

SI AAA logo



## Oral history interview with Virginia Ewing, 1964 Jan. 7

**Contact Information**

Reference Department  
Archives of American Art  
Smithsonian Institution  
Washington, D.C. 20560  
[www.aaa.si.edu/services/questions](http://www.aaa.si.edu/services/questions)  
[www.aaa.si.edu/](http://www.aaa.si.edu/)

## Transcript

### Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Virginia Ewing on January 7, 1964. The interview took place in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and was conducted by Sylvia Glidden Loomis for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Archives of American Art's New Deal and the Arts project.

The original transcript was edited. In 2022 the Archives created a more verbatim transcript. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

### Interview

SYLVIA LOOMIS: This is an interview by a representative of the Santa Fe office of the Archives of American Art with Mrs. Virginia Ewing of Santa Fe on January 7, 1964. Mrs. Ewing was the wife of the late Vernon Hunter during the time he was New Mexico state director of the Federal Works Progress Administration in the 1930s and '40s. Although you were not involved personally in this Project, Virginia, we hope you can tell us something about Vernon himself and recall some details of his work and experiences during the WPA days. First, do you know where Vernon was born, where he was educated, and when he first came to New Mexico?

VIRGINIA EWING: He was born in Hallsville, Illinois in 1900. He was educated at James Millikin University in Decatur, Illinois and at the Art Institute in Chicago.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VIRGINIA EWING: And he came to New Mexico in 1907. His parents came out to Las Vegas in 1907, and then he later moved to Texaco, which was his home until 1934.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: That would—

VIRGINIA EWING: Of course, with being away in New York and California and various places.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, yes.

VIRGINIA EWING: And, of course, going back to Chicago to the Art Institute.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes. And it was in 1934 that he came to Santa Fe?

VIRGINIA EWING: No—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh.

VIRGINIA EWING: —he first came to Santa Fe in—or you mean first or for WPA?

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, for the WPA.

VIRGINIA EWING: He came to Santa Fe for WPA in October of 1935.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, yes.

VIRGINIA EWING: That was when the Project started.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes, I think. And where were you before that?

VIRGINIA EWING: Do you mean before we came to Santa Fe?

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes, mm-hmm [affirmative].

VIRGINIA EWING: We were Puerto de Luna—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh.

VIRGINIA EWING: —New Mexico.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, yes.

VIRGINIA EWING: A little Spanish village near Santa Rosa.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Do you know under what circumstances he was made director of the WPA Art Projects in New Mexico?

VIRGINIA EWING: Oh, I remember that very clearly. [Laughs.]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: You do? Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VIRGINIA EWING: Ms. Mary Perry was—I don't remember her exact position at the time. She had something to do with the state welfare office. And she used to come to Santa Rosa, and came to Puerto de Luna to see us—not officially, but we met her through her—on the visit she made there. And she was very much interested in what Vernon was doing in Puerto de Luna. He was director of a vocational school. At the time, the state had this very intensive vocational program trying to get the Spanish people to get back to their old Spanish crafts.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, yes.

VIRGINIA EWING: Making furniture, doing pottery, weaving, and so forth. And he had a vocational school in Puerto de Luna and she was so interested in what he was doing in that and also in the fact that he was an artist. And she talked with him so much about his ideas. And when the Federal Art Project was started—she, meanwhile, had changed jobs and was in charge of the Woman's Division of the Works Progress Administration, under which the Art Project came. And it was her responsibility to select someone to direct the Art Project for New Mexico.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh.

VIRGINIA EWING: And she recommended Vernon Hunter. And the people to whom she had direct—to whom she had to make this recommendation agreed with her selection, and so he was employed to come do the job.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, yes.

VIRGINIA EWING: And with tremendous excitement [phone ringing].

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. [Phone ringing.] [Recorder stops, restarts.] What was exciting about this Project?

