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# Interview with Karl Mattson, August 10, 2011

Karl Mattson
*Gettysburg College*

Michael J. Birkner
*Gettysburg College*

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## Description

Karl Mattson was interviewed on August 10, 2011 by Michael Birkner about his life starting with his earliest memories. This interview is part 1 of a 2 part interview.

**Length of Interview:** 46 minutes



## Keywords

gettysburg college, gettysburg, service learning, chaplain

## Disciplines

Higher Education | Liberal Studies | Oral History

**KARL MATTSON ORAL HISTORY**

**MICHAEL BIRKNER:** This is August the 10th, 2011. I'm Michael Birkner sitting in the Harner Room of Musselman Library at Gettysburg College, with Karl Mattson, the former chaplain and also Director of Service Learning at Gettysburg College. We're going to start today with Karl's earliest memories and move forward. This will be the first of what will be at least a two part, or possibly three part interview. So Karl, tell me about your first memories, tell me about your parents, where you were born. The names of your parents will help too.

**KARL MATTSON:** OK, well, my father came from a generation where they had four names. His name was Karl Evald Emanuel Mattson, and my mother was [Eva], her maiden name was [Eva] Emma Maria Bergendoff. I was born in Montclair, New Jersey, although the residence was in East Orange New Jersey, May 8th, 1934. My father had the campus church at Upsala College and also taught philosophy at Upsala, so my first years were spent in a house adjoining the Upsala College campus. My first memories then have to do with life on and around the Upsala College campus. Upsala, as you know, is now defunct. It made an effort to adjust to East Orange becoming black, succeeded partially for some years but never quite made it. My first memories, actually, have to do with carrying the train for the [Spring Queen] at Upsala College.–

**BIRKNER:** Let me just clarify, was your father's title Chaplain, or did he have a different title at Upsala?

**MATTSON:** I think he was the pastor of the church that served the campus.

**BIRKNER:** And again to clarify, Upsala was a Lutheran-related institution?

**MATTSON:** It was the, yeah; it was the Eastern Swedish Lutheran school.

**BIRKNER:** And how many Eastern Swedish Lutheran schools could there have been?

**MATTSON:** They were the only one.

**BIRKNER:** They were the only one. And the clientele came from where?

**MATTSON:** The school was also undercut by the establishment of the ELCA, because they changed the jurisdictional regions and so Upsala, which had [traditionally] had the New England conference, the New York conference, and several other eastern conferences to support them, was reduced chiefly to New Jersey and New York; so its source of support dwindled.

**BIRKNER:** And the student population from which it might draw was not channeling there any more with the new ELCA lines.

**MATTSON:** Yeah, and the money was less. Interestingly, and we'll get to this eventually, but I became pastor of Bethlehem Lutheran Church in Brooklyn, which was the Swedish mother church in Brooklyn. Upsala College was founded by Bethlehem Lutheran Church, so I eventually served the congregation in which the school began.

**BIRKNER:** So I get the sense you probably know this history then. How old was Upsala? Was it founded in the nineteenth or the early twentieth century?

**MATTSON:** It was in the late nineteenth century.

**BIRKNER:** OK. And it was meant to serve this particular population.

**MATTSON:** Uh huh, it had been founded by a man whose name is suddenly out of my head, who had been offered a position at Yale teaching Scottish theology, but he instead decided to go to Brooklyn because of the influence of Swedes in Brooklyn.

**BIRKNER:** I wanted to clarify another matter, and that is that I'm assuming Upsala was small scale, because we're talking about the Depression, and a school like Gettysburg College, which is the oldest Lutheran College, had no more than 600 students in the middle of the Depression; I'm guessing Upsala must have had even fewer.

**MATTSON:** If my math and my memory's correct, we had about 500 students.

**BIRKNER:** Which was not unusual for a small liberal arts college at that time.

**MATTSON:** I was baptized also by C. G. Ericson who was then the President of Upsala College.

**BIRKNER:** C. G. Ericson?

**MATTSON:** Other people used first initials. C. G. Ericson.

**BIRKNER:** And is it E-R-I-C-S-O-N?

**MATTSON:** E-R-I-C-K I believe.

**BIRKNER:** With a K.

**MATTSON:** No, I think you're right. I think it's E-R-I-C-S-O-N.

**BIRKNER:** Just for our transcriber's sake. Now, you grew up in East Orange.

**MATTSON:** No, I only lived there 'til I was five years old, so my memories are minimal.

**BIRKNER:** OK, so what happened when you were five years old?

**MATTSON:** My father became the pastor of the Swedish Lutheran Church in New Haven, Connecticut.

**BIRKNER:** Which would have been for him a promotion of sorts?

**MATTSON:** Yeah, one of the reasons he went and took the call in Upsala, it gave him opportunity to study at the Union Theological Seminary. He never did get a Ph. D. from there, but spent several years with what was then one of the great theological faculties in the world.

**BIRKNER:** Yes, in fact Harold Dunkelberger studied there around this time—well, perhaps a decade later.

**MATTSON:** Really?

**BIRKNER:** He attended lectures by people like Kart Barth and Reinhold Niehbuhr. While he was at Columbia, now that I think about that, he went to lectures at Union.

**MATTSON:** The most famous name my father was a classmate of was Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

**BIRKNER:** I did not know that. So, your father, during the thirties while he was at Upsala, was taking courses at Union Theological.

**MATTSON:** That is correct.

**BIRKNER:** And, once he's in New Haven is he largely restricted to pastoral duties, or is he also doing more education?

**MATTSON:** He was largely restricted to pastoral duties. He was at a significantly larger church.

**BIRKNER:** So you have memories of growing up in a parsonage in New Haven?

**MATTSON:** Do you know New Haven?

**BIRKNER:** No.

**MATTSON:** Well, for the first years, we moved there in 1939, which were interesting years. The Depression was still an important factor, and we lived in downtown New Haven. There was a Celestine nunnery on one side of the house and there was a dry ice plant on the other side, surrounding the house on two sides. The liquor store across the street and the railroad tracks ran right, I mean the trolley tracks ran right in front of the house; it was an Italian neighborhood. I had minimal contact with many of the Italians, but we would visit in their homes occasionally and I can always remember how exciting I found that, the cultural difference.

**BIRKNER:** Did you ever talk about this with [Emeritus Professor of Biology] Ralph Cavaliere?

**MATTSON:** [overlapping] No.

**BIRKNER:** [overlapping] Because he grew up in one of those Italian neighborhoods.

**MATTSON:** I can remember the smell, and a lot of them had these sea shell curtains with these small sea shells that were threaded that divided living room from dining room.

**BIRKNER:** Ah, right.

**MATTSON:** Strange memories like that. I can remember throwing snowballs at trolleys as they passed and I can remember going to the Yale ballgames. They brought up the open air trolleys during the war, and you'd ride the open air trolleys to the Yale ballgames. African American children were on the way. The sport was throwing pennies and nickels and they'd scramble for them.

**BIRKNER:** Right. Did you have siblings?

**MATTSON:** One brother.

**BIRKNER:** Younger or older?

**MATTSON:** Seven years younger.

**BIRKNER:** So he wasn't born until you were in New Haven, right?

**MATTSON:** Right.

**BIRKNER:** Is that brother still alive?

**MATTSON:** Yes.

**BIRKNER:** So your memory was essentially growing up as an only child for a while. Seven years difference is almost a generation when it comes to kids.

**MATTSON:** Right.

**BIRKNER:** Do you remember your years in New Haven in a happy way? Was this a good time in your family experience?

**MATTSON:** I remember those as happy years.

**BIRKNER:** The war was a funny time because I think they just as in the Depression, your experience depended on whether you had a job or not, or so the breadwinner in your house had a job. In the war years I think your experience varied by whether you had a close family member in the war or not, because if you didn't it wasn't as scary a time.

**MATTSON:** We didn't have close family members in the war, but there were young men that I knew well in the congregation who went to war, one of whom was killed, as I recall the story, killed on the first wave on D-Day; [he was] a particular favorite of mine and that made an impression.

**BIRKNER:** That would make an impression.

**MATTSON:** By the time the war began in '42, we had moved Hamden, Connecticut.

**BIRKNER:** Why was that?

**MATTSON:** Well, you know the Swedes, they were upwardly mobile, it was a mixture of Swedes who did traditional Swedish jobs, painters, house-servants, but also some entrepreneurs who had done very well, particularly with decorative glass, for example. The members of the congregation, and the Swedes thought that it was not fitting for their pastor to live in want.

