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Oral history interview with Marshall B. Davidson, 1977 November 27-1978 January 10

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

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Marshall B. Davidson on November 25, 1977, and January 10, 1978. The interview took place in New York, New York, and was conducted by Paul Cummings for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

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

Interview

PAUL CUMMINGS: —okay it's the 25th of November, 1977. Paul Cummings talking to Marshall Davidson, 140 East 83rd Street in New York City. You're a born New Yorker, right?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: New York City. 19[0]7?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I know you went to Princeton, but where did you go before that? What was life in New York like?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: I was born up in Fordham, New York, when it was somewhat rural. Up to the time I went away to college, there were horses and pastures across the street, naturally. It's slums now. [Inaudible] slums. And I went to the grammar school there, but then I went to what was probably one of the most distinguished preparatory schools in the country, and that was Townsend Harris Hall. I don't know if you remember that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I've heard of it, yeah.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: It was a three-year school, and it had a lot of illustrious graduates from it. The faculty of City College taught the kids, me and others, and they were a distinguished group, in many instances.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you come to go to that school?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Friends of mine went to it, and I decided I wanted to. You had to qualify, and I qualified and went there. It was a very interesting experience. I think I got more out of that than I got out of four years of Princeton, really. [They laugh.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really? In what ways?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: The contact with the faculty, for one thing. It was full of characters, some of them bizarre, some of them fascinating. We had Professor Ecti [ph], a big, robust Italian with a white beard. I suppose he was less than my age now. He was very venerable to me in those days. He would walk into the classroom, and all the little boys—practically 90 percent of them were Jewish, and quite a number of them were better-to-do than in the ordinary public school. Etti would watch them come in with a baleful glare, and as they sat down, he said, "Now, boys, please, all the jewelry on the desk here, please." [00:02:07] So little kids would come in, take off their wristwatch and their ring. "Now we begin." [Laughs.] Things like that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really? Why would he do that?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Well, it's one of his idiosyncrasies. He thinks they're barbarians, he called them. We had another fellow named Bobby Ellis—Ellis, I guess it was—who, on Jewish holiday, when there were only about three or four Christians in the classroom, he'd inevitably dismiss the class, but he'd say, "Davidson, I want you to stay." And the first time he did it, I was scared to death of him. What the hell did I do now? [They laugh.] And as soon as the door closed on the last of the kids, he said, "Now let's get these chairs out of the way and play a little handball here." So we played handball against them—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really? [Laughs.]

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: —and things like that. We had an art department with some very curious people in it. I wish I could remember the names of some of them, because they were known in the field. They were practicing artists. They taught us freehand drawing and things like that. We had, in that class, Ben Brower, who, as a little

boy, already quite histrionic, with long hair when little boys didn't wear long hair, and little [inaudible] hats. This teacher was a tall, gaunt Canadian, who had a practice of taking the drawing papers that he wanted us to use, and having ball plane [ph], and inevitably, they'd go right down in front of you. Every time he sent one to Benny Brower, Ben Brower, he'd make it go on the floor. And Benny would reach [sighs] acting out his dismay. [They laugh.] This fellow—I can't remember his name—said, "All right, buddy, go home and tell your mother about it." The sense of that was that Benny was in a play on Broadway with his mother at that time, you see?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, you're kidding. Really?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: No. His dad [ph] was in that class, too.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Where did all these students come from? The Fordham area, or from all over? That was a city —

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Mostly Manhattan. [00:04:01]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, it was a city school.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: I had to go down on the elevated every day to get there, and get off at, what, 136th or [13]8th Street—6th Avenue. Completely white. Completely white at that time. And walk up the hill into the college. No, they came from all over the city, but primarily from Manhattan. They were about, I would say, 90 percent Jewish, a sprinkling of colored fellows, a few Catholics, and a few WASPs, like me. [They laugh.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: A few?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: A few.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What did your parents think of your getting into the school? Was that a—

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: My mother was dead, for one thing, and I was brought up by my grandparents. My grandmother, who, in effect, brought me up, was virtually illiterate. She had no sense of what I was doing, had no idea what I was doing. My father had remarried, and I didn't see him a hell of a lot, so he didn't care. A little anecdote about my grandmother, speaking about her illiteracy. She could very barely write, and she could read a newspaper by holding her finger on the line and going across.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Like speed reading?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Yeah. It wasn't very fast. She had been orphaned during the Civil War. Both my grandmothers had been orphaned during the Civil War, one in the South and one in the North. The one in the South was taken into the family of a very—the household of a very genteel family, and given a proper education of a Southern lady. My other grandmother was farmed out as a hired girl up in New York state. This is the one who brought me up. She ran away from the hired girl job, came to New York. She got a job in a bakery. She noticed a little man going by every day, and she set her cap for him. Well, that turned out to be my grandfather, who was property man for Booth and Barrett, the Shakespearean actors. So my grandmother went behind stage, after that point when they got married. The funny thing I'm trying to bring up is that here's grammy, who could cuss like a sailor, and did drink like one, too [they laugh] not really, but she liked her totty who could hardly read, and could barely write, but quote Shakespeare by the yarn [ph]. [00:06:15] Just spouted everything, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, fantastic.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: But they—as far as my education goes, I had no supervision at all.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Were there brothers and sisters, or just you?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: I had a brother. My father had been in the Spanish-American War, the Texas campaign, Mexican campaign, and was very much a military man. He was determined that his boys would go to West Point. My brother chewed on that one, and liked it, and went there, and had a very distinguished career in the army. He became superintendent of West Point, eventually. He was the coach of the football team for a while. He was commander of the Seventh Army in Germany, and so forth. But I didn't buy it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Didn't take?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: No.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What did you not like about it?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: The military—I couldn't define it in those days very well. I just thought the discipline was very healthy, probably, and all that, but there are wider horizons to life than you can find up there. There was an older chap—I was on the swimming team in high school, as I was later at Princeton. There was an older chap who worked in the pool down there, who told me stories of various colleges, and said, "Why don't you go down to Princeton, take a look?" I had—one of the graduates of Townsend Harris had gone the year before. I went down to visit him and got sold on the place, and went in. My father said, "Where are you going to get the money? I can't give you any." I said, "Well, it's my problem." Worked out fine. I never made more money, relative to my needs, than I did in college.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: It wasn't very much, but I didn't have any needs. [00:08:00] But I ended with a bankroll.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's fantastic. What did you do?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Started by waiting on tables, selling hotdogs at the football games, and ice cream cones at baseball games. Then I became the manager of my eating club [ph], board and room free, scholarship, and I became manager of the student's newspaper agency.

PAUL CUMMINGS: My goodness. You had a full-time factory going.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Well, I did [inaudible] studying as a consequence. [They laugh.] I got no real education out of Princeton. But I had fun. I wanted to swim and make money, and I did those things adequately.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's terrific. You obviously lived in New York City until you went to Princeton.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: That's right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You never went anywhere else? There was no traveling involved? What was the city like for you in those days, kind of growing up, World War I time, into the 20s, teens, 20s?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Well, I was quite active as a little Boy Scout, and that took a surprising amount of my energy and time. For the rest, we kids just ran around the street and played stickball, or modified football across the street, in the big lot that was there. World War I, I made 300 speeches to selling war bonds. Got up on a box and talked to people, told them to be patriots and that sort of thing. But when I went to high school, there, as in Princeton, my major concern was to swim.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really? When did you start?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Hmm?

PAUL CUMMINGS: When did you start swimming?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: At Boy Scout camp. The swim teacher up there, whatever they call him, eventually became a very good friend of mine, and he swam for City College, and I swam for Townsend Harris. Went to Princeton—that's why I went to Princeton. I had lifeguard jobs during the summertime.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Were you interested in other sports?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Not really. I really was a swimmer, first and foremost and [inaudible]. [00:10:00]

PAUL CUMMINGS: What do you think appealed to you about swimming?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: I liked it because of the rhythmic nature of swimming. I often feel as though it must be the same satisfaction to swimming easily and well as there is to doing a good dance well. The rhythm of the stroke, and the kick, and the synchronization of all your muscles with the ballast of the water, which is nice. A light feeling, you know. All those things combined made it, for me, a very desirable sport.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What about high school? What kind of academic interests did you have?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: What interest I had was due, almost entirely, to the character of the professors of the teachers there. We had a rigorous routine to get through, four years in three. There was a great deal of studying to do. But it was standard: English, physics, mathematics. This was right after World War I, and they would not teach German in the school. Otherwise I would have taken German, so I took Spanish and French, and learned a smattering of each.

