

Interviewee: ROBERT LEWIS "BOB" BLISS
Interviewer: MARY EMMA HARRIS
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[BEGINNING OF TAPE 1]

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

BB: A friend of my mother's has just read Louis Adamic's book, My America. I wasn't really interested in the University of Washington, which is now known as U-Dub. I read the book and applied and, astoundingly, I was accepted – because I wasn't a great student in high school.

MEH: Where were you living?

BB: Seattle. I was born in Seattle. Still have fond memories of that, and like to go back whenever I can. I still have some relatives there.

MEH: Were you – Did you go to public schools in Seattle?

BB: Yes. Highline High School, which has now become, I think, Highline Junior College. We lived south of Seattle about fifteen miles on a wonderful place called Three Tree Point that sticks out into Puget Sound. We were about four feet from the water when the tide was in. So we did a lot of sailing and things of that kind. It was a marvelous place to grow up.

MEH: What did your parents do?

BB: My mother did what would now be called word processing, and my father worked until he retired after thirty-some years for the telephone company.

MEH: They were willing to send you all the way across the country to this experimental college?

BB: They were pleased to see me go [LAUGHS] – No, I don't think so. We didn't have very much money, and the college was willing to accept me on a very, on the very low end of the tuition scale, which, as you probably know, was graduated, depending on what people could pay. So, there were some very wealthy students who paid the full price and I think quite a number of us who were highly subsidized.

MEH: Do you remember how you traveled to Black Mountain that first trip?

BB: Yes, there was a boy in Tacoma who was also accepted at the same time. He and his mother and his sister and I drove back in their car. I recall it was a Plymouth, or a Chrysler – I've forgotten. At any rate, one of the memories was stopping here in Salt Lake [LAUGHS], going swimming in that brine, briny deep. At that time the old salt air pavilion was still there, which was a fantastic Arabian Nightmare, which was extremely popular. All the big bands came there, and there was a huge dance floor, restaurants. But I remember stopping for that. Then we visited the Mormon Tabernacle and Temple Square and then kept going, over into Colorado. Finally ended up in Black Mountain.

MEH: Who was this person?

BB: His name was Jim Wilson. I'll have to look it up. Jim and Mary Frances and – That's what happens with your memory!

MEH: That's okay. Listen, it was seventy years ago!

BB: [LAUGHTER] It'll come to me!

MEH: That's okay. Do you remember anything about the application process?

BB: Not very much. I think it was a fairly simplified form. I believe that you had to say something about what your interests were and why you might want to go to Black Mountain, and so on. But as I recall, it was not extensive. Why, on the basis of my response, I was accepted, I don't know. [LAUGHS] I just don't know.

MEH: Do you remember your first impressions of the college?

BB: Yes. Well, we drove up to Lee Hall and disembarked, the four of us, and wandered into the great hall. It might have been Morton Steinau or someone that met us and gave us some instructions and told us where we needed to go for our – where our bedrooms would be and our studies would be. That's about it. Walking into that what turns out to be the largest wooden building in America –

MEH: Is that true?

BB: That's what they were saying. It's enormous. It's still enormous. It shows it, because there's a lot of dips and sags in the floor. That happened also over at Lake Eden in the Studies Building. In that case it had to do more with using extremely wet wood, which had just been cut, practically. So –

MEH: So, you were met and given your rooms and whatever. Had you – This was your first time on the East Coast? Or in the South?

BB: Oh, yes. Yes. I hadn't been – I had been to California, with an uncle, but other than that – nothing. So, it was certainly eye-opening, and then Don Page greeted me. He was my first roommate and introduced me around. The people I drove with – Jim didn't seem to fit in and his mother and sister seemed to be around constantly. So, as I recall, he only lasted, they only stayed maybe five or six months – something like that.

MEH: Now the other two people in the car, were they going to Black Mountain also?

BB: No. The mother –

MEH: Oh, it was the mother and sister.

BB: The mother and sister. I don't know exactly what happened, but we didn't communicate very much after we got to Black Mountain.

MEH: Did you have any idea when you went what you wanted to study?

BB: No, because I'd started out wanting – I think because of a lot of boating experience, I had initially wanted to be a naval architect. The thought was I might ultimately be able to go to Stevens Institute in New Jersey. It was only when Larry Kocher came and gave a series of talks, and Claude Stoller one day showed me the Aalto catalogue. Of course, in that year we were beginning to talk about the problem of having to move from Blue Ridge, and I became more and more interested in building, in architecture. That's really what did it. I gave up the naval architecture but – Rudy Haase became a naval architect. But we both did a lot of construction on the Lake Eden facility.

MEH: What do you remember about the discussions that year? At that point Gropius and Breuer were still involved.

BB: Yes, but I think at that point it was very clear that there simply wasn't the kind of money available to the college to be able to do as extensive a building project as Gropius and Breuer had proposed, although it was very good. I wish in some ways that it had been possible. But after it became – I don't know what the connection with Larry Kocher was. He had been, he had been head of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute of Architecture. He had been editor of Architectural Record. He had worked at Williamsburg. When it became clear that we couldn't find a way of doing the Breuer and Gropius project, someone brought Larry down, and he gave a series of talks which were very stimulating – talked about how the project might be done with community labor and what the materials might be and where it might be, and – I think it was '39 – no, it must have been '40 when Larry came. And '41 he came full time.

MEH: What was Larry Kocher like, just as a person in the community? I mean – Let's come to that later, because we'll be talking about the construction of the building. You took Albers' classes?

BB: Yes, which was the real introduction for me to the college. Also to thinking about a field, or an area, that I certainly had not given much thought to. For the first six weeks I really didn't know what the hell was going on [LAUGHS], and other people, I think, had the same experience. But Albers was very good about giving positive reinforcement, but he could give negative reinforcement, too. I had a couple of reasonable presentations, and then I began to really get into it and became fascinated with the whole idea of materials and color and details of the way things went together. So, that was absolutely the eye-opener for me. I

don't know why, but I didn't take more courses from Albers when I had the opportunity. I was still feeling that I should get more mathematics and physics and things like that for naval architecture.

MEH: What was he like as a teacher? Just as a person.

BB: Very dynamic. Just probably – I think everyone will agree —one of the great teachers of this century, of the last century I should say. Stimulating and – Stimulating and questioning and asking other people what they thought. It was absolutely one of the best learning experiences I've ever had. He was Teutonic. If you didn't produce – and there were a few people that didn't bring anything to class – then he would be absolutely devastating. So, his method was reinforcing and scolding. I recall he told someone not to come back unless he produced. No other class epitomized, epitomizes Black Mountain as that class did, at least for me and I think for many other people.

MEH: Which of his classes did you take?

BB: Only Werklehre.

MEH: Only Werklehre.

BB: Yes. And, as I say, I certainly regretted not taking the Drawing class and the Color class, although occasionally I did sit in on the discussions. But I – I might have been wiser to have taken more classes with him.

MEH: What do you remember about the Werklehre class? How did he conduct it?

BB: Oh, it was always a very simple problem statement of – It could be working with leaves. It could be working with – Could be working with the way some materials need to go together. It's hard – I don't – Oh I did some problem – I did

some problems, some projects, with candle smoke on plastic. Then one day I did a kind of a color study, and he said, "Well, that's interesting but this is the wrong class." [LAUGHS] But it was a class you just absolutely worked hard for and looked forward to.

MEH: Do you remember what types of materials you used in the class? What your sources were?

BB: It could be anything. Albers, in fact, in Germany used to go to the dump and get broken glass, broken bottles. We had certainly glass, we had tin, we had paper – paper folding was one of the major projects. I found it extremely frustrating doing such intricate stuff. Don Page did it wonderfully. Leaves. Moss. Anything you could find outdoors. As I say, anything you could find in the trash-heap. Wire mesh. Stuff you could get cheaply from the Black Mountain hardware store. Textural things such as tree barks. It was wide-ranging, whatever you could do, whatever you could find. Whatever turned you on at the moment about working with something.

