

Interviewee: BREWSTER ELLEDGE
Interviewer: MARY EMMA HARRIS
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[BEGINNING OF SIDE 1, TAPE 1]

MEH: [GIVES IDENTIFICATION]

BE: I've been retired for three years, and I'm busier now than I ever was in my life. People ask me what I do, and I say I'm headmaster of Thomas Creek School for Wayward Girls, because I discovered there's no such thing as a bad girl, and I'm trying to prove to the world that every girl is reformable.

MEH: Simply "wayward."

BE: [LAUGHS] Yes.

MEH: Before you got so busy, what did you do?

BE: Well—

MEH: You left Black Mountain in 19—

BE: '40. I was there, now you can check whether '40 or '41. I heard the Roosevelt speech after lunch, sitting out on that little cul-de-sac behind the Dining Hall, when Roosevelt said, "And I can assure you mothers that not one of our sons, your sons, will ever go to war." And I can recall everybody looking at each other and saying "That son-of-a-bitch. He never told the truth when a lie would do just as well. Just as well." [LAUGHS]

MEH: Had they already built the building?

BE: They were just working on the foundations. They were—They were having summer camps down at the other site, down at the lake.

MEH: The lake. So you were in the Blue Ridge building.

BE: Yeah, we were in the Blue Ridge building. And, of course—I was only there for one full year, and many people felt that the magic was gone when we came down off the mountain. And G.K. Chesterton says it's very dangerous to live on top of a mountain because you confuse yourself with God when you live on top of a mountain [LAUGHS]. But when they went down in the valley, that was an entirely different thing. And, of course, the tragedy of having the dam burst and all that—which belongs to another story.

MEH: Were you there then?

BE: No. But I can still recall the first night that I got up to Black Mountain, and it was so enchanting and so exhilarating. It took me three years to get to Black Mountain. I read about it my last year in high school, or my next-to-last year in high school, and I thought, "Boy, that was the only place I wanted to go to college." But my mother was determined that I should go to a church school, where I would be—have spiritual guidance.

MEH: Where were you in high school? Where are you from?

BE: Painesville, Ohio. Near Cleveland. But after I graduated from high school and the following fall had gone to this church school, I just didn't fit in there. It wasn't—It didn't have anything to offer me. I was interested in playing the violin and there was no—all the assignments and all the courses I was taking seemed to me a waste, complete waste of time, and entirely irrelevant. When I

was in a Bible literature class, taught by a sixty-year-old woman who assured me that the "Song of Songs" was a poem written by Jesus Christ about how Jesus Christ loved the Church, I felt that it was time for me to move on. I stayed the rest of the school year, but I didn't do anything. I just was in neutral. My mind was in neutral too. I came home and worked a year at a rayon plant and saved my money, and then with help from my father I finally enrolled in Black Mountain.

MEH: What had you heard about the college that interested you?

BE: Well, they believed in academic freedom. Of course, since I was not an academic, and I still am not what you'd call a scholar, I can—Maybe I went there to see if I could find a definition of it. The irony of it is I still go to college every summer. I take courses. I'm sixty-seven years old now, and it'd be boring to enumerate all the different institutes and universities I've attended. I've never graduated from one yet. [LAUGHS] I'm proud that I attended Oxford in England last summer, and, of course, when you're sixty-seven, college credits don't make any difference anyways. My life is divided into seven years—five years in the Merchant Marine, which I went into right after I left Black Mountain. Of course, the War came along, and I stayed in until after the War was over and was in all the different theatres of war. [I] was lucky because finally I was in Okinawa when the war was over and was quite surprised that I was still alive. Then when I came home, like a great man any other young men, I hadn't the faintest idea of what I wanted to do. But I went back and visited Black Mountain, and it had changed. I didn't feel there was anything

there for me after the War. But certainly it molded my character so I don't think there was anything I ever did after Black Mountain that, which there were not elements of the mental discipline—what little mental discipline I got when I was there.

MEH: You mean it molded your character.

BE: I would say it molded my opinion—the way I look at things. I tried to get enough college credits together so I could teach school, and I ended up teaching school for about seven years without ever having had a proper certification. In between times I worked on circuses, and I stayed around circuses until I was no longer interested in circuses.

MEH: Doing what in circuses?

