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Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Charis Wilson,
1982 March 24

Funding for the digital preservation of this interview was provided by a grant from the Save America's Treasures Program of the National Park Service.

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Charis Wilson on March 24, 1982. The interview was conducted at Charis Wilson's home in Aptos, California by Mimi Luebbermann for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

CHARIS WILSON: You sure got all that data in on that. If I did that when I was making tapes, I would have no problem, but I never do, and then I don't label them properly, and I have to go through and try both sides of the tape and see what's on it and record things over other things. I would never make an archivist.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: Well, now, I don't know. You've been taping interviews for a number of people?

CHARIS WILSON: I tapes Willard Van Dyke and Beaumont Newhall on this trip for particular things that I have wanted to have on tape and keep a record of. And before that, the last thing I did, which was a horrible mess, I taped Cole before I wrote the introduction for his book.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: Which has just come out.

CHARIS WILSON: Yes, and I did, I guess, four side of two ninety-minute tapes. And I didn't pay any attention to the thing; I did check it, I put it on high, I put it on the tape, and the things was s garbled and such a mess that I can't figure out what it's saying most of the time, but the person I gave it to to type --

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: -- had a very difficult time. Well, you've been working on this biography how long? When did you get the idea to start on it?

CHARIS WILSON: I got the idea some years ago when I got so annoyed at some things that were being written about Edward that sounded preposterous to me, and I just don't have the time or resources to go ahead and do it. So this is my second year trying to get a Guggenheim Fellowship, which I didn't get this time again, and so I have to dig up some more money somewhere, but meanwhile, I've got a considerable start on the material I want to get - not much on writing, I make notes, sort of scrappy notes here and there.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: Well, you've done a lot of writing. I was amazed when I looked at the California and the West book - and you wrote that. That's a huge book that you basically wrote. How did you --

CHARIS WILSON: I didn't have any inhibitions in those days.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: Isn't that wonderful. I know a little bit about your background, about your grandmother, and I gather - were you raised in the kind of circle where you knew a lot of authors and artists?

CHARIS WILSON: Yes, to the extent that my family consisted of a writing father and writing grandmother and great-aunt, and everybody in Carmel was doing something arty. People all painted, or at the very least were active in amateur theater, plays, and took themselves pretty seriously. So I was around a lot of that. I just took it for granted that I would be a writer. I think, like most young people, I didn't take it for granted that there would be a lot of work to it. It just happened.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: Had you written before you started on the California and the West? Did you keep journals?

CHARIS WILSON: Yes, I kept journals, and I also happen to be a poet. I wrote reams and reams of poetry, most of which was extremely derivative, kind of following the footsteps of T.S. Eliot and people like that. And I kept journals off and on. For a while, I wrote reviews of all the books I read and all the movies I saw and things like that, which, unfortunately, got destroyed in one of the cleanout --

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: You threw them all out.

CHARIS WILSON: Oh, yes, because they were so juvenile; I couldn't stand them.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: Oh dear. And no you're sorry.

CHARIS WILSON: Yes, of course. I hate to see things like that disappear.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: Now did Edward Weston ever feel sorry that he had thrown out a lot of his early work?

CHARIS WILSON: Yes, I think he did, I think he did, eventually. At the time he threw out, he couldn't feel sorry because it made him sick, and I know just how he felt. But later on, when he got a little more tolerant -- I think you have to get to a certain age before you arrive at a point where you feel tolerant about who you were, and you don't feel responsible any longer: well, that was her back then; I don't have to worry about it. So I think when Edward reached that age, he was sorry he had done it, simply because it disconnected him from a lot of records he might have had. It's always fascinating to know how you felt, really, about things instead of how you, now, supposed you felt.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: So those journals you really kept on a day-to-day basis, with your feelings and your world around you.

CHARIS WILSON: The Guggenheim one?

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: No, I'm talking about the early journals that you did.

CHARIS WILSON: I did it sporadically. I'd keep them for a while, and then I wouldn't. I had intense periods of introspection and writing. I wrote some short stories, too, terrible.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: Well, when you did get down to writing the Guggenheim, was that easy for you?

CHARIS WILSON: It wasn't very hard because I had such an enormous mass of material. I have -- I'm sure the American Archives would be interested to know -- the original log of the Guggenheim travels, which is something like 700 and some single-spaced typewritten pages.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: And this is your log?

CHARIS WILSON: And deteriorating, believe me.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: Horrors, don't tell us that; we can't stand it! This was your log that you kept? Did you have a typewriter with you and type as you went?

CHARIS WILSON: Yes. Yes, I had a little single keyboard typewriter, and it's all in slanty caps and it's always running off the edge; there's nothing to tell you to stop. And I wish I knew where it was. I either gave it to someone or I traded it. I'd love to fix it up and have it now. It was very handy. You just whipped it out and put it on the fender of the car, or put it on a rock and whack, whack away.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: It was one of those nice little ones.

CHARIS WILSON: Yes, very small, very lightweight. It came during the thirties. Royal made them, and the first time I saw one was at the house of a painter who said, "Oh, it's just to write postcards on." I thought, "You're crazy; it's a travel typewriter." So I typed on that every single day with very few exceptions. Once in a while I'd miss a day. Usually about three quarters of a page a day. That's a formidable record. When Aperture was going to republish the book, our original plan was that I was going to do an appendix and take some more stuff out of the journal to put with it. It was lots of fun; I went through and I found all kinds of goodies and braided them in. But they ended up not doing it because it would have been more costly and I guess they didn't think it was worth the cost, so they had an introduction instead.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: Well, I've leaped forward, you can tell. I can't stand just doing it in one. We really should go back a little bit over your growing up as a person in a very amazing, exciting intellectual circle, right? Is that how you feel about it now when you look back on it?

CHARIS WILSON: No, I think -- this is something you see in retrospect, or that someone else sees. I certainly wasn't aware of this. I mean, there were all kind of people around, but they were just people.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: They did influence you to the point where you did feel that being a writer was a logical choice.

CHARIS WILSON: Yes, I felt that, I think, because I was around it all the time. It was something I knew about. It's too bad that I wasn't exposed to some scientists because I can think of several scientific fields that I might have done better at. But no one like that was around when I was growing up. I didn't even recognize that there was such a thing. I think this makes a big difference with kids: what you see happening, what you know works. Oh, my father wrote books and he sold them and we looked on that, and my grandmother and great-aunt did.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: I'm a great devotee of Ruggles of Red Gap. That's a wonderful book. I think it will come back at some point.

CHARIS WILSON: Yes, it's really a good book.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: And do you remember him writing?

CHARIS WILSON: Yes,

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: Did he go everyday into a studio and sit down and work?

CHARIS WILSON: Yes, he had a workroom upstairs where he paced up and down in an old redwood house. You could hear ever pace in the pacing. His writing system was to accumulate notes on the back of envelopes for quite a period of time and then shake them all together in a basket and sit down and type out the work. Fantastic. I wish I could work like that.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: I was going to ask if you had tried this method.

