



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Charles
Griffin Farr, 1964 Oct. 22

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Charles Griffin Farr on October 22, 1964. The interview took place at 733 De Haro Street, San Francisco California, and was conducted by Mary Fuller McChesney 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

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: This is Mary Fuller McChesney interviewing Charles Farr, spelled F-A-R-R, who lives at 733 De Haro Street, spelled D-E, capital H-A-R-O, in San Francisco, California. The date is October 22, 1964. Present also this evening is Robert McChesney. Charlie, I'd like to ask you first where were you born?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Just a minute. I would like to say it's Charles Griffin Farr, because there's another Charles Farr in southern California who isn't a painter.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Fine. Charles Griffin, G-R-I-F-F-E-N?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: I-N.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: I-N.

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Yes.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: G-R-I-F-F-I-N.

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Charles Griffin Farr.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Good. Where were you born?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: In Birmingham, Alabama.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: What year was that?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: 1908.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: And where did you receive your art training?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: At the Art Students League, and in Paris.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: That was the Art Students League in New York?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Yes. That's right.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: How long did you go there?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: For two years. And I was in Paris for a year.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Right after you were at the Art Students League?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: That's right.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: How did you first make any connection with any of the government-sponsored art projects?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: I was in New York and needed a job, and applied for a job with the Art Project and was not—there was no opening at that time, or the quota was filled. And I went on another project that was not the Art Project. It was a work project.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: What year was that? Do you remember?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: No, I don't. Probably '33. And I had a regular laboring job on the WPA first, and then was taken on at the Metropolitan Museum. Now I'm not sure if this was the Art Project or not, but it was concerned with art. I was a restorer there, not of paintings but of ancient sculpture and pottery. And there were a great number of artists employed there at that time, in all the departments. But in the particular department—the restoration department I worked in, there were only about, I think, three other WPA artists working there.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Had you had training in this before?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: No. I had not. I'd done some pottery, but that was not important at all. It didn't enter into it. The fragments of ancient pottery and sculpture that the archaeologists would bring back from expeditions to Persia and other parts of the world were put together in the museum, and the missing sections were filled in with plaster so that there would be a complete pot or vase or piece of sculpture. And my job was to put the patina of age and the same coloring and carry out the same design onto the plaster. But I had some problem at first because I did it too well. They couldn't tell the difference. [Mary Fuller McChesney laughs.] And that's not what they wanted. They wanted to [laughs] be able to see what the complete original thing was like, but they didn't want to fool the public.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: And therefore, immediately, they wanted to see the parts that were restored. So, I had to make it a slightly different value from the original, so it would indicate, and it would be outlined.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: So they could tell—the public could tell that it was not—

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Had been restored in part.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. How long did you work at this job?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: I was at the museum about three years and enjoyed it very much. It was—I never would have known the collections at the Metropolitan so well if hadn't had that job.

[00:05:02]

You go to the museum for an afternoon once a year or something like that, and I was there—well, I worked 16 hours a week, which was perfect. I think three days, six hours. And my lunch hours, I'd always spend in the museum itself and got to know their collections there. The atmosphere was—had really a profound effect on me because of the unhurried quality of the art—unhurried, the feeling of timelessness there. I was told in the very beginning that they wanted the best job that I was able to do, and time was no object.

For example, the curator of the Greek and Roman division, or wing, of the museum, Miss Richter [ph], called one day to this department and asked Mr. Smith, the director, if the piece of sculpture that she sent down was ready—had been finished. And he said it had. And I found out later that this piece of sculpture—he looked through his book to see if was ready, and he told it was, that she could send for it. And I found out later that this piece of sculpture had been sent down there nine years before. [They laugh.] So that was quite an experience for me to be able to work in an atmosphere where I wasn't hurried. I could do—the object was to produce the very best work possible.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: It's a unique experience in America, I think, to have a job like that.

