

SI AAA logo



Oral history interview with Boris Gilbertson, 1964 June 25

Contact Information

Reference Department
Archives of American Art
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, D.C. 20560

www.aaa.si.edu/services/questions

www.aaa.si.edu/

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Boris Gilbertson on June 25, 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. Additional information from the original transcript that seemed relevant was added in brackets and given an -Ed. attribution. 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

BORIS GILBERTSON: Do you have to do much editing on this?

[Audio break.]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: This is an interview with Mr. Boris Gilbertson, sculptor, at his studio at 518 Alto Street, Santa Fe, New Mexico, on June 25, 1964. The interviewer is Mrs. Sylvia Loomis of the Santa Fe office of the Archives of American Art. And one of the subjects to be discussed is Mr. Gilbertson's participation in a Federal Art Project during the 1930s and '40s. But first, would you tell us something about your background, Mr. Gilbertson? Where you're born? Where you received your art education and so forth?

BORIS GILBERTSON: I was born in Evanston, Illinois. At which I left when I was about six months old, so I don't remember much about it. We lived all over the country. My father was a chemical engineer.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see. Where did—[Cross talk.]

BORIS GILBERTSON: [Inaudible.]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —you go next?

BORIS GILBERTSON: The next stop was Watertown, Wisconsin, I believe. Then from Minnesota, we were in Rochester for quite a while, Minneapolis. So on and on, in between, I stayed and spent a lot of time with my grandparents.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Tell me something about your grandparents. I understand they're quite interesting.

BORIS GILBERTSON: Oh, yes. [Laughs.] My grandfather an old Russian [ph] who raised bees [laughs]—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh?

BORIS GILBERTSON: —and such things. But that would pretty well cover it, actually.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Was that your mother's father?

BORIS GILBERTSON: That's my mother's father, yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And—

BORIS GILBERTSON: Very fine old fellow. He's got whiskers. Very sparkly.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Where did he come from in Russia?

BORIS GILBERTSON: I'm not certain.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see, you said it was a Cossack, though?

BORIS GILBERTSON: Yes. Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Is that the name that you say that you can't even pronounce?

BORIS GILBERTSON: Yes, that's the [laughs]—so, I won't try.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Uh-huh [affirmative]. And you also said that your father's name, being Norwegian, also had been anglicized into Gilbertson?

BORIS GILBERTSON: Yes, it's a place name from Norway. And the spelling and pronunciation are very difficult. The name is always anglicized to Gilbertson.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, was that what your father was called, Gilbertson too?

BORIS GILBERTSON: Yes, Gilbertson. Oh, yes. Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: How was it spelled?

BORIS GILBERTSON: I didn't know how it was even spelled. I've never known it except as G-I-L-B-E-R-T-S-O-N.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see.

BORIS GILBERTSON: I never learned it any other way. I believe it's G-I-L-B-R-A-U-N-S-O-N, something of that, but with many good accents. It's something of that nature. My grandfather used the old Norwegian pronunciation.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes. And what was that? Could you pronounce—

BORIS GILBERTSON: No, I couldn't possibly. I can't even remember. [Cross talk.]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see.

BORIS GILBERTSON: I was just a child. It's impossible.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Then we won't try to do it then, if you can't. Well, now, where did you receive your art education?

BORIS GILBERTSON: The Art Institute in Chicago, the University of Chicago too. I worked in the Oriental Institute for a while.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, as in what capacity?

BORIS GILBERTSON: Restoring, yeah.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, is that right?

BORIS GILBERTSON: [Inaudible.] That sort of thing. That large bull's head that's at the institute.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, and that's yours? That's one of your—

BORIS GILBERTSON: That's one of the things I worked on. And they had another man that was—I was really just the student, [laughs] you see.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see.

BORIS GILBERTSON: So, this is very fine old Italian was the chief restorer.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yeah.

BORIS GILBERTSON: And we just put pieces together, came up with some very sculptural—this very famous head—bull's head.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, I'm not that well acquainted.

BORIS GILBERTSON: Yeah. [Inaudible] these are the excavations that we're working from the Persepolis. Was it the Persepolis? I forgot the pronunciation. But it's that great crescent in

Persia.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, yes.

BORIS GILBERTSON: And I never worked in the field. I went to school instead.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see. Did you have any particular teachers at the Art Institute that affected your—

BORIS GILBERTSON: Yes, I had about the same teachers for everything.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. What was the course?

BORIS GILBERTSON: Just straight sculpture.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Just straight sculpture?

BORIS GILBERTSON: Very classic type of sculpture. I mean, we worked from the figure in the morning, did architectural work in the afternoon.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BORIS GILBERTSON: Simply copying and being able to criticize and evaluate any architectural style. Very early—old Byzantine [inaudible], Greek, Roman, Romanesque, Coptic, anything you want, we just had to know very thoroughly, be able to do them, just as an exercise. That was all.

[00:05:05]

And one month you worked on that, one afternoon—one month of afternoons one worked in that, and the next you did your own work—original work.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

BORIS GILBERTSON: But always in the morning you worked figure, model, clay, and armature. And full-sized figures [inaudible].

SYLVIA LOOMIS: How long would—did you have to take a regular course?

BORIS GILBERTSON: It's a regular—well, you stay there. It does involve a degree, I guess. I had college work too. So, it did involve some sort of degree, which I never went around to collect. But I was there for about six years [laughs].

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh.

BORIS GILBERTSON: So, I just didn't pay much attention. [Inaudible.] [Cross talk.]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see. Well, then what happened to you after that?

BORIS GILBERTSON: Oh, I used to like to bum around a lot.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BORIS GILBERTSON: And I knew most of the railroads in the country. I worked on them. I'd wander around [laugh], just take off, hit a rattler, and go for a ride. But I've worked—I worked with explosives. I did things like that. Worked tunnel work.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. What happened to your sculpture during this period?

BORIS GILBERTSON: Oh, you just keep on your sketch and draw. Carved what you can, come back when you have enough money. And—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: When did you settle down?

BORIS GILBERTSON: Well, I don't think I've ever settled [laughs].

SYLVIA LOOMIS: You haven't yet. I see. [Laughs.]

BORIS GILBERTSON: A little impractical for sculpture, but I doubt that I've ever really settled

down.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, where were you when you first became involved in a Federal Art Project?

BORIS GILBERTSON: Well, I was living up in the woods in northern Wisconsin.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: All by yourself?

BORIS GILBERTSON: No, no, no, a friend.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And then how did you—how did you become involved?

BORIS GILBERTSON: Through a competition. I was in one competition. And they offered me some work on another—on a post office in Wisconsin. And that worked out very well.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: You did that—you won that competition, and you did that assignment?

BORIS GILBERTSON: Well, no, I didn't win the competition. But as a result of what I submitted, I was offered this. And then I was given—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Where was that?

