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# Oral history interview with Margaret Bensco, 1976 September 7

Funding for the digital preservation of this interview was provided by a grant from the Save America's Treasures Program of the National Park Service.

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## Transcript

### Interview

MB: MARGARET BENSCO

PK: PAUL KARLSTROM

PK: Your father was the American painter, Ernest Lawson, distinguished member of The Eight group, who died in 1939. I would like very much if you could tell me something about Ernest Lawson as a man, an artist, and especially, you are in a unique position to talk about Ernest Lawson as a family man. I'm wondering if you could perhaps start from the beginning, going back as far as you can remember. For instance, where were you born, and when?

MB: Well, I was born in Paris. My father had met my mother . . . he was teaching in Asheville, North Carolina. Before, he also was teaching in Kansas City, Missouri for a while where she met him as a student. He was copying Rosa Bonheur's horses at the time. She got him on the idea of working from nature rather than copying something and so she became very interested in his work because she saw that he had a definite talent. So then he went to . . . after first going to New York and studying at the Art Students League, he went to Paris in 1894 and . . . .

PK: Met your mother.

MB: No, he went alone, you see, and they corresponded during the time he was there. And then he came back and they went to Paris after that, after a little interval. And I was born there.

PK: What year was that, if I may ask?

MB: That was 1895. And so, when I was still a baby, they left. They went to England and then later on stayed in England for a short time. He had some cousins there and they tell a few stories in one of Ira Glackens' . . . a book that he wrote, called William Glackens And The Ashcan School. They tell some little anecdote about his not getting along too well with his parents, and so he decided to leave -- take French leave, as they say -- there by climbing down a drainpipe. I think it is just an amusing story, and I doubt if there's much truth in it. In any case, he came back and they went to Canada for a while. He had some family, cousins, there. He evidently, for a short period, tried to paint portraits which he eventually gave up because it wasn't the thing he was interested in. I think there are only two or three portraits among some of his family that remain there.

PK: This was in the late 1890's?

MB: Well, he actually came back in 1895, and then my mother went down to Ashville and taught for a while.

PK: Was she an artist, too?

MB: Well, she was an artist, but she taught. She was one of the few women that really was able to go out and really teach art. She went to the art school in Ashville, North Carolina. In Ashville she also was teaching for a while and then in Kansas City, Missouri.

PK: What was her maiden name?

MB: He name was Ella Lawson.

PK: And what was her maiden name?

MB: That was her maiden name, Ella Lawson. That was her name until she married him.

PK: Lawson was her last name?

MB: Did I say Lawson? Ella Holman. I didn't realize I said Lawson.

PK: So she was trained as an artist herself and then went on to teach.

MB: Yes, she was an artist herself and had always been interested in art. And she went to Philadelphia for a while. I think she went to the Academy there for a while. But anyway, that's the way they met. And his father, as

you've probably heard before, was a doctor. He was a doctor in a large engineering firm in Mexico City. My father went there with his father and worked on some drafts and some architectural drawings for the firm. He also went to the . . . there was a very well-known art school there in Mexico City, and he went there for a while. That was his first training, in Mexico.

PK: Let me make sure I have this straight, then. Where actually did your father and mother meet?

MB: They actually met in Kansas City, Missouri. In the school. She was teaching there.

PK: So then you were born in Paris but apparently your parents brought you back to the United States.

MB: Yes, when I was a baby. Before I was . . . .

PK: Probably one year old.

MB: Yes, I was probably even less than a year.

PK: And did you say they went to Canada for a while?

MB: Yes, they went to Canada for a while and stayed, but she didn't stay very long. She went to Ashville, where she apparently had some friends there and started teaching in the art school there. And then, later on, he joined her. I think he stayed in Canada for a short while . . . for some period of time. And his second child, my sister Dorothy, was born in Ashville.

PK: So your early years were really spent in North Carolina?

MB: Well, yes, but of course I don't remember anything from that time.

PK: Well, let's see. When do you start remembering?

MB: Well, I don't remember any further back than coming back to New York where we lived in Upper Manhattan. We lived right near the Speedway. What's the name of that bridge? High Bridge. We lived in the High Bridge area. And we lived in an apartment there, the earliest I remember.

PK: When was that?

MB: That was when I was just of school age; I was probably six or seven at that time. And so I went to school first there at that place in Upper Manhattan. It looked over the Speedway where they had the ball games and racing events, different events.

PK: Did your father and mother have a position that brought them to New York? In other words, did one or the other go for a job or did they just go to New York because, after all, it was the art center?

MB: Well, you see, there was a house in Cos Cob, Connecticut, where we lived for a while, where Twachtman lived. And my father was influenced by Twachtman at first. They lived in Cos Cob and that's the house we lived in at that time.

PK: That painting over there on the wall?

MB: That was somewhere around 1900. And so for a while they lived there, in Connecticut. Of course, I don't remember it. I have a vague recollection when I was about four, maybe, of leaving there one moonlit night. And I remember we went with a horse and buggy, one of those buggys that had a fringe on it. And we left on a moonlit night and I remember feeling very badly about it because we had to leave some wild kittens that . . . we had a wild cat that had some kittens and it was a wild cat . . . . We had to leave these kittens. And I remember sadly leaving there, and I think that was Cos Cob, Connecticut.

PK: So you and your family were really guests, I gather, of Twachtman?

MB: No, we weren't guests, because we rented that house. That had nothing to do with Twachtman. He lived nearby.

PK: I see.

MB: He lived in the vicinity and my father, I guess, was quite influenced by Twachtman. And then William Merritt Chase took an interested in my father. William Chase used to have a class that he took to Spain -- he married a Spanish woman -- and he used to have students that he took to Spain every year. Some of his students bought some paintings of my father's. He took an interest in promoting them because he thought he was one of the

coming artists.

