

Interviewee: WILLIAM RAGLAND "RAGS" WATKINS  
Interviewer: MARY EMMA HARRIS  
Location: McComb, MISSISSIPPI  
Date: January 9, 2002  
Media: Videocassette 2  
Interview no.: 309  
Transcription: Ellen Dissanayake, February 25, 2002; corrected by Mary Emma Harris, March 2002. Converted from Word Perfect by MEH, May 2015.

**[BEGINNING OF SIDE 1, TAPE 1]**

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

**RW:** Well, I was at Georgia Tech. I was there with Albert Lanier and we were good friends, and he knew about it. I did not. I had never heard of it. We were doing work together at Tech, and he suggested that we go to Black Mountain, so I got on the train and went to Black Mountain [LAUGHS] for the summer. He didn't come until the fall.

**MEH:** That was the summer of 1947?

**RW:** '47, yes. Let me think. Yes.

**MEH:** Where were you from? Where did you grow up?

**RW:** Well, I grew up here in McComb, and went off, graduated from high school here. I went to Millsaps College in Jackson, my first year, to get acclimated to college, and then I went to Georgia Tech to go into the architectural department. No I didn't. I got through about half of my sophomore year, and then the army took me. I went to my training and then was sent to Bowdoin College where I was supposed to be in an ASTP (?) Program, which was to make us all officers. Well, I was there for about four months, and they decided

they didn't need any more officers [LAUGHS]. They'd rather have machine gunners, so they pulled us all out and sent us to the army, into the real army. That's how I got that far. Let's see, then I went to Europe and was a soldier until – god, I don't know. I went over right after D-day, or shortly after D-day, and did not get into D-day, thank God, and then from there went into combat and stayed until the War ended, upon which I came home. I have put the cart before the horse here, because then I went – No, I – Then I went back to Georgia Tech. I had never really enjoyed Georgia Tech, and when Albert suggested Black Mountain, it sounded good to me and so I went to Black Mountain. It certainly was different from Georgia Tech, believe me! [LAUGHS]

**MEH:** What did your parents – You went first for the summer. What did your parents think about this? Did they – ?

**RW:** Well, they didn't understand, I don't think, quite. But they went along with it. There was no problem there at all, no kind. No, we didn't fight or fuss or anything. I think my father felt if I could get through World War Two that I could do anything. Of course, he wasn't right, [LAUGHS] but in any case i was part of my family.

**MEH:** The first time you went to Black Mountain, how did you get there physically?

**RW:** On the train [LAUGHS], as I recall.

**MEH:** Do you remember your first impression of the school?

**RW:** Well, I liked the way it felt. I liked the way it looked. It was different from any experience I'd ever had before. First impressions. I was very pleased with it. I had a great summer.

**MEH:** On, let's see. Was Albers there that summer?

**RW:** Yes.

**MEH:** Right. That was just before he went on –

**RW:** He was there the whole time I was there.

**MEH:** Okay. What do you remember about that summer? Any particular memories?

**RW:** [LAUGHS] It was just the different lifestyle than I'd ever known. It was fine with me. I enjoyed it. I wove. I really liked weaving. I don't think I was a great academic student, but it was a hell of a good time. That's not a very nice thing to say, is it?

**MEH:** No, it's fine.

**RW:** But, I didn't know what I wanted when I went there, I don't think. I had always wanted to be an architect. I thought so, but I think I had a lot of maturing to do that I hadn't done yet when I went, frankly. I think you needed to be pretty mature when you go – with some directions in mind. I made a marriage there, which I shouldn't have made. I'm not blaming anybody, except it just wasn't the right thing. We left Black Mountain – am I jumping the gun here? But anyway, I stayed until – the end of the second semester, we left, but anyway you're the leader. You tell me.

**MEH:** Okay, we'll come to that a little later.

**RW:** We needn't go into that, further than that.

**MEH:** What do you recall about Albers' classes?

**RW:** I didn't have a lot of his stuff. I had the weaving, which Anni Albers was involved in. I, for some reason, took German. I guess one of the biggest

things we did was to build a house up the hill, and we were very involved in that.

