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Oral history interview with Virgil Ellsworth Poling, 1980 February 8

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Virgil Ellsworth Poling on February 8, 1980. The interview took place in Little Deer Isle, Maine, and was conducted by Robert Brown for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The Archives of American Art has reviewed the transcript and has made corrections and emendations. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

ROBERT BROWN: So, this is an interview with Virgil Poling in Little Deer Isle, right? Maine. It's February 8, 1980. That's correct?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: That's correct, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Perhaps we could begin by your talking about your childhood in general terms, and also think about something—anything that led you toward your eventual career. How far back can you see glimmerings of what you eventually did? What did your family do? What was it like?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Well, I was born in rural area of southern Ohio, and my grandfathers were both farmers, of a different sort, one liked to farm the soil, and one liked to have animals. Neither were very prosperous. My father was into a lot of things. It would be difficult to pin down exactly what he had done. Anyway, I remember my childhood very vividly, and it was very happy. We were—we'd be now considered extremely poor people, but I don't have that impression. We were very rich, because we lived in the country. And I enjoyed many acres to play on and roam. I was not born in this log cabin. I was born across the road, my grandfather's, grandmother's, house. But we moved into the log cabin, so I spent—until I was about 11 or 12 years old, we lived there. [00:02:06] And then we moved to a small town in Ohio.

ROBERT BROWN: Where was that?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: In a town called Tarlton, Ohio.

ROBERT BROWN: Tarlton?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Yes, near Circleville, where I went to school, and then on to high school there.

ROBERT BROWN: Were you—did you like school?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Oh, I loved school. Yes, I could hardly wait to go to school all the time. And then I went on to college.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you think why you wanted to go to college, or did your parents just think you might go?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: No. It was just something that sort of happened. I had the desire to know more about things, to learn. And actually, my life at that time was on a completely intellectual level, trying to learn more, instead of getting into doing things. But all the time, I had been doing things. My father always did things for himself. And I had—during this time, because of my interest, I had the good fortune of knowing a family that—three sons and a father, who were builders and cabinetmakers. They were all specialized, so that one would build stairs, and one would do the framing, and so forth. Highly-skilled people. It reached a point where I was big enough, they let me hand them things, like a tool, or carry some lumber. Then it got to the point that they would let me do a little of the work, and then a little more of the work, and so forth. [00:04:00] So I learned a lot. And this might have been the beginning.

ROBERT BROWN: But this was something you'd do after school?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Yes, and summers. Largely summers.

ROBERT BROWN: But it was very enjoyable?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Oh, very enjoyable. And then, on the other side, was, near there, a blacksmith, who had been a carriage-maker, and was still repairing carriages. This was still in the days when they had carriages.

ROBERT BROWN: Was this the 1920s or so?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: The 1920s, yeah. I remember that he was getting pretty old, so he would let me help him bend the rims and so forth. I admired him more for his independence and his workmanship than anything else. Mainly his independence, because this was at a time when one person didn't do everything. They started factories, and he'd gone to Columbus because he heard they were paying big money to people to make carriages. They put him on a lathe, making a hub, and he made a hub, three or four hubs, and then he went to the foreman and asked him when he could make the rest of the buggy. The foreman said, "But you don't. You're just going to make hubs." He said, "Oh, no, I'm not." [Laughs.] "I'm going home to make the whole buggy." And he did. He never worked any longer. There wasn't a lot for him to do, but he was busy and happy. So that gave me a little respect for craftsmanship, I guess. Anyway, I—

ROBERT BROWN: You also had intellectual interests in coming out of your school?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: A desire to learn, I guess.

ROBERT BROWN: What do you think you wanted to learn?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: It was a broad range, and I wasn't quite sure. Actually, when I went to college, I majored in English, because I read so much that I couldn't—I was so interested in books that I just kept reading them. [00:06:12] I had no training whatever, formal training, in industrial arts or anything—never had. In fact, I couldn't have gone out to teach at a public school in the field, because I didn't have the formal courses.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you enjoy Ohio State? Was it a very big place when you were there?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: It was 13,000 then. I guess it's 35[,000] or 40[,000] or 50,000 now. But it was big then, yes. It was too big.

ROBERT BROWN: What do you mean too big?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: I think any college that's more than 1,000 or 2,000 is too big. You miss the intimacy of knowing your classmates and your professors, having small classes, and all this. I still think that. Though I had some very fine professors, and I learned a lot at Ohio State. I think, perhaps, this was fortunate that I went there, because of that, even though I was majoring in English.

ROBERT BROWN: What was your—did you develop any particular interest in writing or in literature, history?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: I did—yes. Yes, I was interested in writing. In fact, had took some courses in journalism, thinking I might work on a newspaper. Did some freelance writing. Never made much money at it, but did sell some. This continued for a while. But then I had—the opportunity came along to do some teaching, and this was in New Haven, Connecticut. [00:08:01] So I did that for a year.

ROBERT BROWN: How did that happen, that you—through a teacher?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: No, I had a professor who had an inquiry for someone to teach, so he suggested I go out there, and I did. It was a great opportunity. I went from there to—

ROBERT BROWN: Was that a public school, the one in New Haven?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: No, a private school. Hamden Hall Country Day School.

ROBERT BROWN: Huh. Did you enjoy that at all?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Yes, it was very nice. Particularly the opportunity to live in the East and be near Yale, where I could do some studying and work with people.

ROBERT BROWN: What did you want to study at Yale?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: I studied fine art.

ROBERT BROWN: Uh-huh [affirmative]. This was when, about 1930 or so?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: 1930 and '31. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT BROWN: Who did you study with there, do you remember, in fine arts?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Well, took some general courses. I had to do these after my hours. They were lecture courses, and so one was Mr. Thompson. There were others, whom I forget.

ROBERT BROWN: Those were courses in the history of art?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Mainly the history of art, yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Mr. Thompson did a lot of work in the technology, or the way art was made. Did you get into that at all with him?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Yes. Some—one of his lectures was largely on this, one class. One whole series of lectures was largely on it. This got me interested in that, and then, soon after that, I went to the Harley Country Day School in Rochester, New York, where I taught art. [00:10:00] You see, I, again, was unqualified. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: How did you go about it? How did you go about teaching?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Well—oh, I used an entirely creative approach, taking the students and getting everything out of them I could. And I worked with them. I didn't just ask them to do it; I worked with them, and did the work with them. And there, they wanted me—they probably hired me because they wanted me to teach courses in art history, at the high school level, and I insisted upon having some courses where students could work.

ROBERT BROWN: You mean studio work?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Yes, that's right, at the high school level. Finally, they gave in and said, well, there was one period in the morning, and one period in the afternoon, an hour and a half each, when I could have those students who wanted to come to work, and work with me. I would have been free those periods otherwise, but I wanted very much to have them. So I took—set up these periods, and I started with a few students. It reached the point that, in the afternoon, I had so many of the big boys out doing watercolors that they couldn't have a football team. [Laughs.] It really worked that way. We enjoyed what we were doing.

ROBERT BROWN: Why do you suppose they enjoyed it so much? As you think back, what did you do, do you think, as a teacher?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: I was doing it with them. I didn't—and I asked them to sit down and paint something, giving them an outline of how to go about it, and then not holding them up to too high standards, but amazingly good work came out of it.

ROBERT BROWN: You mean you'd simply tell them how the certain paint behaves, and how to use a brush? [00:12:04]

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Set them to painting something they were looking at?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Yes, how to start, and then how to go ahead and do it. Most people, I discovered, are down to—they feel they have to do an exact photographic copy of what they're seeing, which isn't necessary at all. I remember one day, one girl said, "Oh, I wish that cow over there would move into the picture so I could paint her." [Laughs] "Move her in, and put her in." Well that was—I was trying to loosen them up and so forth. At the same time, I started getting tools and making things, furniture and so forth.

