



Smithsonian  
*Archives of American Art*

Oral history interview with Arline  
Custer, 1975 April 7

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# Transcript

## Preface

Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The original transcript was edited. In 2024 the Archives retranscribed the original audio and attempted to create a verbatim transcript. 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.

Poor audio when switching between speakers led to some words and phrases being inaudible; the original transcript was used to clarify passages.

## Interview

[00:00:02.82]

GARNETT MCCOY: This is Garnett McCoy at the Archives of American Art. I am interviewing Arline Custer, who is the first Archivist of the Archives. [Audio adjustment.]

This is Garnett McCoy of the Archives of American Art, and I am interviewing Arline Custer, who was the first Archivist of the Archives when it began in 1954. This is April 7, 1975. Now Arlene, I wondered if you could recount some of your recollections of your initial awareness of the idea, the concept of the archives, and how it initially began?

[00:00:50.04]

ARLINE CUSTER: Well, as I remember it, the only three people who knew about anything about the Archives of American Art was Mr. Richardson, Director of the Detroit Institute of Arts, and Lawrence Fleischman, a Detroit merchant who was most interested in the Detroit Institute of Arts, and in art problems in general, and myself. I think the two men had talked about the need for accumulating material about American art, primarily because Mr. Richardson was a specialist in American art, and he had been writing a book on American art, and had had great difficulty in finding material that he needed for this program.

[00:01:44.89]

And as it was presented to me, it was Larry Fleischman's idea that we form a group to bring together all of the art materials about American art, and have them in one central place so that they could be used by anyone, and would be a resource—research tool.

[00:02:17.13]

And the idea was that not only the manuscripts themselves that could be collected in Detroit, but the team, or a team, or teams would go out to various cities, and museums, and art galleries and microfilm whatever records they had. And on, let's see, the seventh—on June the 16th, Mr. Richardson asked me if I would have breakfast with him and with Larry to discuss this program, whatever would follow as a program. And I told him, well, I always had breakfast with my husband, and if he could come along, why, that would be fine. [Laughs.]

[00:03:10.56]

So we met for breakfast on June 16 and the two men were very much excited about their idea. And either one or the other of them had already dreamed up the name of it. It should be called the Archives of American Art, and it would collect in one central place all the documentation of American art manuscripts, sources, or other secondary source materials, and microfilms of material already in collections. And that the material should be carefully arranged, cataloged, and indexed. And they hoped to have grants in aid to further research in publication. And I think that the two men had discussed this only fairly recently so that it was a brand-new idea.

[00:04:16.93]

GARNETT MCCOY: Had you met Larry before that?

[00:04:19.34]

ARLINE CUSTER: I had met him just because he was around, yes, but I hadn't really visited with him. But I was the Librarian of the Detroit Institute of Arts Reference Library, and I'm sure that's why they called me in then to do this, because they foresaw that it was a problem of acquisitions, of cataloging, of indexing, of microfilming techniques, and that sort of thing, which is—or was, anyway, library matters, and they knew I had been interested in all of those aspects. And I was fascinated by the problem and eager to begin it, even though I recognized that it was a tremendously presumptuous plan.

[00:05:12.05]

And my husband, who was the realistic skeptic, suggested obstacles, doubting the plausibility, suggesting limitations, cautioning against haste, proclaiming that it was a five million-dollar project, would require a huge staff of experts. And I think in a way, he was really right. But the rest of us could only see the good to come of it, and thought we would be willing to start it. And as it happened, we really did start without any money at all. And through the years, I've watched this program [laughs] very interestedly to see that it is still going on, still being really very exciting.

[00:05:59.07]

GARNETT MCCOY: How did they get their initial money to take off?

[00:06:04.39]

ARLINE CUSTER: Well, I think one of the first things we did was to devise an announcement of what we hoped to do. And I'm not sure whether I can come up with a date on that or not. But the first—I guess the first thing we did was to begin the microfilming program. I think that was before we even had any money. [Laughs.]

[00:06:38.87]

But we decided to go to Philadelphia first. And they sent me—it was the first time I'd ever made any sort of business trip on my own. But on June 30, I took an airplane to Philadelphia, and I visited practically all the museums and the historical societies there. And everyone I talked to thought it was a marvelous idea. They were all very interested to have their material microfilmed, partly because they saw that as a way of preserving their material, and also not only preserving it, but knowing what they had, which in many cases, they didn't realize, because a lot of it was historical records of their organizations, which were stored in attics or in basements, and was so covered with dust and so old, they didn't really know what they had. But let's see, wasn't that fairly quick after the beginning?

[00:08:01.47]

GARNETT MCCOY: Well, it's just—basically, that's a few days.

[00:08:03.57]

ARLINE CUSTER: Yeah. The 16th, I think, was—I had breakfast with them and then on the 30th, I went off and—

[00:08:11.45]

GARNETT MCCOY: Two weeks.

