

Interviewee: ALBERT LANIER  
Interviewer: MARY EMMA HARRIS  
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**[BEGINNING OF SIDE 1, TAPE 1 ]**

**MEH:** [GIVES IDENTIFICATION]. Al, how did you come to be at Black Mountain College?

**AL:** I found a catalogue in the Architectural Library at Georgia Tech, where I was studying architecture, and it was so interesting that I – a few friends decided to drive up and see it. So, we did. That was in – probably in the spring of 1947. Those friends would have been Ragland Watkins, maybe Si Sillman, and a man named Jim Bruce – all architectural students.

**MEH:** Do you remember what appealed to you about the college?

**AL:** Well, I think that they were building it themselves appealed to us. I have no idea what that catalogue looked like anymore, but it just sounded terribly appealing to us. I was fed up and annoyed with Georgia Tech, which was a rat-race of highly technical and dry subjects – mechanics, calculus, electricity, all kind of technical subjects. Granted we were studying design, too, and we had some drawing classes, but basically it was a treadmill course – towards graduation and getting out. I suppose I was looking for something more stimulating than that.

**MEH:** Where were you from?

**AL:** I was from a little town called Metter, Georgia, which is sixty or seventy miles from Savannah, very near the coast. I'd spent all my life there until I went to Georgia Tech, which was really only sixteen years.

**MEH:** What was your reaction to Black Mountain when you first visited?

**AL:** We were very interested in it. I believe at least two of us applied – ultimately three of us ended up there. Ragland Watkins, Si Sillman, myself, and then another guy named Forrest Wright came along later I believe, maybe in the spring of '48.

**MEH:** Did the three of you all enroll at the same time?

**AL:** No. Ragland Watkins enrolled for the summer session, and I came in the fall. I believe that Forrest either came in the spring of '48 or the summer of '48. The only one of us who stayed beyond the summer of '48 was Si Sillman, who by that time was pretty much embedded in architecture or painting.

**MEH:** That first year what – You were there one year. What did you take?

**AL:** I took Dehn's class called Mathematics for Artists. I took Albers' design class, which I believe was only the second semester, spring semester. I don't think he was there for the fall semester maybe. I took Wallen's class which had to do with community. I took – Briefly, I took German from Frank Rice. I took M.C.'s poetry class. In the summer, I pretty much devoted myself to Buckminster Fuller's class.

**MEH:** The first fall that you went – and we'll come back to the summer – the first fall you were there, Albers was gone, wasn't he?

**AL:** Yes.

**MEH:** Did you take Bolotowsky's class?

**AL:** No, I didn't. No, I had no art classes, but we organized – we organized, three or four of us, maybe five of us, to design a Minimum House, with the idea of building it. We must have met on something of a regular basis – Paul Williams, and Warren Outten were part of that. Other people were peripherally involved, but essentially it was Paul and Ragland and Warren and myself. We designed that, and with a little grant from Paul's mother, we built it, finishing it in the spring semester.

**MEH:** So, that was a major project for the year.

**AL:** Yes, yes it was.

**MEH:** Was this done with any faculty supervision, or – ?

**AL:** Not really. There was nobody, nobody there to supervise it. It was totally student, student-driven.

**MEH:** What do you think is the importance of your doing such a thing, you know, students being – How would you compare this architectural experience with what you were getting a Georgia Tech?

**AL:** Oh, Georgia Tech, you were designing office buildings and schools and some housing but very little. That was just a sketch problem. Then you had juries and you had criticism. You really never needed to know anything about nailing (?) or anything about mixing of concrete or installation of a roof or flashing. Those were things that were taken care of with specifications and catalogue, and you had nothing to do with them. So, it was very, very concrete. We collected the

stone on the site that was used in this building. We fabricated all of the windows were made of – they were not standard items. They were made in the wood shop there. It was an interesting experience and just the school letting us do it was a big thing for us.

**MEH:** What materials did you use?

**AL:** We used stone, from the site, and then the rest of it was frame with corrugated aluminum siding or roofing for the non-stone walls. Then there was one huge wall of glass, which faced the creek. I believe we actually altered the course of the creek slightly to give us room for a terrace on that side. It must have been facing – It must have been facing either south or east. I don't really know at this point without checking drawing, as to which way it was facing. Inside the walls, the walls I believe – the walls were all plywood that came from Ragland Watkins' father's mill, and they were, they were magnolia, which was a very white plywood. Ceiling I believe was Celotex, for acoustics and perhaps a little insulation – it's a wood fiber product. The concrete slab was covered I believe with coir matting which was a fibrous kind of grassy material. Essentially, that was it.