**BIRKNER:** Oh. So they actually encouraged him; did they provide him with the housing in Hamden?

**MATTSON:** Yes.

**BIRKNER:** How far away from the church was Hamden?

**MATTSON:** I think it was between eight and ten miles.

**BIRKNER:** That's surprising to me, because presumably most of the people he was pastoring were in the neighborhood, no?

**MATTSON:** No, this was a –

**BIRKNER:** [overlapping] you mean Swedes were coming from miles away to go to this church?

**MATTSON:** This was typical all throughout New England. The largest Lutheran church in New England was the Swedish Lutheran Church. There were ninety-seven congregations in that, scattered around New England, but that was the largest Lutheran body and these were later immigrants. The earlier immigrants had gone west, but the land, the free lands had dried up so the later Swedes settled in urban settings in the east. New Haven was one of the important churches in the constellation of Swedish Lutheran churches. . . . Conrad Bergendoff was my uncle, my mother's brother, who was a noted theologian in the Lutheran Church who was president of Augustana College, and sort of a regional saint. His daughter was married to Dick Thulin who was dean at the Seminary and teacher of homiletics. He lives right across, a few houses from you. . . . But anyway, let me just say something about that congregation. Eventually the congregation got even more upwardly mobile, and became the congregation for Yale Divinity School. For example Sydney Ahlstrom, was a very active member.

**BIRKNER:** [overlapping] A-H-L-S-T-R-O-M.

**MATTSON:** Right, a very active member in the church, but none of the Italians. A few of the Italians had joined the church when it was on State Street, but the Italians were not able to follow the church up to Whitney Avenue near the divinity school.

**BIRKNER:** Do they actually physically build a new church –

**MATTSON:** [overlapping] Uh huh.

**BIRKNER:** Near the divinity school?

**MATTSON:** And it became one of the churches in town to go.

**BIRKNER:** Was your father the pastor when it became that?

**MATTSON:** No. The move occurred after he left, but the move was being planned and discussed when he was there.

**BIRKNER:** OK, so how long was your father pastor in New Haven?

**MATTSON:** Until 1946.

**BIRKNER:** So he had a run from '39 to '46?

**MATTSON:** Uh huh.

**BIRKNER:** Now you started school in New Haven. Did you go to local public school?

**MATTSON:** I went to Skinner School on State Street. That's where I began school.

**BIRKNER:** And what memories do you have of that?

**MATTSON:** Well, surprisingly I was the best artist in kindergarten, and I had an affinity for drawing birds, and the teacher used me to instruct other children how to draw birds. And I also remember that I bit my finger nails, and the teacher was trying to get me to quit biting my finger nails, and she drew these graphic pictures of all the finger nail clippings gathering up together in a ball in my stomach and causing untold harm. I remember that.

**BIRKNER:** Was the school multi-ethnic?

**MATTSON:** Well, only in the sense that it was mainly Italian kids.

**BIRKNER:** Mostly Italian kids. And --

**MATTSON:** [overlapping] and in those days, even though the neighborhood was bad, I walked home five or six blocks alone.

**BIRKNER:** I'm trying to think, you would have been eight, nine, ten, eleven I guess during the war years.

**MATTSON:** I was born in '34.

**BIRKNER:** So from '42 to '45 you would have been eight to eleven. Those would have been years where you would have at least been aware of war-time activities.

**MATTSON:** Oh yes. The Yale Green, the center of New Haven became the center for much wartime activity. They put up Quonset huts. Every cadet in the V-12 program was on the Green, and all kinds of military parades and processions would take place around the Green. I spent endless hours drawing panoramas of battle as well; on the green felt boards that you put on the dining room table.

**BIRKNER:** You were following the war?

**MATTSON:** Mm hm. I did a great many model airplanes that flew in World War II.

**BIRKNER:** Did your father subscribe to a particular newspaper?

**MATTSON:** No, the main journal was the Christian Century, actually, I can recall as a kid.

**BIRKNER:** Which would have come every week as a magazine?

**MATTSON:** Yeah, but I can't –

**BIRKNER:** [overlapping] you must have read certainly the New Haven –

**MATTSON:** [overlapping] The New Haven Journal, I think it was. Journal? Register.

**BIRKNER:** [overlapping] Register, right, is my recollection.

**MATTSON:** And my father got some notoriety. There was a corrupt warden in the local jail. There were questions of law enforcement very much involved there.

**BIRKNER:** Do you have recollections of blackouts or salvage drives or anything of that nature?

**MATTSON:** Well, as you know a U-boat surfaced off New Haven early in the war, so blackout was strictly enforced in New Haven. By that time we'd moved to Hamden, so, but there were warnings; you would constantly hear the whistles at night.

**BIRKNER:** It does occur to me that some of what I'm asking you is maybe a little off-key because Hamden is a more suburban experience than New Haven, and you're there by '42. Still, the all for one, one for all mentality existed in Hamden I'm sure as it did in New Haven, right?

**MATTSON:** [overlapping] we spent endless time picking milkweed; they make kapoc out of it – milk weed pods. We gathered blue, grey bags of milk weed pods used for life preservers. I was really good at collecting fat, for which we got a nickel for a large grapefruit can. And the rationing memories are very key. My father, because he was a minister got, what was the normal? C [gas ration] was the normal?

**BIRKNER:** I couldn't tell you which letter was the normal.

**MATTSON:** Well, anyway he got a little bit more than average, so we could travel a little farther than most people.

**BIRKNER:** You're talking about the –

**MATTSON:** [overlapping] gas rationing.

**BIRKNER:** [overlapping] gas rationing, yeah. And how about at home, did your mother cook?

**MATTSON:** My mother cooked.

**BIRKNER:** So she had to deal with rationing of certain foodstuffs; meats and sugars and things like that. You probably didn't eat a lot of sweet cakes during those years.

**MATTSON:** No, and Jell-O was a family staple. Jell-O salad disappeared.

**BIRKNER:** Mm hm. So, do you feel in any way that your childhood experience was constricted by the war effort, or was it not something that entered your consciousness, it was just normal for you as a kid to experience what you experienced. Do you have any memories of mom and dad saying, "Karl, you can't have that new pair of shoes" or "you can't have this or that"?

**MATTSON:** No, there was no significant privation.

**BIRKNER:** When you were at this age, were you a baseball player?

**MATTSON:** At that age, yes. We lived on Woodlong Avenue in Hamden, and there were four of us my age in my section of the block, and we played baseball incessantly. One of the fathers fenced in his the backyard, which wasn't a very large size with ten foot high fences so we could hit away and not trouble the neighbors.

**BIRKNER:** Ha! Baseball was you know the big deal. Were you a rooter for a particular team? Did you root for the Yankees, for example?

**MATTSON:** I can't remember.

**BIRKNER:** Or the Red Sox?

**MATTSON:** I didn't become a Red Sox fan until I moved to Worcester.

**BIRKNER:** So you were a player but not necessarily a spectator at that point?

**MATTSON:** Right.

**BIRKNER:** I mean obviously a lot of the best players were siphoned to the military--Ted Williams, Joe DiMaggio, and Hank Greenberg being three examples--but they still were playing, the major league

season still went on. Were you more on the athletic side or were you more on the aesthetic side of things? You mentioned being a good composer of words.

**MATTSON:** [overlapping] I was physically very active. I mean, I've never been [a great athlete], I've been cut from more sports than most people, but I tried out everything. I always loved sports.

**BIRKNER:** Did you ever feel you had to be a goodie-goodie because your father was the pastor?

**MATTSON:** A moral formulation stuck with me from very early on, I'm not sure when it first came, but I would love to be good because I wanted to be good rather than I had to be good. I used to reflect about that even when I was young.

**BIRKNER:** What about the business of church? I'm assuming you went with your mother to the church on Sundays.

**MATTSON:** Well, my mother sang in the choir so I sat alone on the front pew. I was very well disciplined as a kid and I was told I couldn't move. There was a great story about the pews being watertight. I peed in my pants, and my father was up in front, he could see one person after another as the pee went down the pew, moving.

**BIRKNER:** [laughter] You were young then, I'm sure. What did you think of your father as a pastor?

**MATTSON:** Well, you should have known my father. What did I think? That's a good question. He could be a good preacher, but I don't remember, as I kid I didn't know if he was good or bad. I suppose I didn't listen.