MEH: Do you remember ever going to the town dump for materials?

BB: I don't think so. I don't think so. No, I don't remember going there.

MEH: With whom did you take physics?

BB: Charles Lindsay.

MEH: Unfortunately, Charles Lindsay, I never interviewed him. I hope somebody did. What was he like as a teacher?

BB: Very competent. Very thoughtful. Quiet. Pretty supportive. It seems to me I took math and – math and physics from him.

MEH: The college really had a liberal arts, regular liberal arts program at that point.

BB: Well, I think that's the misconception that so many people have had, that, you know, it was only an art school. It certainly wasn't, because we had, we had Dick Carpenter in botany or biology, and Charles Lindsay. Ken Kurtz in literature. Incidentally, Ken Kurtz had been at Deep Springs School in California before he came to Black Mountain to teach. Locally, here, a man who became a Dean of Liberal Education was a product of Deep Springs. He's recently gone back there to head it and has done a marvelous job from what I hear. His name is Jackson Newell. The other connection is that Jackson Newell was the thesis advisor for Katherine Reynolds, who wrote the book on John Rice. These connections keep going all over. Anyway, I saw Jackson – he happened to be here a few weeks ago. He's managed to get a number of new buildings built and things are going very well. So from Ken Kurtz to Jackson Newell to Utah to – But there were many really wonderful people. The Jalowetz, of course, and Dreiers, and obviously, except possibly when – after the War, when Albers organized the summer institutes, that certainly was the almost totally art-oriented kind of thing. So, that's really where the misconception that the school was just an art school. Also it was the reason that, as I understand it, that when Juppi and Ted Dreier were up in New York and Boston raising money, the rumor came back to the school, I guess this was '49, that they were going to make it just an art school – and wasn't true. But the community met with Charles Olson and other people and asked them to leave. So, that was one of the many revolutions. I think it was a really unfortunate one because

after that it was just dystopia, I think – from what I can gather from various people. You mentioned Bob Creeley. He gave a talk here across the street a couple years ago. I got Nancy and George Eisenman to come. There was a good audience. There is a good audience for poetry here. Bob got up and mumbled and drank a six-pack of beer, and it was a disaster. I don't understand it, but I've seen his work with – hmm – Anna would know. At any rate, he had a show at the Public Library in New York about a year ago? Two years ago? Who was he with? Creeley and –

MEH: It was really a show of all of his collaborations with different artists.

BB: Yes. Yes. But I thought that was very good. I think the writing often is pretty good. But [LAUGHS] – I guess I'd heard similar things had happened before.

MEH: Going back to the earlier years at Black Mountain, you did take – That first year, '39-'40, it was clear at least by 1940 that the Gropius-Breuer building – this country was going to become in the War, and also that Blue Ridge, you were going to be evicted from Blue Ridge fairly quickly. Or not evicted, but that they'd found another tenant, you wouldn't be able to renew the lease. So Larry Kocher was a fortunate contact. That second year at the college, that was the great construction year, '40-'41. What do you remember about that year? First you had to – No, no, what do you remember about that year of still being at Blue Ridge and working over at Lake Eden?

BB: Well, we got fairly well organized with people agreeing to a certain number of afternoons to go over to Lake Eden and get started on things. Some of the first work had to do with remodeling the old building so they would – I think it was

some of the first work – so that they would be useful for dormitories and then some of the faculty housing. Larry worked quite, quite quickly in developing the scheme for the Studies Building and the Library, and so on, and it was in – Well, it had to be late '40 or – when Charlie Godfrey was hired as the contractor, an absolutely marvelous person who knew how to do things. The first thing we ran into was the swampy condition of the north end of Lake Eden. That was where the Studies Building was to be. Charlie figured out how to make a pile driver and use the farm tractor to drive this pile driver, which was a piece of black gum [LAUGHS]. A huge piece that Charlie had found, and rigged this great structure to carry it. So then we cut all of the – I think they were pine logs, used for piling, and that, once that was completed then the foundations were poured in around them and the rest of the concrete structure started to go up, and then as enough of that was completed, the wooden structure. Mainly I did carpentry. I probably shouldn't have done it, but I tended to spend more time working than I should have. I might have better spent my time with some other classes.

MEH: So, that year you were – Kocher was at the college that year teaching.

BB: Yes.

MEH: And you had Charlie Godfrey and his crew helping, doing the construction, students working.

BB: Students and faculty. It was a very joint process.

MEH: So even though you were maybe not taking as many classes as you felt you should, you still were learning – working with faculty. I mean it was a different type of class.

BB: Oh, yes. Yes. No, almost every faculty member, including Dr. Straus, would get out and lift stones and so on. But there were also things to still do at Blue Ridge while all of this was going on. Such as hauling coal from the coal car in Black Mountain, and that was an experience. We all ended up in blackface.

[LAUGHS]

MEH: Did you do that both at Lee Hall and – Did that have a coal stove also? It probably did, so you probably did it both at Lee Hall and at Lake Eden.

BB: That's funny. I don't remember doing it at Lake Eden. I vividly remember doing it, sitting on top of the coal and chugging up the hill in the old truck, and then having to get, then having to unload it. But I don't know why I don't remember it – maybe I didn't do it when we moved to Lake Eden.

MEH: This was a very different experience than the experience you would have had in a traditional school, where you would have been going to classes.

BB: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely.

MEH: As you look back, how do you evaluate the sort of experience you had at Black Mountain which involved community and work and building big buildings?

BB: I was so utterly naive –

MEH: It was your right at that age.

BB: Yes. But, but early, very early, in fact, in being at Black Mountain and experiencing the first general meeting in which there were a lot of very strong

opinions expressed and arguments back and forth. That was completely beyond anything I had ever experienced. So the learning that went on in community meetings, the learning that went on particularly at meals – the learning that occurred during that whole construction process, and then in the classes, and then just the socializing, if you will, through Saturday night dances and through getting dressed for dinner every night, not going in blue jeans and having the interaction of students and faculty in dancing and eating together, and all of that. When I compare that with what students even today at a university like the University of Utah – We have a stupid fraternity across the street, and these remain adolescents often through their senior year. The only thing they seem to gain is fraternity brothers who may be helpful to them in business later in their lives. But I think it's – I've been actively trying to get the university to get out of the fraternity and sorority business and try and become a first-rate institution, but these are – they're all around our neighborhood here. It only represents about three percent of the, two or three percent of the university enrollment and the rest of the students are living in dormitories or they're living at home or in small apartments around school, but they – I don't think they really have anything beginning to be comparable to what I was fortunate enough to have in Black Mountain. One exception may be the School of Architecture because we're there so much of the time, night and day, and so there is student-faculty interaction that way. I think a lot more than almost any other department on campus.

MEH: How would you remember, say, at Lee Hall before the construction started, how would a typical day be structured at the college?

BB: Breakfast fairly early. I've forgotten what the hours were, whether classes started at 8:30 or 9. I think it was probably 9. Usually – It's hard to remember, but usually we would have two or three classes in the morning. But even when we were at Blue Ridge, there was a Work Program, various things – getting wood, getting apples, getting coal, and almost always that occurred in the afternoons. But there wasn't nearly as intense a Work Program as it became when we were doing the building. So, often there would be – at that time – afternoon classes. Those certainly continued, but I was working almost every afternoon over at Lake Eden after that, after that got going.

MEH: What do you remember about Jack and Rubye Lipsey?