VIRGINIA EWING: Well, the whole idea of the thing, the whole concept of it. Vernon had been a teacher and a very good one. And he was not only interested in his own art, but he was interested in art in all phases. And he had been interested in helping other people. He had been a sort of a patron—not a patron in the sense of—in any financial way, but he had stimulated interest in art, in, oh, Pedro Cervantes in Clovis, Peter Hurd in Roswell. And Peter still talks about that.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, yes.

[00:05:00]

VIRGINIA EWING: And a great many other people. He'd been interested in giving to them what he had to give, and encouraging them. And so he was—he felt this was a terrific challenge. It was frightening because he'd never had a job of this sort—well, no one had ever had—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: No.

VIRGINIA EWING: —such a job before.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: It was unprecedented.

VIRGINIA EWING: And there wasn't a clear statement of what was to be done. It was a whole new venture. And so, he came with the excitement of taking on a wonderful new venture.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: How did he—what was the first thing that he had to do?

VIRGINIA EWING: Sit down and read reams and reams and reams of paper about it from Washington.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh.

VIRGINIA EWING: Just unbelievable quantities of directives and instructions and suggestions and ideas about what the whole thing was all about, what the purpose of it was, what were the main things to keep in mind in everything that was done, suggestions of how to go about it, what to do and how to do it.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And then when he started actually—

VIRGINIA EWING: And then—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —working at it—

VIRGINIA EWING: —begin to try to—well one of the—of course, the first things to do were to plan projects. To find out who could be on the Art Project. The Welfare Department took care of the certification for relief, and found out which people were artists, or said they were. And then they were referred to the Art Project. And after he began to get some idea of what people he had to work with, then it was up to him to plan the projects, to decide what kind of thing could be done, where it could be done. And one of the main things that he had to do was to get local sponsorship, which would provide the funds for materials for a project. He couldn't just simply say, well, we're going to do murals in such and such a school, or in such and such a public building.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, the—

VIRGINIA EWING: The whoever—whatever public building it was either had to sponsor it or some organization had to sponsor the project—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, yes.

VIRGINIA EWING: —and pass on it, approve it, and provide the funds to pay for the materials.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, I didn't realize that.

VIRGINIA EWING: And then when that was taken care of, then the personnel was selected to do the work.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VIRGINIA EWING: And there was a certain proportion—I do not remember exactly what proportion of the total funds for a project—could be spent. Of course, Washington's approval, of course, had to come—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, after mural—

VIRGINIA EWING: [Inaudible.] Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —after they'd been—

VIRGINIA EWING: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —after they'd been set up locally then—

VIRGINIA EWING: Then it had to be approved.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —approved in Washington.

VIRGINIA EWING: And then a certain proportion of funds were permitted to be spent for certain key personnel who could be employed. Not relief people, but employed for their skill or ability to do a particular thing. And that, in turn then, would enable the employment of a great many other people to assist.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, yes.

VIRGINIA EWING: For instance, if someone were employed to do a mural, a great many people

could be employed to assist in doing that mural.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Were these non-welfare people the supervisors mostly or were they the actual artists themselves?

VIRGINIA EWING: They were actual artists.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And what about his supervisory staff? Did he have—did he have supervisors—

VIRGINIA EWING: Oh, yes, he had supervisory staff over the state, various people. Now, in some instances, I believe those people were on relief and in some instances they were not.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see.

VIRGINIA EWING: I think Joy Finke would be in a much better position to give you that sort of detail than I. Um—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: What happened to his records, the ones that he kept during that time?

VIRGINIA EWING: He suddenly had word—of course, after war was declared in 1941, we knew the WPA would close out. It was certainly not anything that was going to go on. But he suddenly had word from Washington to destroy all records and close the office and the Project. And I think, if I remember rightly, this was to be done in about a weeks' time. And it was a terrific blow.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I should think so.

VIRGINIA EWING: Because there was the consternation over what to do with all of these records. How could you just throw into the incinerator records of years of work that you put your very life into, and just pitch it all out? And Vernon was not the kind of person to throw away records. He just didn't do it well at all—throw away anything, much less records.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:10:14]

VIRGINIA EWING: So, they did throw away practically everything, but he kept two tremendous, big cartons, which were the most important things about what had been done, what had gone where; the very sort of thing you would want most.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, yes.

