



Smithsonian
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Oral history interview with Buckley Mac-
Gurrin, 1964 June 20

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Transcript

Interview

BH: BETTY LOCHRIE HOAG

BM: BUCKLEY MAC-GURRIN

BH: Mr. Mac-Gurrin, you were one of the most important artists on the Projects which the Archives is studying because of the work that you did in the Los Angeles County Museum and also in the Los Angeles Hall of Records, where you did half of ten murals which are certainly some of the most interesting done during the Project. It involved more research and involved working with more of the Project groups than most others. But, before we talk about them, I'd like to ask you a little about your own life. Will you please tell us where you were born and when?

BM: Well, I was born Kalamazoo, Michigan in 1896.

BH: Of Irish-American parents?

BM: Yes, yes. Both my parents were from Grand Rapids, and my grandparents were also.

BH: Where did you go to school?

BM: I went to parochial grammar school in Kalamazoo and then we moved out to Salt Lake City in 1912 and I went to Salt Lake High School for one semester and I went to All Hallows College for one semester. From there I went down to Santa Clara in California, and I went through high school down there and my first year in college at Santa Clara.

BH: I see. And then you went on to the University of California after that, didn't you?

BM: Yes. I went to Berkeley and I had one semester at Berkeley. Then the first war started so I joined the Navy and had about two years and a half, about. Naval Reserve and Ensign submarine chasers, mainly. While I was at Berkeley I went to Berkeley School of Arts and Crafts at night and took life-drawing and so on. I had some art credits from Berkeley under Perham Nahr and Xavier Martinez.

BH: Had you always been interested in doing art work? Or did this start when you were in the Navy?

BM: It was a thing that always seemed to bother me. I used to . . . Ah, of course, I went to a little art school in Kalamazoo, too, when I was still in grammar school. I used to go on Saturdays and after school, you know. And that . . . it was kind of cute because it was a commercial art school but you learned something: you learned how it smelled, and so on.

BH: That's a good introduction.

BM: It wasn't bad. It had a smell, you know, and then. Well, then I got up as far as life-class and I remember there was a big discussion about that. I went with another kid who lived across the street and we were only about 14, I guess. So there was a big problem about whether or not we should be allowed to see the models, or not, without any clothes on. That was quite a thing. But it was solved by the fact that we moved out to Salt Lake City. I had some life-drawing and stuff in high school there for a little while. But mainly it was at Berkeley. But the main thing was in 1922 when I finished college there. I came down to Hollywood and worked with Famous Players Laskey for a while; I designed some stuff there. And then I decided that I would be a full-time artist, and so I thought, "Well, I'd better go and study." And I thought the best place to go would be Paris. So I went to Paris and I stayed there from 1922 till 1933. I went to Colorossi there and I studied at the Louvre also.

BH: How do you spell Colorossi? Was it a school?

BM: Yes, it's a little old school in Montparnasse. It's Colorossi Ancient Academie Suisse. It was founded in something like 1778 or so.

BH: Is that where you studied with Richard Miller and Charles Guerin?

BM: Oh, yes. I had a little work with Richard Miller. He was an American painter, an Impressionist, and he'd been

in Paris, I guess, for a long time. So I did a little bit with him and then I went to Charles Guerin in the same place and I did life-painting with him, you know. And I studied life-drawing with Richard Navdin; and also all kinds of graphic work, like lithographs and etchings and things. But mainly my But you know the way the French artists always say they are "l'eleve de so-and-so" and use the information for the rest of their lives? Well, my master was Henry Morisset. I was with him for four years.

BH: Was he any relation of Berthe Morisot? [Note: I didn't know my spelling at the time!]

BM: I don't think so. No, he was a marvelous, a marvelous man. I just loved him, and he was so very kind to me, very nice to me. I used to sort of help a little bit because, for some strange reason, I could speak fairly good French when I got there; it wasn't excellent but it was all right. And of course all of his criticisms were in French and . . . so he used to . . . some of the kids When he'd go to criticize the students, you know, he'd say something to him and a boy would look at him with this look meaning that, "I don't know what you are talking about." So he'd call me over and he'd say in French, "Tell him about the so-and-so." Well, for instance, "Tell him the thing about values." Then I'd tell him the thing about values.

BH: Well, you were doing the thing that we call being a "TA" [Teacher's Assistant] today, practically.

BM: Perhaps I was. Perhaps I could say that I was once an assistant. But it was very nice and I stayed there for four years with him. The way I graduated was that in 1926 I received an invitation to the Salon des Tuileries, which was a very excellent show, a big one. Morisset was my sponsor along with Rene Exavier Prinnet. Gosh, I've forgotten already; I can't remember. I'll remember it after a while. Anyway, here I was at the Tuileries and that was a very wonderful show because they used to give you a certain amount of space; they wouldn't say "a painting" or "two paintings" or anything. They'd say, "You have two meters of wall." The theory was that in order to tell anything about an artist, you'd have to see more than one picture and it is better to have a small selection of his work.

BH: They should do that more often that way in galleries!

BM: Yes, it wasn't bad. Of course it was a big show, a big show. It was, well So there I was. Then that same year, 1926, I began to expose. I exposed . . . I could not expose until 1926. I had a thing in the Salon des Humoristes. Forain was the president of that, the head of illustration and of gouache, Oriental kind of drawing.

BH: Pardon me. You had an Oriental-type gouache in that show?

BM: Yes. Oriental kinds of drawings and things, yes.

BH: When had you started being influenced by Oriental things? Had you brought that with you?

BM: Well, this was illustrating for an Oriental tale, you see. The Humoristes . . . it wasn't just funny, but all the "designateurs," the men that did the deluxe illustration, were designateurs. People like Forain, Daumier, sort of thing, you know.

BH: Yes.

BM: People who made their drawings and illustrations for Le Rire, Le Vie Parisien, Le Journal and other papers, too. And illustrations. It was a good show. It made me feel good. It was a juried show, and I didn't know any better or anything. That same year there was a thing called "Salon du France" which was in the gallery Armand Drouant in rue de Rennes. It was a patriotic sort of how. A number of artists contributed paintings to it; they were to be sold and the money was to be given to help revitalize the franc, which was a very optimistic point of view. But it was nice. There were a lot of foreign artists there. It was an international show. So I had a painting there, and then I was happy to get a letter from them afterwards saying, "You'll be happy to know that your painting has been acquired by the State." Because they had some people from Beaux-arts come there, and they chose some things and bought them. So my picture was in a national collection, and that was pretty nice.

BH: What was the painting?

BM: It was a thing called "En Japonaise." It was a portrait I did of my wife with a pallet knife and in a kind of Japanese costume.

BH: Was she an artist working there?

BM: No, no, no, no! Thank heavens there is only one in the family.

BH: But she was holding your pallet knife?

BH: She was posing for me. That made me feel pretty good because it was the first year I'd shown anything, so

it encouraged me quite a lot.

BH: Of course it would!

BM: Well, anyway, I started to tell how I graduated from art school. This happened, this was in '26, the show at the Tuileries opened around May, and then we used to go to the country and stay in the country in Burgundy until about October - September. Anyway, so this . . . after this first Tuileries show, we went back to Paris in the fall, and I went back to Colorssi's out of habit, you know. And so here I was banging away and Morisset came along and said, "What are you doing here?" I said, "I'm painting this painting." He said, "Ah, non, non! Now you go home, and you paint; and you paint now, you paint home!" So that's how I graduated. After that, my invitation for the Tuileries came along every year for the rest of the time I was there, seven years more.

BH: Seven years!

BM: And Morisset [Bless his heart and may he rest!] used to come to the studio once a year. He'd come all the way across Paris on the Metro to look at my production. Then we picked out pictures to send to the Tuileries. And I think that was absolutely marvelous. How could you help loving someone like that?