BB: Oh, Jack and Rubye. Oh, such nice people. I remember [LAUGHS] – One of my first memories was taking a not-quite-cooked boiled egg back, and Jack said, "I'll fix that in a minute," and he just put it back in the water until it cooked. But we became good friends. Of course, Rubye was always there, a beautiful woman. The last year I was there Larry asked me to be in charge of building what we called the Service Building, which was housing for all of the help. As I look back on that, that was not the way to do it, but –

MEH: In what respect?

BB: Well, it was sort of isolating the help down in the south end of the property.

MEH: That's so, but it also was segre- – part of the whole system of segregation in that the help were – It was really for the black help.

BB: Yes. Oh, yes. Other than Bas Allen, there wasn't any white help. Of course, this was debated a lot. Bob Wunsch had grown up in the worst of that. He said one day his uncle came in and threw a black hand on his desk, and – But Bob was, I think, I don't know, I think he was very hesitant to try and push integration at the college. I think so. It didn't really happen until I think Mary Washington came? That was after I was there. There was great fear, of course, of the local community reaction, Black Mountain, Asheville and so on. That may not be one of our better, one of our better times.

MEH: But it was still – I think it's very easy to look back and say we might have done this or we might have done that. But at the time, at least you were trying to see that these people did have very decent housing to live in at the college. What do you remember, just from a point of construction, about the construction of the Service Building?

BB: Well, the foundation was concrete and stone, and the piers were huge pieces of locust that I cut up on the hillside. That's a tough wood, very tough wood. Then it was wood frame. Larry had designed it, and it was two stories. A series of bedrooms and a living room, and a corrugated tin roof. A lot of masonite was used on the walls. Before we put the wallboard up, the plumbing was in and we ran a plumbing test. A local plumber had done it, but the whole place just exploded with water. Every connection. [LAUGHS] I couldn't believe it. So, finally we got all of that straightened out, and we finished it. We worked out ways of holding the ceiling boards up with T-boards, and springing them into place, so you could get it up there and nailed. It had a big porch facing the

front. The stairway was exterior. I designed that. And [LAUGHS] one day just after we'd gotten the roof on, Larry came running down to the field and said, "Oh, from up above I thought you got the proportions of the roof slope wrong!" I said "I'm not going to take it off!" [LAUGHS] It had been done exactly as he had drawn it.

MEH: Did he do the design?

BB: Yes. He had designed it.

MEH: So, in constructing, obviously you had had limited experience in building buildings. Did Charlie Godfrey –

BB: I was so – I had to meet every morning with Charlie. Now this was after we'd moved to Lake Eden, because that, I think, was the last building built. I had to meet with Charlie every morning, and I had a lot of anxiety because I didn't know how to do a lot of the things, and he'd tell me "Wal, you do it this way – " and then I would try and do it. It wouldn't have been possible without Charlie.

MEH: What was Charlie like? How do you remember him as a person?

BB: I really enjoyed him and am thankful to him for all that he taught me. He was just a very good, small North Carolina contractor. He had Mundy as a mason, and he had – I'm going to lose the name now, but he had another fellow that was the carpenter, and there may have been one other. They used to arrive in the morning in their old Model-T truck and start work. One of the most interesting things was when we were building the barn. That was a lot of fun to work on because we got these great poplar straight trunks. I think it's still one of the best buildings there. It's very strong. We got the hayloft done up above.

When we finished it, we had a great barn dance, which was fun. A lot of the locals came, and there was a good deal of white lightning being passed around. [LAUGHS] I remember Susie Noble being invited outside by one of the boys and she was scared. She should have been.

MEH: That was an incredible mixture of people, if you think about it, working. I mean you did all of this construction in really two years – the Studies Building, the Jalowetz house – winterizing and putting the furnaces into the existing buildings, the barn and silo, the Service Building. You had this incredible mixture of people. You had the local contractor and his workers. Charlie Godfrey. You had a very erudite architect, Lawrence Kocher, you know, a sophisticated man. You had Ted Dreier, with all of his energy, you had Straus and Hans – Was Hansgirg there at that point, or was that later?

BB: That was I think a little –

MEH: I think that may have been later. But you had this incredible – Plus all the students.

BB: Also we always had a lot of visitors coming down. Yella Pessl came with her, with her harpsichord, and Edgar Kaufmann came with John Cage [this was later, 1948], and Leger came. It was just constant –

MEH: What do you remember about – who was the first person you mentioned?

BB: Yella Pessl?

MEH: Well, we'll start with Yella Pessl. I don't think she had John Cage with her.

BB: No, she didn't. No, no. Cage, I think, came with Kaufmann. Merce Cunningham came too. So maybe it was with Merce.

MEH: Okay. But what do you remember about Yella Pessl's visits?

BB: Well, just marvelous music emanating from the Great Hall at Blue Ridge. She gave several, several concerts.

MEH: Had you heard harpsichord music before?

BB: Not that I knew that it was called a harpsichord. [LAUGHS] No. I think that was – Now I need to emphasize that. That is one of the things I most appreciate about the Black Mountain experience was music. I was trying to remember what it was that Maude Dabbs was practicing in the Practice Building, which was out near the gate at Lake Eden, what it was that she was practicing when I was pounding nails. [LAUGHS] I thought it was Brahms Variation on a Theme by Haydn, but it wasn't. It was Schubert's Ninth Symphony, which is now the Eighth. The Eighth became Seventh. But I often don't sleep at night and I listen to KBYU, which is all classical music, all night, all day all night. It's one of the few that's left. Recently the University of Utah station dropped classical music and went to chatter. There was a – the head of the station explained why they did that and that the only people that listen to classical music were people that – liberal people that voted Democratic and they lived on the East Bench (?) and they were people that drank wine and read The New York Times. [LAUGHS]

MEH: Had you pegged.

BB: Most cutting of all, they read The New York Times. Oh, gee. But for a long time we were without a record player or a good hi-fi, and with CD's it's marvelous.

MEH: So, going back to Black Mountain. Other visitors that you remember? Edgar Kaufmann, what did he do? Do you remember anything in particular about him?

BB: Oh, no, he just – I've forgotten whether, I've forgotten whether he did talk about Falling Water or not. I don't know. It hadn't been finished all that long, the family house. I think he was talking about modern architecture in general, and at that time he was connected with the Museum of Modern Art, so we got a lot of people coming down from that, that group.

MEH: Do you remember a visit by May Sarton, the poet?

BB: Yes. Yes.

MEH: Do you have any particular memory?

BB: Not a great deal. She was quite forceful, as I recall. But I think I only heard one reading of her poetry.

MEH: What do you think was the importance in terms of the total picture at Black Mountain of these visitors coming in and out and giving lectures and concerts and whatever? How did that fit into the total picture?

BB: Well, I think it got us connected with a larger world than our little world at Black Mountain. It was extremely stimulating too. Leger was wandering around, pinching girls. Einstein came. Everybody wondered what could one ask of Einstein. [LAUGHS] Gropius came down, and Breuer was doing a house in Asheville which I guess is still there. Larry Kocher took us to visit it one day, the day that we also I think visited Biltmore. What other people? Well, there really was a kind of constant infusion of notable people that the faculty obviously arranged, and many of them were intrigued with the whole idea of Black Mountain. Many of them came for I think nothing.

[END OF RECORDING ON TAPE 1; TAPE 2 BEGINS]

MEH: Okay, Bob. Going back to Black Mountain, did you ever leave the campus to go into the surrounding area?

BB: Oh, we used to go to Asheville for the symphony, which was always fun to do. There would be a caravan of cars going in and out. We once went to climb Mount Mitchell, is it? Yes. Well, in the immediate area, one of the memorable things was Marty Hunt and I climbed up over Blue Ridge, went on the south side, and that is covered with – I don't know if it still is, but at the time it was covered with dead chestnuts. Chestnut trees. These great white, white logs, some of them still – some of the trees still standing, but it was like a surreal graveyard.