VIRGINIA EWING: And we paid for their storage. We paid for their transportation, through all of the years from 1941 to 1955. They were still sealed up, had never been called for or wanted or anything else—of course, this was against government regulations to keep these. Because he'd been told to destroy everything. Send nothing to Washington, just destroy everything.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: That's strange.

VIRGINIA EWING: So, we kept those boxes sealed up, never opened them, and when he died in 1955, and I was going to be moving out of town and knew that I would be in a very small place—would be living in a very small place, I could not continue to house and take care of those boxes. So I finally destroyed them without ever looking at them at all.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh.

VIRGINIA EWING: I just opened them and burned them. What else could I do?

SYLVIA LOOMIS: That's right.

VIRGINIA EWING: I just—I shouldn't have done it, probably—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, as long as those were the—[Cross talk.]

VIRGINIA EWING: —but I didn't know what else I could do.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —if those were the orders, why, I don't know how you could have done anything else.

VIRGINIA EWING: And I knew that it was nothing that I was legally responsible to take care of because it was legally wrong for us to have kept in the first place.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

VIRGINIA EWING: So, that's where they all went.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, I see.

VIRGINIA EWING: The remaining things—the objects of art that belonged in the office were distributed as quickly and as advantageously as could be done.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: You remember what distribution they made of those? That seems to be one of the big questions as to what happened to some of the—

VIRGINIA EWING: To all of the work that was done on WPA?

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yeah, the paintings and the sculptures.

VIRGINIA EWING: Well, the sponsors—everything that was sponsored went to the sponsors.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, yes.

VIRGINIA EWING: Now as far as objects that were made, small objects, easel paintings, I'm not clear as to who sponsored those, and I know that that sort of thing was allocated to schools, to museums, to public buildings. And I don't know what the—I just don't remember on what basis. Whether there was a certain degree of sponsorship or whether there were certain things that were simply done without sponsorship and were allocated wherever seemed best. They went to—they all went to public places of some sort.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Public places?

VIRGINIA EWING: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, there's some turning up at the—[Cross talk.]

VIRGINIA EWING: City Hall, courthouses, schools, and that sort of thing. And a great deal went to museums.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes, well, there's—

VIRGINIA EWING: And much of what went to museums is now in their basements or their deepest storage.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, I found some at the museum here, and then some down at the university—

VIRGINIA EWING: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —at the art gallery down there, in their basement. Do you remember the type of projects that he directed? The ones I have down here are painting, sculpture, graphic arts, murals, arts and crafts, Index of American Design, and architecture. Do you recall any other types?

VIRGINIA EWING: Well, other than easel paintings and sculpture, I remember a fountain that was done for—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: For the Carrie Tingley?

VIRGINIA EWING: —Carrie Tingley Hospital. Murals in the Highlands University. It was—they then had a different name. What was it?

SYLVIA LOOMIS: It was the New Mexico [inaudible]—

VIRGINIA EWING: Nor—[inaudible]—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —College of Agriculture and—[Cross talk.]

VIRGINIA EWING: Well, it was the—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —[inaudible] or something in that line.

VIRGINIA EWING: —it was the University in Las Vegas.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, yes.

VIRGINIA EWING: It was murals—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh.

VIRGINIA EWING: —for that.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, I was thinking the—

VIRGINIA EWING: There were murals for—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —one in Las Cruces, no.

VIRGINIA EWING: Well, there was—Olive Rush did a mural in Las Cruces. Now, of course, Olive was never on relief.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: No.

VIRGINIA EWING: She was employed as a key person to do that job.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well now, as I understand it, that was done on the PWAP, the one before Vernon.

VIRGINIA EWING: Well, Vernon—she did one for Vernon on WPA.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: She did?

VIRGINIA EWING: Yes, she did.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And was that at Las Cruces?

VIRGINIA EWING: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, maybe we—maybe that was—

VIRGINIA EWING: Because I distinctly remember a joke Vernon told about it.