BH: Of course! Well, he must have loved you, too, to do that!

BM: So, that lasted until '33. And in '33, what with one thing and another, I came home.

BH: You came home to Los Angeles?

BM: Well, I came home to the United States. I stayed in New York for about six months and then we came out to California and I got . . . the thing that got me . . . Well, I got a dealer here, Carl Stendahl, on Wilshire Boulevard. He had a very nice gallery there and he took my work, and I had a studio in the gallery there. I did some work there and I did some . . . Then finally, I got some pictures . . . Well, I had my first one-man show in California at Stendahl's in 1933. And then I did quite a lot for Paramount Pictures. They rented a lot of my pictures to put in a movie that they were making. That sort of got me going. Then along came the Art Project. The first one . . . there were two of them, you know.

BH: Yes.

BM: The first one came along . . .

BH: This was the Treasury Department?

BM: Yes. Thyrus Field was with it and Merle Armitage and Millard Sheele and I forget who all were more or less running it. So they said, "Well, we've got a wall down in the Los Angeles County Art Museum down in the basement; someday it's going to be the cafeteria or something. Would you like to have a whack at the wall there?" I said, "I certainly would!"

BH: Had you done murals before?

BM: Oh, yes. I'd done quite a few.

BH: Oh, you had?

BM: Yeah. I did some in Burgundy and I did some on the Riviera and some in Paris. I was pretty good with fresco. I did a lot of fresco there in France; that's where learned. So I wasn't afraid of this wall.

BH: That was a marvelous thing for California and the Project then, because there were few people who had done murals before this started.

BM: Yeah, that's true. And this fresco technique wasn't very well known either. This first wall was thirty feet long by eight feet high -- that is from the dado up to the ceiling is about eight feet. So, I made a little drawing for that and everybody said, "All right, go to it." So I did.

BH: You did three walls?

BM: Yes, I finished that wall and I was just packing up my stuff and ready to go home when Merle Armitage called up and said, "Hey, would you like to do the other wall there?" I said, "Sure." He said, "All right, go to it." so I unpacked and worked on that. And then I did the third wall. So it took about six months, I guess, down in the basement.

BH: This is called "Gastronomy Throughout the Ages," and it has 750 sq. feet, hasn't it?

BM: It was a little bigger than that because there were a couple of pillars out in the middle, too. It was a lot of fun. I enjoyed it although it was lonesome work.

BH: You did it all by yourself?

BM: Well, on the first wall I had a helper to knock the plaster off the wall. But after that, I did it all alone.

BH: Who was he? Do you remember?

BM: I don't remember his name. He was a nice lad, too.

BH: Six months took you up to about the time of the second project . . . got going, didn't it? I believe that was in the winter time of '34.

BM: That must have been in '34, yes. Then I worked over at Paramount; I designed a lot of things for Cecil B. De Mille.

BH: Is this when he was doing the Ten Commandments?

BM: This was called the Crusades, this particular picture. I was there for sixteen weeks on that, designing all of what they called "hand props," anything that you can move, you know. That includes all furniture, and weapons, shields, banners, and all sorts of things. And I loved that kind of thing anyway because I was very keen on

BH: History?

BM: Well, yeah, especially of the Middle Ages and knighthood and all that. Because, in my time, you know, we were still serious, more or less, about those things. We were raised on "La Mort d'Arthur" and "Idylls of the Kings," etc. It wasn't just something you see in funny-pictures where it's ridiculous. I'd studied quite a lot of medieval costume in Paris at the Bibliotheque Nationale. All that helped; I had a good time with that part. Oh, it was fun because that way we got to have, well, the soldiers charging across the desert, and maybe they have to have something, say, to drink out of. So then I'd design a goat-skin canteen. All those things. It was fun. And I got to know De Mille pretty well because I used to go over with drawings to see him in his bungalow in the evening and he'd tell me that he didn't want them, and then I'd draw him some more. That was

BH: Well, let me

BM: Then, after that That was nice; it was interesting.

BH: Excuse me, were there many other artists working for De Mille at that time who were later on the Project?

BM: Not that I know of. I started out doing all this designing myself and then we got more people so I had about four or five draftsmen working for me there.

BH: Don Totten told me about working there and about some of the other men who were on the Projects -- a little later, I guess.

BM: Well, I don't remember anyone from the Project on that. No. There probably were, but not in what I was doing.

BH: Sorry to interrupt you.

BM: So, then came along this other Art Project, Federal Works of Art thing. So, I started with that when Macdonald-Wright was supervisor here. And so I started on those Hall of Records murals, and that was pretty good. The first ones I liked pretty much. I liked the first one better because that was King John and

BH: That was "Granting the Magna Carta?"

BM: Yes. That was the kind of thing I liked to do. A lot of armor and a lot of manners, and a lot of helmets and things, you know.

BH: That's a wonderful mural as far as your painting goes because the composition and symbolism and

BM: Heavens! Have you seen it?

BH: I've seen pictures of it.

BM: Really? My goodness! I don't even know whether it exists anymore! They tore the building down, I'm pretty sure.

BH: I haven't been downtown to see.

BM: Ha ha! Anyway, that's when I used to see John Anson Ford a lot because he used to come over. We lived over in Los Angeles then, on Manzanita Street; and we had a little old house and it had a nice attic in it. Yet, it was big enough to put a . . . I could put a fifteen-foot canvas in there, you see. And these Hall of Record canvases happened to be fifteen feet; they just fit. Beautiful. So I had this nice spot, and I worked on that; and John Anson Ford used to come quite often and check. Then I was working in conjunction with the County Board of Engineers (I don't know exactly why) but Alfred Jones was the County Engineer then, and I used to get my material through his department, you know, because they furnished the paint and so on. We did that, and then finally Macdonald-Wright was going to Japan, so that's how I happened to take his particular spot on the Project. Then I became the supervisor for Los Angeles County and Santa Barbara.

BH: You were able to do that and still go on doing the mural?

BM: Well, yeah. I was trying to do it and then I had some helpers on those murals after that. This went on for quite a little while. It was pretty exciting. But the thing was, as far as I was concerned, . . . finally got to be so much administration and so much paper work that I developed an ulcer. You know, you can't afford an ulcer at those prices really.

BH: It's supposed to be something you can have when you're in the proper bracket.

BM: Here, I had a poor man's ulcer!

BH: Was that when Mr. Feitelson took over?

BM: Yeah. So then I resigned and old Lorser moved in. But I painted some more after that. I finished those murals and then I quite and I came out here to El Monte. Oh, we did a mural in a high school in El Monte -- that's how I happened to know about El Monte, as a matter of fact. Then

BH: Now, is that what they call Ruth Street School?

BM: No, this was in the El Monte High School.

BH: Is that still in existence?

BM: Yes.

BH: I'll see it on the way home today, good.

BM: Oh, don't.

BH: Why?

BM: Well because it seems

BH: Is it desecrated, mutilated, or something?

BM: Yes, something like that. I don't know. I had a friend visit here from San Antonio, Texas, Warren Hunter, and he wanted to see the things around here, you know. We went out to Pomona to see the Crozco murals and everything, and he wanted to see this thing so I took him down there. I hadn't been there for years. We walked in and I almost fell dead. I said, "My heavens! I couldn't have done this." I recognized the design and so on, but . . . and the color, in a way, you know. And so then I hurried out of the place and apologized to Hunter and it seems probably that I I didn't go into it anymore. But I think what must have happened was that the art teacher in the school probably said, "Well, we'd better fix this up; it's getting old." It was made of casein, you see. It looked as though the children had painted over it again.

BH: They kept refreshing it! Freshened all the life out of it!

BM: The nice part was that they had painted out my name on it, so that helped a little.