**MEH:** How many years had you had at Georgia Tech before you came to Black Mountain?

**AL:** I was in my fourth year.

**MEH:** You would have been a senior.

**AL:** I would have been a senior, but architecture was a five-year program, so I would have had another full year to get a degree from Georgia Tech.

**MEH:** Do you remember who the first occupants of the Minimum House were?

**AL:** Just Paul and Vera. Paul Williams and Vera Baker Williams. They were married at the end, I believe the end of the school year – in '48. When they returned for the summer session, they lived in the Minimum House, which was great.

**MEH:** What do you remember about Max Dehn and his class?

**AL:** It was marvelous because, whereas at Georgia Tech you had to go bang-bang-bang every day, every week, so that you could keep up and so that you might pass the exams and the quizzes, with Dehn you took an idea or a concept and explored it and all of its ramifications. Only when you had exhausted what interested you with this did you proceed to another one. What a way, what a way to study math. A beautiful way to study math. Geometry, you know. Really great.

**MEH:** What was Dehn like as a person, as a teacher?

**AL:** He was very gentle, very sweet. I said to him once, "You must be very frustrated having so few mathematics students – or having so few serious mathematics students." There was one or two. He said, "At my age, you could care less about mathematicians!" (LAUGHS) He himself was very, very knowledgeable about the native plants and would take long, long walks in the woods, and talk about the trillium, the trees, some plants that he knew – knew history of and what they were good for and how they were associated with civilization. He brought the plants into it. That was Dehn.

**MEH:** You named your son after him. One son.

**AL:** We named a son Hudson Dehn Lanier. Hudson named his son Max.

**MEH:** Is he Max Dehn Lanier?

**AL:** No, he's just – He's actually Max Sanford Clark Lanier. The Sanford was the name of his truck, my son's truck. (LAUGHS) He has a son named for his truck, and for Max Dehn, who he never really knew. I don't think he ever saw him.

**MEH:** What about M.C.'s class?

**AL:** M.C.'s class was pretty much lost on me. It was a pondering of the meaning of the poem, and I liked to read poetry and I enjoyed hearing her read it. But I wearied of long discussions and contributed very little on my part, so that was probably the big problem – that I was not contributing to anything. I guess, I guess I was kind of tired of discussion. It's hard to say "discussion classes," because I wasn't – At Georgia Tech, one of the things I enjoyed most were the English classes because they permitted you to do something other than a mechanical sort of learning. That and the drawing classes were the best. No, I would say it was, for me was not a great experience.

**MEH:** Was Molly Gregory still there, or had she left?

**AL:** No, Molly was not there that year, and I don't believe she ever really returned.

**MEH:** No, she didn't. When she left, she left.

**AL:** I don't think she returned.

**MEH:** Was the woodworking shop there?

**AL:** The woodworking shop was being run by, I believe by Harry Weitzer, and I made – That year I made some dolls from apple wood, where the parts were interchangeable. (LAUGHS). I carved them and I think the apple wood came from old apple trees that had been cut down. It's a very stable wood. Drawing

instruments were made from pear – pear. Primarily pear, I believe, but maybe apple, too.

**MEH:** What about – What was Albers teaching in the spring when he returned?

**AL:** It was his design class, and you went through *matière*, figure-background, transparency. You had a different problem every week. You were assigned these problems, the problem was discussed, you went away and you came back with your solution. You were not treated very well if you did not bring something back. Everybody's solution was presented and discussed, and then you got the next one – or a continuation of that assignment. It was a great class, a great class. Then you spent – You could spend many hours on whatever it was inside class.

**MEH:** How do you think – How did that class relate later to your architectural work?

**AL:** I think in the – in seeing and representing three dimensions in two dimensions. I think that was the biggest thing, and it helped you to – it helped you to envision what the space was going to look like, you know. Very important in architecture.

**MEH:** What about – What do you mean by "seeing"? Could you expand on that a little more?

**AL:** Well, you – For instance, let's talk about a color. That – The color is really almost entirely dependent on its neighbors, whether it looks warm or cool, or whether it looks bright or dull, even whether it looks pastel or intense is dependent upon what it's surrounded with, or what's it's adjacent to. That was something that we'd never, never really seen before, or I'd never seen it before. Folding a paper just was a revelation in its geometry and what it did

three-dimensionally by folding it – even structurally. You saw that the folding transformed a very flexible material into a very rigid material that could support surprising amounts of weight. This was all a part of seeing. Having it demonstrated.

