In the Spring, every year for the last twenty-five years, there has been a celebration in a town in Virginia. Sometimes the celebrations mark the opening of a new facility like a child care center, but they always honor a man who has never held public office in the town, nor been its financial benefactor, nor a school alumnus, a war hero, or even a rock star. He was, however, its creator. The man is Robert E. Simon, Jr. and the town is Reston, which takes its name from his initials. The story of that town and its creation is essentially the story of the man. Curiously, what made Reston possible was Simon's involvement many years before with Carnegie Hall in New York City.

Reston, like Carnegie Hall, is world famous and has been analyzed, criticized, admired, and lauded in innumerable articles, magazines, and books. Especially today, by contrast with the state of many of our cities and towns, Reston stands as a model of what is possible in the way of a planned community which combines physical beauty, economic health, variety in life styles, and comfort for its inhabitants. Simon's master plan was realized in spite of almost insuperable difficulties and now is an inspiration to other planners and a source of enormous pride to its residents. And yet, the whole enterprise was an audacious gamble with as many twists and turns as a spy novel - and it began with the denouement of an almost equally complex series of events, the transfer of Carnegie Hall from private to public ownership by Robert E. Simon, Jr.

Robert E. Simon, Jr., who took the enormous, expensive and exciting gamble of creating a town from scratch, is a man of many contrasts. Physically, of average height and slender, with his beard, ruddy complexion, piercing blue eyes, slightly Romanesque nose, he pays keen attention to his companions and his surroundings. He gives the impression of an alert sea captain sniffing the air for trouble. His upper class background and schooling are apparent. Yet, in conversation, he is almost courtly. He is gentle, sympathetic and, at the same time, keenly alert and quietly ruthless in his sharp examination of the logic and facts of what people say to him. He clearly does not suffer fools gladly but appears to have developed a subliminal humorous patience with those he does meet. His story begins with Carnegie Hall.
Robert Simon, Jr. (Bob) was born in New York City on April 10, 1914, the son of Robert B. Simon and Elsa Weil Simon. Two sisters, Betty and Helen preceded him and the third, Carol, followed. The sisters, Betty and Carol, are married, with children, and live, respectively, in Ithaca, New York, and Southbury, Connecticut. Helen is deceased.

His father had a very successful career in real estate sales and development and was the president of a firm which held, at various times, numerous properties in New York City, including the Fisk Building, the Herald Square Hotel, and the former site of the old Paramount building, originally purchased from the Astors. The specific Simon family holdings were managed by Robert E. Simon, Sr. in a family corporation called Mercer, which Simon headed.

In 1925 the firm bought the Carnegie Hall property from the residuary Carnegie estate, together with other properties adjoining it. Lovers of music and of New York traditions were greatly upset by the prospect that Carnegie Hall might disappear in the maw of new building development. However, Mr. Simon, Sr. was an idealistic man with a deep interest in social issues, in music, and in community betterment. He created and headed the United Parents Association, and was a civic leader who fought for and won raises for New York City public school teachers and librarians.

To allay the fears of the music-loving public, a clause in the purchase contract provided that Carnegie Hall would be maintained as it was for a period of at least five years, unless, during that time, a comparable concert hall were to be built to replace it. When it became clear that no replacement was going to be built in the depressed economic climate of 1929, Mr. Simon, Sr. turned his energies and resources to modernizing Carnegie Hall so as to turn it into a profitable entity. This required modifying and improving the building extensively to provide more rental space and income.

Vast expenditures were made in redecorating the halls, introducing the Art Gallery, a reception hall on the eighth floor for the use of pupils and guests of tenants, the introduction of stores, and the installation and maintenance of modern heating and lighting equipment. Many of the beautifully designed rooms of the 1891-1894 period were converted to rehearsal halls, musical instrument storage space, musicians’ locker rooms and meeting rooms for tenant artists of all types.
The economic pressures of the 1929 period made it necessary for many of the artist-renters of Carnegie to live in their working studios. To respond to this trend, more and more of the studios were converted into combined living and working apartments.