**BIRKNER:** Plus you had nothing to compare him to.

**MATTSON:** Probably. He was a great story teller. He was known for his stories both good and off-color. In fact, he became president of the seminary eventually, and the students took out a petition to remove him from office because they said that no man who tells stories like that should head a Lutheran seminary.

**BIRKNER:** I assume some of these same people wouldn't have wanted Lincoln to be president because he told off-color stories.

**MATTSON:** Right. He was very, well he could be moody. He had a temper, but he was always a presence; you always knew he was there. People recognized him as a kind of leader. It was in New Haven where political powers in the Lutheran church sort of assisted his career to move forward.

**BIRKNER:** Your father evidently had some kind of a scholarly side as well–

**MATTSON:** [overlapping] He taught systematic theology often.

**BIRKNER:** You say he did not get a PhD but he did have graduate credits from Union, and I assume a Master's degree aside from his [M div] right?

**MATTSON:** Yeah, and then he also got some honorary degrees as well.

**BIRKNER:** Okay, so you had books in the house, and he was a person who delved into those books aside from Bible study –

**MATTSON:** [overlapping] I was a reader.

**BIRKNER:** And you read, you were a reader. Might as well ask you, what did you like to read as a boy growing up? Were you reading history or were you reading other stuff?

**MATTSON:** Well my father used to read with me James Fenimore Cooper –

**BIRKNER:** [overlapping] pretty ponderous stuff.

**MATTSON:** [laughter] yeah, some of those images still [linger] –

**BIRKNER:** [overlapping] you mean Natty Bumppo and that kind of thing?

**MATTSON:** Yeah, things from the Last of the Mohicans – always stayed with me.

**BIRKNER:** So your father read aloud to you when you were a little boy?

**MATTSON:** Actually, as formative as anything else was, you know the essence of religion is grace before meals and there is no religion without grace. The essence of religion is thanksgiving. The chief expression of that is grace before meals. So that was extremely important, but then after the supper he would read for at least twenty minutes from devotional classics, and I don't remember the content much, but Harry Emerson Fosdick who was initially the pastor of Riverside Church of New York became a presence in my consciousness; not so much because I remember what he said, but because we often read

from him. We can talk about how grace as worked out in my life and in my children's lives if that is of interest…

**BIRKNER:** What about reading on your own?

**MATTSON:** Well, I remember mainly I didn't read anything precocious. The most exciting time for me was when the Saturday Evening Post, and Jack and Jill, and National Geographic would arrive, and I would save them all and I would open them, and then I would go to my room and open them all on the same afternoon. I became addicted to Horatio Hornblower, and the other character in the Saturday Evening Post was Alexander Botts. Remember him?

**BIRKNER:** No.

**MATTSON:** He was just a local character in a serial that ran in the Saturday Evening Post.

**BIRKNER:** So you were basically a kid who was out there doing as opposed to being closeted in your home.

**MATTSON:** Once we moved to Hamden my parents didn't know where I was. I came home for supper and then was gone again until dark.

**BIRKNER:** We haven't mentioned much about your mother; was she an influence in your life?

**MATTSON:** Ultimately probably more than my father, although my father was the big deal, my mother sort of held things together.

**BIRKNER:** How so?

**MATTSON:** Just the care.

**BIRKNER:** Was your mother the model pastoral spouse?

**MATTSON:** Yes, all her life she was the hostess for the institution my father served and was president of. She was very good at this.

**BIRKNER:** I didn't ask you if your parents spoke Swedish.

**MATTSON:** Yes, both of them spoke Swedish, and they used to say things that I did not understand.

**BIRKNER:** So they didn't encourage you to learn it?

**MATTSON:** My father preached in Swedish too. His churches still had, not regular Swedish services, but occasional Swedish services.

**BIRKNER:** What about what happened if you went to one of those? What'd you do, just sit there?

**MATTSON:** No. The most significant Swedish service, Julotta, took place at five a.m. on Christmas morning. Christmas Eve was the one night we never went to bed because we had midnight services on Christmas Eve and then, we'd open our presents; Swedes open their presents on Christmas Eve. We'd open our presents and go to church and get home by 1:30 and we didn't have to go to bed. We could stay up and play with our toys until we went off to church at five a.m.

**BIRKNER:** And then you crashed [laughter].

**MATTSON:** I have memories of well-being in East Orange. One of my first memories I remember a lot, at five am, I'd be so god-awful tired. I was sitting with some woman, whom I don't recall any longer, but I laid my head in her lap, I must have liked her a lot, and as I fell asleep I looked at the candles you had those rays of light coming down, and I can remember those rays of light coming down and being nestled in this woman's lap and going off to sleep –

**BIRKNER:** It's a sweet thought.

**MATTSON:** At five a.m. and God, all was right with the world.

**BIRKNER:** Well just so, before we go on for our transcriber, can you give us a spelling of Julotta.

**MATTSON:** Julotta? I'm not sure I can.

**BIRKNER:** Is it, I assume you can, you're talking–

**MATTSON:** [overlapping] it's phonetic.

**BIRKNER:** They're a derivation of Yule right, so Y-U-L-E-T-A?

**MATTSON:** I think so.

**BIRKNER:** We have to transcribe this so –

**MATTSON:** What do you call those marks?

**BIRKNER:** Accent marks. Yeah.

**MATTSON:** J-U-L-L-O-U, J-U-L-O-T-T-A.

**BIRKNER:** Oh, okay, with a J, so transcriber please note that.

**MATTSON:** But there's two dots over the J or the U, I can't recall.

**BIRKNER:** Umlaut or whatever. So in Hamden you were in school and you were being a good church kid and playing a lot of sports and being out and about, and following the war. The war ends of course in the summer of '45.

**MATTSON:** My most significant memory in terms of public affairs in those years was the death of [President Franklin D.] Roosevelt. Nothing shook me as a kid to that point more than Roosevelt's death. And the pictures of the black folk lined up along the railroad tracks as his corpse was transported back to Washington; extremely moving.

**BIRKNER:** There was a moving picture of a black woman, middle-aged, who was deeply upset, taking a handkerchief and going up and down with a handkerchief as the train passed, and another one of an accordion player with a tear coming out of his eye. It's kind of an iconic picture–

**MATTSON:** [overlapping] I think I remember the handkerchief, but not the accordion. When I heard that I ran all the way home from school.

**BIRKNER:** Well, a little bit like the Kennedy assassination experience for kids of my generation. I was almost exactly your age when Roosevelt died when Kennedy died, so I remember obviously like a lot of Americans the moment Kennedy died. Was your family politically interested? Did your father ever express opinions about Franklin Roosevelt?

**MATTSON:** Yeah, I mean we were, yes I mean I was clear that Roosevelt was –

**BIRKNER:** Popular in your household?

**MATTSON:** Extremely popular; which was not typical of Swedes. But as we'll get to, all my politics and religion comes from an uncle, my father's brother, who was very much involved politically.

**BIRKNER:** And that's chronological further down the line so I shouldn't ask you about it yet.

**MATTSON:** [overlapping] Yeah, that's not until Seminary, actually.

**BIRKNER:** Okay, so in '46 something happens. Where does your father go in '46?

**MATTSON:** In those days the Swedes didn't have bishops, they had what they called synodical presidents; nowadays they're bishops. He was elected the head of the New England Synod of the Augustana Lutheran Church.

**BIRKNER:** And is that a different Lutheran church than the one that Gettysburg College is affiliated with?

**MATTSON:** It's one of the forbears. I believe the date for that formation of that church ELCA was 1958.

**BIRKNER:** So it sounds like a fairly significant post. Did it involve you having to move from Hamden?

**MATTSON:** We moved to Hartford, Connecticut.

**BIRKNER:** Which is an industrial city, right, a little bit like New Haven?

**MATTSON:** Yeah. We lived in an old temporary residence for the president of the synod, which was an old immense old mansion on South Quaker Lane. It was quite a house. It had a portico where the carriage was to pull up and unload people directly into the living room. For example, we had a greenhouse in the back. It was a grand old place with an orchard right in the middle of West Hartford.

**BIRKNER:** I assume it's gone now.

**MATTSON:** I don't know. It wasn't gone seventeen years ago.

**BIRKNER:** And how would you describe your experience in Hartford? Did you regret going somewhere for a new school?

**MATTSON:** [overlapping] There's something I should have said, I was a good student in school, and unfortunately I skipped fourth grade. They decided that I was bored with school and needed to skip a grade. They did that back then, and that threw me for a loop athletically, I mean –

**BIRKNER:** 'Cause you were younger than your peers.

**MATTSON:** I went from being a competitor to the last person chosen. And that was really difficult for me, and it took me years and years to recover from that. I would never put a kid forward again like that.