**MEH:** What was Albers like as a person?

**AL:** Entertaining. Entertaining, brusque, dogmatic, but very funny. He held your attention. I think maybe – I think maybe it was an element of his needing to like you for this to come through. I think there were people he didn't like, just like there were people that all of us don't like. But I had no problem, no problem at all with Albers, and I just loved being with him. Sorry that I was with him such a short time – really only about six, six or seven months.

**MEH:** Do you think it was easier for women students to study with Albers than men?

**AL:** Not necessarily, no. I don't think so. I think – I don't think he showed much partisanship, and I don't think – I don't think men were put off by him. Well, I certainly wasn't. Maybe they were a little more devoted – the women were. I don't know.

**MEH:** You didn't take any science classes with Natasha.

**AL:** No. No science. I'd had a lot of science at Georgia Tech: chemistry and, you know, electrical engineering. It was – I was really very tired of that.

**MEH:** What about the – What did you do for the work program?

**AL:** Essentially, I built the Minimum House. I must have done a few other things. You know, I don't have much recollection of it. I must have worked sometime in the Dining Hall. Certainly, I worked on the dish crews. I really can't remember



what I did. I didn't haul coal. Didn't work in the laundry. I just don't know what I did. I think the big thing was working on that house, building that house.

**MEH:** Well, that's a significant work.

**AL:** Yes, yes, it was. It was weekends, and, you know, after hours.

**MEH:** Did you ever leave the Black Mountain – Lake Eden – and go into the surrounding area?

**AL:** I went into Asheville a few times, but not very far into the surrounding area. I went home for holidays and vacations, which was not all that far. But I didn't, I didn't explore the area very much. I was very happy staying at the school.

**MEH:** Did you ever go to, was it Peek's then?

**AL:** Yes, we went to Peek's, with Elaine de Kooning, finding (?). In the summer, or maybe before the summer of '48, I bought a Model-A from a farmer that was inoperable. It was parked in a farmer's barn or on his farm anyway. I've forgotten whether I paid a hundred or two hundred dollars for it. Forrest Wright and I got it to run, and restored it, and drove it that summer. Yes, it had to be that model. Our friend Peggy Tolk also had a Model-A, a beautiful one, and she was no longer there that summer though. I remember driving to Peek's Tavern with Elaine de Kooning in the rumble seat of the Model-A, and her shrieking, "Oh, I've eaten all the almonds out of my Joy!" (LAUGHS) Which I thought was incredibly funny. Yeah, we'd go to Peek's. I didn't drink beer, so that going to Peek's for me was not quite what it was for many of the students, because I never mastered beer – even though I'd been in the Navy.

**MEH:** So, at Black Mountain what did you do if you were so isolated? What entertainment?

**AL:** Well, we read. I did music, listened to music. You – and I'm not musical. You might –

**MEH:** I want you to repeat the Elaine thing. You said you went to Peek's with Elaine? De Kooning.

**AL:** Yes, and she was riding in the rumble seat, and it was at night – scares the hell out of me today. I'm sure the headlights were not adjusted, or anything else, but – As we were driving along, she suddenly shrieked: "Oh, I've eaten all of the almonds out of my Joy!" Which I find very funny. Still do.

**MEH:** I'd asked you about how you entertained yourself. Were there plays or concerts? Parties?

**AL:** There were plays, concerts. We swam in the creek. We didn't swim in the lake at that point. I guess it was considered polluted, but we'd swim in the creek. In fact, we would work – On those hot days, we'd work on the Minimum House, and just before noon-time, before lunch, we'd run down to the creek and jump in and still get to lunch on time. We hiked around. I found the immediate area very fascinating – you know, the mountains. I didn't grow up in mountains and that was marvelous. The rhododendrons. The dogwood. The plants were just marvelous. Then you spent time – or I spent time – working on the problems that Albers or Dehn had set for us. I had a very hard time with German, and a poor time with the poetry class. I really even didn't have a good time with the

Wallen class, because there again it was endless discussion of interpersonal relationships and [TECHNICAL INTERRUPTION].

