



Smithsonian  
*Archives of American Art*

Oral history interview with Alice Graeme  
Korff, 1965 Oct. 7

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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Alice Korff on October 7, 1965. The interview took place in Washington DC, and was conducted by Harlan Phillips for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

## Interview

HARLAN PHILLIPS: I think most important of all and something which historians often overlook is the context in which events occur. Somehow it gives shape, dimension and scope. Were you here in Washington in the thirties?

ALICE KORFF: Yes, I was living here and I was a friend of the Bruce's - Ned Bruce, I assume that you've worked with Peggy Bruce.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: She was marvelous.

ALICE KORFF: Well, it was really through him that the project started, as you know, and through George Biddle. Ned Bruce was the guiding force of the project for so many years.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Is this the PWAP - the early one?

ALICE KORFF: Yes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: '34?

ALICE KORFF: Yes, just about that time.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: December 8th, 1933, was the first announcement.

ALICE KORFF: Was it?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: It ran through, I think April of '34; this was I think under the Civil Works Administration.

ALICE KORFF: Yes. Works Progress I think it was.

ALICE KORFF: And Procurement. It was set up under procurement because the Post Offices were also under that section at that time, and the decoration of buildings would automatically fall under Procurement in that way. He had to set it up with a very practical view to how the money would come, of course, and he was able to put through the percentage, if you'll remember, of the cost of the building, which was allotted to public works. He had a great feeling that art should go where people were. It was really his basic thinking on it, and that was why he was particularly interested in art in public buildings, taking sculpture, murals, designs to places where people would assemble. This was sort of a broad democratic idea he had, and I think it was a very sound one. That was the name of the book, I guess it was ART AND FEDERAL BUILDINGS, wasn't it that Olin Dows -- you've seen that, haven't you?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes. Yes.

ALICE KORFF: Those books are quite rare, too. I think he hasn't even got one now. I have one but I lent it to Rogers Stevens, and I don't know of any others - they all seem to be scattered. You do have copies?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: I believe they do in Detroit.

ALICE KORFF: There are two volumes of that which has reproductions of almost all the murals and sculptures which went into the buildings during that period.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: How long have you known Ned Bruce?

ALICE KORFF: Well, I know him. I knew he and his wife then at that time when the project was forming, and their niece, Maria Ealand was a school friend of mine, I had known her in California. Of course, she was right in on it, as well as was Polly Gutheim, who -- that's Fritz Gutheim's wife whose living here now, -- and we were all interested in the project. At that time I was working on the Post. I had a job as art critic on the Post, so that I was looking for material to write about, and I covered all the new decorations as they went up in Washington. Then through Olin Dows, who was a great friend, all of us met the people who came to town, which was of course fascinating. When Reggie Marsh and George Biddle and all these people were here, Olin was working with them,

and I was writing them up, and we used to often take Sunday's off. There was a classic walk up the canal and Olin would stride forth with a knapsack and thermos, usually of hot potato soup. It was winter, and chops which didn't cost as much in those days, and then we would walk miles, but of course talking all the time and whoever was in town for a project - he would just invite to go along, so it was sort of an outdoor salon, really -- I'm sure he's told you about this?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes.

ALICE KORFF: But it was a wonderful way of seeing them all informally. We even used to go when it snowed, build a fire and then sit around and then just talk and talk. It was a marvelous, marvelous way of knowing the people who were -- Henry Varnum Poor all those people who were here at that time.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes. Ned Bruce, of course, had a rather late interest in art, or development in the art field --

ALICE KORFF: But he went to Italy and worked with Maurice Stern, was it not?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes, yes, but his training was that of a --

ALICE KORFF: Lawyer.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Lawyer.

ALICE KORFF: And then he worked with the sugar lobby, too. You know he was very active in that and then --

HARLAN PHILLIPS: -- and in the Phillipine Independence Bill --

ALICE KORFF: Yes, completely turned his way of life and went into the art world which meant everything to him.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: But with reference to the development of this particular project and organization, he had a sense of power. He knew, you know, those things that you learn through experience in terms of Congress, legislation and interest. How to convert an idea into something that walks -- not on a piece of paper but something that walks.

ALICE KORFF: Something that works, too! Yes, he knew the political, had the political know-how to put across the ideas and touched the right people and touched the right wellsprings to bring forth the money and the interest and the backing for it, so that he had a very unusual combination of qualities -- he was both artist and business man. A go-getter --

(Telephone interruption)

HARLAN PHILLIPS: I wish I had known him because I had a sense that he was more or less instinctive with reference to how to go about doing this. A man somewhat impatient -- you know when the idea emerges he's already going 60 miles an hour. I can't picture him slow about anything; there's a cyclonic force about this -- or it seems to be --

ALICE KORFF: Yes, yes, yes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: I don't know whether you got this impression or not from him as a person?

ALICE KORFF: Well, yes. He was a very earthy, hardy person, and he had a tremendous drive. He always felt that anything could be done, if you had a will to do it, and he did the impossible, I think. No one dreamed that this kind of a project could be brought across. I stayed with them down in Key West -- you know about his venture down there probably? They spent several winters, holidays down there after he had not been so well, and Key West, as I remember, was used as sort of a demonstration project, on how the arts could help vitalize a community. They spent quite a good deal of money by placing artists down there -- a whole group of them. One of the things that they did was to paint a series of watercolors which were translated into postcards, and produced, and flooded through the country, which brought back the tourist trade tremendously. Then they painted murals in the post office, in the bars, in the hotels -- all over town they got the whole place, alive with producing art, and he brought back a great interest in Key West, I think, really, through the project. It was meant to be a demonstration of how art could help in different communities, and it was awfully interesting being down there at that time, because John Dos Passos was there. There were a group of artists and writers, and it was wonderful being in their house and seeing them all.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: It was like grand central terminal.