**MEH:** Tell me what you can remember just about the whole process of planning and building?

**RW:** Well, we did a floor plan. We'd started on materials and that sort of thing. I built a model of the house. I don't remember the scale, but it was probably, I don't know, probably a half-inch or something, which as a matter of fact we sent to a showing in North Carolina, I think, at one of the colleges. Our only contact outside with them, that I was aware of. We built the house. We climbed up that mountain and brought back rocks and stones and gathered our materials and built the house. It was an exciting thing. It was a nice house.

**MEH:** When you say "we," –

**RW:** It was Albers – Albert, myself, maybe – I don't know whether a boy from Tech that had come up there was with us or not. Oh, he died recently. What's his name? From Winnetka, Illinois.

**MEH:** Paul Williams.

**RW:** Paul Williams was very involved in it, and he was a very sincere guy. But he was very involved in it. His mother donated some money towards this thing. I can't think of – there must have been more people than just the three of us, but they're the three I remember.

**MEH:** Was there any faculty involvement?

**RW:** No. Not that I re- – I don't think so, at all.

**MEH:** So you built the house that year. Would that sort of student-initiated project have been possible at Georgia Tech?

**RW:** I don't know. Everything was pretty well scheduled by the faculty at Tech, and this is really something that Paul wanted, I mean probably brought up. I don't remember how it started. But it was purely a student thing. It was just people who were interested in what we were doing that got involved. Paul was. Albert was and I was, and so on.

**MEH:** Was Warren Outten involved in that, do you recall?

**RW:** Warren must have been. I remember him very well. I don't remember him particularly in building the house. I did the little model of the house. I've said that. No, as I say, Warren was quite a guy. I liked him very much. But I don't remember – he probably was. He must have been.

**MEH:** I have a note here, I have a note that you took weaving with Trude Guermonprez? Do you remember her?

**RW:** Yes. Yes. Delightful woman.

**MEH:** I also had a note you took philosophy. Who would that have – Would that have been with Dehn, or – ?

**RW:** Oh my god, I don't know! [LAUGHS]

**MEH:** What do you remember about Albers's class?

**RW:** I went to a few of his classes. I did – I remember doing one of those things we did.

**MEH:** The matière.

**RW:** Which he says was not a matière, so I dropped out. [LAUGHS] There was no ill feeling there, but I think I had a rag that someone had been using to paint with, and I put it in the bottom of a basket, and over that I put all these clear marbles. I thought it was pretty, pretty sexy, but he didn't think so [LAUGHS]. He said "You're in the wrong direction there, son." So anyway, I don't know. I never got close to him at all.

**MEH:** Do you remember other classes? I also have a note you took mathematics.

**RW:** Yeah, I did – from Dehn.

**MEH:** What was that class like?

**RW:** Well that was fascinating. I can't remember anything specifically, but he was very interesting, and I enjoyed that class. I remember that.

**MEH:** You had your own little student study?

**RW:** Yes. We all did, of course.

**MEH:** Any other memories in particular? What did you do for recreation at the college?

**RW:** I don't know. It was mostly people. I didn't play ball. We had awfully good people there, artists – people who sang. There was a marvelous black woman who sang, I remember, oh god, what was it? I don't know, she was just tremendous. We had, of course, – who else? We had some artists. I can't think of names is my problem. But we had a great deal of that. We had dances sometimes. We walked. We would climb the mountain a lot. I did. We went out into the woods and stuff and that was nice.

**MEH:** Did you ever go into Asheville or Black Mountain?

**RW:** Yes, a few times I went into Asheville. Not often. I went into Black Mountain occasionally. We had this thing where everything was too tense, we all left the college. It seems to me we all went to New York, and met each other at the Museum of Modern Art or something [LAUGHS]. We didn't get far away from our friends. But it was a change, and it was loosening us up, I suppose.