BORIS GILBERTSON: Fond du Lac, Wisconsin.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Fond du Lac, oh, yes.

BORIS GILBERTSON: Yes. Then there was one in Janesville, I believe. Actually, I forgot, there was a whole string of them, and I have forgotten some of them.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh. And what type of work did you do for the post office in Fond du Lac?

BORIS GILBERTSON: Stone carving [ph], on the outside.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: On the outside?

BORIS GILBERTSON: [In glaze (ph)].

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And what about these others? Were they all similar?

BORIS GILBERTSON: Oh, no, some were metal inside. Others were—there were some woodcarvings. And—most of it was stone [inaudible]. Then the biggest one there was the Department of Interior in Washington. That was stone.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: You don't remember any other of the ones in Wisconsin?

BORIS GILBERTSON: No, I don't. I did some in Illinois. I did one, I believe, in Minnesota. Some of them were quite small—just very small post offices. And you are just putting a little accent, that's [inaudible].

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see.

BORIS GILBERTSON: They did as much of that as they could.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: What were the subjects?

BORIS GILBERTSON: Mostly animals.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see.

BORIS GILBERTSON: Animals. [Inaudible] the type of stock was in the area cattle, or just wild animals, mostly animals.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: What was the Fond du Lac one?

BORIS GILBERTSON: That was, oh, practically all the animals in Wisconsin [laughs]. There were 11 animals.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: 11?

BORIS GILBERTSON: Yes. And I just put oh, bear, deers, birds, and ones that are seen locally. So, with animals, you can say almost anything, and no one can criticize you [laughs]. It's overdramatic. It gets kinda corny. But with an animal, you make them say all sorts of very corny things, [Sylvia Loomis laughs] and it doesn't seem corny at all.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes, that's true. Well now, who did you correspond with doing these assignments in Wisconsin?

BORIS GILBERTSON: Well, mostly, directly, most of my correspondence was with Inslee Hopper.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Inslee Hopper?

BORIS GILBERTSON: Yes, and some with Ed Rowan [ph].

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And this was all the Treasury Department?

BORIS GILBERTSON: All the Treasury Department.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see.

BORIS GILBERTSON: It was under Ned Bruce.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes. You said before that you knew Ned Bruce personally?

BORIS GILBERTSON: Yes, yes. So, every time—I went to Washington quite often, and in fact, I judged several competitions [inaudible]. I was on the jury and just became acquainted with Ned Bruce. I've been at his home, which is full of Despius [laughs]. He had several really beautiful Despiu portraits of his family.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh.

BORIS GILBERTSON: And I think that was the work of Forbes Watson [that kind of sicced him onto it -Ed.]. I'm not—I gathered from conversation.

[00:10:05]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see. Uh-huh [affirmative].

BORIS GILBERTSON: Forbes was a great critic. Really one of the few really great critics. Really, really good. I mean, no prejudices, no—he'd evaluate anything.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: [Inaudible]—

BORIS GILBERTSON: Regardless of the school of thought, or style, or labels.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: You don't often find a critic that is that objective, do you?

BORIS GILBERTSON: No, it's very remarkable. He was a very remarkable man. Don't know that he's still around.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I don't know.

BORIS GILBERTSON: I doubt it.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I'm not sure. Did you take it—did you ever take sketches with you to Washington that have them approved?

BORIS GILBERTSON: Oh, yes, I usually—I usually work with models, sometimes drawings. I'd make small models. They're easier to see [inaudible]. In the case of the Department of Interior building, I had to be very careful, drawings and models. They were quite large.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, now, before we get into that one, which I know is one of your very large ones, I just wanted to find out a few more details about this other procedure. And did you— who had to approve these your models before you went ahead?

BORIS GILBERTSON: Well, I gathered that the section simply approved it. Both Inslee Hopper and Ed Rowan were very capable.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

BORIS GILBERTSON: And I'm sure that—of course, Forbes Watson was there in an advisory capacity.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And what about the local people, such as the postmaster? Did you ever have to —

BORIS GILBERTSON: Well, subject matter sometimes got into that. And it—I tried to do something in New England once and didn't make it at all. I just couldn't get along with those people.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see.

BORIS GILBERTSON: I just couldn't on the basis of subject matter. But that's the only time.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, that was what I was getting at, whether—because I know that sometimes the easel painters or the mural painters have had difficulty with the local people, even though they did not with the administrators of the projects. So, I wondered if you would run into that problem.

BORIS GILBERTSON: No, that's one reason I rather liked animals too, because you just didn't—don't run into those using animals.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: No propaganda.

BORIS GILBERTSON: No. And there's—you can say anything you wish with those animals. Emotionally, I mean, any feeling can be evoked, just as the Russian fables. These great fables of Russia, which are simply marvelous. [Laughs.] They're among the greatest, and they always involve animals instead of people. Or perhaps *The Wind in the Willows*, that sort. I mean, you see. This way you sort of [laughs]—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Circumvent.

BORIS GILBERTSON: Yes, the old Arabian saying: The shortest distance across the plaza square is around three sides. [Laughs.] It's that system.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

BORIS GILBERTSON: Then everyone is very happy.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, now let's go on with this large one that you did for the Treasury Department, is that correct?

BORIS GILBERTSON: Treasury, yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Treasury Department building itself in Washington.

BORIS GILBERTSON: Not the Treasury Department building, the Department of Interior building.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, the Department of Interior?

BORIS GILBERTSON: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, that was it?

BORIS GILBERTSON: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Now, suppose you just tell us about what happened on that and everything you went through in regard to it?

BORIS GILBERTSON: Well, first, I submitted very quick sketches [inaudible]. Simply involving some of the animals. And in that instance, Harold Ickes had to approve it.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see.

BORIS GILBERTSON: Which was reasonable enough, and there was no trouble. Even if he was temperamental. [Laughs.]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: He liked it?

BORIS GILBERTSON: Yeah, there was never difficult—any difficulty—none of the artists had any difficulty. Then I made models. From then on, we've decided on the material [coughs]. In this case, it was Carthage Marble [inaudible] Joplin, Missouri.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: What was this?

BORIS GILBERTSON: Carthage marble.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

BORIS GILBERTSON: From Joplin, Missouri.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, yes.

BORIS GILBERTSON: A very beautiful stone. Very—actually, it's not marble. It's an oolitic limestone. It was a very warm buff color. They the—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: How large were these?

BORIS GILBERTSON: They were at least about—I think, it was 13 or 14 feet long, about five feet high.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And how many?

BORIS GILBERTSON: Two of them.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Two.

BORIS GILBERTSON: One on each side of the corridor that comes out at the main entrance.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see.

BORIS GILBERTSON: There were a whole group of us. Edgar Britton worked on that project, too.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh.

BORIS GILBERTSON: Tom Lea [inaudible].