CHARIS WILSON: He just had the thing so well fixed in his head that all he needed were these little reminders. I - nothing like that. He was probably a natural writer; I'm afraid I'm not.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: When did you get exposed to the whole art world?

CHARIS WILSON: Principally through Walter Arensberg, when we were living in Hollywood, and Beatrice Wood is the person who introduced me to the Arensbergs. I ran into her when I was coming back from Hollywood High one day - I was about fifteen and said, "Where are you going?" and she said, "I'm going to see some old and very dear friends, the Arensbergs," and I said, "Well, why don't you take me?" She said, "Well, all right. They don't much like children, but you can come along." So I went, and I and my brother, also, became - you might say - favorites of theirs. We were the exceptions. They didn't much like children, and I think Walter was convinced that we were both geniuses and that made us more attractive. But there I was faced with walls full of Picasso and Braque and not only the Nude Descending the Staircase, but Duchamp's first version of Nude Descending a Staircase. You could compare the two and see how he'd changed. Sculpture and pre-Columbian art and lots and lots of paintings. The whole house was just loaded with painting. And Walter was an absolutely fascinating man who was a devoted Baconian and was in the midst of absolutely proving that Bacon had written Shakespeare. This involved great mathematical proofs. He had the head of the math department at UC working for him.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: Doing mathematical proofs?

CHARIS WILSON: You know, all this line counting and how things got to come out. He had a cipher.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: The computers would do it now.

CHARIS WILSON: Yes, I have often thought that Walter might have been put out of the business very quickly if he lived in the age of computers. Things went slower in those days. But he was a really fascinating man. He was, I would say, entirely responsible for my art education.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: That's certainly getting it from one of the best.

CHARIS WILSON: He had an absolutely original way of looking at practically everything.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: This was if he looked at a painting?

CHARIS WILSON: Yes, I think, for example, of a painting - let's see if I can remember who this was - shucks, I can remember the picture, but I can't remember the painter at the moment, but there's a long spoon - this is a sort of Surrealist painting - a long handled spoon and a couple of spherical pill size things. It seems I can't even remember the painting too well, except that it was quite green and black, an odd shape, and I cannot think of who painted it. But I remember Walter looking at those - I was looking at it, and he came up when I was looking and said, "You know, I really think he was making a pun on the Trinity there." And of course, I always looked very knowledgeable when he said something like this, and said, "Yes." I had no idea what he was talking about. But it was interesting that after Edward and I were together, we would go over there and Edward would show prints and real altercations would ensue. Walter always insisted the same sort of thing about Edward's pictures, that these were puns and that a rock form at Point Lobos was really supposed to be a torso and so on. And Edward insisted, "No, that's not what I see at all; that's what you see." So they used to go round and round on the subject.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: We need a tape recording of that. That must have been wild.

CHARIS WILSON: Yes, it was.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: When did you move from Hollywood back to Carmel?

CHARIS WILSON: We were in Hollywood two years. My brother and I were living with my mother and at the end of that two years, I went back to boarding school in Portland, which is where I had been the year before I went to Hollywood. I had no intention of going back, but the principal of the school, Ruth Catlin, made a point of looking me up in the summer after my first year in Hollywood High and said, "Well, you should go back to the school for your last year so you'll be sure to have all your credits in order and can go to college, because you really ought to go to college. There's a wonderful college that has been started in the East, called Sarah Lawrence, and it is run of a very free plan. You mostly have conferences with you teachers instead of classes, and you use New York for your laboratory and do this, that and the other, and I'm sure this is going to interest you." Well, I thought, "Well, it really does." It would be a painful idea to go back to boarding school for a year, but it sounds as though it would be worth it. So that's what I did. And when I decided to do it, I asked my father and he said, "You," that would be fine for me to do that, "Go to Sarah Lawrence." Then, when I came back in spring vacation he said, "Well, I'm sorry about that, but there isn't enough money. You can't go." And I said, "Well, suppose I get a scholarship. Can I go then?" And he said, "Well, yes, surely we could work that out." So I got a scholarship for \$2,000, for God's sake, which was astronomical in those days.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: So that was an honor. It was wonderful.

CHARIS WILSON: Yes, and a \$500 clothing allowance added to it, and I came home and said, "Oh boy, look at all this." And he said, "Well, I'm sorry, but there's not enough money; you can't go." Which wouldn't have been so hard to take... except I knew he did have money, and that if my brother had wanted to go, he would have gone.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: So it was really because you were a girl.

CHARIS WILSON: So, because he always had great misgivings about me. So I took that very hard.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: Would it have cost that much more to have sent you? It wasn't the money is what your saying; it was really the issues --

CHARIS WILSON: I think it was. Well, it's hard to say. He just didn't feel like doing it.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: That must have been a monumental blow. Just disastrous.

CHARIS WILSON: That was very bad. I went up to San Francisco, and I stayed at the French Theater up there, an arrangement that I'm sure my mother worked out, but how she knew the family or how it came about, I don't remember. But that was kind of nice because I improved my French and sort of fiddled around the edge of being in plays and so on. And I was going to secretarial school, which I had already done some of in Portland and Hollywood. I was going to do some more. And then I just sort of dropped out of that and started a fairly dissolute life.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: In San Francisco.

CHARIS WILSON: Yes. And after a while I went back to Carmel and went back to work in my mother's dress shop, which is what she had wanted me to do in the first place.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: Your mother at this point, you had mentioned, had been working in gardening but she had gone into the --

CHARIS WILSON: Her gardening business was long before that, while she was still married to my father, and we were all living in the Highlands. They had divorced when I was twelve years old. Then she had lived in the East for a while, and she had gone to Paris with some friends. She'd been back, but she hadn't been living in Carmel, when her sister broke her back, and Helen simply took over the store that her tenant - she'd owned the building, the same building that she'd had for the flower shop, and she had rented it all this time, and her tenant had just stopped paying - a very common Depression situation. So she took over the business because it was the only way she could see to get any money out of it. If the woman went ahead and went bankrupt, she wouldn't get a damn thing. So she took over the business, and she'd been running that, I guess, for a couple of years before I went to work there. So I went to work, kept the books, ordered the stock and went on this blasted trip to San Francisco once a week, take clothes up and bring clothes back.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: And that must have been quite a journey in those days.

CHARIS WILSON: Three hours in a model-A Ford.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: With the back piled with boxes.

CHARIS WILSON: With the thing piled with boxes and a two-lane road, and you'd get behind a truck and can't get around it. Yes, that was a pretty grim year, and it certainly convinced me for life that I didn't want to be in any kind of business where I had to wait on the public. And again, I think this wouldn't necessarily be true anywhere

but Carmel. Boy, people are real creeps in a place like that. And, of course, the Depression was hitting the well-to-do people, too, that would come in and want to take a dress on approval and bring it back the next day and say, "No, it doesn't fit," with a cigarette burn through the bottom and a cocktail spilled down the front. We had to get all these devices, which are now fairly common in stores, to figure out how you could stick some thing in the middle of the dress that they couldn't remove so they couldn't wear them out. That was the year I met Edward. Now we're all up to date.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: Now we're up to date. That's right. And it, to me, is the most wonderful kind of – I'm sure everyone has said this to you. In a way, in some of your writings, you've said it as well – it's the most romantic meeting that there is, don't you think? How do you think about it?