**MEH:** What about – are there students you remember in particular?

**RW:** A woman named Harriett Sohmers was there. She called me after many years of separation, out of the blue, which was amazing, and I got her address in New York and even called her and we had a drink together, and I've lost her address. If you can find it for me, you let me know. I don't know whether she's on your list. (OVERTALK)

**MEH:** She may be, I'm not sure.

**RW:** Her son's name is not Sohmers. What did you ask me? What was the question?

**MEH:** [IRRELEVANT TECHNICAL REMARKS] I asked you if there were students you remember. What about Ruth Asawa. What was she like then?

**RW:** Quiet. I was never particularly – I don't remember Ruth being someone I was terribly close to then. She was very quiet, as I recall, and very talented and was very earnest about her work.

**MEH:** Did you have particular assignments on the Work Program?

**RW:** I thought everybody – I don't remember it, but I must have. If other people did, I did. I don't remember what they were. It seems to me the people on the farm had the most in the way of Work Programs.

**MEH:** Did you work on the farm?

**RW:** No. Making the house was a Work Program. I guess it was a very good work program.

**MEH:** Okay, let's get your chronology straight a little bit. You graduated from high school. Did you go into service before you went to Millsaps? You went to Millsaps and then you were into service.

**RW:** I went to Millsaps, then went to Georgia Tech for a semester and a half, then I went into the army.

**MEH:** Okay, then you went into the army and then you went back to Georgia Tech.

**RW:** Then I went back to Georgia Tech, and from Georgia Tech I went to Black Mountain.

**MEH:** Right. So you were at Black Mountain for a summer, and then for a year.

**RW:** For a summer and then for a year, except I got married and we left right a little bit before the second semester ended.

**MEH:** And that was to Peggy.

**RW:** That's correct.

**MEH:** So why did you not remain at Black Mountain?

**RW:** Because Peggy didn't want to. I was happy to stay there.

**MEH:** So what did you do when you left the college?

**RW:** We went to New York for about six weeks. Then we went to San Francisco. Peggy had gotten pregnant. She flew and I drove her Model A, her 1930 Model A convertible, to San Francisco with Harriett Sohmers and another young woman who – I don't remember very well. She hadn't been at Black



Mountain very long. We landed in San Francisco after five days, and I got a job working on a Frank Lloyd Wright building that was a jewelry store that was being built right off of Union Square. It didn't last very long. I wound up with a job at the City of Paris, nothing very – Wait a minute, I also worked for an architect and I forget his name. Actually we did a house for him, Albert and I, which appeared later in that magazine that was published in Los Angeles, the architectural magazine – what was it?

**MEH:** I'm not sure. Architectural Digest or Architectural Record.

**RW:** No. It was not – it was a slick magazine. In any case, some man with a lot of money was the one that published it, had an interest in architecture. In any case, then I worked for another architect. I worked for – Oh yes, that was after my, that was after my service at the City of Paris as a clerk. Then our marriage broke up, and I went to New York. Peggy had a baby in the meantime. Our marriage just wasn't working, so I went to New York, and Peggy stayed in San Francisco. I stayed in New York for a year and a half. I worked for Kahn and Jacobs (?) and then I worked for another firm, the name of which I can't remember right now – a small firm. Nice firm. I liked it. Then I realized that I needed to get on with my life and my education, so I called Tulane and they said, "Come on down," so that's just what I did.

**MEH:** You finished your architectural degree there?

**RW:** I got my degree there in 1953, I think.

**MEH:** You moved immediately back to McComb?

**RW:** Not immediately. I worked in New Orleans for a couple of firms, and then my son was – my son was going to – How did that happen? God, I don't know. I don't know. Peggy and I were divorced, and then I – Bragg (?) started spending some time with me. He spent a lot of time with me, and so I moved to McComb and opened an office so I could fix things for him and have him live with me, which he did.

**MEH:** So, you basically raised your son.

**RW:** Yeah.

**MEH:** So what was it – You had – What about your training at Tulane? I mean obviously at some point you had exposure to contemporary architecture.