[00:15:00]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh.

VIRGINIA EWING: About Olive's consternation trying to find a hammer—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh.

VIRGINIA EWING: —no, a saw.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh.

VIRGINIA EWING: This was a great joke in the family at the time and—she'd asked someone for a saw and the man said, What do you want, a cross-cut saw or a rib saw? And she said, [Imitating Olive Rush], "Well, how do I know what kind of a saw? I just want a saw to cut a board with." [Laughs.]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Sounds just like her.

VIRGINIA EWING: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VIRGINIA EWING: And—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, maybe she was mistaken about that.

VIRGINIA EWING: I think so because I remember that very distinctly. Did she tell you it was PWAP?

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, I don't—I just don't remember now. It seemed to me that I concluded that from the dates, but it might have been that she started under—

VIRGINIA EWING: She may have started it and that was finished—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: [Inaudible.] [Cross talk.]

VIRGINIA EWING: —it may have been something like that. But I know she worked on it under Vernon's direction because I heard too much about it. We were living in her house at the time. It was just a household matter.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

VIRGINIA EWING: Then there was a mural in what's now Eastern New Mexico University at Portales.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Do you remember who did that?

VIRGINIA EWING: There was one that was done there under PWAP.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh.

VIRGINIA EWING: Because Vernon went over to take the place of whoever was supposed to accept it. But they were—there was work later done there on WPA. A Lloyd Moylan did the one in Las Vegas. I don't remember whether he worked on the Portales one or not. I don't remember.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, I remember seeing a picture of it, a photograph of it, but there was no name.

VIRGINIA EWING: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And I wondered if you might happen to know.

VIRGINIA EWING: Then of course there was the Portfolio of Spanish Colonial Design in New Mexico, which was one of the big projects that was done. The portfolio of mainly *santos* on which so many different people worked.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And that was before the Index of American Design?

VIRGINIA EWING: Yes, that was—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Okay.

VIRGINIA EWING: —yes, that was long before that.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Do you know anything about how the community theater in Albuquerque came into being under WPA auspices?

VIRGINIA EWING: No, I don't. I do not know about that.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Because I—from what I have discovered so far, it was apparently of the— all of the furniture was done under WPA—[Cross talk.]

VIRGINIA EWING: Well, I know that the building—I know about the building.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

VIRGINIA EWING: But the work with the theater, I don't remember who started that. But John Meem designed the building—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

VIRGINIA EWING: —and the Art Project designed the—those beautiful, big tin lighting fixtures



and made them. And the mural was done under the Art Project by Dorothy Stewart, who of course was not on WPA—I mean, on relief.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VIRGINIA EWING: But a great many people were employed assisting her with it—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

VIRGINIA EWING: —who were on WPA.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VIRGINIA EWING: Then all of the furnishings—the small objects, the tin things, and beautiful decorations here and there were done on the Art Project, but the furniture was done on the NYA.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh.

VIRGINIA EWING: And I think the Art Project had something to do with the design of the furniture.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, it seemed, as far as I could figure out, that the whole project was WPA.

VIRGINIA EWING: Yes. Now the—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: But I suppose they had a local sponsor, you see, which was the community theater.

VIRGINIA EWING: Well, I don't know whether the theater, or whether it was somebody else. I don't remember who was the sponsor. Now, Joy would probably be able to tell who had sponsored that, or Roland Dickey.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Because that seemed to be as complete a WPA Project—

VIRGINIA EWING: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —as I have come across. [Cross talk.]

VIRGINIA EWING: And it was a fascinating and a beautiful one and a continuing—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

VIRGINIA EWING: —joy.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I know, some of those frescoes are just as fresh today as they were when they were made.

VIRGINIA EWING: Yes. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, I've been curious about that and how that was set up, but I'll ask Joy about it. Where were the projects located?

VIRGINIA EWING: All over the state.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: All over?

VIRGINIA EWING: Yes. And there was—there were—well, Vernon traveled almost constantly, and he went all over the state from Raton to Las Cruces, from Clovis to Gala. Another—toward the end of the period of the WPA, the Art Project—the art galleries were an important project. There were galleries in Gala, the Roswell Museum started as a WPA art gallery.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, really?

