



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Mildred Baker,
1965 July 22

Contact Information

Reference Department
Archives of American Art
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, D.C. 20560
www.aaa.si.edu/askus

Transcript

Interview

Interview with Mildred Baker Conducted by William Agee In New York July 22, 1965

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Mildred Baker on July 22, 1965. The interview was conducted in New York by William Agee for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

WILLIAM AGEE: Well, Mrs. Baker, since we have before gone into some detail about your background, background in the arts, I think that what we should do is ask you to start talking about your very first experiences on the project. Now you first started to go out into the country as a trouble-shooter from Washington and I think it's important that we get on tape your fundamental impressions and experiences within the context of the project as a whole. Does this suggest the first important or significant thing that you did after you'd come on to the project?

MILDRED BAKER: Oh yes, it does indeed because I went down to Washington with absolutely no experience as far as the rest of the country was concerned. I had no view of what went on beyond the Hudson River and so it was quite an experience to go out on my first trip to Ohio. That was to find someone to direct the state art project there and I believe, as I said before in my forward, that Mr. Milliken of the Cleveland Museum tried to help me and that was the purpose of my first journey going from Ohio to Iowa, to Missouri, to Kansas. I think that's all on the record. But then, at the conclusion of the establishment of the program in the states, my job became that of heading the exhibition unit and that in turn related to the establishment of the community art centers, which was one of the interesting developments of the program and I have been reminded of it recently because I've just returned from a conference in Washington of the Arts Councils of America, which has become quite a sizeable group, and I can see where some of the beginnings of the programs that exist today occurred back in the '30's. I know I read in the report of the Utah Symphony Orchestra that the beginnings were in the WPA art program and this was a joint meeting with the Orchestra Society of America so that I had a view not only of the art situation but also of the music situation and it was a most interesting conference because it was such a big one and you felt that the whole art movement now is so widespread over the country that no one is isolated, whereas in 1935 we felt that people were pretty far removed from the cultural center, which we considered New York.

WILLIAM AGEE: Yes, I'm sure it must have been a great surprise to suddenly find that the world extended beyond 57th Street . . .

MILDRED BAKER: Yes.

WILLIAM AGEE: . . . and I think this is as true today and I think that, going back to that time, I'm sure that it was even more magnified then. Before you came on to the exhibition and the community art centers, you were moving throughout the country. I think that you indicated before that the primary problem was reconciling the needs and aims of the art project with the local political setup, both generally and within the state administrative offices of the project.

MILDRED BAKER: That was often the case but I think one of the main difficulties was that I went out into the field without any knowledge of the political situations that existed in the states and of course the administrators were highly sensitive to the political situation and Hopkins determined deliberately that we should not be informed -- I think my husband put that on the record also -- that he didn't want political considerations to be taken into consideration at all. And I recounted the tale of Missouri, which was such a tough nut to crack.

WILLIAM AGEE:

MILDRED BAKER: Yes. And we finally got through with not only the Index of American Design but with the Negro art center in St. Louis. Those were the two major contributions but it took a long time to get those going. It took the backing of important citizens, which makes the current situation very interesting because Missouri has just passed its Art Bill setting up an art commission and, while we were in Washington, that was announced with a very nice budget to carry it forward. So I feel that Missouri is really one of the enlightened states.

WILLIAM AGEE: Perhaps -- certainly far from the case from what it was then, wasn't it?

MILDRED BAKER: Yes indeed. The other political situations weren't merely as dramatic. Texas, however presented a problem and it took us a long, long time to get going there. And I met many talented artists when I went on first survey of the state. I started in Dallas and I had introductions to Owen Travers, I believe his name was, and various people in Dallas. I met Everett Spruce there; he was working in a museum and he was just beginning to develop as an artist. He had come from Arkansas and had a very interesting history. I became terribly interested in his work. But then from there I went to San Antonio and there was quite a powerful state administrator and of course at that time I didn't know that he had a mother who was a collector and he was terribly prejudiced against modern art. If I had had that information, it would have helped me too. The Draut family.

WILLIAM AGEE: Did Hopkins believe that the project would ultimately function in a more efficient way if one deliberately stayed away from the political situation or knew nothing of it? Or did he not realize, do you think, that the matter of practical necessity that the people who went into these areas did in fact have to know for the ultimate success the often intangible factors of the local power structure?

