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Oral history interview with Amelie Kneass,
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Transcript

Interview

MM: MARY MCCHESENEY

AK: AMELIE KNEASS

MM: This is Mary McChesney interviewing Amelie Kneass spelled AMELIE KNEASS, no Amelie Kneass.

MM: Who is now Mrs. Fred Elkinton and who was supervisor of the WPA in the Monterey area in California.

AK: Actually I was the state supervisor.

MM: How did you happen to get into that position?

AK: Well, I was a social worker with the SFERA and my mother was secretary of the Carmel Art Association Board and when the WPA was organized, Nellie Montague, who was then curator of the Carmel Art Association Gallery, was the first supervisor. And she asked if I would be her assistant. Now actually at that time financially I qualified so therefore I could come on, as you call it as an unemployed person and so forth. So I was her assistant and then Mrs. Montague was relieved as supervisor.

MM: She was the first supervisor.

AK: She was the first supervisor and then Burten Boundey was made supervisor. He was a very fine artist. Burton Boundey incidentally Mr. Boundey's widow is still living here, you might like to talk to her. Then Mr. Boundey left the project and the project was left in my hands. I am not an artist, I did mainly clerical work and saw to it that the amount of proper time was placed. I also had charge of other projects, the white collar projects, book binding projects at the library and other projects. Sort of a combination of what they call the professional projects.

MM: Oh, I see, how many of them were there?

AK: Well, there was a very good writer's project here for awhile. We had some difficulties with the change in state wide supervisory personnel. Some of them stayed on the book binding project. Oh my, I'm trying to remember. There were several others that I can't remember now, small groups you know, 2 or 3 people. Oh, I had to go down to San Obispo county once a month, drive down there and we had some so called workers in the library at Camp Roberts.

MM: Did you have sewing projects or were you covering them?

AK: No, we didn't have sewing projects as far as I know. And then later on toward the end of the project we were doing work, as probably Miss Collins told you, for the soldiers club out at Fort Ord which was a very wonderful dream of General Stillwell's. And 2 or 3 of the young soldiers, who were assigned to the project out of the army were working in my office toward the end of the project up until after Pearl Harbor time. And they were painting murals right in the office. These murals now are out at the Fort Ord Social center.

MM: Where were your headquarters here in Monterey?

AK: First headquarters was in the Carmel Art Association Gallery, the second headquarters was in the upper floor of Coulton Hall, whoops, the second one was in Mr. Bounday's own home in Monterey and the third headquarters was in the second floor of Coulton Hall.

MM: Do you remember what year it was that you went on the WPA? '35, '36?

AK: I could go and look it up. I happen to have a copy of my record but I imagine it was '35 or '36. I'm not sure really.

MM: Had the project been in existence very long before that?

AK: No, it was just starting at the time I went onto it as far as I can remember.

MM: And how long a time were you a supervisor?

AK: I'd have to go look up the record.

MM: It must have been a couple of years though.

AK: Oh, yes.

MM: Were there any large projects that the artists were involved in down here? Several people have mentioned a mural backdrop for the fairgrounds.

AK: There were 2 quite large projects. The first one, unfortunately, has burned and I thought it was an excellent piece of work. It was very large mural for the Pacific Grove High School. It extended around 3 sides of the big library building and it was beautifully done, designed by Augusta Gay and Bruce Ariss helped him on the project. Then the other one was a project on canvas done for the Monterey County Fair and I don't remember how many hundreds of feet it extended. It was used for years. Oh, I imagine it has been used for 7 or 8 years at least, rolled up at the end of each year and then hung again. Actually it acted as a wind break and a background on 2 sides of the Fairground, the horse arena area. And that was also designed by August Gay.

MM: We're talking about the mural at Pacific Grove High School, was that done in oil on canvas?

AK: Yes.

MM: And what was the subject of it?

AK: I suppose the most general term that you can use is the History of this Area.

MM: The History of the Monterey peninsula. And how large was that? You said it was 3 sides of library.