BE: Well, I worked as a rigger and advance man, and sometimes as a musician. But mostly I was just fascinated with this rapidly disappearing art, as far as the mud (?) shows in America were concerned. I was studying anachronisms. I think I was studying the characters and personalities of the performers. It takes a particular type of person to be so self-centered that they'll spend their lifetime learning to juggle or learning to do particular physical tricks. And, of course, all through this I always wanted to play the violin. I still kept trying. The years just went by, boom boom boom, and finally I ended up teaching—back in North Carolina—teaching school. I finally got to Pamlico County twenty-four years ago, and outside of leaving to take care of sick relatives and going through—and attending more universities—I came back to Pamlico County the second time, eleven years ago, and bought thirty acres of swamp and

rattlesnake ground [LAUGHS] and have been here ever since. I sometimes say the best job I ever had before I finally got on Social Security was being garbage man at Oriental for three years, which was a step up from putting in septic tanks, which I did for a year before that. Now I enjoy the few music students that I have.

Now what made Black Mountain famous was, of course, the Albers, who were very Germanic technicians, before they were artists—in my opinion. There's too many art schools that are artsy-fartsy. To become an artist, it's like Casals said: "If you're a cello player, you wake up every morning, pick up the instrument, and try to find F-sharp, [LAUGHS] and then you're ready to start your day." If you play a stringed instrument, you try to put your whole body into a relationship with the tension of those four strings and the resonance of the body. But that sounds very, very profound, but what most people don't ever do is to learn how to play through all the arpeggios, through the circle of keys until you can do it without thinking about it. Learning how to play all the double-stops without thinking about it. I've never heard of anybody accomplishing this without having teachers, and I was lucky that I did find a good teacher about six years ago. I'd about given up playing the instrument because of arthritis tension. And when I found this miracle worker, witch-woman, [UNINTEL NAME - Erequita Hovash?]. It doesn't matter what you call her, it was just like a whole new life had been opened for me.

MEH: Is this a person in North Carolina?

BE: Well, she lives in Cambridge now, but she travels and gives seminars all over the world. I've studied with her three times.

MEH: This is cello you're studying?

BE: No, this is violin. But it was lucky the year after the first seminar I went with Quito [PH], I had the privilege of studying under Margaret What's-Her-Name from Berkeley, and then she explained everything that Quito [PH] had been trying to tell me [LAUGHS]. So there were two very important women teachers in my life. Then I've been going back to Quito every since. Margaret has a marvelous assistant, a younger woman, who is like a straight man in a vaudeville act, because she hangs around and keeps saying, "Oh, Margaret, you really don't mean that. You really don't." [LAUGHS] Of course, these—They're marvelous seminars because they're all things to all string players. But to really discover the inner beauty of the stringed instrument—It's like a lifelong quest. While I've been doing that, of course, I had Alexander lessons, and I discovered that you could make the voice a beautiful instrument too. In the last ten years, or the last twenty years, all my elementary school teaching and band teaching—high school marching bands and that sort of thing—I've been trying to teach good solid moveable "Do" [as in "Do-Re-Me"] Shape Note, Kodály-type exercise singing. As far as I'm concerned, I had good success with it. But if you were to stick to one particular type of approach to music, it's like the moveable "Do" solfège. You're only going to interest one in every ten students, because the other nine drop out. It's too technical. It's too much work. Students—Most junior high and high school students don't

really want to learn how to read. They want to be able to play the instrument like they heard it on a record, and they don't know how much the record has been screwed up. The instrument doesn't sound like the record. The record has all been phoned up. It's like telling them there is no—that the Virgin Mary wasn't a virgin, if you explain to them that you could play the instrument for the rest of time, and it's still not going to sound like it is on the record. Teachers are never thanked for wiping away disillusionments.

But the magic of Black Mountain was the magic of having people say what they thought. Having intelligent discussions. Sitting at least for lunch and supper every day at a round table so that everyone was equal, and you were on a one-to-one basis with your teachers. And if you—And you worked with the teachers. There were never any time limits on the lessons that I remember. Of course, when I was there I worked with Trudi Straus.

MEH: You were studying violin with her

BE: Yes. Looking back, she was a good solidly-trained Berlin conservatory, Berlin Academy, player, but she wasn't really what you'd call a first-class violin teacher.

MEH: Had you studied violin before you came to Black Mountain?