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: It was unique for me.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Did they have technicians there who trained you to do your work?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Well, there were permanent employees of the museum who supervised the work, but there was no set training period that led into this at all. It was just you went to work on a piece of sculpture or pottery and went so far, and you would be told if

you were going wrong.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Were there many other artists employed in the same kind of work there who were WPA people?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: The—I think only—in that department, there were three other artists. Three other WPA artists. But throughout the museum there were other artists working in other departments, although I don't know exactly which department they were. There was maybe, I think, maybe 25 or 30 WPA people were employed at the museum then, in various capacities.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Who were the other artists who worked with you? Do you remember their names?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: No, I don't.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: What kinds of pottery did you work on mostly, or were you working on sculpture, too?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: The pottery was—an expedition had come back a year or so before with a great deal of Persian pottery. And that we were busy on for a year or so. And then there would be pieces from the Greek and Roman, the Romans. We'd have from all over.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: What sort of paint did you use on the plaster?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Well, it was a paint that had been perfected by one of the artists there, a permanent employee of the museum, name of Simmons. I don't know if—the museum owns one of his works. His name is Cordray Simmons, I believe that was his name.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: What was his first name?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: I'm not sure, but I think it was Cordray.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: C-O-R-D-R-A-Y?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Something like that. I'm sure of his last name, but I'm not sure of his first. And the paint itself was—the binder was dammar varnish. And it was put on with—it had to be used very carefully. The plaster would be treated so that the paint wouldn't sink in too rapidly. And was usually used in glazes.

[00:10:21]

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: What did they use on the plaster?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: On the plaster?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Yeah.

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: I think probably it was just a clear dammar.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Cut?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Yes.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: During this three-year period, did you have any contact with any of the other WPA Projects? Were friends of yours on them?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Yes. I knew several people who were on the Project. The easel project, Balcolm Greene, and, I believe, his wife was on the sculpture project. I think that was probably illegal but—I think husband and wife weren't supposed to be on the Projects. Now I'm not sure that they were both on at the same time. But they were—at least one of them was on it all the time during this period. And that was Gertrude Greene and Balcolm Greene.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Were they on the easel project?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Balcolm was a painter, and he was on the easel project, and he also taught. Or maybe he was on the teaching project. But his wife, Gertrude, was a sculptor.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: That was on the New York sculpture project?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: That's right.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. After the three-year period you spent at the Metropolitan Museum, where did you go then?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: To Florida, and got on the Art Project there. First, I was teaching in Key West, at the art center in Key West.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: WPA art center?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Yes. WPA art center. And then, for a while, I was on the easel project there. And then again later on the— I was teaching again at the art center in Jacksonville.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: They sent you out of New York to Florida?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: No. No, I went there on my own.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Oh. But they did send a lot of artists all over the country, didn't they? To teach in these different art centers?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Yes, they did. And in the early days of the Project, they sent artists to Key West, which was a depressed area at that time. They sent artists to decorate the bars and all the public—

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: You mean gin mills?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Sure. Sloppy Joe's, [Robert McChesney laughs] and they all had WPA murals. One in—

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: They were trying to bring them out of this depression.

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Yes, yes. [Cross talk.]

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Excuse me. You mean the artists went down to decorate privately-owned—

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Yes.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: —bars in Key West?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Yes. The government paid for them.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: That's the first time I've heard that. [They laugh.]

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: [Laughs.] That's terrific.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Did any people that you knew from New York go down to do that?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: No. Although the murals that I saw there were by artists—well-known artists. And I can't remember the ones who did the work, but they were quite professional, well-designed murals and may still be there.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Probably are.

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Of course, Key West changed enormously during the war and had a boom since, so. Big navy construction there. But I'm not sure that these bars still are there, but they probably are.