In spite of its age (it was completed in 1891) and because of its marvelous original all-masonry design and construction, (entirely without steel beams) Carnegie Hall was able to accept all the modifications needed to create more and more living accommodations and stores on the same property and still conform to the complex requirements of the building codes of New York. It was rated a Class A multiple dwelling by the fire department and fire underwriters.

In addition to its studios and stores, one of the most prestigious tenants was The American Academy of Dramatic Arts. In addition, the Chapter Room was used for meetings of associations of all types. Until 1929 Carnegie Hall was operated at a reasonable profit, but, with the depression, it became more and more difficult to achieve a break-even, let alone a profit. On the same group of properties, Simon, Sr. added a restaurant (now the famous Russian Tea Room), a drug store and other facilities to increase income.

One of the major problems in maintaining the Hall was taxes. The assessment when Mr. Simon, Sr. purchased the hall was $1,850,000 and the taxes were $49,765. Six years later, in 1931, the assessment was $3,000,000 and the taxes were $81,600. In the face of these steady increases, and the deteriorating economic climate, it became more and more difficult to keep the operations of the Hall in the black. But, through the hard-headed idealism of Mr. Simon and his syndicate they were able to keep Carnegie Hall in continued operation through the lean years of the thirties. Even in 1935, at the time of Mr. Simon's death, work was under way to improve elevators, recondition ventilating and air conditioning systems, erect a new stage and redesign the marquee.

During this period, Bob attended Horace Mann School, went to Harvard and in 1935 graduated cum laude with a degree in English literature and history. As a graduation present he was given a bicycle tour of England and France, which was interrupted when he learned that his father had died suddenly.

It had been planned for Bob to start at the bottom of another real estate company and take the time needed to learn the real estate business before joining the family corporation. However, without the benefit of this preliminary training, he returned from Europe and
immediately began the process of taking over the management of Mercer, the family corporation, and other holdings of his father. He was then twenty-one years old.

Many of the early events of Bob's life which intimately involved him in the more recent history of Carnegie Hall and, ultimately, led to the creation of Reston are described in excerpts from a transcription of a long interview. The story begins when he returned from Europe after his father's death in 1935. His father's chief assistant at that time was Mr. Murray Weisman. Miss Veit had been Simon, Sr.'s personal secretary and Arthur Felber was then the chief bookkeeper. Al Sharf was then the real estate expert.

Bob recalls: "I went into the office at 654 Madison Avenue and there was this sumptuous office that Dad used which had four exposures, believe it or not, north, south, east and west. There was a terrace overlooking Madison Avenue and a view of Central Park. There was a big desk, and outside in the outer office were Emily Veit and Arthur Felber. I don't remember whether Hiss Halley was there or not. Then, in an office next to Dad's was Murray Weisman. Murray Weisman had been Dad's number one guy, his chief assistant. He was a Harvard graduate, a rather slick article."

"Here was Arthur who had shown me how to operate the adding machine and Miss Veit, on whose lap I had sat. They took me into Dad's office and told me that was to be my office. So I sat in the chair which seemed enormous at the desk which seemed even bigger and I remembered there were buttons to call people. So I pushed Miss Veit's button and I didn't know what was going to happen — whether she'd come in and say: 'What the hell do you think you're doing, you nasty little kid?' or what she was going to do. Well, she came in with her pad and pencil and sat down in her chair ready to take dictation and made me feel I was real!"

"Al Sharf was there also, so I had the feeling that I was going to a kind of school and my teachers would be Murray Weisman and Al Sharf and Arthur Felber and Miss Veit. Al was supposed to be the expert in real estate values and construction while Murray was supposed to be the expert in corporate operations and finance. Arthur Felber was then the bookkeeper."

Initially everybody seemed to be enormously helpful, particularly Arthur Weisman, with whom Bob felt very close at that time. They would frequently have long philosophical as well as business discussions. Bob found, however, that Al Sharf, who was a brother-in-law of one of Bob's uncles, would, in response to questions, give quick, dogmatic answers often found later to be unreliable.
After Simon, Sr. died, Murray Weisman became president of all the corporations in the real estate syndicate, except for Hercer. Bob decided to hang on to that title since it was the family company, but he also was vice president of the other corporations. He soon began to realize that, although Murray Weisman was probably honest and loyal as long as Simon, Sr. was alive, in a relatively short time after Simon, Sr. died, Weisman started to take money for himself that he shouldn’t have. Bob’s real coming of age, so to speak, took place about six months after he took over his father’s office.