BE: Yes. I'd studied since I was in third grade, and I had two or three pretty good teachers. There was no end of good violinists near Cleveland, where the Cleveland Symphony was. In the best traditions of the Prague Conservatory. But Trudi has a great love for music—so I don't know exactly how much I got from her, but I had the opportunity to play the violin as much as I wanted to. I

began to see that there was something in life besides playing the violin, and I enjoyed reading. I enjoyed a lot of reading. Of course, I'd always been a vociferous reader. I began to maybe get a little bit of a focus in my reading. But one of the courses—the teacher that I got the most out of at Black Mountain was Kirill Chenkin. I don't remember the first time we met, but it seemed like there was—the traditional electric spark went between us the first time we met. We found something in each other that was mutually attractive.

MEH: I know very little about Kirill Chenkin.

BE: Yeah. Well, I didn't get along with the homosexuals at Black Mountain, and I didn't care for Evarts at all. Of course, I was a pretty opinionated, pig-headed ex-high school snot, and Evarts represented to me all the things that I thought I didn't like about the Ivy League colleges, I think. But Chenkin also didn't like the homosexual or the Evarts—oh, there were two or three others that everybody knows. He also didn't like a couple of the love affairs that were going on that he felt were immoral.

Now this is not unusual for a Russian, and I was enchanted with the fact that his father was a professional performer. His father and mother were both mime artists and had worked all over the world. I remember I spent one Christmas with them in New York, and Kirill was literally born backstage in a trunk. I mean, he was born between shows. His uncle was a hero of the Russian what-do-you-call-it, Soviet Union, as a famous circus clown. Like early on, since Kirill found out that I was very interested in circuses and the concept

of a circus, and I remember—What was that guy that wrote the play, Waiting for Lefty, or—?

MEH: Is that Odets.

BE: Odets visited there that year, the year that I was there. It was the first or second time he had visited. We, he and another—he'd had a big seminar on the art of playwriting, and he'd gone and on like you could at Black Mountain, all through supper and after supper and on into the night. Then I had listened and listened to all this intellectual palaver, and we were drinking I think too. Then finally I broke in and said, "Well, to me the only pure theatre, of course, is the circus." Odets stopped and said, "Oh my God." He said "I've got a wonderful book. I'm just reading it." Of course, every playwright tries to make a play like a circus, like the focus of a circus. And the—Of course Kirill was somebody who really knew circuses. After all, he'd been raised in Paris in a big apartment house where many of the dancers that worked professionally in France and England lived, and where they studied and trained, and where some of the famous teachers were. Kirill had actually attended ballet classes from the time he was three or four years old until he left home to join the Spanish—go in the Spanish War. There were four people there from the Spanish War, and—

MEH: That's why he ended up—that's why he left Russia? Or they were living in Paris.

BE: He was based with his father and mother in Paris. That's where they worked out of.

MEH: Then, but he then fought in the Spanish Civil War?

BE: Then he went and fought in the Spanish Civil War. It was one of the three battalions—he was in one of the three battalions that was supposed to be wiped out, that Stalin didn't want to come back home. Or maybe they just were dumb. Maybe there were more guys on the other side. He was supposed to have been one of eight men left out of his battalion that managed to get back. Of course, he was an alcoholic when he got back and spent six months in a sanitarium before he came to the United States. He had passed all the requirements for a doctor's degree at the Sorbonne in languages, but they had an age requirement, and nobody there had been given a doctorate from the Sorbonne at the age of twenty-three or something like that. You had to be twenty-seven or thirty or something. So here he was, a scholar with nothing to do. Of course, he'd been in the war, and he was very disenchanting about the stupidity of fascism and the dangers of fascism. But he still had a girlfriend that was working in Russia, and he still wanted to get back to her for some reason or other. So he told me early on, he said to me he was just marking time at Black Mountain until his father and mother found a place. They had left Paris. They saw that the war was inevitable in Europe, and they didn't want to go to Russia. But Kirill still wanted to go back to Russia where his friend was. He told me a story about his uncle. He said all his life he'd heard about how great a man, how famous his uncle was.

MEH: This is the performer in Russia.