ALICE KORFF: Dornbush was there too --

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Oh, was he?

ALICE KORFF: Yes. He was in charge of the project down there for a while, I think, and several others. Then some of the newspaper men would come down and write it up. Well, of course they always came to the Bruce's. It was very exciting thing to have been a part of.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Do you happen to know the present whereabouts of Adrian Dornbush.

ALICE KORFF: I don't know. But Peggy would know, Peggy Bruce would if anyone, because of course -- no, I haven't heard from him for years.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: I heard that he went to Puerto Rico for a while. That's an illusive thing. Well, how receptive was the Treasury Department to this unprecedented, cyclonic, driving force -- Ned Bruce and this idea?

ALICE KORFF: Well, I wouldn't be able to gauge that very correctly for you, but I think there was rather a sense of surprise that was it was going on, and I'm sure that there were a great many people who wondered how they ever got the authority because the usual mind -- you know, of the government employee would not understand it at all.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes.

ALICE KORFF: But they were able to put Harold Westen's murals into the procurement office which I think created quite a stir -- actually bringing it into that board building, there, you see.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: I would think and this as a judgement without much support but I would think it was almost requesting the Treasury Department to speak a language that it had never been instructed, you know, --

ALICE KORFF: Yes, it was something quite new --

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Roberts is a name that figures. I don't know what his background in the arts was, but he was an Assistant Secretary of the Treasury

ALICE KORFF: As I remember, he was rather sympathetic to it, and helpful.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: I've heard this. I don't know how reliable it is, that the Morgenthau's -- more particularly that Mrs. Morgenthau -- was quite sympathetic.

ALICE KORFF: Very.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: And a strategically placed wife is sometimes a great help.

ALICE KORFF: Oh, they were extremely helpful, and very interested and good friends of the Bruce's. Of course Forbes Watson was alive at that time, as you know, and Mrs. Watson's still here -- I'm sure Olin has told you that?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes.

ALICE KORFF: Have you seen her, or talked with her?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: No, I haven't.

ALICE KORFF: She's delightful you know, and very articulate, and I'm sure that -- well, she's not well, but I'm sure that you could talk with her.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: The representation was that she was not well. I have a certain feeling about invading -- you know -- I do. But Forbes Watson was a giant figure -- you know, The Arts Magazine.

ALICE KORFF: Oh, I don't know, Olin would be able to tell that better than I, but I go there to see her -- oh, a couple of times a year at least, and she's always glad to talk about the days when Forbes was so prominent, and her apartment, which is just around the corner here, it just filled with paintings, and Glackens, you know, and all the people that they knew so well. And of course, he was the giant wasn't he? -- critic and a great, great force, and I don't think Bruce would ever have been able to put it across without Forbes as the guiding light on it, as far as the aesthetic content of what was done.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes, he was a gifted user of words. He could make them walk. I mean his editorial in the Arts Magazine -- wow they're touched with fire.

ALICE KORFF: He was so funny and so gay -- oh he was, he was an enfant terrible, he was -- (laughter)

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Really?

ALICE KORFF: Lots of fun -- very, very gay. We used to often have many, many evenings at his house and then, oh all around, different friends, who knew him very well at that time.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Then he's other than his editorial -- lively, witty --

ALICE KORFF: He, himself, oh yes --

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Sardonic -- probably wit of the graver kind.

ALICE KORFF: Naughty, yes -- he used to say anything. I remember his remark about the National Gallery, which you, as you know, was designed by John Russel Pope, and he said "that is the last papal bull."

HARLAN PHILLIPS: That's marvelous.

ALICE KORFF: He thought it was a terrible building.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: What insight did you gain into the procedures which were established to -- you know, this was on a competition basis in the Treasury Department.

ALICE KORFF: I think it was very good and they tried different types of competitions -- more open, than limited, and of course, always with the regional idea. That was basic to everything, that the artist should come from the area where they were to paint, which was good, and that helped bring up the whole idea of regional art, I think, and spread it around. One of the ideas that Bruce wanted to put forward, I think, in his project was to have painters more representative of their native part of the country, instead of doing what had been done so often; taking a New York artist and sending him on to the Middle West, or anywhere, and having complete control in New York of what was done on the big jobs. He wanted to open it up and have the painters in the area where the mural, the work of art would be, to have them have a chance to produce and have something that would have the native flavor. I think he really succeeded in that. I'm sure that Olin has told you this too?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Well, you know, its almost mystical to me that you can float an idea that would have national impact the way this one did. And open up space, wall space.

ALICE KORFF: Well, that was one of the tragedies, of course, that the wall spaces were not as good as they should have been, because they were an afterthought. The decoration was an afterthought. Nowadays, I think the idea has been so much more accepted that the decoration, the mural, the sculpture should be spotted, should be placed there by the architect, and go into the original concept of the building, rather than someone going around after the building is up and saying well this could be cleared away, or we could put something there, or there's a possible vista here, and so forth. But this was so sad that these good things had to go into walls which had not originally been planned for them; they were not an intrinsic part of the building.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: But it illustrated, I think, as of the times the distance between architects and fine artists.