ROBERT BROWN: You began making things yourself?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you exhibit while you were there? Because they had regular shows in that area, for various crafts, I believe.

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Not at that time, not in crafts. I had lots of exhibits with my students in art, or a few, the time I was there. As you know, Rochester had a very active art club, which we all worked on. Exchanged ideas and had exhibits.

ROBERT BROWN: Who are some of the artists you remember being out there then? Did you know the people at the Memorial Art Gallery?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Oh, yes, yes, yes. I lived a couple of blocks—let's see, who was head of it then? Two girls. Uh, sisters.

ROBERT BROWN: Yes, Isabel Herdle and—

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: That's right, the Herdles—Isabel and Gertrude Herdle. That's right.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you get to know them pretty well?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Yes, very, very well.

ROBERT BROWN: What were they like?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: I think they were enthusiastic, and very, I think, competent administrators for an art gallery. They emphasized a lot of the work for the community, classes and this sort of thing. [00:14:08] And they personally gave lectures, and had interesting people in to give lectures, so it was a pretty broad coverage they had. I was quite impressed with their program. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT BROWN: So you were there several years?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Yeah. I forget how many. It was 1941 that I went from there to Dartmouth.

ROBERT BROWN: You were through—you were tired of being there, or you were offered an opportunity at Dartmouth, or both?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Well, you reach a place like that, you sort of reach the limit of what you think you can do. There, I also did the scenery for the theater.

ROBERT BROWN: In Rochester?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: In Rochester, for this school, and helped with the Community Players. Do scenery there, because I liked to build things and paint. Well, anyway, the way I went to Dartmouth is rather an unusual way. The dean of the faculty at Dartmouth had started a program, encouraged a program, where they would have visiting, or in-residence, artists. They had built the Carpenter Art Gallery, the top of which was a studio, and no one to work in it, so they—a liberal arts college does not try to give technical training, but the dean rightfully said, "Here we give all these classes, teaching people to appreciate art, but we do not offer an opportunity for them to create." [00:16:01]

ROBERT BROWN: Hmm. What was the dean's name?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Dean Bill. Dean E. Gordon Bill. He said, "We should provide an opportunity. We don't have to give credit. Let's just give them an attractive place to work, with some competent person to work." So they appointed Paul Sample as artist-in-residence.

ROBERT BROWN: He was one of the first in the country. This is one of the earliest programs in the country, wasn't it?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: I think one of the very first ones, yeah. And this was very successful. Paul painted for himself, at certain times. Afternoon—two afternoons a week, and two nights a week, he would have students come in and paint, often from a model. Occasionally, he would take people out to do landscape. And he was available for criticism, which is a very important part of the program. Well, this was very successful, so soon afterwards, they had Robert Frost come as a poet-in-residence, who worked very much the same way. He would meet with—he was available for criticism on certain afternoons. Usually about two nights a week, he would meet with students, where they would read poems and exchange. He was there for criticism, inspiration, hopefully, and then this was something the dean could go out and talk to alumni groups about. And he came to Rochester to talk to Rochester alumni group, and he ended his speech by saying, "And now what we need is a good workshop man." And I, having a good friend who thought I might do it, went up and said, "I have just the man." [Laughs.] So a few days later, I had a letter from the dean. [00:18:01] Two days later, I was asked out, and a few hours later, I was hired as what we finally call—it was an artist-in-residence program, but I was called the director of the student workshops.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And what was your mandate from the dean?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: When I first went, he said, "I don't know a thing about this, and I don't expect you to be very successful right off, but why don't you just do what you think should be done? We think you're on the right track. We'll see how it works out." Of course, it started out—it was very successful. I had so many students, I didn't know [laughs] what to do with them. It was very successful from the very beginning.

ROBERT BROWN: What sort of things did you set them to doing?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Well again, it was very much what they wanted to do, but the point is, I was there working. We were all supposed to be working artists or craftsmen, or poet, and we were there for an example,

and to assist. And finally, we boiled it down where we could say we were offering attractive opportunity to create, and hopefully inspiration. That's about what we did.

ROBERT BROWN: Were they making woodworking, mainly, this was, or?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: It started off largely woodworking, because that's about the equipment we had. Of course, as you know now, it's developed into ceramics and jewelry, silversmithing, lapidary, almost anything you can name, because it's grown that way. First, we had to take what little equipment we had and make the most of it. Then, of course, it was very—it was not just for people to come in and make something they wanted to make always. [00:20:02] It was usually something closely associated with classwork, and it developed more and more into this, where a student in a science class could make some equipment, an engineering class could make some equipment. They might make some new ideas. For instance, we made perhaps one of the first hover car—craft—made on the campus, that went around the engineering school grounds [laughs] hovering over the ground. One student made some equipment for physics, various types of equipment for experimental work in the physics department. He was a physics major. It grew to the point that he made this his life work. He was selling to MIT, Caltech, and wherever.

ROBERT BROWN: Making equipment?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Yes. Now that's what he does, with a brother. After he graduated from there, he decided he needed a little more business background, so he went to Harvard and got a business degree, while his brother was running the business. Then he decided he needed some more legal background, so the last I heard, he was getting a legal degree [they laugh]. They're running a fabulously successful business, making various types of equipment for testing.

ROBERT BROWN: You had a family by then? Had you married in Rochester?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: I was married in Rochester, and had one daughter.

ROBERT BROWN: Was your wife—does she have an art background, too?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: She was a musician. Eastman School of Music. And then, another daughter was born, in Hanover, and that's my family.

ROBERT BROWN: What was your—were you recognized as—you and Frost and Sample—were you recognized as full faculty members? [00:22:04]

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: I think all of us started as just an appointment, and then they decided we should have—we would be recognized as full faculty members. I was made a member of the department of fine arts. Went through the steps of instructor, or assistant professor, full professor with full tenure, and this happened in a—I think it was six or seven years, in my case. Rapidly rose to a full professor. So we held this. We did not teach formal classes. We did not give credit for anything. We did not have a schedule that students had to follow. But we were there to help them as they needed help. Now, during the war, I did teach classes in—well, engineering drawing, a few classes like that, and I did have, on, I think, two cases, some honors students who worked on a project which I supervised. That's the nearest I came to any formal type of classes. It's an ideal teaching situation.

ROBERT BROWN: Oh sure. What was your relation with the regular faculty? Did they think you all were just a luxury there, or was it by and large—how did it go?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: No, no. I think at first it seemed that way. In fact, there was a certain amount of criticism, but this didn't last long, because they could—in fact, they were calling on us to help very often in their classwork, and they saw the value of it. No, we had a lot of support, and we avoided all of the, well, inter-department squabbles, as you—they might have. So we were independent. [00:24:00] A great opportunity.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you have exhibitions of your work in the '40s and '50s?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Yes, only I exhibited largely with the students. We had an exhibit each year in the gallery, each spring, when we would show pieces, largely furniture, that the students had made, and that I had made. This was held along with art exhibits, paintings the students had done during the year. Sculpture.

ROBERT BROWN: Was Dartmouth pretty up-to-date in those days, did you feel? Was it in touch with, say, New York or Boston as a cosmopolitan place?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Oh, yes. I think in this respect, they were more up-to-date than most colleges, because they were spreading out a little broader. And certainly, we were near enough Boston and New York that—available for shows there and so forth, and we had lots of people visiting from New York and Boston. They had

not yet started the visiting professor idea, or visiting artist, as they have now with the sculptors and painters, which are constantly changing.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you get fairly close to your colleagues, to Sample or Frost?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Oh, yes. Oh, yes, yes. Very. All the time walking with Frost, and fishing with Paul Sample, and things like that.