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, yes. Yes.

BORIS GILBERTSON: Who I knew before.

[00:15:00]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Was—did he do sculpture?

BORIS GILBERTSON: No, he painted.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: That's what I thought.

BORIS GILBERTSON: Edgar painted too. Edgar did a fresco, not sculpture.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BORIS GILBERTSON: And John Curry, Heinz Warneke.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BORIS GILBERTSON: Very nice crew, very nice crew.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And did you work together on this, more or less? I mean, coordinated your work?

BORIS GILBERTSON: No, that was done by the section—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see, mm-hmm [affirmative].

BORIS GILBERTSON: —pretty much. And the building was large, and things are rather removed one from the other.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

BORIS GILBERTSON: But always they were quite appropriate. And they worked well together.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: How long did it take you to do this?

BORIS GILBERTSON: About a year and a half. I did it up in the woods up in northern Wisconsin.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BORIS GILBERTSON: Then shipped it. Crated it, shipped it down, they installed it.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And then there were just two pieces, or were there a small pieces—

BORIS GILBERTSON: Oh, no. That was in—each piece was in six—or three sections, three sections. The weight was about—each section weighed, oh, I would say, two tons. [Inaudible.] They're very—it's very heavy.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Sounded rather large to transport from Wisconsin.

BORIS GILBERTSON: The difficulty of installing it was even—there's no head room for a hoist. It had to be jacked up and slid in, each section. Very beautifully done by an old Italian fellow from—who lived in Washington. Did nothing but that sort of thing. Washington, at that time, was full of very good craftsman because of all the sculpture. And so forth, [inaudible] like Borglum.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Like whom?

BORIS GILBERTSON: Borglum.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, yeah.

BORIS GILBERTSON: That sort of thing. [Inaudible.]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BORIS GILBERTSON: [Laughs.] A lot of it—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Do you remember what year this was?

BORIS GILBERTSON: Actually, I don't. I presume it was about '38 or '39. It was probably '39. It might have been '40, but I don't think so.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see. Was that the last one you did?

BORIS GILBERTSON: No, I did several small ones after that.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Do you remember where those were?

BORIS GILBERTSON: No, I actually don't, I'm afraid. I had other things to do. I had some commissions to do at the time, too.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see.

BORIS GILBERTSON: A lot of outside commissions. Also, I was doing some logging. [Laughs.]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh. Keep yourself in shape, huh?

BORIS GILBERTSON: To keep things—[inaudible], yes. I really liked the work [inaudible].

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, I see. It sounds like a wonderful place to work.

BORIS GILBERTSON: It is good. A lot of good hunting too.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, then you didn't have any local supervision at all.

BORIS GILBERTSON: No, no, no. Oh, no.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: It was all through Washington?

BORIS GILBERTSON: There was—you gave them progress reports in the form of photographs.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BORIS GILBERTSON: And payments were made, usually in installments. Three installments in the actual work, including the installation and one after the sketches were [inaudible]. So, usually in four installments, sometimes three.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see.

BORIS GILBERTSON: And about half the payment was after the installation was approved.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BORIS GILBERTSON: And also, in the case of sculpture especially, everything—anchoring, and so forth—all had to be approved by the architects. So, technical—very, very particular about all the technical details, and after all it should be. Large weights involved, and scaffolding [inaudible].

SYLVIA LOOMIS: That sounds terrific.

BORIS GILBERTSON: Yeah, it gets very involved. That's one of the difficulties of sculpture.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: [Laughs.] Yes, rather unwieldy, isn't it?

BORIS GILBERTSON: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, what effect did this work have on your career as a sculptor?

BORIS GILBERTSON: Well, I think it kept it going, I'm sure it did, as far as those goes. It's very difficult to say.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Did you have any commissions before this came about?

BORIS GILBERTSON: No, no, there wouldn't be—I lived—I was living on a farm part of the time when things first started up, but very early, I don't remember the name of it.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BORIS GILBERTSON: But I remember doing some things for them. They got in contact with me. I lived on a farm in Illinois, western Illinois. They got in touch with me there. I don't know how or when. Well, Edgar Miller, through Edgar Miller.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Who is he?

BORIS GILBERTSON: He's a Chicago artist.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, I see.

BORIS GILBERTSON: Had charge of that whole area, and three or four states.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh.

BORIS GILBERTSON: I believe Edgar was [inaudible].

SYLVIA LOOMIS: He probably recommended you then?

BORIS GILBERTSON: He must have. I don't even remember much about the Project or what it was. I never saw anyone. It was all done by mail. So, I just don't really recall too much, and I was very busy with the work on this farm, so I didn't get to do too much.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see. Well, were you—did you have an opportunity to experiment in any of these so that it affected your work?

[00:20:06]

BORIS GILBERTSON: Oh yes. I mean, just the fact that you can keep going. And also, the

general feeling of enthusiasm from the people in the section of fine arts, the cooperation. It's very stimulating, extremely stimulating. You're just not working in a vacuum or something. And all the labels of regionalism, generic painting, and sculpture, it was nonsense. I mean, actually, everyone in the section that I ran into was far above average, both in perception, intelligence, certainly they were as imaginative a group that you could possibly get together. Very fortunate —

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I know, it's a really wonderful thing.

BORIS GILBERTSON: — the circumstances. I mean, really remarkable.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Where there any other instances where you worked with other artists, aside from this large Interior Department—

BORIS GILBERTSON: Oh, no. No, that's the only one.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Only one? Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BORIS GILBERTSON: The only one. I—we saw very little of one another, except to get together once a month to have parties. We had such parties that Ned Bruce gave. [Inaudible; laughs.] He was a really great guy. Had a nice sense of humor—very, very intelligent man.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, these were the times you came to Washington then?

BORIS GILBERTSON: Yes, that was when I came to Washington.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see.

BORIS GILBERTSON: Yes. Because a lot of this had to be done there. A lot of the approval, there was a lot of discussions too, of course, of various projects. And it's just easier to sit down and talk about it.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BORIS GILBERTSON: And so, I frequently went to Washington.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: There weren't any local artists that you—any local artist group, then, that you associated with, particularly while you're in Wisconsin?

BORIS GILBERTSON: Oh, no.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: You're rather isolated, weren't you?

BORIS GILBERTSON: We were very isolated.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see.

BORIS GILBERTSON: [Inaudible.] It's in a Russian settlement, Finnish and Russian.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: What?

BORIS GILBERTSON: Finlanders and Russians.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, Finlanders and Russians.

BORIS GILBERTSON: [Inaudible] it's an incidental—that little town, very small. It's right on Lake Superior. And it's the only church, I think, in this country that was built by the Czar. The funds were furnished. It was built in oh, 1911 or '12.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BORIS GILBERTSON: He sent 5,000 rubles, and all the necessary church equipment, which are very wonderful. Very beautiful.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And what did you say the name of this town was?