From time to time he used to go over to Carnegie Hall to try to learn what was going on there. He later discovered that Weisman had asked all the people there to keep things from him to the extent that it was possible.

Bob explains: “A decision had been made to buy a generating plant for Carnegie Hall at a fairly substantial price. My memory is that it was for $50,000 at that time, so if you convert it into today’s dollars it would be about $400,000. It was a big investment. This generator, incidentally, had been brought into the office by uncle Ray, which further complicated matters. I took the papers home with me to study like a good boy takes his work home from school to do his homework.”

“I read the analysis which resulted in the decision to buy the generator and I couldn’t come up with the same answer as that in the conclusion of the analysis. The way the figures were arranged, as I remember it, was analogous to the way the happy wife greets her husband at the door and says: ‘Honey, I saved fifty dollars today’, and the husband asks: ‘How did you do that?’ and she says: ‘I bought a seventy-five dollar dress instead of a hundred and twenty-five dollar dress’.

“That’s the way the figures had been arranged. I got the figures arranged differently to show how much money was going out and how much was coming in and I came up with a different answer. So I went to the office and said to Al Sharf, who was the expert on these matters, ‘I can’t get the right answer. Show me how to figure this. I want to figure it this way and it’s a perfectly valid way to do it. Show me where I made my mistake’.

“After we’d spent some time together, he said, well, he couldn’t satisfy me so he’d have Murray Weisman satisfy me. When I finished my discussions with Murray Weisman the decision to buy the generator was cancelled. This immediately converted me from a student to a principal. All of a sudden I felt responsibilities I hadn’t imagined and it was almost terrifying.” Bob was then 22 years old.
As a result of this and other things which disturbed him, he
fired Murray Weisman from everything except Carnegie Hall and
sent him to work there full time.

Later, John Weil, who worked in the engine room at Carnegie
Hall, confided to Bob that all was not right. The nature of
the problem was that the Carnegie corporation always called
for competitive bids from contractors for any work that was
needed. Curiously, there was one contractor named Joe Lipcah
who always won the contract and got the work. The reason for
his low, winning bids was, John Weil realized, that Joe
Lipcah was using Carnegie Hall painters, carpenters,
plumbers, masons, all in-house employees, to do his work. So
Carnegie Hall was supplying Lipcah with labor and even
materials gratis.

A man named Nelson was then in charge of the Carnegie engine
room. John Weil told Bob when Nelson could be caught red-
headed. Bob had stored a set of coveralls in Carnegie Hall
for himself so that he could wander around in the engine
room and through the building to learn the plant physically.
Many of his visits were made during the day and generally
were well announced. However, following John Weil’s
suggestion, he turned up one night in the engine room at one
A.H. wearing a tuxedo because, in those days, they were de
rigueur for anything that went on in the evening.

He chose that time for his visit because Joe Lipcah had been
awarded a major plumbing repair job. A huge pipe, about 24
inches in diameter, had to be replaced. As Bob approached
the gate to the engine room, he heard a scuttling sound, the
kind of sound one associates with mice disappearing into
their holes. He walked in to find chief Nelson and Joe
Lipcah standing at the scene of the action with a chain hoist
attached to a huge pipe which was hanging in the air. There
was no one else in evidence.

Bob played it cool and said: "Hi, fellows. This looks like a
pretty big job you’re doing - for just two men." Before many
minutes passed, Nelson said: "The jig is up" or words to that
effect. And out from holes in the wall reappeared the
sheepish Carnegie crew.

Soon thereafter Bob called a meeting of his board of
directors, which included some very eminent men. Judge
Proskauer, John Rosenberg, Judge Elkin, Henry Ingraham,Sr.
and Milton Bergerman were on the board at that time. (At this
point it would be useful to give some indication of the
affiliations of these men at that time ) At the board
meeting, Weisman and Bob made their representations and the
upshot was that Weisman was fired and Bob became President of
Carnegie Hall. He was then 23 years old.
On subsequent investigation it turned out that Joe Lipcah had not been involved only in plumbing contracts. On some painting contracts he had some six painters on the Carnegie payroll who were working for him. While it was clear to Bob at that point that everyone seemed to know what was going on at Carnegie, he decided that it would be unreasonable to fire anyone other than Nelson. So Nelson was marked as the culprit and was fired.