CHARIS WILSON: No one ever said that to me.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: Oh, they didn't? I'm so glad to be the first. He looked across the room and fell in love with you.

CHARIS WILSON: Yes, that's true, but it's very romantic.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: And you had the same feeling, so it was really love at first sight for the two of you. I think that's very romantic.

CHARIS WILSON: It is quite romantic, it's quite true, it really is.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: It also gets us to the nub of our supposed topic, which you'll see I don't stay to very strongly.

CHARIS WILSON: Yes, I wondered if you were going to bring that up before you ran out of tape.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: Oh, yes. I get around to things slowly. You had, or you hadn't done any modeling before?

CHARIS WILSON: Just for heads, for painters. Helen was always in sketching classes and groups, and I used to sit for them sometimes. She always complained my features were much too regular, that I needed some warts of my nose or something interesting to paint.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: It was Sonya who actually introduced you, or suggested to Edward that he use you as a model.

CHARIS WILSON: Right, and suggested to me that I might like to model.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: And this was really your first experience. But you felt good about him. Is that what made you feel you could do it?

CHARIS WILSON: Well, I had a natural tendency to exhibitionism. It seemed a perfectly natural thing to me to model. It didn't seem at all – I didn't have any particular concern about it ahead of time. I thought it was a good idea.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: You mean that it felt very natural for you to model.

CHARIS WILSON: Oh, yes, to run around with no clothes on. I was a sunbather by nature. I'd had a kind of interesting experience, having never given any thought to sunbathing, you know, if no one was around that was going to object to this. And in the house that we were staying in in Hatton Fields, lived my grandmother and great-aunt as well as my mother and my brother and myself, and what would have been the master bedroom had a deck off it with a four foot wall around it, an absolutely ideal place for sunbathing. This was when I'd come back to – I'd come back there to stay. This was not dress shop; this was pre-that. I'd come back there to stay when I was fourteen, and -- so my great-aunt was occupying this room, and she always had curtain pulled on the door for inscrutable reasons. So I said, "Is it all right if I go out and take a sunbath? And she said, "Sure, go ahead." And she and my grandmother were quite lively types, very much with it. So I went out, and I was lying there, having a sunbath and Aunt Allie pulled the curtains and opened the door and said, "Well, at least you might turn over," because I was lying face-up. You know, this really shocked me. It never occurred to me there was really any different between lying on my back if I was going to sunbath. And I remember, at that age, thinking, "Well, it was something that she grew up with, and that there's some distinction in her mind that I don't fully understand or appreciate, but that's all right." But my own feeling was that one side was as good as any other, and had there been nude beaches in those days, I certainly would have gone to a nude beach. It's much more fun to swim without a bathing suit, I did. As a matter of fact, I used to swim out to the kelp beds from the Carmel beach, tie my bathing suit to a piece of kelp, so I could lie there with nothing on. It was very pleasant. Of course, the water is so freezing, I don't know how I stood it, but I did. I was used to it. Anyway, I certainly had no qualms about nudity. When I got there, it turned out I was a little bit uptight about it, but it

didn't occur to me in advance that I had – I seemed to be above and beyond all that.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: So you arrived for this session. You have said in your writing that she was just such an amazing, vital, wonderful, lively kind of person. Did you feel comfortable with him instantly? That would have been the first time you would have been in his studio, as well, I guess.

CHARIS WILSON: No, because I'd been there when Sonya showed me prints, so I knew the place all right, but I didn't know what was going to happen. She'd described how he took pictures with the Graflex, and you just moved around when you felt like moving, and he told you if he wanted you to stop. So I had that much of an idea of what was going on. But because there was something really going on between Edward and me, it was not quite that relaxed.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: So you felt a kind of tension between the two of you.

CHARIS WILSON: Yes, I was a little self-conscious, at least the first shot I was. The second time I went back, I felt I had it all in the bag. And I think the thing that made the different was seeing the pictures of the first time. I thought, well, that's okay. So part of my concern for the first time undoubtedly was am I going to make it as good as all those other pictures I saw.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: We talked about – I and Betsy Currie worked on the idea of the differences between working as a model for a photographer and working as a model for a painter, where, as a model for a painter, you have to hold the same pose for three hours. I don't know if you've ever done modeling for a painter?

CHARIS WILSON: After I posed for Edward, the guy who ran the adult education life class in Carmel asked me if I'd pose, and I said sure. That was just excruciating. He wanted to do coming down the staircase, you know, so all your muscles were going like this. My idea of a pose was something where I could lie down and read a book and be comfortable, as long as I was going to have to hold still. No, I didn't like that at all. I did it once or twice and said, "To heck with it."

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: It must have also felt different from working with Edward. Again, this is another thing we're very interested in, where you're working with one person with whom you share a relationship versus a room of strangers.

CHARIS WILSON: Yes, I think with a life class you get absolutely no feedback whatsoever; it's just a bunch of dumb people sitting around sketching on paper.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: But it was different, very different, working for Edward.

CHARIS WILSON: Yes, because you're tremendously conscious of what's going on all the time.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: And he liked you to just move. Would he say something like, "Stand in the corner. I'm interested in the way the light is coming through the window"? How did he get you going in a session?

CHARIS WILSON: No, he'd say, "Why don't you try sitting over there," maybe, but he was very nondirective, and made a point of not really suggesting anything at all. I would suggest things. I'd say I'd rather be on the floor. But the main thing is that, of course, although you move, you move very, very slowly, because he's looking at minute differences, and you learn if you really move around at the normal rate of speed, everything's going to be missed, and it isn't easy to go back and get it. So you want to do a kind of slow motion. Move.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: So would he shoot as you were moving, or would he ask you to stop?

CHARIS WILSON: No, he'd say, "Stop."

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: "Stop," and then he'd make the exposure.

CHARIS WILSON: Yes. He'd say, "Hold that." But he worked very fast so there was no strain of stopping at all.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: And how many exposures would he make in a normal kind of sitting?

CHARIS WILSON: Maybe eighteen – twelve, eighteen.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: And he was working with a Graflex. Was that 4x5 or 8x10?

CHARIS WILSON: 4x5.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: So they were already pre-loaded; he wasn't working with them individually. It's the loaded magazine, right.

CHARIS WILSON: Yes, all you had to do to get it out was let it down.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: My husband uses that as well, so I know about those. One of the things that people have said, which is an age-old debate, I guess, the question of how, when a model and an artist are working together, how that kind of dynamic tension between them is – creates some kind of very creative intensity in the artist. Did you feel that with him, or did he talk about what it was like to work with you, how he felt about that?