[00:08:12.39]

ARLINE CUSTER: Yeah. Some—well, we talked about having Anna Wells Rutledge for the research person in Philadelphia, to really be there to organize the work of going from museum to museum, or society to collect the—or to find out what should be microfilmed. But I don't quite remember whether she was busy and couldn't do it, or not. But somehow or other, we got Charles Coleman Sellers, who was free that summer, and his wife helped. And he then worked all summer on organizing the material, and he found a microfilm or two, T. Worcester Brown of Microsurance firm, I think it was called in those days. And he went right

to work on it.

[00:09:18.47]

GARNETT MCCOY: There was a lady there, too, Ms. "Lichtein?"

[00:09:24.66]

ARLINE CUSTER: Toward the end of the summer when he realized he'd have to go back to teaching, he found Frances Lichten, I think it is.

[00:09:31.23]

GARNETT MCCOY: Oh, I see.

[00:09:32.22]

ARLINE CUSTER: Uh-huh [affirmative]. And then she carried on after that. Now, in a way, this was a separate project, because it wasn't really under the Library, and it wasn't really part of the Institute's work. And I have a note here that on July 6, I had a meeting of my library staff, anyway, and told them about the Archives. All this had been going on without knowing really what it was. But on July 8, Mr. Richardson and I, with advance notice, went downtown to City Hall and we had our picture taken with the mayor. What mayor would that have been?

[00:10:27.45]

GARNETT MCCOY: Mayor Cobo?

[00:10:30.99]

ARLINE CUSTER: I believe it was Cobo. Yeah, that was 1954, so I guess it was Cobo. And this was to be used to advertise the Archives, and we hoped, of course, that the mayor and the city would take over the financing of the archives. But I guess Detroit has always had budgetary problems, and although the mayor thought it was a fine idea, he didn't provide any financial aid for it. He said we could use the Archives building, but—I mean, the Museum building, yeah. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. But there would be no funds for it.

[00:11:14.31]

Let's see. The picture was in the night edition of the *Free Press*, but it wasn't in the edition that we got at home as a Morning Edition. And I think it was just the picture. But the news carried the story the next day, I guess it was. And—oh, I do have a note for a day or two later, July 11, that the *Free Press* did have an article on it, and that the story was almost word for word from—I forget her first name. Her last name was Peck. She was the press public relations persons of the Detroit Institute of Arts. Then it wasn't until July 20 that we began a final conference on the prospectus. And I have always thought that I wrote the prospectus, and I haven't really found anything says I didn't. But Mr. Grigo [ph] and Mr. Richardson, and Mr. Bostic [ph], of course, worked on it, too.

[00:12:34.98]

GARNETT MCCOY: Yeah.

[00:12:35.94]

ARLINE CUSTER: And Bostic did most of the typesetting plans, the design—

[00:12:42.96]

GARNETT MCCOY: The layout.

[00:12:43.32]

ARLINE CUSTER: —the layout, and all of the prospectus. And in my folders here, I have written on two of them, "this is the second revision," and "this is the third revision." And I don't know whether there are any more beyond that or not, but I think we got that out in

early August, or early summer, anyway, of 1954.

[00:13:05.72]

GARNETT MCCOY: Yeah.

[00:13:16.33]

ARLINE CUSTER: You asked about the funds. And I haven't come to it yet, but there was some kind of a meeting later, which we'll probably, in my notes here, come to. And the first big money was \$10,000 from Mrs. Ford.

[00:13:32.82]

GARNETT MCCOY: Oh, I see.

[00:13:33.44]

ARLINE CUSTER: Mrs. Edsel Ford. \$10,000, is that what I said? Yeah.

[00:13:38.24]

GARNETT MCCOY: And that was used for the filming in Philadelphia?

[00:13:42.77]

ARLINE CUSTER: Well, it must have been, yeah. I don't think we had any other funds.

[00:13:49.52]

GARNETT MCCOY: Because you had no staff at that point.

[00:13:51.32]

ARLINE CUSTER: No, we had no staff. Mm-mm [negative]. There was just me. I wrote all the letters to Mr. Sellers and Ms. Lichten, when she came on. And then later, when we had Ms. Calgary in New York, I wrote all the letters and instructions to her.

[00:14:12.79]

GARNETT MCCOY: Yeah.

[00:14:13.48]

ARLINE CUSTER: I have notes through September, and probably all the rest of the year, of meetings with Mr. Richardson and Mr. Grigo about the Archives. But they don't really say what we talked about. Oh, except about September 23, I began writing up notes of all the Archives' gifts. And I think those were then published in some sort of little brochures, or—

[00:14:43.57]

GARNETT MCCOY: They were in *The Art Quarterly*, I believe. Yes, finally in *The Art Quarterly*.

[00:14:47.38]

GARNETT MCCOY: Yeah.