BH: What was the subject:

BM: Oh, it was the "Santa Fe Trail" sort of thing. I had the Seventh Calvary, and some Indians on horseback, and a lot of settlers and gamblers and It was on three walls. It was quite a mural.

BH: It was real fresco then, wasn't it?

BM: No, it was tempera. It was with casein.

BH: Applied directly to the wall?

BM: Yeah, on the wall.

BH: With the Hall of Records murals, for instance, if you did them on panels, they could have been taken down if anything did happen?

BM: Yes, they were painted in oil on canvas.

BH: They may have been saved, then.

BM: But the Los Angeles Museum murals, that really was fresco; that's true fresco work.

BH: Did you have any help on this one in El Monte?

BM: Oh, yes. That was marvelous! We had . . . because we only had, I think it was something like three weeks to do it, and it's a very big room with the three walls of pictures you know.

BH: Why were you so limited in time?

BM: Well, because school was going to start or something. It was a brand new school; they had just finished the school and then it was going to, you know, the term was going to start soon. We had, I think, three weeks. Anyway, I had made the drawings and the color layout and stuff before that, but actually to execute it took three weeks. We got two nice big scaffolds with double deckers so you could put people on four levels at once. And then I had a great, tall step-ladder, oh, a nice big one, about twelve feet high. And I had a long pointer. Then I made color samples of everything that there was around there, in the room; in the linoleum, the walls, the ceiling, the venetian blinds. We had quite a number of color samples . . . all this and had all these colors . . . quite a number of them, and we had a big long table and we had people mixing up these colors, and we made two or three variants of each one, you know, and then we numbered the whole works. We had all this stuff ready and then I tore up my small drawing and gave it to the people. Using charcoal they enlarged it on the walls within squares. I went around afterwards and sort of maybe fixed that a little bit. And this was so that each person could have a chunk , i.e. each person had one square to color.

BH: I see.

BM: Like Foster Kleiser! [California outdoor advertising company which puts up billboards; the pictures are painted on a strip at a time.]

BH: Ha, ha, ha. Production line.

BM: Then finally I went around and numbered all these little partitions. They had to be pretty geometrical, you know. There was no blending. They were frankly flat areas. So I numbered each square and then put numbers on all the different samples of paint. We moved in and we had about eight people, eight or nine people, on the scaffold and a couple of people on the floor passing out "number 7," you know, or "number 6," and all this. It was marvelous! And I was up on my big high step-ladder with my pointer, you know. And I could paint and say, "Hey, Mary, so- and so." Or, "Joe, you'd better put this . . ." Afterwards, I went around and touched up the heads a little bit. And in three weeks it was done!

BH: That is just amazing. Ha, ah. These men and women working for you probably came from all over Los Angeles. Did they live over here in El Monte while they were doing the mural:

BM: No, they'd come out here. Probably a lot of the people still remember that. I don't remember everybody's name who worked on it.

BH: Do you remember any of them?

BM: Well, I remember one girl named "Mary." Her last name I don't remember, but she was very nice. She was the Project's model. We had a few models hired by the Project and that was her job. You could ask for Mary if you were working on figures, you see.

BH: She was really expendable, wasn't she?

BM: She'd go over to so-and-so's and Tuesday she'd go to so-and-so's and so forth. Well, anyway, Mary was ambitious; she didn't want to be a model all her life. She wanted to be a mural painter. So she put in for an assistant job on this school mural. I said, "All right." So Mary showed up with the rest of them and she looked very cute. She had a bandanna thing around her head, you know, a smock, slacks -- and everything was fine. And so we gave her a can of paint, "No. 17," and she climbed up on the scaffold. And everything was going fine;

everybody was banging away. And so I went up on the second level; she was up on top of one of these scaffolds. At this point Mary had put her can of . . . she had red paint, "Number 4 red," and she kicked that over, and of course it all drooled down through the planks onto me, naturally. Poor Mary looked over and saw this, so she started climbing down the ladder and said, "Well I guess I'm leaving." Ha, ha, ha, ha!

BH: Ha, ha, ha, the poor girl!

BH: I said, "No, Mary, no. You don't have to. Just get some of this gook out of my hair and then try it some more." She was sweet. So she went on working. And I heard from her . . . I got a letter from her a couple of years later from Fresno. She told me . . . she sent me a photograph of a mural that she had done up there for somebody.

BH: Is that so?

BM: Yes. So she did go on.

BH: Isn't that fine? I hope you can remember what her name was so I can look her up.

BM: Just "Mary."

BH: I'll look for "Mary" in my file.

BM: It was an awful long time ago.

BH: Well, it's amazing how people keep turning up. But we all remember it well.

BM: Well, yes, that's true.

BH: You also had a lithograph exhibit at the Los Angeles County Art Museum in Anaheim of Federal Art Projects things, so you must have been working on that part of it too.

BM: Oh, yes. I did a couple of lithographs for the Project. And I did some easel paintings too, I think.

BH: Did you?

BM: Yeah.

BH: Those are things that you just did at home? You weren't working as a group on them?

BM: No.

BH: Some of the artists were working at one place, at the Projects headquarters.

BM: We had artists who didn't do anything but easel paintings. And then we had this lithography set-up which was very good. And we had excellent people there and they did beautiful things. Tyrus Wong was there, and Ben Messier, and I think Dorothy Jeakins.

BH: Yes, she was. She was telling me yesterday about it, about how much it meant to her as a young artist. Who was that?

BM: And Kay Waters. I used to know her in Paris a long time ago.

BH: I wonder if she is still around?

BM: I don't know. I haven't heard from her in a long, long time. But did they tell you about the arrangement we had with the library for our lithographs?

BH: With the library?

BM: Yeah. We set up a beautiful thing. There was . . . the head librarian's name then was Althea Warren, and a very nice person. We made many lithographs, you see.

BH: Yes.

BM: Because we printed them right there in the place [Project headquarters] and we did the whole thing. We had an excellent man for printing and all this; we did it all ourselves, the whole business. So then we'd made a portfolio of them and then we had a man . . . also we put a man in the library, actually one of our people, to display them. He had a nice little counter there and a thing so he could display some of these lithographs and

then he had a whole bunch of them . . . They weren't framed but they were matted, you know, they had mats on them. So the people could come and when they'd get a book . . . they'd get a lithograph like they got a book. They could check them out as well as books and keep them for two or three weeks, or whatever it was, and then bring them back and renew them just like a book.

BH: What a wonderful idea!

BM: Yeah. It was good and people were very much interested in them. Of course, many people wanted to buy them but we couldn't sell them.

BH: Because they were the government's.

BM: But you could tell people who the artist was, and where he was, and so on.

BH: Did it give very many of the artists work that way? Do you remember at all?

BH: It probably did because when we'd print them the artist would get two or three proofs; it gave him a chance to have some of his own.

BH: That's fascinating.

BM: It went along for quite a little while and then finally, for some reason, I forget what, some administrative rule or something else, we had to stop it.

BH: You don't remember who the man was in the library? It would be fun to get more stories about it from him.

BM: No.

BH: He would have been one of the artists who was in lithography, like Benjie Okoubo?

BM: We had our own photographic set-up, you know.

BH: No, I didn't know that either.

BM: Oh, sure. We had our own dark room and everything else. The way we used to do was, for instance, when we wanted to interest somebody (like a school) or something in a big job or some sort, whatever, we'd have a designer make a painting . . . [END OF TAPE INTERVIEW CONTINUED ON NEXT TAPE]

BH: Mr. Mac-Gurrin, you were going to tell me about the photographic lab with equipment that the Project had for doing work. And, if you wouldn't mind starting at the beginning of that again? **BM:** Well, we had our own dark room and we had our own photographers. They worked full-time at the Project. Young Weston was one of them.