MEH: It was a disease then, affecting the chestnuts. [TECHNICAL INTERRUPTION]
Yes, there was a blight then, a chestnut blight, that killed –

BB: Well, I've forgotten what year it was, but it simply devastated the whole chestnut forest. It's a marvelous wood. Then I know they were picking it up and selling it, sound wormy chestnut. So, there were a lot of little wormholes in it.

MEH: Did you ever have any – First, what do you remember about – What did you do for entertainment at Black Mountain?

BB: John Evarts was always wonderfully playing the piano, with all kinds of things. There was that. There was the Saturday night dancing. There were the various talks that were given, either – well, often faculty talked to the whole community on various topics of their interest. But we mentioned having so many visiting people. Certainly there was the recreation of climbing around the hills and – both at Lake Eden and also at Blue Ridge. Sundays there were, I think there

were – there wasn't any lunch served on Sundays, and it was always a treat to be invited to the Alberses with Don Page to have toasted peanut butter and jelly sandwiches in their apartment. Other entertainment. Of course, we'd walk down to Roy's and stagger back up. [LAUGHS]

MEH: Was Roy's then in the new buil- – was that by the railroad station, or was it in a new building that Forbes, Stephen Forbes, had built? Sort of a roadside building.

BB: A roadside building.

MEH: Was it a roadside building?

BB: Yes. It wasn't in town. It was off to the west a little bit.

MEH: But walking distance from Lee Hall? Or staggering distance?

BB: Yes. It was fun. We could dance to the juke box and put salt in the beer. [LAUGHS] It was a change. There always seemed to be something to do. We were certainly never, never bored – that I remember.

MEH: What was John Evarts like?

BB: Ebullient. He was always – I took Appreciation of Music from him, and I still can't read music but – or I can't play an instrument or anything but, as I mentioned earlier, it's become one of my great interests. For a number of years we went to the Utah Symphony. Recently we had all of the visiting chamber music and groups coming through. So – In fact, we have one, I think, tomorrow night, maybe Sunday night. The Emerson Quartet, or any of the others.

MEH: I had a question in my mind that I've forgotten.

BB: Oh, well, he always played for the dances, and improvised wonderfully. The last time I saw John was – We'd just spent a year wandering around Europe on bicycles, in 1950, '51. I was standing, standing in front of American Express in Paris with my bicycle and a "For Sale" sign, and there was John. Also we saw in Paris the Mangolds at that time. We had a nice evening with them and they introduced us to onion soup at Les Halles at midnight, which was absolutely great. But John was a very stimulating teacher. He added a lot to that community.

MEH: You had a lot of refugees there at that point. Do you think you were really aware of either, for one thing, their eminence, and also the plight of the refugees – what was really going on at that point?

BB: The community relationships were so close and informal that – and the use of first names – I'm not sure that we naive little kids out of the West Coast realized quite how eminent many of them were. I mean it certainly didn't lead to – I don't think we were brash with any of them. An aunt of mine who lived in Baltimore came by to visit me, and she was very disturbed at – the German education that I might be getting. [LAUGHS] She really didn't understand what was happening. In fact, when she'd learned that I was going to go to Black Mountain she wrote my mother, and said "No, he should go to Oberlin." I never made a point of following my aunt's advice, so it didn't happen. But I don't know if the full impact of what was occurring in Germany was fully enough appreciated in 1941 by the students who were at the college. Certainly some of them knew what was going on, but the full horror of it, I don't think was coming through. I

remember once going into borrow a record. I think it was from Straus. We were at Lake Eden then, and I knocked on the door and the Strauses. The Albers and the Jalowetzes and – I've forgotten who else, but the entire German community was in the room discussing what was happening, because that was the weekend that Hitler moved into Russia. I was embarrassed to interrupt it. Early on I just don't know how much detail they knew about what was happening there. God, the horror.

MEH: I think that's true. Were you really at all aware of the Bauhaus? Was that a presence in terms of your thinking or teaching, do you recall?

BB: Before going to Black Mountain?

MEH: At Black Mountain.

BB: Oh, obviously there. I had never heard of it. Well, I guess Louis Adamic mentioned it in his book. But, no. The Alberses talked about it, other people talked about it. We, of course, knew about Gropius and Breuer and others, and we were beginning to learn about the whole Modern movement that may not have been in the forefront of our minds, coming out of high school. But obviously the influence was huge. One of the few good things that Philip Johnson ever did was to recommend Albers to go to Black Mountain. Philip has been such a strange, strange character. Very – Has done some good things, but things that were, well, he's – Early he was really exploiting Miesian ideas, then he caught up in so-called post-Modernism and then he got caught up in something else, and it's not any many – They keep calling him "The Dean of American Architecture" but he's a sham.

MEH: [INTERRUPTION] So – just a second.

BB: Well, then Philip got most recently caught up with Frank Gehry, and Frank's show at the Guggenheim last fall – well it's kind of sad because now he can't do anything else except wrap titanium. He's absolutely over-exposed.

MEH: Okay, well, let's go back to Black Mountain.

BB: Sure.

MEH: What did you do in the summertimes? There was no summer school that first summer.

BB: The first summer I went back to Seattle and my parents were building another house on the property. I worked on that all summer, and then took the train back to Black Mountain.

MEH: How long did that take?

BB: I think it was four or five days. Long haul through Montana and North Dakota and then Minneapolis, and then Chicago. The second summer I stayed there and worked. The third summer was when I left. I had applied to MIT and went up to Baltimore and stayed with my aunt and got a drafting job, working on some army barracks. Then when summer school started at MIT. I think I took the bus up or something and found a boarding house at Central Square and did the summer school. And did well enough that I was able to apply for the regular program in the fall, and had that fall semester. I'd gone into the ROTC. Then in February, after the fall semester, I was in the army and that's another story.

MEH: Why at that point did you choose MIT instead of Harvard?

BB: I don't know. [LAUGHS] I don't know why. I think I found an MIT catalogue, and it was, it was – I think it turned out to be a good choice, but Charles, Chuck Forberg and Claude and – well, this is before the War now. After the War, most of the people like Alex Reed and Chuck and Don Page and Claude, who else? all decided to go to Harvard. So I was at the other end, and this was 1946 when I got back from the Philippines. Then all of us were in Cambridge at the same time so we saw one another, we tried to help one another, but the contrast between MIT and – being a student at MIT and being a student at Black Mountain was hilarious.

MEH: Be specific.

BB: Well, you were in enormous classes, enormous lecture classes. Not in the School of Architecture, but we had to take calculus and chemistry and physics and a few other basic things, and I did very poorly in all of that.

MEH: Do you attribute that to your Black Mountain background, or – ?

BB: No, no. No, just native ability. [LAUGHS] But I remember the testing was extremely important, and of course we didn't have much of that at Black Mountain. One would go into a room with perhaps a hundred drafting tables and sit down with the slide rule and blue books and it was such a – Well, it was known as The Factory, at the other end of Mass Avenue. So it was – Although the students within the Architectural School were fairly close-knit, but very different pace and absolutely the antithesis of the kind of life at Black Mountain. But that was '46 on, so that was after being away from Black Mountain for four years.

MEH: I'm going to go back to Black Mountain. My mind sort of jumps. What do you remember about the Jalowetzes?

BB: I didn't know them very well. I didn't take any classes from either. Claude was quite close to them because of building the house for them. One remembers Jalo conducting and talking or rather making noises at the same time. He was just such a thoughtful and nice person. Of course, Lisa was there at the time, so we all knew and liked Lisa very much.