ROBERT BROWN: What was Frost like, as you remember? Or as you knew him.

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Well, I was very fond of Frost. He was—first of all, he was a great ham, a wonderful one. He had a great sense of humor, which, in his dry manner, wouldn't come out unless you understood it. [00:26:00] But a lot of people were sort of afraid to approach him for a lot of things. I remember once, a friend in a publishing house in Boston—I forget which one—wanted to make—they were starting to make records of readings of poetry and this sort of thing, and he phoned me to ask me if I knew anyone who could read Robert Frost poems. And I said, "Of course. Robert Frost." He said, "Do you think he'd do it?" [Laughs.] I said, "He'd love it," and he did. [Laughs.] He loved it. I remember once, in his 80s, Frost was to give a reading of his poems, which he did every year, to community, the college and community. He got up after a proper introduction, and he had his—lay his book out in front of him, and he got these glasses out, and made a great show of it. He said, "You know, I've never used these things before. I've come to the point I have to." And then he read about two or three lines. He said, "Oh, they're no good." He took them off and read the rest of the whole evening without. Of course, he knew the poems. He didn't have to have the glasses. [They laugh.] It was just a show. It was one of the nice things about him.

ROBERT BROWN: Was he a fellow you got fairly close to?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Oh, yes. Yes. Well we naturally worked pretty close, all of us, since we were working in, more or less, the same field. We're comparing notes all the time and working together.

ROBERT BROWN: What about Sample? What was he like?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Paul was a wonderful—not only a wonderful artist, but a wonderful person. [00:28:00] Very kind, and interested in a lot of things. Very talented. He was also a fine musician. Played the flute, and was a great outdoorsman. He had horses, and rode a lot. He was a great fisherman, and spent a great deal of his time in out-of-door life. You know, he had been ill, and was supposed to spend a lot of time outdoors.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Did you get fairly close to him?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Oh, yes, very. To the point where I designed and built a barn for him, for his horses. And then they had a place up on Lake Willoughby, where they had five or six houses, and I think I did over all those houses for him, and for the whole studio—his summer studio was there. I did over at least three of the houses, where the family—a lot of the family lived in them. So I worked very closely with him. And I used to make all these frames, and it was a lot of frames.

ROBERT BROWN: But you did this sort of thing willingly?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Oh, yes. Yes. It was something that was interesting, and with interesting people.

ROBERT BROWN: Now you've said your teaching method was to work alongside the students.

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Uh, did you then bring them into more and more difficult things throughout the year?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: They naturally got into more and more difficult things. They would follow their own interests, and a lot of the time, way ahead of me. For instance, when I first went, I had a boy come in and say, "I'd like to build an organ." [00:30:01] He was fascinated by organs. I said, "The only thing I know about organs is that my wife's great-grandfather was an organ-builder down in Connecticut, but if you're willing to start with that, we'll learn together." He built an organ. He built two. It ended up he was getting every book out of the library and reading them. And he cared to the point he knew a lot about them. In fact, we had one professor who was a scholar, and he gave a lecture one night on organ construction, in which my student friend went, of course. I went. During the lecture, the Leonard Professor said that, at one period, the organ types were made from 60 percent zinc, and 40 percent tin. And on the way, walking home, after the lecture, my student friend said, "I wouldn't say anything to the professor, but he had it reversed." [They laugh.] It was 40 percent tin and 60 percent zinc. It showed how deeply he had dug into—not insignificant, but how deeply he had gotten into this to know what was happening.

ROBERT BROWN: Did a number of your students go on, in some way or another, affected by their time with you?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Well, this one, for instance, is now a heart specialist and a surgeon at Mary Hitchcock in Hanover. Some went on. Like, the physics major went on, equipment. Usually not. Usually it was something that they carried on as a hobby, but mainly they carried on an understanding and appreciation of this sort of thing. After all, most of them were preparing to do something else. [00:32:03] We weren't trying to teach a trade. We were trying to teach them to—help them to understand and appreciate. Which, I guess, after all, is the—in a broad manner—is the aim of a liberal arts education.

ROBERT BROWN: At this time, also, you became involved in the planning for the American Craftsmen's Council. Could you discuss that for a bit? When you came in '41, I guess, it was already actually set up.

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: I guess it was. I'm not quite—

ROBERT BROWN: How did that come—how did you become involved with it? You became an advisor to it fairly soon.

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: How did that happen?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: I'm not quite sure how it happened, but I was in New York. I guess I must have gone for that purpose, and had an appointment with Mrs. Webb, and we seemed to speak the same language. So from there on, we had a very close association, with the result—at that time, she had organized the American Craftsmen's Educational Council, and the result of our talks, many trips to New York, and her many trips to Hanover, we decided we should start a school. From then on, we spent endless days, weeks, planning, and writing a program, and trying to develop the type of school, the level that we would have, and so forth. And that was the beginning of the School for American Craftsmen.

ROBERT BROWN: What was she like? What was her outlook, as you remember it?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: She was devoted, certainly in the last part of her life, and after I knew her a great many years, as you know, to crafts. [00:34:11] I think it started trying to do something in her community to help craftspeople, and she got more and more interested. But mainly, she had a higher level of expectation than most people, and had always worked along this line. And—

ROBERT BROWN: What did most people expect at that time, as opposed to her?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Well, if any, it was just the handy, crafty thing. Anything that was made was fine, because it was made by hand. Neither of us felt that way. We felt that it was fine that it was made by hand, but you should have greater expectations than the average thing that was made that way. That there were skills which had been demonstrated in the past that should be revived, and maybe renewed, and that you could still make beautiful things by hand, and that there was a market that would pay you for it. And so we started off with this, more or less, in mind. As the project developed, we made this a very strong point in the program, that we would have rigid requirements, and teach—have highly skilled teachers, and expect students to major up and turn out beautiful things.

ROBERT BROWN: So you were a consultant to her. And you talked about what kind of teacher she should have? [00:36:02] Did you have yourself in mind as being a teacher, or did she?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Of course, you always have in mind—I don't know what she had in mind, but I didn't really—I wanted to stay at Dartmouth, but I wanted to see this thing established. At first, we just had an informal relationship, where we were both interested in something, and we were working on it, trying to develop a training program. This got other people involved, a great many, and after consulting with them, it got a name of the School for American Craftsmen. We started to get a few students and a few teachers, and to me it was obvious that we were not getting the quality that we should be. So after it was going a short time, I told her very firmly that there's no point in starting a craft program like a lot of others. We had to set high standards and maintain them. We might have to go abroad to get teachers. It didn't matter where, we had to get—set these standards, and maintain them. Of course, she bought it.

ROBERT BROWN: This was during the Second World War?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: This was right—well, right after the Second—

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, right after? Did you think it should stay at Dartmouth?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Well, I didn't. It didn't quite fit in at Dartmouth. Something very close to it does fit in, and something very close to it is there now. But it was—it had too much emphasis on the training of people to become skilled craftsmen, which is not the aim of a liberal arts college. So we agreed that it would stay there for a while, and then we'd decide what to do with it. And at one time, it was almost established there on a whole new school, but it moved from there to Alfred, and onto Rochester. [00:38:09] I could have gone with it, but I chose to stay at Dartmouth.

