the sixties. We came as visitors, you know. We weren't buying anything at that time. We had a house, you know, (in Queens), and in my day you had one house! Very few people had two houses! [Laughs]

JB: Yeah, yeah.

VS: We rented in Oak Bluffs, and we really liked it! We liked the ambiance. We liked the casualness. We had land, which we had bought, in Sag Harbor, and we hadn't built on it. But Sag Harbor was more chic! [Laughs] At least to us. There were nice people in Sag Harbor, too. But Oak Bluffs was really down to earth, and that appealed very much to both my husband and myself. And we started coming. We became renters, or whatever you want to call us—tourists. And then Rufus—that's my husband's name, Rufus Shorter—he really fell in love with Oak Bluffs, Martha's Vineyard—you name it! I mean, it's really like a love story!

JB: Yeah.

VS: It's not just that I liked the place, I liked the trees, or something like that—I liked the beach. He wanted to come, and he had a very busy job with the Board of Ed in New York City. And perhaps that had something to do with it, that it was tranquil for him. And so he then started pressing me, early, to buy a house, to buy a place here. In the seventies I was still reluctant, because our girls were in college, or coming out of college, and it seemed expensive to do that. So finally I said, "Okay!" So we did buy a house. [Laughs] And we thought we were buying in Oak Bluffs, but it ended up in Sea Glen, which is down the road from where I live right now, off the Edgartown Road. But you know, the way they divided these towns! It's interesting, because if you're riding down Vineyard Haven-Edgartown Road, you'll come to an imaginary line, which is part of Oak Bluffs. And so we thought we were buying—in Sea Glen, we thought we were in Oak Bluffs, until we sat down with a broker, [laughs] and he said,

“No, this isn’t Oak Bluffs.” But it didn’t matter to me, anyway. So, we did buy a house there.

JB: Great.

VS: And we subsequently sold it, and came here.

JB: And so what—what kept you coming back to Oak Bluffs? I mean, you said your husband was—was falling in love?

VS: He was in love! [Laughs] Madly in love! [Laughs]

JB: And how did you feel about it?

VS: Well, I was working. I had a pretty high-power job by that time.

JB: What were you doing?

VS: I was the Equal Opportunity Officer for Manhattan District Tax place. Three thousand employees.

JB: Wow!

VS: And I had a small staff and a group of volunteers. So you know, I had a lot of work.

JB: Yeah.

VS: And I was on the Director’s staff, and I was meeting with him, and we were really trying to solve problems, which we—knock on wood; I’m always knocking on wood—but we managed to solve some. Not all; we just couldn’t. But it was a very great experience.

JB: Yeah.

VS: And so I didn’t really want to move down here, and I didn’t want to spend all my free time, every free moment, here. We ended up spending every free moment here, because my husband was a tennis player. I played tennis, too, but nothing like him—not as well as he did.

JB: Yeah.

VS: I began to enjoy it a lot more than I had. I liked it at first. I shouldn't even give you the impression that I didn't like it. I just didn't feel that this was the place I needed to move to!

JB: Yeah.

VS: And so we ended up moving here, when Rufus became the Superintendent of Schools. We had bought Sea Glen before he became Superintendent, but when he became Superintendent, I knew that we needed a little more of a house.

JB: Yeah.

VS: And I loved the fact that I'm off the water. That's my beach down there! I don't use it, but it's my beach! [Laughs] I tell the neighbors they can all use it. All the little kids come down and play. We just kept coming back—that was your original question—because there is something about the Vineyard that's really unique, and it's the sort of closeness of people. Your neighbors are really neighbors.

JB: Yeah.

VS: They're really neighbors. Now, it has some of the same problems as the bigger world. I mean, there's prejudice. There's some discrimination, but it's much more subtle than what you would see in—certainly in Mississippi or some other place.

JB: [Laughs] Yeah.