BE: There were still people that went back and forth between Russia and Paris in those days—if you were in the right place in the party. Since his uncle was a hero in the Soviet Union, he finally came and spent two weeks in Paris. He said his uncle came to the small apartment, and he was all excited, eleven years old, "I'm going to meet my famous uncle." He said this short, little man came in and sat in a chair in the corner of his mother's kitchen and spoke only in monosyllables while his father and mother chatted-chatted in Russian. Kirill said, "I couldn't understand. How could this be a great clown? He just sits there and does nothing." So it was seven days plus five days, he just sat. Monosyllables. He drank with his father and mother. Then suddenly Kirill said—He figured his uncle realized that he had to make an impression on his young nephew, and he'd probably never see him again, and as he was sitting in the chair, two days before he left, or the day before he left, suddenly something was transformed, and he got up and walked across the room. He was a completely different man. Then he walked down the corridor, where people were standing, and then he walked out in the courtyard, and within a half hour he said the whole apartment building was in hysterics. His father preformed for the whole apartment building—his uncle—then to the next two apartment buildings, and then they began to walk down the street, and then every damn Russian in this whole section of town was following him. He went down with his father, I suppose, and went to a café and came back. Kirill said the next morning he went down to get on the railroad train, and the whole three apartments just emptied out and followed him down to the train station

and put him on the train back to Russia. Everybody was actually sick with laughter. The man never stopped performing.

Then Kirill began to talk to me about the art of the clown, and he said, "Why don't you put on a clown act?" He said, "They're having an amateur contest at some civic building, downtown Black Mountain." So for the next two months—now this is something you could only do at Black Mountain—he and I met for an hour every day, and we went through this basic clown act. There's only seven different clown acts in all, I mean, and each one of them was basic and all the moves are basic, but what Kirill said, "For every move you make you have to have two alternative moves, because you never know exactly how the audience is going to react. And you'll have to segue seamlessly, without a seam showing, from one spot to the next, and you have to build and build." So a clown act is like a symphony orchestra with themes, subthemes, modulations, tempo changes, and you've got to be able to get off before the audience wants you to get off or before the audience realizes that you're through. And we didn't work with the props. He was very—he was very meticulous that we had all the props that I was going to use—there. For two months, that's thirty days a month, sixty—We put in sixty, seventy hours on a clown act that was supposed to last exactly four minutes. What we were doing was an imitation of one of Grock's famous entrances, and I later—after World War Two—I watched Grock perform three times. I spoke to him once, and I saw him, oh, six weeks before he passed on.

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

MEH: You said you realized that what Kirill had taught you had taken four minutes—

BE: Right. That Grock was able to put across in two minutes, but, of course, you're comparing a high school violinist to Heifetz, you know, because Grock was the great master. There was one—Boyington [Derek Bovingdon]? Wasn't there a fellow named Boying-, Pappy Boyington? Do you remember that name?

MEH: Boyington? Was he a student?

BE: Yeah. He played clarinet. He played the Brahms clarinet sonata, with the Jalowetzes, the year I was there.

MEH: Not Leon. He was a student?

BE: Yeah. He got killed in a plane crash.

MEH: Derek Bovingdon.

BE: Bovingdon. He was a clarinet player. Yeah, he was the only person that worked with us. I needed a prop man. He went down to this amateur Elks Club thing and we went on, and there were three or four girls—Hope Stephens—got very unhappy. They didn't know what I was going to do, and they were afraid I was going to disgrace the college. But anyways, Pappy and I went down, and we went on, and it took, with the laughter, it took twenty minutes for me to get off. It was one of those, you know, dream audiences. So once that I got the tempo started and got the moves started, you couldn't do anything wrong. Then I came back to school, and I was completely exhausted. I've never been so exhausted in my whole life. [OVERTALK]

MEH: Did you win the contest?

BE: Who knows. I mean—At least I won the audience. And Boyington [SIC] was quite tickled, and he, of course, told everybody that it was a success. Then Kirill and I got drunk, and while we celebrated, we critiqued the whole thing. He said he didn't go, but I've often wondered if he didn't slip down and slip into the back and then slip away before it was over. It would be the sort of thing that he would have done. It cured me forever of wanting to be a clown, because the intellectual tension and emotional tension, and the sheer physical draining, the concentration. It wasn't for me. I think I was born a little bit lazy. But at least it gave me an insight into the actual physical pain that goes into becoming a great concentrated performer, and the fact that they can do it, you know, night after night. It's why some of them tear themselves apart in a very—with a very few years performing.

Then, of course, Kirill and I enjoyed doing practical jokes. I remember it was after—maybe after the Halloween party. But he and I were still up when the sun was coming up, and everybody at the school had really celebrated very—We took the doors off of every study and put them all in the girls' john on the second floor. I guess it was on the second floor. So when they got up to go into the, you know, when the first people got up on Sunday morning around seven or eight o'clock, there wasn't a goddam door in the whole place [LAUGHS]. And some people thought it was funny, but a lot of people were furious. Then they discovered where the doors were, and then since many of the doors had personal decorations on them, all the doors had to go back to the right place. Of course Kirill and I were no place to be found. They claimed that nobody knew

who did that until six or seven months later that it came out in one of the New York parties a year or so later. But it was Kirill and I that did it. Now it gives you an idea at my ripe age of sixty-seven how physically strong Kirill and I were that we could do it and do it so quick and fast and moving all the time. And, of course, everybody wanted to do the Claude Monteux automobile trick. I mean that was the—

MEH: What was that?