[00:15:02]

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: So, the art center had already been established when you went

to Key West?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Yes. It was one of the most colorful art projects in Florida because the local people were involved in it. The art center was sort of a social center, as well as a place where they taught classes and where they had exhibitions. All the WPA traveling shows would come there. And this was such a social center that all the artists would come for the winter, Grant Wood and various other well-known eastern or northern painters, would come to spend—if they were affluent enough—would come to spend the winter there. And they would invariably check into the art center to let the art center know they were in town, because anything that happened was—that was the center. The whole social life revolved around the art center.

I remember one class that I had, a landscape class, there would be a string of cars, maybe 25 cars would go in a caravan to the spot where I'd picked out to sketch. And it was the thing to do. And it was a very popular place. The philosopher—the American philosopher who is so well-known, died around 90, who's he?

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: John Dewey?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Yes. He lived just a couple of blocks from the art center and was—the classes were well filled, evening classes and day classes. Many of the servicemen came from the navy yard there.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: I was going to ask you what kind of people did come to the art center. I was wondering if it was a fisherman's village or—

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: No.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Tourists?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: I would say in the winter, it's mostly tourists. There were a number of—that was just at the beginning of the war. Or at least—I guess, we were—that was in '40, '41, and there were servicemen there, and local people. Fishing is not a big thing there, it doesn't seem to me. I can't remember the fishing as I did further up around the Gulf Coast of Florida, around Tarpon Springs, that was sponge diving. There's a certain amount of fishing in Key West, but it's not a commercial industry—or it seemed to me, as well as I can remember, it wasn't then.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: What did you teach there when you first went?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: I taught painting and drawing.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Day classes and evening classes both?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Yes. But the hours were short enough so that I managed to do a lot of my own work.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: What other subjects were they teaching?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Craft and—craft, I think, weaving, and no pottery. They didn't have the equipment to teach pottery. But design, and painting and drawing.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Did they have life classes?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: No. Let's see now. I know we tried to get models. And the difficulty was finding models. And sometimes from the bars, we'd round up models.

[00:20:12]

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: You mean nude models, or—

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Yes.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Yeah.

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Not—

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: I suppose the regular models, the dressed models were easy enough to find.

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Yes, yes. Those we could get someone to sit for us very easily. And occasionally, we'd have nude models, but they weren't easy to come by.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: How many instructors were there at the art center?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: There was a director, and I taught there, and there was one other teacher.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Just the three of you?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Yes.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: And where was your building located in Key West?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: It was near the aquarium. It was just at the entrance to the dock that led out to the aquarium.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: So, you were close to the beach?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Right on the water. Yes.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Did you have studio space there for your own work?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: No. But I had a large room in the town. The old Key West houses are very spacious, high ceilings, porches, and there's space enough. Even in the room that I lived in, I had plenty of space to paint.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Oh. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Were the other people—the other two instructors, or the director and the other instructor, were they artists too?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Yes.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Did they come from New York?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: I know the girl who taught there was not from New York. I believe she was from Detroit, and I don't remember her name. And the director was quite well-known. I can't remember his name. But he had been involved in the Art Project in the Virgin Islands. And his—a tragic thing happened while I was there, his wife shot herself because she had cancer or something. And that was very tragic there. But I can't remember his name.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: He wasn't a painter though?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Not—I think he didn't paint then. Maybe he had in the past. I'm sure he didn't paint then.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: What kind of painting were you doing at that time?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: I was painting in egg tempera. And it was something that I had started exploring the medium about a couple of years before that. I had worked on a gesso panel that I prepared myself, and then used dry color and the yolk of egg and built up the painting quite methodically with an underpainting and then on to the finish, which was time-consuming. But I had plenty of time. That was the good thing about the Project.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Were there any murals being done in Key West when you were there?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: No. There were no—[inaudible] nothing being done at that time.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Was this art center just about the only thing the WPA was doing in Key West?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: In the art line, yes. But many people were employed on the Project. You know, they were on work projects.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: But there weren't any easel projects or mural projects?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: No.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Well, how about these bar murals?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Well, that was done—I'm not sure that that wasn't done on Treasury. It could have been under the Treasury program. But these were done several years before I arrived there, probably in the early '30s, the murals were. That was—Key West had been devastated by a hurricane at that time. There were no jobs or anything. They just sent the artists down there to give them something to do, I guess.