PAUL CUMMINGS: When you left there, did you have any academic direction when you went to Princeton?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: No, absolutely none.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Just to swim and make some money?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: That's right. [They laugh.] Oh, I did some studying, but it didn't really, seriously affect me. All the—if you may call it—all the cultural increments in my life came, for the most part, after I got out. It was only after that that I really became interested in a variety of things, like art and music.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But you got a bachelor of science at Princeton.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: That's because I didn't take Latin, and you had to have Latin or Greek to get an A.B. If you didn't, you got a B.S.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What did you end up majoring in?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: History.

PAUL CUMMINGS: History. American history, world history? [00:12:00]

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: It was both, actually. They had quite a strong medieval department there, and they pushed that pretty hard. There was not very much American history. But I remember, in my senior year, I had to write some sort of historical essay, and my faculty advisor called me to his house one day and said, "Davidson, I don't believe there's anybody who knows less about history, or writes worse, than you do." [They laugh.] He said, "But I'll try and get you through." And he did. I just barely got through.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Were there any professors at Princeton that became friends, that were interesting or provocative or influential?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Not really.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really? Not as much as Townsend Harris?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: No, not really. I found my association with my high school teachers, in many ways, more stimulating and closer than in college, even though Townsend Harris was not residential. I had to go home on the subway, or the elevated, every night.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why was that, do you think? Usually a college is so much more involved.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: I was awfully young. I was too young. I was immature, and I was small in size, and small in wisdom. I didn't have my sights on anything. I never did get into a sharp focus until after I got out. Even then, I went from one thing to another, trying to accumulate some of the experience and cultural interests that I had missed earlier.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What happened when you came out of Princeton, which was just—1928, right?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Yeah. I had absolutely—

PAUL CUMMINGS: What were you interested in doing?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: I had absolutely no idea what I wanted to do. So I got myself a job on a freighter that was going through the canal and out to the West Coast. The sailors called it—it was the Transmarine Lines. [00:14:00] The sailors called it the dirty T lines. It had a T on the funnel, and it had such a bad reputation that the only people that they could get to go onboard were the drunks that had missed their other sailings. So when we went out—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, dear.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: —when we went out of port in Newark, the first mate and I were the only sober people onboard the ship. [The laugh.] But there's a little anecdote attached, if it isn't too personal, I don't know. We got out to San Pedro Harbor, which is the harbor for Los Angeles. My uncle, at that time, was a motion-picture actor of some fame.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Who was that?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: You're probably too young to remember. His name is Jack Holt.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, yes.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: I had written to him, saying I was coming out there and I'd like to drop by, but he didn't write very much, so I never heard from him. When we dropped anchor in San Pedro Harbor, I thought this was it, and I'll go wash my face and put on a necktie, and run up to Hollywood and see if I'm admitted. I didn't realize that we were dropping the anchor merely to pick up the pilot, and somebody had to go down and chain-lock them when they brought up the anchor, and see that it didn't kink, and that was me. [They laugh.] So I went down there, followed by the curses of the mate, who couldn't find them for a while. I had to make sure they didn't kink around me, too, because that would have been fateful. I came out of that covered with slime, just as they were putting up the gangplank. The first person up the gangplank was a chauffeur, in a ripcord uniform, leather [inaudible] and visor cap. Saluted the cap and said, "Sir, is Mr. Davidson aboard?" There was a Rolls-Royce waiting for me. Little Timmy Holt—remember him, movie pictures? He played in *The Treasure of Sierra Madre*. He's dead now. They all are. Little Timmy was sound asleep in the backseat. And I skipped ship.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What happened in California, then?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Well, I had this bankroll, you see. [00:16:00] My uncle and aunt said, "Just stay on and do what you want to do." They didn't know what to do with me, really. They were in their late 30s, I suppose. I was just 21, 20. My uncle would take me down to Paramount Studios, where he was working on a movie. I'll never forget my first experience there, because it was about nine o'clock in the morning, we'd walk in, and all the actors, stars, had their little cabins. I remember walking by the first one, and Gary Cooper stepped out. He was about as young as I was at that time. He had just arrived in Hollywood. My uncle, who was a heavy drinker, said, "Hi, Gary. My nephew here from Princeton thinks he can drink." He says, "Well, come on in. Come on in." Nine o'clock in the morning. So we went in, had a couple of slugs of whiskey. Then we'd go on a little further, and there's Chester Compton [ph], the fellow who had cross-eyes like this. Same thing. "Hi, Chester. Got a young nephew here from Princeton, thinks he can drink." "Come in, Jack." By the time they were both out on the set, everybody was cockeyed. That was the days of the silent pictures, so they didn't have to articulate.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Which would have been—

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: —very difficult. [Laughs.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: How long did you stay in California?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Actually, what happened was that it was in Hollywood, and some of the people I met there, that I became interested in reading books, for instance. I suddenly decided I was going to learn to play the piano, come what may.

PAUL CUMMINGS: From what?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Starting from scratch.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What inspired that?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: I guess it—I knew one pianist there, who, incidentally, ultimately introduced me to my wife. He had just come from Paris to see his brother married out there. Between one thing or another, I just pecked away at the piano. I took lessons. Also, because the talkies were coming in, there were singing—vocal teachers, they called them. [00:18:05] They taught vocal, in every four corners of Hollywood. I got the idea that I wanted to learn how to sing, not because I was going to be a singer, but I wanted to understand what good singing really amounted to. So I took lessons every day to learn the technique of singing, until—I was also swimming for the Hollywood Athletic Club, and I found that the two things together were too much, and that singing was more energetic than swimming, so I gave up swimming. [They laugh.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: You gave up swimming?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You said you got interested in reading books in Hollywood?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I've never heard anybody say that before.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: I know. It's cultural generation, not regeneration. There was nothing to regenerate. I got stuck on this cultural binge, I call it, especially the piano, and finally I decided I had stayed on my aunt's and uncle's bounty long enough, so I went up to San Francisco and got myself a job in a building and loan association, the idea being that I wanted a job with no responsibility, so I could spend all my time learning to play the piano, which worked for a while. I got so that I could play a few pieces rather decently. Then I just had to go from one town to another in California on this job, got to know the state pretty well. I'd been out there

about six years, and when I was back in Hollywood, on my own this time, I'd look out the window every morning and see those mountains, and I began to believe there was nothing on the other side of them. Finally, an older friend of mine came from New York to say hello to me. He was a psychiatrist. He decided that perhaps I was going to pot out there. [They laugh.] So after thinking it over for a few months, I decided the same thing. This was in 1934, at the bottom of the Depression. [00:20:02] I quit my job in the building and loan association. And Mr. Harlow [ph], the vice president said, "You realize what you're doing? You can't get a job anywhere." I said, "Well, so I can't get a job anywhere." I got a—I took a Greyhound bus to New York from Hollywood, $29 to get there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Ten days—

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: No, it was only about five, night and day. Half-awake all night, and half-asleep all day, that sort of thing. Came to New York. Shacked up with my father and stepmother for a while. [Doorbell rings.]

[Audio Break.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Come back on the bus trip from California.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: It didn't work, living with my father and stepmother. At that time, my brother was football coach at West Point, and I went up there to visit him and said, "How do you get a job? I've got to get out of the house and do my own housekeeping." He said, "I'll tell you, the godfather of the West Point football team is the president of the home insurance company, and he's just hired Bud Sprague, who's the All-American tackle that I coached and played with. Go and see Bud." So I went down to see Bud. Bud gave me a job as an assistant underwriter—apprentice underwriter. I knew I wasn't going to like it. I knew from the start. For a while, I had been living in California with—it was a strange arrangement. It was perfectly chaste, but with a bearded musician and an interior decorator with one leg, a woman. [Laughs.] We had a very pleasant house. The musician was really good, and this woman was good, and there again, it was part of my cultural advance. They opened my eyes to things I hadn't heard of or thought of before. [00:22:00]

PAUL CUMMINGS: In 1935, you got involved with the Metropolitan Museum.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Right. Now, wait a minute.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What about '34?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: We started off in '34, when I got this job. My father, at that time, was at the Metropolitan Museum of Art as registrar. One of the things that I had—one of my new interests was the decorative arts. I had been reading about this, with the inspiration of my friends to help me along—

PAUL CUMMINGS: In California?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: In California, yeah. I said to my father, "Will you tip me off if you know of any opening up here so that I can apply?" Sure enough, there was an opening in the American Wing. Ruth Ralston had just quit. Joe Downs was then the curator. It had just been made a department, separate department. First, they had the decorative arts, which was an umbrella for all the different cultures, but then they broke it up into Near Eastern art, Renaissance art, the American Wing, and so forth. Joe Downs hired me, and he later told me, when I asked him why, "Because you knew less than anybody else that applied."