MILDRED BAKER: I think he wanted us to function unhampered rather than be too aware of what . . . I think that probably the thought was that the Washington office could handle the political situation and we should do our job, which was to get artists to work and to do it in the most effective way that we possibly could.

WILLIAM AGEE: After the initial experiences when this became clear that this would not be the case, did he come to change his point of view?

MILDRED BAKER: I don't know. I can't answer that question.

WILLIAM AGEE: Did you feel it in any way, if not in a . . . ?

MILDRED BAKER: Not really, because, as the years went on as I said, I became more removed from the local situation, the state situations, and was more concerned with selection of works as I went around the country and more concerned with assembling the exhibitions that were needed to go out to the community art centers. So, as time went on, I became less aware of the political situation. I didn't have to contend with it, in other words.

WILLIAM AGEE: Yes. Well, how did you get into the community art centers and the exhibition field; how did this evolve within your job as you had done it up to that time?

MILDRED BAKER: Well, actually I believe the first community art center was established in Raleigh. And there were two people, one of whom I'm still in touch with, namely Elizabeth Holt, who was very responsible for that. I believe she was at the University of North Carolina. And Daniel Defenbacher, who was I believe a director of it and who was taken from there by Tom Parker to come to Washington to set up similar centers over the country. That was his job. And he was a salesman who went out whenever there was a need for a center or whenever we received word, for instance, that a junior league might be interested in setting up a center, or if a group of citizens in a community were willing to put up some money, it was his function to go out to those places and to help the people, guide them, advise them, and show them exactly what could be done from the point of view of WPA and from the point of view of local sponsors. And of course his most dramatic success was with the Walker Art Center which was quite a model and of course which today is one of our important museums in the country.

WILLIAM AGEE: Very much so. Defenbacher stayed on at the Walker?

MILDRED BAKER: Yes, he did, as director of it.

WILLIAM AGEE: Defenbacher was very successful at going into a community and convincing people of the need of what they could do and showing them how to set it up. Is this . . . do you agree with this?

MILDRED BAKER: Yes. I mean I think he set standards too. I think the centers were amazingly effective, considering some of the areas in which they were located, in old stores and basements, but they always had a fresh look. We still have some photographs around somewhere showing the very odd spots where you'd find a community art center and he did establish standards as far as furnishings were concerned, set out a basic design that WPA people could have made by WPA workers and which also gave employment to other people. And he did also set a standard by selecting directors for the centers and I think you know how many went out from New York to head centers because help was not available as a -- professional help was not available locally. And in that way artists did spread out over the country. And some of them remained in the areas to which they were sent by the program.

WILLIAM AGEE: Yes.

MILDRED BAKER: The classic case is of course Carl Morris and Hilda Morris, both of whom were sent to Spokane, Washington and remained on the West Coast in Portland and have made a reputation for themselves out there.

And of course, Philip Curtis too. He was sent to direct the art center in Phoenix and has remained . . . lives in Scottsdale and has attained success as a painter with a show at New York last winter at Knoedler's.

WILLIAM AGEE: Were there any particularly notable cases of community reactions against a man being sent into the community?

MILDRED BAKER: Well, I think not so much on the part of the community, perhaps, as on the part of an individual. I don't know if I should put this on the record but I'll just say . . .

WILLIAM AGEE: I wish you would.

MILDRED BAKER: . . . one case relates to Don Goodall who was such an outstanding person who went into Salt Lake City and just had a great struggle, and of course now you know he's head of the art department at the University of Texas. He could have contributed greatly to the art situation in Utah but he did encounter terrible difficulties. I went out and encountered this myself when I was there and there was nothing we could do about it. It was just a local situation that couldn't be straightened out.

WILLIAM AGEE: Would you care to go into the details of it?

MILDRED BAKER: Well, no, it's just a matter of personalities.

WILLIAM AGEE: I see.

MILDRED BAKER: It wasn't a political situation; it was personalities.

WILLIAM AGEE: I see. Then did he stay there or . . . ?

MILDRED BAKER: I believe he went from there to California, didn't he? To Southern California and then to Texas, as I recall.

WILLIAM AGEE: Yes, that's it. In Texas, was Jerry Bywaters there at that time?

MILDRED BAKER: Yes. It was he whom I first encountered in Texas and who introduced me to the artists. I had an introduction to him from someone in Washington who had known him in the past.