ALICE KORFF: Which we would hope would be closed more now, yes ---

HARLAN PHILLIPS: And this was, in a sense, a lesson. I don't know how educational, in a mutual way, it was. I think you do anticipate today that in public buildings certainly there's some form of decoration and architects in their planning ---

ALICE KORFF: There was an excellent little exhibition that was done last spring for the Convention for the American Institute of Architects here, and it was called, "Art in Architecture." It was arranged by a Norman Fletcher from the Architects' Collaborative in Boston, that's Gropius' firm, and it was on the occasion of this joint convention of the Latin American architects and the American architects who are here, so they choose examples from both continents. I think it was an exceptional little show that they put together about 30 panels, 40 x 40 in size, showing the fine murals, mosaics, sculptures, fountains in place, and their use in contemporary architecture. I haven't seen this done before. This was a stunning show.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes. This was an educational period, you know. Given the times, I suspect that a survey of wall space available would be Bruce's way of getting out on the road, getting the machine going, even though in his own thinking the fact that this space was not designed, expressly for some decoration --

ALICE KORFF: It was the best that they could do!

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes, and he would make -- he'd be the kind that would -- well, seize the opportunity and improve it, by the procedures which he would set up, and the emphasis upon the regions.

ALICE KORFF: Yes. Of course he did other projects also -- the easel painting projects.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes, I wondered about this too?

ALICE KORFF: Well, I remember being a judge once of a show of watercolors which they had made for one of the hospitals in Louisiana, I think, and a tremendous number of pictures came in, and then we selected different groups to go out, and some were shown here in an exhibition.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: I think that Maria Ealand let me have a catalog ---

ALICE KORFF: Of that?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: -- of the watercolor show. But I hadn't supposed it was again something which was called in from various areas in the country. That wasn't clear. You mentioned Louisiana --

ALICE KORFF: I think -- well, this went to Louisiana. It was put into one of the Federal hospitals, I think --

HARLAN PHILLIPS: I see ---

ALICE KORFF: The watercolors were hung in the rooms down there, but this was not the decoration of a post office, or a public building as such. This was really a different kind of project to have smaller items hung in private rooms, but this was a government supported hospital and quite a valid, I think, thing to do.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: But was there much easel painting?

ALICE KORFF: Not so much, no.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: No. You know there were jurisdictional matters. I often wondered if there was any difficulty, what the source of it was as between Bruce and Cahill. Maybe this was just the necessary thing, I don't know, some funds as I've often understood it, were used to defray the expenses of assistants on murals, which came from WPA funds. I can't believe that Cahill, you know, philosophically minded as he was, would think in terms of dollars and cents that were going for some other purpose. I don't know, but there seems to have been some antagonism between the two agencies. Now what it's source was, I have no idea. Have you got any enlightenment?

ALICE KORFF: No. I agree with you that there was some antagonism there -- between the two. I think they felt that Cahill's project was much more wholesale, much less selective; whereas, they were doing a definite job of decorating of the buildings.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes.

ALICE KORFF: This was a clear-cut, clear defined, single thing which they were attempting to do, whereas his was more employment, and they took what came in, and so forth.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: But these, in both instances, easel painting was selective for public buildings.

ALICE KORFF: Yes, yes. I hung the exhibition down at the Labor Department, too, after the project was over, and Ann Blankenhorn worked with me on that. We made a selection of the works which were to be hung in the corridors. I think, I don't know whether they're still there or not, but they were there a few years ago. There were inroads on that collection and people snatched them into offices. They disappeared. I remember going back and finding holes all around. I think Mr. Wonder is interested, you know, in collecting what was there. I have an idea they've been taken down now? Do you know?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: No, I don't, I don't. But in the large murals that were done then here in town -- I've talked with George Biddle.

ALICE KORFF: Yes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: I talked with Henry Varnum Poor who's a dear, sweet fellow --

ALICE KORFF: Yes. Geoffrey(?) of course, was one --

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Well, I haven't talked with him, but Biddle had some difficulty on the acceptance of the mural. He didn't particularly care to talk about it, but I suspect it was like anything else -- you know, a set of blinders. That the passage wasn't necessarily easy, even once accepted. I suspect there's a deep independence -- well, like most artistic people, some would react more violently to attempts or thought attempts to control and redirect something that they may have designed. I don't know --

ALICE KORFF: He pulled a great many people into it, you know that, did you? Miss Perkins was in it, and my roommate that I lived with, Miss Melcom Ross who became Mrs. Melcom Ross, was in it also. Olin was in it -- its interesting that he put those people in.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes. He didn't have much in the way of explanation as to why that was so?

ALICE KORFF: Why they --?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: No --

ALICE KORFF: I don't know.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: I don't know. He's a strange fellow --

ALICE KORFF: Well, I think his figures are sometimes unflattering. I think maybe perhaps that was what was the - of course the "Ladies in Cheesecloth" era, you know, was very accepted then. The murals that most people were used to were the very flowing garments, and the simple and the pretty more-candy-box kind of colors. I think many of the murals which were painted on the project were more the Ashcan School, were the stronger, more -- well almost ugly --

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Caricature --

ALICE KORFF: Yes, yes, I think people felt that, but it was just a more realistic, a franker portrayal, and out of the type of thing that had been seen so much.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Well, I don't get this impression from Henry Varnum Poor. He would make a design and carry it out and the rustling of feathers would just pass him by, but I suspect that George Biddle was somewhat more sensitive to even whispered, or hinted criticism.

ALICE KORFF: He might have been, yes, -- temperamental --

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes --

ALICE KORFF: He had a different disposition, I think --

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Very much so.

ALICE KORFF: Yes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: And I think he harbored, in a sense, the thought that in some ways he was either responsible for the development of the idea --

ALICE KORFF: He was, yes! He was swimming with Roosevelt in the pool, I think, when he hatched the idea.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: But I think it was a sort of thing given the times that was in the air. For example, what impact do you see of the Mexican school on this, you know, the development of something American, as distinct from Rivera Orozco, Siqueiros and others that were working in the Mexican School. I don't know how much preparation we had in terms of murals.