**[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE 1. BEGINNING OF TAPE 2, SIDE 2.]**

Discussion of interpersonal relationships, and I really wasn't interested in those things. That's how we spent our time. Or how I spent my time. Everybody did it in a different way, I'm sure.

**MEH:** You had a study in the Studies Building?

**AL:** I had a study and loved that.

**MEH:** What do you think was the effect of having your own little studio?

**AL:** Well, I think maybe, maybe it taught us to work alone, to some extent. I think just the thought of controlling a space exclusively is pretty novel to young people. I loved it. They were generally very bare and stayed very bare unless you built yourself some bookshelves or a worktable or put something up on the wall to look at. It was – It was a great experience, and it was very little space that you would think almost any school could afford – Of course, there was a hell of a lot of living done within that space, as opposed to the dormitory, which was very unprivate and tended to be noisy when there were people around. Could be at all hours. We gave parties. I remember Peggy giving one party, and it was going to be a benefit for a black church or a black school – I don't know which. It was held in the Dining Hall, and you were going to pay for drinks. I don't know what else you were going to pay for, exactly how we were raising the money. Peggy felt that people were lonely, and so she'd invite them to drink with her. Of course, no one – she wasn't paying and they weren't paying. The

next day there was no money. No one could find the money. Finally, I went to the dormitory where the bartender lived, and he was sound asleep. I pulled back the cover, and there were all of these loose bills and loose change.

[LAUGHTER] The money was in bed with him. At any rate, it was counted, and I think we'd gone in the hole only by about ten dollars! We had raised nothing for the black school.

**MEH:** What do you remember about Peggy Tolk? Who was she?

**AL:** She was a student that came the summer of '47, and she came from New York. She had lived in San Francisco. She and Ragland Watkins became sweethearts almost instantly and were married at Christmas in New York City. "Where were you married, Peggy?" Her reply is "Christ's Church, whose else?" (LAUGHS) Or "who else's?" She was thoroughly outrageous, and she knew it. She had a big collection of folk music – spirituals, particularly. She sang them. She sang very well, very haunting voice. She painted primitive paintings, and she was intent on keeping them primitive. She was something that I'd never really ever encountered before in, in her outlook and her demeanor. Very soon, I think bored to tears at Black Mountain College, found it just too precious, too tame, too flat for her. So, they moved on.

**MEH:** To San Francisco?

**AL:** Well, yes, they may have gone first to New York and then from New York to San Francisco. Or maybe they left Black Mountain and just came directly to San Francisco. That's what I remember. I remember many things because we were friends in San Francisco. We spent many many years as friends.

**MEH:** I'm going to stay with Peggy. Only her friends – I only have her friends for reference. She created The Tin Angel here?

**AL:** Yes. I came to San Francisco because Peggy, who had lived here before during the War, told me that you could get a seven-course meal, or a five-course meal in North Beach, with a bottle of red wine for a buck fifty. That was not true anymore, or it had never been true. Well, it was no longer true when I came. At any rate, I came to San Francisco, and Peggy had her first child [TECHNICAL INTERRUPTION] in October of that year. Then she and Forrest Wright, who came out here with me and Ray Johnson. She and Forrest and Ragland bought a little building on the waterfront in Sausalito, which was a crab – you could eat the crab there, but it was primarily to sell crab. They cooked the crab and made those – called a Crab Market, or something. It was built on piers over the water. It's still there. It's a hotsy-totsy restaurant. She – For a little time, they sold crab. Had a little cottage built behind it on the pier, at the end of the pier. They moved into the cottage, and then she got rid of the crab. She had music in the evening. She flew to New York and took down a – I believe a weather vane that was made of, maybe it was made of lead, I'm not sure. But she called it "The Tin Angel," and that became the name of the restaurant. It was The Tin Angel. Over the years, there was a bar, and the bar – I don't know if the bar ever had hard liquor. It certainly had wine and beer. It became kind of a hang-out for the hip of Marin County and to some extent of San Francisco and very, very successful, and became a place where she promoted jazz. At some point, she sold it and moved to the waterfront in San Francisco, Embarcadero, near Front