In his youth and relative inexperience in managing a real estate empire, Bob experienced considerable uneasiness and uncertainty at first. He had, however, strong support from members of his family, his Uncle Harry in particular. While the kind of venality represented by the Weisman episode did not recur until World War II, it did show up in another connection that made Weisman persona non grata. There were other problems, however, which tested Bob's intelligence and stamina and, ultimately seasoned and matured him.

During the middle and late thirties times were tough for many people and even for real estate owners and managers. Rents were not being paid and foreclosures were going on apace. The Simon syndicate was in danger of losing some of its properties because it could not make some mortgage payments. Carnegie Hall was also endangered. The syndicate had property on 59th and 3rd that was producing a profit but nothing else was. The full interest rate in those days was five per cent and the lending institutions really were not interested in foreclosing if they thought they could make a reasonable arrangement with the owners.

On one property on 33rd street behind the Herald Square Hotel the holder of the mortgage was the Harlem Savings Bank. Because the syndicate wasn't able to make the interest payments, Bob went with Murray Weissman to meet Arthur Westerfelt, then president of Harlem Savings to renegotiate the terms of the mortgage. Bob listened while Weisman made his presentation, constantly fussing with the papers and folders in his briefcase. While Westerfelt was asking him questions Bob noted that some of Weisman's answers were forthcoming and some not. Finally, after they got back to their office, they got word that they had been turned down and the bank was going to foreclose.

In the face of this rejection, Bob's response was to organize all the materials and information relevant to the problem on one sheet of paper, study it until he had virtually memorized it, and then make another appointment with Westerfelt. (He took the piece of paper with him to the meeting). The result this time was vastly different. Westerfelt reduced the mortgage interest rate from five per cent to one and one half per cent! Bob's concession, on the other hand, was that he
would take only a management fee for the office and that all
the rest of the rental proceeds would go to paying interest.
As a result, the company was able to hold on to the 33rd
street property. Aside from his elation at his success, Bob
recalls: "The thrill though, after the meeting, was that,
although I was used to chauffeur-driven cars, I wasn't used
to having a bank president send me back to my office in his
chauffeur-driven car!"

Another troublesome mortgage was one held by Union Dime. The
president there was a man named William Debeau. Bob
describes him: "He was an intimidating figure right out of
Grant Wood; he was very tall with gray hair and wore a very
high, starched collar. I developed a technique for dealing
with him that was very helpful to me in some other
circumstances. Just before I went into his office, which
was enormous, I pictured him lying flat on the floor, with
his grandchildren sitting on his chest, while his wife was
saying to him: 'Now come on, you old goat, get up on your
feet!' Somehow, it was very helpful picturing him that way;
it made me think of him as an ordinary human being and we got
along well. In the end, he gave us the same deal we got from
Westerfelt and, except for two or three we lost, we ended up
hanging on to all of our other properties."

Not all of Bob's experiences were happy ones, however.
The company had made a swap of a property at 59th and 3rd,
across from Bloomingdale's, for a property on 5th Avenue and
37th street. The key to making this a successful swap was to
get the assessed value of the 5th avenue property reduced.
The assessed value then was $1,200,000 - only a little less
than the existing mortgage, which was $1,300,000. The
property's assessment was so high that the taxes made the
building operate at a loss.

Bob felt that he could get the assessment reduced and told
the board of directors about this while one of Simon, Sr.'s
close friends, a board member and important judge named
Proskauer was present. Proskauer told Bob: "Let me handle
this because I have very good contacts at the assessor's
office." Bob was concerned about this suggestion because
he had asked for a very substantial reduction in the
assessment, and, although Proskauer had looked in at the
office about six months after Bob took over and commented
approvingly, Bob wondered how much of Proskauer's influence
and power he would really exert to achieve the desired
reduction in the assessment.