[00:25:14]

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: How—

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: They were so devastated with that terrific financial crash, too. [Laughs.]

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Yes.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: They had gone through that terrific boom of real estate selling down there, where they were selling everything, swampland, land that didn't exist, stuff like that. No wonder they were depressed.

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Well, the bridge that connected Key West with the mainland had not been built at that time. I think it was under construction. But when that was completed, as it was—when I was there, it had been completed a year or so. Then things were looking up, and of course, the war. That brought all kinds of new people in with government jobs that brought the economy up.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Yeah. Sure.

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Before the bridge was built, they just had ferry service. Their cars could come down from Miami, but they would have to go along the Keys. In between the Keys would be just ferry service.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: How long a time did you spend there?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: I think about two years.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Oh, that long. Then, where'd you go?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: To Jacksonville. Maybe I was in Key West only a year. Then I went up to Jacksonville and was teaching at the art center there.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Did they have many art centers in Florida?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Yes. The Project was very active there. I think, outside of New York, it was one of the most active in the country. The traveling exhibits were always being circulated from center to center.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Were there many New York artists' works that was shown?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Oh, yes. All the best-known New York painters were in the traveling exhibits.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Did you ever get any shows from the West Coast?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: I—if so, I don't remember. Made no impression.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: [Laughs.] How large was the Jacksonville art center? Were there more people working there?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Oh, yes. There were—well, it was a large building. Of course, Jacksonville is a city. Key West was just a village. But the art center there was—the atmosphere was altogether different. There were not so many tourists, not nearly so many tourists. In fact, all the activity was from townspeople and servicemen.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: How many instructors were there in Jacksonville?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: I believe there were four.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: And they had craft classes too?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Yes. They had craft classes, as well as I remember. No pottery, though, for sure, some sculpture, and painting.

[Recorder stops, restarts.]

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: We were just talking about the reason that you left New York and went to Florida. And we haven't gone into that before. You said that it was because there was a time limit.

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Yes. There was a time limit. I am not sure how long an artist could stay on a project. But after a certain length of time, you were just dismissed or let go or told that this was the end of your employment.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Did they find you another job or put you on a work project?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: No. I suppose that if you had no other job, that you could keep reapplying. And maybe after a period of time that you could be rehired. I'm not sure of this. But I know that some stayed on a great deal longer than others. And I think that it was probably just that there was a ruling that could be not followed exactly. Some artists could stay on longer than others or managed to stay on longer than others.

[00:30:19]

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Yeah. Some way of working it out. So when you went to Florida, then had you heard a rumor that there were going to be openings on the WPA there?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: No. I welcomed a change. I'd been in New York for maybe 10 years. And I wanted a change of scene. And I went there hoping that I could get on a project. And after being there for—why I first went to Florida—the reason I—I'd forgotten why I actually went there—was I received a fellowship to a place called Research Studio near Orlando, Florida. Well, it was near Winter Park. And it was something like the MacDowell Colony, except it was located in Florida. The artist was invited to stay for a number of months and their expenses were paid, room and board—studio and board. And there was no allotment for materials.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: My God, there must have been a lot of applicants for that then?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Yes. I think there were. Part of the money came from the Curtis—or the Buck [ph], who was head of—or the editor of the *Saturday Post*. In—the Bok Tower in Florida is named for him.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Curtis Publishing Company?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Yes. And his widow was involved in a huge—partly supported this project. But it was not for me, I stayed for a month. I was invited for I think four months or six months, and a month was enough. [They laugh.]