VS: It's subtle, but it's here. But the neighbors are truly neighborly. So I think that's one of its endearing qualities. And the other thing is its pace. Only in the summer is the pace a little rapid, but that's a couple of months. And I don't mind it, because this is a tourist economy, and I feel the people should try to make their money while they can.

JB: Absolutely.

VS: And of course, they do try, very hard!

JB: Yeah, yeah.

VS: I decided to live here after my husband's death. Because my daughter was in France, and my other one now is in England. But all—everybody invited me—nieces, nephews—to leave the island, and I didn't know then how much I loved the island myself. I went to California; I stayed with people. I went to France. I went to Spain. I did all of that, and I said, "I want to go home." So home is here.

JB: Yeah.

VS: And what is the line? Home is where heart is? So obviously, my heart was here, so I moved here. I didn't move here—I came back here, and really, really settled. I had been here, after he retired. I quit my job, because it would have been too much to try to commute. I was offered a job in Boston, but I don't want to commute. That's one of the disadvantages about the Vineyard –

JB: Yeah, yeah.

VS: It is not the ferry itself, but the fact that you have to get off the island in some conveyance, and of course now they have Cape Air. I think they did have the airport there then, but not like it is today! [Laughs]

JB: Yeah, of course not.

JB: Well, could you talk about what the social life was like when you were coming in here in, like, the sixties, just for the summer?

VS: Well, it was much more homey than it is now. It was—well, we were all younger, so I'm saying it was a younger group, but we were younger!

JB: Yeah, yeah.

VS: And it was very casual. Like, you would go to the beach, and swim, and even still be a little drippy. And someone would say, “Oh, we’re having cocktails at my house. Come on over.” And you could go just like you were. You didn’t have to dress up. Well of course, some people were uncomfortable that way, but people like me, well that’s fine. It wasn’t as, I would say, formal. That’s the word. It was much more informal then. Now, it is a little bit— We have a lot of rich people down here, too. And a lot of book signings, and all that stuff. So now people—when I go out, they seem to be in a more formal mood than in the sixties.

JB: Yeah.

VS: Now, and that’s even true—that’s true of African Americans as well as whites. But back in the sixties and seventies, it was a smaller group, too, so you could really say to everybody on the beach, “Come on over to my house and have a drink.” Now, you probably can’t—because a hundred people might show up. So, there’s always reasons for why mores change. I’m not a sociologist, so I can’t really analyze the change, but it is a change.

JB: Yeah.

VS: But it’s not unwelcome, you know. It’s fine. People like to look pretty anyhow.

JB: Yup. How many families were there when you were coming here? You said there were fewer.

VS: Oh, I wouldn’t know a census of it, but let’s say, as far as I was concerned, sometimes you’d go to a big party. Like Miriam Walker—he probably mentioned Miriam Walker to you.

JB: He might have.

VS: Miriam Walker—she would have a big party! She was a relative of the Shearer people.

JB: Okay.

VS: So she might have a hundred, a hundred and twenty (guests). But most of the time, it seemed to be thirty, forty, maybe fifty at the most, if it was a party. But if you were just coming from the beach, it might just be twenty people. Or it could be ten! Whoever they were sitting with came. But it wasn't planned where you had to get your hors d'oeuvres together, and get somebody in to do the serving and so forth. Although people did that then, too. I mean, they did, and very elegantly. And of course, today they do it, the same. So it's not that much different. It's just a change in a little style.

JB: I see.

VS: Just the style, the dressing is a little more dressed up.

JB: I see.

VS: It's not that they wear formal clothes! The only way to put it—it's very hard to identify a subtle change like this; it really is. So it's more—maybe it's a little more elegance attached to it than it was before. We might have lobsters and put paper on the table, and just do it that way. But today, people have lobsters, and they have the little bibs for you to have the lobster, and so forth.

JB: Yeah, yeah.

VS: I mean, you can sit on the floor and do lobsters, or crabs or things like that, which we did years ago. That's about all I can think of.

JB: So what did people talk about, you know, when they were getting together? Like, what were the subjects of conversation?