A few days later Judge Proskauer called Bob and told him that
he had settled the case with the head of the assessors
office. What startled Bob, however, was that he had gotten
only a fraction of the needed reductions. When Proskauer had
indicated that he would take on this problem, Bob had
immediately sent all the necessary data to Proskauer’s office
and confirmed all of it in a letter.

What happened, Bob subsequently learned, was that the Judge
had gone into the assessor’s office to do a job for
Consolidated Edison, which he represented. When he was
finished with his negotiation, he had thrown Bob’s letter on
the assessor’s desk and said: “See what you can do for us.”
Unfortunately, the deal that he had accepted was completely
unacceptable to Simon, Jr.

Again demonstrating his persistence, Bob then went to the
assessor’s office and said to him: “A mistake has been made.
I’m sure if you call Judge Proskauer he will confirm that he
made a mistake; we simply can’t accept the deal as it is.”
The assessor replied: “I’m astonished that you, your
father’s son, would suggest to me that Judge Proskauer wasn’t
representing you properly and that you now want to welsh on
the deal he made for you.”

Greatly upset, Bob called the Judge and said: “You’ve got to
call that man.” and the judge refused. Again demonstrating
his refusal to accept defeat, Simon, Jr. went to court, won
the case and got the reduction he wanted. However, Bob was
greatly shaken by this experience. Considering that
Proskauer had been one of Simon, Sr.’s best friends, Bob
expected that Proskauer would do the honorable thing.
Because Proskauer had had the requirement for the assessment
reduction in his office in writing, Bob expected that
Proskauer would call the assessor and tell him: “I did make a
mistake. Bob is right.”

This was not to be the last disappointment or unfair blemish
on Bob’s reputation, but he was then 23 years old and it was
hard to take. To balance things somewhat, others of his
father’s friends and associates were wonderfully helpful,
among them, Judge Alcoss, John Rosenberg, and Henry
Ingraham. As we will see later, Carnegie Hall was a
continuing source of both pleasure and pain for Simon, Jr.

Carnegie Hall was at all times a major preoccupation with
Bob. For example, although the company wasn’t making enough
money to distribute to its investors, the then current
earnings made it possible to continue, out of cash flow, the
rebuilding program at Carnegie started by Simon, Sr.

With the coming of World War II Bob entered the Army in 1942
as a private, and was soon sent to Officers Candidate School.
First assigned to the Quartermaster Corps, he was sent to
the Harvard Business School and the Judge Advocate School.
He served in the European theatre until 1946.
On joining the Army, Bob gave over the operation of Hercer and Carnegie to a family friend and lawyer, Milton Bergerman. He found some unsettling things when he got back four years later. Milton Bergerman was apparently the kind of man who assumes knowledge he does not have. One example was his interaction with Arthur Maroff who had replaced Nelson as the chief engineer at Carnegie.

Maroff was a proud man who had a graduate degree in engineering and who didn't like being called "Chief," saying: "I'm not an Indian." Bob called him Arthur and they got along fine. Bergerman, however, demonstrated his ignorance and completely alienated Maroff when, looking at the hydraulic tanks that provided the pressure for the Carnegie Hall elevators, said that he thought that the way the fuel tanks were being maintained was wonderful. From that time on Maroff would have nothing to do with him.

After VE day, when things settled down a bit, Bob asked for the Carnegie Hall and other statements so that he could see what was going on. It didn't take him very long to see from the statements that all was not well. One problem was somewhat like the plumbing repair scam engineered by Nelson. The new problem was the bill for the purchase of ice for the Carnegie air conditioning equipment.

The company was paying for 40 tons of ice, and Bob knew that the system had a 25 ton capacity. So he questioned Maroff: "How come you're buying 40 tons when the damn thing holds only 25?" Maroff's reply: "It holds 40 tons." It was then October, and Bob said: "Be my guest. I'll buy 40 tons of ice and you see if you can put it in there."

Bob had told Johnny Totten to monitor the ice business and to be sure that all 40 tons were actually put in. Later, Bob got a call from Maroff saying that he'd put the 40 tons in. Later still, Johnny Totten called to report how it had been done. Maroff had used iced picks to chop up the great big ice blocks and had shoveled the shards under the floor boards where the ice didn't belong.