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.] They like competition, don't they, museums?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: There was some reason for this. There was no way of getting—there was no academic approach to learning about a job like this. As a consequence, the field was full of dilettantes. Joe told me, he said, "I'd rather have somebody I could train from the beginning than have somebody that I'd have to un-train to start with." That's the way it worked.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What did you start doing there? What were your activities?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Taking inventory. Washing the faces of Wedgwood medallions. [00:24:00] Gradually becoming a specialist in a few aspects of it, like silver, early silver. I got to know quite a bit about that. And early glass, which didn't interest Downs at all, so he was very happy for me to take that on the side. I gradually found that what I did not like about the American Wing was the everlasting housekeeping. I was no interior decorator, and I was much more interested in the ideas behind the things than about the things themselves. So I started to write articles for the bulletin, with this approach in mind. Articles on general aspect of the decorative arts in domestic circumstances, on heating, lighting, and things like that. What it meant in terms of cultural differences and so forth. I had several of these articles published in the bulletin. Comes Francis Taylor to the museum, like a big, fresh gale blowing through the place. One day, I had a telephone call from him, asking if I could come up

and speak with him. He was still Mr. Taylor to me. He said he'd just been approached by Houghton Mifflin, who were looking for some non-professional historian to do a book on—wasn't quite sure. Illustrated history of America or something like that. And would I be interested? I said, "Well, I don't know anything about this, actually, but invincible [ph] yeah." He said, "You sell yourself to Houghton Mifflin, and I'll give you a year off to write the book." I sold myself to Houghton Mifflin on the strength of these bulletin articles that I had done.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That was later, though, wasn't it? This *Life in America*?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: That's right. It took six or seven years, you see.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did it really?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Oh, yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, fantastic.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Francis gave me a year off, and I got so immersed in this that, at the end of the year, I was only beginning to get going. So then he gave me another year off. [00:26:00] In the meantime, this book had been growing into, potentially, a rather big operation indeed. When I first had the editorial meeting with the Houghton Mifflin people, they said, "How many pages are you going to have?" I said, "It would have to be two volumes, at least. About 1,200 pages." "How many illustrations?" I said, "At least a thousand." Nobody batted an eye.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.] That's fantastic in those days.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I mean, you had no precedent for a book like that.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: There was no precedent for it. I asked Francis what kind of—Taylor—"What sort of book do you have in mind?" He said, "That's your problem."

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you decide on two volumes and all those illustrations?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: It was an act of creation. I had no precedent for this whatsoever. I thought the thing out as carefully as I could. What I really wanted to do was to satisfy my own ignorance on all the things that interested me, and I was going to write a book out of—basically out of ignorance, in order to satisfy myself. This is the form it took.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Somehow, those are all the most interesting books, I think, rather than somebody who's just displaying one that they already have.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Yeah, well. I didn't want anything to start with.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did this—that started some years later, and before we—

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: I'll come to that right now, because after the second year, I was still far from finished, and I told Francis that I was going to quit, because I liked this so much more, doing this so much more than I did working in the American Wing, I think I should keep on doing the book. He said, "I think you're very, very wise. I'll take you off the payroll on April 1st." This was about January or February. I no sooner made that commitment than I said to myself, "My God, what have you done?" My wife was in the hospital. I had no resources of any sort. I began to worry, how am I going to live? [00:28:00] It was only a few weeks before April 1st came around when Francis called me urgently—I was working at home—urgently to come over. The editor of publications had just quit, Emmett Chase. They asked me if I'd take it on. They wanted to work from within the house, rather than bring somebody in from outside. I said, "I don't know anything about editing." He said fine. That was Francis—[inaudible] new approach. [They laugh.] I said, "Francis, I don't know a typewriter from a Linotype machine from anything else." "Exactly right." Then I realized that they really wanted me, for some reason which I couldn't imagine. I had them over the barrel, more or less. So I collected my courage and said, "Of course there will be a sizable increase in salary, won't there?" He said, "Oh, yes." So I took it on. Now, you see, that meant that I had to learn this editing job, and do the *Life in America* manuscript weekends, nights, and that sort of thing. That's what took the extra four years.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I see. One thing that is interesting, you were involved with the Met for quite a—what, 25 years about?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Twenty-six, actually.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Twenty-six years. What was it like there during the '30s, say, up to the beginning of the war, the Depression years, and all the times around the museum?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: I can tell you that it bore no resemblance whatsoever to the museum today. It was really a quiet place. They had paydays in those days, when I first went there. Two days a week were paydays. You had to pay—I forget whether it was a nickel or a quarter, and as a consequence, the building was deserted, practically, on those two days. When my father was there, as a kid during paydays, I'd run down and say, "I want to go see my father," and the Irish guards would send me right in, so I'd get in for nothing. Herbert Winlock was director when I first got there, and he, like his predecessors, came up from curatorial ranks. [00:30:04] Winlock was incapacitated. He had several heart attacks and quit, became emeritus. After scrounging around, they found Francis to take over. In the meantime, Billy Ivans was acting administrator for a couple years while they searched for the candidates. Rorimer wanted that job awfully bad, but he didn't get it that time. Next time around, yes. But Francis came in, as I say, like a very strong wind, and he was the first one who could be called a museologist rather than a graduate curator.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How do you define that? What does that mean?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: A man who can divorce himself sufficiently from his own curatorial prejudices to look at the administration of an institution of that very nature. It's not easy to do if you're a dedicated curator. You just need a curatorial point of view. Somebody on top has to take a wider view than any single curator can, and that's what makes him a good administrator of an institution of that sort.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What did you do besides take care of the objects as a curator? Did you work on exhibitions? What kind of program was there for exhibitions then? Because it was very quiet, wasn't it?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Yes, but there were some really very good exhibitions. Joe Downs and I put on several—largely Joe, but I helped him—several which were really first-class. We put on one on the China trade, which was a very elaborate presentation of the whole thing, from the beginning of the China trade to the later American days. [00:32:03] Even Mrs. Sara Delano Roosevelt got into the act, because she had been in China during the later days of the China trade, and she lent some things. But this was not only the American aspect of it. It was worldwide aspect. We had Portuguese pottery, and Chinese taste, and we had French furniture, and Chinese taste, and also American—Chinese export porcelains, and so forth. We put on sort of a groundbreaking show on the Greek revival in America, which had not been done before. The subject was just beginning to get larger attention than it had earlier. This was quite a definitive show.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you like the problem of expanding an idea into a three-dimensional installation?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Frankly, not an awful lot. I had no theatrical sense. But Joe Downs did, and he was very good at it. So I would provide a lot of the documentation, and some sweat and labor, and Joe would be the—

PAUL CUMMINGS: —impresario.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: —director. Yeah. I just didn't have it that way, because I have no flair for installations and that sort of thing, quite candidly.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Hmm. That never got you interested? You never got interested in that?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: As I said earlier, really what became my major interest was the ideas behind these things, rather than the objects themselves, and that's what led me to write things instead of—

PAUL CUMMINGS: What do you think provoked you in that, in the ideas behind? What led to the development of a certain kind of table or ornament?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Well, there was a late-starting intellectual curiosity, frankly. All those things that I didn't get stirred by at Princeton suddenly began to germinate in my old age, when I was [they laugh] 28 or [2]9—30. [00:34:02]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you think that was due to your native curiosity, or the ambience? It was just—

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: I think it was just something that grew within me. I do not recognize any personal outside influences that shaped that direction for me.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Also, in the '30s, before we get into the sort of war period, there wasn't really a voracious interest in American decorative arts, was there?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: No.