CHARIS WILSON: Not an awful lot, but I think you're aware of it when it's going on. Like sometimes he'd make nudes and wouldn't be really satisfied with what was going on, and I think you feel a kind of slackening of that kind of concentrated tension that you'd have when things were really going well.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: After the session, was he always kind of exhausted, or was he withdrawn? Did he rush off to the darkroom?

CHARIS WILSON: No, we'd sit around and talk. I remember his commenting on a woman who had been a model, I guess – I'm pretty sure this was after I knew him. I don't remember when she posed for him, and he said, "Oh my God, it was terrible. She simply wouldn't move; she wouldn't do anything. It was just like photographing a lump."

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: What a condemnation.

CHARIS WILSON: Yes, and considering that he usually picked people himself; he had a pretty good eye for what he was going to get. I thought it was interesting that he got fooled that time.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: So there had really been no communication in some kind of way between the two of them.

CHARIS WILSON: Nothing at all. He'd tried to get some life into her, but it just wasn't there. But one thing I think about the 4x5s, the best of the 4x5s, they're all the next thing to action pictures. You can feel this carry on in them.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: When you look at – because you have a very good sense and you've thought about it and you've written about it, so you really have, I think, a very much more developed understanding than a lot of people – when you look at all the different women that he used, can you see a difference, I mean, a difference in terms of the kind of relationship that they had? In other words, what was their effect, and how do you see – you, I think, had a great effect on his work. Can you describe it? Because I think it is part of this whole relationship of an artist and model that's amazingly important.

CHARIS WILSON: I don't know. I think it's a hard thing to pin down, particularly because the camera is such an abstraction in its way. It, for some reason, seems more of a removal, or an intrusion in whatever's going on between the people than you sense in a painter, and yet it really isn't.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: Certainly with you, he had one of the most creative – maybe that's very judgmental – but when you were together, he had an incredibly creative period in his life. I would say – some would say, I'll put that – that it was one of his most creative periods.

CHARIS WILSON: Yes, I think that's true.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: Again, if I may jump to a conclusion, it had a lot to do with your relationship with him.

CHARIS WILSON: Yes, I think it had a lot to do with it. I think the fact that not only was he aware of being loved and all the affection and caring that went with it, but we had a really fine communication level, so that we just shared a tremendous amount of reaction to things and so on. A lot of it was the fact that I was inclined to take on his point of view and look at things his way, but a lot of it also was that we shared things that we didn't agree about pretty well. But I think it was probably the only time in Edward's life when he lived with someone that long who really brought love and understanding and appreciation to the relationship, and I think he fattened on it. I just read over the letters to Miriam Lerner, which are at the Bancroft, and it's an interesting one-sided correspondence.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: They're his letters to Miriam.

CHARIS WILSON: Yes, his letters to her. He says to her sometime, at the point she's already gone off to Paris and she's evidently feeling miserable because she wants to be some sort of an artist and isn't feeling successful at it and so on, and he says to her something to the effect that, "Don't you realize that any woman who freely gives herself in love to a man contributes as much to what he is doing as he does" – words to this effect. I don't know that it was any great consolation to Miriam, but I think that he was certainly aware of this as a part of the mechanism, if you will, by which he worked.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: You worked as a model with him, but you mentioned that it was very important to you that you not study photography, so that must have been kind of a very important point for him.

CHARIS WILSON: I think it was, shocking as it was to him, I think it was, and I think it was what, in effect, really broke the pattern in our – Margrethe, Tina, Sonya, and a few others thrown in along the way, but those were the outstanding ones, and here was not another proto-photographer coming along. I think it made a big difference to him. It was a long time before I ever thought about that at all.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: He showed you prints. What did you think when you saw yourself, images of you, the nudes of you? How did you relate to them?

CHARIS WILSON: Oh, well, I just thought they were beautiful pictures.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: Did you see yourself in them?

CHARIS WILSON: Not really, not really. I saw Edward making magic with his camera, and I'm still inclined to think that way. It's a curious thing that you can identify yourself in the picture and say, "Yes, that's me," but it isn't the kind of whammy reaction of really recognizing that that's you; it's just that you happen to know this, as you might know what's said in the fine print underneath.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: Do you see your relationship with him in the photographs? There are a lot of people who feel that a photograph that is made between two caring people has a different kind of essence.

CHARIS WILSON: I think, to some extent, yes, because I could see a difference in the pictures of Maudelle, for instance. That's about the only other person he did nudes of when we were together, and I could see that there was something in one set of pictures that wasn't in the other.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: Did you feel uncomfortable that he was using another model?

CHARIS WILSON: Oh, no, I was fascinated because it was the only time I ever really got a chance to see what it looked like from the outside, so I was delighted.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: Did the process seem basically the same to you as with you?

CHARIS WILSON: Well, not really, because when he did the one of Maudelle, of course, he used an 8x10. You know, he was already, from "The Dunes" on, he was using an 8x10, and for some reason, because it had been the Graflex that the earlier pictures of me were made with, that seemed to be occupying most of my mental picture of what went on. And the 8x10s were quite different, and of course, it was already different with me, but somehow I reverted when I was going to watch him make pictures of someone else. I expected it to be more like it would have been if he had been using a Graflex.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: What was the difference with the 8x10 photographs? You mentioned the Graflex made it almost continual motion.

CHARIS WILSON: Yes, much faster work with the Graflex, and a simpler operation. The business of the focusing cloth and getting the holder out and putting the holder in, pulling the slide, putting the slide back in and turning the holder around. Although you can do all these things pretty fast, there is a detachment between you and the picture that hardly exists with the Graflex, looking in here and running the thing at the same time.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: So it was a very different process.

CHARIS WILSON: Yes, it was quite different. Actually, Edward managed the 8x10 very fast. I think the main difference existed in the subject's feeling of detachment. With the Graflex you felt that you were there every second, and with the 8x10 you have lapses of a half a minute.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: When you went on the California and the West, most of the time he really worked in the landscape. He switched, he did – I guess there were some early nudes.

CHARIS WILSON: Just that one time, in New Mexico.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: Most of those were landscapes.

CHARIS WILSON: Yes, landscapes and artifacts and buildings and statues.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: So when he was working on the Guggenheim project, he didn't just – his whole attention was focused on that. He didn't do nudes.

CHARIS WILSON: Yes, the Guggenheim. This was what the money was for, and this was what the opportunity was to do, and we were never anywhere where nudes would have been practical. Now if I'd been lying around with no clothes on somewhere, undoubtedly he would have made nudes, but I wasn't because there wasn't any place to do that.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: You would have fried within minutes. After the Guggenheim did he go back to nudes?

CHARIS WILSON: Yes, he did some nudes fairly soon after.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: That work was very important to him, the nudes, seeing it as a constant thread. Can you tell me why, or what his feeling was, why that was so essential for him?