That meant good-bye to Arthur Maroff, the new engineer. Subsequently, Bob found out that, in a fashion somewhat analogous to the operations of the contractor Joe Lipcah, there was an informal Carnegie Hall painting and decorating company that had been going up and down 56th street painting and decorating premises for different business owners. So, venality raised its ugly head again.

Even without venality, however, there were other exciting problems left behind by Bergerman who left the company on Bob's return. Through a very genial broker named Tony
Trunk, who had used Bob's father as a kind of father confessor, Bergerman had authorized the sale of one of the company's properties to Zeckendorff at a ridiculously low price. When Bob learned of this he was horrified, so he called Zeckendorff and questioned the deal. Again demonstrating his persistence and skill in negotiation, the price was revised to a very substantial increase over what Bergerman had accepted.

Thus, Bergerman was happy to get back full time to his very successful law practice, and Bob found himself in full charge of both Hercer and Carnegie Hall.

For a long time, even before the war, Bob had become convinced that, because of its international importance in the world of music, Carnegie Hall should be a public facility rather than privately owned. Even though he had been able to operate the Hall at a profit, the taxes were a great burden. He felt that if the Philharmonic, the then principal occupant, or some non-profit organization or the city could take it over, Carnegie could benefit considerably by having all of its income available for operations and improvements without paying taxes.

On at least four or five occasions during the forties Bob approached the Philharmonic to see if they would take Carnegie over. It was a logical arrangement which would be good for the Philharmonic if it could be done. These discussions took place long before the Moses plan for Lincoln Center was developed.

The Simons, father and son, had for a long time had been making improvements at the Hall and, in conjunction with the discussions with the Philharmonic, various reports and architectural drawings were prepared showing ways to further improve the building and its facilities. One small but important accomplishment had been to improve the rest room facilities. It seems hard to believe but, in 1891 Carnegie Hall opened without a single public rest room facility. It may be presumed that the Victorians had better kidneys than ours or, possibly, they just did not use such public facilities.

In the course of the improvement program, one major find was the double height ceiling at the back of the dress circle. There a double decker was built, one level for the public and the other a personal locker room where the ushers could change.

A considerable amount of money was spent in redesigning and rebuilding the Recital Hall. Then, in the level below the recital hall, public facilities were built for the Recital
Hall audience. This was all part of a program to make the Recital Hall the debut hall in New York. This was not only an enhancement for the hall but also provided a recital hall far better than that available in Town Hall, with its fourteen hundred mostly empty seats and poor acoustics.

Plans were developed for knocking out the stairs entering from the 57th street side, and coming in instead at street level to a new circular stairs going up on both sides. When finished, this effectively doubled the public areas to which patrons could go at intermission time. The Lyceum theatre was also added for legitimate theatre productions. The Phoenix Theater started in the Lyceum and a man named Hamilton continued as the main producer of Phoenix Theatre productions.

All of this activity represented a schizophrenic period in Bob's mind. On the one hand he was trying to get Carnegie Hall into the proper public hands, and, at the same time, he were going full blast on major improvements at the company's expense.

The final scene with the Philharmonic was with Floyd Blair who was then president of the Philharmonic and Arthur Judson, the manager. Blair was a small man, physically, who was one of many vice presidents at the First National City Bank, now Citibank. In modern parlance, he was in public relations and in charge of entertaining visiting firemen. Bob did not consider him a very cerebral type but he knew Blair well as a fellow member of the same ice-skating club out on Long Island.

Arthur Judson, on the other hand, was a big and very powerful figure. Bob met with Blair and Judson and said: "You guys should really get organized and buy this thing." Floyd Blair said: "Well, your price has always been too high." This response irritated Bob because he had already subtracted a quarter of a million dollars from what he felt was a fair price for the Hall. This was more than a gesture. He considered this reduction as an appropriate contribution from his group to save Carnegie Hall.

In what many would consider to be an extraordinary offer and an indication of his commitment to save Carnegie as a concert hall, Bob said: "God-damn it. If that's your only reason for not buying Carnegie Hall and if my board will agree to it, we'll sign a twelve-month contract to sell you the Hall with the price to be determined by binding arbitration."