WILLIAM AGEE: I see. I see. Then, going on to allocation work, that's why I think first we should perhaps talk about some of the exhibitions that you set up. You mentioned before we turned on the tape the difficulties, for instance, that you encountered at the San Francisco show. I wonder if you might want to talk about this in terms of the problems that were involved in setting up a large show like this which was 3,000 miles away from New York and Washington.

MILDRED BAKER: Well, we might begin by talking about the method of selecting the works. We set up the exhibition section in Washington in 1936 when Edith Halpert came and operated it from a small area that Duncan Phillips contributed to the program, and then it evolved from that. And we asked the states to send us their best works which we accumulated in Washington, and not only allocated from Washington but also included in exhibitions to help promote the work of the art program. We set up an office on Tenth Street, a rather large one with a workshop. We had a carpenter and various technicians working on framing and creating cases, and so forth, for the exhibitions and we had a few hundred exhibitions which we sent out to the community art centers, so we had a double function allocating works. Many of them went into the offices of Senators and Congressmen and in public buildings in Washington and people also came from other sections to select works for schools and universities. But theoretically we had the best thing in our hands in Washington so that we could organize exhibitions. But when it came to an exhibition like the one in San Francisco, I went out and selected things for it and other people did also so we tried to get the cream of what existed then in 1939. It was very generous of Walter Heil to offer the space. As you know, it was the time of the Golden Gate Exposition and there were many people coming to San Francisco for that and he gave us many, many galleries, a large section of the Museum for it and also I think did a marvelous job in contributing toward the printing, or rather making the catalogue possible, which is a fine record of the program. But I went out several months in advance to work on the exhibition and it was an overwhelming task. Joe Danysh was the regional director at the time and he had an excellent staff in San Francisco who worked, but it was really a day and night job getting the exhibition together, and rather a frustrating one. I had a concept that the introduction to the show might be a photomontage which would bring together all the activities of the program. It was constructed in New York and, although we had the measurements of the gallery, when the exhibition arrived, it just didn't work out satisfactorily. I was quite desperate. So I sent an SOS to Tom Parker in Washington and he in turn asked Phil Curtis to come to help me. And, with the assistance of Phil Curtis and all the other people in San Francisco, we pulled the show together but it was scheduled to open in the afternoon at three o'clock and we were still hauling things around. But we had a fine helper in the form of Benny Bufano who said, "I can fill the gallery for you." And

of course Benny Bufano, who was a little giant, had monumental pieces of sculpture in his studio. And I said, "Well, I don't think, Benny, that we will use all of this sculpture but we will select a few pieces." And so, just before the curtain was to go up, Benny's pieces were still being brought into this one gallery and the arrangement started with a mouse and went to another animal form which I have forgotten and then into a bear. So here were Benny's -- as I remember it -- Benny's three things right in the center of the gallery. But we did bring in some other sculpture by Donal Hord and some sculpture by Sargent Johnson who was one of the Negro artists on the project in San Francisco at the time. So we made a presentable introduction to the exhibition. But it was I think quite an impressive show and I did read you a rather touching letter from a woman in San Francisco who wrote her deep appreciation of the exhibition because it attracted all types of people. She said every race, every age group, and she herself had gone six times to see it. That was '39. And the next big presentation of art project work was at the New York World's Fair when we were given the art building and we presented a show of the best work of the country once again.

WILLIAM AGEE: I'd like very much if you would go into detail on some aspects of the World's Fair exhibition. That's something that we really don't have much material on and I understand that there were quite a few problems involved. I wondered if you might want to go into that now?

MILDRED BAKER: Well, it was the New York City project that worked with us on it and did the actual labor and getting the exhibition hung and so forth although we were largely responsible for the selection of the work outside of New York City. It was a big job, a backbreaking job, getting the show up and filling that building. But, as I said before, it was a New York City project and I'm very sorry indeed that I have no catalogue of the exhibition. I don't know where there is one.

WILLIAM AGEE: I've never seen one. But that's something that perhaps we'll be able to find later.

MILDRED BAKER: It was fun to be out there because we worked until one or two o'clock in the morning and had the whole Fair grounds to ourselves and we could see the Fair, too, before it opened. I think it was an important show but, as I said, I have nothing to refresh my memory except the recollection of lots of work in connection with it.