VS: Sometimes race, politics, and gossip, you know, and who's who, and what's what. And of course, for me, with celebrity tennis, and I was constantly meeting celebrities, people would ask about whose-whatsey, and you know. And actually, I didn't know those people. I cultivated them, because I wanted to raise money for Nathan Mayhew Seminars. [Laughs] But if you're going to encourage people to donate to organizations, you have to cultivate them.

JB: Yes!

VS: And so I did! But insofar as becoming close, I think the only people I knew were Mike Wallace from 60 Minutes, and Art Buchwald. They really became—I wouldn't say friends, but pretty friendly with me.

JB: Yeah, yeah.

VS: They all knew my husband. I've been to parties where they were. Wallace, Mike Wallace. Mike Wallace, Art Buchwald, the fellow, the President of the University of Pennsylvania, Hackney, Sheldon Hackney and his wife. And I had a good connection with them, because her—Lucy's father, Mr. Durr, had been—had been Martin Luther King's lawyer, at the time when they had the bus strike.

JB: Uh-huh.

VS: So she really had a background! And so, those are things people would ask questions about. And I would tell them whatever I knew, which wasn't too much. And then they would tell me! And of course, we had some distinguished young people here: Wayne Budd, and he was Assistant Attorney General, I think, here from Massachusetts. I don't know where he is now. And I can't think of his name, but he became the Comptroller for New York. He's a young black man—
younger than we were—of New York. And they—they talked

politics. They talked—and it was interesting. They talked about current things.

So you really had an intellectual group, as well as a down-homey group. And they all went together! You see, you weren't divided by: your profession. None of that existed. You could be a painter—of course, the plumbers and the electricians make more money than the doctors and the lawyers anyhow, when it comes to money! But the point is, there was very little class difference, if it existed at all! I mean, it just didn't seem to exist.

JB: Yeah.

VS: I think that pretense is so hard to live up to!

JB: I know; I know. Well you said people were talking about race. Could you talk more about what they were—what they were saying?

VS: Well, people talked affirmative action and discrimination. We were a little taken aback, particularly about Oak Bluffs, because there were no, or very few, salespeople were visibly black, in the stores. So one of the issues that we took up with the NAACP—I was Affirmative Action Chair—was how to handle this. We thought of a way. We didn't want to upset this balance that they had here, of being nice people! We had a plan of action to meet with store managers.

JB: Yeah.

VS: Because sometimes African Americans are invisible! They're not recognized as being there! And people tend to always hire people who look like themselves anyhow.

JB: Yeah.

VS: So we did it, and it was successful. Nobody got up the creek, or angry. And some people really tried to do that, to hire somebody.

And some people said they couldn't, and they wouldn't, because they had a son who was going to work, or a daughter, and they couldn't afford it.

JB: Yeah.

VS: But it was always a logical reason. So that was one discussion. The other discussion was the school system. We formed a task force. We had a wonderful intern working at—I can't remember her name, and that's a shame, but I probably have it written down somewhere—in West Tisbury. We all: Bobby Tankard—who you may have heard of—myself, Jim Norton, who runs the farm over there—there are many more, but these are the ones I remember. We formed a committee to do something about hiring African Americans in the school system. My husband had hired Q. Bannister; he was one. And he hired Marge Harris, who was not black, but she was married to a black man who was a technician at the hospital. And she couldn't get a job at the high school either! And so my husband hired her.

He was trying to make some inroads, but he was so busy trying to bring the towns together to build the addition to the high school that he really didn't have enough time to work on this. He died. So, we took this up, this banner, so to speak! We're going to do our march this way. And so we worked out a plan, and we got all the school boards to agree that first of all, that the NAACP would be represented on selection committees for teachers, principals, superintendents. The community should have some say. So it was all agreed on. So that was a lot of discussion. When I say race, that's what I meant.

JB: Okay, I understand, yeah.

VS: So we had two big issues: the education, and employment.