ROBERT BROWN: You chose to stay with your program?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: What relation did these plans have with the already-established League of New Hampshire Craftsmen, which is well-known?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Yeah. No real relationship at all, except we were very cooperative. We had no direct connection whatever. We didn't do any training for them. We didn't use, as far as I know, any of their instructors. No, this was a—if you sign up for this, you had to sign up for a fairly long period of concentrated study. The League of New Hampshire Arts and Crafts had people who worked on a—they took a class once a week, or twice a week, and they worked when they wanted to. The School for American Craftsmen was a school where they would come and work eight hours a day, and seriously try to become craftsmen.

ROBERT BROWN: Were you able to get some of those European craftsmen before the school left Hanover? Were you instrumental in some of that?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: No. Most of them came along after that, because the school was still being funded, but at least we set the standards and the levels we wanted to accomplish. And since then, of course, it has done that admirably, with very high levels, and very fine instruction, and a very great reputation.

ROBERT BROWN: Who were some of the other people that were involved with you and Mrs. Webb in the planning for the School for American Craftsmen? Were there any others that were quite notable that you could mention?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Yeah. Mrs. Webb had set up a committee of people who would work together, and there were some pretty well-known names. [00:40:09] People were extremely helpful to me. Let's see. Horace Jayne of the Metropolitan Museum. Rene d'Harnoncourt, Museum of Modern Art. Arthur Ruggles, who was head of a hospital, a mental hospital, in Providence, Rhode Island, was extremely helpful.

ROBERT BROWN: In what way was he?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Because he had believed in it, and he had started perhaps the most elaborate shops anyone had had in a mental institution until that time, probably even since then. And he and I both believed that there was a very close association between your mind and what you do, that a coordination of mental and physical action was very stabilizing. And he had found it extremely successful there, in his hospital. So he was a very helpful person, and of course a great supporter of it. In fact, it was he who gave the school its name, at his suggestion. Well, there were many others. Kenneth Charlie [ph], who had done Williamsburg.

ROBERT BROWN: What role did he play?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Well, advisor. He was not as active as some of the others. For instance, d'Harnoncourt and Horace Jayne were very active in giving advice, and—

ROBERT BROWN: Do you recall what kind of advice they gave?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Well again, a great deal of it was on the standards that you would set, and the quality that you would maintain. I think largely that. [00:42:00] And this sort of thing is very useful when you're starting off an operation.

ROBERT BROWN: Were both of those men quite acquainted with contemporary crafts and design in Europe?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Oh, yes, of course.

ROBERT BROWN: Is that more or less the standard you had in mind? Something on that level?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: That certainly was a guide that we were thinking of, because at that time, we were beginning to get a lot of beautiful craftwork, Georg Jensen and so forth, from Europe. It was something to aim for. Of course, you're familiar with the reputation of European craftsmen, the tradition that carried down which we had in certain fields, such as furniture, but sometimes in other crafts we were losing. The object was to bring

those up-to-date in a contemporary manner.

ROBERT BROWN: But you stayed on at Dartmouth? You stayed on there into the early '60s, really, didn't you?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: You got quite familiar with the New Hampshire craft scene. Do you have recollections of aspects of the crafts in New Hampshire?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Yes. I worked closely with the League of New Hampshire Arts and Crafts, of course, all the time I was there, from the very beginning. They're doing a—have always done a great job. Again—

ROBERT BROWN: It was under David Campbell much of the time you were there, wasn't it?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Yes. In fact, David Campbell came just about the same time. And Bob Strong, who was a dean of students at Dartmouth, was head of the craft organization for the state, so I of course worked closely with him. They were doing, then, a great deal—are still doing a great deal—in providing good instruction, through again, getting good people in from outside, very competent people, to raise the standards of design and instruction. [00:44:23] And they raised the quality of what they had to sell. And providing a good market. Their shops provide the best market of any organization I know to sell the objects.

ROBERT BROWN: What was David Campbell's role, as you see—see it?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Well Dave was the director of the league who was running the whole thing, everything about it, but his greatest achievement was in going out and getting really good teachers, like the Shires [ph] and the Karl Drerups, and the so forth, to come in from outside and work—set up a shop where they would work, but provide enough teaching opportunity that they could make a living, so that they could afford to go on and do their own work, which was beautiful, and set these standards and teach, and in this way, influence everyone in the state, really.

ROBERT BROWN: Well now, Drerup, for example, started teaching at the college in Plymouth?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Through his students—

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: The Shires started teaching at University of New Hampshire, but they were still teaching outside. They were still teaching League of New Hampshire Arts and Crafts classes, and the people they were teaching were going out and teaching more classes, so it spread like that.

ROBERT BROWN: And Campbell felt that was a major way of upgrading the quality? [00:46:04]

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: He felt it was the only way, and perhaps it was, because you were getting very competent people in, who just naturally have a lot of influence on the others. And you can see what has happened. The entire output has been upgraded a great deal, until now. It's very respected everywhere.

ROBERT BROWN: This is comparable to the advice you gave to Mrs. Webb with the school, then?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Yes. Of course—

ROBERT BROWN: Get outside people to come in.

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: —yes. Of course, this was carried even further with the School for American Craftsmen, where they have established and maintained such high levels that you have to be pretty competent to get into the school now to study [laughs], which is great. There are an endless number of schools you can get into if you're mediocre, but there are only a few that require you to be excellent to get in.

ROBERT BROWN: In the '40s, there weren't that many schools were there, even? Were there, weren't there?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: There were quite a few. There were—

ROBERT BROWN: Cranbrook. How was that—

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Cranbrook was good. The Rhode Island School of Design. Some of them down South. They were good also. But we were aiming at something just a little more—I think a little higher, in the sense that we were wanting to go out and get—not just maintaining traditions, but something—the next step, in

design, particularly, using the same skills.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. You continued, into the '50s, more or less without a break at Dartmouth, you—

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Yes, I was there—let's see—20 years without a break. [00:48:00]

ROBERT BROWN: Hmm. Did that bother you, or were you just—

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: No, no.

ROBERT BROWN: —absorbed in your work?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: I loved every minute of it, and had many opportunities to go elsewhere, but I liked that and stayed with it. In fact, I stayed with it until the headquarters, the building I was in, was to be torn down, which put me out of a place to work. Since I had not had a sabbatical in 20 years, they decided I could have a long one. In fact, I could have a year or two, since the building would be—building Hopkins Center. Since this would take two years, I could have a year or two. And I had just about decided to go to Santa Barbara as a visiting professor, when the telephone rang one day and someone in Washington said, "Say, would you consider going to Morocco for a year?" [Laughs.] I said, "Sure, but I need to know more about it." So he said, "Oh, sure." The end result of that was that I did decide to go to Morocco, what then—let's see, it was called I—International Development—

ROBERT BROWN: —Agency?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: —Agency, or something. It's United States Agency for International Development [AID] now. But anyway, it was just before that. And so I did go to Morocco, as a small industry advisor.

ROBERT BROWN: Small industry? How would that—

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Well then, in Morocco the small industry was just crafts, really.

ROBERT BROWN: And that's why you were—

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Yes. It was fascinating. [00:50:00]

ROBERT BROWN: Had you always had some interest in foreign work? I mean, is this—

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: I had always wanted to travel and was never able to. This gave me that opportunity. And of course, I was interested in the work. So it fitted together very nicely. Anyway, I went there and stayed about two and a half years, and then resigned and went back to Dartmouth to set up my shops in the Hopkins Center. Now this was in 1961. And I stayed there and set up these beautiful shops and equipped them, and had everything going. And then, in June 1963, Washington called again and said, "We need you desperately in Nigeria. Would you go just for the summer?" I said, "Sure." Once you've been overseas, you want to go overseas—you want to go again.