**RW:** Well, yes.

**MEH:** Who was teaching there then? What sort of –

**RW:** At Tulane? Oh, god, I forget his name. They had a pretty good staff. They had some talented people there when I was there. In fact, I went into the office of a progressive architecture – what was – it was one of the architectural magazines. I remember there was a – doesn't matter where they were. They weren't building in New York. A guy suggested to me that Tulane had done a lot in revising their programs and developing their school, and I might look into that. I did, and I was accepted and I went down there. It was midterm I remember. I stayed until I was graduated. I liked it. I liked Tulane very much.

**MEH:** Do you think, looking back, that your year at Black Mountain made any real difference in your practice as an architect?

**RW:** Yes, I think so.

**MEH:** How was that?

**RW:** I can't tell you how, except that I was exposed to people. I was exposed to so much that I had never been exposed to before in the way of art, music, of people and the way they were. Hell, I saw a hell of a lot. As I say, we'd go to New York [LAUGHS] every time we got uptight. Also I lived in New York for a year and a half after I left San Francisco. Yes, I think it – I think it did make a big difference. It's hard to tell you what, because things got sort of curdled up there for a while, but I think if you were pretty well directed on the way you wanted to go yourself, it was a marvelous school. I think there were people there who weren't. As for myself and how directed I was, I think a lot of it frankly was that I was seeing something – I was taken by the newness of the whole thing, the freedom and all that sorts of thing. But also I think I think it affected me in the way, in my architecture and what I've done. I mean, hell, I met people that I would never have met. Looking back at Georgia Tech and even at Tulane, those were not either one of them the most sophisticated schools in the United States, particularly Tech. It was pure – It was just not – their diploma was bad. Yeah, I think it was very broadening for me. I can't be too specific. I can't tell you. I guess I'm (UNINTEL) think so.

**MEH:** The style of architecture that you've practiced here in McComb is definitely – when you've had some options – not the traditional Southern style of architecture. Where did that change take place? I mean at what point – What was the influence on the style that you've practiced?

**RW:** Well, it was contemporary architecture, and it was more Bauhaus than Frank Lloyd Wright – at all the schools, I think, that I attended.

**MEH:** So you were exposed to this at Tulane and at Georgia Tech?

**RW:** Yes, but stronger at Tulane. But I guess at both places I suppose you'd say so. It certainly is not Beaux Arts in any sense of the word. I don't know – what are you asking me now?

**MEH:** You were saying earlier that you were the first licensed architect here in McComb?

**RW:** No. Wait a minute. Maybe I said – That's not right. I think the other man was probably licensed, but that was a time when you didn't need a college degree or whatever. You didn't– you didn't need licensing. Usually they would go to Jackson here for their architects. It was the whole school system I know, in 1921 or '2, went out to, went to Jackson for their architect, and built five school buildings. No, I mean it was a pretty unsophisticated town when it came to using an architect. I'm sure people did, but it was rare.

**MEH:** So, what has it been like practicing in a small, Southern, generally unsophisticated town, when it comes to architecture? How have you made that work? [LAUGHS] No, this is the real question. I mean because you have done things that are – some of the buildings we saw were definitely not in the mainstream of local architecture.

**RW:** Well, then you're asking me how – Number one, I had a son and I had to take care of him, and I had to live, and so I just did the best I could do. Then there were lots of good reasons to come back here in that I was known here and it

was easier to start a practice here because I had connections that were right and I could do it. That was a big part of it. There's a lot that I feel that I – I still love New York [LAUGHS]. Or I love more of a city than this. But you do what you do.

**MEH:** Then you married and had two daughters as well as your son to raise.

**RW:** Right. Well, when that happened, it never occurred to me not to stay here, and I married –

**MEH:** After your wife died and you had the two girls.

**RW:** Oh, oh, yes. Well, I had no – God, what could I do? I could have moved my family into my house, but I didn't want that for me or for them. So I just stayed here and practiced architecture.

**MEH:** What do you think of your buildings that you've done here – if you had to select three or four that you feel, besides your house, that you feel most well about?

**RW:** Well, I – the buildings I've done here that I think – I overlook stuff. I don't know whether I remember all of them. I think that the Central Baptist Church was one, the library at the junior college was one.