JB: And when was that going on?

VS: I would say in the seventies and the eighties.

JB: Okay, yeah. So once you were living here permanently?

VS: Yeah. And it's still going on. There are always issues. And so when you get together, people will talk to issues, talk of issues, and about them. And in fact, these people who are coming here at four, they're probably going to talk about an issue.

JB: Yeah, yeah. So when you were vacationing, what was a typical day like?

VS: Oh, that was fun time! Well, with us it would be tennis in the morning. Come home, do whatever you do, shower; get on your bathing suits. People tended to go to the beach anywhere from twelve, on. But it was too hot for me, so I liked to go a little later. So we would come home. My husband definitely was going to play tennis! And even if I did or didn't. We'd have lunch, and maybe a little siesta, or sit down for a minute, read a book. And then we'd get dressed and go to the beach. And there would be a wall of people that you knew.

JB: Yeah.

VS: And they were all happy to see you, "Hello!" It was really very, very nice. I really miss it, to this day, because I don't know; some of the children of the people that we knew still do this. And a few times I've gone to the beach when my daughter is here. I've sat with them, and I see that they are enjoying the same thing that we enjoyed.

JB: That's great.

VS: It was really nice, really nice.

JB: That's wonderful. What would you do when the weather wasn't good?

VS: Well! [Laughs] If you weren't working?

JB: Yeah, I'm talking about like when you were on vacation, and the weather wasn't good.

VS: On vacation, oh. Often we people played cards, bridge, and pinochle, and bid whist, and all that. But I'm not a card player, but my husband would play cards, if he was free in the evenings. He worked all year; remember, he did not have vacation-like vacation. When he did, he wanted to go to Saint Thomas, Saint Maarten's. He wanted to really get away where nobody could call him on the phone, and worry him with anything! But he had time off in the summer. Of course, he didn't work from nine to four every day.

JB: Yeah.

VS: And so he would—read, and we're both big readers. So if I had any time off, I would read. So I would to that.

JB: Now, did you have problems like, I know there was the town beach, and then there was the pay beach.

VS: Yeah! [Laughs]

JB: Can you talk a little bit about it, because I've heard about the town beach versus the pay beach.

VS: Well, the most interesting story, that was told to me by Dorothy West, who was the writer. You've heard of her?

JB: Yes, yeah.

VS: Okay. This is not my experience, because I really didn't have any experience with this. But she said that the town beach was reluctant to accept us. And so we moved over to the beach that no one wanted,

because it had so much seaweed, and it was the dark seaweed. And it looked like ink.

JB: Okay.

VS: And she said, “That’s why Vera,” in her very precise little voice! “That’s why it’s called the inkwell.” She said, “And a lot of people think that it has to do with the color of black people, and it’s not!” she said. “But we moved over because we would rather have a sense of belonging than go to town beach, where they didn’t want us to come to.” That’s what she told me.

JB: Yeah.

VS: So I don’t know if this is a story or folklore, and some are—most of them have a little truth in them anyhow, a core of truth.

JB: Yeah, yeah.

VS: Because I was very curious about that, too, because some people resented it. They’d say, “Why do you call that Inkwell? Just because there are black people down there?” And I said, “Well, I’m going to find out from one who has been here a thousand years.” Barbara Townes, who’s also dead now, she gave a similar—not exactly as delightful as Dorothy West’s story—but she said, “We went to that beach because they didn’t want us at town beach.”

JM: Interesting.

VS: And she said it was an ugly beach, and it needed sand, and it had an awful lot of dark seaweed! She said it like that. But Dorothy gave me the whole—the picture as she saw it, you know! [Laughs]

JB: Yeah. That’s really interesting. Where else did you hang out? I mean, you hung out at the beach—?

VS: At the beach, oh, with Island Country Club Tennis Courts.

JB: Is that where you played tennis?