ALICE KORFF: We didn't! And there were just a few people, as I said, that were doing it from New York, and there was none of this regional flowering which came out. That was the exciting thing, the new talent and the new people, men like Frank Michau, whom you don't hear of now, but who were very admired at that time. I don't know whatever happened to him, but he did those wonderful horses, great things that appeared -- even some of the Indian work was interesting, too.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Oh yes. I mean it had ramifications way beyond -- I wonder in terms of fresco work. I suspect the great leaders, you know, in this period were the Mexicans.

ALICE KORFF: Yes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: And yet, they were working in Radio City, in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and it was a whole unexplored area of possibilities. I don't know when the idea is really spawned; it may have come as early as '30, between one artist and another. Wouldn't it be great, if, you know, given this we might be able to do something so it grew in a sense.

ALICE KORFF: I don't know how many of murals were in fresco and how many were on canvas, do you?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: No I don't, and it varies, but this effort do define something American, as opposed to the

Mexican influence.

ALICE KORFF: This was very much part of it.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: I think so -- certainly part of Biddle's thinking --

ALICE KORFF: Yes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: -- because Biddle had been in Mexico. He had talked with Rivera, knew Rivera.

ALICE KORFF: And the Mexicans were coming up here, at that time, were they not?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes.

ALICE KORFF: Where was the Rockefeller -- that mural, wasn't it about that time?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: '33 and '34.

ALICE KORFF: Well, just about then.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah. Did we have something definable American? Could we develop, not a rival, but an American School of mural painting and painters? I don't find much of this from the Association of Mural painters which is --

ALICE KORFF: Well, they're rather reactionary, you know.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Terrible!

ALICE KORFF: Terrible, yes. The whole thing has more or less died down, hasn't it?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes. Even prior to its development, I didn't find them making this kind of suggestion --

ALICE KORFF: No.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: It waited for Bruce, Porter, Biddle and others, even in the literary field, like Ernestine Evan, you know, the group that used to meet, and think and talk aloud. Out of it the idea comes, and you make whatever arrangements you can by correspondence as to what you might do if you had the opportunity. And when opportunity knocks, as the pool incident that you relate -- it strikes a fire.

ALICE KORFF: And it happens - yes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes. Then it becomes a question of how to organize it, how to manage it --

ALICE KORFF: Well, that's why Bruce was so valuable, I think --

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Right. He's the architect of the means whereby this idea -- which I think was pretty general was pushed to a conclusion.

ALICE KORFF: You know about the Virgin Island Project, too?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: No.

ALICE KORFF: Well, that was another one that was very similar to the one in Key West. A group of artists was sent down there. I did an article on them for the Magazine of Art at that time. Aron Bowrod, quite a few people like that, went down and made a whole series of paintings on the Virgin Islands.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: This was a deliberately seeded thing?

ALICE KORFF: Yes. Yes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: I'm not entirely sure about that whole complex down there -- Puerto Rico, and perhaps the Virgin Islands, too, were placed under an overall kind of czar from an economic point of view -- his name escapes me at the moment -- to help rehabilitate the islands or create some industrial base. This may be part of it.

ALICE KORFF: Yes, I don't remember. I could look up that article, and maybe there's something in it, that would give some light on why they were down there.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Did you follow the WPA aspect as closely as you did the Treasury Department?



ALICE KORFF: No, very little.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Very little.

ALICE KORFF: We knew Mrs. Halpert and I saw her a few times of course she was very much in it.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: I didn't know that she had a position.

ALICE KORFF: Yes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Oh, did she?

ALICE KORFF: Yes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: This was in the early days?

ALICE KORFF: Yes. Well, I think she worked with Cahill on it, it seems to me. I don't remember if she had the New York Section, or what it was.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: There was some hint or suggestion in terms of the volume of materials that came into Washington there was some problem as to how to allocate them.

ALICE KORFF: Yes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: She may have handled that aspect of it in the early days, I don't know. I've talked with her about this particular subject --

ALICE KORFF: She's not at all well now. I think she has some kind of a brain tumor, or something of that sort; and she's been in the hospital.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Just opened a new gallery.

ALICE KORFF: Oh.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: It's a marvelous little gallery.

ALICE KORFF: And Stuart Davis has done so well too. He was her great protege.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: I talked at great length with him. He was quite a guy -- Stuart Davis. Strange. But you didn't follow the Cahill aspect of the --

ALICE KORFF: Very little.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: -- because I wondered whether there was any cross fertilization?

ALICE KORFF: No, I don't think he had anything to do with it, as far as I know --

HARLAN PHILLIPS: No. Untouched -- almost.

ALICE KORFF: They each did their own job and rather checked their cards

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Well, this is understandable, but the whole impact on America, you know, post office murals where none had been before, on people who perhaps had never really known what fine art was.

ALICE KORFF: Well, that's why it was exciting, I think. I talked with Robert Frost when I was down in Florida, too -  
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HARLAN PHILLIPS: Oh, did you?

ALICE KORFF: He was perfectly delightful. I was visiting the Ross's there who knew him, and they took me over to tea one day, and you know how Florida houses are all Spanish styled. We drove for miles around Miami to get to his house through all this Spanish architecture, and then we came to a little grove of pine trees that looked just like New England, and in the middle of this grove of pine trees was a white clapboard house, believe it or not, and here was Robert Frost living there. I don't know how he ever found the place which was this sort of, this transplant of his own atmosphere. There he was in a light blue cotton shirt, you know, that just went with his intense blue eyes, newspapers spread all over the floor; it was Sunday, they had been reading, and he talked about the project and he was so interested in it and said, "What a wonderful thing it had been and what a new wind had been blowing during that time," and spoke so glowingly of it. I believe he knew Ned quite well also.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes.