CHARIS WILSON: Well, I think it was a thing he felt he never got to the end of, that it was a subject of infinite variation and that it was just an endlessly fascinating territory because such very minute changes made such a big difference in what you were looking at.

[Missing portion. Subject changes.]

Charis Wilson: These are Nancy's original notebooks.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: How wonderful.

CHARIS WILSON: Well, that is in fairly good shape. Unfortunately, some of these things – I don't know if there's any way to make copies, because she loved to fiddle around with delicate pencil scrolls.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: You know, I have been just working with a friend, Emma, and she has some very early Gold Rush journals that belonged to her grandfather that are in pencil on paper, and the pencil is fading. Interestingly enough, although -- please, don't any archivists listen to me – you can make a really good Xerox. They make superb Xeroxes, and that is what I recommend to you.

CHARIS WILSON: That's what I've been hoping I would find. Where do you find such a Xerox? I see here it says, "Charis – no writer." Interesting to know what that means.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: It would, wouldn't it.

CHARIS WILSON: Anyway, I've got to go through and get all the EW's.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: Look at these treasures. Now, who made these photographs?

CHARIS WILSON: Bill Holgers. He's a man who just died a few months ago.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: Well, they certainly look much more fun and livelier than a lot of the things that go on. Look, it's beautiful. That must be one of a favorite of yours.

CHARIS WILSON: Well, it's interesting to see what a bit of jailbait I looked like. I was twenty-six years old when I looked like a mere child.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: You felt very comfortable with the age difference. Did you have comments from other people who were less comfortable?

CHARIS WILSON: Oh, yes. Usually when people got to know us a little, someone would look very seriously and say, "Would you mind telling me how – what it was that brought you two together?" And Edward would give an anticipatory smirk and say, "Sex."

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: That was the end of that conversation at that point, right?

CHARIS WILSON: Here's the rest of the Highlands party. Here's Willard Van Dyke on Point Lobos all dressed up in a suit. Here's my giant vegetable garden.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: Now, where was this vegetable garden?

CHARIS WILSON: Down right in front of the house on a flat there, where Neil now has a pool and some fruit trees.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: Well, you were very careful about your diet, weren't you? You ate simply and well, and lots of fresh fruits and vegetables.

CHARIS WILSON: Yes.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: I guess what I'm thinking about was the fact that --

CHARIS WILSON: Well, here's the picture of Edward and Ansel, the first one. Now, this is a Yosemite forum in 1940, and the students were all banging around and making pictures. Here is the follow-up, and it shows you the really characteristic difference between Edward and Ansel. Edward adored clowning and felt perfectly happy doing it, and Ansel obviously looks a little pained and self-conscious about it all.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: Especially in front of all his students. Well, in the biography that you're working on, how are you approaching his life? Are you doing it sort of chronologically?

CHARIS WILSON: Well, I'm concentrating - essentially it's a memoir of our years together, and I'm tossing other things in as I feel they have some bearing on it. But it's not supposed to be a biography.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: Well, they were very exciting years. You met everyone who was working in the medium, and you knew their work, and they came to Edward and brought work, didn't they, to kind of look at and share and talk about? Were you always invited in to listen and comment?

CHARIS WILSON: Oh, yes, I was very much a part of that, of what was going on. Once in awhile I'd get fed up and take off. But living as we did, there wasn't much way to get away.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: Did Edward have the sense of really making history?

CHARIS WILSON: Yes, I think he did. He was extremely modest, as far as, you know, any of the horn-blowing that some people do go in for. He never insisted on any recognition of any special precedence for himself, but he had absolutely no doubt about the value of his work, and one way. I think that illustrates that is at the start of the war, when Henry Allen Moe of the Guggenheim, secretary of the committee, suggested having a collection of his Guggenheim work in Huntington, and they started negotiating how much it would cost to do it and how many prints and so on. It started out with the idea of putting 1,000 prints there and doing it in a year's work. He wouldn't be doing anything else. And even at cost, it was more than Moe thought the committee would think was reasonable. So Edward pared it back to 500 prints made over a period of two or three years so that he could be doing his own work at the same time, and really scraped it down to where it was going to be just the cost of material. I think it ended up being approximately a dollar a print, for which, of course, they have 502 vintage Weston's which I defy you to say how much they're worth. But the main thing is that the war was on its way - we had no doubts about that -, and he wanted to have at least one collection somewhere where moth and rust wasn't going to corrupt, and that was the chance to have it. He didn't care if it came out of his pocket or what.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: And those are Guggenheim prints, the work he did during the Guggenheim.

CHARIS WILSON: Well, as it happens, it's Guggenheim, and it's Whitman trip, and other things thrown in, because by the time he got to the end of making prints, it got to be kind of a chore, and it was hard to keep track of what - they were sent in batches to Huntington, and, of course, once the war had started, we were all being gas rationed and there was a question of how to get them there. So I guess it took about five years altogether. But I saw the prints last fall, and it's just such an experience to see 500 of those prints, and they're so different from the project prints.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: In what way are they different?

CHARIS WILSON: They're better prints, much better.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: So they are really the --

CHARIS WILSON: They're beautiful prints.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: The Huntington, have they shown any of those, or put on any shows?

CHARIS WILSON: They had a show recently, I think sometime last summer, and they had some Weston's - I'm trying to think what else it is that they had. Anyway, I remember there were some Weston's, but generally, no, they've just been sitting there. But, what's happened now is, they have acquired, the Huntington has acquired, the most extraordinary angel, who obviously had her ear bent by someone on the staff. She has left them funds to build a new building to house an American art museum. She has also agreed that any time they want to upgrade her collection by trading, they're perfectly free to do it. You know, nobody ever thought of that themselves outside of a museum. But anyway, this is going to be built, and when it is built, the Weston's will at last be in a place of their own and they will, they hope, have a fairly permanent, rotating show of them, so they'll come into their own.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: Do you, if I may ask, have a body of the Weston work as well?

CHARIS WILSON: Absolutely none. I never had really segregated collections; it didn't make much sense - we were both living in the same shack - and when I left, Edward said, "Well, we'll have to get together a portfolio for you, so you tell me what you want and I'll make you some prints." And, you know, this futzed along as those things do, until he wasn't printing anymore. Meanwhile, there was a package of stuff that was done with my name on it - birthdays and Christmases and so on. But I was living in a small house with several small children and no place to put these damn things, so I never had any. And I have finally decided that it was a good idea that I didn't because I think easy money would have been bad for me.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: You chose the tough road. It must not have been an easy position to have been such an important person to him, and really a step-mother in lots of ways to the boys, and yet it wasn't defined, and it wasn't really clear - it must have been difficult for you.

CHARIS WILSON: Well, by that time I had seen so little of them for so long that I think everybody took it for granted that I was really off the scene, and I guess I pretty much did, too. As far as being a step-mother to those, I simply didn't have it in me to do it. My only very strong impulse, as far as all the boys went, was to get rid of them as soon as possible. As I saw it, they were a serious drain on Edward, and he devoted much too much time and effort to them that he should have been spending on photography, or recreation, or anything else that suited him, you know, that was his own command. So I think I did him a favor by getting them off his hands.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: Did you feel different about the relationship when you had your own child?