BH: The son, Bret?

BM: Yeah, and several others whose names I can't really remember. But one of the things we used to do which was very practical was to . . . For instance, if we wanted to interest a person from some school or other public building in a large-scale decoration (Mosaic, mural or whatever it might be), we could with our photographic crew take pictures of the room; then the designer would design the decoration and then we'd photograph that and then superimpose that photograph onto the photograph of the building. In this way, the person could see what it was going to look like before the building was even started. It was a very good way to interest people in the thing because, you know, when one sees a blank wall, it's very hard for one to visualize what might happen to it. We showed them this, and there it was!

BH: Mr. Feitelson told me about a man named Tom Wiley who took such designs around and was responsible for getting a lot of the commissions. You don't know where he is today, or where I could see him?

BM: No, I don't.

BH: He was working on the Project when you were there?

BM: I don't really remember.

BH: He wasn't an artist, but he had important talent.

BM: Yeah. Well, we had people who did various things, you see. We had a carpenter because we needed a carpenter. And we had a gallery-attendant; we had our own gallery and Mr. Terry was in charge of the gallery where we had exhibitions.

BH: What "Terry" was he, I wonder?

BM: I don't remember. I guess his name was as far as I remember. We always called him "Mr. Terry."

BH: Where was this? By West Lake Park:

BM: Yeah, West Lake Park. We had a nice gallery there, very nice.

BH: Was it open all the time to the public?

BM: Yeah, all day.

BH: They didn't have just once-a-month exhibits?

BM: Oh, no, no, no. It was a steady thing. We showed the easel paintings that our easel painters had done and so on. We had good shows.

BH: Most of the artists have forgotten that the things were shown. I've asked them and they don't remember.

BM: Oh, sure. Oh, yes, they were shown.

BH: I see. In New York they had outside shows sometimes for

BM: Oh, we were more dignified!

BH: Yes, you had a whole gallery. Ha, ha, ha.

BM: Well, it was a very fine building there at West Lake Park; it was a beautiful building. When McDonald-Wright came back and took over again . . . he was the Regional Director

BH: Of 11 states?

BM: Yeah. Then they moved into that very, very nice building there. We had the whole building and we had classes there for our artists, lectures by all different people, demonstrations, and so on. Life classes, and so on.

BH: Just for the artists on the Project?

BM: Just for the Project people.

BH: This was completely separate from classes for the public?

BM: Oh, yes. We didn't have any classes for the public as far as I can remember.

BH: Oh, you didn't? They did in Spokane and Butte, and I supposed that they did in Los Angeles.

BM: No, I don't think so. I don't remember anything like that. It was to improve the quality of our own people.

BH: Did the Project pay for the models? It wasn't like the old Art League?

BM: Oh, the models were hired like everybody else; like our friend Mary about whom I spoke. She was on the payroll regularly, and she was busy all the time because there were so many artists working in different places on different things that she galloped around from one studio to another.

BH: I just wondered if she could possibly be the same model who is at UCLA now, because this girl I've been planning to go and see was Rico Lebrun's model for many years. I believe he was on the Project, too. In fact, I know he was. He did some work for it. I wonder if she might be the same girl since she's been a model for years.

BM: Could be. See, we had a thing . . . oh, don't let me get off the track . . .

BH: It's all "on the track." Go ahead.

BM: . . . because, you see, the way the thing was set up, we were entitled to employ a certain percentage of people who were not on relief. The majority of the people were supposed to qualify for relief and then we could use them. But we also had a small percentage, something like -- I forget exactly, but perhaps something like 10 percent

BH: For extras like carpenters and specialists?

BM: Yes, for executive people and also for artists. We could

BH: Oh, some of the artists . . . ?

BM: That way we were able to get all the outstanding artists in Southern California to work for us at one time or another. We could get them for a month or two months and then replace them by somebody else, because, of course, we wanted to get things from everybody who was around, you see. So, for instance, we got an etching from Arthur Millier; I think we got something from Millard Sheets; from all the different artists. We could do that, we could have them temporarily, you see, long enough to produce a painting or two. And they were glad to be with us.

BH: Some of the magazines of this period, at the beginning of the period mentioned many of these artists "contributing without credit" when it got started. But in this case, you mean that they were being paid for their work?

BM: Well, they were getting back whatever it was, maybe a month's pay -- whatever it was, but it wasn't very much. That way we really had a very representative thing. We had the best people, the best-known people and then the obscure people. It gave the people nobody every heard of, it gave them a chance to be seen and to develop their talent, and so on.

BH: It was wonderful for those lesser artists who The had a chance to see the work of more important men. Mr. Mac-Gurrin, about how long were you Supervisor? Was it a year, or so?

BM: Yes, it was just about a year, till my ulcer developed.

BH: Meantime, you were going on with the "Hall of Records" murals?

BM: I finished those.

BH: I think Before we go on, I'd like to talk to you about each one of them in particular, and I hope you will tell me anything you remember about them. The first one was "Granting of Magna Carta," which you have already mentioned. That one . . . I thought it was quite interesting, what Mr. Feitelson said about it, that it showed your French training, and the French tradition of painting, in the combination of emotion and intellect.

BM: Good old Larser! All right! And then what? There was "The Signing of the Declaration of Independence."

BM: Then the "De Neve Found Los Angeles?" Is that how you pronounce his name?

BM: Felipe de Neve, yeah. Oh, that was rather amusing. That mural was one in the middle, and that was right over where the Board of Supervisors . . . where they all sat, you see, and it probably has the only bare bosom in any public building in Los Angeles.

BH: That is the first comment everyone makes when they see that picture!

BM: Well, that was a modest triumph in a way. And then also it was kind of cute because quite a long time after it was finished I got a note from John Anson Ford saying, "Where I sit during the meetings of the Board of Supervisors, I can spend a lot of time looking at your mural, which I enjoy very much. However, there is a thing that bothers me about it: the thigh of the Indian in the lower right hand corner is quite long; could you do anything about that?" Ha, ha, ha, ha!

BH: Ha, ha, ha, ha!

BM: So I dashed down and cut two or three inches off the Indian's thigh.

BH: Oh, really!

BM: And John Anson Ford was very happy and everybody was happy. And the board of Supervisors sent me a very nice letter, you know. "Be it resolved that the meeting - - and so forth. Congratulations and felicitations -- and so on and so forth -- for these things." Which was pretty nice of them.

BH: Well, of course it was! I wondered if you did any portraits of your family or friends in it? I know Mr. Deutsch put his wife in most of his murals. And some of your faces look like they might be people you knew.

BM: No. The only time I ever put Generally I put my wife in, in a sort of cipher. I always . . . lots of times I put a little Marguerite flower in a corner, you see, because her names happens to be Marguerite. That's as far as she's gotten so far.

BH: Oh, I think that's nice, very poetic.

BM: She's in about . . . oh, I don't know . . . I've done some 35 or 36 murals in different places. She is in most of them, in that form.

BH: And the little child is not a child of yours, or something?

BM: No, no, no. So then, the "Signing of the Declaration of Independence" had a story too, in a way, because I put George Washington standing there with his general's uniform on, and then there is Thomas Jefferson, and everybody, and John Hancock (before he went into the insurance business), and different people; they are all there. I got them from various documents so they look authentic, like them, I think. Anyway, a couple of years went by and all of a sudden there came a story in the papers; somebody protested that George Washington shouldn't be there because he wasn't there. So, I've got some clippings about it; we had a little skirmish thing back and forth about it. Well, my idea was that in Mr. Trumble's painting it looked like George Washington was there. And then I said, "Well, besides, if he weren't . . . if he hadn't been there, he should have been there. That was the time for him to be there."

BH: One time for "the Father of the Country" to appear?