ROBERT BROWN: They must have felt you'd accomplished something in Morocco

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Well, I hope so. Anyway, I went. It ended up that I stayed on, extended a little and then I stayed on until I had to make my decision, so I decided to continue with overseas work, and I spent the rest of my life, a total of almost 15 years, with the Department of State—Agency for International Development, doing work, small and medium industry, crafts development, in countries all over the world.

ROBERT BROWN: Well now, how did you get this industrial expertise? What does that mean, planning? Like, when you went to Morocco, that was an ancient crafts system there, wasn't it? What role did the agency think it could play in Morocco, for example?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Well again, it was updating methods, more than anything else, there. [00:52:05] For instance, we did a great deal of work in tanning. Morocco was famous for leather, as you know, for centuries. But yet, the leather was deteriorating, to the point that it was very bad. It was smelly and it didn't last, and a lot of things wrong with it. They were going to lose their market. So we had to go in, provide some new chemicals and some new methods for tanning. And we updated this to the point where they're again making among the best leather in the world. Again, you can't go in and just change everything. They won't accept it. For instance, they were still tramping [ph] the hides in pits. They didn't know anything about tumblers and paddle wheels, and we had to make these. They had to be turned by hand. The smell was largely because they didn't have enough water to wash it and clean it, and some of their tanning materials were wonderful, but by putting a little detergent with the water, you could get rid of the smell, and by adding a few chemicals to their native materials,

such as takahoot [ph]—

ROBERT BROWN: What was that?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Takahoot is—grows on a tree down in the desert. It's like a little pea. A bee comes along and stings the tree, and a little blister about the size of a pea forms, and this has more tannic acid than anything known. It does a beautiful job. Well, you don't need to change that. You just use this and add a little to it, and you change the methods. [00:54:02]

ROBERT BROWN: Were you working with natives, or with French colonial—

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Oh, no, no.

ROBERT BROWN: —administrators?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: All native people. I didn't know this much about tanning. Don't get that idea. I had —

ROBERT BROWN: Yes, let me ask, how did you get to learn these things? Part of your job was to find the right people with the answers?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: I had a Belgian assistant who was a tanner, and he knew about the tanning. I knew how to go about putting it together, but he was the one who knew the tanning. And we took people in the desert. They usually worked in groups, maybe 50 people. We had one group where we had raised from the point where they're barely making an existence to the point where they were quite prosperous, increasing their income more than 12 times, with a market for everything. And it's very rewarding to see a whole village upgraded to the point where they're clean, they have plenty to eat, and they have clothes. And it gives them a different outlook on life entirely. So these were rewarding parts of it.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you find that these people took greater pride in their work as another result?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Yes. Yes, yes. They were turning out good materials. For instance, in one village—they couldn't sell it in Morocco. They had to take it by bus to someplace way out to sell their leather. After we had spent a few months with them, they could sell it anywhere. It was beautiful. And they were proud of their equipment. They were setting up new equipment. They were still turning it by hand. And I visited there sometime later, and they had bought some gasoline engines to turn them. And they said, "You know, that turning by hand is hard work." [00:56:03] Well, the point is [they laugh] they had reached the point they could afford to buy a little Briggs & Stratton engine and put on it, and they kept everything in immaculate condition. It was cleaner—they were always dirty before, because they were tramping them in pits. Now they had water and they had an organized system. They kept everything immaculately clean. They were cleaner themselves. Uh, flies weren't sticking all over the children's faces. They were clean. And it looked like they had enough to eat. So it upgraded everything.

ROBERT BROWN: How did you find the markets for these things? Was that your job, too?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Well fortunately, we didn't have to worry, if they make good product, there's plenty of market for good leather, and that wasn't the problem there. Most of them were sold in the souks, the markets. It just takes care of itself. There was a certain amount of export, but it was difficult to get enough leather. You could export all you wanted, all you could make, but it was difficult to get enough together to export. So that if they could do more—which they won't, because there aren't that many animals—but if they could, they could still sell it.

ROBERT BROWN: Hmm. Well what was the United States' aim in all this? Humanitarian?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Partly that, partly political, of course. But as we went into Europe after the war and gave them—we didn't need to give them a great deal of advice. We gave them money and encouragement, and look what it has done for Europe. Well, the idea was to do more or less the same thing for underdeveloped countries, so you could raise their standard of living and their economy to where they would be more able to exist in a dignified manner. [00:58:09] It—we still haven't caught up. We probably never will. But it's something worth trying for.

ROBERT BROWN: But you told—that's one of the things that kept you interested in these programs?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Yes. Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Well when you came back to Dartmouth and saw this new art center and all, that must have looked fairly soft and posh, didn't it? The prospects there?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Yes. It's something I had spent all of my life working for and hoping for. It was very difficult to change my mind and go into overseas work. It was a great decision [laughs], I'll tell you.

ROBERT BROWN: What do you think tipped the scales toward going back to the AID work?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Well, some of the success I had had in Morocco and the desire to travel, and see more parts of the world. I'm afraid that had a lot to do with it.

ROBERT BROWN: Really? What is it about travel that attracted you?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Well, what attracts you. [Laughs.] It's there, and I'd like to know more about people and how they live, and what they do, and this was a tremendous opportunity to live with them, and work with them, and learn a great deal about them.

ROBERT BROWN: In these programs, you lived very close, very intimately, with the local people, didn't you?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Oh, yes. That was part of it, always.

ROBERT BROWN: In Nigeria, you were there, when, in '63?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Sixty-three to the end of '67.

ROBERT BROWN: And how was that set up, and what did you do there?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Well there, we lived on a compound with largely Nigerian people. This was a rather large operation, where we were running an industrial development center, where, instead of going out and working with people only, we had them come in for training sessions and technical training sessions, and marketing, all phases of industrial development. [01:00:17] And then we also went out and advised them in their own operations. This was a little different. But this was highly successful, and we were able to help people there to—a great many of them—to improve their operations and turn out some very good product. Of course, they're very ambitious people. First of all, you're over that hurdle. You have ambitious people. All of them were educated to at least, about the eighth grade. That's something, too. I mean, you can't teach people to do bookkeeping unless they have a little education.

ROBERT BROWN: So these weren't tribesmen out in the bush? These were people that had some schooling?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Under the British or—

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: All of the managers—or the missionary schools. All the managers with whom we worked, the head people who owned the operations, were fairly well-educated, if eighth grade is a fair education, and there it was. For instance, we took one man, who was a shoemaker, and again, I had a shoemaking expert on my staff, a Norwegian, who was with ILO [International Labour Organization], actually, but he was on my staff. We took one man, who had 25 apprentices. Well they were the tribesmen, he was the manager. When we started with him, he was making 25 pairs of shoes a week. When we—a year and a half, two years later, he was making 360,000 pairs a year, and was headed to double that, and was selling them the usual way. [01:02:14] There, he had buyers coming in and buying them—peddlers, maybe, who carried them on their backs somewhere, because they were sold in markets, too. But they were sold in the northern region, and the west, and all over. Again, it was a good product and the marketing was not a problem. So, we were working with the people who were capable of managing.

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ROBERT BROWN: Side two.

[Audio Break.]

ROBERT BROWN: In Nigeria, and also perhaps Morocco, was there resentment of Europeans or Americans coming in and showing them what to do?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: No, no.

ROBERT BROWN: You just mentioned these were ambitious Nigerians, so perhaps they were eager to learn what they could learn.

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Yes, they absolutely—they were very eager to learn, and very eager to do

anything, perhaps on a bigger scale than they were ready to do. That was one of the difficulties. We had one group of about five men come in one day and said they wanted to start manufacturing automobiles. You had to be patient, so you asked them why, and what they had to start with, and they were very firm. They had about five acres, and 500 pounds, which would be $1,2[00], $1,300, and they thought this was enough to start manufacturing Fords and Chevrolets. So, the best thing you can do is not discourage them, but start them into something they can comprehend and do as a sort of group.