ALICE KORFF: But everybody felt that -- you know, the great possibilities of bringing art out of the very "effete recherche" sort of atmosphere, and bring it as you say to people who may never have come in contact with it before, who wouldn't go into a gallery, but they would go into a post office and they would see it.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: There's just no way of measuring that.

ALICE KORFF: I remember once working with some children in a gallery and a child came up and looked at one of the paintings there and said, "Is it hand-painted?" Well, this is something. It is hard. It takes you back. You don't know how to begin.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes.

ALICE KORFF: But this is it -- could it possibly be by someone's hand? It's not mass produced. This is the thing that you break down I think, by taking a new work of art into a public building.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes. Yes, of course there's no seismograph by which we were able to measure. I think there's a great educational process going on. The real nature of which we may never understand, except insofar as taste is at least broadened. It's funny what happens when you kick open a window in your brain and you let in some new life.

ALICE KORFF: Yes, yes, yes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: It's never the same again, even if you are inarticulate about it, or whatever it may be, nonetheless you see a picture on the wall. You may not have to say a word about it, but you're altered in the process, having seen it. Like the fellow, "Is it hand-painted", or just watching someone up on a scaffold is a procedural device as to how it can be done. I suspect that most of the murals that were done had their little groups of watchers. I can't believe that in a city when you build a big building and they cut holes in the fence around it so that you can --

ALICE KORFF: Sidewalk superintendents!

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Exactly, this is the same --

ALICE KORFF: This is important, isn't it?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Indeed it is! As to what is carried away from this experience --

ALICE KORFF: Yes. Well, this is part of the widening horizon program that Mrs. Goldberg is so interested in and the head start program -- it's just the same thing, isn't it?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: That's right. How to open windows. Right.

ALICE KORFF: It's exactly the same thing.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: How to open windows. You're right. In the fine arts, in the public building aspect of it, has this had continuing vitality? I wouldn't think so.

ALICE KORFF: No.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: No. I don't know why, do you?

ALICE KORFF: Do you mean as far as architecture --

HARLAN PHILLIPS: That is so far as the Treasury Department -- it came to a terminal point it seems.

ALICE KORFF: Well, I don't think that they had been distinguished for the buildings that have been going up, do you?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: No.

ALICE KORFF: Finally, GSA, as you know, is going to have an advisory panel of architects, 17 architects are just about to be appointed now to work with the General Services Administration on selecting architects and on the quality of buildings. This is what the Embassy Program has had for a great many years, extremely successfully, but this is the first break through really in the GSA, so we've all been despaired with the Post Office Department's construction.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Oh, that's terrible.

ALICE KORFF: But it is interesting that they finally agreed to that. I think Gasko is a very strong man, and I'm sure that he will make it work.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: It's quite possible that this period of the 30's, so far as the Ned Bruce operation is concerned, perhaps didn't quite educate government circles as well as it might conceivably have. It did provide America with a collection of painting experiences which they can visually see, you know, on existing things, but it never worked its way in deeply into the government itself.

ALICE KORFF: That's almost too much to ask. Ha, ha.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: There are perhaps other factors at loose. We sort of turned away from a discovery of things American in the late 30's to a recognition that there were ill winds abroad and we got into that preparedness thing, so that this was in a sense looked upon as something that might be terminated without having the continuity.

ALICE KORFF: A loss --

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes. Well, it's almost an autopsy in that sense.

ALICE KORFF: Well, it didn't carry over as you said --

HARLAN PHILLIPS: No.

ALICE KORFF: That's why I mentioned this about the advisory committee, because this kind of thing, I think, is coming back a little. Of course, Kennedy was so interested in the quality of architecture and the arts, and I think that there was a tremendous pick-up then which we have lost somewhat, now --

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes. Yes. Henry Varnum Poor said that in the very act of succeeding, in the 30's, it's quite possible that we wrote a period to a certain aspect of American fine arts -- that is, in the rash of things -- perhaps that's not the right word, but the extent of the work that was done was, in effect, a period to the paragraph terminating it.

ALICE KORFF: It shouldn't be. It should be the starting point.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: No. But he couldn't understand why, couldn't quite think why, except that the receptivity in power circles or administrative circles, was insufficient. It had to wait for pressure, and well, look at the pressure. Our national past-time now is visiting museums, not attending baseball games.

ALICE KORFF: Well, also there has been a tremendous upswing, I think, in amateur painting. A great many people are trying to express themselves through that medium, and certainly the art schools are jammed. I don't say that it's all good, but at least its participation, and must make them understand other paintings a great deal more.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Maybe it's the whole nature of Edward Bruce, himself, who -- well, he had a kind of cyclonic force -- high and low -- and the very fact that the man who had the quality of vitality and vigor that he had to be chaired during the last part of his life must have been horrible to him. I mean a vigorous man, such as he was.

ALICE KORFF: It was awfully hard for him.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: There in that kind of thing you could see the effect of perhaps a single voice who organized the team and who perhaps in dealing with the Federal architects, Simon and others, who were maybe, so far as I know somewhat more insensitive to the idea -- you know, it's a hard thing to push through. Sometimes the men who made the clearing put it that way -- you have to get rid of the bum furniture before you can refurnish the room. And the bum furniture, probably in the 30's was the vested interest in non-decoration of public buildings -- you know, just uneducated about it. I don't know. I don't know how he felt about resources that were available to him in the Federal Government to help put this across. I would think it was a "roll-up-your-sleeves" fight from the start.

ALICE KORFF: I believe it was, but because he was a tough lobbyist really, he just lobbied and parlayed it through.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: I wouldn't expect him to accept a no. He would find some way, because this is the nature of the restless fellow; and the fellow who has a sense of power, and knows how a thing can be carried out, even when he meets adversity, but I should think that in those days, the adversity was not a little, which may be helped. You know, there's a limit to what the human, however vigorous a man, can stand and this constant

pounding on him must have been tremendous. And then to have to sit an unwilling witness to the loss of one's own vigor -- phwew!