[00:14:47.77]

ARLINE CUSTER: Yeah. Oh, and also, I was getting ready for a trustees' meeting. But I guess that trustees was the Institute's trustees meeting.

[00:15:02.65]

You think I'm speaking into it all right, or too close?

[00:15:04.77]

GARNETT MCCOY: Yeah. No, that's fine. Can you hold on just a minute?

[00:15:13.49]

[Audio distorted:] One of the things that I've always wondered about was, as I said, Mr. Richardson believed that the Archive should be entirely a microfilm collection.

[END OF TRACK AAA\_custer75\_3321\_m]

[00:00:18.98]

GARNETT MCCOY: Arline, one of the things that I've always wondered about was, as I understand it, Mr. Richardson believed that the Archives should be entirely a microfilm collection only and not try to solicit original papers. But shortly after the Archives started, original papers were offered. And we did begin accepting them, and ultimately soliciting them, too. Could you say anything about that?

[00:00:44.72]

ARLINE CUSTER: I think that's right, that we really thought of it first as a microfilming project. The library had a few papers and a few sketchbooks that we discussed as to whether they were manuscripts, or whether they were works of art. And finally, I think the works—the sketchbooks, anyway, turned out to be works of art and were kept at the Institute.

[00:01:10.34]

GARNETT MCCOY: Is that the Thomas Cole material?

[00:01:13.72]

ARLINE CUSTER: Could be. I don't remember exactly.

[00:01:19.13]

GARNETT MCCOY: Do you remember—

[00:01:20.23]

ARLINE CUSTER: But you're right that soon we were beginning to get especially dealers' papers, as I remember it. McIntyre, wasn't he one of the dealers?

[00:01:31.77]

GARNETT MCCOY: Macbeth Galleries.

[00:01:32.86]

ARLINE CUSTER: Or Macbeth Galleries, yeah.

[00:01:34.06]

GARNETT MCCOY: Macbeth Gallery, I think. McIntyre had the Macbeth Gallery and would send things from time to time.

[00:01:39.82]

ARLINE CUSTER: I think his were the first papers in it.

[00:01:42.82]

GARNETT MCCOY: And one thing in particular that I wondered about—and that is a two-volume set, very elaborately bound, of autographed letters from artists. Do you recall that? It's two big, large volumes filled—with autograph letters from artists tipped in, running back to the 18th century and going up into the 19th century.

[00:02:03.73]

ARLINE CUSTER: I think—

[00:02:04.21]

GARNETT MCCOY: And it was—I believe it was the first acquisition that the Archives got, is at least what I've heard from Bill Wolfenden.

[00:02:12.58]

ARLINE CUSTER: We'd have to go back into the records on that. My first thought was that belonged to the Reference Library. But yeah. If he says that, it's probably so, that it was one of the gifts. I sort of remember it. Yeah. Beautiful.

[00:02:28.98]

GARNETT MCCOY: It was given to the Archives by the Detroit Institute of Arts, possibly as a manuscript.

[00:02:36.43]

ARLINE CUSTER: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. As a manuscript collection, yeah, or a sort of trans—if it was the library's, transfer it over to the Archives—[cross talk] —Uh-huh [affirmative].

[00:02:45.49]

GARNETT MCCOY: Because at one point, there was an agreement that book material that the Archives gathered in would go to the Museum. Do you remember that, or was that later on?

[00:02:58.06]

ARLINE CUSTER: That must have been later on. But yes. The Archives wasn't to keep any books, anyway. So they probably did have that arranged.

[00:03:09.46]

GARNETT MCCOY: [Inaudible]

[00:03:15.61]

ARLINE CUSTER: The only—Let me see. Now, I've come to something that called itself a finance meeting of the Archives in October, October 11. As I sort of remember it, we had a meeting of a select group of people from around the community, and that Mr. Richardson talked to them and explained what it was he wanted. And I have a note in my diary that I wondered if the people who were there really knew that they were supposed to go out and bring in money. [Laughs.] But we—the next day, apparently, we talked about it, and thought that we would send a letter to all of those who had signed up and give them a book of gift certificates that they would go out and sell. Do you remember seeing—

[00:04:21.78]

GARNETT MCCOY: No, no.

[00:04:22.53]

ARLINE CUSTER: —any of those? No? I'm pretty sure they were done, those gift certificates. And then, the Founders Society was asked to cooperate with it. And the 26th of October, we had only \$25 from the founders' solicitation. But the next day, we had \$625 from about 35 people.

[00:04:47.13]

GARNETT MCCOY: Very good.

[00:04:47.70]

ARLINE CUSTER: Yeah. So that was helping. And by November—well, it must have been even before, because my note is that I began reviewing the letters in order to write a report for the *Art Quarterly* of the work that sellers and Lichten had done in Philadelphia. So we were moving right along.

[00:05:14.93]

GARNETT MCCOY: Very rapidly.