**MEH:** What was the name of the junior college?

**RW:** The Southwest Community College.

**MEH:** That's in Summit?

**RW:** In Summit. I think most of the work up there was pretty competent. I mean I don't apologize for any of that. It's funny. I can block things out of my mind and

suddenly I think, after you've asked the question and left, I thought, "Well gee, there's that other thing."

**MEH:** Well, go ahead.

**RW:** I don't know. Of course, we've gone through these things, and that thing I did at the church. That thing I did – the Student Union Building I did at the college over by the river –

**MEH:** The name of the college, do you remember?

**RW:** Of course I do, but I can't think of it right now.

**MEH:** That's okay. We'll fill it in later.

**RW:** All right. I think, I really think those are the two buildings that I enjoyed most doing. At that time, I had a guy drafting in the office, but the design was totally in my hands. In fact, until I had a partner, the design was always in my hands. Let's see. I did a nice building in (UNINTEL NAME), a bank building. I did a little bank building on a highway down in the town at (UNINTEL), as we were driving to Summit? Remember that? I think that's a neat little building. But I think the first ones I named were the really the strongest that I've done. I did a hospital that wasn't bad. Oh, and I did a doctor's office that I thought was a damn neat item. I liked that job. [LAUGHS] I think it had a lot of – it was smooth and just nice, more than fun. It was just, I thought it was good. Actually I did two or three houses that while they were more or less traditional, they were done, they were good traditional – I feel. I had fun doing them, and as I told you, if you had a client that you enjoyed, it made it a lot easier to do the house. [LAUGHS] I've done other work that I'm perfectly satisfied with. It's just

that some of the work is, oh I don't know, just more appealing to me, and better, like what we talked about today.

**MEH:** Going back to San Francisco, who were other people who were in San Francisco when you were there?

**RW:** Oh, God, I don't know.

**MEH:** Well, Ruth and Al were there.

**RW:** Ruth and Albert. Peggy and I.

**MEH:** Had Peggy built the Tin Angel at that point, or did that come later?

**RW:** Yes. The one downtown in San Francisco, that came later. She had a Tin Angel in Sausalito.

**MEH:** Right, but that's when you were still there.

**RW:** That's when I was still there.

**MEH:** So, you had – What do you remember about the Tin Angel in Sausalito?

**RW:** When we left Black Mountain, we went to New York. [INTERRUPTION]

**MEH:** You were telling me about the Tin Angel in Sausalito.

**RW:** Where the name came from. We stayed in New York with friends who lived at the corner of – [INTERRUPTION]

**MEH:** Rags, at last we're settled here. You were talking about the Tin Angel in Sausalito, the first one.

**RW:** Well, I'm telling you where the Tin Angel came from. We arrived in New York from Black Mountain, and we were staying with a friend who had an apartment which was on the top of a, of a very old Episcopal church which had been, it was no longer a church. The top of that thing must have been seventy feet. It

was absolutely humongous, it was so tall. Many floors. On top of it was a weathervane with a tin angel on it – rather primitive. But you were so far above Second Avenue or Houston, whichever you would have fallen into, that it was sheer death on a slate roof. It was a steep roof. Peggy climbed out from the kitchen window onto that roof, got that angel off, and brought it back into the kitchen. It was just frightening. But she wanted it and that's what she did – and that says a lot about Peggy. It does, really.

**MEH:** How big was the Tin Angel?

**RW:** Oh, about so tall. I don't know where it went to. She held onto that thing. We went to San Francisco. We rented a house in that district that's, I think, south. Anyway, it was not in, it wasn't in the classiest – it wasn't in Nob Hill. But it was a neat little cottage. Then we moved to Sausalito because Peggy had found this on – what's the main street in Sausalito, what is the name of it?