MEH: What about mealtimes at the college? What do you remember about mealtimes and how do you see them as fitting into the total picture of learning?

BB: Well, we mentioned that earlier. When we were back at the reunion a couple, what five, six years ago? '95? I was disappointed that the Dining Building had been expanded, because then you were so much further from the lake. But oh, I can recall being at a table out on the porch and maybe it would be with Bobbie and Ted Dreier, or perhaps with Jalowetz, or John Evarts, or Ken Kurtz and his wife, or other – It came to be such a natural easy relationship. All the time at Black Mountain I was very inarticulate. I don't know why it occurred, but I was articulate and Anna remembers it when we met – more so. But I was just very quiet. I think early on – this is one of – this is a real memory of being somewhat overwhelmed by other students who had what I felt was, what I sensed was a much better secondary education, and they were very voluble, very able to expand on ideas and with a lot of social ease that I didn't feel. I think that was one of the hardest things for me to – Maybe I didn't begin to break out of it until I began to teach. I could express myself in my work, my design work, but I had

a lot of hesitancy. I think many freshmen in college had a similar concern about preparation, and whether they were able to compete, and so on.

MEH: I think if ever there was a great place to be a good listener, Black Mountain might have been that place.

BB: Yes, it is. It was. [INTERRUPTION]

MEH: Bob.

BB: I look so old when you flip that [OVERTALK] [CHANGE IN SETTING]

MEH: Well I must say this makes you – this looks much more contrasting than when it's actually on the screen, so all your wrinkles and everything show up a great deal more here. [LAUGHS] You don't look old at all. Don't worry about that. When you reach eighty, you have certain privileges and one of them is not looking twenty. So I want to talk a little bit more about what happened after you left Black Mountain, I mean after you left MIT. First, your education at MIT was interrupted by service?

BB: Yes.

MEH: What did you do in service?

BB: First, I was in the Army Engineers, and trained at Fort Belvoir and then in Louisiana, and then in Colorado Springs, Fort – Camp Carson. Then I had a medical condition and was given a medical discharge and went back to Seattle and then joined the Merchant Marine. I sailed on tankers and Liberty ships. We ended up, the last ship was a Liberty ship which ended up taking – Well, we were in the Philippines when the bombs were dropped in Japan, and we were sent from Subic Bay to Indochina to pick up some Chinese Nationalist troops

which we then took to Taiwan. Then we went back again and picked up some more troops and took them to Hulutao (PH) in the, way up on the Yellow Sea. The ship then was directed to Shanghai, and we sat in Shanghai for a couple of months and finally got back to the States in 1946, I think in March or April. I had written to Dean Bill Wurster at MIT from the Philippines saying that I hoped to be back at MIT. In June or July I went back to MIT for the summer session and into the regular program. But I had a lot of anxiety [LAUGHS], foolish anxiety about getting out of college. I'd had three years at Black Mountain and then the Army and the Merchant Marine experience, and so I went eight straight semesters, which was much too much of MIT. And graduated in January of 1949. I was fortunate in being able to work with a very good firm, actually of two MIT faculty members – Lawrence Anderson and Herbert Beckwith. I worked for them for about a year and then I won the Rotch Traveling Fellowship, which was open to graduates of Massachusetts schools who had also worked for a Massachusetts firm for at least a year. In the fall of 1950 – Meanwhile, Anna and I had married in '49 – but in the fall of '50 we had I think 43 hundred dollars from the scholarship to last a year in Europe, and it almost did. But we started in France and bought two bicycles, one an English Raleigh and the other another English bike, and started at five o'clock going south towards Versailles and going around the Etoile through all of the traffic and saddlebags and baskets on the bike, and it was pretty hilarious. But we then went all the way down through the, through the valleys to Marseilles and then went along the coast, finally getting to Pisa. Either for weather reasons or something, we put

the bikes on a train and went to Florence and we found an apartment to stay in and we were in Florence for four months, did some touring around the area, and then went down to Rome. We stayed – our first stay at the American Academy was then, in the summer, in July. We made from Rome a trip to southern Italy to Bari and Albergo Bello and some of those places, and then went to Greece. Anna had a classmate from Wellesley teaching in the American School in Greece, but we also had introductions to Gorham Philip Stephens [PH] who had been the head of the American School of Archaeological Studies. He was then in his eighties, and he took us on the Acropolis and teetered on the edge of [LAUGHS] of various things as he pointed out to us the, all the marvelous things there. After Greece we went back to Italy and stayed in Rome again, and finally went back towards Holland. We had tickets on Holland-American line, but got back to – Well, we went to Switzerland and then back to Paris and, as I think I mentioned on the earlier tape, that we needed to make some money and so tried to sell the bicycles in front of the American Express in Paris and that's where we saw, ran into John Evarts. Sold one of the bicycles and ended up having to bring Anna's back, which was really the better bicycle. Got back to Holland, visited Rotterdam, Amsterdam, and a few other sites and after a number of days arrived back in New York where we were met by Anna's parents, luckily, because I had only seventeen cents, or nineteen cents left. So we got back to Cambridge. It took three or four weeks to find another job, and I worked for two different firms. The last firm was Smith and Sellew, a very excellent small firm doing, at that time

doing schools particularly. The Architects Collaborative with Gropius and our firm had contracts.

MEH: Let's talk generally and then go back and be much more specific. But basically that was your first commission that you really did individually – I mean as your design.

BB: Well, when I was in school I did, I moonlighted on two jobs. One was a Quonset hut for a young couple, down near Taunton, and another one was a beach house, which got built. But this was the first major thing. When I was working with Anderson and Beckwith I worked on a lot of remodelings of offices at MIT – John Burchard's office and – Burchard was one of the people who had been very interested in Black Mountain. They visited several times. I'd worked on a house in Anderson-Beckwith's office and did a little bit of work on Portsmouth Priory School in Rhode Island.

MEH: So the firm that you were with in Cambridge – was it Boston, Cambridge?

BB: Boston.

MEH: How long did you stay with them – the second firm?

BB: It was about a year, and I had been asked by Lawrence Anderson to do some part-time teaching at MIT with beginning students. I did that for about a year and –

MEH: What were you teaching?

BB: Design. Architectural design. Found that I enjoyed it very much, but it was something that I had never, never expected to do or do be asked to do. The dean, or the head of the department, at Minnesota used to come to Boston

every year or two looking for potential faculty members, and he interviewed me and asked me to come to Minnesota. So in 1952, we moved to Minneapolis and shortly thereafter, I guess it was '54, we got architectural registration – I think I got mine a couple years earlier but Anna did too – and so we opened a practice in Minneapolis which, while I was teaching actually full-time, but generally Anna kept the office going. So we had a practice in Minneapolis from about '54 to '63.

MEH: And Anna had her degree in architecture also at that time.

BB: Yes. She graduated in 1950, from Harvard.

MEH: What did you call the practice? Was it Bliss and Bliss?

BB: No, Bliss and Campbell. [LAUGHS]

MEH: And so then at the time in Minnesota, what was the department like when you went there?

BB: It was in the attic space of the old engineering building and shortly after I arrived, I think the next year, Roy Jones, who was the department head, retired and there was a search for a new head. I had suggested that Ralph Rapson (PH), who was at that time teaching at MIT, might be interested because he originally came from the Midwest and had gone to the University of Michigan. He'd worked in Chicago for a number of very good architects. It turned out that he did accept the job, and so Ralph became a very successful head of the school. Ultimately there was a new building which was finished I think in about 1960, somewhere in there.

MEH: Were you teaching the general architectural curriculum? Was there a particular aspect?