[00:05:15.86]

ARLINE CUSTER: Yes. And in December, the first part of December, we were wondering about employing somebody else to help with the Archives.

[00:05:31.21]

GARNETT MCCOY: When was that?

[00:05:32.44]

ARLINE CUSTER: That was December— December 2.

[00:05:35.00]

GARNETT MCCOY: Because it was becoming too much for you to handle?

[00:05:36.89]

ARLINE CUSTER: Yes. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Alone.

[00:05:40.25]

GARNETT MCCOY: With all the other work.

[00:05:41.75]

ARLINE CUSTER: With all the other work, and with material coming in.

[00:05:44.93]

GARNETT MCCOY: [Inaudible]

[00:05:47.30]

ARLINE CUSTER: [Laughs.] Well, I've always said it took three or four to take my place when I left. [Laughs.] Now, that's all I have in my personal diary of 1954. And here in January of '55, we—I'm recording the gift from the Macbeth Gallery, of 91 photos of artists. Now, there may have been something earlier than that. But as I said, this diary of mine mostly tells about what I cooked for dinner or what the weather was like. Just now and then would I put in something about the work.

[00:06:37.08]

Well, here's a little point. In March—March the 9th, the three of us had a little conference about the Archives. And we talked about whether we should sell subscriptions to our microfilms. Apparently, Winterthur had asked for it.

[00:06:55.95]

GARNETT MCCOY: Yeah. We're still talking about that.

[00:06:57.44]

ARLINE CUSTER: Are you? Yeah. I don't remember any decision then to whether we'd sell it. Do you sell them now?

[00:07:05.42]

GARNETT MCCOY: No, we don't yet. But we're still talking about it.

[00:07:16.13]

ARLINE CUSTER: [Laughs.] [Pause.] Yeah. That's not important.



[00:07:19.18]

GARNETT MCCOY: Particularly in connection with our auction catalog, do you remember the auction catalog project in its beginning?

[00:07:25.17]

ARLINE CUSTER: Yes. Well, not really. Though, the auction catalogs was one of the things we did microfilm. And they weren't on—they weren't manuscripts, really.

[00:07:37.71]

GARNETT MCCOY: That's right. They weren't. They were catalogs.

[00:07:40.55]

ARLINE CUSTER: But they were printed catalogs. But we—I think I'm saying this right, that we did think right away that we should film them.

[00:07:48.33]

GARNETT MCCOY: Yeah. And there are great many of them in the Pennsylvania Academy material that we filmed.

[00:07:52.50]

ARLINE CUSTER: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. That was really one of—the first place we microfilmed.

[00:07:57.03]

GARNETT MCCOY: [Inaudible] Pennsylvania—

[00:07:58.31]

ARLINE CUSTER: Pennsylvania Academy of Arts, yeah. Well, we hired Ray McIntyre in August of '55.

[00:08:10.32]

GARNETT MCCOY: Was he the first?

[00:08:11.56]

ARLINE CUSTER: He was the first one.

[00:08:12.76]

GARNETT MCCOY: The first one after you?

[00:08:13.90]

ARLINE CUSTER: Yeah. Mm-hmm. And of course, I was still there. Uh-huh [affirmative].

[00:08:17.34]

GARNETT MCCOY: [Inaudible] Did he work full time?

[00:08:20.09]

ARLINE CUSTER: He worked full time. He did mostly the recording of the microfilm. We had two things we were doing in those days. We had a running account, by looking at the microfilm, of what the material was about. And then, we had a system, but I think we bogged down right away on it, of transferring the microfilm to black reading on white, that was self-adhesive so that it could be cut, clipped, and mounted on cards.

[00:09:03.71]

GARNETT MCCOY: Yes, that was the micro [inaudible].

[00:09:09.82]

ARLINE CUSTER: Micro—Yes. I've forgotten. It was a reproduction of the microfilm itself on white paper with black reading. So you could read it with a magnifying glass. You didn't have to really have a reader with light shining through it. And although I had started the recording on sheets of what the film had on it, Ray went on with that and did the—whatever we could, of recording on cards, the names of the artists.

[00:09:48.55]

GARNETT MCCOY: And you began that?

[00:09:51.17]

ARLINE CUSTER: I began it and did it for several months until we got Ray, uh-huh [affirmative].

[00:09:56.72]

GARNETT MCCOY: Well, you do an awful lot of it for somebody who has much other work to do too.

[00:10:00.50]

ARLINE CUSTER: Yes. And we didn't have a very large library staff then either. We had May — May Ott [ph] who did all the typing, and mostly worked with the slide collection, and Warren Peters who did the reference work. And I was supposed to still do all the cataloging of the books, and all the ordering and purchasing of the books [laughs], as well as doing all of this archive stuff. But it was great fun. I just loved it.

[00:10:29.09]

GARNETT MCCOY: Well, you learn a lot. That's for sure.