**MEH:** I don't know.

**RW:** Well, it's on the waterfront. It's right next to – This building was right next to what had once been the Yacht Club at Sausalito. It was just a little Victorian building that sat on piers and – on piling – and was out into the water. You stepped off the sidewalk into this building. The whole thing was in the water. It was a neat little building, owned by this old man. This was the remarkable thing about Peggy. How she accomplished things I do not know, but somehow we – I had a job at the time, I guess. Must have. But I remember I went in and there was a little shed – a little house on the back of the thing as well as the building on the front. We lived in the back, which I renovated, did sheetrock on



the walls and put some windows in the back, gave us an exciting view of the whole city of San Francisco. Life was rolling beautifully. We opened a little restaurant [LAUGHS], a crab restaurant. I don't know how we did that. We still had the car, and she would go and get the crabs and put it in a trap out in the bay. We'd fish the crab out and cook them and then sell them to people. Anyway, then one day the crab (trap?) broke and fell into the water. I don't know what happened then, but something happened that saved our lives. I don't know what it was. Maybe I got a little better job. I don't know. But she worked me pretty hard [LAUGHS]. I don't know when I had time for a job. But that's where the tin angel came from, and she named that thing The Tin Angel.

**MEH:** Now was that a bar that beats – [HORN HONKS]

**RW:** That might be my driver. But that's okay. In any case, things started to go bad in our marriage and I went to New York. Peggy at some point started some sort of thing, a bar or something. She didn't have the money for a liquor license. I don't know what she did. She had something going in there. I know that [LAUGHS] – I don't know what I was going to say. Anyway – and it was The Tin Angel. Then she apparently was doing better and better in that thing. She went into the city, down on the waterfront, and rented this place, decorated it I assume, and opened The Tin Angel down there, and it was a roaring success. She should have been a rich woman a thousand times, but she had absolutely no sense about money. People I think probably stole her blind that worked for her. In any case, that was the Tin Angel. From there she went to – She decided to open another thing, which the woman who was the

madam at the – what's her name, in San Francisco, well-known madam. Oh God! I knew her and I can't think of her name. Anyway, she had a whorehouse and she entertained when the – When the War was ending and they were forming the United Nations and all that, that's where all the countries met. She served all those men [LAUGHS] as well as marrying one of the people who – the store that handles oriental stuff, expensive, in San Francisco. Anyway, Peggy rented the place from her and called it, instead of The Tin Angel, the something else Angel.

**MEH:** Was that The Fallen Angel?

**RW:** The Fallen Angel! I don't think that was that much of a success. But Peggy was up and down about everything. I mean she – You know. But anyway, that's the tin angel stuff. That's where it came from. I would like to know where the tin angel went. Out of curiosity, really. My son probably would like to have it. But that's the story of that tin angel.

**MEH:** Now, the one in Sausalito, is that the one that Joe Fiore and Dan Rice painted?

**RW:** Probably.

**MEH:** Okay. I could ask Joe about that. He would remember.

**RW:** Joe's in New York, isn't he?

**MEH:** [AFFIRMATIVE]

**RW:** I don't remember Joe, and I saw him in New York. I didn't see him in San Francisco that I remember. Look, I can't even remember my children's name anymore. [LAUGHS]

**MEH:** I think you're doing pretty good.

**RW:** But I try to look up Harriett Sohmers, and she's married to some guy that sounds, maybe seems like a Polak name.

**MEH:** It was Zwerling or something, Z-W-E-R-L-I-N-G, I think. If I have her address I'll get it to you.

**RW:** She's where that hotel is, on Gramercy. Gramercy Square Hotel, which is my place to stay in New York. It's on that street that sides on that hotel, and it goes down towards, down and away from Fifth Avenue, in that neighborhood, 23rd or 22nd or so. Anyway, that sounds like you might know who she is. I'd love to be able to call her, because I – she was something else too. All sorts of strange people at Black Mountain [LAUGHS]. She left on a French liner with something like two hundred dollars in her pocket. She went there, she had an affair with some woman who writes – a well-known novelist that writes pretty hot stuff – and she stayed over there for years. Surviving. [LAUGHS] She's back in, and she works in New York, and she's retired now on [UNINTELLI WORD] on a good salary.

**[END OF RECORDING ON TAPE 1]**

**[END OF INTERVIEW]**

**[END OF TRANSCRIPT]**