**BIRKNER:** So you were dealing with that in Hartford.

**MATTSON:** And then the move.

**BIRKNER:** It's especially hard, I think, if you're thirteen, fourteen years old.

**MATTSON:** And I had this bunch of kids, I mentioned to you, that I ran with every day, and to leave them to go was difficult. I can remember there were a lot of Jewish people in the neighborhood, and I can remember I played soccer, some, but there were three Jewish kids who used to enjoy beating the shit out of me [laughter].

**BIRKNER:** [laughter]

**MATTSON:** I can still remember them knocking me down one time.

**BIRKNER:** Did you play soccer with those kids, or were you just –

**MATTSON:** [overlapping] Yeah, I didn't necessarily dislike them much, but they sure beat–

**BIRKNER:** [overlapping] they just liked to give you a hard time.

**MATTSON:** They used to give me a hard time.

**BIRKNER:** Now, when you were in Hartford did you start going to the movies and things on your own? Do you like movies? It seems to me teenagers are often drawn to the cinema.

**MATTSON:** [laughter] Funny you should ask that, I remember that was the year "The Outlaw" came out, and the movie I remember I wanted to go so badly; my juices were beginning to flow, and there was Jane Russell in "The Outlaw."

**BIRKNER:** A movie that made her name, right.

**MATTSON:** [overlapping] And they had wonderful pictures of her, oh, extremely low cut.

**BIRKNER:** Yeah, yeah, yeah. I'm sure the Catholic "Legion of Decency" didn't like it very much.

**MATTSON:** My main desire with movies was to get to see "The Outlaw," which I never did.

**BIRKNER:** [laughter] You didn't even get to see John Wayne movies?

**MATTSON:** Movies were not very big [for me]. The first one I can remember was in Chicago, with my family, "The Wizard of Oz," which really made an immense impression on me. My cousin, God knows why, took me to see the stockyards and I saw the old Swift Company slaughterhouse which was my idea of Holocaust. I won't describe to you the grossness of those scenes, I'll just give you one

example. The pigs that were rejected because of some sort of disease were shunted to side into a chute and they fell a story and a half into a great pile of pigs into carts and were being squashed while these rejected pigs still alive were coming down.

**BIRKNER:** That's pretty awful.

**MATTSON:** And I see that all the time. That, there's an article in the New Yorker this week on, you should read it, you get the New Yorker?

**BIRKNER:** Yes.

**MATTSON:** Did you see the article about getting a dog in a New York apartment?

**BIRKNER:** No, I haven't read it yet.

**MATTSON:** It ends up as a sermon about ever expanding circles of compassion. It's really about the domestication of dogs and how it occurred, but the dogs are included in our circles of compassion and the plea is for the expansion of these circles. It's a marvel.

**BIRKNER:** I'll take a look at that.

**MATTSON:** I relate that to the slaughter of the pigs, I mean that is the opposite –

**BIRKNER:** So this really revolted you when you saw this in Chicago?

**MATTSON:** I see those slaughter pictures in my mind.

**BIRKNER:** So a kid could actually get in to see what was going on?

**MATTSON:** [overlapping] I was probably seven.

**BIRKNER:** Alright, so going back to Hartford, you were dealing with the fact that you've been moved ahead a year and you're a little out of chronological sync with your peers. Did you still like school in middle and high school?

**MATTSON:** No. I wasn't real keen for school until I got to high school. School was essentially painful.

**BIRKNER:** Mm hm. Did you have friends?

**MATTSON:** Yeah, there was a small circle that I ran with, and I began to have girlfriends, sort of. What I mean is that there were flirtations. The big deal for me was confirmation class in Hartford, which was down by the old state capitol. Do you know Hartford?

**BIRKNER:** Not at all.

**MATTSON:** Okay, well it has a big green. It's like New Haven, only ten times as large a green, with the state capitol. Another grand old Swedish church is right on the green there; it's where I went to confirmation. I had friends in that city. I can remember we got in a lot of trouble there because I think it turned out eventually that the choir director was having an affair with this soprano, well--the church is full of sex, you know that, I mean [laughter], but having an affair with one of the sopranos sort is one of those sins which he should never have done, and we had to sit as a confirmation class in the front pew, so everyone could see us there before we made our profession of faith, and when she sang we went into convulsions of laughter, and we laughed so hard in the pew, we had to lay down in the pew because we were laughing so hard when she sang.

**BIRKNER:** Did they know why you were laughing?

**MATTSON:** I don't know if they knew, but we all knew. . . .Church choirs are such an affliction.

**BIRKNER:** [laughter] So, you remember that vividly. Your father is like an administrator at this point, is that right? Does it change your lifestyle any? Is he making more money, do you have a fancier car? Do you enjoy other creature comforts or do you not even notice any of that stuff?

**MATTSON:** No, my father never made more than twelve thousand dollars [a year] in his life.

**BIRKNER:** So they didn't pay big to someone who'd be the elected head of the synod.

**MATTSON:** The quality of clergy decreases in direct proportion maybe to the access to the money tree. My grandfather was a circuit rider in the Dakotas and Southern Canada. He lived on what the congregation would give him and what he could raise--I mean, possessions were not, there is that tradition on both sides of my family, possessions are not something to aspire to. I often wish now I had gone out and made money. You know what I mean [laughter]?

**BIRKNER:** Mm hm.

**MATTSON:** But it was never supposed to be a factor. That sounds kind of, well, idealistic, but it's true.

**BIRKNER:** It's worth knowing. Now when you went off to high school, you said you kicked in a little bit more with being a student. Is that right?

**MATTSON:** Well, two things happened to me in high school. In Worcester I had failed algebra.

**BIRKNER:** I didn't know about Worcester, so when do you go to Worcester?

**MATTSON:** We were only in Hartford a couple of years.

**BIRKNER:** Okay, so '46 you're in Hartford, you moved to Worcester in '48; is that what you're telling me?

**MATTSON:** Nah, it must have been '47; I think we were only in Hartford a year.

**BIRKNER:** Okay, so '47 you moved to Worcester Mass?

**MATTSON:** Uh huh.

**BIRKNER:** And what's going on there?

**MATTSON:** It became the permanent office for the president. I went to North High School by that time.

**BIRKNER:** Were you right in downtown Worcester?

**MATTSON:** No we lived on the outside of Worcester on Brattle Street. I can't remember the name of the neighborhood. It was a far suburb. And the house I lived in was destroyed the year after I left by that great tornado that decimated Worcester.

**BIRKNER:** Mm hm.

**MATTSON:** Many of my neighbors were killed.

**BIRKNER:** Yow. So you went to high school in Worcester is what you're telling me?

**MATTSON:** Just for a year.

**BIRKNER:** You were only there for a year? Well, you had a rather peripatetic growing up.

**MATTSON:** Yeah, I mean I don't remember, a year and a half –

**BIRKNER:** [overlapping] It's kind of hard to make long lasting relationships when you're moving that much.

**MATTSON:** After years of floundering in school after I skipped, there was an algebra professor and I flunked the test, and he sat me down and he convinced me that I knew it, and I took the test over again and I got a higher grade. That was a very significant event. I don't want to push it too much, but it restored my confidence in myself.

**BIRKNER:** Did you have a special interest in a particular subject when you were in high school? Did you favor the sciences or the humanities or –

**MATTSON:** [overlapping] Anything that had to do with language arts.

**BIRKNER:** You liked language, okay. So how long were you at Worcester?

**MATTSON:** Well both Hartford and Worcester, we left New Haven in '46 and we got to Worcester in '48, so I forget the exact dates.

**BIRKNER:** And is that when your father goes out west?

**MATTSON:** He then becomes president of the Seminary of the Swedish Lutheran Church.

**BIRKNER:** Which is?

**MATTSON:** Augustana Lutheran.

**[TAPE CUTS OUT TEMPORARILY – TURNED TO SIDE B]**

**BIRKNER:** So what did you think of moving out west, leaving Hartford?

**MATTSON:** Well, it was exciting. For some reason I liked that scene. It wasn't as if I was unfamiliar there, we had family there.

**BIRKNER:** You'd visited it?

**MATTSON:** Yeah, I had two uncles there. We really need to know more about my family on my mother's side and my father's side.