AK: I think you would have to ask someone at the Pacific Grove High School. I'm trying to estimate about how long the library is. I would say it was maybe 60 feet long and about 25, or 30 feet wide. There were windows on one side and then the other 3 sides were covered by this mural.

MM: And you mentioned that it had been designed by August Gay and he had this man Bruce Ariss for an assistant. Did other artists in the area work with him?

AK: I don't remember if it was on that or a later one but I believe that Victor Mantilla and someone else helped with the fair, the one for the fair. But I believe that most of the work on the first one was done by August Gay himself and Bruce.

MM: Where did they actually paint it? Did they paint it on the wall? Or did they have a headquarters where they worked and afterwards placed it on the wall.

AK: I believe the one at Pacific Grove was done on the wall, the one for the Fairground was done on stretchers outdoors on the fairgrounds under very uncomfortable conditions with ladder. The sketch had to be enlarged and drawn and I was always afraid that Gus, who was always apt to back off a little bit from something, would back right off the platform.

MM: He was a Frenchman, wasn't he?

AK: Yes.

MM: What was his background?

AK: Gus Gay, I believe his family came from France to San Francisco. It was a fairly large family. Had a brother Kleber who for many years has worked at the Pacific Grove Museum as a general handyman and also did the carpentry work in preparing the exhibit cases. Gus lived in this area, oh, at least since about 1905, off and on until his death. He lived in the old Stevenson house in Monterey, the old adobe, and he was a man of great sincerity, a man whom any younger artist would probably feel had a good deal to give to him. He also was greatly admired by the outstanding artists who used to come to this area. I don't think he ever painted for money. I don't think he ever painted for money. He did gilding and worked for the Church Guild under Miss Charlotte Fortune and I'm sure if you speak to Miss Fortune who is quite elderly and I would speak to her before too many months passed, she can tell you a good deal about Gus's background. Have you met Miss Fortune?

MM: No, I haven't.

AK: The Church Guild was the group of artists that Miss Fortune had that did all the pieces background, sculptures, paintings for various churches throughout the country and Gus did beautiful gold gilt work. He's also a fire craftsman. He had a small shop on the grounds of the Stevenson house.

MM: What kind of painting did he do? Was he a landscape painter?

AK: Not entirely no, generally speaking I guess you'd call it that. He also did excellent etchings. I had one or two

and he had moods like many of the artists do. I mean periods that they go through where intense blues or some other color would be predominant.

MM: Did he have much of an influence on the other artists in this area.

AK: I would think so indirectly. The very personality of the man. I think you might also ask what influence he might have had on John Steinbeck.

MM: Oh, was there any connection?

AK: Yes.

MM: He must have been (inaudible quite a bit older than Steinbeck though.)

AK: Gus was a good deal older than most or any of the other artists on the project. He was sort of a hold over from the 1900 period. And also as a holdover from the earlier period, we had 2 artists on the project who were holdovers. One of them was Evelyn McCormick and her memory went back to the period in Monterey of Sterling and Keith and the others who had lived here.

MM: Oh, George Sterling, the poet, and William Keith, the painter.

AK: George Sterling, the poet, was a friend of hers and she had painted in Monterey since she was a young girl. She came from a well to do family and lived in Monterey as a very young woman with her sister and had a home in Pacific Grove and then in later years, when financial difficulties came upon her, she lived quietly in the Royal Hotel in Monterey and she's always a little Lady of the old school. She painted pictorially, in other words like a photograph, but I remember Armin Hansen and some of the other greatest artists saying that no one that they had ever known could paint an adobe building like Evelyn McCormick. She used to tell me that an adobe building was not white. There were all the colors in the adobe which is true and if you see some of her paintings which are now hanging in the city hall, in the Monterey Library, in Hartnell College, why you'll find the lovely shading. She never painted more than about 15 minutes a day or sometimes an hour a day in front of each building so that the light was exactly the same, from the same angle so the shadows and the overhang of the roof were the same.

MM: (INAUDIBLE) Always painted at the same time under the same light conditions.