VIRGINIA EWING: And then was continued by the city as a museum. And there was a gallery in Las Vegas. I believe there was in Raton, if I'm not mistaken, but I may be wrong about that.

[00:20:10]

And these were WPA-operated galleries with traveling shows. WPA—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And were they—

VIRGINIA EWING: —and local.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And I suppose there were WPA artists in each one of these localities, too.

VIRGINIA EWING: They were—no. Well, you mean, in charge of the gallery?

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, yes—

VIRGINIA EWING: Or—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —and working in that area.

VIRGINIA EWING: Oh, yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

VIRGINIA EWING: Yes. Oh, yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I don't suppose you would know—

VIRGINIA EWING: There were artists all over the state.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: All over the state?

VIRGINIA EWING: Oh, yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: They weren't—[Cross talk.]

VIRGINIA EWING: [Inaudible] great many—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —concentrated in—

VIRGINIA EWING: Oh, no. No.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: No.

VIRGINIA EWING: They were all over the state.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —in the larger places.

VIRGINIA EWING: No. There were more in Santa Fe and Albuquerque because they're larger towns, but they were in all of these towns and Vernon traveled constantly supervising their work and checking up on it, seeing what had been done, talking to them about what was to be done, and then talking to sponsors. And he was traveling almost constantly.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Did he find enough projects to take care of the need of the WPA—

VIRGINIA EWING: Well, it was—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —employees?

VIRGINIA EWING: —his job to see that enough—that there were enough projects to employ the people who were to be employed.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Who were available or needed. [Inaudible.] [Cross talk.]

VIRGINIA EWING: Yes, yes. And it was his job to get these projects going. And to get—the biggest difficulty was to get the sponsorship, to get the money, for the project.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: [Inaudible.]

VIRGINIA EWING: And then, of course, after the thing was started, to keep the people working on it, to keep them happy with it. Many of them felt they were not doing as creative work as they would have liked to do, but many of them were not capable of doing creative work that was worth paying for. And then of course there were sometimes when there were people doing work

that was not up to their full capacity. But there was the balancing. There had to be the balancing of producing something which you could show the public had been done with the money spent, and still employ all of these people. And it was a terrific balancing job to find projects that were not beyond the skills but that would use the skills to the best advantage and still something the community could use and was willing to pay for.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

VIRGINIA EWING: So that was a—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: He did a terrific job.

VIRGINIA EWING: It was a terrific job. It was a terrific—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And he just—

VIRGINIA EWING: —strain.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —covered that in New Mexico, not Arizona?

VIRGINIA EWING: No.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: No.

VIRGINIA EWING: Just New Mexico.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Just New Mexico. That first PWAP, Region 13, that was both states.

VIRGINIA EWING: No. No, it was—I believe, no. I don't—there may have been other combinations of states, but New Mexico was always just the one state.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: By itself.

VIRGINIA EWING: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Of course, it was a part of a larger region. And what was done in New Mexico was under the direction of the regional director. Most of the time that was Donald Bear—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh.

VIRGINIA EWING: —who was director of Denver Museum.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Denver. And that was his headquarters?

VIRGINIA EWING: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And how many other—

VIRGINIA EWING: And everything that Vernon did in New Mexico, his plans and so forth, were discussed and approved by Donald Bear.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see.

VIRGINIA EWING: And by Washington.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: But how much of a region did he have? I mean, what were the other states in that region, do you know?

VIRGINIA EWING: Well, it was Colorado, I think it was Utah. I believe Arizona. I just don't know how many states. I would say four or five states, but I may be wrong. May have not been that many. But there again, Joy would know about that, what the region was.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Were there many Indians employed on the projects?

VIRGINIA EWING: I don't know how many. I know there were some because I remember so much about José Rey Toledo, and Vernon talked about him so much. He was so interested in him. And there were many Indians.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Did they do really creative work?