PK: Did your father ever study with Chase, formally?

MB: No, he didn't study with him but I think Chase sort of took an interest in his work and so it was one of the valuable things that happened to him at a time when he was a struggling artist. I'm not sure, I think he . . . . I don't know of his having done anything else to earn a living except through art. And it was really quite a struggle he had in the beginning. He had to be able to support a family and I don't think my mother taught any more because she had two children. And we went to school in Upper Manhattan and then we moved to another place up near the Juneau Mansion where Washington's headquarters were. And we used to play there. I remember living in the apartment and his coming . . . . We used to very often on weekends or certain periods of the summer . . . he'd call home and say, "How would you like to go to Coney Island?" And then he'd take us out. It was a nice excursion there. And we'd go on a boat that went to Coney Island. And then we'd go on the various things that they had there, the carousel and all that sort of thing. That was a big moment in our lives. He was very . . . you know, he was a very nice family man at that time. He was interested in our being and he seemed to be prosperous enough. I don't remember any period when we had a want or a need of any kind. And at that period it wasn't that expensive to live. We'd pay maybe $50 a month for rent.

PK: Did that buy one a comfortable apartment in New York at that time?

MB: We had a six room apartment, a very comfortable apartment. It was an elevator apartment and very nice. So I can't remember any period that -- sometimes they speak of in books -- this period of struggle. Of course, he did have a struggle until he came across Daniels who was the first dealer to . . . . He had quite a few artists that . . . his stable of artists, as they used to call it.

PK: They still do.

MB: There were a number of well-known artists, a number of artists that made the grade later and my father was one of them. So Daniels always seemed able to sell enough paintings for him to live on. And at that period I don't think he had much of a struggle. It came later on. In his early career he had Daniels as a dealer. And then, later on, there was the Ferargil Gallery and they handled his work until the Depression came, when they folded and didn't even try to sell pictures. But, up to that time, my memory is that we had a happy enough life. We went away places in the summer were he painted.

PK: Connecticut, perhaps?

MB: Places in Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, all the different states. We went to Blue Hill, Maine and we went to that place in New Hampshire; I mentioned it before now, where there was . . . . So he was really dedicated to painting and I don't remember his ever doing much of anything else except paint. In the summer we were with him and he went around by himself. And, to me, when I look back on it, it was extraordinary how in those days when there weren't cars to take you around -- and there weren't -- people still got around well. There was the elevated railroad at that time, the El, the Third Avenue El, and the Sixth Avenue El, at that time. And we used to go up into Inwood, and that was the upper part of New York where it was still . . . . Edgar Allen Poe lived up in that vicinity of Inwood. My father did a lot of paintings up there in Upper New York, and that was quite not settled. There weren't a lot of houses and apartment houses there, or any high-rise things at that time. And so he wandered around different parts of Harlem where he painted, and different parts of Connecticut. It really is remarkable how he got around the way he did without a car. He must have had some way of getting around, took the train. I don't think in that period there were many cars around. In my youth the first time I remember when there were lots of cars was around when I was about eight or ten years old; when we saw automobiles much at all.

PK: Did he ever take you or your sister with him on his painting trips?

MB: Well, I didn't go. I went sketching with him a few times when I was a little older and became more interested in art, definitely interested in art. I started at the Art Students League and before that I used to do a few sculptures of animals. I was very much at home at the Bronx Zoo, because I knew Curator Dittmeyers and the president -- I don't remember his name now. I was given a special key where I could come and go, you know, on days when they were closed or go in there earlier, or anything, and I was doing some modeling of animals. I have a chimpanzee that I did and a study of monkeys, although I did animals from all parts of the zoo. Then I went to the Art Students League and, until that time, my mother used to take me to art exhibitions at the Academy and to various places. I remember as a small child going with my mother a lot to exhibitions and so I became quite early knowing something about painting and art. But when I was in the Art Students League, I did go out a few times sketching with my father. I didn't paint, myself, at the time, because I was really at that time more interested in sculpture. I didn't want to compete with my father and be a painter. My interest at that time was with Rodin, Bourdelle, Despiau and all those well-known sculptors. And also I was a protege of Malvina Hoffman. Do you know her as an artist? She was really an outstanding personality and sculptor at the time. Janet

Scudder was another woman artist, but I think Malvina Hoffman was the most outstanding. In any case, my father was very interested in his family in periods when we were together more and during the other periods we went to school and he went his way. He went to different places and sometimes stayed. At that time it was quite the thing for wealthy people that were interested in art to invite the artist to their "doghouses." On estates they had certain, what do you call them? -- little places where artists came and would spend weekends, and he used often to go there.

PK: Of course the families were never invited along . . . ?

MB: We weren't invited, ever; the families were never invited. My mother had rather a lonely time of it. She was rather a loner anyway. She wasn't a very sociable person and she was very much devoted to us children and keeping a nice aesthetic apartment. She made nice interiors and made a pleasant family life.

PK: I wanted to ask you about that; what your home was like. Were there paintings hanging around?

MB: Yes, we had a lot of my father's paintings, but in those days I think it was unfortunate that painters didn't buy each other's work very much. At least I never came across any.

PK: Didn't they trade? Artists seem to do that now quite a bit.

MB: They do that now but I don't think they did that much then. I think they were more occupied with selling their paintings and I don't remember my father having any other paintings by anybody else. But we always had a very nice, very comfortable apartment and my mother really excelled in making nice, aesthetic interiors.

PK: Would you describe it as a Victorian environment at all?

MB: No, it really wasn't Victorian because my mother had rather modern ideas of things. She was not a very sociable person and artists at that time, as I said, were invited over by these people, the patrons of the arts. They used to go quite often to Mrs. Meredith Hare's who was interested in art and later on her son became quite well known.