AK: Yes, when she was painting the Hartnell college in Solinas area, I would drive her over there and leave her sitting out in this field and she had the same little coat that she wore year after year. She had the same gloves with all the fingers out she wore year after year and the same hat and she was small, very much a gentlewoman and could tell a dirty joke in the nicest way.

MM: You mentioned Armina Hanson, was he ever on the project?

AK: No, Armin was never on the WPA project. I believe he did something for the previous Federal works project. I'm quite sure he did and so did George Seideneck.

MM: Seideneck, how do you spell that name?

AK: Seideneck, he still lives here. Up in Samuel Valley.

MM: That would be the PWA?

AK: Public works, I believe it was called, previous to the actual WPA project.

MM: (muttering) where the artists were on non relief status.

AK: Non relief, that's right.

MM: This lad you mentioned, Evelyn McCormick, was on your easel project?

AK: Yes.

MM: Who were some of the other artists that you had on the easel project? We interviewed Patricia Cunningham and John who, I think, was on I guess her husband John and she interchanged.

AK: Well, I tried to remember the number that were on the project and actually, as far as I remember, somehow or other the number 18 comes to me. Now I don't know whether that included myself when I made out the

payroll or whether it's just a number that came out of my head. But anyhow these are some of the artist that I remember. Bruce Ariss, Patricia Cunningham, Cecily Edwards, Dudley Carter, August Gay, Andre Moreau, Susan Hedger, Evelyn McCormick, Victor Mantilla, Alberta Lamb, Sybil Anireyev, Tulita Westfall, Raymond Scardiglia, Roy Nzolan, Joe Smith, Barbara Graham and, I believe, Elwood Graham but I'm not sure was actually on the project. I think only one of them could be on the project at the time. Then there was also a watercolorist who did not stay all the way through and now for the life of me, I can't remember his name. Very excellent watercolorist. He later went east to new England.

MM: Oh, I think he must have been mentioned by Victor Mantilla. Harrington? No? I have the name, I think. I don't have my files with me but he did talk about a watercolorists who wore cowboy boots or was that somebody else? I wonder if you would mind going through that list and as you go through the names, tell what kind of painting the people were doing on the project. The ones we haven't covered.

AK: Well, Patricia Cunningham did work mainly in oil an watercolor. Cecily Edwards did sketches for the Index of American Design, costumes and other things. Dudley Carter was a very interesting sculptor in redwood. There are about 5 or 6 of his monumental pieces now at the County Fairground. He was a cruiser, their call it in the timber business, a man who goes into a redwood forest or any type of forest area to estimate the number of board feet that is standing and also a good sculptor. He went down into the redwood area south, in the Big Sur area, chose him redwood tree, got permission through the county or whoever owned the area to fell the tree, felled it and then we arranged to have the sections brought up to this area and some of them were placed in his space where he was working. One of the pieces was taken over to pacific Grove for Roy Nzolan to work on. Then from them he carved sculptures some 10, 12, 14 feet high.

MM: (Inaudible). Using a double bladed axe.

AK: The double bladed axe and if you see that man stand on the scaffold,he as just swinging and the cuts would come out just the way he'd want them. Yet he was physically a fairly slender man but tall.

MM: I watched him work at the Fair at Treasure Island. (Inaudible) Demonstrating a beautiful craftsman.

AK: Andre Moreau, I don't remember what Andre did.

MM: He must have been on the easel project, oil?

AK: Well, you see, for a great deal of these artists because I'm not an artist myself, many of them would keep their work until Mr. Allen, who was the sate supervisor, came down to this area and then we would go to visit the various artists and they would turn their work directly in to him. But Andre did do some paintings mostly easel work would be the type of thing that he did. I also think he did a few plates for the Index of American Design. I'm not sure because Mr. Allen wanted a great deal of that work done in this area and he'd try out various artists but you realize for the Index you had to be very meticulous, had to be photographic and that was difficult for some artists. At one time Andre was doing sort of a relief painting, primarily relief, cutting out sections of plywood and building it up on the ground. I don't know whether that was later or not. I think it might have been later.