[00:10:30.23]

ARLINE CUSTER: Yes. That's right. About everything, about organizing material, and—

[00:10:36.26]

GARNETT MCCOY: And about the artists.

[00:10:37.25]

ARLINE CUSTER: —and about the artists themselves. And so well, let's see, in August of '55, we—apparently, the three of us got together for a meeting, the first time we'd had one in quite a while. But I guess we were all busy on our jobs, keeping things going. And in October the 5th, I have a note that we were buying a reader and a typewriter for the Archives. That's the first equipment of its own, I guess, that we got. The rest, we were using from the Library and other places.

[00:11:14.64]

GARNETT MCCOY: And the money that had been—the money for the microfilming in Philadelphia was still out of the \$10,000 that Mrs. Ford gave us, I assume.

[00:11:23.22]

ARLINE CUSTER: I assume.

[00:11:23.76]

GARNETT MCCOY: [Inaudible]

[00:11:26.25]

ARLINE CUSTER: I never really knew much about the finances. At least I didn't notice anything more in these diaries, as I went through.

[00:11:36.30]

GARNETT MCCOY: But apparently, there must have been some sort of board by that time, too, at least—

[00:11:40.37]

ARLINE CUSTER: Yes. Yes. I'm sure there was.

[00:11:44.62]

GARNETT MCCOY: But you weren't involved with that at all?

[00:11:47.06]

ARLINE CUSTER: Well, I must have gone to the meetings. Well, I don't know. Maybe I didn't. If they were high-caliber financial geniuses, I probably didn't go. [Laughs.]

[00:12:00.77]

GARNETT MCCOY: But all this time, Mr. Richardson took a great interest in what it was that going on, I imagine.

[00:12:06.53]

ARLINE CUSTER: Oh, yes. He was very much interested. And I would occasionally show him some of the microfilm. I had a note that he looked at the Longacre film.

[00:12:16.07]

GARNETT MCCOY: Oh, yes.

[00:12:16.22]

ARLINE CUSTER: And he thought it was just wonderful, and the microfilming was very clear and neat. And that was one thing of interest too. I think this was about the first microfilming of manuscripts, and we had to work out a system of showing where one letter began and where it ended, and also identifying each frame, so that a researcher could refer to a particular role and a frame number as a device.

[00:12:46.45]

So, good. I'm glad to hear that, because it seemed to me that it was a very useful way to footnote anything that they were doing. And of course, in cataloging, too, I suppose you could identify it that way. You knew where to find it on the reel, if you gave the frame number.

[00:13:06.39]

GARNETT MCCOY: You almost have to, because the [inaudible].

[00:13:08.80]

ARLINE CUSTER: Yeah. Somewhere along in October of '55, I wrote up a ten-year plan for the Archives, which probably [laughs] never came to pass, but particularly because we were using a very small space at the back of the Reference Library, where we had to house the photograph collection. And there was no light, no windows, just the door that went into this small room. And of course, it was dark, so that it was all right for microfilm reading. But there wasn't any air. It was pretty bad. And anyway, with the amount of microfilm we were getting, and the beginning of use of the microfilm, we really did need to have plans for some kind of a room to store the material and to use for readers. So I think that's what that ten-year thing was that I was writing in October.

[00:14:17.05]

GARNETT MCCOY: You projected the larger staff and [inaudible].

[00:14:19.82]

ARLINE CUSTER: Yes, that sort, uh-huh [affirmative].

[00:14:23.00]

GARNETT MCCOY: Were you beginning to get users by that time?

[00:14:26.12]

ARLINE CUSTER: Not really very, very heavy. I think we had more correspondence about what we were trying to collect. I remember Mr. Bettmann of Bettmann Archives came out terribly worried, for fear we were going to usurp some of his business from him. But I think he went away satisfied. I don't remember hearing anything more about it.

[00:14:50.60]

Well, here I have a note, finally, on October 17, that the Archives' Trustees signed a charter and made bylaws. Now, I don't know who this Moore could have been, M-O-O-R-E.

[00:15:07.33]

GARNETT MCCOY: I don't know exactly who he was either. I think he was a local art patron of some kind, I believe.

[00:15:13.28]

ARLINE CUSTER: Mm. And then, apparently, Mrs. Ford and Larry Fleischman. And at the end of the moon—at the end of the afternoon, there was a check for \$10,000 from Mrs. Ford. So now, that didn't come in until 1955. I really don't know what we were going on before that. [Laughs.]

[00:15:34.20]

GARNETT MCCOY: It must have been that \$600 that came in through the—

[00:15:37.55]

ARLINE CUSTER: Yeah. Or maybe Larry did give something that I didn't know about. But I have always thought that he didn't really give any money to it. But here, Mr. Richardson, maybe he—

[00:15:51.98]

GARNETT MCCOY: You don't suppose the Philadelphia institutions themselves kicked in money [inaudible].