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: What was the matter?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Even though it was free, it was enough. It was a perfectly luxurious set up. Each artist had a studio, maybe a half dozen artists had a studio around a central patio, and the food was great, and—but you had no privacy at all. The director was always putting his head into the studios to see what you had done today, and the—he was just so curious, and he wanted to be sociable, too, I'm sure, but [laughs] it was just such an ingrown little group of artists. Their whole life centered around the dining room and the patio there, and there was, there was no—if it'd been near a large—larger town, it was just near, not even a bar in the village where you could get away too, you're strung with this small group. And it was too much for me after a month, why, I left.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: You're completely isolated, huh?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Yes.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: It's very much the same way at MacDowell, you know.

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: The—and if you happen to be with a group of friends, but the chances are that you'll be with that many complete strangers that you never have had—that you have nothing in common with at all. And they divide up into little cliques, and just to create some excitement there has to be little battles and all these things going on, currying favor with the director. It was terrible. Terrible atmosphere. So, I went from there over to Clearwater, and found a place—I had a little money, I think about \$100, and I went to—I stayed in a farmhouse that had been used as an art school. The art school had moved away, and the farmhouse was empty, so I stayed there for a summer, painting. And there after the—I needed a job in the winter then, too, and applied for the WPA Project.

[00:35:17]

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: And then went to Key West. And then went to Key West?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Yes.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: That's right.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: After the Key West period, then you went on to Jacksonville, Florida where you were at the art center. How long were you at Jacksonville?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Probably a year. And from there I was inducted into the army.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Were there any mural projects in process in Jacksonville?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: No, there were—I think most of the—maybe in the beginning of the Project there had been people employed doing murals and on the easel project, but at that time I knew of no one who was even on the easel project. There was—all the artists were deployed at an art center.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Were there very many artists there at that time?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: In Jacksonville?

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Employed by WPA or just artists?

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: No, just there.

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Not in Jacksonville, no. There were—a town of that size, there were just the normal—there were not—no outstanding painters there, or sculptors.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: These art centers, though, apparently were established pretty much all over Florida?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: I believe so. I think they had a good system there of art centers. I know that the only two that I was—actually knew were the ones in Key West and Jacksonville, but I know that nearly all the cities of any size had art centers.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. It's interesting that the Project should have taken that kind of form there, rather than mural projects. I wonder why that was?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: I don't know. It could have been—see, this was right at the end of the WPA.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Just before the war.

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: It was just the beginning of the war.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: I think the war had already started in Europe, and I think we were already in it. But—no, I remember that Pearl Harbor happened while I was in Jacksonville. So, all the time that was in Key West was prior to our involvement in the war, in the World War here. But then I think the—there were—mural projects were taken care of in competitions. If a post office or public buildings needed murals, and there were competitions. The information would be sent out, and then artists could send in their designs and would be considered that way, but there was no project that employed muralists and just kept them on call and would tell them to go out and do a mural.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Those competitions, weren't they under the Treasury Department?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: I think they were.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: They must have been, yeah. I can't recall at all any competitions that took place in the Project themselves, the WPA. I'm interested—were there any Negroes at all on the Project down there, Negro artists or sculptors or [inaudible]?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Not—

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: In Florida?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: No. There were Negroes who came to the art center—

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Classes. Study?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: —though. Yes. Not—just some brave ones, I mean they were not—Key West was not exactly like the rest of Florida. Now this didn't happen in Jacksonville at the art center there.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: No.

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: They were not integrated at all. But in Key West it's a different sort of—altogether different from the rest of the state. Not to an extent where it was really a good atmosphere racially, but the—there I did go to teach in the Negro school, and they were separate. The schools were separate.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:40:22]

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: But I recall that—that we had at least one Negro who came to the drawing class at the art center.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: That's very interesting, that there would be this division, separate approach to things between Key West and Jacksonville.

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Maybe the influence of the Caribbean was stronger in Key West.