BM: And of all people George Washington was the man who should have been there, so I put him there. You have things like that happen, you know. Ha, ha, ha.

BH: You had a very imposing list of people helping with research on all of these murals. I think this would be a good time to read them and for you to tell us about them.

BM: Oh, can we get back to White Bead Quann?

BH: Well, she comes in with the last mural; shall we wait till we get to it?

BM: I want to get to White Bead Quann because I liked White Bead Quann!

BH: Good. The "Index of American Design" supplied some of the research matter. Stop me if this material isn't right; I found it in a catalogue, the material and the Writers Project; of course you read Dana's "Two Years Before the Mast" for that particular mural; and "Touring Topics" (which is now called "Westways Magazine," and has many historical articles) and bulletins of the Southwest Museum and Los Angeles County Museum and the California Historical Society; the San Diego American Guide Series, and White Bead Quann.

BM: Well, good.

BH: The "Dana at San Pedro" is a very fascinating mural, I thought, with so many symbols for the clipper ship and . . . ?

BM: Oh, that's not a mural, those are triptychs. There were two of them. They are in corners of the room.

BH: Yeah.

BM: They were . . . so they had to be in three pieces. There was one though with the "Butterfield Overland Mail Stage."

BH: That's a triptych too?

BM: Yeah, yeah. It had a map of . . . it showed the old stage route up, you know, through Warner's Hot Springs and so on.

BH: Down in Mexico to Santa Barbara or . . . ?

BM: No, from Missouri.

BH: Oh, the Butterfield Stage coming across the plains!

BM: Yeah, all the way across; and then they came up through Escondido and to Warner's Hot Springs. I forget the names of them, but they are all on there. Then I had . . . for the "Dana at San Pedro" I had a nice feller helping me named Marius Hansen. He must have been a young (probably) Dane or Norwegian, and he was an old sailor, you see.

BH: Oh, he was?

BM: Yeah. And I also am an old sailor so we got along fine. And so then I had a wonderful time putting two ships in this mural: I put in "The Pilgrim" which was the first brig and then the ship "Alert" which he went home in, I

believe.

BH: Dana?

BM: Yeah. Those were nice. And then I had islands out here, Santa Catalina, and so on. It was pretty good.

BH: You had another helper on that named Katherine Skelton, so the catalogue says. Do you remember her?

BM: Yes.

BH: Is she still an artist around here, I wonder?

BM: I haven't heard from her for a long time. I'm not sure whether she's not . . . she wasn't . . . Frode Dann's wife, I believe she was. In that case, she's dead.

BH: Oh, wasn't that Keel?

BM: Maybe she's dead.

BH: Oh, I have someone named "S-K-E-E-L-E" who was Dann's wife, Katherine Skeele.

BM: Oh.

BH: The catalogue lists Katherine Skelton; it must be a mistake in the catalogue, which happens quite often.

BM: Yeah. OK, she worked on that Dana mural.

BH: What was her part? There weren't too many women who worked on murals so I just wondered . . . ?

BM: Well, when I was doing this supervising assignment and I had to have . . . I couldn't work on the murals all the time, so that's when Hanson was helping and On another one,

BH: Magna Carta?

BM: Oh, we don't have to . . . no, on another one. I guess it was the "Founding of Los Angeles." Ben Messick helped me on that one.

BH: Yes. That's the one that has . . . it is composed of many triangles -- the composition of it?

BM: It has, yes. And it has a horse, a Palomino horse. Because I remember I told Ben, he asked, "Well, what color is Palomino?" and I said, "Well, it's the same color as a cup of coffee with quite a lot of cream in it." Ha, ha, ha.

BH: Ha, that's what you got. And the "Butterfield Overland Stage" picture has an interesting motif in the corner, a windrose. Is that a nautical term? I am not familiar with it.

BM: Yeah, that's right. Good!

BH: Well, how is it used on a boat?

BM: Well, it's not really inside; you'd find it on charts.

BH: Oh, I see.

BM: It simply shows which way is north, that is all.

BH: Usually where the legend is?

BM: North, South, East and West, and then . . . the different points of the compass; there are 32 points, you know.

BH: And in your windrose the compass-needle is an Indian arrow -- the compass pointer?

BM: Oh.

BH: Then you have a buffalo skull and a rattlesnake. It's a beautiful little motif. Where is the marguerite in that painting?

BM: I'm afraid there isn't any; she doesn't get into all of them, you know.

BH: Well, there are many cacti; maybe she turned into a cactus!

BM: The last time she figured in one was a fresco I did in Bel Air a couple of years ago, in a house out there, and, of course, I depicted Saint Francis then so I had a lot of flowers in it. So naturally I had a marguerite in it.

BH: Oh yes. Did you say it was a mural in a private home?

BM: No, a fresco; it's eight and one half feet high.

BH: I wanted to ask you a little more about White Bead Quann. I know she was a Cherokee Indian.

BM: White Bead Quann was wonderful because she came in You know, I used to have to interview people, which was very painful and difficult.

BH: Why?

BM: Well, because everybody needed this work, you know.

BM: Oh, they had to qualify as artists?

BM: Yes. So she showed up one day and she was very timid and subdued and so on. So she showed me some things and they were . . . well, they were conventional watercolors of flowers and what not. She was intelligent and everything, very nice. And so I said, "Well, maybe we can do something. If you'll 'make more like an Indian,' because you are an Indian." And she said, "Yes, I am." She told me about it and I said, "Well, now let's try something different." So she showed me one of her things and I said, "Supposing instead of painting this representational kind of landscape, it's got some clouds in it, it's got some stuff . . . why not make these clouds the way you'd make them if you were making an Indian Painting. Because you must have a way to make clouds besides this." She said, "Yes." And I said, "The same way when the breeze is blowing, you must have a graphic way to show wind, and so on. Why don't you try something like that?" She said, "Yes, yes." So I said, "All right, why don't you get some guache, you know, get some other materials?" Then her face fell because I'd said to "get something" and then all of a sudden

BH: She had no money for it?

BM: Right! But I said, "Well, you've got a job now, you know." And she said, "Oh? So I can buy some materials!" Ha, ha, ha. She did that and brought me quite a few paintings in the traditional Indian style. One day I said, "There must be traditional stories too. Can your mother or grandmother or somebody tell you these things?" And she said, "Yes, yes, yes." Right away, she was interested, you see. So she'd bring something and it would be a story and then we'd look at it; and I'd say, "Well, maybe in this particular part here you could make this more symbolic, or more authentic, more Indian." So she'd do it. Well, she developed into a wonderful thing and then she produced all those wonderful stories. Then she could . . . we put her into making lithographs. She had a very nice handwriting. It was open and regular, but sort of naive, you know?

BH: Yes.

BM: So she'd write these folk stories on stones, write this nice story and make decorated borders, and full-page illustrations, and so forth. And we published these things. Then

BH: In book form or individual prints?

BM: Well, no. We couldn't have a book, but we put them in a portfolio. The story of little Rain-in-the-Face, or whoever it was about, with a nice little decoration on the outside of it. Well, this went like mad with school teachers, you see. Primary school teachers were mad for them; they could use them. They couldn't buy them but they could borrow them.

BH: From the library?

BM: From us.

BH: From you directly?

BH: Yeah. I think we put them in the library too, sure we did. So that was how she developed her terrific talent. Because she was very talented and she was as sweet as she could be, and she was producing terribly interesting stuff.

BH: She was a one-man department in herself, really, wasn't she?

BM: Yes, she was one of our "stars," you know.

BH: Was she quite a young girl?

BM: Oh, she looked like she was may be 18 or 19.

BH: How do you suppose she got into Los Angeles? Was she all alone?

BM: Her family moved here. They lived here.

BH: Did they?