Street. There is a little book called I Am a Lover – I've forgotten who wrote it – where the cover, at least on the paperback, the cover – and it may have only been in paperback – the cover is a picture of The Tin Angel on the waterfront. There she really, really began to be a draw for the jazz scene. She gave parties, and she had fights with the Bartenders Union, and she had fights with her lovers who came and went. The first time that Odetta ever performed was at The Tin Angel. Dave Brubeck performed there. Lizzie Miles performed there. Then she got still another place, which was Sally Stanford's old house of prostitution on either Pine or Bush, and she spent a year working on it and that was opened up and known as The Fallen Angel. It lasted a very short time and went under, and then she turned, she turned The Tin Angel over to the Weiss brothers, who owned Fantasy Records, and pretty soon it was out of business, although at Fantasy Records she'd gotten to know Saul Zantz who later became a movie producer the movies Amadeus, and One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, all of those great movies, and he used – he used her paintings as album covers. He became the owner of Fantasy Records and still, I guess, owns Fantasy. At any rate, then Peggy fell very much on hard times. Had little, very little or no income. Had a bad bout with cancer. Maybe lived another five years, in and out of psychiatric wards, and died, I believe, at about fifty-three. That's Peggy.

**MEH:** Going back to Black Mountain – long digression. You stayed for the summer of 1948.

**AL:** Right.

**MEH:** They had what today is a really stellar faculty with Buckminster Fuller and Bill de Kooning –

**AL:** It was marvelous.

**MEH:** At that point, were you aware of – Had you ever heard of any of these people?

**AL:** You know, I had never heard of Fuller before, before he came that summer. I don't think I'd heard – Of course, I, you know, I'm a country boy. I had never heard of John Cage or Merce Cunningham. Not many other people had heard of John Cage. Maybe people that were in the know in dance had heard of Cunningham. Certainly had never heard of de Kooning. There was an architect who came from Harvard there that summer, but I don't remember his name. It's a name that I had heard of, but his being there was redundant with Fuller, or almost redundant. Maybe somebody took his class. No, I hadn't – it was all a revelation to me. I didn't know anything about it. I was so naive then. When I was stationed in Washington, D.C. in the Navy, I went to the Phillips Academy – I think it was called the Phillips Academy or the Phillips Gallery – and thought I had discovered an unknown painter named Paul Klee. I really thought so. Paul Klee. Then there was a sculptor whose drawings that were there who – oh, the English sculptor who's very big. I can't remember it.

**MEH:** Not Henry Moore?

**AL:** Yes, Henry Moore. Henry Moore's air raid shelter drawings, I thought, I thought I was the only one that knew about these. (LAUGHS) So, I needed a lot of educating, or exposure.

**MEH:** How do you remember Fuller that summer? What was he like?

**AL:** Oh, he was frantic to try to get the first dome up, and we spent the whole summer plotting, punching the holes, getting ready for the erection of the first dome of any size. Until then they'd been models, fabricating the frame for it, which was made of Venetian blind slat material. Of course, you know the story of finally at the end of the summer we're ready, and we went to a field to bolt this together, and nothing happened. It lay there (LAUGHS). It lay there in the grass, with a gentle rain falling. It was a great disappointment, but not to Fuller. "Well, maybe you have to use something a little stronger next time." He was entertaining, and he had a devoted, a devoted group of us working with him. Warren Outten, Kenneth Snelson, me, a fellow – I believe Forrest Wright, but I'm not sure. There were a few other people that really spent the whole summer session. We did virtually nothing else. We went to performances, but I didn't take Albers' class that summer. I should have, but I didn't.

**MEH:** Where did Fuller hold his class?

**AL:** There must have been a classroom. I believe – What I'm remembering was that it was in the Studies Building, but I could be wrong on that. It was just a space, you know. I think maybe it was in the Studies. It was either in the Studies or it was in one of those old war housing barracks that they had erected. That's where it was held. Where were classes held generally? Classes were held generally in war housing. They were really strange. We didn't worry about it.

**MEH:** Did he live in his trailer that he brought with him? Or was that just full of material?



**AL:** I don't think he did, although he may have. I didn't know. I didn't know where he lived, or if I did I've forgotten.

**MEH:** Was that the summer that he was on the stay-awake-for-two-or-three-hours-and-then-sleep-for-twenty-minutes syndrome?

**AL:** He was on that. He would, he would work for four hours and sleep for twenty minutes or something like that, so that he slept very, very little.

**MEH:** Did the students try to go on that schedule?

**AL:** I didn't. I don't believe – Alex Morse was another student that worked with us that summer. I don't know whether any of them did or not. If anyone did, it was probably Snelson. He had come as a painter or an art student and embraced what Fuller was doing. Warren Outten and Mary followed him to I.D. in Chicago, leaving Black Mountain.