WILLIAM AGEE: This At the Fair there was, I should think, some sort of rivalry or sense of rivalry with the sections of painting and sculpture. Do you remember anything along these lines? Did the fair seem to symbolize in any way?

MILDRED BAKER: Not to me. I'm sorry; I have absolutely no recollection of that. Is there something in the record indicating it?

WILLIAM AGEE: Well, there are some things, yes. But if this doesn't recall anything to you, I don't think we need to go into it now. Well then, in addition to the large exhibitions which we have just talked about, you were constantly assembling smaller exhibitions, were you not, to go out to the various . . .

MILDRED BAKER: Yes. Art Centers.

WILLIAM AGEE: . . . art centers?

MILDRED BAKER: We had several hundred exhibitions circulating over the country and for many communities it was the first time that an original work of art had appeared in the community. I had an interesting experience in relation to that. There were, as I recall, two art centers in Mississippi, one in Greenville and one of them in Oxford. And there was a writer by the name of Kersey who was greatly interested in the one in Oxford -- that's Faulkner's town. For their first exhibition they wanted something very important, very spectacular, and I thought if I sent them an exhibition, a collection of Lessing Rosenwald's prints that we had on loan from him, that that would be the best thing that could happen to Oxford, because there would be Rembrandts and Durers and so forth. But, much to my surprise, the community was greatly disappointed because they didn't want to see prints. As far as they were concerned, those were reproductions.

WILLIAM AGEE:

MILDRED BAKER: They wanted to see real oil paintings.

WILLIAM AGEE: No color.

MILDRED BAKER: So I learned my lesson there and never tried that again. I have the catalogue of this show, by the way, "Six Centuries of Fine Prints" -- having taken the title from Carl Zigrosser's book. And this has an introduction by Emanuel Benson and might be of interest if you haven't this in your file.

WILLIAM AGEE: We don't, no.

MILDRED BAKER: I'd be glad to give it to you.

WILLIAM AGEE: Thank you very much. In other circumstances, perhaps more successful from the point of view of community reaction, how would you generally go about picking the exhibitions? Would it vary from each city or would they suggest something that they thought might be good, or were they usually dependent on your ideas?

MILDRED BAKER: I'm afraid they were because we had to do the booking and we had to transport paintings by the least expensive means -- freight -- from the closest point. The routing was one of the big problems and saving money was another. So that they took what we sent.

WILLIAM AGEE: I see.

MILDRED BAKER: And I got from outside sources several exhibitions. For instance, we had an exhibition of Ruth Reeves' textiles. We had an exhibition of reproductions of or facsimiles of Matisse drawings. We tried to draw things from various sources so that it would not be just a monotonous program of one oil painting show after another, or one watercolor show after another. And there were four- or five-hundred-some-odd exhibitions that were circulated over a period of time. I have a cumulative report somewhere on that, if you'd like to have the figures. The exhibitions I think were well received but I think it was the experience of seeing original works of art that was one of the important things. Of course in most of these art centers the people themselves were learning to paint, were working and having the experience of painting so that seeing the work of other artists, professional artists, was important to them.

WILLIAM AGEE: This I think remains one of the most fascinating aspects of the project -- the impact on a town such as Greenville, Mississippi. While they might not have liked Rembrandt, but when they see for the first time really an original oil painting turned out by contemporary working artists, professional artists, the impact on them, suddenly the horizons that opened. It may only be for two or three weeks or just one glance even, but sometimes great things have been sown I think by even less than that.

MILDRED BAKER: I agree. One of the centers that interested me greatly was the one developed in Big Stone Gap, Virginia, over the border towards Ohio, West Virginia, which was a poor coal mining town. And we had some very touching photographs of the children themselves going out to paint in the fields. It was rather a gloomy community and I think a great job was done down there. I'd love to go back and see just what has developed since. But Mary and Edwin Scheier, the ceramists, went down from New York and they developed a fine program there. As you know, now they are in New Hampshire teaching up there. But I think they must have had an impact on that community. I went to visit the center and it was in a school, a very nice little one, but it's the effect that I'd like to go back to observe.

WILLIAM AGEE: It's just this sort of thing that the effects we're just no really beginning to see.

MILDRED BAKER: Yes.

WILLIAM AGEE: And I think it's marvelous now to sit and think about what at the time perhaps might have seemed a completely temporary thing. It has in fact had lasting effects.