ROBERT BROWN: So they were sort of leaping too far ahead sometimes?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: In their fantasy, at least.

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Yes, but we had another man, for instance, who was doing the—he had some heavy equipment, and he was doing the roads and platforms for the oil drilling rigs of the Shell BP operations, which now, of course, is fabulously successful. Nigeria is in the, what, top 10 oil producers of the world. Then, they were still prospecting. This man has just sort of grown like Topsy. He had—say he had a bulldozer to start with, and he got some work, and he came to us for some advice. [00:02:07] And we were able to help him in his management planning, help him borrow money to buy more equipment, and plan ahead so that he was sending nephews and so forth to England, the United States to be educated, so they could come back and help him. And within three years, he had a quarter of a million pounds, which is almost $1 million dollars, worth of equipment. He was highly respected by the Shell BP people, and was very successful. He was smart, but he was almost ahead of himself all the time, but he was preparing so that he would be able to operate at this level and did it very well. You had all kinds of small ones who wanted to be too big, and more usually that rather than trying to stay too small. They were overambitious. The Nigerians are very, very hardworking people. This was in Eastern Nigeria, the Igbo area. I think it would have been the same in other regions. I supervised work in the north, which was largely Hausa, and in the west, but never lived and worked with them. Perhaps a little less ambitious, but I think, given the proper assistance, they would have done about the same thing. Of course, I was there until just before the civil war, and they were killing people right and left before I left there. In fact, in our village, there were many people killed. But that slowed things down. It has been interesting—I've kept in touch with the project since, and my Nigerian counterpart has been in this country on two occasions, and we've talked on the telephone. [00:04:11] We've corresponded regularly. After the civil war, in spite of the hatred and animosity between tribes and so forth, they seemed to wipe this all out, and they established the center again. None of the people who worked in it—had about 80 people. None of them lost their lives. They made it larger. They got more equipment. They got more personnel, more housing. And it was used as a model operation for every state in Nigeria. They're setting up a similar operation in each one. And the last time he was here, he was supposed to come up and visit me here, but he phoned and said he couldn't. He had just gotten a cable from Nigeria that he had been made head of the whole operation for Nigeria, and he had to come back immediately, which is [laughs] really rewarding, because here he was, an Igbo, hated during the war, and had been accepted and been made in charge of the whole operation. And we still hear from him. It's a very successful operation.

ROBERT BROWN: Do these amount to sort of technical and education centers, then? Management training centers?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: That's right, management training to the extent of bookkeeping and planning, right down to real nuts and bolts of business management. We could go farther in a place like that because we were working with, as I've said, fairly well-educated people, and they learned quickly. [00:06:00]

ROBERT BROWN: Were—how was this related at all to your work in the crafts? Did you work with traditional crafts at all, and how they could be brought up-to-date?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: It's difficult to know where craft starts and industry begins. And it was particularly difficult there, because some of the operations were small and were still a craft. For instance, the shoemaker had a—when we first started, had a paper pattern, and he cut his leather with a pair of scissors around a paper pattern, which is not very accurate. And the first step there was to go down the street and get a Coca-Cola sign, and make a metal pattern to give him a good, sharp, pointed knife so he could cut around it and get something accurate. Well, of course, when he was making a great many, he had clicker die and was stamping them out like any modern operation. But it took some time to develop this. So this grew from a craft to, really, it was an industry in the end. And a lot of them didn't. Another thing, it was difficult, often, to raise standards, and I found there something I'd usually maintained, that it isn't always easier to do just a little. In other words, you can't say, "Well, you should sand it a little more." You give them another method of sanding. You give them a power sander, even a piece of sandpaper on a block of wood, a new method, and then you can immediately set a new standard at that—with that procedure. So we were able to raise standards. If you're selling 25 pairs of shoes, you can sell them, because they might need shoes, but if you're going to sell thousands of them, it's got to be a pretty good product. [00:08:00] And so that turned out to be a business. In fact, most of the operations there

were just plain industrial production to make, for instance, buckets, pails, that people could carry water in, because they had to carry so much water. This was changed from a method of taking a piece of metal, sheet metal and a stick, and hammering it around the tree, say, and riveting it and soldering it together to—you have a machine that would roll it, and then roll the bottom on and so forth, which is a very simple, hand-operated machine. But there's so much need for just what they have to have to live that there's plenty of business for that. So it was largely that. Also, making—we made a great deal of the equipment. We had equipment within our compound, our shops, to make patterns, to make castings, to machine the castings, to make a machine. We could turn on almost anything. And this was a great help, because if you had to order from overseas, you've lost six months or so before you can get started, and here we'd turned them right out.

ROBERT BROWN: Well now, did you deal at all with art forms? I mean, tribal forms for which there was perhaps a market? Did you get into that at all, where you were dealing a lot with artistic design?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Not so much there, because there was so much need. This, as I say, was largely just an industrial development program. I was, of course, very much interested and spent a great deal of my own time going around to tribes, and not only seeing, but learning as much as I could about their art forms. Anything from the juju sculpture, to their tattooing on their cheeks and their clothing, and so forth. [00:10:02]

ROBERT BROWN: Were they proud to show you this sort of thing?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Oh, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Were they self-conscious?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Oh, no, no. Very, very proud of it, always. Not self-conscious at all.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you see that—was the older way of life being wrecked, or was there a fairly good transition?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Well, actually, the older way of life had not changed that much when I was there. They were still carrying water a half mile or something. And if there was a transition from that to where they could get water nearer, that was a great thing. A lot our work—not my work, but the agriculture people and the engineering people—to do just that, to try to make it a little easier for them to live, and make the water cleaner, so that they wouldn't catch a lot of dreadful diseases by drinking it. So, they were very eager to have us come in and help. They were completely un-self-conscious. I was taken in, often, to some of their sacred shrines, where you could see the height of their artwork. And this was by invitation only, and you had to be with someone that they—like a government official, who knew you were all right. So, we were trusted. They wanted us to know, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: You also, there, did work with a woodworking enterprise, too, didn't you?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Yes, we had a lot of woodworking operations. And our own shop was very well-equipped, so that we could do practically anything that could be done in wood, except saw it. [00:12:01] We did have a big operation in—forestry operation, where—a very large one, actually. It was sawing—some logs were six and a half feet in diameter, and they had the equipment to handle it. Big band saws, and the equipment to get it—move it in the woods. It isn't as difficult there as you think. They had to do it in the dry season, so it was dry. And the woods are not like tropical forests, rain forests. They were open, and the trees were so large that you could maneuver in and around them without damaging others. And so, they were taking trees no less than 24 inches in diameter. Well, a 24-inch tree now, here, would be a prize. I hope they'll continue according to our plan, because if they do, they can operate forever, really, on this, because it will renew itself. They had—well, this one had 460 square miles, with an optional 460 square miles more, so that's a lot of lumber.

ROBERT BROWN: And I suppose it's fairly fast-growing there?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Yes, because it's warm. Of course, you have to have the rainy season. The rainy season is only part of the time, but it still grows rather rapidly.

ROBERT BROWN: And there again, did you work with traditional methods, and begin to show them new ways which—

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Well, the sawmills certainly were the traditional method. They had an airstrip, where they [laughs] commuted by plane into it.