PK: What was that name again?

MB: Meredith Hare. When they went to Europe they invited us to come, my father and me and my two children, Alice and Jean, who at that time were very small. Jean was a baby and Alice was about two or three. Mrs. Hare invited us, my father and me, to live on their estate on Long Island.

PK: It must have been quite a bit later than we're talking about now. It was obviously after you were married.

MB: Yes, but when I was young my father was very interested in the fact that I was, you know, what he thought was going to amount to something in sculpture.

PK: So he encouraged you.

MB: He encouraged me very much and he was very sympathetic because I was probably a pain to my mother since I was always bringing pets home. I'd go out in the woods and bring home snakes and all kinds of toads and various things. I had an aquarium and I went down one time when I was quite young and bought a monkey and brought it home and, of course, my mother was horrified.

PK: These were your models, of course.

MB: Well, they weren't models. I was just pretty interested in animals and my father was quite sympathetic about it, and sort of took my side. So he and I were quite sympathetic although he wasn't enough of a family man to devote a lot of time to us because at that time he was having quite a bit of success and he was away quite a lot. He was also on the jury quite often and they used to go to Philadelphia and the various places where he did jury duty. He was very occupied with painting; like Monet and some of the French Impressionists, he was absolutely devoted to painting. His life was painting. He did an enormous output of painting and devoted a lot of his time to it. So we didn't see him that much, except at times when he would think it would be nice to take us somewhere.

PK: Did you ever visit his studio?

MB: Yes, he had a studio on MacDougal Alley and I used to go down there quite often.

PK: Do you remember what it was like?

MB: Well, it was right opposite Fraser. Fraser had a huge studio that had been a big stable, you know, quite a

large stable that had been turned into a studio. Were you ever in MacDougal Alley?

PK: No, I don't think so.

MB: Well, it was a very interesting place. It had cobblestones and there was real atmosphere; it was not built up at all. It was like it was in the old days in the lower part of New York. And my father had this comfortable studio, not so comfortable that it wasn't . . . . He had to have a stove that he burned coal and wood in and he didn't have much steam heat for comforts. But it had big skylights, and the whole side was windows. He did a large part of his painting there. He did very little painting at home; he practically never painted at home, except in the summer. When we went away in the summer, we rented a place that usually had a part of it that could be turned into a studio and an extra room, sort of in the basement, where it went off right straight from the ground. It had a nice light and was large enough to do painting. I remember he used to spend a lot of time with the painting, going out of the house and painting. He painted very prolifically, you know. A great many things that he would start and then he would come home and spend hours just regarding them, studying them, criticizing them, or taking them out again and working on them. So that's how I remember him mostly in my life, aside from the playtime that I had up there near the Juneau Mansion. There was a very nice grove right opposite our house where they had the thirteen Cedars of Lebanon which were given as a gift to the city from Palestine. It was a big grove where they had trees and children played ball, baseball. There were huge trees with big branches and boys had built some houses in the trees, you know, platforms. So we spent quite a lot of time climbing up those trees and having fun with the things that were built there.

PK: Most people associate your father's work with landscape, with Impressionism and landscape. I'm wondering what kind of work he did then, in the New York studio, which I expect was mostly in the wintertime.

MB: Well, in his studio . . . he painted in his studio in MacDougal Alley and he used to go out in the summer and do a great deal of work constantly. I mean, during the summer months he just painted continually; every day he went out painting, you know. He was home in the evenings, of course, and after it was later in the day, but he spent a lot of time studying his work and painting. And so my remembrance of him is mostly of working and painting. Then in the evening he liked to relax and have a good dinner which he went in the kitchen and helped get it.

PK: You were saying earlier that he liked to cook.

MB: He liked to cook and he liked to get up earlier usually and make breakfast, too.

PK: Did he have any specialties that you can remember which maybe you as children enjoyed?

MB: Oh yes, he used to have special things that we liked. I always remember his Spanish omelettes, marvelous Spanish omelettes. He'd take everything that was in the icebox and put it in. We had nice memories of him in that way. He wasn't exactly what you'd call a family man, and yet he was quite devoted to us, to keeping us happy and contented and all that. And that was a period when he was, you know, having this . . . . But then later on, there were periods when he was having a little more difficulty because the times were changing and all the modern types of painting were being done. Then when I was married, of course, we came up weekends and usually had dinner with them in the apartment in New York. And then my sister and my parents and I went to Spain in 1916, and that was one of the highlights in our life. My father won an Altmann Prize. It was a prize of $2,000 and it was really quite a windfall. And he came home . . . and we were living down in Greenwich village at the time, around 8th Street, and we had quite a nice apartment there. And he came home one day and said, "How would you like to go to Spain?" He had just won the prize, and so of course we were overjoyed. We went to Spain in the spring of 1916 and I had my 21st birthday in Spain, in Segovia.

PK: Lucky you.

MB: And I remember I had a very nice impression, then. And then he met Maxwell Kuehne during that time in Spain. They had been there for quite a while, and Max Kuehne -- Do you know him at all? Anyway, Max used to work with Mrs. Price for the Whitney Museum. He got very interested in Spanish antiques and brought a lot of them back from Spain. He painted on the side but he never really made the grade as a painter, but more as one who made frames. The frame here on the wall was one of the earlier frames that he made.

PK: How do you spell his name?