**MEH:** What – Did you take Bill de Kooning's painting class?

**AL:** No. No, I only had the – Albers design class was the only art or design class that I ever had there. No, I didn't study with de Kooning. I talked to de Kooning, but – I'm not sure that, I'm not sure that he really had a class. I think maybe he just painted. But I'm not sure of that. Maybe he did have a group of students that he worked with.

**MEH:** Were you aware of the type of painting he was doing that summer?

**AL:** Oh, yes, we saw them. He didn't have a show, but you could go to his studio or to his space that he was working in and see them. He was very open and very generous with his time.

**MEH:** Did you have any familiarity before that time with the emerging Abstract Expressionist style?

**AL:** No. No. I really didn't have. I didn't have, and to tell you the truth I really wasn't interested. I wasn't interested, and it never really reached me.

**MEH:** What was Elaine de Kooning like?

**AL:** Very funny. Very bubbly. She had one yellow dress, or a blouse with a top – blouse, top, and then the skirt had kind of embroidery elastic at the waist. During the day she wore the skirt up – by up, I mean pulled up on her waist. Then for the evening, where you were supposed to dress for dinner – much more formal – she would pull the dress down on her hips and she would have almost an evening gown. (LAUGHS) Then, of course, she was in the Satie play. That was the other thing we did. We made props – Ruth and I and Forrest Wright, maybe Mary Phelan Outten. We all made props for the play, and that was a very big thing too that summer was that play, that performance.

**MEH:** Do you remember how you put together the different props?

**AL:** Roughly, yes. There was kind of a chaise, and we put real feet on it first for the legs.

**MEH:** Were they like papier maché feet? How did you make those feet?

**AL:** I don't know how we made them. No. Then Ruth made things out of sheet metal that she cut with tin snips. I think that chaise was primarily made by Forrest – kind of upholstered in some outrageous material that we found. It was very funny.

**MEH:** What about Lippold? What did he do that summer?

**AL:** Oh, Lippold was very – He worked with Fuller some. He made his sculptures. There again I don't believe he had a class. I think he just worked on his own work, and students could go and talk to him or he would talk to them. But I don't believe he had a sculpture class. I could be wrong, but the Fuller thing left no time for much else, you know. He made me a cap for my radiator for my Model-A, which got stolen in San Francisco. I don't have it. Wish I did. Wish I had the Model-A.

**MEH:** Do you have any other particular memories of that summer that we haven't talked about?

**AL:** Well, there were the concerts. There were duels between Bodky and Cage that were duels on the piano. I believe that's how they were billed, as a "duel." No one's ever mentioned those duels. They challenged one another. Or I've forgotten who challenged who. They – in concert – had this duel. There was that, and then of course The Ruse of Medusa which took up the summer.

**MEH:** How do you remember John Cage?

**AL:** Utterly fascinating. It was restricted to Satie and his own compositions, and the prepared piano, which – How would I have ever encountered a prepared piano before, you know? He was very open, very, very friendly, very entertaining.

**MEH:** What about Cunningham?

**AL:** Less so, I think. I was really not very interested in the dance. Still am not interested in the dance. I didn't know him.

**MEH:** Had you taken part in any of the music activities at the college – the chorus?

**AL:** I'm very unmusical. I liked it but had no ability whatever in that area. No, I took no part. I really didn't take any part in any of the theater part, except helping to make props for that one production. At one point, I'd been – Earlier I had been terribly interested in theater and had gone to the University of North Carolina for a summer. Could have stayed there. They would have kept me without a high school diploma. I wrote a little play that was produced that summer.

**[END OF SIDE 1, TAPE 2; SIDE 2, TAPE 1 BEGINS]**

**MEH:** This is February 24, 1998, Albert Lanier, in San Francisco, California. Albert, you had said that you went to Chapel Hill one summer.

**AL:** The summer of '42. It was a special summer session for high school students who were permitted to go there for the summer, and it was particularly strong in theater. That's why I went there, although I did take an art class from Allcott, who was the head of the art department. Years later we sent an exhibit over to the University of North Carolina from Black Mountain, and so I think I saw Allcott again. I had a cousin who taught at Chapel Hill. His name was Edwin Sidney Lanier, and he later became the Insurance Commissioner for North Carolina. That's why North Carolina was chosen for this fifteen-year-old kid to spend the summer there. For me it was a great experience. I don't know if they still do it. Probably don't. I could have continued instead of going back to high school, but I decided I wanted to graduate, which – it's a good thing I did, because it's the only thing I'm a graduate of, is high school.