MM: Talk it louder.

AK: And Susan Hedger worked in watercolor, just free watercolors an she turned them out very fast and very seriously. Some good and some very, very bad. Evelyn McCormick, as I said, did adobe buildings. She did many of the adobe buildings in this area and it took Evelyn many months to finish one. She would do a sketch first as she called it which to most artists would be a completed painting. She worked in oil. Alberta Lamb made a very fine contribution. She was interested in wildflowers and she traveled all over this area working outdoors, making sketches from wild flowers as they came into season. Then she would come back with her sketches and make a very exact painting in watercolor. And they were later made into a series of plates which were contributed to schools through out the state.

MM: Was her name later Spratt?

AK: Yes, but she was Lamb at the time that I knew her. Alberta Lamb and I believe she's passed away now I'm not sure.

MM: Yes, I think so.

AK: Sybil Anikeyev, that's ANIKEYEV was a photographer. She had been and was still a student of Edward Weston's and she had a talent for personal photography. She did pictures of interesting people in this area,the fishermen on the beach, the few remaining descendant of some of the Indians, or the part Indians living here.

She traveled up and down the coast and took landscapes and she was supporting herself and her husband, who was dying of cancer, and a small boy. And some of her photographs turned out beautifully. I believe that many of the negatives of her photographs are in the Monterey Library at the present time and many of the prints are in the Monterey Library, the series she did of the adobe buildings in Monterey county.

MM: Was she the only photographer that you had on the project?

AK: Yes.

MM: Not Edward Weston? Or any of the Westons were on?

AK: No, no. Tulita Westfall did a few easel paintings but Mr. Allen felt that her best forte was the Index of American Design and she made a good contribution because through her family connections, she was able to contact descendants of the older families in this area and they would allow her to come in on their homes and paint the jewelry that was made in this area and the saddles and all the handicraft work that had been in this area. Many of them took things out of their personal vaults for her to do and many of her plates are now in Washington, D.C. I saw them there few years ago but unfortunately the identifying date had become separated from the individual plate, as had often happened. And when I was back there, I spent a little time downstairs and I was able to help them get a few of them together. Cecily Edwards did some too of jewelry but Tulita's were quite good some of them. At least you have a representation of what the item was, and Tulita later became ill and has passed away. In fact, many or several of these people have passed away.

MM: When you did the Index of American Design work down here, you didn't have photographers working with the people who did the drawings?

AK: yes, sometimes we photographed.

MM: I wondered because sometimes in San Francisco they would have a photographer photograph the material and then the artist would work from the photograph.

AK: And some of the negatives are at the Monterey Library, the Index of American Design art. Raymond Scardiglia came on the project as a sculptor. He did do several plaques in semi- relief, very low relief. There's one of the fisherman which is owned by the Monterey Library and one of an artichoke picker, I believe, out of redwood, a wall plaque. Quite large, I would say about 21/2 by 4 ft. And then he went off the project, I think, fairly early. As far as I know later he became a jewelry designer. I believe he's living in Mexico now.

MM: Most of the sculptors who were working in this area were working in wood.

AK: Yes, Roy Nzolan was a sculptor. Roy did there wood figure of the Franciscan monk, or Franciscan father, which is in Deivendorf Plaza in Carmel. It's hidden underneath the trees. That was one of the large pieces of redwood that was brought up from the Big Sur area that Dudley Carter had cut down.

MM: Yes, stopped to look at it.

AK: And he also did several small figures. Roy died on the project very suddenly of a heart attack. He, I believe, if he might have lived, might have become quite well known. He was a very quiet man, a retiring man, deeply sincere. He kept to himself a great deal but a few months before his death a priest from Southern California had interviewed him and there was a project contemplate of establishing the stations of the cross from the lowest point geographically in California to the highest point. And Roy was to be the sculptor on that project and each depiction of the station of the cross would have been quite large and they would have been done in stone. The money was promised and I believe that the project would have gone through and Roy would have been off the WPA project. Unfortunately, as I said, he died of a heart attack.