ALICE KORFF: Well, he came right down in this wheelchair to the office, and kept right on.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Oh sure. But you know, I suspect the story in terms of the total product is the story that can be seen in terms of the energy of Mr. Bruce's himself. It's related to this kind of skyscaling thinking, you know? And while he had standards, and this is part of the battle, you know. How to run with standard at the same time and create opportunity and set up those procedures where acceptable items can be chosen. It's not easy when you deal with artists who are these cranky, unique individualistic things.

ALICE KORFF: I had an interesting time early in the game. When the project was first set, I worked at the Phillips Gallery, and Mr. Phillips was head of the local committee for the PWAP, and my job was to interview all the artists that came in who wanted to be on the project, and find out where they came from, their history and biography, and then catalog their samples of the work that they all brought in. Then once a week Mr. Phillips and just have Watkins and the others that were on the committee reviewed all the work and selected the candidates. It was awfully interesting to see how it was done. This was the process that went on in all the different states for the different regions for selection of the artists to go on the project. It was my first indoctrination and orientation in seeing how the critics evaluated. It was just fascinating, you know, to see. They knew immediately whether this man, you know, well here's something, and it was just fascinating. Then all the personalities of all the people who came in, too. There was one boy -- I don't know if you heard of him at all. His name is Richard Sargeant. I have one of his little watercolors here now which he gave me. He was a tiny little man, looked as though he were half starved, and he and a friend drove in a little jalopy all the way from Seattle so he could be on the project, or try to find something to do. He had almost no money and told me his mother gave him a barrel of apples to put in the car. I really think that he ate apples all the way across. It was about all they had. He was extremely successful and turned out some beautiful work. Then later he went to work with Ben Shahn, and I don't know what's become of him now. We were speaking of him the other day, because he was one of the ones who had great promise. But they were these kind of very colorful people who were appearing.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: I think you're right. If you get a generalization about the 30's in art, and you take it to an individual artist, as I have, you know, sample them on the West Coast and in New England and in New York and in the Mid-West, the detail of what happened in their particular life, and how this loomed as a great opportunity. You're right. They were doing a hundred and one thousand things not connected with art in order to keep themselves busy.

ALICE KORFF: Yes! One of our projects, which I had to oversee and which was done under Duncan Phillips Section was the habitat backgrounds in the Zoo. The artist had to study the flora of the different areas, this was particularly in the reptile house where the snakes came from and then paint these marvelous backgrounds. Really they were putting fine painting in the backgrounds of the snake houses. I remember one poor man who, we were going to assign out there. He was already to go in, and he didn't realize that of course the snakes would be taken out, but he was so anxious to work. It was interesting going up there and seeing. They had headquarters in one of the rooms behind the scenes where they kept all the mice that had to be fed to the python and the men were working and in the very difficult space up there, but turning out fine things for the zoo. As you say, they had to do all sorts of projects other than straight artists assignments.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes, yes. Well, you know, the one of the rare things was the Index of American Design.

ALICE KORFF: Yes!

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Well, you had people who were not necessarily creative, but who have fantastic precision and competence in this particular line -- rendering. Why you can put a rendition alongside of the real thing, and there are occasions where it is very difficult to tell them apart -- that's how marvelous these things are.

ALICE KORFF: It was a wonderful record, wasn't it?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Of course. This grew out of the other projects where the necessity to tailor-make a project to fit the tools, and people and interests that you had on hand lend itself, but for that fluidity in the selection, we might not have had it. Suppose they would have simply said, "You're not a creative artist, we can't use you."

ALICE KORFF: Yes. I brought down this little booklet to show you. I don't know if you had seen this or not. Perhaps you have.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Oh yes.

ALICE KORFF: You know those?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Oh yes, yes. These are gorgeous, I think I sent one out to -- Maria Ealand had a selection like this, which I sent out to Detroit.

ALICE KORFF: Fritz Gutheim gave me that. I've supposed you talked with him too?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: No. But someone else may have talked to him, but I haven't. Forbes Watson was the sort of public relations person, too, wasn't he?

ALICE KORFF: Oh yes. He did a lot of that.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: The Bulletin was largely his -- wasn't it?

ALICE KORFF: I think so. Eddie Rowan was on the project, too. I don't know just how they divided the work, but Forbes was the writer. He was the front man. I think he talked to people and did do the promotional end of it, put together, I think the Bulletin.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes.

ALICE KORFF: Mrs. Gutheim was his secretary for a long while, so she knows a great deal about it too.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: You mentioned Ed Rowan.

ALICE KORFF: Yes. He died.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes, unhappily; he would have been a person. Was his a complimentary quality to Mr. Bruce?

ALICE KORFF: Oh, yes. They got along beautifully. Strangely enough, because he was sort of an odd person, but he had the same principles, the same basic feeling that Bruce had, and then it seems to me he was out in Iowa, Stone City, was he not?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes.

ALICE KORFF: The school there? So that he had a very good background for this kind of thing. He was a dedicated, devoted worker in this operation.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes, you know, whenever you run into a person who is a cyclone and he gives off sparks, you would think that part of the living with him is also the return of sparks, but apparently -- at least I have gathered that he could take some of the skyscaling power statements from Ned Bruce and in terms of the detailed management in working them out make them walk, help make them walk.

ALICE KORFF: Yes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: And not an inconsiderable talent in those terms --

ALICE KORFF: Yes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: So that there never seemed to be a disparity between leadership as to what the aim was.