CHARIS WILSON: Did I feel differently about the relationship with Edward's kids when I had my own?

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: Well, different, viewing how he related to his children when you had your own and saw the kinds of needs and demands.

CHARIS WILSON: Yes, I think so. I was very young at the time, and very, in a lot of respects, very immature. But I also - you know, it wasn't just how I felt. I don't want it to sound as though I were getting rid of them for Edward's benefit. I was getting rid of them for my benefit. I wanted to have Edward to myself; I didn't want to split him up with all these things. He had this formula worked out over the years; whoever he was consorting with, you know, got equal representation with all of the boys: all one happy family and treat everyone alike, and that just wasn't my idea at all.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: So you were one out of four, instead of one out of one.

CHARIS WILSON: Right.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: I think my sympathies lie with you, particularly having two boys of my own.

CHARIS WILSON: Yes, well he had fought that this made for more peaceful living, or so he thought. So I don't know; it's interesting. Edward had a sweetness of character, a simplicity about him, a really straight, human depth to him, that none of the kids got. The nearest to an exception is Neil, who has a lot of the sweetness but no force of character to go with it. And the kids at that age were very, very brawly and noisy and flamboyant.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: Adolescents.

CHARIS WILSON: Yes, kind of super adolescents.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: Precocious adolescents.

CHARIS WILSON: No, they weren't precocious.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: They were super: everything was exaggerated.

CHARIS WILSON: Everything was exaggerated, and everything was repeated ad infinitum. Interestingly enough, Brett is still repeating. They were very hard for me to accept as part of the family. I thought the sooner they all got out, the better for everyone.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: But you still see them, I guess.

CHARIS WILSON: Oh, yes.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: And you wrote the forward to the --

CHARIS WILSON: Yes, we're old friends. I really got tricked into writing the forward for that.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: Oh, you did. It wasn't exactly what you'd expected?

CHARIS WILSON: Cole kept promising me that he was going to make me some prints. He let on to be really upset because I'd never gotten any prints, and they'd all lived on them so long. He said, "Just tell me what you want, anything you want, and when I'm printing something I'll print it for you." Well, I gave him a list, but nothing came of it. I got six of his prints, I guess, one time when I was down there he said, "Pick out whatever you want to." There wasn't much I wanted, but I thought I'd better get something out if I was ever going to have anything. So when he asked me if I'd write this thing for the book, I thought, "Well, that's dumb," because I didn't know anything about Cole. I hadn't seen him for thirty years between times. What am I going to say about him? But then Cole, to my amazement, said, "You know me better than anyone else." It took me a long time to digest that, and what it meant was, "You know me better than anyone else who knows how to write." He doesn't know many people who can accomplish that. So I said, "All right, I'll do it." And in the back of my mind, I thought, and when I get done, buddy boy, I'm going to have some prints. Of course, by the time I got it done, he transfers the archive to Tucson, and there go my prints.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: While you were writing you - we started on this earlier, and we should go back to it because you were - saw yourself as a writer, you were living with Edward among amazing, wonderful, interesting stimulating people, you were very stimulated by him, and you continued to write. Did you write a journal at that time?

CHARIS WILSON: No, I was - the first couple years I was still busy writing poetry. And then I dropped the poetry and took up painting, and what with one thing and another, until we started Guggenheim, I wasn't keeping any kind of journal. And even then, I just kept it while we were traveling. And it's too bad I didn't go ahead and do it. At the same time I knocked out his journal writing, I fell down on the job on mine.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: So you typed up the daybooks for him, is that what you're saying? You mean the journal when you were on the Guggenheim.

CHARIS WILSON: No, I mean, he always said that it was my fault that he stopped keeping the daybook, and in a way that's correct, and in a way, I think he would have stopped anyway, because the main use he had for it, it wasn't really necessary anymore.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: It was you keeping, and by that - I'm a little confused - it was your keeping the journal on the Guggenheim that he felt -

CHARIS WILSON: No, no before that. When he first met me, he quit keeping his daybook, and there is this to be said in my favor, that he had really slacked off on it the last year before he met me. It was a very, very small annual output that year, and no more of the really searching questions about what he was doing and how he did it and so on, and he really solved all these problems; he knew what he was doing, and he knew it was goof and he put the same amount of effort into turning out good shows and showing prints, making more negatives. So I think the daybooks covered the periods that he had the greatest need for them. And actually, when I look at all the letters he wrote thereafter, I see that he pretty well picked up the slack.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: -- in the letters.

CHARIS WILSON: Yes.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: You talked about one group of letters. Are there a lot of other letters?

CHARIS WILSON: Well, there's the Newhall Collection, which is all the letter Beaumont and Nancy and Edward and I wrote to each other, and in that also is a set of letters to Strand back and forth, which began when we did the Encyclopedia Britannica thing, and then I just looked through down at Tucson the Johan Hagemeyer letters, and incredible body of stuff, and which straightened out a couple of things that I had been puzzled about. But of course these were all kind of pre-Carmel. They're still going on in the early years of Carmel, but they're pre-me for the most part.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: You said you were writing -- you were doing ghost writing for him. This was articles?

CHARIS WILSON: Yes, we did a series of photographic articles that appeared in Camera Craft originally, and a number of them have been reprinted in collections since then.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: When they are printed, do you get any credit?

CHARIS WILSON: No. I never had any acknowledgment that I had anything to do with them until recently, and that's due to Beaumont saying, "I understand that Charis was substantially responsible for these things." So Peter C. Bunnell was doing a collection of Edward's writing, wrote to me and said, "Well, I understand from

Beaumont," and so on and so on, "would you mind checking off on this list, telling me which ones are yours." Over half of the ones on his list were things I'd written. So then he wanted to know how the writing was done, and I explained that to him.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: Did you feel when you did that, did you feel it was hard for Edward to – was it – I mean, I'm wondering why you were willing to be the silent partner.

CHARIS WILSON: Well, I don't know what the emphasis in the question is, so I'll give you a general answer, and then we'll see if I've answered what you're asking. In the first place, Edward had a terrible handicap as a writer, which a great many writers have, and that is that he wanted to boil everything down and make it tighter and tighter and tighter, and you see some curious examples of this in the day books, where he'll take a statement he's writing for a catalogue, put it in some sort of twenty-four dollar words that end up meaningless, because he thinks maybe that says it better than what he said before, whereas when he just writes, he's okay. But he's very self-conscious about anything that had to do with saying what he was doing as a photographer, and loved to use words like "quintessence," which I like very much. So what I did was simply take his ideas, which, God knows, I was familiar with by then because I had heard them expressed so frequently, and expand them and spread things out so that they were stated as simply as possible so any dope could understand them, and I also livened them up a bit. What I did was use Edward's general statements and just apply a little tension.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: So you felt they were basically his articles that you were just editing.