[00:15:57.16]

ARLINE CUSTER: No. I'm sure they didn't. And I'm not sure that they got a copy of the film.

[00:16:03.89]

GARNETT MCCOY: I don't think they did. No. They got a copy of the inventory list, I think.

[00:16:14.08]

ARLINE CUSTER: Ah. Uh-huh [affirmative]. And in December, I see I spent 13 and a half hours on writing a manual for field-searching staff. [Laughs.]

[00:16:23.23]

GARNETT MCCOY: [Inaudible]

[00:16:25.94]

ARLINE CUSTER: I'm a slow reader, writer. And only in December did we put a sign on the back wall of the library saying "Archives of American Art," with an eagle over the top of it, for this little back room where we were working. And probably, the reason I was writing on that manual for field-searchers was because we must have, about that time, taken on Bartlett

Calgary to do the New York—

[00:16:59.97]

GARNETT MCCOY: Oh, yes, of course. So, she would have come in about at the end of December.

[00:17:03.79]

ARLINE CUSTER: Yes, I think so. I don't have any note here when she started, but probably the correspondence would date that for us, if we wanted to really find it.

[00:17:17.00]

GARNETT MCCOY: Do you remember her? Did she come out to Detroit?

[00:17:20.69]

ARLINE CUSTER: She came to Detroit, but after she'd been working for us. I went to New York. Must be in the next year. And I talked to all the people in New York that I could find. But I think we had already found her to work for us.

[00:17:45.40]

GARNETT MCCOY: Did Mr. Richardson get her to work—

[00:17:48.25]

ARLINE CUSTER: I think he may have. I don't have the real—don't remember seeing how we got her. But apparently, she was available. And some people had said that she was difficult to work with. But she turned out very well for us.

[00:18:07.83]

GARNETT MCCOY: She did get a lot of material.

[00:18:09.27]

ARLINE CUSTER: Yes. And then, she gave a lot of her own material, which she had collected. And she was a very good—really, a very good worker for us. It was in January, January 24, that I made my first trip to New York and—

[00:18:26.71]

GARNETT MCCOY: 1956?

[00:18:27.67]

ARLINE CUSTER: '56, '56, right. And the first time I had met her too. And we met in the New York Public Library's Manuscript Division. And there, we had to talk with the microfilm people, because the New York Public has its own microfilm plan. And although Mr. Brown came up from Philadelphia, I'm not sure at this point whether New York Public did its own microfilming, or whether we did hire Brown or someone else to do it.

[00:19:06.05]

GARNETT MCCOY: I believe that we did it at the New York Public. But whether it was right away or not, I don't know. I know that later on we used their microfilming facility.

[00:19:16.58]

ARLINE CUSTER: We did use their microfilming facilities, yeah. I expect they didn't want anyone else to handle it, and especially since they had their own. I think it probably cost us more than Mr. Brown's did. He gave us a quotation of \$37 a day, which would work out to .485 [cents] per frame.

[00:19:41.31]

GARNETT MCCOY: That's not bad.

[00:19:43.41]

ARLINE CUSTER: But what—I don't know what the New York Public charged. And I went to New York again on February 7.

[00:19:58.14]

GARNETT MCCOY: And Ms. Calgary was working entirely out of the New York Public Library. We didn't have our own facility.

[00:20:04.42]

ARLINE CUSTER: No. No. I think she worked in there in the manuscript section and picked out all the things that should be microfilmed, and took care of getting it microfilmed. Yeah. I don't remember whether she went—Did she go anywhere else besides the New York Public Library?

[00:20:26.04]

GARNETT MCCOY: I don't think she did, except that she did—she found old collections of papers here and there for the Archives to acquire. She got us the papers of Elizabeth McCausland, for example, the critic. And she got some papers of a man named Ducasse, which had been in the Metropolitan Museum. And she got some papers of a man named Weichsel of the Peoples Art Gallery. But I believe the New York Public Library was the only institution that she worked out of, the only repository of material, I believe.

[00:21:02.38]

ARLINE CUSTER: Maybe we didn't get any from anywhere else. Though, I talked in February with the people at the Met.

[00:21:09.48]

GARNETT MCCOY: Later on, we went there.

[00:21:11.45]

ARLINE CUSTER: We did, and we did microfilm later there.

[00:21:13.72]

GARNETT MCCOY: After Ms. Calgary had left.

[00:21:15.82]

ARLINE CUSTER: Oh, I see. And I talked with Mrs. Howell at the Frick.

[00:21:22.24]

GARNETT MCCOY: [Inaudible]

[00:21:23.61]

ARLINE CUSTER: Did you ever do anything with the Frick?

[00:21:25.50]

GARNETT MCCOY: We did.