VIRGINIA EWING: Yes, they did.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: They did.

VIRGINIA EWING: Yes, they did.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: They weren't just helpers?

VIRGINIA EWING: Oh, no. No, they did creative work whenever they were able to. And he was very anxious to keep them doing their own creative work, and not make them do things that were not creative. However, it was very difficult because at that time—well, for instance, José Rey Toledo was a Jemez Indian. Had great difficulty with the pueblo, because they—the Indians, you know, do not approve of the individual artist doing work under his own name. And at one time, he told Vernon about the old ladies having put cornmeal all around his house, which was a very bad thing. They were keeping his evil spirits within his own little sphere. They didn't want it to get out into the rest of the pueblo.

[00:25:14]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I didn't realize that that was as recent as this.

VIRGINIA EWING: Oh, yes. They were strongly against it.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I knew that—

VIRGINIA EWING: So, they had a bit of a problem in the things they were doing.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

VIRGINIA EWING: To try to do their own type of work, their own subject matter and still not incur the ill will of the pueblo.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, I'd heard about that with other Indian artists—

VIRGINIA EWING: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —that they would, if they were recognized as individual artists—

VIRGINIA EWING: [Inaudible.]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —of ability, that they were frowned on by the rest of the pueblo. But I didn't realize it would be on a WPA Project, too.

VIRGINIA EWING: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Were there many Spanish Americans?

VIRGINIA EWING: Yes, many. A great many.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I know that Pedro—

VIRGINIA EWING: Patrociño Barela—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

VIRGINIA EWING: —in Taos was—started on WPA.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VIRGINIA EWING: And I remember one time he'd been—when Vernon went up to make one of his periodic visits, he said, Well, you know why I kept hoping you'd come, I had a—this was after the article had come out in *Time* about him. He said, I had a request from a man for an autograph. And he said, I don't know what an autograph is, but he said, I just sent him one of my carvings, because I thought that's probably what he wanted.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh. [They laugh.] Sweet.

VIRGINIA EWING: He said, I kept thinking you'd come and would tell me what this autograph

was all about. But I—I just go ahead and sent him a carving. [They laugh.]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, I saw some of Pedro Cervantes's—

VIRGINIA EWING: Yes, Pedro was on the Project.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Do you know what happened to him?

VIRGINIA EWING: He's still in Clovis.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: He is?

VIRGINIA EWING: And—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Is he still painting?

VIRGINIA EWING: He's still painting, but not being very creative about it, I'm afraid. He's having to do too many other things to keep—he's doing sign painting—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: [Inaudible.]

VIRGINIA EWING: —to earn his keep. [Cross talk.]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: [Inaudible.]

VIRGINIA EWING: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: [Inaudible.] I was curious about what happened to him, and E. Boyd asked me to find out if I could—

VIRGINIA EWING: I think he needed guidance in his subject matter.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh.

VIRGINIA EWING: He seemed to get into trouble when he didn't have someone to sort of suggest and guide him toward subject matter. And then Eliseo Rodrigues here in Santa Fe, [inaudible]. He was [inaudible].

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: [Inaudible.]

VIRGINIA EWING: And—oh, there were a great many.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: There were?

VIRGINIA EWING: Oh, yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, what were some of the major problems that Vernon encountered?

VIRGINIA EWING: Well, other than securing sponsorship, the most difficult—the greatest problem was with the artists themselves. Many of them felt that because there were allowed to stay at home and paint, they didn't need to paint a certain number of hours a day. And it was very difficult to make them quite understand that they were being paid, they had to turn out a certain amount of work. They shouldn't be pushed and made to feel that at eight o'clock they had to sit down, and they painted every second until 12 and they went back at one and so forth. It was a difficult problem to decide whether an artist was putting in enough time, whether he was turning out enough work, or whether he was playing along. And Vernon did a great deal of soul-searching on that, trying to be fair to the government, who was paying them, and to be fair to the artist. And he tried very hard. And I think on the whole he did an awfully good job of that, or he couldn't have stayed in the whole time.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I know that some of the artists felt sort of resentful of the fact that they were required to turn out a painting a week—

VIRGINIA EWING: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —for [inaudible]—[Cross talk.]—small amount.