BORIS GILBERTSON: Cornucopia.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Cornucopia.

BORIS GILBERTSON: You can't [laughs] believe it. [Inaudible.] Very, very unusual group of people. And there were a lot of local people who whittled and carved and painted.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BORIS GILBERTSON: The Finlanders and Russians.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Did any of those ever become involved—

BORIS GILBERTSON: Oh, no.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —in the Federal Art Project?

BORIS GILBERTSON: Never. In Wisconsin—John Steuart Curry got a project started for these people, but it was under state. Under the state.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, I see.

BORIS GILBERTSON: He'd go all over and get their work. They'd have exhibits in Madison. Very nice, very—we've found some wonderful things. He was a good friend of mine. We dug up some of the darndest things you've ever seen. They're really beautiful.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Did you know anything about the Federal Art Projects in Wisconsin?

BORIS GILBERTSON: Not a thing. I had no association with it at all.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see.

BORIS GILBERTSON: I believe several people from the museum that were connected with it in Milwaukee came up there at one time. And they came from Minnesota, and just looked to see what I was doing. And talked to me, and that was all. I saw 'em once or twice, just moving around. I suppose it was vacation.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, I see.

BORIS GILBERTSON: [Laughs.] [Inaudible.]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: It wasn't official.

BORIS GILBERTSON: No.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Just for pleasure.

BORIS GILBERTSON: No, well, I lived way off in the woods.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see. Well, I'm sure they—

BORIS GILBERTSON: It wasn't easy to find either, so. I was completely isolated as far as that went. [Inaudible.]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, I'm sure there was a Project in Wisconsin [inaudible]—

BORIS GILBERTSON: Oh, yes, very definitely there was. Very definitely.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, what effect do you think that these Projects generally had on art in America?

BORIS GILBERTSON: Well that's [laughs]—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Big question.

BORIS GILBERTSON: Well, I do think that it laid down a very good foundation for work that was to come, and work that followed. Because just the economics—I doubt that there would be very many artists functioning during the '30s without it. I think the whole thing woulda just kind of died out. And this way there is a strong basis. The average that they hit for was about half.

[00:25:20]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BORIS GILBERTSON: And they did a little better, much to everyone's surprise. If they had gotten—if 25 percent of the project had gotten were good, it would have done pretty well. As it is, they went over half.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

BORIS GILBERTSON: And that was excellent. Very good judgment. But all of these people— most of them have contributed since then, a great many of them. And I'm sure that just the fact that it was there and existed was a good steppingstone for younger artists that were coming along, later.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: What do you think made the general public more art conscious?

BORIS GILBERTSON: Well, it certainly did, especially those opposed to the [laughs] Democratic Party. [Laughs.]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, [inaudible].

BORIS GILBERTSON: I mean, in a very backhanded way, it did. Actually, it was good. It stirred up a lot of talk. There were a lot of bad jokes about some of the poorer pieces. A lot of strange things happened. I—actually some very strange things happened. So, it did stir up a lot of controversy and talk, which is very good. Because most of the criticism was very unjustified, it could easily be squashed by the slightest intelligence. And it just didn't bear up under the weight of facts at all. Some things were pretty awful with the Project, but that's to be expected. I wouldn't—I personally produce pretty dreadful things every so often.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh?

BORIS GILBERTSON: [Laughs.] But I still keep going on. Most of the things are at least a little above average. But once in a while, one comes along that really doesn't make it.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BORIS GILBERTSON: It just makes you blush. You just can't imagine how it happened. And the same thing would happen on Projects, the bad jokes—the jokes were similar to the WPA jokes about people needing more shovels. Just kind of bad taste, that's all.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, I think those were critics of the administration—

BORIS GILBERTSON: They were, mostly, yes. Constructively, I think it just gave a lot of impetus to what's going on now. And I imagine that it'll be the basis of a future revival, actually, with these more tolerant values. Because at that point, everyone was quite familiar with oh, Despiou, [Derain -Ed.], Kolbe. These were very academic people. But at the same time, there were Brancusi—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Lipchitz, was he doing anything then?

BORIS GILBERTSON: I believe he was, yes, Lipchitz. But the—and Chagall of course. And Picasso, Pissarro, all of these people. But the tolerance was very—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Limited.

BORIS GILBERTSON: No, no, no, it wasn't at all. I mean, most of these men could appreciate Kolbe's work, for instance, which was rather academic. Well, then there was Lehmbruck, for instance. Very wild. But we still—you did it either way. The main thing was that—it was whether it was good or not. And the labeling is little busy-body critics. There weren't labels as far as these men were concerned.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: No, that's true.

BORIS GILBERTSON: And people like old Gaspard that just—who just died in Taos. He was a very close friend of Kandinsky and Chagall's. Well, these men admired one another, and that's in spite of vastly different concepts. The fact was that, whether it is genuine aesthetics or not,

whether you really mean it, or whether it's from the inside, or whether it's just a superficial spellbinder which has nothing really to do with it.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, they respected one another's integrity at least.

BORIS GILBERTSON: Yes, their problem, I feel certain is—we're doing something great in the commonplace. And it doesn't matter how long one does it.

Labels are nonsense, just pure, purest nonsense. It was—I know that in the '30s, everyone respected everyone else. Just so it's real. The phonies didn't get by as well as they do now.

[00:30:18]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: No. Well, there's great deal of phony art, I think, at present.

BORIS GILBERTSON: A tremendous amount. All sorts of exhibitionism, sensation [inaudible] of people expressing themselves like that. People who have nothing to say expressing themselves are kind of a dull business. No, thanks.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well do you think that it helped artists to sell their work?

BORIS GILBERTSON: I rather doubt it, actually. That is a very hard thing to say, however, because very few galleries were functioning, really functioning. And in some instances, I know that I got commissions, several commissions, because of work I had done for the Treasury Department.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh.

BORIS GILBERTSON: But it wasn't a great impact. I think usually people thought, Well, now the artists are taken care of, as far as the Treasury Department is concerned. And the collecting came a little later, during the war, I believe. Or right after it. I think it was a direct result of these people being kept—the Projects had kept these people functioning. They didn't just drop by the wayside and find a job with a factory or anywhere they could.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, I think that is a great contribution—[Cross talk.]

BORIS GILBERTSON: I think that's it. Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —to the artists [inaudible]. Oh, thank you. Well, what happened to you after your work with the Project was finished?

BORIS GILBERTSON: Well, I worked in the woods, I worked in a stone yard. I did all sorts of things just to [inaudible]—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Did you continue to work in the same location?

BORIS GILBERTSON: No, I moved around. I went back towards Chicago and Evanston. I have relatives there, of course. And, oh, Wyoming for a while. Montana. I have relatives there. Bummed around.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: When did you—

BORIS GILBERTSON: [Inaudible.]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: When did you come to Santa Fe?