BE: Well, when Claude—I don't know whether it was Claude Monteux and a small foreign automobile—Austin or something. When he went away one day, two of the boys took the entire thing apart and put it up on the third floor in his room so that when Claude came back, he couldn't find his automobile. He was cussing and moaning, and then he went up and opened his door. When he opened his door, the automobile immediately started "brrrrmm, brrrrmm," [LAUGHS] and there it was all put together. Of course, he had to take it all apart and carry it downstairs. Those were the days of the great practical jokes.

MEH: Yes.

BE: Rube Goldberg's son was in on that particular deal.

MEH: And who was Rube Goldberg?

BE: He was a famous cartoonist at the turn of the century. You've seen where you—if you want to light a match, you put the cat on the back porch and the cat laps up the cream and the saucer falls over and rolls down the steps and tips over an ashcan, and the ashcan releases a rope et cetera—you know, a whole series

of—I later played under Claude when he tried to become a conductor, but he never made it. But then I never made it as a violinist, so it makes us even.

MEH: You play the violin in these fiddling conventions now. In these fiddling festivals.

BE: Yeah. Well I always played violin but—I played violin in the Seventh Army Symphony for three years.

MEH: In which symphony?

BE: In the Seventh, the army, the Seventh Army Symphony. That's when we toured Europe for three years—eleven months a year. That was a big propaganda outfit. And we played only classic music.

MEH: Wait. Down [REPEATS “down” to an animal?]. I'm sorry. Let's go back a second.

BE: I've played viola—When I went to Longy School in Boston after the War, and Claude Stoller and I roomed together for about four or five months, I switched to viola because I saw I was never going to make it as a violinist. I later played viola in a couple of stateside symphonies. But I got bored with that. Last summer when I went to the Oxford Festival Orchestra, they were short bass viol players, so I played bass viol in that.

MEH: You were telling me when I talked to you on the phone about a particular method of playing, were you not, that—at these festivals?

BE: Well, the—all the students of Quita Howash [PH] play with a very relaxed style, and it's a systematic—Alexander Dance Technique approach. As I said, she's a witch-woman. You learn, like all, many dancers say that all movement begins behind your belly button, and your breathing is important, and your thumbs are the great enemy. They want your attention. Your thumb is like an obnoxious

macho male that's always trying to correct the little woman. I don't know whether you've ever met any men like that, you know. The woman sits around and knows that there's a completely simple answer, but she can't get to it because the male is so intent on overpowering her. You know, you use a sledgehammer when all you need is a thumbtack. I mean a tack hammer. It's a whole new approach. I mean, the Howash [PH]. It's internalizing relaxation, I guess.

One of the greatest things I got as far as music was concerned at Black Mountain was of Susie Spayth—you say the name is Susie Riley now—Claude [Jerry Wolpert] Wolpert's ex-wife. She had a dance class, and she had studied with Martha Graham, and she talked me into joining it. I remember I had the worst charley-horse of my history of my whole life after one or two sessions with her. But I stuck with it for an amazingly long time for someone with my fly-by-night temperament. But I noticed within a week after I started going to Susie's classes that my sight reading had improved a hundred percent. I was coordinating my whole body, and when you think, since I'd been in sixth grade, I'd been trying to play the violins with my fingers and my thumbs and my arms and holding it tightly under my chin. Susie Spayth's dance classes at Black Mountain was the first step towards an internalized freedom. I didn't—And I—which finally accumulated many years later in me going to Howash [PH], and then finally I—the joy of being able to be a dance accompanist at the American Dance Festival. It's fun to be able to sit and really play to the dancers. Lay the tempos down.

MEH: How did you come to play for the American Dance Festival? You played the violin?