BB: Yes. Well, I was teaching sort of basic design and introducing ideas of basic structures and so on, but we did tend to move from different age class groups. We were there from '52 to '63, and during those years we did a number of projects, primarily houses, but we did some commercial work. Then sort of in a way our big break was the Family of Man show coming to the Minneapolis Institute. They didn't have anyone that they thought could put a show of that scale together. Russell Plimpton, the head of the museum, came to the school and Ralph Rapson suggested maybe I would be interested. So, we did that, and it then got us very involved in museum work – whether exhibitions or case work or remodelings. That became a substantial part of our activity.

MEH: To what extent there was your design course based on the design course you had had with Albers?

BB: I thought in many respects that it was [LAUGHS], but it was also based – what I did was also read what the previous people had been doing and trying to integrate whatever I could with that. But when Albers – Anni and Juppi – came to give talks and we had a small exhibit of their works, Juppi came into the drafting room and looked at a few things and said "What's that!" [LAUGHS] I obviously was not fully understanding what Albers was trying to do. At any rate, revisions were made and things got better. But there was – around the country there was a lot of half understanding, misunderstandings, misinterpretations and all listed under the name of Basic Design. A lot of things were very badly done, and it was unfortunate, but –

MEH: [TECHNICAL INTERRUPTION]

BB: A funny thing, amazing things, happened in Minneapolis with our, with our firm. Practically our first job – and it really came through our association with the Walker Art Center and Minneapolis Institute – was a big house for one of the Dayton brothers, the Dayton Department Store. This was for Douglas Dayton. He had ninety acres near Wayzata on a lake. We were apprehensive of trying to do a house of that scale. The initial house was four thousand square feet. This was 1960 – no, 1956 or 7. By most standards that was a very large house. Subsequently, after we moved here, we added another four thousand square feet. So it's a very large house. But that led to, of course, other projects. Also I got very involved in trying to save some significant buildings in Minneapolis or in Minnesota – the Louis Sullivan Owatonna Bank was threatened by a very insensitive architect in proposing to remodel it. We managed to put together the right people to save it and to get to the bank president, and the president of the bank corporation. So it was saved and Harwell Hamilton Harris, a very good architect and one who is of a Wrightian bent, did the remodeling and it's marvelously done.

MEH: Were you working as a group of individuals, or was there an organization that you were working with to try to save the bank?

BB: Todd Catlin, who was a curator at the Minneapolis Institute, had discovered on a trip down there what was happening. He called me and so we started putting together a number of people and planted some articles in the paper about what was happening, and so on. One morning I arrived in my office and the bank president was sitting in my chair behind my desk. He said, "I'm on the Board of

Regents, or the Alumni Association, and I'm going to have your job!" So I said "You can have it." [LAUGHS] So we began a campaign to find a way to help them and, as I say, got Harwell Harris involved in the project, and the bank corporation president which was over the local bank president. Harwell Harris was a very personable and articulate architect and was able to establish a good relationship with the banker. The banker, Cliff Summers, then became – after that experience he became the banking world's expert on Louis Sullivan and wrote articles and gave talks about it. That was, I guess, my first real introduction to historic preservation. Then there was a marvelous building in Minneapolis called The Metropolitan Building, which was twelve stories high, masonry exterior bearing walls starting at about six feet thick at the ground. It had an interior atrium that was forty feet by sixty feet and balconies around that which were glass floored. In fact the piece of glass on our coffee table is one of those. This is 1893. That was one inch thick glass in sheets five feet by seven feet, supported on a steel T-frame, and so the light from the skylight filtered down through all of these glass balconies and lighted the interior, gave interior light to the offices which surrounded it. I took Charles Eames in there, who had his camera with him, and he just went mad as we wandered around. There were open cage elevators rising up and down, with red ceilings in the cages. So we devoted our office, really, for three months on a campaign to try and save that building, but, typically, the Minneapolis Redevelopment Office tore it down and it became a parking lot for a long time. Jerry Liebling, a filmmaker, made a very good film of the building at the time. The interest in historic preservation

continued when I came here. I was a founding member of the Utah Heritage Foundation. I was very active in that for quite a few years. Now I've not been so active but I've still been supportive generally, but yesterday we were talking about the way in which the whole movement – actually, out of that movement the silliness of postmodernism arose and you got a lot of really bad work that went under the name of contextualism and historic preservation when it really wasn't, but also attempted to save everything and it's ridiculous because you – that doesn't make a living city. So the current fight in that whole area is to try to redirect it towards saving the very best things, most significant things, and not waste energy and time and money on saving everything no matter what.

MEH: So you came here in 1963, did you say?

BB: [AFFIRMATIVE]

MEH: And did you come as head of the department?

BB: Yes. I was head for about a year or two and then the university decided to change the designations to Chairman. We talked about "folding chairman." So then I was chairman until – I think it was 1970. But we had been a department in the College of Fine Arts – it was not a very happy arrangement – and put together a blue ribbon committee of local influential people who convinced the university administration that it was time that we became a separate professional school. That pretty much coincided with occupying our new building, which we did in 1970. So I'd been head, I'd been chairman, and then I became dean. So I really was full time at the school from 1963 until 1989.

MEH: You must have had quite a significant role in developing this department as a professional school.

BB: Yes. We, we managed to complete the change in the curriculum and a major change in faculty. The new building, and the most – I think the most significant part of the program – . [INTERRUPTION]

[END OF RECORDING ON TAPE 2; TAPE 3 BEGINS]

BB: And to me the most significant part of the new program was that we asked that students get an undergraduate degree in some other field – not in architecture. Because typically around the country – it was true of Minnesota and most schools – the professional program in architecture was largely technical training. Students were getting very little opportunity for self-discovery. They were beginning as freshmen, and five years later exiting as architects but had not a very significant university experience or even the opportunity of finding other areas, learning other things. Architects need as much to draw upon as possible, and if they are simply self-centered in what the profession had been doing, it's of no import. They just go out and keep doing what they were doing in school or what the magazines are publishing. So when it was going well, we had students coming into – Well, the program was changed to a kind of overlapping one that they would be doing four years of an undergraduate study – and we had students at one point coming from twenty-six different areas and bringing all kinds of other insights to what the architectural problems were. So, at the end of four years they would have had some pre-architecture but would have finished up their undergraduate B.S. or B.A. in something else. They

would have had some testing of their architectural abilities at that time, but then there would be two more years in the Master's program, and that would be very intensive professional work. So that was the idea. It did work.

MEH: Has it continued?

BB: Well, this is one of my frustrations – that it has been watered down and there have been degrees developed – Bachelor of Science of Architecture, which is a meaningless degree, or Bachelor of Arts in Architecture and that's a useless thing. So I've been rather frustrated in the last few years because with the change in direction. I suspect that part of the change was generated because of a feeling that we needed to have more student credit hours in order to get more budget, and so on. So, that has happened and I don't think – Well, we were getting a much more mature student into architecture than previously, and now there's, I think, just too much in-house kind of experience. There's pre-architecture and then there's professional, and we are not getting the broad range of interest that we had before. So, it will be interesting to see what a new dean – this will be the third since I left.

MEH: And when did you leave?

BB: In '89.

MEH: Looking back, do you think that your experience at Black Mountain had any effect on the program that you developed here?

BB: I hope so. I certainly hope so.

MEH: What do you think that might be?

BB: Well, it was the opportunity for being with people with many different directions and many different interests and many more things to contribute. So, that's my biggest frustration at the moment.

MEH: Was there a practical work experience requirement in the program?