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: True, I think that had a lot to do with it. See, there's so many Cubans in Key West, and it was difficult to draw the line there.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: I know Jacksonville is terrible. I came in there on a ship with a Negro friend and he was—

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: What kind of painting was being done in Florida at that time? Was there much art activity, aside from the WPA? Museum shows, that sort of thing?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: No, all the activity was WPA.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Oh, it was? Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: What they were doing on the WPA, what kind of projects that they were interested in? Was there any European influence, say Cubism or Dada—[Cross talk.]—Surrealism, perhaps.

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Well, that was when the American scene was so popular all over the country. It was—

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Regionalism.

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Yes. And Grant Wood was in Key West, and—but didn't paint there, just came for vacation. And a number of other well-known modern artists came there.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Did you know him, Grant Wood?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: I met him there, yes.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Did he ever have exhibits at the art center?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: No, but the—I remember one evening that there was a party for him at the art center, and—who were the well-known painters who were—Doris Lee and Arnold Blanch were there, and the people were asking, Where's Grant Wood? And Arnold Blanch was saying—telling, Well, he had to go to the bathroom, he'll be—[they laugh]—out soon. I think he was probably a little miffed, because he was—Arnold Blanch, they weren't at all interested in him [laughs]. Everybody was looking for Grant Wood.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Was he living in New York then? Just came down for the winter. Or probably up in Iowa, I guess.

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Yes, he lived in the Middle West. But he was at the peak of his popularity then, he was making a great deal of money.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: So, was his influence as a painter strong on the other artists in the area?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Not particularly, no.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Did many New York artists come down to—did many artists come down from New York in the winter in Florida? [Cross talk.]

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Well, it's Doris Lee, and Arnold Blanch, and Schreiber, if you know him. There were a number of artists that were connected with the gallery that Lowenthal [ph] had—Latin [ph] American—had American in the title of the gallery, unless I'm imagining it. I've forgotten what they are, but the art—I think Blanch and Lee, they were both showing there at that time. And—

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: An American Place?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: No.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: No?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: No, that—I almost said that, but that was—

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: [Laughs.] The only one I can think of, I don't know what it means. [Cross talk.]

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: I don't remember this man's name, he was a captain of a PT boat in Key West. Later he became very well-known, because it was on his PT boat that MacArthur was taken from the Philippines.

[00:45:15]

I've forgotten his name, but he came up in the news a lot after this—this was just the beginning— he was only the captain of a PT boat. And it was up on the ways in Key West, getting some work done on it, having some done—work done on it. And I was making a—doing a painting of this area, and I started the painting before the PT boat was placed on the way, but I saw that it was there when I went down to work after I'd been working on the painting for a couple of times before. And I thought their security was a little touchy subject down there, and I thought maybe would have some difficulty, but I took the precaution of asking. I went over to the boat and asked if they would—if there would be any objection to me continuing with my painting. And this young captain came and said he didn't see any

reason why I couldn't continue with it, but I couldn't put any of his—well, and it didn't fit into my painting anyway. But that same evening, I was at the bar called the Garden of Roses. It was a huge dance hall place, where both the servicemen and civilians all went, a very colorful place. And I ran into this captain, and I remember—the thing I remember is when he put his hat down on the bar, it was—I guess his hat was too large because he had corn pads—[they laugh]—stuck around the inside. But he—we—[they laugh]—got into a very lengthy discussion, about various things. And I realized later that he'd touched on all the important things that a detective would quiz a suspect on. I didn't realize at the time at all, he was very smooth.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Cool.

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Yes, very cool. [They laugh.] But I didn't have anything that I was hiding, so I answered him. I mean, I gave him all the information he wanted. But the next night, the whole—the art center was, had—was entered by someone who had gone through with a—every paper, everything was gone through with a small-toothed comb. Everything was looked through. And I am sure that this had a connection.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: I'll be damned.

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: And I think they—I'm sure they didn't find anything, but I guess my answers weren't too convincing or something. [They laugh.]