**MEH:** Did you – You stayed at Black Mountain for the 1948 Summer Session.

**AL:** Right. I was there for the school year, '47-'48, and for the summer of '48. I left with the idea that I would spend a year in San Francisco and go back to Black Mountain. I never went back, or not as a student anyway.

**MEH:** That was the summer that Buckminster Fuller was there.

**AL:** That's right.

**MEH:** Had you ever heard of him?

**AL:** No. I really was totally unfamiliar with him.

**MEH:** How do you remember Bucky Fuller as a person?

**AL:** As a very exciting – "exciting" is hardly the word – mesmerizing presentation of his ideas and what he was working on. Before he came, or before he began teaching, he made a presentation to the whole school down at the Dining Hall, which I believe began right after dinner, maybe 7 o'clock, and probably ended two or three in the morning, with most of the people staying for the full time. It was really stunning. So, the few architectural students that were there, plus many others, or several others, devoted the summer to working with Fuller. It was very good. There was another architect there from Harvard who, I think, concentrated primarily on history, but there were few people who worked with him. I've forgotten his name. Somebody that you've heard of.

**MEH:** What – Tell me what you remember about the design and construction of the dome. Had Fuller already designed it?

**AL:** (OVERTALK). Oh, yes. He had designed it and it was in model form. He had never built one other than the model. He knew all the math for it. He had worked that out. This one that we were going to build I believe was going to be

maybe thirty-six feet in diameter, and the hemisphere would have been about eighteen feet tall at the center. For this we were going to use standard aluminum that was made for the slats in Venetian blinds, but the big blinds, not these tiny ones that we have today – not the mini-blinds. All we had to do was calculate and mark on these and punch holes for the bolts for assembling this. Then we coiled up these and marked them, and we practiced, practiced to the extent of how we were going to roll them out, and we were going to use these bolts with wing-nuts. When you got it all together, it was going to stand up. The day finally came when we had it all done, and the whole school knew about it, and we were going to do it in a field which was adjacent to the Studies Building. The roadway comes up here and the field was down there. The whole college assembled up on the roadway there, and those of us who had worked on it – there are photographs of it in your book – maybe twelve of us and Fuller, were down in the field with our coils of aluminum blinds. We rolled them out and began assembling them and putting them together in this very intricate pattern. It never rose. It just lay there like spaghetti. It began to rain. It was a – It was pretty dismal. Only Fuller was not – or didn't show any great disappointment. He said that obviously we needed to use a stronger member, that the Venetian blind was not strong enough. His approach to engineering was to use the least possible, and when failure no longer occurred, this is what you used. It was very interesting, but much too close to the end of the summer to start over with a stronger material, even if we had had the money for it. That's what I remember.

**MEH:** Do you have any other particular memories of that summer? Of Fuller in or out of class?

**AL:** Oh, well, it was the summer of de Kooning, of Cage, Cunningham. I believe it was their first times there, as it was Fuller's. Lippold. It was a pretty exciting summer and there were many, many concerts, and there was the performance of The Ruse of Medusa by Satie, and there were duels between John Cage and Erwin Bodky on the piano and the harpsichord. There was something happening all the time. It was a very, very busy, exciting summer. I can't remember any real disasters. I believe Paul and Vera Williams had been married, and they came back for the summer and lived in the Minimum House. They were the first tenants of the Minimum House. I believe Warren and Mary Outten were also married that summer. My friends Peggy and Ragland Tolk Watkins – Peggy Tolk and Ragland Watkins – had left Black Mountain. They had left in the spring for New York, and then from New York they'd gone to San Francisco. That's why I chose to come to San Francisco for a year, or that was my plan – for a year.

**MEH:** Did you have any particular plans in terms of what you were going to do here?

**AL:** I was going to work – I was so naive. I was going to work in the various building trades. Not just in one, not just you know be an electrician or the masonry or carpenter, but I was going to work in all of them and then go back to Black Mountain College with this experience was what I was going to do.

**MEH:** And what did you do?

**AL:** I started out working as a carpenter's apprentice, and then the rains came and I was laid off. I decided I'd better hit architectural offices and see if I could find a job. I finally found one, found a desperate architect who hired me, and I went to work for him. He was Mario Corbett, who was very, very publicity-oriented. He published – His wife was very publicity-oriented, and through, through them I got to know the magazine Arts and Architecture. I was familiar with it before, but I got to know the editor, John Entenza, who published the drawings for the Minimum House, and some photographs of Hazel's. At any rate I went to work for Mario Corbett and worked for him for about a year and a half until, probably until 1950, somewhere around there.