BM: They are all very poor. They lived, I don't know where they lived, but anyway, she did that. I was very proud of her success because I thought I had had something to do with it.

BH: Oh, isn't it just wonderful that you thought to do that? Otherwise, she would have been just lost in competition with the other artists.

BM: Or she could have painted those little flowers forever.

BH: I wonder whether she did some of the native design work for the "American Index?"

BM: She probably did. Then when I wanted information for this El Monte High School mural, you see, I asked her if she would help and she said, "Sure." I said, "I want an Indian and he is going to be on a horse. He's a Plains Indian. What kind of weapon would he have?" And so on. She wanted to know exactly what kind of Indian he was, what tribe he belonged to and everything, and I would say "He's a Choctaw, or he's a Whatisit." Then I would ask her how he would paint his horse, because the Plains Indian did put designs on his horse. Well

BH: And she would do this research?

BM: No. she'd bring me sketches of details, like the feathers, the way his feathers were arranged in his headdress; whether he should wear a shirt or whether he would have had a bare torso; whether he had leggings; whether they would have been of buckskin, or something else. All that kind of thing. She was very helpful that way.

BH: What I mean, she must have done much research because, being a Cherokee, she wouldn't have known about other tribes unless she had really studied them. I wonder what has happened to her?

BM: I don't know.

BH: Strange that no one knows.

BM: Oh, that was years ago.

BH: Yes, but with a talent like that and with this encouragement in the beginning, perhaps she went on and did book illustration or something.

BM: But you know whether somebody becomes successful or not depends on so many things besides talent. Talent is necessary but it's not enough all by itself. There have to be some breaks. There has to be somebody to back people up a little bit, and encourage people and help them, and give them opportunities, and so on.

BH: And being a woman, she may have gotten married and became saddled with children

BM: Maybe she had a lot of little Blue Beads and Red Beads! But White Bead Quann is a wonderful name.

BH: A beautiful name, yes. There were so many interesting names among the Chinese and Japanese on the Project, to. One of them, whom I haven't been able to find, is someone named Fong.

BM: Yeah. Fong, Fong? I don't remember right now.

BH: Then there was a girl with "Jade" in her name.

BM: "Jade?"

BH: Green Jade something

BM: Oh, I can't remember because I get it confused with a Chinese girl I had in San Antonio in the school down there. Her name translated as "Beautiful Purple Plum Blossom," . . .

BH: How lovely!

BM: . . . which is no slouch as a name, you know!

BH: Wonderful. It was an inspiration! Mr. Mac-Gurrin, I think we'll come back to some of the events and people in particular on the Project but I think now it might be a good idea to bring you out past the Project, because I want to tell about what you are doing now. Were there any other works that you did after this? I think that was about the end; World War II came along then, didn't it?

BM: Well, yeah, I left the Project in '38. I think that El Monte mural was the last thing I did for the Project. Then I left the Project. We lived here then in El Monte. We moved out here that year. So when I left the Project I went over to San Gabriel and I painted a fresco there for Father De Prada in the Baptistry of the Old Mission, which was rather nice. It is still there; it looks just about the same as it did then.

BH: Was this an original mural of yours or a repainting?

BM: Oh no. It was one of mine. There were in this Baptistry . . . it's a small room, part of the original mission, you know. And it dates from about 1776, I guess, around that. [Note: It is 1771.] But there was a niche. In the wall there was already a good-sized niche, about six and one half feet high, maybe by four and a half feet wide; and it was set-in about 14-16 inches. I saw that and I thought, "Well, there must have been something here once upon a time." And there had been a lot of plaster and white-wash painted on it. So, before I did anything else, I was very careful, and very carefully scraped it down, little by little. I thought, "Maybe there is something here." But there wasn't; there had never been anything there. So, then I painted this Madonna for Father De Prada. He called it "Madonna of Holy Baptism" because it's in the Baptistry. Part of the deal that I made with him was that I be permitted to play on the organ whenever I wanted to. So that was pretty good because they had . . . he has a great organ that they bought out of a motion picture theater when they stopped using them, you know. It was this marvelous organ with about 75 thousand little gadgets on it. And he'd had them take out the banjos and the bass-drums and the snare-drums and things like that, you know. But there were still many things left. I could work on my fresco and then when I got tired I could go up and play on this organ. It had a marvelous tone; I couldn't play it, but it's terrific to try.

BH: I bet you can now!

BM: You'd get a hold of the gros bourdon, you know, and it's such a low note that you can hardly hear it. All it does is shake you; you vibrate, you see. It's way down there. Oh, it was a lot of fun. Then what did I do next?

BH: Let me detour you again right here. Did you have anything to do with any of the mission restorations under the Project? Or was that later?

BM: Well, yes. Not under the Project. The Project had nothing to do with the mission over here but . . .

BH: Not there, but did you work on some of the other restorations?

BM: Oh, up in Santa Barbara? Yeah, a little bit. But most of that was one by the Santa Barbara people. Douglas Parshall was the Supervisor in Santa Barbara.

BH: I haven't gotten up to talk to him yet.

BM: Douglas Parshall, yes. I remember we used to go up there and sort of supervise the work. They did some work in Purisima Mission, on a fountain, I think.

BH: And at San Buenaventura Mission?

BM: Yeah. Then I had a studio over in San Gabriel for a couple of years.

BH: As well as here in El Monte? You mean you worked both places?

BM: This studio here hadn't been built yet. We just had a little house here. Then the War came along so I joined the . . . I tried to get back into the Navy because I was in the Navy in the first war and I had . . . but I was getting pretty old, you know, so finally I went into the Merchant Service and I sailed out of Seattle to the Aleutians a couple of times to the ocean. And then I came home and got my Third Mate's license in San Pedro. I sailed from then on until '46. I was Second Mate on those big ships. I had a Lieutenant's commission in the United States Maritime Service. So that took me up until the beginning of 1946, and then that was over. I came home and I painted at that time and then John Jarvis Barlow was directing the Pasadena Museum, you know, over there in Pasadena and they were setting up a teacher program in '46. So he asked me if I'd take a life-class, which I did; and then a lecture series on "Appreciation of Art," which I did.

BH: At Pasadena also?

BM: Yeah. At the same time Dan Lutz was teaching at Chovinard and he was going to take a leave of absence or something, so I took his place at Chovinard for one semester down there, which I didn't enjoy at all.

BH: Why?

BM: Oh, it was so crowded, and so . . . they were in an old garage and there were too many people; there were 35 to 40 people.

BH: In a studio class or art appreciation?

BM: No, this was painting. And so I didn't like it too much. Anyway, I was pretty busy then and I painted quite a lot and then pretty soon . . . Well, by this time they already had a few samplings . . . Dalzell Hatfield was handling my paintings.

BH: Had he been, all this time, since 1933?

BM: Well, since . . .

BH: 1933?

BM: Oh, no, no. Stendahl

BH: Stendahl . . . ?

BM: No. Stendahl had them until, I forget when, oh, about '37 or '38.

BH: Hm?

BM: Yeah. So then, from then on it was Dalzell Hatfield. Oh, so then I went to San Antonio to the San Antonio Art Institute, which was established by Marion Koogler McNay who had a tremendous collection of modern French painters, one of the very best collections west of New York. It's a good school, nice school.

BH: Do they still have it there?

BM: Yeah. So, I went there and I taught down there. But I don't like to teach year-in and year-out; I can't do it. So, I'd teach a half a year down there generally. One year I stayed all year but it was too much. After that I began to alternate with Etienne Ret, was there before I was.

BH: How do you spell that? R-e-t?