ALICE KORFF: They all got along extremely well, I think.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: (Olin) Dows said that.

ALICE KORFF: And Olin was awfully good too. He worked like a dog on his TRAP Project, too, and left his own work entirely to do it for what I think a couple of years or more.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes. Yes.

ALICE KORFF: And he had a wonderful way with the painters too, you know. He was just marvelous with them, and he saw them all the time, -- had them to his house a great deal and then as I say Sundays that we used to spend together, he just -- well, it wasn't just office work to him. This was to him a total project, a whole way of life at that time.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Right, this was an extension of what he was really, I think what is really interesting in some respects, and, perhaps, an unanticipated is that artists, or artistic people, became under necessity very good administrators.

ALICE KORFF: Yes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: And you wouldn't have thought so, and its a -- I don't know if the two are necessarily exclusive, but I would think that the demands--

ALICE KORFF: They're often considered to be.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: The demands of one would require a different impulse in the kind of freedom in terms of artistic temperament.

ALICE KORFF: Well, I'm not sure that Forbes was a good administrator. I think that he was more free-wheeling, but the others probably kept him in line, and he went way out ahead with his ideas, and his promotional ability.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Well, there is always this flavor to have a voice, and an articulate voice.

ALICE KORFF: Yes, yes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: But sometimes the idea by itself isn't enough, you know, it's how its to be done, and this requires a different approach. What has surprised me really is that people who have no necessary background in administration as to mechanics, you know, techniques --

ALICE KORFF: They pick it up.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes, and do surprisingly well.

ALICE KORFF: Well, sometimes better because you're not afraid to cut through a good deal of red tape.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: I think that's probably part of it, because there was no precedent to this.

ALICE KORFF: Of course, Olin had the added advantage of being a neighbor of the President's in Ryhnbeck and the Morgenthau's too, he knew very well, so that he was a natural for that position.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes. Well personal contact is important --

ALICE KORFF: But he had ability also, which he hadn't, as you say, hadn't done any office work at all.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Had had perhaps no opportunity before and you know the times or the situation in which we find ourselves, certainly so far as we're concerned, seems to throw to the surface -- it's surprising how it does -- that person, or that group that somehow or other becomes a catalyst for --

ALICE KORFF: Well, people were fired with the idea, I think; well, that was all part of the whole New Deal time, wasn't it?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes!

ALICE KORFF: Because you got to many of young lawyers who were in New York, or who had never dreamed of going into government because that was too stale, too fuddy-duddy, and you know they had the picture of the typical government worker. They wouldn't touch it, and they all came streaming down here and there was that wonderful atmosphere of the New Deal of people who were suddenly finding drama in what had been so hum-drum, considered un-drama before.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes. You're right. This is the land of opportunity, and for brightness, too.

ALICE KORFF: It was so exciting, all you knew, the group you would see everywhere and the people who had just come down and were landing all these marvelous jobs in the National Youth Administration too, the people were doing such exciting things that had never been done and there was a great feeling, well now it can be done.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: I think abroad the land was the impulse in the thirties, to do something -- that is, government, that far-away-thing, that enemy in a sense -- ceased to be --

ALICE KORFF: Suddenly you found you could get in the door and you could put across some of the ideas that you'd always had in the back of you mind.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: It became an instrument of youth and service in these terms, and I know the study I did of young lawyers who came to Washington --

ALICE KORFF: That would be interesting, yes --

HARLAN PHILLIPS: -- Well, they were arguing cases in the Supreme Court.

ALICE KORFF: That was fantastic. Perhaps they over did it.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Well, I guess this is a choice again. Stanley Reed had the theory that rather than have some of the old-timers argue these cases, he'd send the young lawyers and give them an opportunity, in a sense that David could slay Goliath seven days of the week, and you had some young bright fellows --

ALICE KORFF: Oh he was great, yes, --

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes, and he would give them this opportunity!

ALICE KORFF: Yes, yes, yes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: So it changed the whole flavor. I know I talked with Telford Taylor who was arguing in Court on appeals, two months after he arrived in the Interior Department, and would never have found his way to the courthouse had he gone into the law firm in New York which was interested in him, but for the 30's.

ALICE KORFF: Well, there's a little of that now, don't you think? You feel still attractive to people to come down -- Kennedy and Johnson, also I think has appealed to the younger people to take a cut in salary and to take these interesting jobs. Like Burton Wooten the other day, taking over the second job in Poverty. I think, that spirit is still going --

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes, it's a bigger challenge, really, a greater opportunity to work out the details of a general idea, or impulse, and it takes a fellow who will sit there for awhile with his eyes closed and his feet up on the desk somewhere, dreaming away as to how to do it. It's not a humdrum nine to five. Its a twenty-four hour a day process if you get involved.

ALICE KORFF: And Ned Bruce was very anxious that the Indians should be represented, too. He made quite an effort to get them in on the project, and also even Lopez, the wood carver -- you know who did those wonderful Pientates figures -- they have a tall, almost an El Greco - like figure, attenuated and pulled out. They stand in a cart, in a carro, and it's part of the figures that are drawn in the procession of the Penitentes. Well, he was famous all though the southwest for carving these, making these wood carvings. He was one of the ones that was on the project, too, all those people because he felt that this was a way of preserving their art too and helping them. Ned Bruce reached out in so many ways, used his project to bring out all sorts of values which he thought should be preserved.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Did he work with the Indian Bureau?

ALICE KORFF: I believe he did. I know that Nina Parara, who is now Mrs. John Collier -- her father-in-law was the Indian Commissioner that worked a lot on the project, and she developed some of the criteria for the Indians and how they were to be in on it. She lives out in Santa Fe now.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Well, John Collier was an imaginative fellow.