**MEH:** And in the meantime you and Ruth had gotten married?

**AL:** We got married in the summer of '49, in July of '49. I also visited Ruth's family in Los Angeles while she was there, because she decided to go back to Black Mountain for another year. So, I saw Los Angeles and met her family. Even – If I hadn't gotten a job here, I'd considered going to Los Angeles. I didn't but I'd considered that.

**MEH:** So you were getting general architectural experience with Corbett?

**AL:** Oh, I was getting total architectural experience. He took a vacation almost immediately and left me to run the office. It was crazy, just crazy. Ragland Watkins was also working for an architect. He was working for Dinwiddie, you know John Eakin Dinwiddie, I think. So, he was working. I didn't let my lack of experience slow me down at all! Actually I was a good draftsman. I was a good draftsman and probably had more savvy than most people right out of school.



**MEH:** So, what did you do after you left Corbett?

**AL:** I opened my own office with a partner, and that lasted about eight months, until it was obvious that we couldn't make a go of it. I took another job with architectural firm, a big one, and I worked for them for a year. Got laid off at the end when things got slow and went to work for an interior designer, where I worked – I had to agree to stay at least six months. When I went to work for him, I stayed only six months. I left at the end of six months. Went to work for John Funk, an architect, very good architect, and proceeded to stay there for the next eight years. Once I left him, I opened my own office – second time around.

**MEH:** How did you get licensed? Were you licensed at this point?

**AL:** You're licensed – I could have been – You can be licensed, you're licensed by a state exam. With a degree, you can be admitted, I believe, with only two years' experience, or at the time only two years' experience with a licensed architect. If you don't have that degree, you're given credit for, some credit but not the full points, and you have to make up the rest of the time in years that you work for a licensed architect. I obviously worked many more years for a licensed architect than you were required to work before you pass it. You pass it in phases. It lasts for about four days. It was a very difficult exam. I don't know what it's like today. I think it maybe is not as difficult today.

**MEH:** What generally –

**AL:** I think today you may have to have the degree.

**MEH:** But your high school was the only degree you ever had?

**AL:** Diploma, yes. Yes, my only graduation was from high school. I didn't graduate from Georgia Tech, and obviously didn't graduate from Black Mountain, and never went back to school after Black Mountain – or not for credit, you know. I took a few courses.

**MEH:** What generally has been the nature of your architectural practice?

**AL:** It's very heavy on residential – some work for the university. John Funk worked a great deal for the University of California, and then in my own practice it was residential, some apartments, some commercial, a little institutional – but no schools. I never designed a school. And not religious – no churches. Very heavy on residential, and very heavy in San Francisco. Very little of our work was ever outside San Francisco, and then only in surrounding counties.

**MEH:** Looking back, what do you think was the real, the importance of Black Mountain as a college?

**AL:** As a college – I think that's a hard question. I think it has to be very subjective. I don't think you can be very objective about it. Let's say for me, it gave me the feeling that anything's possible. It gave me a kind of optimism and confidence in my own ability, and that if I didn't have the knowledge or the tools to do whatever it was I wanted to do, I could acquire them. That it was very, very related – that architecture truly was one of the arts, that I was not abandoning art for trade of architecture or for a business of architecture. That it was art with me. I think I got a lot of that from Black Mountain. I think my life would have been very, very different if I had stayed at Georgia Tech and graduated from Georgia Tech and gone to work in Atlanta and joined the Optimists or the

Kiwanis Club or the country club. It would have been terribly, terribly different.

Maybe I would have been happy. I don't know. I'm glad I didn't.

**MEH:** Are there other thoughts about Black Mountain, other events that we haven't covered that you feel are important?

**AL:** No. I don't think so. I think the intimacy, the intimacy of the school was something I'd never known. Even in high school I'd never known that, or elementary school. Certainly not at Georgia Tech, certainly not in the Navy, and that was – I think it was kind of related to the feeling I got in Dehn's math class, that I felt that I knew a few things completely. I knew that there were many things I didn't know, but I knew a few things completely. I think that's something that most people never, never really have. It's very hard to get in college.

**[END OF TRANSCRIPT]**