MILDRED BAKER: I think it has, very definitely. I was interested at the conference meeting some people from Woodstock, Illinois, where they organized a program that I thought was quite a lively one. They had taken an old opera house and done that over and they have their own arts council. They have a mayor -- a woman -- by the way, and jokingly someone said she was elected by a majority of 112 votes, which represents the membership of our art organization. But there is a small community that's doing something for itself in a way that the WPA helped stimulate communities of similar size back in the '30's. It's being done today but in relation to the anti-poverty program observing the requests for art centers in large cities, making an interesting contrast to the '30's when we were trying to develop art centers in small towns out over the country. Today, with the rural population coming into the cities, we're having to do the same thing in the cities that we did in the 1930's in the country.

WILLIAM AGEE: Right.

MILDRED BAKER: It's a reverse project.

WILLIAM AGEE: It very much reflects the pattern of urban-rural experience.

MILDRED BAKER: Yes. I saw an application for a project just the other day requesting two art centers for the city of Newark where art activities and dramatic activities, and so forth, are to take place in a deprived area of the city.

WILLIAM AGEE: We now go to the city instead of disseminating from the city.

MILDRED BAKER: Yes.

WILLIAM AGEE: For the most part, Mrs. Baker, would you design a given exhibition for a specific center or would you design an exhibition and then circulate it?

MILDRED BAKER: Yes, that's the way it had to be done, because we had to work out uniform methods of packing and make everything as simple as possible so that no exhibition could be tailor-made except in the few instances I mentioned. Of course locally the exhibitions were designed for specific places in Chicago and Boston and so forth and in larger areas that could be done. But in general I would say that exhibitions were designed more or less as the Modern Museum or Federation might do it now.

WILLIAM AGEE: It's very much the international exhibition sort of idea?

MILDRED BAKER: Yes.

WILLIAM AGEE: When these exhibition were done, you must have had a large staff. How big a staff did you have?

MILDRED BAKER: Well, it wasn't really too big, considering the number of exhibitions that were organized. I have a sheet of paper that gives a little bit of the story as it existed in 1941. We had ten persons employed and we crated, shipped out 81 exhibitions, of which, during that one year, six months of '41, 43 were new exhibitions which required framing and special crates, so there was quite a production line there. And the staff, I would say, was relatively small because it included myself, who selected the material and arranged the shows, and then I had an assistant who was in charge of the shop, and then we had a preparator, and then we had carpenter and assistant carpenter and some stenographic help. So I think that it was quite an undertaking for a staff that size to get out that many shows.

WILLIAM AGEE: I think it's an extraordinary accomplishment. Did the allocations evolve from the exhibition program or was the allocation program set up first and then the exhibitions? Or is this the process . . . ?

MILDRED BAKER: There was a large body of material accumulated in one spot and it operated for both for allocations. There were certain things, of course, that might not be wanted in a House office, in the House Office building, or in the Senate Office Building. But we would more or less set aside material which we thought might appeal to Congressmen or Senators or to people who were selecting works for office buildings and then things that we thought were more suited for exhibitions purposes. And we had a little gallery in our Tenth Street headquarters and Senators and Congressmen would come there or send their secretaries there or whoever wanted to come to select a work would come there so that we had both, I would say. We were left in the end with quite a bit of material and, as you know, when the program changed its aspects, the exhibition allocation center was moved to Chicago. And, although it was operated on a national basis, it worked with the Illinois and Chicago program. We employed people through the Chicago office to work on the project. And it was from there that the final allocations were made and it was to that point that the exhibitions that were circulated over the country came for final disposition. And many of those exhibitions were given intact to areas around the country, schools and so forth, that could use them. I would like someday to find out where they are now.

WILLIAM AGEE: The shifting sands of time have dispersed paintings in very strange ways. Did the exhibition program continue after the outbreak of the war?

MILDRED BAKER: Not too actively. Now you place the outbreak of the war at exactly what date?

WILLIAM AGEE: Well, let's say the end of 1941 after we had actively declared war, Did it . . . ?

MILDRED BAKER: Well, we had a few . . . yes, we did circulate exhibitions. We also worked with some of the army camps sending material to them, and by 1943 . . . Let's see, February 3rd, 1943, we had . . . Now I thought I had the figures on the exact number of exhibitions in circulation but I don't. I'm sorry, but I'll try to get that for you some time.

WILLIAM AGEE: That would be fine.