When they turned that offer down, it was clear to Bob that the Philharmonic had decided to move to the Lincoln Center.
The Lincoln Center project had been in the works for some time and construction had actually started, even though there were many doubts about its success. One major concern had to do with the management of traffic, which turned out not to be a problem. The other, more important concern had to do with the acoustics. Virtually the entire musical world had always pointed to Carnegie Hall’s acoustics as being close to perfection.

With his characteristic refusal to accept defeat and even though his offer had been rejected by Blair and Judson, Bob hadn’t given up hope that a deal could be made with the Philharmonic. To keep this option open and, although he had no choice at this point other than to put the Carnegie Hall property up for general sale, in every negotiation with real estate people a recapture right was specified. This meant that up to the final point of concluding a contract, the Philharmonic had a prior option.

Bob’s last effort was to see Amory Houghton, who was the vice-chairman of the Philharmonic board and then president of the Corning Glass Works. His message for Amory Houghton was that, before they went into a new hall they should think carefully about the acoustics. At that time Bob was appalled by the fact that some luminaries in the musical world had been publicly quoted as saying that Carnegie Hall acoustics were not all that special.

He remembers: “I’ll never forget my meeting with Houghton who spoke in an extraordinary American Anglified accent as if he had hot potatoes in his mouth. He explained to me that acoustics was ‘a science’, implying that the designers of Lincoln Center had achieved a perfect result. In fact, until extensive later modifications were made in the Lincoln Center hall, the acoustics were a near disaster.”

“However, Houghton said further that he did not believe that we were operating Carnegie Hall at the profitable rate we had published. Needless to say, that got my dander up and I said: ‘Send your accountants in and we’ll make all of our books available to you. That you should question the accuracy of our statements which are prepared by certified public accountants is a little surprising. But, let’s set a date now and you can send in your own accountants to verify the work of our accountants.”

“Incredibly, Houghton said to me: ‘The time is not opportune for us to do this.’ And I said to him, and I’m a little proud of this, Mr. Houghton, there is no time from the beginning of the earth until the present when it is not opportune to go inspect another fellow’s books if he says you can.’ Houghton didn’t appreciate my bon mots but I was
pleased to have finished our meeting with that remark."

Since the door to the Philharmonic was closed Bob had to look elsewhere to sell Carnegie. During this period, a very flamboyant man named Glickman created a great deal of publicity about a deal to buy Carnegie but no contract was ever signed. On the other hand, a contract was signed for $5,250,000 with Larry Wein and Harry Helmsley—still with the provision that, if the Philharmonic or the City wanted it, they would preempt Helmsley. Earnest money was exchanged. As one of the biggest real estate operators of his time, Helmsley had earlier bought a number of properties from the Simon group, including the Fisk building and the Empire State building, among others.

Even though his board of directors had authorized him to complete the sale of Carnegie, Bob continued the struggle to preserve it as a musical icon. He started a "Save Carnegie" committee and, to avoid any hint of personal self-serving, directed Johnny Totten to assemble some influential people and start the ball rolling. Even with coaching, Totten was not able to make any progress. Then someone was able to recruit Isaac Stern who dramatically changed the face of the project.

Stern was able to create great publicity for the effort and organized a very effective fund-raising program. It is generally agreed that Stern was directly responsible for the success of the fund-raising drive.

One day during the fund-raising program, Isaac Stern and his wife, Vera, visited Bob at home where he was nursing a cold. Bob greeted them and they sat down to talk. Bob was told that the Sterns had a wonderful idea to present to him—namely that Bob should simply donate Carnegie Hall to the city. To say that Bob was stunned is certainly an understatement.

To begin with, Bob did not by himself own Carnegie Hall. Further, as the representative of the Simon family who had a minority interest in the equity in Carnegie Hall, there was no way he could respond sensibly to their suggestion.