**BIRKNER:** Go ahead.

**MATTSON:** When my mother and father were married they said it wasn't a marriage, it was a merger. For example, my uncle on my mother's side was already president of Augustana College in Rock Island.

We'd been there quite a bit. My uncle on my father's side taught ethics at the Seminary. And that's probably all I need to say about that.

**BIRKNER:** Well I'm a little confused here though. If your uncle was president, did he give way to your father?

**MATTSON:** In a sense, yes, but early on in the Swedish tradition Augustana College and Seminary were one institution, which my uncle became president of. My uncle was trained in part by Nathan Söderblom who was the founder of the ecumenical movement.

**BIRKNER:** You're gonna have to spell his name.

**MATTSON:** S-O-D-E-R-B-L-O-M. Söderblom. He was from Sweden and as I said was one of the founders of the ecumenical movement. And also a scholar on world's religions, and brought that sympathetic understanding of world's religions into the Protestant scene. Anyway he became president of Augustana College, but the church as a whole thought the Seminary and the College should split because they're separate kinds of institutions, and one should not wag the other –

**BIRKNER:** [overlapping] Were they literally adjacent to one another?

**MATTSON:** Yes, they were on the same campus, so there was a tremendous fight in the Augustana church about dividing the Seminary from the college, which was eventually done. My uncle Conrad had to choose whether to become president of the Seminary or the college; he chose the college. My uncle on my father's side, A. D. Mattson was, well we'll get in to him, he sort of led the fight on the other side. We could spend hours on this.

**BIRKNER:** Keep going.

**MATTSON:** And so not only was it a church fight, it was a family feud.

**BIRKNER:** Because one uncle favored the merger and one uncle didn't want to have to merge; he wanted to have it separate. Are you telling me that one uncle who supports the idea of separation becomes president of the college and your father comes in to become president of the Seminary?

**MATTSON:** No, the uncle, Conrad Bergendoff, wanted the institutions to stay together, but they were divided, he had the choice of which to –

**BIRKNER:** [overlapping] Oh, he wanted them to stay together--

**MATTSON:** [overlapping] and he stayed with the College. My other uncle taught at the Seminary and had been one of the leaders for the separation.

**BIRKNER:** And he stayed as a professor in the Seminary?

**MATTSON:** [overlapping] He stayed as a professor in the Seminary, but my father was elected by the national church to become president of the Seminary.

**BIRKNER:** That's so incestuous.

**MATTSON:** It is.

**BIRKNER:** It's really wild. I would think that some local grandees might say that the Mattson-Bergendoffs are trying to take control of everything.

**MATTSON:** Um, yes [laughter].

**BIRKNER:** [laughter] So not everybody was a warm admirer. Tell me a little about the dimensions of these institutions. I'm assuming both were quite small, but I really don't know how small.

**MATTSON:** Augustana was very similar to, it doesn't have quite the quality of Gettysburg, but it's always been, together with the Gustavus Adolphus, the top of the Swedish line.

**BIRKNER:** But I'm talking now about size. Are we talking about five hundred students in the College?

**MATTSON:** In those days sixteen, seventeen hundred.

**BIRKNER:** Sixteen, seventeen hundred in the forties, and the Seminary similar to the Gettysburg Seminary?

**MATTSON:** About 270 in the Seminary.

**BIRKNER:** A fair number, and of course those were the days when there still were a fair number of Lutherans out there, right? The main line denominations were still pretty robust in the late forties in relation to say today when it's more difficult to get people to go to church.

**MATTSON:** There was, in the Swedish Lutheran church six hundred thousand [congregants], but there were in those days twenty-five divisions of Lutherans.

**BIRKNER:** That's interesting. Now your father was in his element or not as president of Augustana Seminary?

**MATTSON:** [overlapping] He was in his element.

**BIRKNER:** He liked it?

**MATTSON:** Yes, my father was a church politician, not a –

**BIRKNER:** [overlapping] not a theologian?

**MATTSON:** Well, he was a theologian; he was a good teacher of systematic theology. The reason he got the job wasn't all family connections, but because of his training at Union where he really had distinguished himself.

**BIRKNER:** I see. What did he most enjoy about being president of the Seminary?

**MATTSON:** Probably the power [laughter].

**BIRKNER:** He liked the politics and the power. Now, you mentioned something to me a couple of minutes ago that one of your happier memories was your father reading to you as a little boy. To what extent did you interact with your father when you were a late teenager just before going off to college? Did you have dinners with him or was he just too busy?

**MATTSON:** No, family dinners were always sacred –

**BIRKNER:** [overlapping] That was sacred.

**MATTSON:** [overlapping] There were never any interruptions in it.

**BIRKNER:** So was it the four of you; the two boys and your parents, or were there others involved?

**MATTSON:** We always had company.

**BIRKNER:** You always had company, but you could say whatever you wanted to say to your father at dinner, 'cause he was there.

**MATTSON:** Yeah. Eventually we fought a lot, and –

**BIRKNER:** [overlapping] was it traditional father-son things, like a son going through a rebellious stage, or were there issues?

**MATTSON:** There were issues. He could be oppressive. At some point I had to break free from that oppression.

**BIRKNER:** He wanted you to do what he wanted you to do?

**MATTSON:** Uh huh, yeah.

**BIRKNER:** In one respect you did not break away from him, because you went to college right there.

**MATTSON:** Yeah. I had good years at Augustana.

**BIRKNER:** Did you go there because it was free?

**MATTSON:** Yes. I resented that; by that time I had become a functioning student again and, well, they were very much involved in other affairs. My education was important, but not that important.

**BIRKNER:** To you or to them?

**MATTSON:** They thought it was good enough that I go to Augustana.

**BIRKNER:** And they didn't have to pay tuition to another institution.

**MATTSON:** Yeah.

**BIRKNER:** So you were okay with it at the time?

**MATTSON:** Yes.

**BIRKNER:** And tell me a little bit about getting acclimated. First off, did you live at home or did you go to the dorm?

**MATTSON:** I lived at home.

**BIRKNER:** And that sort of affects your experience.

**MATTSON:** Except that, the only time I didn't live at home I was the first student to go to the Washington Semester Program from Augustana, so I had a hell of a good time in D. C. I fell in love with a girl from Rollins College; we had a ball.

**BIRKNER:** That would have been a couple of years into your experience at Augustana –

**MATTSON:** [overlapping] '53.

**BIRKNER:** [You entered Augustana, I presume, in the fall of '52.

**MATTSON:** I graduated from Augustana in '55, so it's '51.

**BIRKNER:** That's right, because you had skipped a grade so you were seventeen when you were going off to college. Just curious, were you interested in the presidential election of 1952, because Adlai Stevenson was –

**MATTSON:** [overlapping] Oh yeah, I organized demonstrations; I can remember torchlight parades in Blackhawk Park for Stevenson.

**BIRKNER:** So you were a fan of Stevenson?

**MATTSON:** I had become more politically involved by that time.

**BIRKNER:** Okay and he was an Illinois man, he had been a successful governor.

**MATTSON:** Some of the highlights of my political life, when I went to Washington during college was to sit in the Senate gallery and listen to the Stevenson and [Everett McKinley] Dirksen –

**BIRKNER:** Well you didn't listen to Stevenson because he never served in the Senate. Maybe you're thinking of Paul Douglas –

**MATTSON:** No. . . . I'm confused, my mind's confused.

**BIRKNER:** Dirksen was more of a conservative Republican side.

**MATTSON:** When my uncle retired, Douglas came down, and they hated him for his involvement with party-line politics.

**BIRKNER:** Very interesting. So you were politically aware and active in '52. What did you gravitate toward at Augustana either in terms of your studies or your extra-curriculars?

**MATTSON:** I debated; I wasn't very good, but I debated. Augustana was one of the best, for many years running, their debate team won their national tournament. I wasn't on the top team, but I debated some. I met my wife, Marge through debate actually.

**BIRKNER:** How is that?

**MATTSON:** The Illinois High School Debate Society met at Augustana every year because it was excellent for debate, and I was judging the debates and Marge was the time-keeper and she flirted with me.