BORIS GILBERTSON: Oh, I've been in and out of Santa Fe since I was about 15 actually.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Is that right?

BORIS GILBERTSON: Yeah. I came here [laughs]—the first ride in was on the old Chili Line from—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Colorado?

BORIS GILBERTSON: Colorado. As a matter of fact, I took off from home when I was about 15—not quite 15. I hit a rattler and ended up in Denver the next morning. I took it from the Proviso [ph] yards in Chicago. And the next morning [laughs] to my amazement I was in Denver [laughs]. I got a job on the Union Pacific there. And that's where I started working with powder

and stuff.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: With what?

BORIS GILBERTSON: They put me on with a crew that was doing construction, and I got to work with explosives. I helped the powder man.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Explosives, oh, yeah.

BORIS GILBERTSON: That's how I happened to get started on that. But then I worked on the Denver and Rio Grande too. And they did a lot of powder work. And when I had a pass, so I'd—I came down to Santa Fe once in a while. It was really great. So, knocking around, then I'd go back to school in the fall with money in my shoe.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see. Did you associate much with the artists here?

BORIS GILBERTSON: No. Never.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: In Santa Fe?

BORIS GILBERTSON: No, I never have associated with artists in Santa Fe. I like people like John Curry or Heinz Warneke, Zorach. These are people that are—but just associating with artists because they're artists, no. You have to have something really in common. Noguchi, I spent a couple of evenings once with Noguchi, just talking to him. We have a mutual friend. Noguchi is really an acquaintance—but he's someone that I feel that I have a certain something in common. But it isn't true of every artist. I mean, we don't all have things in common with one another. And not that I have a personal distaste for them, but I just didn't—and the material—source material doesn't come from other artists. It comes from all of life around you. You sort of reflect it. You either try to be witty about it or sarcastic [laughs] or whatever. You put down some feelings, or just their reactions. Because reactions are very important. Interplay, like overtones, in music. It's hard to say where it stops and where it starts.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: That's true.

[00:35:00]

BORIS GILBERTSON: It is this very subtle interplay of—like, the tones of a good violin or the piano, it's the instrument and the hearer. You get this kind of sense of things really go. But sitting around talking to other artists doesn't do that, at all. You can learn to be very tolerant. People have—people can have very bad taste, really corny. I mean, you just sigh.

I had a man come in here. He was the darndest guy I've ever seen. I mean, I just didn't expect anything. We went over to the gallery and looked at some things. And he came in with the intention of buying a little piece for \$100. He ended up buying one that was almost \$1,000. He picked the best piece I've ever made. And without any hesitation.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: You can't tell, can you?

BORIS GILBERTSON: He just sounded awful. I mean, his taste. But gee, when he saw something that—I think this piece was good, even if it is mine. He saw that and that's all there was to it. The decision was instant, as it should have been. This is just—so, there you are.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: So, you can't tell sometimes from—

BORIS GILBERTSON: No.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —from some person's apparent tastes.

BORIS GILBERTSON: Well, frequently, the more so-called sophisticated tastes are not as accurate or as good as the direct unselfconscious. The rather well-informed, fairly sophisticated person is a little bit afraid of making a mistake. A little self-conscious about it.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: You think so?

BORIS GILBERTSON: [Laughs.] And so, this old boy from Texas marched in and just, Bingo, like that. Wonderful, it makes you feel really good, and you can hardly wait to do an even better piece. But it's that sort of thing. And I think that these are all things that I learned going back to

the federal—the treasury project. These people's reaction in Washington, Hopper, Rowan, Ned Bruce, Forbes Watson, and Barr [ph]—[inaudible] Barr [ph], Junior, is that his name?

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I don't know.

BORIS GILBERTSON: The magazine—the arts magazine. Anyway, you learn to estimate their reactions [inaudible]. You knew they were good. And you learned to estimate them and [inaudible] feeling that—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BORIS GILBERTSON: That probably is one of the great contributions that the Project has made, as well as just sort of keeping things going. And their prices were very fair. They were neither low nor high. They were right where they belong. They weren't doing anyone any favors. And yet, they weren't taking advantage of a situation, which they could easily have done.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes, in that period, certainly.

BORIS GILBERTSON: Yes. And of course, considering all the political criticism that they were subjected to, it's remarkable that they did as well as they did.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. I don't suppose that you remember how much you were paid for any of these?

BORIS GILBERTSON: Yes, I think—I believe, that the one on the interior building was about \$8[000] or \$9,000.

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

BORIS GILBERTSON: It was in that vicinity anyway. And there were a lot of expenses involved that were paid by the government. Some I paid. It was all in the contract.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BORIS GILBERTSON: And I think it was Fond du Lac post office was around \$3[000] or \$4,000.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, that's a reasonable price.

BORIS GILBERTSON: Reasonable.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: For a sculpture.

BORIS GILBERTSON: It was quite a bit of work. A lot of scaffolding, which was quite expensive. [Inaudible] insurance [inaudible].

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Did you have to pay for the materials out of this?

BORIS GILBERTSON: Yes—no, I didn't believe in that instance. In the Department of Interior, I did.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: You did?

BORIS GILBERTSON: But usually, the materials are installed by the contractor and the work is done in place. In the case of the Interior building that was very impractical. It had to be done in the shop—the studio.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see. But that one in Fond du Lac you said it was done in place?

BORIS GILBERTSON: That was done in place, outside on a scaffold.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I was curious about what you meant by this—a possible upcoming revival of the arts based on the work that was done in the Federal Art Projects.

BORIS GILBERTSON: Yes, I—well, in that respect, I was thinking of coming to a genuine critical—basically critical work.

It's very difficult to explain this sort of thing. I much rather feel at this point museums are much more interested in labels.

[00:40:20]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BORIS GILBERTSON: Suppose that—and often it seems that museum directors are much more interested in their own career than they are in the career either of the museum or the works that they're attempting to—Their whole object, apparently, is to find something new. And some of it gets a little—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: A little bizarre.

BORIS GILBERTSON: —it's a genuine affectation. I mean, it can't be otherwise. Because some of the work—in fact, I know one instance in which a \$2,500 prize, a very important one, was awarded to some oilcloth cut out. A rough human form, very rough, and fastened to some old boards with tar. Well, I happen to know the curator and I offered him to make him a bet that I could take the first 12 people who came through the museum door, and give them the same materials, and let the artist do a little group too, and have him pick out the ones that the artist had done, or the laymen, either way. And, of course, it was impossible. I mean, it was [inaudible]. But I knew he couldn't, because anyone could do it.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BORIS GILBERTSON: However, this has a wonderful effect. Everyone who saw that thing— and it's a big prize, mayb—I think it was \$3,500. It was a big prize and a gold medal and ribbons hanging. [Inaudible] olive branch [laughs]. They really do it up real nice. The thing [laughs], it just didn't gel. I mean, this was not like a piece of Zadkine sculpture or something like that. It just didn't have that sort of imagination. But the point is that anyone could have done it. These people would see it and look at it, and they'd know very well they could do it. It was very flattering. Here's a man who got first prize and great acclaim, and he's done something that I could very easily do. And perhaps this being the great age of the common man, the commonplace could well be the standard of excellence [laughs]. I don't know. That's a possibility.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: How common can you get, though?