PAUL CUMMINGS: There were not very many dealers. Furniture and silver were hard to find.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: There's another aspect. There are some people who, if they heard what I'm about to say, wouldn't like it. One aspect was that collectors were, very largely—or the important collectors—were people of wealth and circumstance. It took a lot of nurturing of those people to be a good curator, and I didn't like nurturing wealthy people. I just didn't like it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's tedious, isn't it?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Some people like it. Joe Downs loved it. The ladies just loved him. I remember once I met with Mrs.—oh, what was her name? She had a big place up in Tuxedo. I was working on *Life in America* at the time, although I was still associated with the museum. What was her name? Well, in any case, I went up there and spent the day looking at her collection of things, because she had graphic material as well that I wanted to look at. When I came back the next day, the director of the Museum of the City of New York called me and said, "What did you ever do to Mrs. what's-her-name?" I can't remember now. I said, "Why?" He said, "She said that you were the first museum curator she ever saw that wasn't tired." [They laugh.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, that's marvelous. [00:36:00] Well, they are overworked, I think.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: I remember seeing a letter from her—I'm going to have to remember her name—a letter from her in the file. She'd helped Joe put on one show—I think it was before I came there. I was going through the files one day, and she said, "Now that exhibition is over, thank God," she said, "I am going away for a short trip on my yacht, which I can ill afford." [They laugh.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: One wonders, the yacht or the trip? Marvelous. You must have had some contact with the dealers and collectors in those days. Who was outstanding or memorable, and where—

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Steven Ensco [ph] in silver. He had a place down on 56th Street and Lexington Avenue. He would get a line up in Boston, with the two major dealers, and old American and old English silver. I learned a lot from Steve. I used to hang out in his shop quite a bit and talk with him quite a bit, and even visit him in his house quite a bit. Of course, there were Ginsburg and Levy, and Issac, and there were a few others in Boston. To this day, the Saxon [ph] and Levy, and Ginsburg were very good friends of mine. I see them occasionally, and I'm on editorial boards with them, in some cases.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Were there many collectors then of American decorative art, or was it rather—

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Yeah, but not as many as there were after World War II. A lot of young people came to the field then, and a lot of younger people who had a lot of money. There were far more of them than there were in the '30s, certainly.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What was scholarship like in those days? There weren't that many books in American decorative art.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Scholarship was pretty slim.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And what, Philadelphia and Boston were interested, as far as the museums, and where else?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: The museum had what they call—they were scholarly journals, in effect. [00:38:04] They tried desperately to fill those up with scholarly articles periodically, or spasmodically. There was no periodicity to it. [They laugh.] They had to scrounge to get the material to put into it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's the same today. [Laughs.]

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Yes, I know it is. I know it is. I had that borne in on me very definitely when I saw Tom Hoving one day at the Century Club. He said, "Are you going home? I've got a car out." He said, "We're going to have a wonderful time at this new journal." I said, "I think you're absolutely crazy. I can give you my reasons for it, but this trip is too short for me to expatiate." He said, "No, I'm quite right." Said, "These curators, when they get a hold of a subject and they write it up, they want to see themselves in print quickly. They don't have to wait for two years to get into some magazine." I said, "Tom, I'm very glad you brought that up, because a little over three years ago, I was asked to write a letter for your learned—article for your learned journal, which I did. And it's two years, and I'm not included [ph] yet." [They laugh.] He said, "We'll have to correct that." Which they did.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, marvelous. Was the Metropolitan in those days as competitive as it seems now between the various departments, would you say, pre-World War II?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: I don't know exactly what backbiting is maybe going on over there now. You mean within the one museum? [Inaudible.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, yeah. They all seem incredibly aggressive nowadays.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: They were certainly each pushing his own load as hard as he could, and there was a lot of backstairs gossip and bitching. There was no question about that. But on the whole, my memories of all these people are very pleasant. I remember them with real fondness, even Billy Ivans, who could be a son of a bitch, and Alan Priest, who was as quaint as a person could be. [00:40:07] Lovely story about Alan Priest. He was dickering for a Chinese relief, and it went on and on and on. Finally, something happened. In the meantime, his secretary had quit. Hadn't even looked at the correspondence, and only after weeks of scrambling did they find it under charities. [They laugh.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, marvelous. What was it about him? Because everybody seems to have a series of stories about Alan Priest.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Oh, endless. He was Peck's bad boy [ph]. There wasn't a director of the museum at any time, I don't think, that wouldn't like to get rid of him. He was not a scholar, but he was a very sensitive person. I mean, he was more sensitive than he was scholarly in his approach to the subject. He wrote quite well, but carelessly, but with good editing, which he got plenty of. Turned out quite brilliantly, actually. But he got very heavy editing. He was always playing little tricks, and one of his best stunts was—James Rorimer couldn't stand him, and vice-versa [laughs], although they were amicable on the surface, of course. They were civilized people. But Alan kept giving things to the museum and putting his own evaluation on them. The first thing you know, he had enough to get his name chiseled in marble over James Rorimer's. [They laugh.] Kay Rorimer wouldn't like that story, but it's true.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's always intrigued me about how many curators at the Met are donors to the collections. Not many other museums seem to have had that [00:42:00]

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: There are two aspects to that, I think.

PAUL CUMMINGS: —situation.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: One is that—well, the majority of the curators were people of independent means. Not a great many of them, but—

PAUL CUMMINGS: —several.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Also, they were in a position to pick up things, and under an obligation to offer the museum first. So the combination of those two things did lead to a lot of curatorial presentations and gifts.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But it's fascinating. You don't see that so much around the country.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: This I don't know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I haven't observed it as readily as one does at the Met. Also, about working with other curators at the museum, were you pretty well self-contained in the American Wing, or was there a certain amount of interplay with other departments?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Most of the interplay was either because of propinquity—my office was next to Louise Avery's, and I saw her every day and talked to her. She had written the catalog of the Clearwater silver collection when she was just out of college, and she was the next office I was in, early American silver. I saw her every day of the year, practically every working day of the year, and the other curators in that department were along the line there, so I saw them. But there was a certain amount of socializing. I dare say that most of my contacts with the others were done either at the lunch table—that is, the curator's lunchroom—or in their home or my home.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Have you always lived close to the Metropolitan?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: When my wife and I were married, 40-odd years ago, our first residence was right downstairs here, next door.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You're kidding. [They laugh.]

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: As a matter of fact, Joe Downs lived next door. The lady that owned—Ms. Phyllis French owned this place, and it was rather a sumptuous place. [00:44:05] She was going away for the summer, just as I was getting married, and she wanted somebody to caretake for her, so she let me have it for $50 a month. Two bathrooms, two or three bedrooms, a porch in the back, and all that sort of thing. Those were the days.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Not anymore. That's true. How did the war, which came along in the late '30s, 1941, affect

your activities at the museum?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Well, maybe starting backwards, a lot of the hired help, from the curatorial staff down to the guards—guardians, protectors—went off to war, mostly young ones. I did not, primarily for the reason that my wife was deathly ill, and I got un-drafted every time I came up. It was health [ph] problems. Joe Downs was in no condition to go to war. He had a nervous breakdown, and I took over the wing for one year when he got over that. One of the things that was required of us was the able-bodied members of the curatorial staff had to stay at the museum all night, on schedule, as supervisory guardians in case anything should happen, like an airplane dropped a bomb on the place, which seemed likely at the time, you know? Somebody with curatorial sense would tell the firemen what to do first. So we'd make tours of the museum, and up in the catwalks, under the skylights, down in some sub-basement. There were three layers of basements down there, including sub-sub-sub-sub-basement, where there was flood control, and you had to check that every day, every night, every few hours. [00:46:01] Then take a few hours catnap, and come back to work the next day.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's why curators get tired.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: That's one reason. [They laugh.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you think that the fact you were working with objects stimulated your ideas about their background, history, and the—

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Oh, yes, no question about that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: —genesis?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: No question about that. It seemed to me, in the literature that I could put hands on, left a lot of things unexplained in my mind, that I wanted to know about. I tried to find out. I wanted to interrelate things. I couldn't accept a thing for itself. I wanted to know how to relate it to everything else, to get a complete, three-dimensional, theoretical understanding of what the piece was about [inaudible] seller and [inaudible].

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you find out in some cases?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Occasionally. That started quite early.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you ever get interested in collecting the things you were working with, or was it just—

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Not really. In 1939, I got a $500 grant to go to Europe, to study the European background of American decorative art.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Was that your first trip to Europe then?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: It was my first trip to Europe. My maternal grandmother died and left me $500 at that time, so my wife and I had $1,000, 1939. We spent—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Pretty good sum of money.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: —ten weeks over there, and came back with money. My wife had been there, had studied in Paris as a young girl, so she—

PAUL CUMMINGS: What did she do? What was she—

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Hmm?