**BIRKNER:** Was she in college at that time?

**MATTSON:** She was in college. She was –

**BIRKNER:** [overlapping] Was she at a different college?

**MATTSON:** No, Augustana. She flirted with me to find out what I had decided as to who was winning the debate –

**BIRKNER:** [overlapping] The spark was struck. That's really nice. So that goes back to Augustana. Were you doing religious studies or –

**MATTSON:** [overlapping] no, I was a double major in English and Political Science.

**BIRKNER:** Did you have an inkling of what you wanted to be when you got out of college?

**MATTSON:** Psychologically I probably wasn't free to make the decision about what I wanted to do until some years later, because of the path that I've sketched for you between my mother's side of the family and my father's side of the family.

**BIRKNER:** Are you saying that you were destined to go to Augustana Seminary?

**MATTSON:** No. I had enrolled, for example, or had begun the enrollment process at the University of Illinois for a Political Science degree, but when push came to shove I just sort of caved in and went to Seminary, because the tracks had been laid down around me.

**BIRKNER:** What, you're describing almost sounds like a kind of invisible spider web around you that enveloped you that you could have with tremendous effort broken through and done something else, but you didn't really fight it.

**MATTSON:** Yes, you got it.

**BIRKNER:** So straight out of college, you didn't face the draft in '55?

**MATTSON:** No I came up between the wars.

**BIRKNER:** Well, people were being drafted in the fifties, but if you went to Seminary maybe you got a deferment.

**MATTSON:** No, it doesn't count. In college, I learned a lot from the Korean War veterans.

**BIRKNER:** So in '55 you go straight into Augustana Seminary? It's a little bit like Harold Dunkelberger growing up in Gettysburg going to Gettysburg College, and going to Gettysburg Seminary.

**MATTSON:** That's what I mean by the tracks. There were certain tracks that could have been resisted.

**BIRKNER:** But the logic was what compelled you in a certain direction.

**MATTSON:** Well, for example, both of my grandfathers were ministers, and both of them were –

**BIRKNER:** [overlapping] You had the tradition. Well, let me ask you this, did you take classes at the Seminary with your uncle?

**MATTSON:** Which uncle?

**BIRKNER:** The one who taught Seminary.

**MATTSON:** Yes. The story I often tell, which I think is true, is that he was an organizer for a farmer's union among other things. I used to travel with him on occasion going from one small white-frame church to another filled with poor farmers trying to resist economic forces beyond their control, and trying somehow stay on the family farm. Those [memories] are very strong.

**BIRKNER:** And that probably affected your ethic of life, wouldn't you say? Your sympathy for the underdog or things like that?

**MATTSON:** Yeah, I had been sort of weaned on this, too; I don't mean to sell my father short.

**BIRKNER:** Was the Social Gospel something that you were familiar with?

**MATTSON:** Yeah. There never has been anything other than the Social Gospel.

**BIRKNER:** Well, there are churches today that tell you today that your job is to get wealthy and enjoy yourself and dote on yourself.

**MATTSON:** That's somewhere between a heresy and a perversion.

**BIRKNER:** [laughter] Most of these people tend to be televangelists but not all. But you're saying the old fashioned Walter Rauschenbusch approach to Christianity –

**MATTSON:** Rauschenbusch was a key figure. And also my uncle had gone off, like [Samuel Simon] Schmucker had gone off to Princeton, he went off to Yale. In those days for example, Yale had hired a guy by the name of Jerome Davis simply to stir up students about social issues, this is in the late, middle thirties, and Niebuhr was there, Richard Niebuhr, and in Hamden [we lived on] the same block with D. C. Macintosh, who was a Canadian theologian who had been a Canadian conscientious objector –

**BIRKNER:** When I interviewed Lou Hammann it seemed to me that his experience in New Haven was transformative in this way. I mean, it was exactly what he needed at that time, and it charged him up enough for the rest of his life.

**MATTSON:** The same thing happened to my uncle. I haven't thought through these names for a while, but the answer to what you said is yes. And he maintained these contacts with the religious left of America. For example, right after the Russian Revolution he and Jerome Davis traveled to Russia to check out what was happening there.

**BIRKNER:** This is the uncle who taught at the Seminary?

**MATTSON:** He went and spent a lot of time at Koinania Farms, which was a very significant experiment.

**BIRKNER:** Which is in Georgia, right?

**MATTSON:** When I came here to the college, someone called me and said they wanted to make a contribution to Gettysburg College because he had paid their bail money and they were Freedom Riders. He had gone to visit Cesar Chavez in California to learn that scene, and then he brought all this stuff back to Augustana Seminary.

**BIRKNER:** In some ways it sounds like he would have been more of an [intellectual] influence on you than your father.

**MATTSON:** He was. All my, as I said earlier, all my relation to politics come from my uncle [A. D.]

**BIRKNER:** Did he have a sense that he was laying on hands with you?

**MATTSON:** He didn't – Well, you know Swedes are private and [unemotional] beings. Anyone who cries when he leaves home is less than a man. You know there was that kind of spirit in the family.

**BIRKNER:** You're talking about the difference between physical and emotional and –

**MATTSON:** Yeah, very little physical contact. But [A. D.] would show up every day at our house for lunch, and he and my father would just sit and talk about issues.

**BIRKNER:** So they weren't competitive with each other, they got along?

**MATTSON:** Oh yes, my father and his brother were very close. And actually my father and my uncle, the uncle who he displaced, were close as well. He buried my aunt who died of appendicitis, he buried my grandfather, he gave the eulogy at [A.D.]'s funeral. So despite these, what do you call them, rifts, these rifts within the church and the family, the point is we could fight but we should never break with each other, and they never broke with each other.

**BIRKNER:** How long did all of this last? How long was your father head of that Seminary?

**MATTSON:** Well he died young. He died at age 59.

**BIRKNER:** Was he still in office?

**MATTSON:** Uh huh. I guess he died in '64.

**BIRKNER:** Oh, '64. And had he been sick or was this sudden?

**MATTSON:** Well he was a smoker; two whole packs a day. He had ulcers, and he functioned under tremendous strain.

**BIRKNER:** Did you notice this [at the time]? Did you know your father was not looking as good as he should have looked?

**MATTSON:** For some years, I had left home by then, but I knew that something was wrong.

**BIRKNER:** So he passed away in '64 while still president of the Seminary?

**MATTSON:** But the merger was about to occur, so a factor in his death may have been that he had been by that time displaced as president of the Seminary, because in the merger several seminaries moved together and became the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago on the University of Chicago campus.

**BIRKNER:** How do you merge the Seminary from Augustana –

**MATTSON:** Because the churches are coming together so they don't want to –

**BIRKNER:** [overlapping] Do students no longer physically go to Augustana to study?

**MATTSON:** No, they go to Chicago.

**BIRKNER:** So what happened to the campus?

**MATTSON:** The College took it back.

**BIRKNER:** And so they simply spread out on to what had been the Seminary.

**MATTSON:** It became the college chapel, for example, the Seminary chapel.

**BIRKNER:** So you graduated from college in '55 while your father's still president. It should be noted that although things are percolating underneath the surface, in terms of our country, it's considered to be a fairly quiescent period. It's the Eisenhower era; people are enjoying a new prosperity, cultivating their own gardens and so forth. It's not what we think of when we think of the go-go sixties. What were you thinking about your future? I mean were you gonna be a pastor after you left Augustana, or did you have a wider level of opportunity? What was gonna happen next once you got your degree?

**MATTSON:** Wel,l I mentioned to you that I had for a time thought I was gonna go on to Political Science.

**BIRKNER:** You did mention that.

**MATTSON:** But I didn't, so I enrolled in Seminary, and then right after graduation, I married Marge. And while I was in college, I had experimented with, as you had inferred earlier on, the main line denominations were still doing well, and there was a shortage of pastors, so summers I, even when I was a sophomore in college I took a three church parish in North-West Minnesota –

**BIRKNER:** [overlapping] no kidding.

**MATTSON:** [overlapping] and preached all summer long. Then I took a parish on a subsequent summer in Marquette, Michigan down by the iron ore docks. And, oh, other summers in college I worked for Del Monte's as a pea picker, and during the corn harvest, but –

**BIRKNER:** [overlapping] Now you have a range of life experience, but again I'm trying to get from you, you're out of Seminary, you're getting married, what's next?

**MATTSON:** Well, the first thing we did, I married, and two weeks later I moved Marge into a migrant labor camp around Aurora, Minnesota. So the first summer of our marriage-- Now wait a minutes, I've skipped a year. We didn't get married until she graduated so I'd already done a year –

**BIRKNER:** [overlapping] so she was a year younger than you?

**MATTSON:** Yeah. I'm in Seminary, and then we got married at the end of the first year, and then we went and worked in the migrant labor camp for the summer in Aurora, Minnesota.