MB: K-u-e-h-n-e, Max Kuehne. We met them in Spain and they had been there quite a while. And they were in Segovia, so we went there. That was a very interesting place, very picturesque, in the little more northern part. We spent some very pleasant months there, about seven months probably. We rented a very nice house there in a very good neighborhood in town. It was actually extraordinary how cheap living was in Spain at that time. We rented a house for about $12 -- $15 a month, and it was a big house with about six or seven rooms in it. Maxwell had a wonderful place, a garden, and a room off of it that made a marvelous studio. My father and Max

Kuehne ground all their paints; they made their own paint. And Kuehne had become very interested in . . . Kuehne had . . . in the formulas for making paints, so they made very good quality paint with, you know, the real oxides and everything. My father went out every day and painted; he did a lot of Spanish painting there. Did you ever see his Spanish paintings in some of these magazines and books you were mentioning?

PK: I'll have to refresh my memory and look through. Well, going back a little bit, you mentioned that your mother used to take you to art exhibitions and gallery shows. I'm wondering if you recall seeing the famous "Eight Exhibition" at the Macbeth Gallery in 1908. Could you tell me something about that, what you remember?

MB: Well, I remember this nice gallery. We went up in an elevator to a certain floor and there were all the paintings that these well-known artists were doing and so I became familiar with them at a very early age. And Macbeth was a very nice person whom I remember meeting and he made . . . they were very pleasant surroundings to exhibit paintings. I remember going there quite often and seeing these, all these different artists, who got together, such as Prendergast and different ones at that time who were just commencing to be known.

PK: Do you remember any special excitement that surrounded that particular show? Do you remember your father talking about it in a way that would suggest that he felt that it was something other than just a regular exhibition?

MB: No, I don't remember that, but I remember going there and seeing these things and that it was one of the principal places where you went to see an exhibition. He was . . . I can't remember any other gallery that had at that time the same reputation. There was the Knoedler Gallery that had lots of good paintings, and the Crowshire Gallery and a few others that I really don't remember. But one of the highlights was a large exhibition when I was young. I was probably only 15 or 16 at the time. They had a large exhibition on, I don't remember where it was, but it was of Sorolla Y Bastida's work. Did you ever hear of his name?

PK: I don't think so.

MB: He had a very . . . at that time he made a sensation, the first sensation that I had ever heard about in art. There was this enormous exhibition which was almost like a ball game. There were crowds that went all around the block that would be four deep waiting to go in, you know. It was really quite sensational, and I just don't remember the name; it had a name. But I remember the artist whose work was shown was Sorolla Y Bastida, and it always seemed remarkable to me that he seemed so little known. Occasionally I've come across some of his work, somewhere. But at that time he was . . . .

PK: Was he an American artist?

MB: He was a Spanish artist and he did mostly Spanish things. He was known at that time as an artist. He had wonderful press agent work done so that he became a sensation, and people went there to see the exhibition. It was a great success and he sold an enormous quantity, nearly all his work. And they were very exciting sorts of works because they were kind of flashy and kind of very noticeable. I just don't know who to compare them to. At the time the exhibition was thought to be very brilliant and it was such a sensation that they made a photograph of the check -- it was about a half a million dollars -- to pay for what he sold. Then he went to England and to Paris and repeated the same thing. And then, for some reason, he seemed to drop out. I just can't understand it, but it was something that wasn't very striking to me at that period. It would be interesting sometime for you, if you've ever thought of it, to find out what the truth of that thing was. I once came across something that spoke about it, but at that time I was very interested in his work. Then, of course, they had the big Armory Show and my father and all those different artists had their work there. There was also lots of sculpture from the different sculptors that we had never seen before. This group of people, "The Eight," were instrumental in bringing over all those French Impressionists to the Armory Show.

PK: Prendergast was very much involved in that.

MB: Yes, he was very much involved in that. And that was the big thing, that and that Sorolla Y Bastida show that I'd seen some time before, maybe a few months or a year before. That made a great impression on me at the time.

PK: Did you go to the Armory Show, by any chance, with your father? Do you remember him talking about it?

MB: Yes, because he was involved in it, too. He exhibited in it, too. He had quite a few of his paintings there, and I remember that was a big art event in my life. And it was just about the time that I was going to the Art Students League, then.

PK: You were what, about 18, perhaps?

MB: I was either 16 or 17, and so my father and I used to talk about it sometimes, the showing there, the different artists.

PK: Do you remember what he said?

MB: No, I don't remember what he said.

PK: Was his reaction essentially a positive one? Did he feel that this was an important event for French artists?

MB: Oh yes, I think he thought it was a very important event and at that time it really was. So I went for several years to the Art Students League and I was occupied with sculpture from the nude and the figure and then in the afternoon I went out to the Bronx Zoo. So I worked quite hard, too. My father was very interested that I would do something in sculpture and at that time I hadn't thought of painting, except that I was very much occupied with painting, too, But I concentrated on sculpture.

PK: Well, how did you, and perhaps your fellow students and other artists, respond to the French Modernists in the Armory Show? I'm thinking perhaps of Matisse, or Duchamp's paintings.

MB: Yes, we saw Marcel Duchamp's Nude Descending the Staircase." That was the most sort of shocking thing at the time because I had pretty much kept up with the advance of art, getting more and more advanced, away from the traditional school, but I wasn't very much surprised at any of these. I had some reproductions but I was a little surprised at the Nude Descending the Staircase and that type of thing.

PK: Did you feel this was art?

MB: Yes, well, I was very interested in it, on the advance in Impressionism, you know. It wasn't anything strange to me because I had kept up with it. I spent quite a lot of time going to exhibitions at that time, besides working, and I was very serious about being an artist. It never occurred to me that I wouldn't make the grade as an artist, you see.

PK: Well, did your father exhibit any sense that he and his colleagues might have been threatened by the more advanced modern art?