ROBERT BROWN: So that was already in place?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Yeah. But the—no, we tried to upgrade. They were still sawing the lumber around the area where I lived, and most of the outlying regions in the—they were still sawing lumber by felling a tree, perhaps a three to four-foot-diameter tree. [00:14:04] They'd dig a huge pit in the ground and put two logs

across it, and then fell a tree over it, and then get a man down in the hole on one end of the saw, and one standing on top of a log on the other, and they would saw their boards out of it. If you're thinking of 95-degree temperature, and 99 percent humidity, that's hard work, but they were doing it, and do it all day long. I don't see how they could do it. But yet, you try to get them a little better equipment for that. When I left, we were just to the point of getting some portable sawmills, but that never developed. In their shops, instead of doing everything by hand, which we did help them get some woodworking machinery, such as saws, table saws, this sort of thing, so you wouldn't have to rip boards. Most of the wood was sawed in two inches thick, about. Say 10 inches wide, 12. And if you want it in the shop—if you want to make a piece of furniture which required a one-inch board, you would rip that the long way. You would re-saw it with a hand saw, operate it backwards, if you please, so the teeth of the saw were away from you. They could saw, oh, a 16 or 18-foot board from one end to the other, 10 inches wide, and keep it as straight as could be. That's quite an achievement. I tried it, but I would wear myself out in a minute. Well, there's no reason why they should have to do that. That again, is where this doesn't add a thing to the finished product. The skills should come into the finishing. [00:16:00] Also, they would plane it by hand, completely. Well, a planer was too expensive for them to get. We did have them in our shops. But when they can get that, and a few of them were reaching this point, then they can save that lever and put their time into where it counts, doing good joints and good finish and so forth. So we were trying to do that sort of thing. You can't believe how primitive some of the operations are in these countries until you have been there, because they have no equipment. They sit on the floor, and the whole thing is between their feet. But they're quick to learn, and they appreciate it more than most people, because it means so much more to them.

ROBERT BROWN: After Nigeria, did you come back here for a while, or were you directly on to Korea when you—

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: No, directly—I went from Nigeria, after a brief home leave in the country, went on directly to Korea.

ROBERT BROWN: How did that come about?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: I was—we had had a director in Nigeria, when I first went, and—Joel Bernstein.

ROBERT BROWN: A director—of what was that?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Of the AID program. And he asked—when I was in Nigeria, he asked me to come to Korea and do a study on a handicraft and a small industry program, to see if it was feasible and what should be done. So, I went out for two months and made a study, and wrote recommendations, and then he asked me to come and do it. So, I was transferred directly from Nigeria to Korea. [00:18:00] Entirely different type of operation there. People are much more sophisticated, much more skilled. Again, very, very ambitious, hardworking, but much advanced, really. And so we were working with a little larger operation, and entirely different type of operation. A great deal of the work there was in textiles and this sort of thing, because there was so much of it being done there.

ROBERT BROWN: What was their problem that the American team went out for?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Well of course, the American team—the overall team, we had a large mission there, and they were helping in agriculture and all phases of industry. My problem was to try to organize what they had. Not so much providing new equipment there, as new skills, new markets, new design, and so forth. And as I told you, they had—one example was they were the largest raw silk producers in the world, but they were selling it as raw silk, almost all of it. They did not process much of it. So, what we did there was process it. We wove it, we silkscreened it, we made a new mixture of angora and silk, and made a new material, and we created—they were making perhaps the most beautiful silk anywhere, whereas they had the best product to start with. And so we were able to create a market, a very high-level market. [00:20:00] And the result was, that within two years, they were making $50 million a year or more than they would have made without this, because they were selling it as a raw silk product instead of a finished product. So, we sold it in London—New York, London, Paris, and Rome, and Dallas, Texas. We had a show in Dallas, Texas.

ROBERT BROWN: How did you arrange that? Who did you interest in this product?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Well, it started off by having—I had an assistant who was an artist herself, which we—and also a man named Leslie Tillett in New York, who was a textile designer and had worked with me on a project in Morocco. I knew him, so I sent him samples. And on a trip back, I discussed it with him, and we decided we would make some samples, which we called the Korean Collection. So I was able to send my assistant over to work with him and develop designs of beautiful silk, which was actually shown, first of all, by the Korean ambassador in Washington to a select group of people, later to the—a group of AID officials, and then went from there back—was accepted to put in the production in Korea, and then was sent out to these places—Texas, New York, London, Paris, and Rome—where people—the coterie, the top people, were invited in to buy it. It sold at very high prices, because it was very limited and very good. That was the way to sell it, and the way to plan it. [00:22:00] A good product for which you could get a good price.

ROBERT BROWN: So you'd had them make it into a textile instead of raw silk?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: That's right.

ROBERT BROWN: It also had designs?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: That's right, silkscreened to designs based largely on a very long study of the traditional Korean arts. Designs based on—well, designs from Korean pottery and textile or what have you, all this put together for something showing the cultural background of Korea, simply because this was a good way to start off. It was not an attempt to do something that was different or flowery, but something that was sound and had a real background.

ROBERT BROWN: Was this something that was already familiar to the designers, the Korean designers?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: No, they had never—

ROBERT BROWN: They had to learn about it?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: No, no, they had never done anything like this. The influence had come largely from Japan, because the Japanese were there a long time, and the Japanese, when I was there, were there, and their market was largely in the very narrow width material which they used for kimono cloth. And they were doing beautiful work in that, but still, most of the silk was sent to Japan to be woven there. And we changed them into weaving materials, three, four feet wide—three or four and a half feet, usually, cut properly, and a different design entirely. That was no problem. They could do this. I mean, some of the most highly skilled craftsmen I've ever known, for instance, in weaving. And their weaving silk—they're very careful. [00:24:00] Usually, they had one girl responsible for a loom, and it was—even though it was a mechanical loom, it was watched closely. There were no flaws. In this country, one man might look after 50 looms, and they're all running in all directions, and they're turning out, largely, in cotton or synthetics, so you don't have loom breakdowns as often as with silk. But just the same, they maintain the quality by attention to it.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah. Did you also set it up so that it would have long-term prosperity, or did you feel—

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: This could last—should—not only last indefinitely, but should grow, because you have a more attractive market, and so it can bring in a little more income. Actually, as things grow too much, some people who live on the farm and grow silkworms are not going to live there, and so you're going to have less silk production. But certainly, I think until the present time, there will be as many or more people producing, because every farm had a little room, which they called their silkworm room. They had their mulberry trees. They'd seed them. It was a place about maybe 12 feet wide, with two rows of trays, and maybe a room 12 or 15 feet long, and it would produce quite a lot of silk, these—

ROBERT BROWN: They had mulberry trees growing in there?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Not in the room, out in the gardens.

ROBERT BROWN: They'd cut them and bring them?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: They would cut them and bring them to them. A silkworm will eat a lot of mulberry leaves. In fact, you can hear them eating, they eat so fast. [They laugh.] They also spin a lot of silk.

ROBERT BROWN: But in terms of design, the first one was Korean traditional, based in traditional design? [00:26:02]

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you have a program of how they would adapt that to the market in the years to come? Change? Because fashions could be fickle.

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: I think—yes—I think they were smart enough to do that. I didn't stay there that long. They also learned to appreciate what Tillett had done in the textiles, so some other industries that were having a little trouble with design invited him back to advise them. For instance, in brass metal, he was invited back and worked with them, and set up new designs in that field. So they're smart enough that if they don't know, they'll get someone who does, such as Tillett, and keep their design up-to-date. As you know, not everyone can be a designer. It's only the most—one or two percent of people are top-notch designers, and there's not that many, really. But if you're smart enough to know enough to go out and get someone like Tillett, then you're going to maintain your level.