**BIRKNER:** What'd she think of that?

**MATTSON:** She liked it. She's good at that.

**BIRKNER:** And why did you do it?

**MATTSON:** Well, that's just what young ministers were supposed to do. It was expected, given, well I mean just that having [A. D.] for an uncle, having been a kind of disciple for some years, it was no other--

**BIRKNER:** [overlapping] It was Christianity in action.

**MATTSON:** That's what you did. It wasn't anything noble; you just did that kind of thing. Just like in those days when you were a young minister you didn't head out to the suburbs. If you were worth anything you had to be [in the city].

**BIRKNER:** Alright, so you did that for the summer but you have to make a living.

**MATTSON:** Well, no, then there was the internship in Los Angeles. After we left the migrant camp, the Seminary students are required to do a full year.

**BIRKNER:** Is it like being assistant pastor?

**MATTSON:** Yeah, a vicar or whatever you call it.

**BIRKNER:** And they were paying you a salary?

**MATTSON:** Oh yeah.

**BIRKNER:** So you went to L. A. I'm just assuming it's a collection of suburbs, but what was it like living in L. A.?

**MATTSON:** We'd just been married so it was a ball. She was working; Marge was working, teaching, which was her profession. She taught in a referral school where you had to be kicked out of at least one school before you got to the referral school. All the men teachers carried paddles. For the first half a year she came home and cried herself to sleep every night, but eventually she learned to discipline and became an exceptionally gentle disciplinarian and pulled through that scene very well, and the point is we had a lot of money. I had a salary, she had a salary, we had no kids, so what the hell, we had a good time.

**BIRKNER:** What specifically did you enjoy doing?

**MATTSON:** Well we lived in Culver City. We wandered the beach a lot, swam a lot, went skiing in the mountains. The minister didn't trust me because he was under attack from the congregation and he didn't want anyone competing with what was left of his popularity. So I was free to do whatever the hell I wanted, so we organized, and [Marge] was better than me, we organized a wonderful group of young adults and we organized athletic teams in every conceivable church league you could walk into. We spent a good part of the year playing in athletic leagues.

**BIRKNER:** Nice.

**MATTSON:** It was a good year; we had a good year.

**BIRKNER:** Does the church then tell you where you're gonna go next–

**MATTSON:** [overlapping] Yes. When I was ordained I was told I was to start a new church in Buffalo, New York. It was what is now close to the University of Buffalo.

**BIRKNER:** You were to launch a church, get it going?

**MATTSON:** Mm hm.

**BIRKNER:** That's a major task.

**MATTSON:** Well it wasn't all that unusual in those days, but it was a major task.

**BIRKNER:** Did you have a physical building?

**MATTSON:** No.

**BIRKNER:** So where did you actually hold services?

**MATTSON:** Well, in the basement of the parsonage. The church bought . . . us a parsonage; a tract house. I mean we announced [we would hold a] service, the first service we had eight people, the second service we had six people, and the third service it was just me and Marge.

**BIRKNER:** [laughter] But it got better, I take it?

**MATTSON:** When I left there four years later, there were about two hundred and fifty members. We built the first unit and conducted a lot of experimental education. Instead of Sunday school we had Saturday school. We had an extensive education program. The suburban kids' parents liked that kind of stuff.

**BIRKNER:** Do you think that, how do I put this, do you think that your qualities are why it went from zero to two fifty, or do you think you were just in the right place at the right time?

**MATTSON:** Effective ministry depends upon contacting people. . . . I just kept at it, you build a church like that around relationships.

**BIRKNER:** Was this older Buffalo or newer Buffalo?

**MATTSON:** No, this was a suburban neighborhood.

**BIRKNER:** So you have people moving in and they aren't necessarily connected to a church.

**MATTSON:** No they didn't [have a connection]; the Swedish Lutheran Church meant nothing to them.

**BIRKNER:** I've seen this with relatives of mine who are Protestant, to a great degree they shop for a church and the minister who is most appealing will often be where they will stop.

**MATTSON:** Or who pays the most attention.

**BIRKNER:** I've seen this here in Gettysburg. One friend who was very active in the Episcopal church in New Jersey moved to Gettysburg, and he really liked the pastor of the Christ Lutheran here in Gettysburg, and they joined that church. So who the pastor is has something to do with it. Now to what extent does the hierarchy notice that you've been successful in Buffalo, or tell you that you're doing a good job, or do they just not even check in on you? How does that work?

**MATTSON:** Well, it was what they called the Board of American Mission. They visit you regularly.

**BIRKNER:** And you tell them your story?

**MATTSON:** Yeah, and they evaluate what you're doing.

**BIRKNER:** So when you do well does that mean you get rewarded by getting a more prosperous congregation, or does that mean you get rewarded by getting a tougher assignment, or something else?

**MATTSON:** Either. I mean it can be either.

**BIRKNER:** And again, after you've done one, and you were there, what, four years you said?

**MATTSON:** Uh huh.

**BIRKNER:** Did you get a say in what you were gonna do next?

**MATTSON:** In those days you only have to go where they told you once, then you could –

**BIRKNER:** [overlapping] negotiate what you want.

**MATTSON:** Negotiate with a synodical official and the congregation as to where you wanted to go.

**BIRKNER:** Before I ask about that association, did you have children while you were in Buffalo?

**MATTSON:** I had my first girl.

**BIRKNER:** And that was?

**MATTSON:** Martha.

**BIRKNER:** And was Marge still teaching, or did she choose to be a housewife at that point?

**MATTSON:** Basically she was the pastor's wife; that was her role. We had Sunday school in the bedrooms, and church in the basement, and people began to think of our house as the church, wandering in at all times, so it was a full-time job. But Marge has always been good at that.

**BIRKNER:** So you talked with her, obviously, about what next. Why was it four years in Buffalo, and not eight years in Buffalo? Or what –

**MATTSON:** [overlapping] Well, I wouldn't do that again. It was not the kind of work I really like. I also became chaplain to students at Erie County Tech.

**BIRKNER:** And you liked that?

**MATTSON:** Well I was bad at it; I wasn't very good at it.

**BIRKNER:** [laughter]

**MATTSON:** But I had a group of students, twelve or fourteen, who'd meet once a week and we'd do different things.

**BIRKNER:** Well, what did you have in mind after –

**MATTSON:** [overlapping] again I was on the old tracks, and had to go to graduate school, so I went back to Yale.

**BIRKNER:** Well you'd been I guess on the the Yale campus, but you had never matriculated there, right?

**MATTSON:** My father was chaplain of Lutheran students at Yale, so we had Yale students in our house all the time.

**BIRKNER:** I see. So were you studying at Yale Divinity?

**MATTSON:** That's correct, for a master's degree.

**BIRKNER:** Tell me about that experience.

**MATTSON:** Well, I was, I really didn't know what I wanted to do. I was just in part going through motions.

**BIRKNER:** Mm hm.

**MATTSON:** But there were highlights of that Yale experience. The chief of which was Sydney Ahlstrom. He was probably the best professor I ever had before; you've read his stuff before, right?

**BIRKNER:** Mm hm. Not a lot because I'm not a religious historian, but I certainly know of his work.

**MATTSON:** And his classes awakened me to American religious history; I was immensely excited.

**BIRKNER:** Did you ever sit in on a Richard Niehbuhr class?

**MATTSON:** No, he was gone by then.

**BIRKNER:** He was gone by then. There was a fellow at Yale Divinity who wrote a best-selling book in the sixties, and he's still there in his late seventies now; Harvey something or other, right?

**MATTSON:** Harvey Cox?

**BIRKNER:** Harvey Cox. Was he there when you were there?

**MATTSON:** No. [inaudible] was just ending when I came. There was a professor by the name of Edward Gustafson for whom I worked. My master's project was to do a survey of the literature then being written about the Protestant parish, and it's ineffectiveness. Harvey Cox was a part of that; his literature is in that corpus.

**BIRKNER:** That's interesting, now you said, I'm gonna quote you, "I didn't know what I wanted to do." But you did have certain moments at divinity school where you clearly were engaged, right?

**MATTSON:** Yeah, there were two [other] professors that engaged me. I was a little bit restless at the Seminary. Philosophical Theology, which was then in vogue at Yale Divinity School bored the hell out of me. Not only bored the hell out of me, but I didn't understand it. So I went off to the graduate English department, and studied with R. W. B. Lewis for a year.