BB: We did institute a work program such as we could. On campus we built a number of experimental structures – not big things, but Bucky was here and we did domes and we did pole structures. Our new building has a yard beside the shop which is intended for buildings – not very big. In addition to that, let's see, in 1969, with the AIA, we started the second or third Community Design Center in the country. Claude had told me what they were doing at Berkeley, and there was a fellow in Philadelphia that started one and there was one in Harlem. So, we were the third or fourth, and it continues downtown. It's called "Assist." This provided opportunities for students to work on – oh, we have a housing program that helps people with handicap ramps, with remodeling houses, taking care of new roofing and furnaces and so on. But in addition to that, we did a number of urban design studies and, with the National Endowment for the Arts, we had two major grants, one of them was to study the ten acre blocks in Salt Lake City which were the result of Joseph Smith's plan for the City of Zion. Generally speaking, as you probably saw in the city, that the periphery of the blocks is not bad but the interior – I should have shown you some of those little alleyways that penetrate the big blocks. But this study built upon that problem of how to best utilize those blocks, and so we did a block for residential use, a block for commercial use, and a block for civic use, and we also tried to

promote – and it's still in the works – inner block walkways, which can connect block to block. So that project had some influence and the students had that kind of planning experience, too. The next major NEA project was to use the old Union Pacific depot as an intermodal transit center. There used to be an inter-urban that ran from Payson to Brigham City, which we proposed bringing back [LAUGHS] and now parts of it are coming back. But it's twenty years later and almost too late, because the smear of the valley has occurred and the overbuilding of freeways has occurred, and the State is so automotive-dependent that for years the legislature would say, "Oh you'll never get Utahans out of their cars." We got the track system two years ago, and since then it's been loaded. So – Then because of the Olympics, we were able to get a branch line from the city up to the university, which ultimately will run to the medical school. So that project has had some effect but – A developer got into the depot property and has done a very bad mega-shopping thing, killed the possibility of making it an intermodal center, and frankly I hope he goes broke. [LAUGHS] He was in cahoots with the former mayor. How did we get to that so quickly? [LAUGHS]

MEH: So, you've been very involved here in Salt Lake City, besides your teaching, in civic interest in projects. Are there other particular things that you have worked with that we haven't discussed? Groups or projects? Did you keep in – Once you were teaching here, did you continue to have an architectural, independent architectural practice?

BB: No, and that was one of my wife's frustrations. When I came, things seemed so needful [LAUGHS] that I was intensely consumed by the school. It was fairly obvious that I wouldn't have time to do much practice. I did do some consulting early on with Dan Kiley and another local firm, Brixen and Christopher. I did the site plan for Snowbird Ski Resort, and some of the early schematic preliminary designs. The then-developer flew two of us to Europe and we visited a ski resort in the morning and drove to another one and visited that and did that for two weeks, which was a very interesting thing. But after the preliminaries were done, the promoter wanted us to redesign it every Monday morning and I couldn't do that. I perhaps foolishly blew up and severed the connection. But that was the last major design project I think that I was involved in. So it was a really difficult time for Anna, and she continued here doing some interiors work. She did work for a client of Dan Kiley's in Columbus, Indiana, and they also had a condominium in Scottsdale. She did that and helped them collect a fairly major Native Indian pottery collection and rugs and so on. We did a lot of traveling in southern – well in the Four Corners area. She also continued with lecturing on color and did a good deal of touring around, mainly in architectural schools. But then she didn't find that very satisfying and started in screen-printing and we set up the basement here for doing that. She worked there for a number of years until we were able to find an old mom-and-pop grocery store that we remodeled and that's where she spends her happy time, still. She's developed a – Well, speaking of the Graham Foundation, she had an exhibit of paintings at the Graham Foundation a number of years ago – I can't

remember when. Well, she had work at the Denise Renée [PH] Gallery in New York, but nothing came of that. She has a gallery representative in Princeton, and she had one in Washington, D.C., but for an artist, unless you're there, they don't push your work. You need to be there to remind them that you're around. Initially, she had no success at all in Utah, but recently it's, she's been selling more things.

MEH: Now, since your retirement you've been quite busy. What have you been doing?

BB: Well, mainly continuing the interest in furniture that I had at Black Mountain, that was really triggered by Albers and by the catalogue of Alvar Aalto's work. So I did make a chair or two at Black Mountain. Then in Cambridge did other work, and when I was doing the office remodeling for John Burchard at MIT – at that time he was Dean of Humanities – and that involved a very large conference table – about twelve people. Molly Gregory, by then, was in Woodstock, Vermont, and I got Molly to make the chairs, and that was just at the point that Ted Dreier, in a very unhappy mental state after the ejection from Black Mountain, was working with Molly up there. In fact the two chairs that are in your room upstairs are the chairs that we used for conference chairs for John Burchard's office. We did them in leather, and – leather webbing – and the funny thing about them was the leather always squeaked, and so I picture a hard conference [LAUGHS] in the Dean's Office and this squeak-squeak-squeaking of the chairs whenever anyone was uncomfortable with an idea. But all of that has since disappeared, but that chair was designed in collaboration with Bill Haible in the Anderson-Beckwith office, and with Molly.

It's a reasonably good chair. They've stood up well. Those upstairs need new webbing, but otherwise okay. In 1986, when I retired from the deanship, I was still teaching but also I got started again on furniture. Since then I've – I don't know whether I've done forty chairs, or something like that, and that continues.

MEH: Bob, as an architect, did you have difficulty interesting your clients in contemporary architecture? Were they eager?

BB: In Minnesota, no. I think because of the activity and actually the competition between the Minneapolis Institute of Art, which was more traditional, with the Walker Art Center it was a very active art community, and people – Well, one might say that the first house, the Dayton House, was perhaps more traditional and certainly kind of Prairie School, if you will, in our, maybe in our – As I mentioned earlier, we had some hesitancy about our first house being such an enormous project. Today it's not an enormous project, and the house only cost \$97,000. [LAUGHS] For four thousand square feet.

MEH: And then you said you later added –

BB: And we added another four thousand square feet after we moved here, for them. I can't really recall any of the clients that came to us as, as wanting or insisting on the traditional style. I don't think they would have come to us.

MEH: They knew your work then.

BB: Yes. They'd certainly seen some of it, so they didn't press anything like that, and we wouldn't have done it – so – that's about that.

MEH: So, essentially your architectural practice in Minnesota ended just as it was really maturing.

BB: I feel that. Yes. Well, it continued in Snowbird, which I didn't show you. Let me just pull that, shall I? [INTERRUPTION].

MEH: Bob, do you want to tell me what you were doing with this chair? [fanchair]

BB: Well, the whole thing started with looking at a folding print rack that was made of slats, and so –

MEH: Just move them and demonstrate.

BB: I tried putting them together and fiddling with them, and suddenly realized you could taper them and make them come together in a form that was sittable. All of my, almost all of my furniture is foldable or – ow, sorry – leg cramp.

MEH: A bad leg.

BB: – or demountable, and this one folds up flat, if I can get it to go. It's tightened up from – I'll have to assure you it does fold up flat [LAUGHS]. One important thing that the Shakers knew all about, and that is that chairs should flex a little bit. This one flexes, as you can see.

MEH: I noticed that when I was sitting in it night before last. At first I thought "Oh dear," but it was, it really was very flexible as I moved my body.

BB: Yes. Well, this flexes more than a Shaker chair does, but there's nothing more uncomfortable than let's say a chair made out of concrete.

MEH: Right.

BB: So, it's a subtlety, but it's important for, for furniture – chair design.

MEH: Now, do you have a workshop here where you work?

BB: Well I can show you what is going on in the basement, in the garage, but when I retired from school I got shop privileges, so I can use a very good shop and most of the detail work is done there.

MEH: Do you do the work yourself?

BB: Yes.

MEH: Now do you – If these were to be reproduced for sale, they would be like unique items? You would build each one, or would you have them built?