As president of the corporation which did own it, he was acting under the orders of the board of directors which had authorized him, given the fact that the Philharmonic had rejected a bona fide offer and there were no other not-for-profit prospects, to sell the Carnegie property on the open market. He had done as his board requested and had not only concluded a sale to Helmsley, but had received Helmsley's deposit.
Even so, Bob had insisted on a provision in that contract for cancelling it if a public body, the City, or some non-profit organization wanted to buy Carnegie Hall. His board of directors had even authorized him to drop the price by $250,000 if the City or any other agency committed to preserving Carnegie Hall were to come forward. Without that concession, the Carnegie Committee would have had to meet the price to which Helmsley had agreed.

Incredibly, neither the Carnegie Committee nor anyone else took notice of this. Instead, Colonel Reigleman, who was the Committee’s front man, began to bring pressure on Bob and his group to sell for a lot less than the $5,000,000. In spite of the fact that Helmsley had already and publicly agreed to buy the property at the original asking price of $5,250,000, the press printed stories fed to them suggesting that Bob was not really in control of the process and, further, that an outlandish price was being asked. The fact that a dominant figure in the real estate market like Helmsley had already put his money down on a price $250,000 higher than that offered to the City was completely ignored. Reigleman publicly gave his opinion that Carnegie’s value was only $3,500,000. At no time did the press juggernaut pause to consider the real facts of the case.

Finally, the deal was made for $5,000,000 with no acknowledgment of the $250,000 reduction from the original asking price. What followed was a great deal of unpleasant publicity and some outright falsehoods about Bob’s stewardship of Carnegie Hall.

One example of these stories had to do with the Recital Hall. When Bob started the Carnegie Hall improvement program after World War II, the Recital Hall had been a place where private teachers occasionally brought their pupils and their families. It was a very modest hall which had windows on an airway shaft, a small stage, bentwood chairs, and no carpet. At that time the only debut hall for aspiring artists in New York for other than well known performers was Town Hall. Town Hall seated about 1400 and it was acknowledged that the acoustics were not great. The average debut recital usually had as an audience a collection of family and friends, and, if there were 50 or 100 people in attendance it was considered a rather good crowd - which was really lost in a hall of that size.

The logical alternative was to turn Carnegie Chambers, as it was then called, into the appropriate recital hall for aspiring youngsters and young artists. The upgrading program started with the installation of professional theatrical seating; they were lucky to find a sale at which they were
able to buy excellent upholstered seats at only $5.50 apiece. The windows which opened on the airshaft were closed, a large stage was created, professional lighting was installed, carpeting was laid, dressing rooms and a reception area on the second floor with men's and ladies's restrooms was built, including a reception area on the main floor.

Before these improvements were made, the critics had stayed away from the Carnegie recital hall because of its poor acoustics and primitive facilities. Arthur Sulzberger of the New York Times was persuaded by Bob to encourage the critics to see the new Recital Hall for themselves, and the rest is history. The Recital Hall became the place for both new and established performers to give recitals in a warm and intimate environment.

When the new management came in after the sale, they did some repainting and brought in new seats. To illustrate the poisonous atmosphere created by the press stories about Bob's stewardship, at the opening of the Recital Hall by the new management Bob was greeted when he entered by a young hostess. She made a speech to the effect that the Recital Hall had been completely recreated by the new group, and, to illustrate, she specifically mentioned some of the improvements that had been made by Bob. Moreover, she said that the way in which the previous management, the Simons, had neglected the hall over the years was a disgrace. Bob found that very hard to take.

There was a great deal of public relations effort expended to give the impression that the new management were white knights taking over a Carnegie Hall that had been abused, mistreated, and previously neglected. This incredible distortion of the truth was certainly unjustified and possibly malicious, but to refute those charges and innuendos, once they were erroneously made part of the public perception, appeared to be an insurmountable task. The press juggernaut rolled on and endlessly repeated its first stories on the Carnegie transfer. The impressions that are first created are never corrected, no matter how false they are. It was shocking to the Simon family to see how all the work done by two generations of Simons, father and son, to protect and enhance the Hall could be so completely ignored.

Bob did conclude the agreement with the new group and the selling price of $5,000,000 held. After making distributions to the non-family stockholders, Bob and his family were left with about $2,000,000. This had to be invested in other real estate within two years to avoid some taxes. And this, strangely enough, was the beginning of the Reston story.