**BIRKNER:** Rather a big name.

**MATTSON:** Oh God, was that something.

**BIRKNER:** And you were allowed to do that as a divinity school student.

**MATTSON:** Uh huh. And I took his class on aspects of the modern novel, and he liked my writing, and he said I had the makings of the style. Only the makings but –

**BIRKNER:** Well, you've got to keep at it I guess.

**MATTSON:** Yeah. He encouraged me a lot. And there was Sydney Ahlstrom, not only a good lecturer, but he was a faithful professor to the students. Those two men –

**BIRKNER:** Talk about two giants, and two years to get a degree?

**MATTSON:** No I finished. I was only on campus for a year. It took me a year to write the paper after that.

**BIRKNER:** OK, but you did get your M. Div, is that what it is?

**MATTSON:** S.T.M.

**BIRKNER:** S.T.M. what does that stand for?

**MATTSON:** Master of Sacred Theology.

**BIRKNER:** That's one more nice credential to have, but it doesn't put bread on the table, so you've gotta do something; you've got a family at this point.

**MATTSON:** We were in the sixties now you know, so then things were happening, so you had to act, and so we left there and moved to this [inner] section of New York City.

**BIRKNER:** Which section of New York?

**MATTSON:** Brooklyn.

**BIRKNER:** To Brooklyn.

**MATTSON:** To be specific, a block from 4th and Atlantic in the Puerto Rican neighborhood.

**BIRKNER:** Before I ask about that, just a quick question. Did your uncle, when you were at Yale, encourage you to think along a particular track? Was he giving you any signals or encouraging you –

**MATTSON:** No.

**BIRKNER:** So he just let you be.

**MATTSON:** We saw him in the summers and we just discussed politics.

**BIRKNER:** But he didn't say, "Karl you need to do this or that"; he just let you be?

**MATTSON:** The only place I really had significant encouragement from all sides of the family was the call I had before I came here. The most significant church, I'm skipping ahead but I'll go back, the most significant church in terms of integration in the Lutheran church –

**BIRKNER:** [overlapping] is in Chicago.

**MATTSON:** [overlapping] is in Chicago where I was pastor for seven years before I came here.

**BIRKNER:** Alright, you and I are going back to discuss that a little bit, but we're running out of tape.

**MATTSON:** There was a lot of encouragement there.

**BIRKNER:** Alright, so you move to this Brooklyn neighborhood; did you have an assignment?

**MATTSON:** I was pastor of the Swedish Mother Church in Brooklyn where we moved, and then in the Puerto Rican neighborhood, my task was to love the old Swedes and open the doors to the Puerto Ricans.

**BIRKNER:** Were there still old Swedes left?

**MATTSON:** Oh yeah, it was still a vibrant congregation.

**BIRKNER:** Did any Puerto Ricans buy into it?

**MATTSON:** Not so many Puerto Ricans. Eventually we hired a Puerto Rican pastor, but he turned out to be a dud, and he wasn't much interested in the neighborhood Puerto Ricans, he was interested in the Puerto Ricans in the Bronx; that was a bad scene, and he was fired. We began to take in black members, but not so much Puerto Ricans.

**BIRKNER:** What was Brooklyn like in those days?

**MATTSON:** Well it was before the gentrification of, do you know Brooklyn?

**BIRKNER:** Nope.

**MATTSON:** [overlapping] it's called Boerem Hill, which was part of the gentrification.

**BIRKNER:** [overlapping] Well, Boerem Hill was an example of something that was down and out, and became gentrified, right?

**MATTSON:** It's still mixed, but it's pretty gentrified. It wasn't when we came in there. The first night we were there someone took a two by four up and down the block and broke out all the windows. Marg was propositioned almost every time she walked out the door, she was terribly afraid to begin with, and after work I had to walk her around the block at night just to get her acquainted with the scene, and finally she went out on her own, she got down to the corner with Martha and someone broke a bottle over somebody's head and it fell at her feet and she stayed in for another month, but she eventually became extremely street-smart and well liked in the neighborhood. Essentially two ministries there working with the old Swedes. A rule of thumb in the parish is give love to people and serve them, and you're free to experiment a lot. If you want to fight with the people you can't do anything, you know? So I did that pretty well. We got big grants and ran theatre in the streets, brought in college kids from the mid-west, and ran summer programs, and once when they cut off the federal poverty funds we organized troops and marched across the Brooklyn Bridge to get the funds restored.

**BIRKNER:** Did you have any interactions with Brooklyn politicians?

**MATTSON:** No, Mayor [John] Lindsey was the mayor of New York, so I got people into the community garden program, and we turned broken lots into community gardens and gave local kids experience in gardening, and some of them, vegetables.

**BIRKNER:** Which is something of course that was taken off the grid in the last twenty years.

**MATTSON:** Abraham and Strauss [provided funding]. I was involved in community development projects. Yeah, I was very good at that.

**BIRKNER:** And you probably met quite a cross-section of people ranging from the most altruistic to the most greedy.

**MATTSON:** Yeah, although, we had a great cop on our block and [in those days] they still worked the beat. We had a wonderful relationship with the police.

**BIRKNER:** Mm hm.

**MATTSON:** There'd be murders most every week close by, but –

**BIRKNER:** Did you eat at home every night, or were you out and about? What were you doing in terms of home?

**MATTSON:** We ate at home. Meal time has been –

**BIRKNER:** [overlapping] family time.

**MATTSON:** [overlapping] family time.

**BIRKNER:** Did you have a growing family at this point, or is it still –

**MATTSON:** [overlapping] two of the girls are born in Brooklyn.

**BIRKNER:** Who are they?

**MATTSON:** Katie and Kristen.

**BIRKNER:** And they were born in Brooklyn?

**MATTSON:** Mm hm.

**BIRKNER:** And, you were recruiting some African American members into your congregation, and that was working out OK, and the old Swedes were OK with that?

**MATTSON:** I don't know if you're the same way, how much time we got?

**BIRKNER:** We've got a couple minutes.

**MATTSON:** I never really, most all of my life, maybe with the exception of here, got the time to do a job I liked; which is always kind of a tragedy. What was your question?

**BIRKNER:** I was wondering if the older congregants took to the new African American congregants.

**MATTSON:** No, but they tolerated them, and they made space for them, and they supported the program. It's a wild scene; we could spend the next hour on that. This was the church that meant the most when they came in from Sweden early on, and most Swedes passed through, forgot the church and went off and made money in Manhattan, but then when it came time to die they had to go somewhere before they got in the grave.

**BIRKNER:** [laughter] You did a lot of funerals, huh?

**MATTSON:** I had forty to fifty funerals a year.

**BIRKNER:** Hopefully they were paying you [laughter].

**MATTSON:** Not much. I think I got forty five dollars per funeral in those days, but anyway, I had buried Swedes from all over. I could tell you funeral stories for the next two hours.

**BIRKNER:** You saw, the inside of a lot of families that way, because you met the family, the grieving families obviously.

**MATTSON:** [overlapping] Yeah I learned a lot about Swedish lodges.

**BIRKNER:** And you had to learn about the individuals and their children, right, because you had to give the eulogies. I think that's the way it works. How many years were you in Brooklyn?

**MATTSON:** In Brooklyn I was just four years.

**BIRKNER:** Just the four years. So you were almost like an Army guy. You know, you'd stay a few years here, a few years there. Would you on the whole call the Brooklyn experience salutary?

**MATTSON:** I'd say both my wife and I did our awakenings to the things that were important to us when we moved to Brooklyn.

**BIRKNER:** Well just as we're reaching the end, why don't you, I think that'll be the point where we're gonna break off, what was the awakening that you had?

**MATTSON:** I didn't know what the hell was out in the world. I'd just been in places like this. Not knowing what was out there.

**BIRKNER:** Did you want to change things, or did you just simply want to be a good pastor?

**MATTSON:** Well, now you're getting into theological issues. I didn't want to change anything, but I believed in the kingdom of God. In the New Testament, the church is only mentioned three times. The church is not what the Bible is about. The coming of the kingdom, the world of justice is what the Bible is about. That's what Jesus set out to do, not form some hierarchy built on some memories, but little demonstrations of justice. So the task was always to build a little garden wherever you went. That little garden that we had next to the church in Brooklyn wasn't just a garden, it was a sign of the coming of the kingdom; a peacefulness in the middle of the jungle. And the task is always, it just, in the meantime –

**[END OF TAPE]**