MM: How old a person was he when he died?

AK: I believe that he was possibly 45 or 50. I'm guessing. Joe Smith worked in black and white sometimes in color. He made pen and ink sketches of the old adobes of Monterey. He also made a map of the city of Monterey and he did some other things. He worked in Coulton Hall in the earlier days of the project and later went off the project. He had a large family to support and he was not well. He later supported himself by putting out little brochures, you know, the historical type of thing that they give out to tourists, to sell to tourists with ads in them. Barbara Graham worked in oil and if I could remember the name of the watercolorist, I think we'd have covered those I remember now. Frankly it's been so 20 some odd years and my memory seems to be gaping in places. Very well done.

MM: You've done remarkably well. A great deal work that was done on the project seems to still be in this area. You've mentioned several places in the Museum, the library the park. Were most of your oil paintings that were

on the project allocated to building here in this area.

AK: Evelyn McCormick's era, one or two Tulita Westfall's are, the watercolors all went to San Francisco, as I remember. The originals of Alberta Lamb's flower plates, I believe, should still be owned by the Monterey School System, I they can find them. The city of Monterey has a number of other paintings that were done on the project. I think they have some of Victor Martilla's. Oh, wait a minute, there was a plaster cast of the seal of the city of Monterey which belongs to the city of Monterey but I believe the rest of went to San Francisco. Of course, it depended upon who sponsored the individual work. The Index of American Design was sponsored locally as was also the large figure that Roy Nzolan did.

MM: Was that part of your job as supervisor to arrange for sponsors for the artists?

AK: No, that was done by Mr. Allen.

MM: You worked in really quite close contact with the San Francisco office.

AK: Yes, Mr. Allen came down, oh, approximately once a month and afterwards Joe Danish came down. Have you interviewed Mr. Danish?

MM: He (inaudible) was interviewed by Lew Ferbrache. In Carmel.

AK: Yes, he's also living in this area.

MM: Yes, Lew came down to interview him. What kind of an influence do you think the WPA art project had on the art community of this area? I was wondering in terms of the revitalization of the artists or revitalization of the culture generally, did it have any of that kind of influence?

AK: That's not for me to say. I think the main benefit is that it kept the artists alive, kept them working in their own field. The artists could continue to communicate in their own manner. It didn't degrade them like so many people were degraded by some of the projects they had to work on. I don't mean that anything's wrong with the project but if you suddenly have to work on a sewing project or a book binding project and that's entirely away from any field of interest that you have, you have that feeling of being mocked. The main thing to me was that it allowed some of these artists to continue in this field. It saved them a sense of contributing to the community in which they lived, in the manner in which they were trained to contribute.

MM: How was the project accepted by the community down here?

AK: I found no criticism of it because remember this is a small community. Most of the artists living on the peninsula we knew these artists and the, of course, there were young and untried ones and they would consider their work as that of any young untried artist. In fact, there was a good number of artists who tried very hard to get on the project but they were just in that in between stage where they either qualified for relief or they didn't qualify for relief and I think a good many of them would have enjoyed very much working on the project if they could have qualified but they might have 50.00 more a month income than allowed them to qualify. No, I don't think there was any criticism. I won't say there was none because that I wouldn't know.

MM: But you never had any difficulty that you became aware of?

AK: No, sometime you had personality difficulties but you have personality difficulties with anyone that you work with.

MM: Everybody I've talked with around here impressed me that it was a very successful project in the sense that everyone seemed contented with the job they were doing. They were very active. They were glad to be on the project. They were doing good work. They thought.

AK: Well, I think that's true.

MM: (This sentence was spoken too fast) You just covered the peninsula area. You didn't extend south?

AK: That was in another field.

MM: Did you have any artists living in Big Sur then?

AK: None on the project. Part of the time Dudley Carter worked down there, as I say, procuring the wood, the sections, but as far as I remember, there were none that lived down there during the period of the project. It was too hard to get there, too far to travel. They had to find small inexpensive places to live around here.