MILDRED BAKER: The war situation of course did affect us as far as transportation was concerned too. But if you're interested in that final exhibition angle of the program, the thing with which I was most closely associated at that time, we had in our hands in Chicago then about twenty thousand items, and there were 15,000 of those that were prints and the rest paintings and watercolors, sculpture. And then of course we had some handicrafts too, ceramics, weaving, et cetera. And those items . . . if you'd like to know where some of them went, I have a pencilled record of that. It might have some interest if anyone ever wants to go back to find out where there might be some things in existence.

WILLIAM AGEE: I think that's very important. If we could have that, it would be a great help.

MILDRED BAKER: Because some of the towns are quite surprising. Because the requests did come from the communities. For instance, here's a town that I don't remember at all called Black River Falls, Wisconsin. The supervisor of schools there asked for material and received thirty oil paintings and prints for distribution to the school system there. And then Macon, Georgia, had an allocation of various exhibitions of ceramics and prints sent around to schools. These were then handled locally by people in the individual towns. And that I think might be useful to anyone who wishes to do research in the future.

WILLIAM AGEE: Yes, I think so. If you have a summary such as you have here, it would be most helpful for us.

MILDRED BAKER: As I said, my handwriting isn't very clear so it will have to be typed by someone before it's handed over to you.

WILLIAM AGEE: Well, we could do that.

MILDRED BAKER: It's quite a report on the allocating we did, to Montana, Indiana, Bowling Green, Ohio; Oshkosh, Wisconsin; etc. We tried to be sure that this material was put into good hands and would be useful in the communities to which we allocated it. But the numbers are quite sizeable. I think you might be interested in knowing that the Public Buildings Administration sent Ed Rowan out to Chicago in '43 to make a selection for public buildings and he received about 7,500 prints and 500 paintings and watercolors, oils and so forth. We were very happy to have people come to select things so that we once again could be sure that they would have good homes. Aud Lyfert at that time was working for the Office of . . . for the Coordinator of International Affairs and she in turn came out and made quite a sizeable selection of well over 1,000 prints. And I guess you've seen the selection at the Library of Congress where we have a few hundred prints that were allocated at that time. And then you may remember Carl Stevens Schreiber who was head of the print department at the Chicago Art Institute. He made a large selection, I think, of something like 200 prints. And we also had an allocation of oils and watercolors go to the Chicago Art Institute. And so I think that these depositories might be of interest if anyone wishes to pursue them further because some of them are in Illinois, in the Illinois State Museum, the Southern Illinois Normal University in Carbondale, and various other state universities. And then the Army and Navy received quite a sizeable selection. One of the allocations went down to Fort Ouachita in Arizona, which was interesting because that I believe was an all-Negro command and it would be fun to see if there's anything left down there of that.

WILLIAM AGEE: I hadn't known of that.

MILDRED BAKER: At that time I think it was.

WILLIAM AGEE: I never heard of that establishment. That's extraordinary.

MILDRED BAKER:

WILLIAM AGEE: In Washington . . . you moved out to Chicago in 1941, is that it?

MILDRED BAKER: I think that was . . . I don't believe that was the . . .

WILLIAM AGEE: Well, in Washington you did have a gallery of sorts. I'm interested in knowing in what spirit Senators, for instance, would come to choose paintings. Was it a sort of thing of they just said, "I want something for the wall?" Or did any of them demonstrate a developed taste? This is . . . ?

MILDRED BAKER: Yes, indeed. One of my favorites was old Senator Green of Rhode Island. He himself painted and he was very discriminating in his selection of works. He came quite a few times to select for his offices. I remember the daughter of Senator Reynolds came to select for her father's office. Some of them were quite sophisticated in their taste. There was a Congressman from Nashville, Tennessee by the name of Byrnes. His wife became interested in painting and I sent her to the Duncan Phillips School where she had a very good time. I hope she's still painting. She exhibited very lively interest and through her I became acquainted with many members of the Tennessee delegation at that time. And I found that they selected very interesting things for their offices.

WILLIAM AGEE: Did Tennessee itself ever have much of a project?

MILDRED BAKER: It developed art centers.

WILLIAM AGEE: I see.

MILDRED BAKER: I think there was one developed in Knoxville and I remember one in Nashville. I don't recall where else. But I know that I went out there. And I don't think there were any creative artists on the project. It was largely art center programs, as I recall.