BORIS GILBERTSON: Yeah, that's the whole—these things are very funny. And for a while, I— several years I collected some artistic doubletalk [ph]. It's really fantastic. This is a very— [inaudible] is strictly a matter of the late '40s, '50s, that sort of thing.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BORIS GILBERTSON: Such as a building, in one instance—a building was being criticized. [Inaudible.] They spoke of the finely conceived right angles of this building. That's one instance, [Sylvia Loomis laughs] which means just what?

SYLVIA LOOMIS: [Laughs.] It means a right angle.

BORIS GILBERTSON: And it's in one of those—that phrase is in one of the standard art books. And it's used as a textbook. But there are thousands of such. Strictly double talk, and then they're just so funny that—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I think you're more tolerant of it than I am. Because I think the phrase that we're going through is an insult to art.

BORIS GILBERTSON: Well, it's an insult to human intelligence.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: It is, and to the discipline of the true artists of all ages. I mean, when you think of the work and the study, and the practice that they have put in, to produce good works of art, and then to have this slapdash stuff that we're exposed to now, it horrifies me.

BORIS GILBERTSON: Perhaps the answer to the thing—I believe it was one of the Dons [ph] at Cambridge, I'm not sure—but his lament was, from this non-elected school, that, within the last 50 years, things have changed completely as far as education went. That now the means determine the philosophy, instead of the philosophy determining the means. And I really think that's the basic—the basis of this sort of thing. I'm sure it is.

[00:45:00]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, I've tried to keep an open mind about it to see if there was any serious motivation behind this. I mean, I know we're in a chaotic period, psychologically. But I still think that that is no excuse for the lack of discipline that is displayed in so many works of art today.

BORIS GILBERTSON: Well also it is sociological because even a can of cleanser on a store shelf has a little label splashed on 'New', [laughs] anything that's new must be good. And the general feeling that any change, any development is progress, which is isn't. It might be change, yes, but not progress necessarily. And perhaps that accounts for it. The great emphasis on doing something different. This year, you do it one way, the next year, another way. They're even changing the tread design on tires every year now. This is—either the tread design works and functions or it doesn't.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And if it works well, why not keep it?

BORIS GILBERTSON: That's right. There's no reason for changing it. There is one area in which it's going to work best. There could be variations in the area. But that, probably, just very easily carries through the arts. I don't see why it wouldn't. It's not the arts that are phony, it's the whole structure, that is rather open to question. And it is— just this means determining the philosophy. Philosophies are not byproducts.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: No. Well, they should be the basis, of art.

BORIS GILBERTSON: That's right, that's the starting point rather than the—you don't adjust the philosophy—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-mm [negative]. To what's going on.

BORIS GILBERTSON: —to what's going on. I mean, that then is no longer philosophy.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, that's why I think that the artist has a great responsibility to interpret the deeper meanings of our society rather than the superficial ones.

BORIS GILBERTSON: Yes, or at least reflect them in some nice, quiet—I prefer to it humorously. I refuse to take these things seriously.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BORIS GILBERTSON: And I think perhaps that's exactly what Shakespeare did too. I think that's why it's great. Nothing in the world could be cornier or more outrageously melodramatic than Hamlet's soliloquy. If there wasn't some humor in it. Remove that little, small element of humor, there's something ridiculous about a man having a conversation with a dwarf's skull, especially someone he used to know quite well as a child. I mean, they were rather friendly. Basically—there's a very great element of humor in that's sort of thing. Just enough. Otherwise, to just take a skull and talk to it. Gee, that—I mean, you could—Victorians rewriting Shakespeare, as they were very fond of doing, couldn't have beat that.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: That's true.

BORIS GILBERTSON: Just—all they'd have to do is leave out anything funny. But I think that that probably—humor is, according to certain philosophers, a very good measurement of intelligence, sense of humor. Was it a Danish philosopher went into it very thoroughly, in a rather convincing sort of way. And I do find that the fewer humor people have, the less intelligence they seem to possess.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I think it's particularly needed this day and age.

BORIS GILBERTSON: Yes, it is. And why not evoke the images, instead of hitting people over the head. That's what I prefer a silly little bird sculpture out sitting on a twig laughing at people. They're very funny. And that includes myself.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BORIS GILBERTSON: Sometimes [laughs] when I look back, I realize that I'm a strange creature [laughs]. Once in a while, get these horrible, momentary glimpses of oneself—utter detachment. It's very difficult if you wanted to do it will be very hard; something will happen and you're completely detached, and the view below you as you go through your paces [laughs] it's really

rather gruesome.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Self-revealing.

BORIS GILBERTSON: It is.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Something that you'd rather not see.

BORIS GILBERTSON: It sort of pulls you up short, and you start again. [Inaudible.]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, what sort of work are you doing now?

BORIS GILBERTSON: Mostly metal sculpture. Mostly animals, some figures. But figures are controversial. I do them, and there are people— I certainly studied with—from the figure.

But the human is just as much of an animal as a horse or a sparrow or any other sort, it's the same thing. You do one or the other. It's metaphor. And whether you do it abstractly or you leave things out, has nothing to do with anything. It's still form, a matter of form. Modeling.

[00:50:21]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I wonder if that piece of sculpture that you spoke about of this Texan who came in and saw it and bought it was that lovely bird?

BORIS GILBERTSON: No, these were two owls.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, they were?

BORIS GILBERTSON: Great big ones.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see.

BORIS GILBERTSON: And very strange [laughs]. No, I never met the gentleman who bought the bird. He bought both birds. As a matter of fact, one very nice bird. You saw the photograph.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I saw a photograph of that one.

BORIS GILBERTSON: There was one that was just as, of nice two birds, maybe nicer.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I saw that up at Taos a couple of weeks ago. That was beautiful, too.

BORIS GILBERTSON: An Episcopal Bishop bought that, which is—Bishop Jones, do you know who he is?

SYLVIA LOOMIS: No.

BORIS GILBERTSON: They have a place here in Santa Fe. Very intelligent, old-school kind—a real classicist [laughs]. I rather—and it's very flattering [inaudible], very quiet, very reserved, very keen. They apparently went up to Taos and saw through the window. The gallery was closed. It was almost dark, or it was dark, I guess. And came the next morning and got it.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: This must be very recently, then?