MM: Do you think it would be a good idea for the government in the United States to sponsor the arts again?

AK: Yes, under certain conditions. Such as who sets the standards, what type of thing that they sponsor, how free a range would the individual artist have and whether he should have too free a range? But to sponsor the arts, yes, of course. But as I say, it would have to be controlled in the truer, better sense of the work control. I think it would have to be directed and then you're going to get the question, who's going to direct it and from what angle?

MM: Very complicated. Victor mantilla mentioned that he did several mosaics in this area. Were you in charge of arranging those with schools? He and Barbara Stevenson, as I recall. He said that she would design mosaics and he would execute the actual mosaic work in the school. Didn't he say that? I think so.

AK: I'm trying to remember where they were placed. He probably could tell you.

MM: He did mention some. He went though quite a detailed list of the one she had done but I was wondering if your job as supervisor had anything to do with the contact between the school and the development of the mosaics?

AK: No, that was all handled through San Francisco.

MM: Do you have anything else to add or have we covered it?

AK: Well, I don't think so. I may have missed some of the things but I do think that's about all. I'm sure I've forgotten a great deal and I hope to remember later. I've forgotten some artist. Isn't that a terrible thing to forget? I might say of those that I know Bruce Ariss is still in the art field, Patricia Cunningham is, what has happened to Cecily Edwards I don't know if she's married and Dudley Carter, last I heard, was north. Auguste Gay is dead. Andre Moreau still living, Susan Hedger has married since then. Evelyn McCormick is dead, Victor Marilla is living, Alberta Lamb passed away, Sybil Anikeyev after the death of her former husband is living in the east. Tulita Westfall is dead, Raymond Scardiglia the last I heard, is living in Mexico. He did have a jewelry design shop here in Carmel in the craft studio.

(Mumbling)

AK: And Roy Nzolan has passed away, Joe Smith is dead and Barbara Graham and Elwood, of course, Graham, both are still living.

MM: Are they both in this area?

AK: Elwood is. I don't know where Barbara is. She's been in Mexico off and on. Elwood is here. They have been divorced, as you know, and Elwood has been married and is living in, I believe the last I heard he was in Pebble Beach.

MM: You mentioned the writer's project and I wanted to ask you a few things about that. Was there much connection between the artists and the writer down here?

AK: No, they were different groups of people.

MM: Was there a large writer's project?

AK: To start with, I believe, it was fairly large. I think the problem we had when the WPA started was one of supplies. I remember Andy Jacobson, who was county supervisor, and I were talking about WPA several years after it was over and when it started, a person would be assigned to any project, for example, on the works project. The first work project that was started was the road work. The county sponsored it. I think something like 200 men appeared to work on the morning, at 8 o'clock in the morning. The county had something like 15 shovels and 4 rakes. Therefore people stood around and Andy who was a very strong Republican and a good politician for this area, said there was a good deal of criticism because they saw men standing around. That was not the fault of the men who really wanted to work. It was the fault of the county which was not prepared for an influx so when all of these projects started, you would have people who would say I'm a watercolorist or I work in ceramics or I do this or I do that and it would take you approximately 2 months to get the material so sometimes they had to make work for themselves. It was true, for example, with Sybil. She just wangled a large number of film from some friends of her's and started to work right away and others with a very limited income, couldn't even buy a brush or a tub of paint or a scratch pad and that made a problem in all of our projects. (Completely inaudible) That happened in San Francisco at the beginning to And also San Francisco was having a difficult time getting organized and when Mr. Boundey was supervisor, he was a very fine artist himself. He had trouble sorting the different people out, you realize that, and it would be sometime before Mr. Allen would come down and see the work that the people were doing and talk to them. Because every time he want to leave San Francisco, why some crisis would rise up there.

MM: Did your materials come down from San Francisco or did you purchase them directly there?

AK: Most of them were purchased in lots in order to get cheaper price and then a small portion would be shipped down here.

MM: Thanks very much for giving us the time for the interview this afternoon.

AK: Why, you're welcome.

[END OFINTERVIEW]