BE: Yes. I was playing violin and piano, but mostly violin. Sometimes I sang patterns. I have a very loud voice. But I can fake in any key on the violin, which isn't any great thing, but if you can fake and really get inside the dancers while you're doing it, it's good. I had been to Howash [PH] seminar at Chapel Hill, and I wanted to go to the dance festival. I walked on the campus there at Duke and ran into Kei Tarkei, and she wanted an accompanist, and I said "Well, try me. Fly me." [LAUGHS] We hit it off. Her husband and I became good friends. It was really through Kei that I met Rosen. But all these things, going back there—I would have never gone—When I finally got to Europe after the War—Well, during the War when I was in the Merchant Marine, I would never have so many interesting times on shore, except that Kirill had taught me enough about circuses so that I could always find a home in any damn circus. I'd worked on American circuses too, of course, and it's a sort of an international profession. But Kirill gave me the confidence. He showed me—he told me where all the cheap hotels were. You know, I'd read the Priestley's, The Good Companions and the Empires, The Lost Empires and so forth. Last summer I actually performed in a music hall in Blackpool, and if I may say so myself, I made quite a big hit. [LAUGHS] At least two of the other performers on the bill came up afterwards and bought me a beer and said, "Isn't that the worst goddam drummer you've ever seen in your life?" So you felt like you were one of them.

MEH: It's interesting that in—

BE: It's a funny thing how I got invited to play—perform in the Music Hall. It was Sunday morning, and I got up and had breakfast at my Bed and Board, walked out on the street and looked up and down the street, and there wasn't a Methodist church in sight. But right across the street was a Congregational church. So I says, "Well, in for a penny, in for a pound," and I went to the Congregational church, which I've always felt was the most boring church in the world. Then that afternoon when I walked into the bar at the Music Hall downtown, you know, in Blackpool. The bartender said, "Oh, won't you sing us a song?" And I said "Well, who told you I sang?" He said "Oh, my mother went to church this morning and heard you sing in the congregation." [LAUGHS] So I did the old dirty World War Two song "I don't want to join the army" and all those things. All those old gray-haired ladies in the audience loved it. I'm not modest about some of my accomplishments.

MEH: It's interesting that in—you were at Black Mountain for only one year, but so many avenues were opened to you, in a way. I mean knowing Chenkin and in a formal university this never would have happened.

BE: No.

MEH: Even of students, Sue Spayth, teaching, and you learned something from her dance. You studied with Trude Straus, and you've studied with Kirill Chenkin, informally. Do you remember studying with anyone else?

BE: No, they—All the rest of the teachers—The English teacher who died of cancer, whose wife wrote potboiler romances—

MEH: The English teacher who died of cancer. At Black Mountain?

BE: Yeah. And his wife wrote these Harlequin romances.

MEH: He died while he was there?

BE: He died a couple years afterwards. Yeah, he had been to Cambridge University on a scholarship.

MEH: It could not have been Mangold, because he didn't—He lived many years.

BE: No, no. Not Mendell [PH—Mangold, I think. MEH]. Mendell didn't like me very much because I rode a bicycle on top of Robert E. Lee Hall, and it scared him to death. As a matter of fact, he wet his pants when he looked up and saw me up there with a bicycle on the rooftop. He wanted me kicked out of school. But I had gone up there, I had wires—the little Dreier boy that got killed later.

MEH: Mark.

BE: Mark. Mark had his bicycle way up by the stairs, and we'd gone up the stairs, and we'd gotten up on the roof. The roof was a real—it was flatter than 45 degrees, and I figured if you just sat there and coasted down you could coast up. It was a dumb thing to do, but it wasn't dangerous. But from the ground it looked paralyzing [LAUGHS], you know. I don't know why I did it. It was one of those dumb things that you do when you're that age. I certainly would have never done it if I had known it would have caused pain to Mendell (?), but it scared him silly. Then when I came down I realized, you know, that poor son of a bitch, if I had killed myself, all the trouble I'd caused him. He'd have to go out and find an undertaker. It ruined his whole day [LAUGHS]. I hadn't thought of that for years.

MEH: I guess it was pretty scary from his point of view. What about John Rice? Was he still there when you were there? [Actually Rice left before he arrived. MEH]

BE: Yes, but I never, don't ever remember saying more than two words with him. He was still in love with that—with this little girl that caused so much controversy. But then Clarence, the cook, was there, and I was one of his great admirers.

MEH: This was Clarence, not Jack?

BE: Jack, was it Jack?

MEH: Jack Lipsey.

BE: Yeah. He taught me how to make—what do you drink at Christmas time?