BM: R-e-t. Then he went back to France so then I went there and from then on we had . . . I alternated with Michael Frary. He used to come down here and take half the year and I'd take the other half. So that kept me occupied half of the time, and then half the time here painting, you know. I had a little class here, two or three people; maybe four or five, but never more than that. They would come once a week, and so that's the way it goes.

BH: Before we went on the tape you were telling me about some of the interesting things that you've been doing recently. One was paintings to be made into tapestries at the Aubuson works in France. Would you like to tell a little bit about that? It's very interesting.

BM: Well, this is . . . I've only done . . . only one of them has been made so far, that one there, that big one there. [He indicates.]

BH: But you have designs for more?

BM: Yeah. I'm working on three designs for other ones now. This one [indicated] came out nicely. They can do wonderful things. I wanted to go there and see them when we were in France this last summer but I didn't quite make it.

BH: That would have been fun.

BM: We went back to Burgundy. See, I had . . . the way we used to live was to be in Paris in the winter and fall and spring till about May, when the Tuilleries generally opened. We'd stay for that, generally, and then we'd go down to Burgundy to a small town where Margaret's mother lived. She had a nice little stone house there and I had a studio built out in the garden there in 1924 or '25. I had an ideal setup; it was wonderful. No distractions at all, and I managed to a lot of work. I loved it anyway.

BH: I should think so. Sounds ideal for an artist.

BM: Oh, then I painted . . . that's when I worked on . . . the first fresco I did. It was a commission though, and my conscience, if I had any, would bother me a little bit about it, in a way.

BH: Why?

BM: Because I got a case of double pneumonia in about 1928. When I got out of the hospital, we went down to the South of France, you see. And the doctor said that I could get outside if I'd get out of Paris. It was a horrible winter; people were dying that winter. So we went down to the south of France to Villefranche where some friends of ours showed up. And they had a car, and we drove around and we found an inn up in the mountains, not in the mountains but in the low hills, back in the East St. Paul-de-Vence. And it was called to "Colombe d'Or." So I was in an enchanting spot; I'd never seen anything quite so wonderful in my whole life. When I got back to Villefranche, I was talking to somebody about it, and he said, "Oh, yes, that's the Colombe d'Or." He said that the man who owns it is crazy because he is crazy about paintings. He loved paintings so, of course he is kind of nutty. He loves to have artists around him.

BH: And you knew right away you'd like it there?

BM: Yes. So I wrote him a note and I told him that my name was Such-and-Such, that I had exhibited here-and-there, and so on; that I would like to come up to the Colombe d'Or. I immediately received an answer. He said, "Come at once. You will do something for me in my livre d'or." So we packed up our possessions . . .

BH: Not having any idea what this was going to be?

BM: Right. And here he was, "Hello, hello, hello." So he took me and said, "I'll show you a studio." Besides the inn, he had built another building with some studios, with about, oh, four or five beautiful studios --- with tremendous great glass windows and everything.

BH: Why how fabulous!

BM: Yes. And he said, "How about this one?" And I said, "This will be fine. And What do you want me to do for you?" He said, "Well, how about painting a frieze around here, around this building?" I said, "Okay, you're on!" So we made a deal: I painted his frieze and we stayed there for most of the winter. It was a fabulous place. I've read a lot about it since; it's become tremendously famous, this thing. I remember that once a few years ago in "The New Yorker" there was a whole great big profile about it, this spot.

BH: How do you spell it? BM" C-o-l-o-m-b-e d'O-r.

BH: Oh. "The Golden Dove," the same name as that of the cafe in Venice, where the owner has the paintings hung on the walls. I wonder whether it is the same man?

BM: No. Anyway, so we stayed there. Then we had a grand time that whole winter and met a lot of people . . .

BH: Excuse me, but were there living quarters in the studio?

BM: Sure. Oh, yeah. Hot and cold running water, fireplaces and a beautiful private terrace overlooking the valley down to the Mediterranean, the Alps up behind.

BH: Were there other artists in the other ones?

BM: Yeah.

BH: French, American or . . . ?

BM: Well, there was Sylvan Sauvage; that's where I met him. He was one of the greatest, and, well, there were all kinds of people. Maharajahs would come up for lunch all the time, arriving in Hispana-Suizas and Rolls-Royces.

BH: Sounds a little like an F. Scott Fitzgerald story.

BM: It was the kind of thing F. Scott Fitzgerald would have wished he'd had!

BH: Yeah, and Hemingway and . . .

BM: It was such a big success that the following winter I wrote to Paul again and said, "How about I should come again?"

BH: To do more frescoes? Ha, ha.

BM: I went down there and I said, "What do you want me to do this time?" He said, "Well, out on this terrace here, you see, there is a stone wine cellar that's got a big old door on it and soft stone, of beautiful olive wood. The place up above the door would be good for a fresco, hm?" Do you know how to paint fresco?" And I said, "Yes."

BH: Thinking of rushing to the library?

BM: I did know how to paint fresco, but he didn't ask me had I painted any fresco. I did know how; I'd read all of Benvenuto Cellini's book, and everything. But I never happened to have done anything. So I said, "Yes." He said, "All right, do it there." I made him a drawing of Bacchus and Selinus and a lot of other figures and stuff and so I thought, "It will take a long time to have the masons to fix the wall for me and stuff, because they had to first make a little projecting roof with some Spanish tile on it, and then we had to put on mortar and everything." I thought, "This will take these fellows two or three weeks; I'll have plenty of time to practice." I went down to Nice and bought some paint and everything and then I got some tiles and made some mortar. And I made some little trial frescoes. But, darn it, before I really mastered the thing he came and said, "Well, it's all ready! There is the wall. The scaffold is ready and everything."

BH: Ha, ha, ha, ha.

BM: I said, "OK." And away I went. Ha, ha, ha.

BH: Ha, ha, ha.

BM: So I painted that for him. That was the first fresco I painted for him.

BH: Changing the subject, I have some rather abstract questions about what you feel were the results of the Project. This is kind of interesting because it leads directly into the influence of men like you (who had done these things before) on the younger artists here who obviously lacked your experience. Otherwise they would have had to learn the hard way. During the Project, you were able to transfer your knowledge of it to many people who had had no chance to study work like fresco.

BM: Well, I suppose we did do a little good now and then. But mainly, I think the main thing that we did was to make it possible for these people to do this work. That was the big thing

BH: To do the work at all?

BM: Yes, and also to get a special feeling from working with people who had had much more experience than they did. Naturally they were going to learn; they were going to learn quite a lot. But they developed a feeling I don't know, because it was like the old guilds. It was that way, you see? Because, you know, artists always feel they are a kind of people a little bit special; they feel rather set off by themselves anyway. And I think probably that's the biggest strain about being an artist -- this kind of isolation that you are in. Most of the time you have to feel it, anyway; it's good for you but it's not a lot of fun. During the Project, artists suddenly felt that there was something interesting to be done; somebody wanted them to do it. They could compare with each other; they've achieved a kind of camaraderie, and esprit-de-corps and that was very fine. We realized how nice it was when it stopped an everybody was once again all on his own!

BH: You were saying that it was particularly strong during the period of the Long Beach mosaic work, that feeling?

BM: Yes. Because that was such a big thing; that was a huge job.

BH: Just in case Mr. King doesn't get to it, I wish you would tell the tape what you said about some of the artists even living on the beach at that time.

BM: Well, yeah. Because, you see, we had this great big room on the top floor of a building there in Los Angeles, where this thing, the mosaic pattern, was laid out on the floor. And the big drawing, full size drawing And then artists worked on the big, full-sized drawing under the direction of Macdonald-Wright and Al King and other people. They worked out different textures of tile for different textures of materials depicted in the thing. For instance, they worked out a certain design for sky, a certain other for sand, for baskets, for whatever. They'd take these little tesserae (which were about an inch square) and they'd cut them into different patterns; some were diagonal, others were this-or-that. And they put those together and that was to give a different texture actually. It was not really texture, in the sense of different surface feeling (because naturally it was all ceramic tile) but being broken up a little bit with grout in between gave a little bit different effect for various elements of the picture. They would cut these tesserae and then place them on the drawing until they got a section completed.