CHARIS WILSON: Yes, what they were was – no, I was writing them, but I was writing his ideas and his point of view, and I was simply expressing them for him. And nine times out of ten, he had no complaints about a thing at all when I finished writing them, you know, he said, "I couldn't have said it better." Once in a while we would have some discussion about something that maybe he wasn't sure I had said right, but not very often. The fact is, Edward was a man of some pretty simple ideas, and he repeated them to every new audience that came, so I damn well knew what I was writing about. And when I didn't know, and we had to tackle a new subject, I would sit down and talk to him about it. As long as he was talking he could do fine. If I had had a tape recorder, it would have been a whole lot simpler. But even making notes as he talked was a much better way to get into something than to have him start writing, because he always had that incredible love of compressing. As soon as he wasn't writing daybooks, then everything had to be pounded down, so you'd get these places where the gravity is so terrific, you know, that a key will weigh more than the whole earth. Well, that was Edward's idea of writing. Anyway, it was always his statement that he had to stop writing because I made fun of him.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: Well, he must have been very pleased with the California and the West book. That reached an amazing audience.

CHARIS WILSON: It was the first book to make any money – quite a feather in the general caps of everyone concerned with it. If it had had a publisher with a little more enterprise, I think it would have been kept in print right along.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: Well, you've continued writing since then? You've done some introductions, some forwards and that kind of thing.

CHARIS WILSON: Yes, I just started doing some photographic writing within the last five or six years, and while I was in Eureka, I did some writing, but nothing that amounted to anything of a permanent nature, except that I got started writing a children's book which was kind of a long, involved thing, and it's still about two-thirds done and sitting on a shelf because I haven't had time to get at it – or the money, either way.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: Well, did you do any more modeling after Edward?

CHARIS WILSON: No. I wasn't interested in modeling in general: I was really interested in doing it for him, just as I wasn't really interested in photography in general. I was interested in his work. Now I've broadened out a little; I'm interested in some other photographers.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: Has anyone ever done any comparisons between Edward's work with you and Georgia O'Keeffe and Stieglitz?

CHARIS WILSON: Well, I'm sure that this has come to people's minds now and then.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: Have you seen her recently? Did you get to know her at all?

CHARIS WILSON: No, I met her in New York when we were there in 1941, just briefly, and I asked about her when I was in Santa Fe. Apparently she is almost entirely blind now, and not very enthusiastic about seeing people, I gather.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: Do you feel there is any comparison between that work that was done? [Portraits of O'Keeffe by Stieglitz and portraits of Wilson by Weston.]

CHARIS WILSON: Yes, I think so. Of course, I've never seen any prints of Stieglitz's work.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: Mostly reproductions. Well, certainly they can't - I'm being biased again - but they have not, like Edward's prints - I mean, I've seen some years ago at the Museum of Modern Art, but I think Edward is a supreme craftsman.

CHARIS WILSON: Yes, he is fantastic. And also, he was convinced that you ought to be able to get a good print. This project for the Huntington - he said he would allow four sheets of paper to a negative instead of three, but that was only because he was having real difficulty with the paper. Well, he said any good photographer ought to be able to get a good print pretty quickly.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: He wasn't one for test sheets and --

CHARIS WILSON: No. That's what was supposed to make my anecdote so funny, but nobody laughs.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: You must tell it; do tell your anecdote, I like it.

CHARIS WILSON: On the thing?

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: Yes, absolutely, on the tape.

CHARIS WILSON: Well, there was an inquiring reporter for the San Francisco Chronicle that said a couple years ago that if you could own a picture, what one would you like to have? And one subject said, "A Monet snow scene." One said, "I'd like the Mona Lisa." Another one said, "I'd rather have an Edward Weston photograph than any painting. He was such a perfectionist; he made 1,000 pictures of an egg before he got one that satisfied him." And everybody just sat there and looked at me as though I were stupid, and waited to hear some more about this man who was such a perfectionist.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: It must be hard to live with suddenly that vision of yourself, having been linked with some kind of historical, god-like figure.

CHARIS WILSON: Yes, it's odd. I do get the impression that I'm a national monument.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: You say that in a way that makes me feel it's not a particular - you should be able to be a national treasure, like the Japanese are, and feel comfortable with that.

CHARIS WILSON: That's right. You should feel perfectly comfortable about it, and I have always felt perfectly comfortable about it, it's other people that are uncomfortable that make me uncomfortable. I went to Beaumont Newhall's history of photography seminar with his graduate students, and he said, "I know they'd like to ask you some questions." So I went in, Beaumont and I chatted about various things for a few minutes, and Beaumont said, "All right, ask her anything you want." Dead silence. And this actually was the first time that had happened to me with people who presumably would have had something to ask, and I didn't really catch on. I thought it over afterwards, I realized that I could have loosened them up if I'd just had my mind in the right gear and seen what was happening, but I didn't, I just kept looking appalled. There must have been twenty people there at least, sitting there in absolute silence. And the next day - one of them was a friend of Amy Conger's, and I was staying with her, and she said, "By the way, I wanted to ask you something," and I said, "Why the hell didn't you ask it yesterday?" and she said, "Oh, I couldn't." You know, here's this thing. Actually, it's just a weirdly exaggerated case of what everyone experiences in a question period after a talk. "Oh, that's a stupid question; nobody's going to want to hear that; this has been asked a thousand times before," you know, this sort of critical take that runs around so that you end up not being any help to the speaker at all. So when I talked at Tucson, I said, "Well, I'm just going to give a half hour talk, and then I'm going to ask you people to help me out by asking questions, because I want to know what people want to know. If I'm going to write a memoir, it's a good thing to find out. So as soon as I'm through, I'm going to turn on my tape recorder and record your questions." So I got through talking, I turned on the tape recorder and said, "All right, let's have some questions." Dead silence. And I said, "well, you're just like Beaumont's class," and then I told them what happened there. That started them off, and I got forty-five minutes worth of questions, some of them pretty good, but at least they kept coming, you know, there weren't these terrible lags going on after that.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: - shuffling of feet.

CHARIS WILSON: But it's very funny that people really do have questions, but they just can't get them out. I have to write a letter to this guy up in Portland who is half the team that's responsible for that interview with me which I really can't stand to look at, and which has now turned up in the Enter/View, the Andy Warhol broadside,

very chic --

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: This I don't know about. Horrors.

CHARIS WILSON: It is horrors. It's unkempt: the idea is that everybody has so much to say about so little, and sort of a proper successor to People magazine and things like this. But these boys were going to interview me for the Willamette Weekly, which they actually wrote a food column for - a couple of doctors up there, who were also interested in photography. So I went over one night, and they made all these tapes of me, and this interview came out. It was kind of a mess, and I said, "Well, I think it would have been a good idea to show it to me before you print it because there are certain things I highly disapprove of having in print," but after all, it's only the Willamette Weekly, so why should I care, and the next thing I know, they sold it to the American Photographer.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: Without a release from you?