PAUL CUMMINGS: What did she study? [00:48:00] What was she involved with?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: French literature. She went—she followed that all through college, and did her master's in some aspect of French literature. She's completely bilingual. That was our first trip together. In subsequent years, we went over almost every spring, largely to France.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So, how did you like Europe in those days? It was really getting politically active.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: In '39, one of the reasons we got along on $1,000 for 10 weeks was we lived in a boardinghouse in England, for instance. I remember—I guess it was the first morning we were there—being awakened by sirens. When I got up, I asked the hired help, "What's this?" Said, "Oh, those are air-raid sirens. You know how silly that is, the air raid." We went over to Holland and talked to people there, and they said, "The trees leading to Germany are all mined." Why? The war seemed so remote to me. We got out just a few weeks before the war came. We were one of the last ships over.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Where did you go? Holland, France?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Britain. London. We spent about a month in England, because that's where most of my pay dirt [ph] was. Then we went over to Holland, where there was still more of it, then to Belgium, and then to Paris, and went home.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So you were in Paris just before the war?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Just before the war. Incidentally, I'm doing a book now with a friend of mine on the story of Americans in Paris over the hundreds of years.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really [laughs]?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Yeah. That's the book there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right there?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: The one in the corner.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.] Oh, the envelope? Uh—

[Audio Break.]

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: [00:50:00] —his autobiography. I learned—he also writes everything longhand.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Inaudible] does?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Yeah, with balloons coming out of it, and carrots and things, and so do I. He's addicted to Altoids, and so am I. [They laugh.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Fantastic. I'm still trying to find out more about your feelings about the museum and about the materials you were working with there, say the period from '35 to '41. Were there scholars around the country that you met, got interested in? Were there very many people engaged in the study of American objects in those days?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: I'm trying to think of a good answer to that. My contacts with them, if there were many of them, were quite limited. I guess the first—it was after the war. I was thinking of the Colonial Williamsburg Antiques Forum. I was on their first program down there, and on a number of later programs, until I ran out of juice. I really don't feel that I—John Marshall Phillips. Do you remember him by any chance?

PAUL CUMMINGS: I know that name, yes.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: He was curator of the Garvan Collection at Yale, and he ran what they called—a course called Pots and Pans, which was a backfiring gut, as we used to say in my college days. It was supposed to be an easy course, but it got harder when you got into it. It was one of the only places where you would get any sort of professional training in the decorative arts. I knew John quite well. As a matter of fact—poor John. [00:52:00] Of all the reviews I got from *Life in America*, the only one that was halfway bad was written by John Marshall Phillips.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: He died two weeks later.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, dear.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Watch your step. [They laugh.] John was very much of a scholar.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you take those classes at Yale ever?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: I did not. No, I did all my own training, under Joe. Joe was—had a lot of experience in this whole business. He'd been in it for years. I believed every word he said, which turned out to be the normal thing, but I learned a lot in the process, some of which I had to unlearn later. Joe was not a scholar, but he was a very sensitive person. Had a good eye, which he trusted implicitly.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you think scholars really have a place in museums?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Undoubtedly. What makes you ask such a question?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, I just—so many of them don't seem to have a great deal of taste or flair or something.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: That's true, but the taste and flair business is only one half of it, because if you don't have the underlying scholarship, the objects, for all your taste and flair, become perfectly meaningless. You've got to have a combination, even several people, perhaps.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, so three people can become one or something like that.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Somebody can document a piece with 4,500 footnotes, and somebody else will see certain virtues of design in it, and how to put it into cabinets so that it looks good, with an understanding—they're able to read the scholarly literature in order to get background information [ph]. But I think there are some very good scholars at the Metropolitan Museum.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Because it always fascinates me. Very few people seem to combine the two—

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: You're quite right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: —aspects.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: I was just looking at—was it the *Apollo*, I guess, and three or four of them [ph] that was there, and very scholarly, by people at the Metropolitan. [00:54:02] Jim Parker, Ogda [ph] [inaudible]. I forget who else. But they're scholarly.

PAUL CUMMINGS: She's been to the archives a lot recently, doing something.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Ogda?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: I was over there the other evening at a party that—they had the Mitchell Award, representing *American Heritage*. For some reason, I don't know why. I saw Ogda for the first time for a long while.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why do you think he's doing that, giving those awards, do you think?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: One way to get rid of them. Sometimes you have to. I guess. That's what they tell me. Speaking of which, I don't seem to be able to get away from the American Wing. I divorced myself from it several times over, and I always keep coming back. The article I did for the scholarly journal of the museum was on the genesis of the American Wing, the socio-historical-political background. So much for that. The other day, they called me up and asked me if I would write the booklet to introduce the new American Wing when it happens.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, terrific.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: I sort of had to do that. It's like going home, going back into the womb again. So I have undertaken to do that for them.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Have you been able to see, in all these years, an influence exerted by the American Wing and other institutions around the country? Is that something that's visible, or is it difficult to ascertain?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: I think—I don't know whether I've got a copy here—and you wouldn't want to read it anyway, probably—of that scholarly journal piece I pointed out. We take the American Wing so much for granted that we forget that when it first opened, it was like a bombshell. [00:56:06] The remarks in the newspaper to the effect that America has an art, after all, utter surprise to this sort of thing. It was the stimulus for a lot of other things, and because of its opening, it collected the interest—it attracted the interest of collectors, and you have the Garvans and the Halseys, and DuPonts and others, who are making house museums for themselves. In the case of DuPont, of course, it turned into a 110-room monstrosity. [They laugh.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: You know, it always fascinates me that Americans are astounded by their own culture when it's pointed out to them. Why do you think that is?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: It comes from, really, generations of being awed by European cultural standards and history. I think that it's only been in the last two generations that a very decent respect for the American arts has become full flower, and even to the point where it's exaggerated.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's typical American response, right?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: You overdo things. You [inaudible] do them.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It fascinates me. Several months ago, I took a European art dealer in very contemporary art, through the turn of the century, exhibition at the Whitney. There were several Thomas Nast things. He didn't know who Nast was. He said, "Why don't I know about this man? He's as exciting as Daumier is." He'd never seen him, didn't know anything about who he was or anything. Terribly excited by all those things.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: I don't think that American art is really very well-known in Europe, and I think a lot of European scholars, as a consequence, are really quite blind to the potentials that are in and can be done in American art. [00:58:11] Grandma Moses is the best known of all, I suppose. And Calder, of course.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, Calder, but Calder is so flexibly American in terms of his ideas.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: The most famous of all American art is—was Benjamin West. Of course, he became an expatriate. But in historical terms, there was no American artist who had a greater international reputation than he did, bad as he was.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Not even Whistler. No, it's fantastic. What happened during the war years at the museum? Because life was complicated generally. Were you able to continue doing programs and doing exhibitions, or were there also limitations?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Yes, it slowed down. There were limitations, but the show had to go on, and it did go on. There weren't so many—nor such elaborate special exhibitions, and there weren't loan exhibitions. The Scrans Round [ph] didn't house—for instance, one of Ted Russo's first tricks when he came there—he had to reshuffle the collection, because a lot of the good paintings went down to Whitemarsh for storage.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Storage vaults, right.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: I remember going down in there as the curatorial attendant for the—I was in the limousine following the trucks, and there's a big Irish guard named Flynn, who sat by my side. I said, "Flynn, what would you do if we were hijacked? What would be the first thing you do?" He said, "I think I'd shoot you and get you out of the way." [They laugh.] What Ted did, for instance, was very ingenious. [01:00:02] Instead of having those paintings that he could lay hands on and keep at the museum arranged in historical, national sections, he arranged them by categories. He had a room full of landscapes, a room full of seascapes, a room full of still lifes, a room full of portraits, and it was really very interesting to see a Winslow Homer right next, cheek-and-jaw, with a Vermeer, for instance. It brought out new—and this is part of this whole European background. If you could see these things in the same general historical context, international context, they'd each take on new values.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Don't you think, though, that being involved with an institution that covered so many thousands of years and so many cultures, that that's more—it's a greater possibility?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Sure.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You could walk from gallery to gallery and see Greek—Samarian.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: It's supposed to be the unique characteristic of the Metropolitan Museum, is that, under one roof, there were more different human cultures represented than museum on earth, including the Louvre and the Vatican and everything else.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Even the British Museum.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Even the British Museum, yes. Because there's one of everything at the Metropolitan. There's not—they don't have the depth that the Louvre does, and they don't have the depth that the Vatican has in this field. They don't have the depth of the British Museum over here. But they've got one of everything, plus more than the others have under their one group, I'd say.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's an incredible treasure trove.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: It's remarkable.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you find, as you were working with the object, that you made discoveries of things that had been there for years and years, or found things that you could look at in a new light, a different way, other juxtapositions? Was that part of what went on?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: I don't know that I can say yes to that. I wasn't a typical museum person, in that I did have no academic training in any of the arts at all, not any. [01:02:05] I never took an art course in my life, or an

architecture course for that matter. Most of my colleagues outside the American Wing had their degrees in art history and that sort of thing, so in a sense, I didn't speak their same language. I was not an academic type. I had to pursue my own way, pretty much, which I did.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Was that difficult for you, the fact that you didn't have that background, or was it difficult for them because—

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: It was partly difficult for them, because none of them knew anything about American art, so I could say almost anything I wanted. [They laugh.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: By default, you became the authority [laughs].