BORIS GILBERTSON: It was last January.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, well—

BORIS GILBERTSON: Just after Christmas. But this bird, the one you saw in the photograph, the single.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes. I'm talking about the one that—there are two birds, two gulls I think in the —

BORIS GILBERTSON: Oh, yeah, that's another one.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Gallery A up at Taos—

BORIS GILBERTSON: That's one I just finished.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

BORIS GILBERTSON: Yeah, that's only been up there a few weeks.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, I spoke to the gallery director, and she said that somebody was very much interested in that [inaudible]—

BORIS GILBERTSON: That's right. Yeah, someone—as a matter of fact, that single bird, that you saw the photograph of, two or three people who came into buying it after it was sold. I think two people at least.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well they were perfectly beautiful.

BORIS GILBERTSON: They only stayed up there a few days. That single one. I don't know about this one, these two.

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

BORIS GILBERTSON: Some of these [inaudible].

SYLVIA LOOMIS: The technical problems in that must have been fantastic, weren't they?

BORIS GILBERTSON: It wasn't bad.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Having just the tip of the wing on the base and—

BORIS GILBERTSON: Oh, that's engineering. [Laughs].

SYLVIA LOOMIS: That's what I meant by technical.

BORIS GILBERTSON: One time had ideas of being a physicist. [Cross talk.] [Inaudible] Chicago. And [inaudible] and very glad I did it. The arts are very practical. All too practical at times. I think about 80 percent of it is just plain dirty work, just labor, and technical things. But then you have to be able to turn it off and on. They are routine—they have to be done very systematically. Using acetylene and oxygen and forging, shaping metal. It's very practical, very technical, not—but if you let it get that way, it becomes just mere craftsmanship, tricky. And no ideas. It's a great temptation sometimes, because people are prepared to question. But it has nothing to do with—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, it looks so simple, these bird sculptures that you did, the two. And—but having had some sculpture myself, I knew that the engineering problem must have been quite something.

BORIS GILBERTSON: Well, there are just the stresses and strains and the weight, the way the weight falls, the directions it takes, and what the metal is capable of. So, to avoid very clumsy joints and still have the feeling of this hanging here—[inaudible]. [Cross talk.]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yeah, they just seem to flutter in the air, a beautiful thing.

BORIS GILBERTSON: [Inaudible.] Quite adequately strong. And the alloys are very good. These are manganese bronze alloys, and very strong. Also, they take a very beautiful finish.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes, [inaudible].

BORIS GILBERTSON: Actually, that piece I'm asking, I think, \$1,800.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BORIS GILBERTSON: The casting—just the casting would cost at least two and a half thousand, [\$]2,500. At least.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yeah, that was nice—

BORIS GILBERTSON: By the time I got through it, I would have to get \$4[000] or \$5,000. And it wouldn't look as well, and certainly wouldn't be as sculptural.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And this was all handcrafted?

BORIS GILBERTSON: Oh yes. Just using your acetylene and oxygen, building it up. Grinding it up. Just keeping that little spark going somewhere.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

BORIS GILBERTSON: You burn fingers and have to wear a respirator, goggles, and God knows what. Under all this equipment it's very difficult.

[00:55:07]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: You have to be inspired, too, at the same time.

BORIS GILBERTSON: Yes. Well, that part's where you want to get at it, but it's—there always seems to—[inaudible], seems to drag always. That's the problem, simply because of these [inaudible]. And then changes have to be made, after getting all together, you frequently have to take the thing apart. [Inaudible] considerable changes, and go all over the same work. But you learn. If you can't control your feelings—it does, it takes great control.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I would think so.

BORIS GILBERTSON: The old romantic concept of an artist [inaudible]. You know when to turn it on and how. You don't just fly around and pull these things out of thin air.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: No, I should say not. It's pretty obvious—

BORIS GILBERTSON: They're too heavy, anyway [laughs].

SYLVIA LOOMIS: [Laughs.] Yes.

BORIS GILBERTSON: That's sculpture [inaudible].

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, are there any other comments that you would like to make about that period in your life? We still have about 10 minutes left on the tape.

BORIS GILBERTSON: Well, I can't—I can't think of any.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: There wasn't anything that was more outstanding during that time than before or since?

BORIS GILBERTSON: No. I do feel, though, that I like to keep fairly close to the earth, so to speak, in the sense that the Chinese do. I'll never forget [inaudible] purchased several mules, [laughs], to keep me company.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, yes. [They laugh.]

BORIS GILBERTSON: Everyone's gotten tired of hearing about my wonderful mules.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, tell me about your mules.

BORIS GILBERTSON: They're wonderful. They're wonderful creatures. They're Spanish walking mules.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, where'd you get them?

BORIS GILBERTSON: They came from around Durango, in Mexico.

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

BORIS GILBERTSON: Very beautiful. They're not a standard deal at all, the mares are Arabian.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh.

BORIS GILBERTSON: Very—little Arabian barbs, they call them, actually. Beautiful little animals. Very intelligent, very—they can be very mean and ornery.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh.

BORIS GILBERTSON: But they're saddle animals, and once they're broken, they'll be alright.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: What do you use them for?

BORIS GILBERTSON: Just to ride, get out in the country.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, you do? Do you actually ride them?

BORIS GILBERTSON: Oh, yes. And they'll go 20, 30 miles in a day over the roughest country you can imagine. I've had them out [inaudible].

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BORIS GILBERTSON: And taking them over trails you could hardly walk over.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see.

BORIS GILBERTSON: Yes. Just up and down, up and down. Just like I was climbing ladders, actually. It's a very rough country around Cerrillos.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, yes.

BORIS GILBERTSON: There are ravines and canyons. And it doesn't bother them. They go barefooted, no shoes. They don't weigh over 700 pounds.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Is that right?

BORIS GILBERTSON: They'll carry my 180 pounds around., even the little fellow. There's one that's a bit smaller.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: How many do you have?

BORIS GILBERTSON: Two.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Two.

BORIS GILBERTSON: Yes. But that sort of thing. I mean, you can sit and listen to them eat, crunching grain. Just the feel and the smell of animals—and it's—because when I was a child, the last Thursday of every month, in the square in small towns, always farmers brought their horses that were for sale. [Inaudible] horse sale, and the trading and selling of horses, matching up of horses for teams, and so forth. And I can remember every gesture. Every one. My father always had horses. Even when we had a car we had horses. He wouldn't have been without them. And I can see why. I mean, he liked to train them. He wasn't very good at it. But he thought he was, and he enjoyed it. He probably was better than I think, but I remember one of these acquisitions [ph] kicking the side of the stable off one night, in the middle of the night.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh [laughs]?