Toddies. He taught me the exact way to mix the whiskey with the sugar so that it digests itself. He had such beautiful hand technique. Every move he made was just like a dance. That probably had something to do with—since I had such bad eyes, I knew I'd never get in the service, but when I got—and I'd already been on one trip—I already had my seaman's papers when I went to Black Mountain, and so I thought "Well, might as well stay in the stewards' department." I worked the two years they required until I was a baker, and then I was allowed to stay on shore and go to the Marine Academy for six months, and I ended up a steward. And I've cooked all—I've cooked all my life. I don't cook professionally anymore. But it was Lipsey that really got me interested in the art of cooking. You were involved in everything while you were there.

MEH: Did you work on the farm at all?

BE: No, I never did that. That was mostly the kids that stayed there all summer. And then Eva Zhitlowsky taught me that I had a brain, or a mind.

MEH: How was that?

BE: Well, she—I don't know. Just being around her. I had more intellectual courage to begin thinking for myself. I doubt if she was aware that she was doing it. But I was very—I was tremendously impressed with her digital facility, just the way she could sit down and make a dress in an hour and fifteen minutes, you know, when it takes most girls two hours to go downtown and try to find a dress to buy. And, of course, she had all these tales—When she started talking about her father and about Lincoln Steffens, who was a neighbor of theirs, other people whom I'd read about. I had read the complete biography of Lincoln Steffens, I think, when I was thirteen years old, and so here I finally got to Black Mountain and met somebody who actually had known him, knew Pete, and had played nursemaid to Pete. And then later on when I was at Longy School—I stayed at Longy School in Cambridge for two years and a lot of it was a waste of time, maybe. Who knows? But I had a room right next to Pete Steffans, and—These fathers—

MEH: Were you at all involved politically at the time?

BE: No, I've never been involved really politically except down here in Pamlico County.

MEH: I mean Eva was very interested in politics and policy.

BE: [OVERTALK] Well, I was interested in politics, national really, the conflict between socialism, fascism, communism, and democracy. And I was becoming more and more cynical about the slight difference there are between them. Of course, Kirill was the first real communist that I'd known. I mean, there was somebody who was ready to die for it.

MEH: So, he really believed in the Soviet system, in Soviet communism.

BE: He believed that it was a workable system.

MEH: Had he ever lived in Russia for any period of time?

BE: No, he never had. It was just a—

MEH: Ideological, idealistic.

BE: Yeah. But as I said, he had been in the Spanish War for a long time. He had—I think he believed in it because having lived in France and in the United States, he couldn't really take seriously our form of government.

MEH: You said that after he returned to Russia that the rumor was that he was killed at Leningrad?

BE: Yes. And it was his—I've always felt that he was put to work in some sort of special school, where he trained other young—younger men. But that could be just my own self-invented fairy tale. But he certainly was an extremely brilliant person, and to say he was brilliant—he was kind of snobbish with the rest of the faculty. He wasn't—you know, he couldn't take any of them seriously. Of course, God knows I was a little snob, so maybe that was one thing that we got together. I was impressed with his circus and theater background. He had tremendous muscular control. I've seen him drunk—When nobody was around, and he would do *jetées* all the way down the hallway.

MEH: Had he ever performed himself?

BE: Well, he performed—Like any other theatrical family, he was made to go to school, made to go to class every day. I imagine that he had performed.

[OVERTALK] He might have been, it might have been—When he ran away to the army, it might have been, you know, in defiance of his family tradition. Or maybe

he just wanted to do something different. But there's no doubt in my mind that he was not a thoroughly-grounded dancer, because—But he never did anything around—when anybody was watching. But I have seen him go the whole length of Robert E. Lee Hall [BACKGROUND SOUNDS] and not even be breathing hard when he finished.

MEH: What are some of the fiddling—What do you call these, "festivals," "conventions"—festivals? The thing you're going to in—

BE: Oh, the Galax. They're just country fiddler conventions.

MEH: Just country fiddler conventions.

BE: There's people singing, play harp, and this is the fourth year of the Annual Marching Kazoo Band. There's a whole bunch of us that belong to this very exclusive kazoo band. And if you come, we may be able to get you in. [LAUGHS]

MEH: How big is this band?

BE: Oh, as many people as have kazoos and want to march. [LAUGHS] But it's a folk festival that's been going on for—it will be fifty-five years now.

MEH: The Galax Festival.