(Al will tell you all the technique of it.) Then, when they got a section about this big [indicates], they'd take that and send it down to Long Beach. People down there stayed there and they had the wall . . . they were working on the wall . . . they had the wall all ready and a place prepared for each section; and when they'd get it, they'd take it and cement it on, then clean it, and so on. Then another piece would come. It went on all the time and that's the way it was done!

BH: There were 20 or 30 people there most of the time, weren't there?

BM: There were a lot of people. I don't remember how many there were on that particular project, but quite a few. And it had to be supervised all the time; that's where Al King and his wife . . . they were very important on that. And of course Macdonald-Wright was. and there was another designer too . . . ?

BH: Stanley Spohn?

BM: Maybe so. I forget who else was on it. But many people used to . . . a lot of them would stay there because they were working at night. They had lights and they worked until 12 o'clock at night, or whatever time it was. And then they would go and curl up on the beach someplace with a blanket and sleep until the morning. Then away they went again.

BH: My goodness!

BM: It was fantastic, really wonderful!

BH: Amazing! It must have been an amazing project.

BM: There were a lot of things that happened that were pretty inspiring.

BH: What kind of things?

BM: Well, things like that. And overcoming certain opposition that there was around to doing these projects. It wasn't always easy to get the jobs. They could only be done in certain buildings, as you know. They couldn't be done in any private, privately-supported institutions. And some of the schools were hard to work with. On the other hand, sometimes one met people who were enthusiastic right away, who saw the advantage of it, so away we went. Like the Hollywood Bowl that George Stanley made sculptures for.

BH: "Music?"

BM: Yes. Well, that was a big job because the whole hill had to be re-landscaped, had to be graded and cut and everything else. That had to go through the County Engineer's office.

BH: They had plans for the future La Cienega Freeway, I guess, so to go through at that time they had to work with future city planning in mind, too.

BM: Stanley made a beautiful model and with the contour, with little trees and the boulevard, and the whole works and the little statues all placed, and the wall in place, and everything else. I remember talking with . . . we went to see the head people of the Hollywood Bowl - - a Mrs. Irish and other ladies. It wasn't too difficult because with this model, because it showed what was planned. But it also had to go through the County Engineer's office where there was a lot to be done from the engineering point of view.

BH: Did they run out of money before they got to the other three figures they were going to have?

BM: As far as I can remember, there were three finished. The main figure for "Music" was a kneeling woman with a harp, I think it was.

BH: It's the only one that was built, I think.

BM: No, there are two others. Both are just small figures.

BH: Oh, there are "Dance" and "Drama?"

BM: Yes, they were made out of red granite. This was the real thing. We did other statues that were made in cast-stone.

BH: Like in Lafayette Park and . . . ?

BM: Yeah, and let's not mention that one; it wasn't one of the best.

BH: Oh, it's the one that only has one frieze but it was supposed to have a lot of other things, wasn't it?

BM: Yeah. Then there are . . . there is the Hugo Reed statue up here by Santa Anita.

BH: I don't know about that one.

BM: Well, Hugo Reed was . . .

BH: A sculptor?

BM: No, he was an old boy, an early pioneer, around the time . . . He married an Indian woman and he had a ranch up there in part of the Lucky Baldwin ranch, which is now Santa Anita Oaks, and Santa Anita Race Track and all that. [Note: Now called Santa Anita Recreation area.] So we thought, Hugo Reed being an early man, we thought he should have a statue because the Hugo Reed adobe where he lived is still standing. (I think it still is; it was during Project days anyway.) So we had a sculptor portray him. Golly, I wish I could remember his name. You might find out about it. [Note: It was Preston Prescott.]

BH: Well, "Batista" someplace in Riverside; isn't that the same thing?

BM: No, no. This is up here . . . that was made out of cast-stone.

BH: And it was a Project work?

BM: Oh, yes. Well, of course, the best sculpture that . . . well one of the very best, I think George Stanley was very good, but I think the best sculptor was probably done by Donal Harl. Have you seen him?

BH: I'm going down to San Diego next week. He's been in Europe and I was waiting for him to get back.

BM: Oh, good. Because he did fine things too, you know.

BH: They sound beautiful.

BM: He did things in San Diego. Marvelous. Of course he worked in stone like diorite, granite and jade; the harder it was the better he liked it!

BH: Then Mr. King cast a lot of things for him. In fact, he still does; he has things right around his kiln that I saw the other day. Well, who did the Hugo Reed statue? Do you remember?

BM: That's what I can't remember.

BH: It wasn't Henry Lion?

BM: No. It was somebody . . .

BH: Merrell Gage?

BM: No. I haven't heard from him since the Project days!

BH: After a while I'll get out my list of sculptors and we'll find out.

BM: Yeah, you think about the Hugo Reed monument. Oh, I'll tell you another man that we had who was excellent was old David Edstrom.

BH: He died, didn't he?

BM: Yeah. He had been a very, very famous man in his day in Sweden. And . . .

BH: But he was only an assistant, wasn't he? He didn't design himself, did he?

BM: Oh, yes. He worked on . . . Well, the . . .

BH: The Planetarium work?

BM: Well, the best thing that he did for the Project was the Florence Nightingale statue which is down in Lincoln Park. I saw it just the other day and it's a very beautiful little statue. It's a beautiful thing. But I think it is another cast-stone type thing.

BH: What park is that in?

BM: Lincoln Park. [INTERMISSION]

BH: We were talking about Edstrom. You said that he wrote a book about . . . ?

BM: Well, it was an autobiography and I have a copy of it. He gave me one. He was very sweet. But he was an old, old, old boy and his great days were over. There he was

BH: There was an age limit on the Project too, wasn't there?

BM: What?

BH: There was an age limit on the Project. Mr. Feitelson told me that.

BM: Oh, I didn't know about it.

BH: He said a lot of people got on it anyway.

BM: Well, this was a thing that would have been a crime if they hadn't had Edstrom on the Project. Here was a man who was an internationally famous sculptor and if you could do anything at all . . . he needed financial help to ease his last years. I feel he was an unusual human being, great, not only simply because he produced this beautiful thing. It was beautiful statue. He used to phone me at all hours, like five o'clock in the morning; he used to wake up and grab the phone to tell me about what he was thinking about, you know.

BH: Isn't that something! Well, that reminds me of something odd. I had been reading about Stanley the other day, about the things that he'd done. Our son had just graduated from high school and we got word from . . . we received a meritorious paper from Bullock's Department Store, saying that he'd won one of their art awards, you know, the contest they have for the youngsters. And the award was a big, gold-embossed seal. So, during the night I dreamed that Stanley had designed that gold seal. I thought it was so funny that I had the Project working on my mind enough to dream of it, and next day I told an artist about it and she said, "Well, as a matter of fact, he did design it." Isn't that weird? She said the award seal is a copy of the medallion that's over the Bullock's Wilshire Store! She also told me that he also designed the Oscar award statuette given in Hollywood every year.

BM: Yea, I know. I just saw that the other day. I never knew that until they gave out the Oscars last time; then somebody mentioned that George Stanley had designed it.

BH: That certainly makes him an especially important local sculptor, doesn't it?

BM: Sure.

BH: At this point we stopped and looked discussed that it was gone. Mr. Mac-Gurrin gave us much material to be microfilmed. When I return that to him, we will continue our tape. There is one erroneous remark: Rico Lebrun apparently did not work on the Project. [END OF INTERVIEW WITH MAC-GURRIN]