MB: Well, I think that was kind of a bad period about that time. I think he did feel a little bit that he was being sort of laid aside. I think it was kind of a sad time and it was about that time that he felt that he was slipping. He and a fellow artist, like Glackens, and a lot of the others of that particular time used to go to a cafe called Chez Mouquins, and another, owned by Jim Morris. He spent a lot of time there. During that period we didn't see him so much. He was having success and was mixing more with other artists. He was going down to the cafe and seeing artists and maybe drinking a little too much, because I remember at that period, just before I was going to the Art Students League, my mother was quite unhappy about it because he was staying downtown quite a lot, often coming home in quite a bad state and often being robbed on the way home. At that time there wasn't much transportation. There was the Third Avenue El and the Sixth Avenue El and we lived way uptown at that time. We lived way up on 181st Street, near the Billings Estate and the Hudson River, you know. It was a little out of the . . . in upper New York. And so he'd come home quite late, maybe two or three o'clock, and maybe he had sold a picture and had all the money in his pocket and he was rolled quite often.

PK: This naturally would make your mother unhappy.

MB: My mother was really quite unhappy about it and so that wasn't a very happy period for us on account of that. Because I think he was feeling a little, you know, sort of piqued because he felt he wasn't having quite the success that he'd had before. Maybe not. But the new thing had come along and I think he was kind of a little out of it.

PK: Would you say that perhaps this marked the beginning of certain strains on the family relationship?

MB: Yes, there were strains at that time. But I was not very conscious of it because he still remained a good father and sympathetic. And we still went away in the summer where he painted, and he was still a good family man at that time. But during this period he was, you know, away quite a lot and so, for some reason, I don't remember being ever very . . . . that we ever had a very unhappy period because my mother was really quite an extraordinary woman and whatever she felt about it she kept it to herself. She never complained about it. She was a very self-effacing person and she never accused him or complained about it. She was a very tactful person and that's what makes me mad when I read something like he says in the book, you know.

PK: The Henry and Sidney Berry-Hill book?

MB: Yes, in this Berry-Hill book, you know, it sounds as if she was cold and that she nagged him, or that she, you know, this or that, and this was absolutely untrue.

PK: You remember her as being, I gather, very patient under the circumstances.

MB: She was a very patient person and she had to put up with a lot. She had to face the bills that came in and that he ignored. He didn't do anything about them, but they were always paid eventually, so we never had any particular stress. I don't remember ever in my childhood having any really bad period where there was any great . . . as has been suggested sometimes, you know, any poverty or anything of that kind, because there was the Ferargill Gallery, there was the Daniel Gallery, and they gave him an income and they sold his paintings. But he did have a little struggle at that particular period. I think maybe more psychologically than anything else.

PK: Well, your parents finally did separate, didn't they?

MB: Well, not exactly. You see, what happened was that we went to Spain. Then we came back and, when we came back from Spain, the time I don't remember exactly, we had quite a normal family life. And then there was a period after I married when my husband was in the International Red Cross, where he went abroad quite a lot with different things he did for the Red Cross. And so when Alice was about . . . . In other words, in 1927, when Alice was about seven years old -- my daughter Alice that you met -- I decided that I would go to Paris and resume, try to pick up where I had left off when I married and had children and get back into sculpture. So we went to France and I stayed for six years and, of course, that didn't help my marriage any. My mother was separated from my father -- my mother went too, you see, with me and at that time . . . .

PK: Your father stayed in New York?

MB: Yes, he stayed in New York. But he was very busy. He and my husband got along very well; they shared a place in Greenwich Village, downtown.

PK: It was very civilized?

MB: Yes, so my husband and my father shared a place and my father was very good friends with Glackens and used to invite him to dinner quite a lot. He was very busy; he was teaching. He went to Colorado Springs and was teaching there. He and Randall Davey were both teaching at Colorado Springs.

PK: I've lost track of time a little bit; when was this?

MB: I have too. I went to New Mexico in 1937.

PK: Did you say that it was in 1927 that you went to Paris?

MB: Yes, I went to Paris in 1927 but in 1937 I went to New Mexico and stayed there for a few years. We're sort of backtracking a little bit. During that time, while we were in France, you see, he taught for several years at the Broadmore Art Academy. And he met Katherine Powell then. You see, we came back in 1933 from France, and he had met the Powells, Mr. & Mrs. Powell, and they became very good friends. They were living in Florida and they invited my father to come out. We were living at the National Arts Club so, you see, we really weren't in very bad financial straits at that time because we always lived in very nice places.

PK: What was your mother doing at this time?

MB: My mother and father were both living there, in the National Arts Club, but at that period he was having a period where my mother couldn't do anything with him because he was really drinking quite badly at that time. I guess he was quite depressed because he sort of lost confidence in his place in the arts at that time or something. I'm sure it had a lot to do with it, although he didn't talk about it, and we knew, my mother knew. As I said, my mother never wanted to discuss with us what went on between them. She was a very tolerant person and very patient, and a very self-effacing person you see, and so she made the best of it. She devoted her attention to her two daughters and to housekeeping. They were living at the National Arts Club. My father had visited us in Paris when we were there; he came out and spent several months in Paris. When he came back and my mother came back too, they started to live in the National Arts Club. But that was a period when he was drinking a little bit and so the Powells were sympathetic. Mrs. Powell had evidently . . . Mrs. Powell's husband was a periodic drinker, and so they were sympathetic and she had known what his problems were. She had evidently helped her husband through it; and so they invited my father to come to live there, to stay there.

PK: They were in Florida, right?

MB: They were in Florida, Coral Gables, Florida. And so for several years, he'd stay there on and off. He came back occasionally but when at the Powells he would stay in their garage apartment in the back. They had a house and then in the back they had an apartment over their garage and they rented that to him. And they helped him because . . . they were very sympathetic and good friends. But they made it clear that he could stay

there as long as he didn't drink, and so that was something . . . .