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Exactly.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Unquestioned. Oh, marvelous.

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PAUL CUMMINGS: This is side two.

[Audio Break.]

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: —father was in the museum for many years before I was there. Sorry.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did that affect your being there, the fact that there was a sort of tradition?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: I can tell you there were several cases in which the father and the son, among the guards, some of the Irish families, had generations.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Yeah. I forget their names, but there were—the Foys [ph]. There must have been 12 Foys there, all related to one another. I remember once that—I heard from somebody else that somebody complained to Ivans that I was my father's son, and the sort of nepotism—no, he was speaking about somebody else, that's right. That somebody's son had come there, and he said, "This nepotism really doesn't work." To my great astonishment, Ivans said, "Yes, but we got Marshall Davidson, and his father is here," as though I was somebody who did a good job. [They laugh.] I was so surprised that old man can say that about me. But let me tell you this. When Tom Hoving became director of the museum, I wrote him a note congratulating him, not on getting the job, but accepting the responsibility. I said, "I have known all but the first two directors of the Metropolitan Museum, and I am sure that you will add luster to this long, thin line. P.S. Incidentally, my father had been secretary to Sir Caspar Purdon Clarke, and I might have known him, but it's too far back for me to remember." That reminded me that when I cleaned out my father's apartment on his death, I found a piece of pristine embossed stationary, Sir Caspar Purdon Clarke, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. So I dated it February 6, 19[0]6, and said, "Dear Tom, mind your manners. [00:02:03] Big brother is watching. This is my last warning, because it's my last piece of stationary." [They laugh.] I got a very cute letter from Tom, saying, "This goes into the archives."

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, that's marvelous. It's fascinating that you've had this lengthy association with this institution and some of—

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Well, Francis Taylor once said to me, "The trouble with you, Marshall, is you were born in this place." [Inaudible.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: What do you think about it in terms of its changes over the years, and the evolution of an institution, which has to evolve if it's going to stay alive?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Exactly.

PAUL CUMMINGS: From your point of view—you've seen it for 40 years, specifically.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: I'm interested to watch the changes, both in terms of what they're doing, changes in museum attitudes, changes in administration temperament, you might say, and they do seem to go by often. You have Herbert Winlock, Egyptologist, period, largely. Man with a skilled trap of a mind, but interested in Egyptology, period, largely. In comes Francis Taylor, blinding his part, practically, with a bunch of new ideas, and being very aggressive about it, and going off in new directions, starting new precedents and that sort of thing. Francis dies, and in comes James Rorimer, who is, in a sense, a reactionary. He goes back and quiets things down. Then after him comes Hoving, who blows it apart again. Now, what's going to happen this time? I don't

know. I'll bet you it goes back in that cycle of a form.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What was Taylor like to work with? [00:04:00] One hears endless, endless stories about him.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: There are endless stories about him. Some of which are critical.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Francis the First. [Laughs.]

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: I wrote a biography of him for the *Dictionary of American Biography* a while back, and I was under great restraint, because most of the things I wanted to tell about Francis couldn't be put in print. [They laugh.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really, why?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Well, they were vulgar, and they didn't fit the format of that august publication. I remember, for instance, once, Francis called me from his office, and mine was four blocks away, in the basement. He sounded terribly urgent, so I dog-trotted through those four blocks of basement corridor. His door was closed, so I knocked on it. He said, "Come in." I went in. He was signing something. Executives all signed something before they can speak to you. Finally, he put down his pen and said, "Marshall, did you ever hear of the rabbit who washed his thing and couldn't do a hare with it?" End of interview. [They laugh.] He was a man of operatic rages. Even if you were the butt of them, it was like going to the theater. You couldn't help enjoying them. I remember once he was going into Cuba—this was pre-Castro—for some sort of cultural mission. The day before, two days before he left, I walked around the museum, and I found one of my colleagues going over the galley proofs of the bulletin. I said, "What the hell are you doing with those galley proofs?" He said, "Francis is going away, and he thought somebody ought to watch the shop while he's gone." I took a deep breath and walked downstairs. On every step, I got madder and madder and madder. I got home that night, and I just blew up. I wrote Francis a very tart note. "Dear Francis"—I can't remember exactly what I said, but in effect, I said, "I've just seen so-and-so is going over the bulletins. There must be something very wrong in your understanding of my job, or my understanding of what you expect of me, if you have to have one of my peers look at me while you're away." [00:06:04] I said, "I cannot accept this." This was Friday. Saturday morning, I ran over and slipped it under his door. The office was open in the morning. Then I went to work on Monday. Knowing Francis full well, every time the telephone rang, I jumped about six feet off of my chair. [They laugh.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Waiting.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Yeah. But he made a wonderful entrance. He came at a time when there was nobody in my office, and he had my memo. He said, "What the hell does this goddam nonsense mean? I've never seen" Full of profanity. Adrenaline starting all through my system, just the shock of this rage. I tried to cool myself off a little bit. I said, "B-b-but Francis, you know, there should be"—and he said, "Look, I'm director of this museum, and I can do any goddam thing I want." By this time I'd composed myself, and I said, "I do not contest that, but I don't have to work for you under these circumstances." He looked at me for a moment and said, "Is that the way you feel?" I said yes. He said, "Okay." All over. [They laugh.] It was all over.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Just like that.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Even at his funeral, they were telling stories, off-color stories. Francis would have loved this. [They laugh.] No, I loved that man. He was cantankerous, but he was very big of spirit. He was a man of very noble inclinations, I think, and a very positive attitude toward practically everything. He could tear a man apart, as I just indicated, just about as quick as anybody. I can remember—I shouldn't mention names here, but one of the more distinguished curators made a remark one day when I was in a meeting, and Francis just looked down and said, "So-and-so"—and you'd be shocked if you knew who this was—"you're a liar." [00:08:01] The other fellow shut up. He was. [They laugh.] I'll never—another time, for instance—one of Francis's supreme anecdotes. I was in his office when the Etruscan warrior was still in good repute. I don't know whether you remember, there was no penis on it. Dietrich von Bothmer happened to walk in, and Francis said, "Dietrich, it's such a shame that that beautiful object is so incomplete where it counts." Dietrich said, "Francis, we have that penis downstairs." He said, "My God, you've got it?" Said, "Well, yes." "Tell you what, Dietrich. You go down and get it. We'll put it on upside down and call this piece the [inaudible]." [They laugh.] But you had to take it from Francis. He could take the wind out of anybody as quick as anybody else.

PAUL CUMMINGS: He obviously enjoyed doing it.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: He was a man of very generous instincts, I think, primarily. He could not stand bluffing or pomposity in anybody, for any reason. That's one of the reasons he didn't get along with some of the trustees. The day he quit, or announced he was going to quit, he came to my office quite early, around nine o'clock, said, "Marshall, I'm quitting." I said, "God, Francis." It came as such a shock to me. I said, "God, you can't do that. Look, we love you. We admire you, respect you. We need you, we want you." He said, "No." I said, "But why,

Francis?" "Marshall, I'll tell you why." He said, "You know, because"—what did he say then? He said, "Because the screwing I'm getting isn't worth the screwing I'm getting, if you see what I mean." [They laugh.] And you see what he meant. He had a lot of perquisites in being director, but he was also under a lot of pressure that he didn't like.

PAUL CUMMINGS: He seemed to like a very earthy dialogue. [00:10:00]

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: You can say that twice over.

PAUL CUMMINGS: With the varying directors that were there during your years, what was the most felicitous style? The outgoing, voluble ones, or the quiet, more reactionary types?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Winlock was a gentleman of the old school, and my contacts—I was just an apprentice at the time, so I didn't have very close associations with the director at all. I found him an extremely pleasant man, a man of real dignity, who also liked a good joke, and played practical jokes. For instance, once when they were accessioning the whole series of Oriental lacquer, Francis went over to the five-and-ten one day, and bought some of those little cute Japanese ashtrays and things like that, and sprinkled them all around for the trustees to look at, and they passed the whole thing. [They laugh.] That was Winlock. He had little tricks like that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's marvelous.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Of course, a lot of the character of the operation of the museum could come, and did occasionally, from the president.