ROBERT BROWN: What was his background, do you recall?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: He was a textile worker. His father had been a textile worker in England. Beyond that, I don't know, but it had been in the family.

ROBERT BROWN: But he had gotten in the design aspect of it?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: That's right, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, then the Koreans, now, you figure, could do their own market studies, can't they?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: The Koreans, now—

ROBERT BROWN: Taken off.

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: —they can [laughs do almost anything now, don't worry, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: When did you finish there? At that time, was that when you went down to Southeast Asia for a bit? During that same—

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: I finished there in 1968. Then I went back to Washington, and then, from there, I was sent out on assignments. Well, fairly short-term, such as three months in the Congo to do a study, five months in Laos, which included Laos, Vietnam, Thailand. [00:28:10] Market studies in—

ROBERT BROWN: How could you study there during the—that was wartime [laughs]. What were you looking for?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: In Laos and Vietnam, Thailand, it was a forestry study, lumbering study, and studying the forest, and markets. Market studies in Hong Kong and Tokyo, and so forth. In Vietnam, if you wanted to go in the forest, you had to have permission from the army commander. They would go out the day before and scout the area, and then when you went out, they would—practically walking between lines of them. It's a little embarrassing. But if you want to see the forest, you have to do a little of it. We spent a lot of the time flying over to—and of course, I—you can't—now, there's a wealth of statistics compiled by the French. I had a Frenchman on the staff there who knew more about the forest of all Southeast Asia than I think anyone else. He had been there all his life, and of course he knew much more about this. So by using his statistics and taking him to areas to show me and so forth, you could quickly get a pretty good idea.

ROBERT BROWN: But your idea was that when it stabilized, they would have a forest products industry in those countries?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Yeah. Again, they were trying to sell a little at a time, and they didn't have a market, and they didn't know how to plan so that—it is a renewable resource, but you have to give it an opportunity to be renewed. [00:30:02] And in Laos, for instance, I set up one area that would never be touched, that would be a park, if you will, with government permission. I wonder what's happened to it. But anyway, in Hong Kong, and particularly in Tokyo, I was able to sell all the lumber they wanted, if they could provide shiploads, not small quantities, and cut the dimensions that they want. And their dimensions are quite different than standard. So I was able to put that together, provide that information to them. They had the sawmills, they had the lumber trees, and if they could put this together, saw it to the dimensions they wanted, it was marketable. [Coughs.] Excuse me. Well, we don't know what's going to happen to that, because that area is still pretty much up in the air. I don't know what's happened in Laos and Vietnam now.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you come back from that sort of puzzled or despondent? From that particular—

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: No. The thing hadn't fallen apart then, so—I had even talked to both Vietnamese and South Vietnam, and Lao people, and so forth, hoping we could cooperate and join their products together so that it could be shipped to a port, and provide shipload lots to Japan. And there was hope that these could be coordinated. So, we were rather optimistic at the time, and they were growing for us. They weren't just cutting what was there. They were reforesting, in teak largely. They reached the point where you could grow a marketable teak tree in perhaps 35 years, instead of 50 or 75, with new kinds of trees, and upgrading, and proper forest management. [00:32:12] So the potential was great. Still is.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you come back from there to retire?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Well, I've come back from several assignments to retire, but I came back to Washington and they put me to writing something, which I did. And then—

ROBERT BROWN: What, a general report or commentary?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Yes, a general report on work I had done in Morocco, Nigeria, and Korea. Then, about this time, they decided that they would loan some AID people to United Nations for assignments. And so, I

was either the first or second, I think, to be loaned, and I went to Greece as project manager for a very large industrial development operation—in fact, the largest in Europe—to do the planning for United Nations industrial development operation. I was on loan from AID, and I spent about a year and a half in Greece, doing that.

ROBERT BROWN: Had you done that particular kind of work before?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Not on that scale. I had done it—

ROBERT BROWN: Morocco?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: —yeah. All the work I had done was on a small scale. This was—

ROBERT BROWN: But this was to be big-scale?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: This was the largest one in Europe.

ROBERT BROWN: Were you to work with some of the great corporations, with their planners and their people?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Yes, but mainly we had an experienced engineering firm, and an experienced architectural firm to do the nuts and bolts of the planning. [00:34:02] My work was largely coordinating and making sure nothing was forgotten. That's what I did. When I left, it was completely planned and on paper, and ready to be carried out. And in fact, a lot of the roads and infrastructure had been done. Electric lines, sewer lines, and water towers, and all this.

ROBERT BROWN: Do you think you were noted in AID as a very good detail person? Thorough?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Yeah, I think I was thorough. I don't know what I was noted for. But yeah, I seemed to establish a reputation for being able to go out to a country and plan a program, or evaluate and see if a program was feasible, and then later, toward the end, about all of my work was to go out and evaluate a program, to see how our program was going, and not say it's good or it's bad, but to give it direction. See what—for instance, they had a program for forestry in Laos, in Southeast Asia, but it had never been coordinated and didn't have any real direction. They were developing lumber, which they were selling largely to the United States Army, but they didn't know where to go from there. And my idea was to go in—or my assignment was to go in and say, "Is this feasible, or should it be dropped, or what should we do with it?" So my—at first, it looked like it should be dropped, but then you go out and spend a week in Tokyo and survey the markets, and see that there is a market for unlimited amount, if it's done properly, then you change your mind and you go back. In fact, I was back and forth a couple of times. And then you can give it direction. And so that's what an evaluation should be, I think. [00:36:00]

ROBERT BROWN: Sure. Were these other Americans who were helping to set up programs, and you'd go out and evaluate their work?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Yes. They would have a program underway. And I worked with them very closely, and got much more information from them than I could provide myself.

ROBERT BROWN: But you found some of them got bogged down in details?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Sometimes, or they—

ROBERT BROWN: In Laos, they had no—they were puzzled. They thought perhaps it would all end.

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Yes, I think so. They hadn't looked beyond what was going to happen after a year or two. And the idea was to look ahead and see what you could plan to make it continue indefinitely.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, were a lot of these people that would come out who were doing projects, were they scientists or technocrats?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Well, they were—

ROBERT BROWN: Agriculturists?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: —they were technical—highly competent technical—

ROBERT BROWN: Technically, but not in terms of planning ahead, perhaps, always?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Well, maybe not, no. Each one of them was a specialist. [Laughs.] I wasn't a specialist—

ROBERT BROWN: You were a generalist.

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: —I was a generalist, and I could look at all of it and try to see some picture ahead. That was the only difference. I had to depend upon them for the technical background, always. So I didn't go in knowing more than they, I went in knowing much less, but I could put all this together and sometimes come up with something.

ROBERT BROWN: Well you did finally retire then, in the early '70s.

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: I retired right after the assignment in Greece. I came back and finished up a bibliography that I had been working on of small and medium industry publications worldwide, that I had been working on between assignments for three or four years. And I spent about four or five months finishing that, and then retired in 1971 or '72. And here I am, on a farm in Maine, working harder than I ever did, and enjoying it more than I ever did.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah. You're your own person now. You no longer—after years of being in groups of people. [00:38:03]

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: That's right, but I miss the overseas work, and I've had many opportunities to go out again. It's very—every one is a challenge, and it's difficult to turn it down, but sometime I guess you have to, so I have.

ROBERT BROWN: But sometimes when you went out on those, I guess you went out with quite a bit of uncertainty, didn't you?

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Oh, I think always.

ROBERT BROWN: They were very iffy situations.

VIRGIL ELLSWORTH POLING: Well, except when—I had been in Korea, and I had written a program, so I knew what I was going to do there. For instance, when I went to the others—had no idea. But that's part of the fun.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

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