VIRGINIA EWING: Well, it was very difficult for them to feel—to realize that—many of them were

so tremendously grateful to be able to paint instead of having to go out and do something that was completely foreign to them in order to earn a living, that they were, they gave no thought to that sort of thing. Then there were others who thought, Well, I shouldn't have to work this hard. And I just can't turn out work that fast and so forth. So it was, there you were getting involved in the most difficult part of personality. And it was extremely difficult, very frustrating.

[00:30:05]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, did Vernon have to settle all these things himself or—

VIRGINIA EWING: Yes, he did.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: He did.

VIRGINIA EWING: He had to settle them himself, there was no one else to do it.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: His supervisors weren't—

VIRGINIA EWING: Oh, well they did. They—yes, they did to a certain extent. But there were many things that he had to settle himself. And there were many times when the supervisor, well, if he was having problems, the artists who were creating the problems knew the supervisor could be a—that there was someone else to whom appeal could be made.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Go over his head.

VIRGINIA EWING: Yes. And then there were problems with—well, at one time, there were a group of very left-wing artists who had a sit-down strike in the governor's office to try to get Vernon out of his job so that one of their own people, they hoped, could be put in. And direct the thing more to their way of thinking. And that was a—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: [Inaudible.]

VIRGINIA EWING: —an unpleasant siege.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes. Well, what happened there?

VIRGINIA EWING: Well, the governor just dismissed the whole thing and squashed it and would have none of it. So that was the end of that. [Phone ringing.] Then there were many people who felt that they weren't doing work that was—particularly on the Portfolio of Spanish Colonial Design, because there were all these plates, which were to be hand-colored. A great many people were given that to do who felt they could do something much more creative. But the job had to be done. It was tremendously worth doing. [Recorder stops, restarts.]

As I was saying before I had to go to the phone, the job was tremendously worth doing. It was a very important project. It was going to be of great value to have these plates, which were made up in the portfolios. And those portfolios were allocated to libraries and schools all over the country. A great many of the people who colored the plates, as I said before, felt they could have been doing more creative work. There were some few who probably could have, but this was a project which used a great many people who had been assigned to the Art Project but who really did not have a great deal of creative ability. That was one of the advantages of doing it. It would employ many people who weren't greatly skilled as creative artists. But in order to do it, some who were more skilled and could have done a more creative job had to be called in to help with it.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes—

VIRGINIA EWING: But I don't think many of those very creative people were greatly imposed upon in order to accomplish this very fine project.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: They were about 200 of those portfolios—

VIRGINIA EWING: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —weren't there?

VIRGINIA EWING: And they are now tremendously valuable. There are places who would pay any amount of money to get them. But, of course, none of them are for sale.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

VIRGINIA EWING: At least they're not supposed to be.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes. Well now, well what would you say were some of the major accomplishments of the Project as a whole?

VIRGINIA EWING: Well, I think the—really the major accomplishment of the Project was the purpose for which it was started, which was to enable artists to make a contribution to society as artists; it permitted them to work as artists, to earn their living as artists instead of having to go out and do something which was in no way related to their art and by so doing perhaps lose it.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes—

VIRGINIA EWING: Because there were a great many of them who were employed and kept painting who have gone on painting ever since then who might have dropped out of it entirely. And I think the Project was a great stimulus to art in this country. It brought an experience of art to a great many small communities who might never have had it otherwise. For instance, a little community in Melrose, New Mexico which had an art gallery. Most of the people in that town had never seen a painting before. And they were tremendously enthused about this gallery and they worked so hard, it was a favorite community project. They were very excited about it and got a great deal from it. That was a benefit to an entire community.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes, of course.

VIRGINIA EWING: Then, of course, there are all the beautiful things that are still left that were produced on the Project. But the essence of it was giving employment to the artist, maintaining their morale as well as keeping them alive, and enabling them to continue and increase their professional skill.