WILLIAM AGEE: I see.

MILDRED BAKER: That was a very useful program because, where there were no creative artists, there were always people who had abilities to run art centers. I think one of the states that had a handsome art center was one in Roswell, New Mexico, and I think that continues as a museum, doesn't it?

WILLIAM AGEE: Yes.

MILDRED BAKER: And there was a center developed in Las Vegas. I don't think that exists but And there may have been some others in New Mexico, but that I remember, Roswell I remember being a very handsome one, because not only were the skills of the people used in relation to setting up the center but the decor created by WPA employees, embroideries, the fabrics and the furniture, and so forth, was all in true New Mexico style, one might say. Spanish colonial style.

WILLIAM AGEE: In your opinion was there one art center outside of the East that was particularly outstanding? We know about the Walker, of course, which was perhaps expanded to the greatest extent. Is there one that really stood out in your mind?

MILDRED BAKER: For importance of influence? Or for importance as setting a standard?

WILLIAM AGEE: Yes, I'd say . . . a matter of . . . it's hard to . . . what it could do and its impact in the community continued and developed on a more sustained level. I know this is . . . out of 103 art centers, this is a very difficult thing to do, but I wonder if there was one that . . . ?

MILDRED BAKER: I'm trying to think quickly, review the country in my mind but, as far as lasting influence is concerned, I really can't answer that question now. I think Val Clear did an excellent job in Oregon. I don't know if anything continued in Salem but he set up a center there. I think the People's Art Center in St. Louis had importance. It was a Negro art center and I went back to see it a few years ago; it was still in existence. I think that had a lasting influence. But if you're thinking in terms of a center that now can command a sum of money, has a budget to continue and is an example of what can be done in a community, there's none that comes to mind immediately. I don't know what happened in Sioux City, for instance. I don't know today what happened to any of the Southern art centers nor to the ones in North Carolina. There were several there. And many in Florida -- Jacksonville, Key West had one. They were distributed over Florida. Louisiana I don't recall -- I don't think that Louisiana had one. But there were several in the South. Now whether any of the developments of today really came out of those centers, I couldn't say.

WILLIAM AGEE: Did the original art center in Raleigh continue itself on a sustaining basis throughout?

MILDRED BAKER: I don't think so. I think the Junior League was interested in it but I don't think that that was the basis for the present museum. There's a strong movement of course in North Carolina . . .

WILLIAM AGEE: Yes.

MILDRED BAKER: . . . and they even themselves have an arts council and a very active president, Mr. Hanes, in Winston-Salem. But, as I said, I can't trace that back to WPA roots.

WILLIAM AGEE: I wonder if you might care to give us your ideas of the relationship between Parker and Defenbacher. Of course there's been considerable discussion over who was involved with what, who was the most influential and

MILDRED BAKER: Well, I think that

WILLIAM AGEE: This is the sort of thing that perhaps never will be set straight but I wonder if you might want to talk about that for a few minutes, just . . . ?

MILDRED BAKER: I can only give my impressions of it. As you know, Tom Parker came from Virginia and was greatly interested in all of the South and, as I recall, he found Defenbacher on one of his trips and decided that this program would be a very good one to establish on a national basis. And I'm very sure that it was Parker that was responsible for bringing Defenbacher to Washington. And Defenbacher operated out of our office and it was Parker who established the procedures and handled the administrative work and made it possible for him to do the things that he did. I think Defenbacher had a flair for design and a flair for interesting people in a program and also a flair for selling. But I don't think that he had any stick-to-itiveness; I don't think he could really, would want to, or was interested in following through. I think his life has proved that. And his ability was at going in, selling, getting out.

WILLIAM AGEE: Right. And then Parker from Washington would sustain it?

MILDRED BAKER: Yes. He did that. I can't imagine that there'd be any conflict between the two. It just seems to me that they would complement one another.

WILLIAM AGEE: Yes. Well, this is more or less my impression of the relation. There has been some discussion over who claimed credit and where . . .

MILDRED BAKER: Oh!

WILLIAM AGEE: . . . and this is one of those things that I think become magnified perhaps over the years.

MILDRED BAKER: Well, I felt that Cahill responded to Parker's suggestion, was interested in the idea and made it possible for him to go ahead on the program, which was a logical one, because it could give employment to people in various categories and also expose people in communities to the work of the creative artists on the program. It worked both ways.