VS: Yeah, over there. We had them over here; they're in Vineyard Haven. And at the Oak Bluffs, there was a very cohesive tennis club, actually with New York and Boston people. And basically it was men, and they formed a very good, strong tennis group. That's another place where my husband would be, as soon as he could get over there. And they had very good players. And they had a tournament every year, and it mainly was all black people. But it seems that Rufus kept playing with a lot of white folks, and so he would invite them in. Hart—Stan Hart, of the Hart and Haven family? They became very good friends, and so they would play in the tournament.

It got to be pretty interracial. Everybody was pretty nice to one another, but there were divisions, and cliques, and groups that really stayed to themselves. They didn't want black people or Native Americans. The Portuguese, of course, decided that they didn't need them, and they built their own club, and they moved along. But the Portuguese finally just became a part of the dominant group.

JB: Yeah.

VS: So this tournament was a beautiful—really, a very exciting event. I think it was over Labor Day. Everybody was out to see it. None of that goes on now! It's really sad, in that way, because it was wonderful! People would—all kind of people out there, audience, you know, watching these matches! And in fact, sometimes they would go over to the country club, because they didn't have enough courts to run the match.

JB: And who played in these tournaments?

VS: Oh, people—at one time, I think, Ed Brooke, the Senator. I can't remember their names, but a lot of—some of them—the professionals, the non-professionals, the young. I think they had divisions, though. I think up to a certain age. You played the fifties or something, or the younger people. And I never played in that tournament, but I would go to see it. And it would be fun—really fun! A lot of prominent people played in that, prominent blacks, who were down for vacation. They would come for the event! Oh, there was one family, the Downing family. You may—what's his name? Bob may have referred to them. Well, Lou Downing—he's a physician—he played in it. I'm not even sure; his wife may have played, too, in the women's division, because they were very good tennis players.

So it was as number of people, all of them attractive people. I mean, in the sense of just being [laughs] not only good looking, but nice, and well-mannered, and all of that! So, so it was a very, very nice period of time. And of course then the New York people, they started either dying or moving off. And the Boston people took it over, and they did well for a while. And then the young people obviously did not replace them.

JB: Yeah.

VS: That's what happened. So it's a shame, because it was a very lovely event! But that event now, Labor Day is taken over by the road race. We have a road race, the NAACP, over the Labor Day holiday. And there is some excitement about that, but it's just not quite the same, you know. Well of course, if you talk to anyone eighty-eight years old, nothing is the same, you know! [Laughs]

JB: Of course not.

VS: No, of course not! [Laughs] Mm-hm.

JB: But that's what I'm interested in. How did you learn to play tennis?

VS: Oh, actually Rufus taught me. I could have learned tennis, because I was an athlete in school, but I wanted to play softball. And it's the same season! And so I—because I played field hockey, I played basketball, and I played all varsity. I was on the team, even though I was skinny and short. And those girls are big girls who play!

[Laughs] Basketball, anyhow—they're pretty tall. The field hockey people are not. I also played soccer, but not—we really didn't have a soccer team, like we had a field hockey, you know, with the stick.

JB: Yeah, yeah.

VS: And so I could have learned it. And I had watched them. And so he, you know, picked me up, and we learned a little bit. But I never was a good player. And besides, I'm a team player, better than I am a lonely player. I feel anybody who plays anything by yourself is pretty lonely out there. And I could see that my response to tennis would not be the same that it was to field hockey: somebody on each side of you, somebody feeding you—yeah. So, it's my personality.

JB: Yeah.

VS: I just recognize it. [Laughs]

JB: How did Rufus learn to play?

VS: Oh, he—he actually taught himself, because he was in college, and they didn't have a tennis team! [Laughs] When he would come to New York, the Lincoln Nurses had a tennis court! And of course, the fellows were always going up there to look at the nurses anyhow, and so he started playing. And he just had a natural talent, a bent for it.

He was good! I don't think he could have made professional tennis, but he was a very good amateur, really.

JB: Neat.