PAUL CUMMINGS: The president?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Yeah. George Blumenthal was quite an autocrat. Preston Remington, who was the curator of Renaissance art for some years, and was a raconteur from way back, he loved to tell the story when George Blumenthal was dying in his place down where the old patio used to be, on 70th Street and Park Avenue. He tiptoed into the dying man's room, and Blumenthal seemed to be out, so he stood there for a moment, and then started to tiptoe out. This old claw reached out and pulled Preston. Said, "The director of the museum is a fool." Preston couldn't say anything to that, so the old man closed his eyes again and Preston started to tiptoe out. [00:12:00] He'd grab him again, and he said, "Preston, your curators are fools." Started to walk out again, and finally Blumenthal caught him once more. He said, "Preston, you're a fool, too." [They laugh.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: What do you think it is that makes trustees so passionately involved with their institutions like that?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: I don't know. I sat next to a trustee emeritus at lunch the other day, at the Century Club, and he was completely objective about the whole thing. If he had ever had any passion, he certainly didn't have it any longer. He was interested, but not to the degree where he would get very upset by things, because he did not approve of some of the things going there now. He was very outspoken about that, but he wasn't losing sleep over it, and he wasn't writing letters to the *Times* or anything like that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But they do seem—once you're a trustee of that institution, or a few others like it, it's very hard for people to get rid of you, and you can—

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Oh, indeed. I can't remember their ever getting rid of a trustee. Of course, in a sense, they have a stranglehold on the museum, because so many of them have the money that museum—and collections which the museum wants. It's part of the purpose in putting them on the board, after all. It frequently pays off.

PAUL CUMMINGS: The eternal gain.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Sure.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But the Met also has—I remember interviewing somebody who was involved with the Brooklyn Museum, and he described a certain trustee they had for years and years, who was very involved. When she died, everything went to the Met. He said there's something about that museum across the river that he said just magnetized—

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: The same thing happened at the Museum of the City of New York, what, 15 years, 20 years ago. What was the name of that collector who had the biggest collection of New York City views, engravings, and that sort of thing, ever assembled on earth? [00:14:04] Even bigger than the Stokes collection, I think. It was on loan on exhibition at the Museum of the City of New York for years and years and years, except for one print, which was that five-foot-long Burgess view of Manhattan in 1718 or something like that. That was in the Metropolitan, in the American Wing. When the man died, he left that print that was in the Museum of the

City of New York, and all the Museum of the City of New York stuff to the Metropolitan. [They laugh.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: You're kidding. How extraordinary.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: I was shocked by this, because I had been working on *Life in America* and using that material all the time, and knew how faithfully Grace Mayer, for instance, had taken care of it, and what a great help she was to me, because she cared for the collection and knew about the collection. I immediately went up to James and said, "Please see that this stuff stays up there on the indefinite loan," which it did, finally. Whether from my persuasion or not, I don't know, but still there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Grace is, I think, one of the few people who's ever read the whole Stokes *Iconography of Manhattan*.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: She probably did.

PAUL CUMMINGS: She did.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: She was up here the other night, as a matter of fact, to visit my wife.

PAUL CUMMINGS: She's splendid.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: She's incredible.

PAUL CUMMINGS: One of those New York institutions.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: She came up here the night that I was fired, which is not a euphemism. [Laughs.] I was fired from the *American Heritage*. Yesterday, I got in the mail—what was it? A card. Well, she sent me a of bottle of Pinch—a bottle of scotch to celebrate the occasion. [They laugh.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: She does have that marvelous smile with everything.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: The man at the museum, from all my early years, even before I went there, up to the time when he retired, was Henry Watson Kent. He was a wonderful man, and he was a gentleman of the old school, and all gentlemen of the old school. [00:16:03]

PAUL CUMMINGS: In what way?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Extremely proper man, who observed every formality to the 10th degree.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, my heavens.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Who outlasted a number of directors of the museum, and as a consequence, had a more contained association with the trustees than any single director had. He could turn the place around through his influence. He was, up until the time he retired, he was, I think, internationally-famed as a great museum-maker. The routines that he established there, and the photographic studio, the cataloging system, all that sort of thing came directly out of Henry Watson Kent. He was a great man. But, by the time Francis Taylor came, of course, he was obsolete as far as—in Francis's terms. Those two could never get along anyway. He couldn't stand Francis. But I knew Kent since I was a little boy. I remember when—my mother died when I was five, and the director at that time was Robinson—Edward Robinson—the classicist from Boston. His wife—they lived at H4 Irving Place. His wife asked my brother and myself down there to take us to the circus. She had one of those little electric cabrioles with bud vases and silk curtains on the window. She would take us to the circus, then bring us back for a cup of tea, and as we left, gave us each a bayberry candle to take home. I think this was several years.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Incredible. Why that kind of candle, do you think?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Early American, I suppose.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So it started with you very early on, but you didn't know it.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: That's right. [They laugh.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, marvelous. That's just terrific.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: I like the smell of them.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, they're terrific. [00:18:00] During the war years at the museum, there were some of the things you described, but you were promoted to an associate curator, which meant basically what, from an

assistant curator to an associate?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Advance in salary, most importantly. Whatever prestige went with it was the basis of things already accomplished, and the general hope that I would continue in accomplishing them. After—how many years was that?—five or six years, whatever it was, I was very diligent in making up for all the lost time. I worked evenings, I worked weekends. I worked everything else. I was trying to, as quickly as possible, compensate for my lack of knowledge and experience.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But what did you do to accomplish that? Did you set yourself a reading program, a looking program?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: It was more catch-as-catch-can, actually. Silver was my major interest, and I became sort of an authority. I remember Aldous Huxley once said that anybody who's willing to spend one afternoon at the public library can thereby become the second greatest authority on any subject in the world. Well, I spent more than one afternoon in the public library. My wife became interested in what I was doing, and she also did a lot of reading and looking. My wife had a much better education than I did. She was brought up by her grandmother also, and I remember—she tells this story that she came home from Mills College one day and told her grandmother, who wasn't very versed in academic routines, "Oh, grandmother, they've just made me a Junior Phi Beta." The grandmother said, "Well, I wouldn't worry, dear, then, if you're a senior next year." [They laugh.] [00:20:00]

PAUL CUMMINGS: What were her interests?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: French literature. Still is. She's in there now, reading like a—as a matter of fact, she's helping me with my Americans in Paris book by reading some French things that she can get through very quickly.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, terrific. How did your interest in silver evolve? What interested you in silver?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: The first thing was, I was asked—well, that was a good starting point, actually. I should have mentioned that earlier. Just as I arrived at the museum, Judge Clearwater gave his collection of silver to the American Wing, and it had to be cataloged.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Somebody had to look at it and do—

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Yeah, and I had to look at every single goddam piece. In order to make any sense out of it, I had to study and study, and study, and study, and get all the catalog material in order. You don't come to know something because you're interested. You become interested in something because you know something. The more I knew about it, the more interested I became.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I see, I see. So it kind of grew of itself because of itself?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: That's right. I got to love it. I still have muscular memories of picking some of these pieces up, how the heft of them feels and that sort of thing. As a matter of fact, I was so devoted in my study of this stuff that when I spoke to the current curator over there the other day, I said, "Did you ever notice that wonderful bottom on that [inaudible] tea kettle?" Instead of just having a little point, which was used to establish the center of the circle, he engraved it with little radiating lines and decorative form. He said, "I never noticed that." But that was the intensity of my interest. I went at it wholeheartedly.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But you've never thought of collecting silver?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: I couldn't afford it, to start with. When my wife and I went to Holland in 1939, I was already pretty well along in this silver study, and in Holland, we saw a tea kettle, brass tea kettle, and from my study of silver, I knew that this was about as early as tea kettles were ever made, and I bought it for 10 bucks. [00:22:15] I also found the little candlestick over your head, which I bought for about five dollars, a 17th-century candlestick, and thought nothing much more of it than that. Then every once in a while, I'd see another little brass piece, which I liked and I picked up. If I could afford it, I'd buy it. Another little piece. The first thing you know, I had quite a collection of brass things. Alice Winchester, who was editor of the magazine *Antiques* came up to the house and saw the collection, said, "My, this is getting to be very impressive. The last thing I do before I leave the magazine, I want an article on your collection of brass." So we had—I wrote a short article about it. Had Lee Bolton photograph it. It cost a $1 million, and he made it look like $5 million.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I'm sure.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: You know, when that article came out, I lost interest in my brass collection. I sold most of it. I kept a few things that I liked very much. I have a little portable sundial outside that I like. I wanted to use

that thing, my prime asset, now that's there. I wanted to put it at the end and call it my tailpiece, but I [they laugh]—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why do you think you lost interest in it?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: I think I got all the fun in finding these things and looking at them, and playing with them a little bit. I thought there were other things in life.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I'm always intrigued when a collection sort of coalesces and finalizes itself like that. It once happened to a collection of books that I had, and something that I never thought would happen, and did. I'm always intrigued when other people have serendipitously acquired things, and then—

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Suddenly [inaudible].