PK: And your mother didn't go along?

MB: She didn't go along. The reason that they didn't invite her is that she wrote to Katherine -- they did correspond at certain times. You have a letter from Katherine Powell, you remember, in those letters I gave you. In a letter my mother told Katherine what the problem was, that she really couldn't influence him, and so Katherine wrote that she was going to invite him to come there, you see, which she did. At this time I went to New Mexico and stayed for about three years but I went to Florida first because he was there. And I stayed in Lake Worth for a while and I had a kennel of Afghan hounds in the meantime. When I came back from France in 1933 I had become interested in breeding Afghan hounds. I had always been interested in animals and they were a new, very exotic breed of dog that was unknown at that time. So I started breeding them, first in Connecticut and then in Florida. I went to Florida with them. And then I went to New Mexico and had a kennel there. The largest kennel of Afghans was in New Mexico. A very wealthy woman had this kennel of Afghans and Scottish Deerhounds and so I stayed there and then we corresponded with my father. But during the time I was in Florida, we saw him there. I was there almost a year, about seven months, and my mother came there, too. We were all very friendly and, you know, we were not estranged at all. We went to visit him very often at Katherine Powell's house and he came and visited us. He came practically every weekend and visited.

PK: Was he able to work at all during this time?

MB: During the time he was in Florida he worked, but his heart wasn't in it because Florida didn't . . . although Katherine was very anxious that he should work in Florida. She was a very nice person but she was a little on the bossy side and she sort of took over in a way that he didn't like very much. My mother had never been like that. My mother never tried to influence him to do anything because she thought he ought to do it. But Katherine used to say, "Now, Ernie, we'll go out to paint. Now, I've already picked just the right place for you." And he didn't like that at all. And so he used to complain sometimes in some of the letters, which I didn't keep, that he was getting a little tired of being bossed. Eventually he got tired of painting in Florida. But he did paint. He painted quite a few things. I don't think they were his best things; maybe some of them. Ira Glackens spoke, in the beginning of the book, as if it were something he had accomplished, but I think most artists felt that Florida was not the . . . .

PK: Well, when he died in Florida . . . . Would you be able to say something about the circumstances surrounding his death?

MB: Well, yes. That's an important thing that happened at this period. You see, my mother and I were both in New Mexico and he wrote to us quite frequently because there were lots of periods when he didn't write. And we were not happy either because he wasn't sending my mother any money, and also I had gone there and . . . . I was estranged from my husband. We were divorced and I was supposed to be getting alimony. But as soon as I got far away, he married again. His wife was Dr. Mary Niafarnen who was a woman doctor. She was a very dominating person and she just took over.

PK: What was her name again?

MB: Dr. Mary Niafarnen. She even wrote a book. She and another man collaborated after my husband's death and wrote Woman, the Lost Sex. She made it very clear to me that, now that I had the dogs and was living in New Mexico, I could get along as best I could. They sent money less and less until finally it didn't come at all. And so I had to stagger along. Everybody knows that you can't really make a good living on a kennel of dogs, especially a new breed that was exotic and sold for high prices but not that often. So my mother and I were not too happy. And so there was a period when we didn't write and he didn't write because he wasn't happy. If you read Katherine's letter, you will remember that he was ill at the time. He had a sort of nervous breakdown because it was during the Depression and the Ferargil Gallery didn't even try to sell his paintings; they just closed down. So he had one commission that was from the Short Hills Post Office, a commission that they paid in installments. And that was practically all the money that he was getting at that time. I left off where we were in New Mexico. My mother was with me and we weren't corresponding too often with my father because on our side in New Mexico I had the kennel of dogs but my income was not really enough, it was only enough to worry about what was going to happen. My father was quite ill at the time because he was worried. He was worried how he was going to live, because at that time, apparently, I don't think it was possible. He hadn't yet reached the age of 65 when he could get Social Security and I don't think they had Social security then. As I remember, it only started in . . . when did it start?

PK: I don't know.

MB: Well, any way, he wasn't getting any Social Security. All he was getting was from what Roosevelt had decreed, that artists, if they produced one created thing a month, they could have a check for $125 a month. And I think that was what he was getting at that time. He had only a little money in the bank, but very little, and

it was getting less all the time.

PK: So he wasn't able to send anything to your mother?

MB: He wasn't sending any money to my mother. Occasionally he sent her maybe $50 or $100. He had that Short Hills commission, which was in a post office in New Jersey. They gave him a commission to decorate the post office and it paid in installments. So he was very depressed and ill. He had a kind of nervous breakdown, and he wasn't enjoying painting. He really was not happy. And then he wrote that letter that I gave you, the last letter I received.

PK: Do you think that possibly is the last letter he wrote, or is it the last one you know of?

MB: Well, I don't think he wrote any other. He wrote this just the day before he went down to Miami Beach. He went to the bank, we found out, and withdrew some money. He had very little left. I think he only had $250 left in the bank. And he went down and sat on the bench overlooking the ocean at Miami Beach. He sat there . . . of course, we reconstruct this. Nobody knows exactly what happened, but I'm perfectly sure that, from all the details that I heard about it, that it happened that way. That he went down, that he sat on the bench overlooking the ocean and his cane was still there. And then, as he looked at the ocean, he got this idea that that was a good time to end it, that he didn't have any hope, he didn't know what to do, he was depressed. He didn't see anything . . . he didn't want to go back to the Powells; he wasn't able to help my mother. So I think he just waded out into the ocean. Anyway, he didn't come home that night and the Powells called the police and told them the story. The police investigated and then they phoned to say that they had . . . that a body had been found answering his description. It was found on the beach; it had been washed up on the beach. He had evidently been knocked over . . . I mean, not knocked over, but had been rolled. His wallet had been taken from him, because he had been to the bank and there wasn't any wallet there. But also, it could have happened the other way. I doubt whether he could have been pushed in the water. If they had robbed him before he had gone in the water, they would have hit him on the head and left him. They wouldn't have pushed him in the water. I don't see how that could have happened, but in any case, he was found on the beach. He had been in the water and he had drifted up on the beach, and that was all that was known.