VS: And he was a sports person. He loved all the sports. In fact, he wanted to be a baseball player. He wanted to be a center fielder! Way back there. [Laughs] But that was at the time of frank discrimination! You know, you couldn't even get on the team. It's always interesting to me. Which takes me back to slavery. It's always interesting to me how the people of that period of time kept saying, and believing, that their slaves were children, and they couldn't learn! But you know, what really made me think is: they didn't believe that! Because why would they prevent them from reading?

JB: Yeah.

VS: Reading was a crime! You got whipped or branded if you read! So if they really believed that these people couldn't learn, why not let them—give them a book, and let them see if they can! So the only books available were *The Bible*, or any version of *The Bible*. And the only person who was supposed to read was the minister, who had to teach himself to read it! [Laughs] Because he didn't get any learning, either! And so there's so many lies in this demonizing that went on, and some of it is still true today! I mean, people actually believe, when they say, "Oh, this school, its level is down," they really believe it's inherent in the child. And it's not!

JB: No, no.

VS: It's also because we have perpetuated these myths so long, that even the kids—it's like Hitler with the big lie. You keep saying it over and over; you begin to believe that it's true. I didn't mean to digress.

JB: No, that's good, because actually now that's a good way we can start talking about your work with the NAACP.

VS: [Laughs] Oh, I see!

JB: And how you got involved with that.

VS: Well, I have always been involved with some kind of way—I told you, since I was a youngster. But the NAACP has really not been respected as it should be, because it is not a 'in-your-face' organization, and it's just the same criticism of Obama that is the criticism of the NAACP. He isn't a bully; he doesn't stand up with a big stick and holler or scream, and our American culture is such that you're supposed to! You're supposed to say, "I'm going to fight!" And when you say, "Let's reason, and see if we can work this together," you're thought to be wimpy, or you're thought to be a person who has no 'guts,' whatever guts are. And I really have felt, and felt way back, that the NAACP needs people to continually work with them, because as far as I'm concerned, they have done more than any one civil rights organization, because they've always been working! They've always been in the back. They do the nuts and bolts. They do the job that most people don't want to do, because it has no glamour!

JB: Yeah.

VS: I mean, it's like being a bookkeeper. You know, and I shouldn't put bookkeepers down, but it's like something that you think is done apart from people, but it's not.

JB: Yeah.

VS: You really have to work together. Now you know how I feel about the NAACP. I feel that we have our quietness, our sanity, but we also have our advocacy. Since I'm an activist, that's where I find myself. And I have found they are most receptive to me. Nobody's saying don't: "Don't do this; don't do that." But I'm now chair of the Legal Redress Committee, and this is area for complaint people, people who feel they're being discriminated against. And most of our cases really are not big cases. Sometimes it's because of poor management practices, and other times it's because they are trying to wiggle that in, some discrimination. It's like all problems. You either solve them, or they're insoluble, and you cope!

JB: Yeah.

VS: Since I have that philosophy, we manage pretty well. Of course, if anybody's flagrant, I'm not going to be so sanguine about it now.

JB: Yeah.

VS: But that's basically what it is. Now I haven't been able to really work like I should, because I've had this personal stuff, you know: stenosis, and arthritis. And I even wanted to resign, but they asked me not to. But I'm going to have to have a committee meeting, and see if we can find somebody who might take this job over.

JB: Yeah.

VS: It's not that big a job. We have—oh, every now and then we have an ad hoc project. Our first project was police—community policing. And we had people go to every precinct—well, they don't call them precincts here—to every police quarters, and discuss this. And it seems to be working. And I think as a result of one of our visits, the

Police Chief of Oak Bluffs has joined the NAACP, and is on the Executive Committee.

JB: Great.

VS: No, but we had another Police Chief, too—Condlon, from Edgartown. He was also on the Executive Committee. We also talked to all island police departments, the Sheriff. Now, the second ad hoc was going to be back on the school system, but we haven't gotten it, because of me. It's like everything else: you've got to have leadership. You don't have any leadership, people aren't going to work. They don't want to work!