CHARIS WILSON: Yes, and I said, "If you're going to do that you really have to fix up this and this and this," and I sent them two pages of corrections. They just ignored it - put it in - and this one guy said, "Well, the other one took it and edited it."

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: That's pretty upsetting.

CHARIS WILSON: Yes, I'm going to write him and tell him off about it.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: Write the editor of the magazine, as well, that there was no release from you that was signed.

CHARIS WILSON: I wrote the American Photographer and said, "I certainly don't think much of your taking this without checking to see if there was a release," and he said, "Oh, well, I understood that these gentlemen were in touch with you, and anyway, it may upset you, but it makes a much better interview if it's really spontaneous." Well, I'm afraid American Photographer is rather like that anyway.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: Well, it is my hope that you don't feel this way about this one. I think we've just exhausted it. What do you feel?

CHARIS WILSON: Do you think we have it beaten to the ground?

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: Well, I'm not sure about that. Are there things you'd like to add, or areas you feel I haven't hit?

CHARIS WILSON: I have no idea. I think you've hit everything there is to hit.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: Well, as long as we haven't been beating it, maybe we should stop.

CHARIS WILSON: Why not.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: Going on. We thought we were going to stop, but we've gone on, talking about what happens with two creative personalities, particularly in the instance where one seems slightly more dominant - would you describe it?

CHARIS WILSON: I think so.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: And how difficult it is to keep a balance of that. We have touched on it through the interview at points, but just to finish up.

CHARIS WILSON: Well, I think this was something that looked to me as though it would never be critical between Edward and me because writing and photography were different things, and obviously in our case, we were complimentary, since I could ghost-write articles for him and also do something like California and the West, or the cat book. But it really came to an issue finally because of the different needs of a photographer and a writer, and I suppose in the long run, no matter what you're doing, that any two people who are pursuing the same or different activities are going to have some sort of compromise or else one of them is going to call the shots. And what really happened to break things up for Edward and me was that after California and the West and the articles, you know, I felt that I had pulled even, as it were, and deserved some consideration for my own operation. And when we started tootling along the Whitman book, and I wanted to stop and spend a day of catching up with the written record, Edward said, "No way, no, there's nothing for me to do here; we go." And that was a great shock to me because I perceived a value in my share of the operation that I thought was not being appreciated, and I think that was the first fatal arrow to pierce our entente. And I can see in retrospect that Edward was absolutely correct from his point of view. It was his project, his contract; it was his work that

was most at stake, and although I think he could have done a little bit of compromising, I can see that he wouldn't take it very far. He was a very restless kind of person who did not take kindly to being help up.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: So you kept his schedule.

CHARIS WILSON: Right. And for the most part, I was perfectly willing to go along with it, but with writing, you have a peculiar need of having some connection with the landscape you're moving through if you ever expect to say anything about it all. And where we happened to be at this time was down in Northwestern Louisiana, some very interesting country from a literary point of view. Edward didn't see anything to photograph, and he didn't want to stick around.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: Off you were to go.

CHARIS WILSON: So off we went. And that rather kicked a hole in things for me, because in the California and the West operation, I'd been perfectly willing to go along with whatever he wanted to do within the limits that I could modify it a little by suggesting things, but I just wasn't that willing anymore now. I had a sense of my own value and what I was contributing. But I know there are noteworthy couples who seem to have pursued similar or adjacent activities very successfully, and I always think one thing that probably makes it possible is that they're not too cooped up together.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: Well, in a way, the role of the model that we know, it seems to me, is one in which there's a lot of nurturing and a lot of stimulating, and that does involve a kind of passive/active - and that's very difficult, because it - one person begins to shrink if that - or not to grow - not necessarily to shrink - but it's hard to grow and keep that going if it is a one-way - not one-way - those are all kind of clichéd words that aren't really that useful. I don't know. You probably have a better way to express that.

CHARIS WILSON: Well, I think it becomes a question of not really confusing yourself with an object if you're too tied to this kind of role. I think far more important than whether you're modeling or not is whether you're really maintaining the same wave length so that you can communicate about whatever you're doing. And when that fails, then you've got trouble.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: The modeling often is an amazing avenue of sharing on a very intense and intimate level. I don't know quite how to do it. I'm editing quietly in my mind here. There's a noted contemporary photographer who always used to say - his question was whether or not he made love to his model before or after the photographing session, and that always annoyed me.

CHARIS WILSON: Yes, I would find that very annoying.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: And I don't know exactly - certainly there is an amazing, intense, stimulating exchange for a good session, and it's a question of how to get it out of that just sort of stayed clichéd risqué sense of artist and model. I don't know quite how to pull it out of that.

CHARIS WILSON: Well, there's a famous limerick on the subject.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: Let's hear it.

CHARIS WILSON: "While Titian was mixing rose madder,
His model was posed on a ladder,
Her position to Titian,
Suggestion coition,
So he ran up the ladder
And had her."

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: I hadn't heard that one before. Well, maybe they aren't necessarily inextricably - are they?

CHARIS WILSON: No, I think there's no doubt that in our society with its very Puritan background, the fact that you're around there with no clothes on sets up all kinds of overtones. But I sure would have no respect for anyone who felt it was necessary to act on all of them. And contrary to the statement of Ben Maddow, Edward certainly didn't "get it on" with all of his models. But of course, he wrote in his daybook about the ones that he did.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: So that's wherewith his reputation is made.

CHARIS WILSON: Right. I felt like saying sometimes, now that Simenon has come out and said that he's probably made love to 10,000 women, why does anyone really get impressed with what Edward did? No more than average.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: Was he very open and personal about – open to you – about his other relationships he'd had with other – so he shared details and –

CHARIS WILSON: Right. We had the most total exchange of detailed autobiographies that I've ever had with anyone. We started in doing it on a long night drive as a way to keep awake, and I think it took us most of a week to get all the way through. We were still in our childhoods when we got from Carmel to Los Angeles, a long drive in those days. But every time one of us would say something, it would remind us of something. But we went through all of our sexual experiences in great detail, and it's a remarkable thing to me to realize that Edward never did this otherwise. Cole said to me one time, "You know, I just don't know that much about him."

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: Well, to share something like that – you must look back at that period of your life with fondness.

CHARIS WILSON: Yes, I do. I do, and in many ways regret that I was young and uninformed enough to really come to a lot of curious mis-conclusions of what was going on. But on the other hand, if I hadn't been that young and uninformed, I might not have had the same appeal for Edward that I did. Who knows. You can't go tidy up the system just because you'd like it to have worked out another way.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: We've done it. We've come to the other end of the --

CHARIS WILSON: We've made it now. Somebody's going to get a fortune for this.

MIMI LUEBBERMANN: Well, thank you for sharing all that with me.

CHARIS WILSON: You're most entirely welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW

Last updated... *August 12, 2005*