ALICE KORFF: Yes!

HARLAN PHILLIPS: You know, he was a skyscaling comet in terms of idea--

ALICE KORFF: Yes, I knew him too.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Oh, did you? And was this done under the Treasury Department?

ALICE KORFF: I'm not sure just how that was done, but I know it was part of this whole project. I remember going to her house one day and working on some of the criteria that we were to put down. Then she spoke of these young lawyers who were so wonderful in drawing up a project. She said, "You just talk to them. You tell them what you need, and they know how to translate it into terms that's going to be governmentese. It's going to get by" and they did set up that phase of the project which included the Indians and made it possible for the Indians to come in on the project. Just how it was hooked on, I don't know.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: No, because -- let's see, there was Farm Security Administration.

ALICE KORFF: Yes --

HARLAN PHILLIPS: -- was doing some photography. NYA, particularly in the southwest, I think, Lou Bloch was out there in a kind of educational and craft thing. This was NYA. Now whether there was any overall coordination, I don't know, I'm not sure.

ALICE KORFF: Probably the Indians Art and Crafts Board would have that material.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes.

ALICE KORFF: I was there yesterday looking at the Indian exhibit and went down to the Board. Apparently, they -- well you know about them?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes.

ALICE KORFF: I think they do wonderful things.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes.

ALICE KORFF: And they must have records, I would think, of the earlier phases of this sort of promotion for the Indian.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: I guess Collier was worried about health -- Navaho health programs. So they got involved -- maybe it was in a sense of free lunch counter of idea there in Washington. And ideas that could be made to serve, where utilized, seized, converted into something in Indian affairs.

ALICE KORFF: Yes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Certainly for the youth, in terms of education. The WPA sponsored a whole series of community arts centers which could be utilized for other purposes, like art instruction, exhibits and so on. There were a lot of facets that were available on the local level which could be put to use, and it strikes me that a fellow like Collier would see that something could be done in Indian affairs to preserve just the craft and --

ALICE KORFF: Certainly a lot more is being done right now. They are trying to direct the training of young Indians so that their wares will be a little more marketable too, and control the dye which the weavers use, for instance, so that they don't get these very harsh aline dyes but have more the traditional vegetable dyes. That I know -- years ago they were trying to do that on the reservation, and I think that's all part of really preserving for the Indians and what his ancestors did naturally, but not letting him become contaminated with the mass-production.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: You know what is so staggering about all this is the fantastic experimentation that went on. It's often overlooked -- that is, the whole way in which a general program in Washington, once made available out in a community --

ALICE KORFF: Is adapted in the end.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Was cut and tailor made to fit and suit local interests and local drive. It varied in terms of success, depending on the local people.

ALICE KORFF: Well, this is called the American Principle really, isn't it?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Marvelous, yes.

ALICE KORFF: It's good.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes, I think marvelous.

ALICE KORFF: I had seen somewhat of Oliver LaFarge when I was out in the southwest, and I remember we went once to the Gallop Ceremonial which is still going on, of course, and there was the Indian Arts and Crafts Fair. Oliver was one of the judges, and he explained to me how important he thought that judging was because it put emphasis on the rugs which had the fine, early good designs rather than the ones that were cute, or had an American Flag in the corner, or something that was completely out of keeping. He was doing the same thing, trying to preserve and trying to bring forward the good elements in the contemporary Indian work.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Wasn't his brother --

ALICE KORFF: Bansil -- yes, was on the project, one of the mural painters.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes.

ALICE KORFF: He was very close friend of -- no it wasn't Bansil, it was the other brother -- I can't remember his name -- who was Olin's close, close friend, and he was lost in the war. He did a mosaic right here in Washington in the St. Matthew's Cathedral -- Tom. Tom LaFarge.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Right, right. I think there was another --



ALICE KORFF: Henry.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: -- LaFarge.

ALICE KORFF: Henry was also on the project, yes. But he was an administrator.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes. He worked with Olin Dows, I believe, for a while.

ALICE KORFF: He did, indeed, he did.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: For a couple of years. I talked to him.

ALICE KORFF: He's in New York, I think, isn't he? What is he doing up there?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Let's see -- oh, an assistant editor or on the editorial board of an Art magazine -- the nature of which escapes me at the moment.

ALICE KORFF: Art News?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Art News, yes.

ALICE KORFF: With Frankfurter?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes, with Frankfurter. I saw him just recently, surrounded by books which I would love to get my hands on. He's got that kind of book, the illusive rare thing. He had some fair keen insight into the procedural basis, that is the regional, or the local judging, you know, in all the competitions and the whole sense of appeal as it came on up to a higher -- that it allowed for that kind of fluidity, instead of being a harsh, cut-and-dried kind of thing.

ALICE KORFF: This was very exciting for him, I think.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes, oh my yes, yes.

ALICE KORFF: Ingsley Hopper was another person who worked on that.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: I don't know where he is, do you?

ALICE KORFF: I don't know either. No.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: He was last located on a farm up in Connecticut.

ALICE KORFF: Yes. That's the last I heard of him.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: But with drawn largely some intimation of some --

ALICE KORFF: Illness?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Some death in the family, or some person quite close to him, and he just turned his back on everything.

ALICE KORFF: Oh dear.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Withdrew. Now whether this is so or not, this is the inference I gathered from the talk I had. He was another one who had much longer continuity with it than LaFarge did.

ALICE KORFF: Yes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes. Much longer. You know, the minute men who sprang to arms. Oh, I can't think of anything else at the moment, that might be fruitful unless you want to tell me the current whereabouts of Ann Blankenhorn, so I can track her down.

ALICE KORFF: Yes, let me go upstairs and see if I can find that for you.

END OF INTERVIEW

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