PK: There were never any notes found, or any letters that indicated he was contemplating suicide?

MB: No, because the letter he wrote us just the day before was full of hope, you see. At that time he said it was pretty bad and he didn't know when, but he said time would get better. "I hope that times will get better and some way we'll see the end." And he also suggested that he'd probably be able to win some influence to get me to be on the WPA, you know, because I wasn't getting any money either, you see. And so it was a terrible shock to me. Early in the morning when we were at home . . . . The people next door had a phone; I didn't have a phone, and so they called me to the phone. There had been a telegram from the Powells saying that Ernest's body had been found on the beach at Miami and that we should contact them immediately and let them know what to do about the funeral service. And so, of course, we contacted them and Katherine immediately wrote all the details she knew and told us about it.

PK: But they had no indication, I gather, that . . . ?

MB: They didn't have any indication either that he was suicidal. I don't think he was thinking about it. It only occurred to him while he was sitting there on the bench looking at the ocean.

PK: Did he go to Miami Beach as a regular thing?

MB: Well, you see, he hated Christmas. That was one of his funny idiosyncrasies. He never enjoyed Christmas because Christmas was a time for hysterical giving and all this that he didn't get into the spirit of at all because he used to be hard up and didn't have the money to give presents and do things. And so he never liked Christmas and he usually got drunk on Christmas.

PK: A lot of people do.

MB: I remember several times my mother would have a nice Christmas tree for us, you know, all nicely decorated and everything. And we'd wait and wait and he didn't come home to dinner. And then he didn't come home until later on and then she would hurry us to bed so we wouldn't see him.

PK: At any time did you come to resent your father a little bit for what you might have seen as non-support of your mother?

MB: No, for some reason I didn't. I don't know why. I just realized his struggle and his difficulties and I always sympathized with him. And we were really quite close as far as understanding each other went. The only thing I resented sometimes, although I was grateful . . . both my mother and I were very grateful to the Powells for

taking an interest in helping him. At the same time, we sort of resented Mrs. Powell for taking over to the extent she did.

PK: Well, there is really only one other question I have, and it takes us back a little bit. I was wondering if you would have any recollections or memories of different members of The Eight Group and some of the other artists with whom your father was friends?

MB: Well, you know, I remember going to a Varnishing Day at the Academy, which is right next to the Art Students League. And I used to go quite often and see their exhibitions. But Varnishing Day, you know, that's a reception day. I used to go there with my father; my mother usually didn't go because she didn't care for social things at all. My father would introduce me to different people, different artists that he knew. But as a matter of fact, he didn't . . . the artists that he knew, we didn't see much of aside from that.

PK: They didn't come to visit at your home and have dinner or anything like that?

MB: No, they didn't. He saw them downtown by himself. He went to the cafes, Mouquins and Jim Moore's cafe. Jim Moore died and the Mouquins went under. Both of these cafes broke up about the same period, and that was one of those periods when he started slipping, you see. It tells in some of the books exactly around the date but I don't remember. But that was a period when he was seeing most of his artist friends, you know, outside, and he didn't bring them home to the house. Especially since, as I've said, my mother was not a very sociable person. Not that she was not nice about it or anything, but he just didn't bring people home to the house; he wasn't that much of a family man, he saw them outside. And so I remember Prendergast, and I don't remember seeing Luks very often and Davies I only saw occasionally. We saw, as I said, Prendergast rather often. Prendergast lived in Westport, Connecticut for a while. That was where I lived. After my divorce I lived in Westport, Connecticut. There were a few artists there and I remember saying that Prendergast lived there. He married a Frenchwoman.

PK: Well, did you get to know any of these people yourself, personally, or more than just casually?

MB: No, I never did.

PK: What about Glackens? You mentioned that when you and your mother ran off to Paris you father was very close to Glackens.

MB: My father lived practically next door to him. They had a house right at Washington Square. They owned a house there and my father rented a place and my husband shared it with him. They shared this place for a while, and so they used to see Glackens quite a lot but . . . .

PK: Of course you weren't there.

MB: Well, I wasn't there but I would see him on and off after we came back. Before then, occasionally we were invited to dinner there. Mrs. Glackens was -- do you know her as a personality? She was an odd personality. I mean she was mostly a person that had a wicked tongue and she was rather witty. And a lot of people were afraid of her because she was very, you know, sort of . . . she had a serpent's tongue. But she was very devoted to my father. She was as much devoted to him as to her husband and son, Ira, who was a very precocious child. She also had a daughter who died. She went to South America against her mother's wishes or something. Anyway, she died. I was never quite sure what she died of, but she died quite early. It broke her mother up terribly. But Edith Glackens was one that was absolutely devoted to her husband, William, and his work. So she invited, quite regularly, people who counted in the art world. And she'd have them to diner and she invited my mother and father quite often. Ernest was there quite often, but she only invited me a few times because I hadn't made the grade in the art world.

PK: Well, I hope, at least, she was nice to you and didn't unleash her serpent's tongue.

MB: Yes, she was always nice to me and she wanted to be very nice to my younger daughter who was quite artistic. Edith was kind of interested in her being an artist, but my daughter was terrified of her because she had this . . . she didn't hesitate to say what she thought. Although when she was devoted to a person she was all out for them.