[00:35:07]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes. Well, do you think that the public reacted well to the Project?

VIRGINIA EWING: I think on the whole it did, very well. We never heard the criticisms, and I have not since heard the criticisms of WPA, of the Art Project, that were directed against other Projects in WPA. I've never heard people speaking about the waste of money or the people who were just making a—shovel-leaning and that sort of thing. That kind of criticism has never been directed against the Art Project. I think what respect there is for the whole of WPA is largely due to the various Art Projects.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well then, you would say that Vernon enjoyed the experience?

VIRGINIA EWING: Oh, he enjoyed it tremendously.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: He did.

VIRGINIA EWING: It was the high point of his whole life—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, really?

VIRGINIA EWING: —because it was the most challenging and exciting job he'd ever had—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

VIRGINIA EWING: —just as it was for most people who worked on it.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes, of course.

VIRGINIA EWING: And I don't think he ever enjoyed anything as much as he did that. It was very difficult, very exhausting, but so exciting, and so worth doing.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And I gather that he had very good relations with his superiors, Mr. Bear in Denver, and with Washington?

VIRGINIA EWING: Yes, he did. It was a very, very good relationship. He had no problems with them at all. There may have been minor things, but, Mr. Cahill, Holger Cahill, was the national

director for the Project in Washington, and he and Vernon became very close friends. And he admired Mr. Cahill very much. And then Mr. Hopkins, of course, the national head of WPA, was in Santa Fe on a visit.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, is that right?

VIRGINIA EWING: And after the public matters were over, he called in Vernon—and I'm sure he did other project directors, too—to come to his suite at the hotel for a personal conversation. And he very kindly included me, which I think was a gesture of acknowledgment of the fact that the Art Project was a way of—a family way of life as well as a job for the man of the family. And he emphasized in that visit that the purpose of the Project was to employ these people, to maintain their morale, to keep them working professionally. That that was almost more important than what they produced, although, of course, they did have to produce in order to show some result from the money spent.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes, of course, mm-hmm [affirmative].

VIRGINIA EWING: But to very careful of the morale and to not to—not subordinate the person always to the accomplishment of a job. And that was a very difficult thing to do. Mr. Hopkins was such a very fine man. A wonderful person and it was a great stimulus to talk to him.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: How long was he here?

VIRGINIA EWING: Oh, just a day or so, I think.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes. Did he have an opportunity to visit any of the projects?

VIRGINIA EWING: I don't remember now how many he did visit, if any. I just remember his being here in Santa Fe. I don't recall his going to others, but although he may have.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, are there any other comments that you would like to make about those days on WPA?

VIRGINIA EWING: Well, I think the value of the whole thing is in the painting—that the artists and the people who are working now, who were kept working and able to continue to be artists at that time. People like Louie Ewing. Like, well, for instance, Paul Lantz, people like E. Boyd, who was up at the folk art museum doing such a beautiful job up there.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

VIRGINIA EWING: There are so many people, there are so many beautiful things. And I do feel that that whole Art Project nationally created an interest in the world of art in this country that might not have been otherwise.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I think that's very true.

VIRGINIA EWING: I think it's almost impossible to measure the stimulus—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VIRGINIA EWING: —and the educational value of it. And of course, it's impossible to measure the value in any way because how many people who are working and doing things in the country now were on WPA? I don't suppose anyone knows.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, that's one of the things we're trying—

VIRGINIA EWING: It's an intangible thing.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, we're to find out and—

VIRGINIA EWING: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —because there are a good many of the artists we know of that almost got their start on WPA that are now very prominent. And it is part of that survey that we're trying to make so we can publicize it and at least have this record, which could be lost if we didn't get it from the people who were involved.



[00:40:14]

Well, thank you very much, Virginia, for this. It's been very helpful.

VIRGINIA EWING: Well, it's been a pleasure—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And—

VIRGINIA EWING: —to do it.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And now we'll see if we can't get Louie Ewing to tell us something else.

[END OF TRACK AAA\_Ewing65\_101.]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]