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: That's a strange one.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Oh, wow.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: This was at the beginning of the war?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Yes.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Did you have any exhibits of your own paintings when you were down in Florida?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Well, while I was there, I sent a painting to the Carnegie. It was the year that the—it was an open jury exhibition of American artists. Always before it had been an international invited exhibition, but since the war in Europe, why, they had opened the—confined the exhibit to Americans and it was open competition. I sent a painting that was accepted there. And I had always been in group shows in the galleries in the art centers, I would show whenever possible.

[00:50:05]

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Since you were only teaching though, and not an easel painter, none of your work was ever owned by the government.

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Yes, I believe several things that I did in Florida were. Maybe time—there were not classes enough to take up my time, so I would spend it painting, and then I would turn the painting in to the Project.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Oh, I see. Do you know what ever happened to them?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: No, I don't.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Did they have any printing—any printing project in the art centers? Any lithography or silk screen?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Silk screen, yes. No lithography.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: The total length of time you spent on the WPA then was what, about eight years, nine years?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Oh no, not that long. Say three in New York, and two in Florida, that was five.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: About five.

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: About five.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: I was going to ask you a few things more about New York. While you were there, did you have any contact with mural projects in New York? Did artists you know make murals there?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: I can't remember. But murals were being done all the time. Gorky was working on a collage or montage type of mural, I remember. And I don't know of any—I can't remember any just now.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: [Inaudible] part of the artists organizations like the Artists' Union [inaudible]?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Yes, I belonged to the Artists' Union.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Were you active in any of their demonstrations in New York?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: I picketed a public library.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: [Laughs.] A public library?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Yes.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: What for? [They laugh.]

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: I don't remember why. [They laugh.] But for some reason or other the Artists' Union were unhappy with the way the artists were being treated in the library. I believe that was it.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: They must have been having exhibitions or something in the library then.

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Well, they had galleries there.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Oh, mm-hmm [affirmative]. They don't in the libraries out here. At least I've never heard of any.

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Well, there is a—

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: That's not true, Potrero Hill Library has exhibitions, doesn't it?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Sure.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Sure, yeah.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Well, that's like the only one I've ever heard of.

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: No.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Really?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: A lot of them

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: [Inaudible] doesn't. [They laugh.]

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Ask in—I would say—

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Was there very close contact between the artists on the Project in New York? Maybe you were a bit isolated in the palaces of the Metropolitan Museum. I was very curious about the way you talked about the Project in New York, because Johnny [Eugenie] Gershoy was saying that to her it seemed like continuous meeting with other artists during the time she was on the Project. Apparently, they would meet at WPA headquarters when they went in for checks or, for work, or—

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Well, I was collecting—yes, they were supposed to turn in a certain amount of work, I believe, those who worked at home in their own studios, who were on the easel projects. That was the best project to be on, because you could work at home, and they had a models project, and you could have a model sent to your studio.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Oh.

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: And this was something magnificent, I mean, to work with a model. [Cross talk.] [They laugh.]

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: That's an unusual arrangement, they didn't have that on the West Coast, although in Washington, D.C. they had the same thing where they had a models project, models were—would work for the artists. And I think in Los Angeles too, but I don't think in San Francisco. What do you think of the work that was done on the WPA Project in New York?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: I think that at the time, the best work that was being done was being done on the Project.

[00:55:01]

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: What style was the current thing then?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Well, the American scene, and then there were a number of avant-garde painters. The later—I believe it was later, a number of them joined together too, and called themselves The Abstract Group. Do you know that?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Yeah.

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: They used to show at the Roerich Museum. This was 35 years ago —

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Did The Abstract Group start during the WPA?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Well, the one group—I knew several that were in the group that were on the Project, but I don't know that it had anything to do with—

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: I think this was after the war, The Abstract Group.

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: No, the group formed long before the war.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Oh.

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: They had these shows at the Roerich Museum on Riverside Drive in the '30s.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: What was the name of that museum again?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: I'm pretty sure it's Roerich.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Roerich.