PK: Well, that dinner party, the one time when you were invited to the Glackens' for dinner, do you recall anything about it? Did people sit around and talk about art or were they like everybody else and tell jokes and gossip?

MB: Well, they talked about mostly . . . told jokes and gossiped, made fun of each other and talked a little art talk, but not much. Mrs. Glackens served very good dinners and she had a servant who was very capable. She was a wealthy woman and so she had money to spend on such things. And Glackens (this is probably something I shouldn't say off the cuff) always said that she ruined his life because he married her and she was another one

who bossed him. He had a studio up on the top floor that he wouldn't even . . . he kept it locked; he wouldn't even allow her to come in it. She was one of those very neat people; she had antiseptic children. The doorknobs had to be cleaned with antiseptic every day so the children wouldn't get any germs. Don't write that down. But I mean she was quite a personality.

PK: Quite a character.

MB: And she had some reputation in her own right as a humorist. Before that, she had made caricatures and things. She was . . . I don't know how well known she was, but she did have a reputation as a sort of caricature artist.

PK: I don't know if it's particularly relevant but I am going to ask this question. Your father and mother were apart quite a bit and, of course, you're free to answer as you choose, but I'm wondering if there was ever a question of any other women.

MB: No, there wasn't. In this book that's one of the things that made me mad. In this book of of Hill's, he mentioned that the reason why my father and mother . . . my mother was cold and distant was that Ours (we always called my father "Ours" for some reason, O-u-r-s) and so when we were abroad, my sister used to use that term and we sort of took it up, much to the amusement of Alice's husband) . . . . Well, anyway, what was I saying?

PK: Well, in the book . . . . You were saying something that irritated you in the book, with regards to the suggestion of another woman.

MB: Well, yes. That he suggested that there was a little affair. There had been a little affair that didn't amount to anything and that, thereafter, as a result of it, my mother remained cold, distant, hostile and all that. This was absolutely untrue because she never mentioned it or brought it up. But he did have an affair with a concert pianist. She was a very hysterical person and she spent most of her life in a sanitarium because she was delicate and had periods of nervous breakdowns. Evidently she sort of made a pass at my father. She had taken a fancy to him and he fell for her and they did have an affair. But, as he always said later on, to my mother later on . . . . Mrs. Powell mentioned this in one of the letters, if you ever read the letters, that he always felt guilty about this, because he thought he had made my mother suffer, which he did, of course. We didn't find out until later on that he was darn lucky to get rid of her, because she, at this particular period . . . . He came to my mother one time when we were still small children and she was in the hospital. He came to my mother and told her that he had a great love and that he had to break it to her. At this time the woman was in the hospital. He said that he and this woman who was a great love were going to France to live, that she was an accomplished pianist and that she was going to give some recitals. He said he was going to leave my mother. And of course that was a terrible shock to her, but she rose to the occasion and made it very clear that he had to support her and the children; that she wasn't going to put up with that sort of thing. I probably shouldn't be telling these tales out of . . . .

PK: It's very interesting. But did . . . he obviously decided against this rather . . . ?

MB: Yes, he decided against it, you see, because my mother put up a strong front about it. But it just happened, at this particular time, that the husband of this woman was thoroughly fed up with this woman. She'd been a great nuisance to him. He was an older man and he was tired of putting up with her nonsense, as he called it. And he thought that, if it was a great love, that this was his chance to get rid of her. And so he came to my mother for an interview and offered to help her get rid of this woman. He told her that he was hoping at the time that my mother would be willing to have a divorce so that he could get rid of his wife.

PK: So then Ernest would go off with the pianist to Paris and everybody would be rid of her?

MB: Yes, everybody would be rid of her. Well, her husband would be rid of her. But, in any case, it didn't work out because there was a series of events that showed that my father was very glad to get rid of her, get her off his hands, get over it. I mean he got over it very quickly. Certain things came about that he found out about her, and he saw that this would have been a disaster.

PK: Was there anything else that comes to mind?

MB: I don't think that he ever had . . . he had his light romantic side to him, but I don't think he did too much about it because I never heard of any other woman. Mary Wilson Preston, who was the wife of James Preston -- he and she had a kind of a thing between them. It was a flirtation, but it never developed into anything, I'm sure of that.

PK: Is there anything else that comes to your mind in general regarding your father that you'd like to say for the record, so to speak? Do you think we've covered it?

MB: No, I think it did sort of estrange them in a way. I think they had a normal marriage, but I think my mother never really recovered from the fact that he had wanted . . . proposed to leave her.

PK: You obviously kept in close relationship with your father right up to the end?

MB: Yes, I had a close relationship with him. We understood each other. We talked about art at times, and I went out once or twice with him when he sketched and painted and watched him paint. We used to go there to see him quite often. After I married even, we used to go and have dinner with them quite often. So, until I went to France . . . I saw him less and less frequently, you know, at certain periods when he was away and when he was occupied. But mainly I have to say that his life was dedicated to painting, and he didn't go much into a lot of things that maybe other people do. He didn't go into sports and he didn't do other things much except go to places in the summer where he could paint. He liked to watch a baseball game once in a while and he even used to bounce a ball against the wall for exercise and amusement. I can't think of anything else. He was a very genial soul, very kind and very genial. He liked to joke. One of the reasons he didn't take my mother around to any social events was that he had a sort of reputation for making jokes for repartees and for telling off-color stories.

PK: So she might not have approved.

MB: No, she had heard them enough so he knew that he didn't want to take her out where she'd have to hear his jokes.

PK: Unless you have anything more to add, I want to thank you for sharing your memories of your father.

MB: Well, I hope that this more intimate thing that I told you doesn't come out in a publication or anything.

[END OF INTERVIEW]