BB: Well, of course, I'd like to see them produced regularly and not just done on a custom basis, but as I mentioned to you the other night, I would really like to have a manufacturer who was interested in producing the work and an agent who would develop consumers and allow me to do the prototypes. That was really my interest in designing almost all of these things, as prototypes that were of some appeal to enough people to make it profitable.

MEH: [INTERRUPTION] Okay, do you want to tell about this chair?

BB: A lot of times you – Oh I spent a lot of time work-, walking around through the hardwood warehouse and you find a particular piece and it triggers something and this chair was the result.
The slab – aw, come on –

MEH: Aha! [SOUNDS OF MANIPULATING CHAIR]

BB: So it comes apart this way and slips through, and that just rotates.

MEH: Right. So you can just reduce it to two slabs.

BB: Yes. So it stores very easily or ships very easily, and everyone says "Well, it looks awfully uncomfortable," but what's happening is that your center of gravity is going through the small of your back, instead of through your tail, and it's really quite comfortable to sit in. I sit in it often, watching TV.

MEH: I can see it has a little bit of give too.

BB: Well, not so much as [LAUGHS], but I've done a series of slab chairs and this one is particularly unique because downtown in the city there is a tree that was pruned, and the Chicano community found that they could see the Virgin Mary in the [LAUGHS] remainder of the big branch that had been cut off. So, if you look carefully – there's the Virgin Mary. [LAUGHS]
Here's her halo.

MEH: So this is – [UNINTEL]

BB: So I can't sell this chair. It's invaluable.

MEH: It's the Virgin Mary Chair.

BB: Actually the pillow to this one is from an earlier version, but I've been interested in aluminum as a material and its ability to take bent forms, rolled forms, and this chair flexes with the legs and also with the back, and it seems to do most of the things. I'm not yet satisfied with the – Well,

originally it was a lounge chair. Here it has been raised to be dining table chair height. I'm not as pleased with the proportions and the height and the width of the pieces. That is part of a series that I [MOVES OFF MIKE]

MEH: [IRRELEVANT REMARKS] Okay.

BB: This is part of the same series, and again bent aluminum. This is three-sixteenths inch of an alloy called number 50-52, which is the most bendable for furniture. But again, the unit comes apart and stacks easily for storage or shipping, and this one, as you can see, flexes and slides sideways. [IRRELEVANT INTERCHANGE NOT TRANSCRIBED].

MEH: Now. Okay, go ahead and tell me about it.

BB: Well it's only a sheet of quarter-inch aluminum alloy, number 6061, rolled to give the curvature, and then very expensive French bridle leather stretched between the ends of the aluminum piece. It's French bridle leather because most of the hides that you get in this country have a brand right in the middle of them, and this doesn't. It's thick. It's almost a quarter-inch thick.

MEH: And you said this is in the Renwick?

BB: Yes.

MEH: Now can I convince you to get up?

BB: Sure.

MEH: You're on.

BB: Where did we end?

MEH: Let's just start talking about this from the beginning.

BB: This little cradle developed out of the possibilities of using thin strips of plywood. This is eighth-inch, Baltic plywood, about two and a quarter inch wide strips and five feet long, which is the standard sheet size for Baltic plywood. By assembling them together and then springing a brass rod between each end, it allowed me to unfold the plywood strips, and they're held apart with small brass

S-clips, so it keeps the form when it's
pounds, and that's a very big baby.

MEH: And about what are the
dimensions on it?

BB: It's about five feet long and about
eighteen inches wide, and it's
positioned to either be hung from
chains or from a brass triangular base system. But it's positioned just four
inches off the floor. If the child is really active and jumping around and falls out,
it's only four inches.

MEH: You said this is in the Renwick?

BB: Yes.

MEH: I was going to ask you another question. What was it?

BB: Let me tell you the story about –

MEH: Oh, the name.

BB: Oh, it's called the Cradle for a Young ViKing-ViQueen. Apparently there is not a
feminine of Viking, but if there's a ViKing, there has to be a ViQueen. Let me tell
you the story of how the museums operate in acquiring pieces.

MEH: [INSTRUCTION NOT TRANSCRIBED]

BB: I visited the director of the museum and showed him my brochure of all of the
work, and he went through it. He was very interested, and said "Well, we'd like
this piece and that piece and possibly that piece, and what we do is find a
donor to pay for them." So, after making another one of these cradles and after

making another version of the Deep Cradle Rocker, which is the aluminum and leather rocker, and having them packed and ready to ship, then I heard that, "Well, we're sorry, we didn't find a donor. Would you like to donate?" [LAUGHS] Financially, it turns out to be, for me at the time, an expensive donation, but they are in the collection and that also is the way the Museum of Modern Art works. Either they get the donation from the artist or from the manufacturer. But they kept my – The Museum of Modern Art kept my brochure for six months and finally said "Well," – I guess I hadn't offered to donate as much. But that apparently is fairly common for most of the museums. [INTERRUPTION IN TAPING]

MEH: Okay. You're on.

BB: This one is really inspired by a sitting structure that I saw at the African Museum in Paris, which was simply chopped out of some tree, of a tree branch structure. From some other furniture projects I had some pieces left over and an existing mold, and so it's an assembly of bits and pieces. The seat structure is strung with black tennis racquet strings and also the headrest structure.

MEH: So you can actually sit in this.

BB: You can actually sit in it. It's not terribly comfortable, and it really isn't ready for primetime.

MEH: You were giving it a name?

BB: Well, I call it Picasso's Guitar. I am working on using some vertical strings, which I think may be the answer to making it somewhat more comfortable.

MEH: [UNINTEL] Go.

BB: This is a little aluminum Z table, which you can stack or arrange in many different patterns for side tables or coffee tables, and they nest one within the other so it makes for easy storage and shipping as almost all of my pieces do. Again, this is three-sixteenths, 50-52 aluminum.

MEH: Okay. This is another configuration?

BB: [COFFE] Yes. This is, say, a coffee table configuration. Or you can spread them apart and put a glass top over the four, if you want something bigger. This comes out to be 22 inches square.

MEH: Okay. You go ahead.

BB: This simply shows the nesting possibilities for the Z-shape.

This U-shaped unit is eleven inches by seventeen inches, 11 x 11 x 17, and it nests of course in a square pattern and then you could take the pieces and use them independently as side tables or put them together as, again, as coffee tables. In our house we use them to hold magazines. This is just one configuration. Again, you could pull these apart and put a glass top, giving you whatever size you want. The height would be eleven inches. Another configuration.

MEH: This really would work for a coffee table if you – either like this, or if you put something else on it. Okay.

BB: About three years ago, there was a pioneer trolley running around town for tourists, and they needed a central depot. The central depot turned out to be a temporary structure made of scaffolding and vinyl fabric. It was only 16 by 24 feet, but it was shaded with black plastic screenshade and then there was a vent at the top of the roof. The temperature differential inside was, from outdoors to indoors in the hottest part of summer, was ten degrees. I also did the folding benches. There were four of these benches.

This is a child's version of the Deep Cradle Rocker. It's made of Baltic plywood laminated, about 5/8ths of an inch thick, and it uses – instead of the expensive French leather, it uses plastic screening. Actually it's bird screening for barns, and it's very inexpensive. Again the piece is just about five feet long because of the size of Baltic plywood sheets. It would be for four to six year old kids. I've made about eight of those, and I've made about twelve of the Cradle for the Young ViKing and ViQueen.

This chair was built for the local representative of Herman Miller Furniture – a girl named Kate Carlson [PH]. She's rather short and dynamic, and the headpiece is set exactly for her height. It comes apart. It's just a three-piece chair, so it comes apart and it stores and ships easily. I sent my brochure to Herman Miller, and they kept it for nine months and sent it through innumerable committees and hands and then, of course, you get the answer "Well thank you very much. We're not interested."

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[END OF TRANSCRIPT]