[00:21:25.83]

ARLINE CUSTER: Yes, uh-huh. And we went to Brooklyn Museum, and Cooper Union, and—

[00:21:34.20]

GARNETT MCCOY: New York Historical.

[00:21:35.46]

ARLINE CUSTER: —New York Historical, and the Museum of Natural History. And I went to three places in Newark. But I guess all of those took later for anything really to—

[00:21:48.49]

GARNETT MCCOY: Like the New York Historical, we're only doing that now, 20 years—

[00:21:52.39]

ARLINE CUSTER: Oh, really? Uh-huh.

[00:21:53.98]

GARNETT MCCOY: They didn't want to let us do it at first.

[00:21:56.52]

ARLINE CUSTER: Oh, they didn't? Well, that seems to be all the notes I have in my personal diaries.

[00:22:06.53]

GARNETT MCCOY: When did you leave Detroit?

[00:22:09.44]

ARLINE CUSTER: I left Detroit in October 1956.

[00:22:15.08]

GARNETT MCCOY: Oh, did you?

[00:22:16.19]

ARLINE CUSTER: So that really was the end of my period there. Yes. I wrote an article about it a couple of years later—

[00:22:23.80]

GARNETT MCCOY: [Inaudible] library [inaudible].

[00:22:25.28]

ARLINE CUSTER: —for the—well, it was for a library publication, but not the journal, the— what is it?

[00:22:38.69]

GARNETT MCCOY: [Inaudible] library [inaudible]?

[00:22:40.96]

ARLINE CUSTER: No. The RTSD— the Resources and Technical Services Bulletin. Yeah.

[00:22:48.94]

GARNETT MCCOY: Did you—Did Miriam Leslie come when you were still there? Or you were gone by the time she got there?

[00:22:55.91]

ARLINE CUSTER: She came later. Now, I can't quite—Was she hired just for the Archives?

[00:23:01.78]

GARNETT MCCOY: I think so.

[00:23:02.50]

ARLINE CUSTER: Because Carol Selby then was the librarian.

[00:23:05.18]

GARNETT MCCOY: [Inaudible] I believe Miriam was hired simply to be the Archivist.

[00:23:10.93]

ARLINE CUSTER: I see. Yes. Well, she came later, and I don't just how much later, but probably—

[00:23:15.82]

GARNETT MCCOY: Yeah. I don't know exactly when she came either. I think it was '58 or '59. It would have been—There must have been a hiatus there when Carol followed up from you as the Archivist and the Librarian [inaudible].

[00:23:29.27]

ARLINE CUSTER: And Ray McIntyre was still there.

[00:23:31.63]

GARNETT MCCOY: And he remained for a while, yes. And then, did you have someone else besides Ray who worked at the inventorying and so forth?

[00:23:42.44]

ARLINE CUSTER: Well, I don't know after—

[00:23:44.46]

GARNETT MCCOY: When you were there?

[00:23:45.32]

ARLINE CUSTER: —that. It was just Ray when I was there. Yeah.

[00:23:50.94]

GARNETT MCCOY: And Bartlett Calgary was still there when you left, too.

[00:23:56.95]

ARLINE CUSTER: Yes. Bartlett Calgary was still there. We hadn't—Let's see. When I went to the New York Historical, I talked to that man who was a photographer, who later, I think, did some work for you. What was his name?

[00:24:14.70]

GARNETT MCCOY: A microfilm man?

[00:24:16.41]

ARLINE CUSTER: No, not a microfilm man. He was an employee at the New York Historical.

[00:24:22.05]

GARNETT MCCOY: [Inaudible]

[00:24:23.77]

ARLINE CUSTER: Main, Wayne. Wayne!

[00:24:25.67]

GARNETT MCCOY: Oh, Wayne Andrews.



[00:24:26.90]

ARLINE CUSTER: Wayne Andrews.

[00:24:27.57]

GARNETT MCCOY: Oh, yes, of course, of course.

[00:24:29.95]

ARLINE CUSTER: Didn't he do something later for the Archives?

[00:24:32.46]

GARNETT MCCOY: He became our Chair. Somebody gave us some money to establish a Chair in American Art History at Wayne State University. And Wayne had been—he had left the New York Historical Society, and had been an editor at Scribner's. And then, he left Scribner's and became our chair at Wayne State University.

[00:24:53.43]

ARLINE CUSTER: Which means he teaches, does it?

[00:24:55.50]

GARNETT MCCOY: He teaches American art history.

[00:24:57.01]

ARLINE CUSTER: Oh. Well, that was very good. Oh, you have more money now than you used to. [Laughs.]

[00:25:02.05]

GARNETT MCCOY: You know, Arthur Brefton was at the New York Historical Society after Wayne Andrews. He's now our Curator of Manuscripts at the Archives.

[00:25:12.11]

ARLINE CUSTER: Well, I'm so proud of you and how you've grown, and coming to the Smithsonian and with your branches—New York, and Boston, and San Francisco.