BORIS GILBERTSON: Just general exuberance. But—bronco, a bronco. But that was the sort of thing—I can remember every gesture that these men would make. First they looked the horse at the eyes, the head. Make sure his vision was good, he wasn't blind in one eye. Just—that was very perfunctory.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BORIS GILBERTSON: Then instantly, their eyes hit the ground. The horse starts from the ground, always, like a good piece of architecture. They looked directly at his feet. If his feet weren't good, what's the use? It doesn't matter how good the rest of him his, he has to walk. That's basic. Then they go around, [inaudible] see if he was sound, feel underneath, there were any ruptures are and thump these ribs to be sure that there wasn't any hollow or resonance. Some of the worst-looking horses were the best. Like the old bronco or a mustang, he wasn't any beauty. But really a good horse when someone was riding him, he was quite a different animal.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[01:00:13]

BORIS GILBERTSON: It's that sort of thing. And I'll never forget those—just the gestures, the feelings, and the way teamsters work. They were always very nice kids, you could always get a

ride with any old teamster in town, on the wagon. And when he was—if he really had respect for you, he'd let you take the reins, on the street stretches. But that sort of thing, you never forget it, and it's very close to the earth. They put their heads down and let you get them—put the nose bags on them [inaudible].

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BORIS GILBERTSON: And all that sorts—that sort of thing makes a lot of difference. These men had a very, very dry sense of humor. Very typical of the West. Dry, and very penetrating. . I remember getting a sliver in my finger, once, from the wagon. The old boy, without a word, pulled out a knife, it was at least that long, very sharp. Grabbed my finger, slid it and pulled the sliver. And then just watched to see. Well, no little boy in his right mind is going to chicken at that point. You just don't, [laughs] that's all.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: You just take it.

BORIS GILBERTSON: And from this sort of thing comes character. And these men handled horses that could easily—when they were young and being broken—could kill them. It was very dangerous. And they did it with great poise. They were always—good horsemen always men of great poise, they didn't lose their temper.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: When this was up in that little town near Lake Superior?

BORIS GILBERTSON: Many, many—no, no. Many, many little towns in my childhood.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see.

BORIS GILBERTSON: I moved up in the woods when I was an adult. But this is typical in almost any small town, where the roads weren't too good, they used horses a lot.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, it's nice that you have a place here where you can have some mules— [Cross talk.]

BORIS GILBERTSON: Well, the mules [inaudible]—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —to inspire you and companion you.

BORIS GILBERTSON: [Laughs.] [Inaudible.] I'm sorry they're not here now.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I'd like to see them. They sound charming

BORIS GILBERTSON: Well, you come over, and make their acquaintance [laughs].

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I will.

BORIS GILBERTSON: I'm sure you'd enjoy them.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yeah, I'm sure I would too.

BORIS GILBERTSON: I doubt it. [laughs]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I wouldn't get very close. I'll look over the fence.

BORIS GILBERTSON: No, they're not tame. They're not pets. [Inaudible.]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see. Have you done any sculpture of them?

BORIS GILBERTSON: Oh, no.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, no? Don't they lend themselves to it or—

BORIS GILBERTSON: Oh, I just haven't thought—I've never done—don't use the dog either. It's just doesn't occur to me. Horses, yes. Mules [inaudible]—you can't—I mean, personal symbols aren't very useful. That might be one of the things that makes it very—makes the present school of aesthetics rather difficult, is that people are using personal symbols, which means something to themselves and themselves alone. As far as communicating anything, or revealing any greatness in the commonplace, which I still think is one of the prime functions of the arts. It is rather impossible if using this cryptic sort of—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I know, they're so subjective, nobody else knows what you're talking about.

BORIS GILBERTSON: No. It's a little—each little world in its own and there's nothing in between. [Inaudible.]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Nothing to communicate to the outside world.

BORIS GILBERTSON: Yes. And I rather imagined that I could prefer the company of my mules to a great many artists. [They laugh.] I'll put that down to posterity and see what happens. [They laugh.]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, I understand from Charlotte, that you don't have any papers. So—that you're not the sort that keeps papers—

BORIS GILBERTSON: No.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —any correspondence, other things from this period—

BORIS GILBERTSON: Oh, no.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —so I'm not even going to ask you about that.

BORIS GILBERTSON: No, I have no photographs even.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: You don't? Oh, that's too bad.

BORIS GILBERTSON: I—someday I'll get around to it.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see. Well, this has been extremely interesting. And I'm glad at least we have your comments on tape as long as you've never really put them on paper.

BORIS GILBERTSON: And my essay on mules. [Laughs.]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: You're what?

BORIS GILBERTSON: My essay on mules.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Your essay on mules.

BORIS GILBERTSON: I think that—I doubt that the arts can be a profession really, because of their lack of academic standards. You can you do it with medicine.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, I think at one time, it was a profession, but whether it is now [inaudible] question.

BORIS GILBERTSON: No, I don't—the Chinese system of it being the product of superior skill and intellect.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BORIS GILBERTSON: Strictly a byproduct. I really believe in that. The reason—a very great Chinese painter, whose name I won't[inaudible], but he always painted bamboo with red ink. Everyone else used these beautiful sumi blacks, they were all wonderful, but he used red. And finally, they got after him. Asked him why, he painted bamboo with red ink. No one's ever seen red bamboos. He said, No one has ever seen black ones, either.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh. [They laugh.]

[01:05:30]

BORIS GILBERTSON: I mean, this is the sort of thinking that—because, of course, the black and white is much more [valuable than color to the classic school -Ed.].

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Neutral.

BORIS GILBERTSON: And I do feel this is just a byproduct, whether they were going to be artists or not was a matter of how great their calligraphy was, how great their intellects were, how much they put into all these things. If they really had a lot to put into it [they did with great

intensity -Ed.] and a tremendous amount of character, then they were artists. But first character.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes, well—

BORIS GILBERTSON: To the Chinese, without character all the talent, and intelligence, and everything in the [inaudible] skill is meaningless. There is just simply a lot of control.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, that's the thing, that the artist has to tell. I mean, if he has no character, he has nothing to tell.

BORIS GILBERTSON: That's right.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: But this comes through if a person also has the discipline of his—and can handle his medium.

BORIS GILBERTSON: Yes, that's true. But you cannot provide any academic standards for the arts. I don't think you can. Nor do I ever think you ever could. The old academic boys, as they were called, and the Romanticists who certainly pretty dull. Just reproducing as carefully as possible.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes—

BORIS GILBERTSON: Or as romantically as possible. It's all [inaudible]very tiresome.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes. Well, I think the standard there dropped because they lost their sense of design in this.

BORIS GILBERTSON: They lose—yeah, they weren't great painters, they were great craftsmen.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: That's all.

BORIS GILBERTSON: So, I still don't think it's possible to be a profession. I put myself down like a muleskinner.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Muleskinner, I see. [They laugh.]

[END OF TRACK AAA_gilber64_132_m.]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]