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: R-O-E-R-I-C-H, I believe.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Was that a private museum?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: No, it was a public museum, but it was a memorial to Roerich, I guess. I don't know who he was. [They laugh.] Do you? [Laughs.]

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Some of these people who were in The Abstract Group were also Project artists?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Yes.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Corbett was one of them.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Ed Corbett?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Well, he seemed young to have been in it.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Well, he was invited to join.

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Oh, well that must have been—

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Much later.

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Much later, yes.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: After the war.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: That was after the war then.

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: I know that—

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: [Inaudible] still active.

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Balcomb [and Peter (ph)] Greene were in the beginning, and I. Rice Pereira was in the group.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Yeah, that's right. There's—[Cross talk.]

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: I'm pretty sure that—yes. I believe Gorky was, [inaudible] sure.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Was kind of influence do you think they—what kind of influence do you think the WPA had on your career as an artist? Or did it have any?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Oh, I'm sure it had a great deal of influence. It certainly—it allowed me time to—to work and gave me a feeling of security that was very fine. I could work without worrying about selling and—

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Or starving to death.

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Yes.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Teaching the way you were, too, you missed the pressure that was on some of the mural and easel people.

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Well, I suppose so. In New York there was pressure all around. The—you mean pressure to complete work?

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: What do you mean pressure all around?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Well, I mean there was a need to be active in the Artists' Union—or there was another organization that was active at the museum, but not the Artists' Union, and was—it involved a number of artists, but it wasn't exclusively artists at all. It was one of the unions that took in, I think, probably the white-collar workers on the WPA.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, the pressure has existed—a certain amount of pressure has certainly existed as far as your status in the WPA. There was pressure to get you off constantly.

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Sure. To continue, there needed to be action.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Yeah.

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: And we needed to continue, because there were no jobs.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: [I would assume, speaking to Charlie (ph)], there would be as much pressure to attend your classes and to do a proper job, as it would be sitting in your house painting in the easel project. Certainly, there's as much pressure there, maybe more, I would say. It would be for me, to have to get up and go to a class.

[01:00:14]

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Of course, many of the artists taught in settlement houses around the city. Children's classes.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: And adults. But a great many children's classes.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Were the classes pretty well attended at the art center?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: Very well.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Never had the problem like they have in adult education now of keeping your class up?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: No.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. What do you think of the way the Project was managed in New York, the supervisors, administrators, do you think they did a pretty good job?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: I wasn't very close to it, I can't say. All that I knew was through the Artists' Union, and they were usually pretty dissatisfied. [They laugh.]

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Do you think it might be a good idea for the government of the United States to sponsor art again?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: I think it would be a wonderful idea.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Why do you say that?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: I think that art can flower in such an atmosphere of security and being able to—freedom to create according to your own wishes, or whatever.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Do you think there's a need for it? Do you think art needs sponsorship in America?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: I think so. I believe that a great many very good talents turn to—from necessity, turn to rather non-creative work because of—that there's—they can't make a living painting or sculpting.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. If the government did start another art project, would you have any suggestions for how they might improve it? Or do you think it was perfect?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: No, I don't think it was perfect at all. [They laugh.] But I—offhand I don't have any constructive suggestions. I'm sure I could think of some.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: I can help you out a little bit. How about the non-relief status?

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: I think that that would be great. [Robert McChesney laughs.] Of course, that was not always—they didn't always use that. They didn't—I mean, an artist had to be on relief. If he was well enough known, or if he was of high professional caliber.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Well, on the WPA [inaudible] unless you went on as a supervisor or a technical man.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: But this was true on the West Coast, but not New York, 'cause Johnny Gershoy was on for three years as a non-relief artist in New York and was not a supervisor.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Really?

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: That's how I understand it.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: It was quite different in New York from the way it was in San Francisco.

CHARLES GRIFFIN FARR: But I think the—that it was—maybe it was in some kind of a category of numbers that they could only hire a certain number of non-relief artists.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]