JB: [Laughs]

VS: Anyhow! [Laughs] Why, especially in the summer when you can go to the beach, why even bother with this stuff?

JB: Yeah, I'm sure!

VS: So anyhow, that's enough about me.

JB: Yeah, were you involved in any other clubs or organizations, or anything like that?

VS: Oh, yeah! Bob didn't show you that thing, in his—book thick? I've been almost on every board on this island! The hospital board, way back. I was president of the Lagoon Pond Association; that's the lagoon out there.

JB: Yeah.

VS: Yeah, I've been—you don't even want to hear all that!

JB: Oh, I do, yeah. I mean, that's a big part of your life, right?

VS: Nathan Mayhew Seminars, Lagoon Pond Association. That was when it was Vineyard Haven Lagoon. Now, they've joined—which is good—Oak Bluffs. Of course, we share the lagoon on the Oak Bluffs

side and the Vineyard Haven side. And in fact they're having a meeting shortly—this week, I think. What else? Oh, the Island Theater Workshop. [Laughs] That's my other side, my interest in acting and writing. I enjoyed everything I did, I really did! I have no criticisms of any organization, even though things changed hands, and some of them lost their push. But every experience has been a good experience, really.

JB: Great, excellent.

VS: And you can even get something out of a bad experience, if you try to find it. You have to look for it, but you can get it.

JB: So when you were coming here for a vacation, you were coming from Long Island?

VS: No, we were coming from Queens.

JB: From Queens.

VS: We had lived in Brooklyn, Queens, and back to Brooklyn! [Laughs] You notice how we did that? And then yeah, we sold our house in Queens; we sold our apartment in Brooklyn, and then we bought Sea Glen.

JB: So when you were coming for a vacation, can you describe that trip?

VS: Oh, the first time was terrible, because they were building that highway between Rhode Island and Boston. And it was like six or seven hours! And for a while I didn't want to come up here! And in fact, we didn't, until we went to Canada, and on the way back—and I don't remember what year that was, but on the way back one of us said, "Let's see what Martha's Vineyard looks like." And this time—the Vineyard looked good when we got here, way back there, but it was a trip! It was horrendous! I mean, you know, who wants to ride

seven hours to get to somewhere, yet you're going to sit down when you get there? We liked it.

JB: Yeah.

VS: And we ran into this charming older couple, and they had an inn. That's the Foster's. They had a bed and breakfast on Nashowena Park. And they were absolutely charming! And Alberta had made her money with concessions in theaters, and in her day people dressed up to go to the theater, and when they went to a concession, you weren't served in a paper cup! You had a crystal glass, and so forth. So she was quite like that. And they were just wonderful! So we stayed with them a few times, and of course that's—that seemed to be very satisfying to everybody—all of us! They liked us; we liked them.

And they really knew a lot of people, and in fact it's there that I met the Pullman—Randolph, A. Philip Randolph. I think that's his name. He was a gorgeous man! He was tall and slim, and he had this beautiful bronze color! And he spoke—I'm telling you, the King's English has never sounded better. He really spoke beautifully—a very dignified man. He's the one who organized the Pullman Porters. So I met him in person!

JB: Oh, wow!

VS: And I was very impressed with that, I really was! Because I know he had to work like the devil to get through something near like a union with the railroad people, because, they had gone all over the country beating and shooting and killing people wherever they wanted to. If anybody ever reads the history of the railroads, you'll know that they were not easy customers.

JB: Yeah.

VS: So I met A. Philip Randolph. And I met a lot of nice people through Alberta and Charlie Foster. And in fact, somebody might even have a picture of them. And I always thought the lady who bought their house was a relative. Her name is Tillie Foster. But she says no, but she looks just like Charlie Foster! So, I don't know. But maybe their background—maybe they're ancestors. I don't know, but it's an interesting thing to me.

JB: Yeah, that's really fascinating. So, this fellow A. Philip Randolph, he was also vacationing in Martha's Vineyard?