[00:25:25.58]

GARNETT MCCOY: And Detroit.

[00:25:26.71]

ARLINE CUSTER: And Detroit still. It is a branch from now, and it was the original.

[00:25:32.58]

GARNETT MCCOY: Did you know Bill Wolfenden while you were the Librarian?

[00:25:35.65]

ARLINE CUSTER: Yes. Bill Wolfenden was head of the educational division when I was there.

[00:25:42.34]

GARNETT MCCOY: I think he came to the Archives in 1950 or so.

[00:25:46.33]

ARLINE CUSTER: Quite a little later, yes, in '56. And I just noticed in one of the letters I have here that he didn't really move from the education part to the—directly to the Archives. He had some foundation project that he was working on.

[00:26:08.77]

GARNETT MCCOY: Yeah, Ford Foundation.

[00:26:10.43]

ARLINE CUSTER: That's right. And they seemed to need somebody to coordinate the Archives. And so he just took that over too as part of his work.

[00:26:20.26]

GARNETT MCCOY: The legend that has been passed down to me is that Larry, as a man who was very much interested in learning all he could about the artists whose works he was collecting, had a painting by someone. And according to one myth or legend, it was the famous Thomas Anshutz painting called "Steelworkers Noontime". And he tried to look up material on Anshutz, and he couldn't find any. So he got concerned about having a place that would encourage people to write about American artists. Now, other people have said it wasn't Thomas Anshutz's painting at all. It was somebody else's painting. You never heard this story, did you?

[00:26:58.61]

ARLINE CUSTER: No, I hadn't heard of Thomas. And I didn't even know he was interested doing research.

[00:27:03.18]

GARNETT MCCOY: Well, it was just for his own personal interest in connection with his collection, because he was becoming a major collector. I believe he himself told me that he was concerned about this problem. And he had been down to the museum and talking to Richardson. And Richardson was concerned with the same problem, because he was writing his book, and he couldn't find very much even secondary material on many of the artists he wanted to discuss. So they talked about it. And Larry got in his car and drove home on the expressway or on the street. And then, halfway home, suddenly he dreamed up the idea of the Archives, and turned around, and rushed back to the museum, and burst into Mr. Richardson's office, and said, "I have this wonderful idea." And that's supposed to be the initial conception. Did you ever hear anything like this?

[00:27:50.80]

ARLINE CUSTER: No. No, I hadn't heard it, but I can believe it.

[00:27:55.10]

GARNETT MCCOY: Yeah, 'cause Larry is a great enthusiast, certainly, yeah.

[00:27:58.41]

ARLINE CUSTER: And he's the one who asked Mr. Richardson to—[audio adjustment] And Larry is the one who asked Mr. Richardson to see if I would help organize it, get it started. And it was the two of them who called me in to breakfast to see how we'd go about it. So I can believe that both men had the same need, then. Though, I hadn't known about Larry's need.

[00:28:26.74]

But what I had—I did know that he was interested in finding out all he could about artists, not only about his own, because Mr. Grigo once complained to me that Larry didn't know a thing about art. And you'd tell him all about it, and the next day, he'd be telling somebody else about it as if he'd known it all his life. And he'd never give Mr. Grigo any credit for having told him this. [Laughs.]

[00:28:54.07]

GARNETT MCCOY: Did Mr. Grigo have much to do with the beginning part of the Archives?

[00:28:58.36]

ARLINE CUSTER: He didn't have anything in the initial part. He wasn't included in this

breakfast when I was—and I don't think he was included when I first went off to Philadelphia to do it. But ever after that, my notes always say that Mr. Grigo and Mr. Richardson talked with me about the Archives, what we were doing, or what we were going to do. So he was really very close to it, except that first week, I guess, you might say.

[00:29:29.44]

GARNETT MCCOY: But he left about '62 and went down to [inaudible].

[00:29:34.50]

ARLINE CUSTER: He left, I think, very shortly after Mr. Richardson left.

[00:29:40.06]

GARNETT MCCOY: And then, he was mad because he wasn't made the Director.

[00:29:42.31]

ARLINE CUSTER: Yes. That's the story I heard when I was here. Yes.

[00:29:47.74]

GARNETT MCCOY: Well, I can't think of anything particular to ask you, Arline. I certainly appreciate your cooperation in establishing these historical points.

[00:29:57.59]

ARLINE CUSTER: It would be nice to get Mr. Richardson.

[00:30:00.00]

GARNETT MCCOY: Oh, of course, we should, yes, yes. We have made a tape with Larry, I believe, but I've never heard it. Well, I think this has been very useful.

[00:30:13.20]

ARLINE CUSTER: [Inaudible] all right.

[00:30:15.61]

GARNETT MCCOY: Thank you very much. Besides, we're just about to run out of the tape.

[END OF TRACK AAA\_custer75\_3322\_m]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]