BE: Yeah. And the Mount Airy has been going on for at least twenty years. They are the only two festivals that I know of where you pay to get in and then you get your money back if you play. Yeah, and the gang I run with—we're not going to go any place to go listen—pay money and listen to somebody else play. To hell with that. But mostly you just hang around and make music, just this ever-changing little groups of five or six or ten people, all sitting around. You take a theme, you take something like [SINGS] "It's a gift to be simple. It's a gift to be

free. It's a gift to come down where you want to be." You can carry on for twenty minutes with that. And with mixed instruments. Lots of times I go—Being sixty-seven, I'm found half the time over with people more of my age. Especially there's a prison warden from the Virginia State Prison System, and his wife has a very pleasant voice, and he's a good guitar player, so we three will start a trio and before you know it there'll be ten people playing. It goes on and on and on. When you get sleepy, you just crawl in your tent and go to sleep, and when you wake up, there's still music going on. [LAUGHS] And some of the younger people go until they drop. You've gotta pace yourself on those [INAUDIBLE]. It makes you feel young, when you're—It's still fun to get out there and fight for the applause. And most of these festivals I go to, the Airy—Mount Airy—and the Galax, they have only acoustical instruments. They don't allow any electronic instruments, which is a blessed relief. Most of my fun in music is just teaching now.

MEH: Teaching individual students around here?

BE: Yeah. Yeah. Right now I have one piano student who's in fourth grade and one clarinet student and piano student who's in eighth grade. I'm very proud of her. I got her to band camp this year, and she did well. I have an ex-student who's a senior in high school, who started out with me on the piano and trombone and is Aa very competent tuba player. And we're lucky. We've got a county high school band that has four tuba players. I hope to live long enough until we have eight tuba players. We haven't got a good instrumental program, which I—when I was bandmaster I helped start it, but I haven't got anything to do with it anymore.

[END OF SIDE 2, TAPE 1.]

[After the interview ended, I drove Brewster around the area. I had been a camp counselor nearby in Pamlico County when I was in college and love the swampy lowlands. Most of the conversation does not pertain to Black Mountain, but I have chosen to include a couple of anecdotes which do. Claude Stoller was also a Black Mountain student. Mary Emma Harris]

BE: Claude Stoller and I, of course, were very good friends, and I was fascinated by all the stories he told about his father who was a friend of Abe Dobensky [PH]. Claude's father came from the same village that Dobensky came from in the Pale in Poland. I remember once when I was in New York, a friend of mine wanted a wedding dress. Obviously, she was getting married. I called up Claude and Claude said, "Well, go on over to my daddy's shop, and he'll get you one." I went to Claude's father's shop down in the garment district. He was glad to see me. Any friend of Claude's was a friend of his. I started looking for a wedding dress. It was a weird size. I think it was for a singer that I played with in Europe. "Oh," he said, "that's no problem at all." He picked up the phone and dialed a number. He said, "Hey, Sol. Sol, how're you doing? Yeah, we got to get together someday. Sol, what you doing this week. Yeah, I heard you were making wedding dresses. How about sending me over three or four? Size 25. Yeah, I appreciate the favor. Thanks a million." About five minutes here comes a messenger boy with some wedding dresses. He says, "Take the one you think is best." He said, "It's alright. The guy owes me a bottle of whiskey anyways." Ever heard of getting a wedding dress like that.

MEH: No, I haven't.

BE: I don't ever recall meeting Claude's mother but she must have been a perfectly charming person. Claude is the only person I've ever known who actually danced with Ruth St. Denis. Of course, Ruth St. Denis must have been as old as the hills, and Claude was just a little seven or eight year old boy. Like all boys in his neighborhood, they all took dancing lessons. Ruth St. Denis—it was one of her last big hoorahs where they did a thing for the summer concerts. Where was the place where they had the outdoor concerts? [Jacob's Pillow].... Anyways, he was one of the satyrs—little satyr's in this big Ruth St. Denis production. He spoke about how old she was. And she was still beautiful.... Ted Shawn was still giving lectures at the Hebrew YMCA [YMHA]. I can vividly remember the lectures I went to. I can recall almost word for word some parts of it. He was a fine speaker.... Of course, I would never have gone to those Ted Shawn lectures were it not for my Black Mountain background.

I've spent most of my life going back to school, trying to learn new things, and I have actually.

When I came down here to teach twenty-four years ago as a bandmaster, teaching in five schools, I was paid the sum total of \$2,700 a year. Can you believe that?

He's a good friend of mine. Judge Bailey. Everybody's a friend of mine. Well, if you're a garbageman here for three years,

[END OF INTERVIEW. END OF TRANSCRIPT.]