VS: Oh, yeah! And he vacationed with the Foster's.

JB: Oh, really? Okay.

VS: We were staying that weekend, and he was staying too.

JB: Okay, interesting.

VS: Yeah, but she would tell me all the people she knew, and Charlie, too. They would talk about all kinds of things. And I can't remember their names. You know, I really should have kept a diary, because I did meet a lot of people through these older people, at that time. And I really felt I would remember everything! And it's, you know, it's like you can't lose, when you're young.

JB: Yeah.

VS: But later on you say, "Gee, how swiftly the time went by!"

JB: Yeah, that happens.

VS: Went through my head, and out the other side, mm-hm.

JB: So are there any notable events that you can recall from when you were on vacation?

VS: Here on the island?

JB: Yeah.

VS: Or Oak Bluffs? Well, I can remember chairing the affair for Eddie Hayward, the pianist, and how I thought he was wonderful. Things like that I can remember.

JB: When was this thing for Eddie Hayward?

VS: Oh, that was probably in the eighties.

JB: Okay, yeah.

VS: You know, after you go I'll probably think of many things! I thought the celebrity tennis events were good, and we included all of us. And in fact, this is one interesting thing about that. West Chop Tennis Club is here in Vineyard Haven. And I don't think they have a black tennis player there! But we got them to host celebrity tennis, and so they said fine. And there was a member of my committee, Barbara Fuller, who was a professional, wonderful person, who is very dark! I gave her the job of getting there early before we arrived, and do something. Whatever it was, she was to do it. So there she is, sitting up on their porch, and these other white ladies are kind of looking at her. [Laughs] When they were bargaining with us to have the place, they probably thought of it as an all white group.

JB: Yeah.

VS: But Barbara is so absolutely happy in her own skin, which is a wonderful thing to be able to be. She's nodding, smiling at people! [Laughs] And we drive up, and she says, "Oh Vera, you're here." And she had introduced herself to a lady who was sitting next to her, who acted like she didn't want to meet anybody! But she just said, "I'm Barbara Fuller," and you know, told her what she was. And she said, "And here comes the Coordinator." And she says, "Oh, Vera, I

want you to meet So-and-so!” And the lady looked up and says, [quietly] “How do you do?” So, that was a memorable—and later I said, “Barbara, did you notice that chilled atmosphere?” She said, “Oh, yes, but I don’t pay any attention to that!”

JB: [Laughs]

VS: She said, “They don’t know any better!” She said, “I was helping them to grow.” And I really said, “Well, you did a great job!”

JB: That’s a good attitude to have.

VS: Yeah, well that was one thing. And of course, we only had celebrity tennis there one time. But we used to have it at East Chop a few times. And there was never a chill there, although it cost a lot of money to rent that place! Although they charged us very little. But if you wanted to rent it for something, it’d be a little high.

Another experience happened with the school board. The board asked the NAACP not to promote Kriner Cash to the job of Superintendency. Now, this is a very capable guy. And so we said we wouldn’t. And, but then somebody in the office of the Superintendent starting calling up people and saying bad things about him. And we found out who it was, because we also had concerned staffers, too!

JB: [Laughs]

VS: They told us who it was. So they asked me to find out if this is true, because we don’t ever go off half-cocked. So I spoke to the person. I asked the person, and she said—I’m not going to name her. And she said, “Yes, because I don’t think we need him.” So immediately, I said to the School Board, “Now, we’re going to politic. You’ve violated the rules.” And so then we did. He did get the job, and he

stayed here a couple of years. And they weren't too happy with him, but he was okay.

JB: Well, we're actually—we're probably almost out of time. Yeah. So let's just finish up.

VS: Mm-hm.

JB: So what's the most important think that you think people should understand about the community here on Martha's Vineyard?

VS: Not to be impatient. Not to be impatient, respect for one another—Don't bring your city foibles to the island. You know, tooting horns, and that kind of thing.

[End of Interview]