WILLIAM AGEE: When you would send an exhibition to a given art center, you knew, they would tell you, how many paintings they would have space for or . . . ?

MILDRED BAKER: We knew more or less because we had diagrams of the galleries and were acquainted with what the available space was. Sometimes an exhibition we might send would be small and the gallery would have other things in it; it would be just one show among several.

WILLIAM AGEE: I see.

MILDRED BAKER: So we weren't too concerned about filling a gallery.

WILLIAM AGEE: The logistics of this continue to amaze me, to arrange first to put on so many exhibitions with a small staff and then to coordinate this all around the country.

MILDRED BAKER: Well, it was great fun and I can say that people worked very, very hard and really were so devoted to their jobs that you could accomplish anything. People thought nothing about working until one or two o'clock in the morning if you were doing a big show like the San Francisco show or the World's Fair show. People were just devoted to seeing it done and pushing it through. So I think it was that drive that was responsible for the accomplishment of the period.

WILLIAM AGEE: This is another thing that remains one of the most impressive things, the way people would pitch in . . .

MILDRED BAKER: Yes.

WILLIAM AGEE: . . . with total commitment, working around the clock.

MILDRED BAKER: Yes. We had an exhibition of the Index of American Design that went around the country. Have you been reading about that anywhere? It was invited, or rather we were invited, to assemble it by AMC, the Associated Merchandising Corporation -- that is a central buying office for department stores over the country and they have stores like Bullock's in Los Angeles, Marshall Field, and various other stores that they service. And so they took over this rather extensive show of Index material and they themselves circulated it. I went around the country to the various areas where it was shown. Our staff, though, would install it, and I was just thinking of the devoted staff in Chicago, how hard the workers in Chicago . . . really what an effort they put into getting that show up in time, tremendous effort there. That met with a great deal of success and we were very glad to do it because it brought the Index before a wide public and a logical public too, the department store public.

WILLIAM AGEE: After the exhibition and allocation program was well under way, how was your schedule set up? Did you spend most of your time in Washington or was it divided between Washington and going around the country choosing things, or was most of the work sent to you?

MILDRED BAKER: It would depend on circumstances. I spent most of my time in Washington except for the period when we were assembling the San Francisco show. But sometimes I came to New York to see what was going on on the Project here, and occasionally to Chicago, but in general I would say that I remained in Washington.

WILLIAM AGEE: I see.

MILDRED BAKER: And, as I told you, I was the last employee so I feel that I hated to leave the program in June 30, 1943 so I really had eight years in Washington, more or less, except for the month in Chicago. In fact, I can call myself the oldest of the Federal Art Project employees . . .

WILLIAM AGEE: Yes, I think very fairly.

MILDRED BAKER: . . . beginning in September of 1935 and lasting till the bitter end, '43.

WILLIAM AGEE: Did you say that you had an extension beyond the final date of . . . ?

MILDRED BAKER: Well, the final date was April 30 . . .

WILLIAM AGEE: April. And you stayed until June?

MILDRED BAKER: . . . of '43 and I stayed in Washington for the two following months to wind up the affairs of the office and the allocations, too. And they were rather lonesome months. Cahill had gone back to New York and I was operating alone down there more or less.

WILLIAM AGEE: Yes, I can imagine it must have

MILDRED BAKER: Seeing it fold, seeing it all ending.

WILLIAM AGEE: It was a rather melancholy time in many ways, I'm sure.

MILDRED BAKER: Well, the whole war effort was the important thing. Many of the artists, as you know, had gone into that. The Navy had taken on people like Diller and Siporin and Newman and they were working on the program, which you've been reading about I'm sure. Bob Wolfe was among them too. And so the effort was in an entirely different direction.

WILLIAM AGEE: After 1939 when the program came under state sponsorship, did this affect your operation in any way, significantly?

MILDRED BAKER: Not really. I think that was one of the interesting aspects of it. You've seen that written up I know, the development of the Federal Aft Project and the WPA art program and so forth, community services project; actually it didn't too much.

WILLIAM AGEE: I see. This of course changed the character of the program significantly. I think it must have been a great relief for you to be able to carry on your work relatively unaffected by it.

MILDRED BAKER: Yes. Can we stop a minute?

WILLIAM AGEE: Sure.

END OF INTERVIEW

Last updated... *May 16, 2005*