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Some years ago, I was going to do a book on Audubon. [00:24:00] I ultimately did do several things about Audubon. In the course of my studies—I had quite a little library here, including some rare volumes of his journals and his ledgers and something—also, some books on Hudson's Bay Colony, Historical Record Society, whatever it's called. One day I was having lunch with Roger Butterfield, who has now become a book dealer, old book dealer, and told him I had these books, and I said, "I've had Audubon up to my ears, and I'm through with it. Would you like to come look at them?" He came down, looked them over, said yes indeed he wanted them. I said, "I'm never going to bother with Audubon anymore." About a week later, I got involved with a book that required me to look at Audubon. [They laugh.] I saw Roger about a week after that, and said, "Roger, you know, the minute you walked out of my house, I found a need for those books." He said, "They're for sale." Then, as a tailpiece to that thing, I had a call yesterday from Michael Zinman of the Haydn Foundation up in Ardsbury, New York. He said, "I see you're getting rid of your Audubon books," and I said, "How do you know?" He said, "I just bought one." [They laugh.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's fascinating what happens to those things. The immediate post-war years at the Metropolitan, you indicated there was sort of a new group of people that came in, and the museum kind of changed.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: That's when Francis Taylor was really in his prime. He had managed to survive the years of hardship when the collections were—practically all the good things were sent away down to Whitemarsh. When they came back, he started a huge program of reinstallation for one thing, new building programs, and especially international loans. [00:26:01] You probably remember that, at that time, there was a great deal of concern about some of the European pressures and the—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, that's true.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: —here come the Russians. The reds are coming. It was partly to get those things to a safe place. The big Viennese show took place, the Berlin painting show took place, and things like that. As you saw, the Hungarian crowd is only going back now. That was part of the same situation. But it also gave Francis a wonderful opportunity to put on an unprecedented series of international exhibitions.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Which he loved, I'm sure.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Which he loved. In connection with the opening of the new galleries, when they were finally completed, he had a huge international congress, with scholars, art historians, and so forth from all over the world, from Japan, every place else. It was a week or two. Some doings, I tell you. Also, other museums were growing quickly and coming back to life again. The number of young people—Harry Grier was one of them—who came back from the war, only stayed a week or two, then went out to Minneapolis or whatever it was—and there were others in that same boat, who found—had used the museum as sort of a training ground, and went on to other things.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That was Taylor a lot, wasn't it? He just seemed to dart around [ph], and knew everybody.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Yes. He also was interested in people going on and doing things. He didn't want to see them get stuck in corners. That was one of the reasons why I said I'm going to quit and write this book instead of staying in the American Wing. He said, "I think you're very wise." He liked to see people grow and become different.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Challenges.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Instead of sticking in the same puddle.

PAUL CUMMINGS: One thing I was going to ask you about was that 1939 exhibition the museum gave.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: *Life in America*?

PAUL CUMMINGS: *Life in America*. Did you have much to do with that?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Absolutely nothing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You'd only been there a few years. [00:28:00] But you saw it, obviously?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Absolutely nothing. Oh, of course I saw it. I've still got the catalog.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I was just wondering if that was an influence in terms of your own ideas or anything.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: I can frankly say it was not. We borrowed the title, I'm sure, but in no other respect did it have any bearing on my two volumes of *Life in America*. I may not—perhaps I'm unwise in putting it that flatly, but my best memory is that I didn't even use it as a sourcebook. That my—I was looking for much greater variety of things than ever appeared in that show, in all mediums, for instance. And for a different purpose.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. Well, it was essentially a painting exhibition, mostly.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Hmm?

PAUL CUMMINGS: That was essentially a painting—

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: All together paintings, yes. It was pretty well done for what it was, and it, in itself, was a trailblazer, because Ivans organized that. Who was it? The chap who was—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Hyatt Mayo [ph] worked on it [inaudible] Brown [ph] and—

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: The fellow who went to the Corcoran.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Williams?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Williams, yeah. He worked on it, Hyatt worked on it, Ivans worked on it. I must say, my nose was a little out of joint, because I would like to have worked on it. [They laugh.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you find this postwar activity affecting your own work at the museum? Was it a sort of burst of activity, or was it slow?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: It took time to work up a head of steam on new, developing programs, but it was in those years that Joe put on, and I put on, these big shows, like the Greek revival, the China trade show. We had one on early American pewter. Such a show has never been held before. When I quit the American Wing to become editor of publications, Joe Downs quit to become—not the same reason—to become head of the DuPont Museum in Winterthur. [00:30:07] Then a whole new crowd came in, with Lydia Powell and Vincent Andrews. Poor old Vincent. Died a mean death. Abbott Lowell Cummings was now up at the SPNEA, and Jimmy Biddle after that, and now the current crop. I understand they're calling this new installation, which consists of everything, American prints and paintings as well, the American Wing. That is the umbrella title for the entire operation. So they told me the other day. It had always, previously, been restricted to the American decorative arts.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So everything will go in there now?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: I'm not sure whether the prints will, but certainly the paintings, the sculptures. There will certainly be representation of prints, and furniture, and all the other decorative arts. It will all be under one roof. It's going to be quite elaborate.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's going to be spectacular.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Yeah. I cased the joint the other day, but they say they're going to open '79. I'd like to see that day. Because there's one hell of a lot of work to do. Because the curators are so busy with their installations and planning, that sort of thing, they felt they couldn't take time out to write anything. That's why they asked me to do it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: In speaking of the pewter exhibition and the China trade, how did those ideas evolve? Did you have a standard way of—

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: For instance, the pewter show evolved because we got a gift of pewter. Earlier than that, there had been very little American pewter in the Metropolitan Museum. Well, this gift was of sufficient interest

to make us decide that we wanted to really learn a lot about pewter and organize the collections differently, so we staged this unprecedentedly large show on American pewter, which attracted more pewter collections to the museum, you see. [00:32:12] The same thing with the China trade. I forget why it was, but I think one could say that a contributing element was that we received something of very special interest related to the China trade, which sparked our imaginations, or Joe's and mine, whoever it was, and went on from there. There again, from these exhibitions, there's almost always an accretion of stuff that comes out of those back into the museum from private collectors. Almost always happens.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's fascinating how exhibitions can be stimulated by a collector or donor, benefactor, and then attract new people because of that.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: That's right. I guess it works that way. One thing leads to another, and they feed on themselves, actually.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you like the aspects of being a curator, which you were for 13 years? Then you went into the editing business. You didn't want to stay as a curator, obviously.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: No. I quit that job, as I told you, to write *Life in America*. Then they hired me back as editor.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, I see.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Just as I was quitting. I was still on the payroll, and I switched over to the editorial job. That was all brand-new to me, every bit of it. In the meantime, when *Life in America* came out, the old *American Heritage* magazine, which is run by the Society of Local and State History, whatever it was, asked me if I'd go on their editorial board, because of the success of *Life in America*. It was window-dressing and such. Would have asked me to do anything. So they put my name as advising editor or something like that on the masthead. [00:34:02] Then these boys at *American Heritage* came along and started the new *American Heritage*, and my name was carried over. So in a sense, I have seniority over everybody associated with that magazine, since I was on the old one, the only one. [They laugh.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really, the only—

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Not that it did me any good. Then, after a few years, they were having difficulty. They started the new magazine, *Horizon*, and they were having difficulty getting printable articles on, mostly, art, and also, to a degree, on history. They asked me if I would act as a contributor on a retainer basis—so many articles a year on this, so many articles a year on that—by mutual agreement. They did not have to accept my suggestions. I did not have to suggest theirs. After doing this for about two years, which meant double work, of course, because I was doing my museum job, they finally came up and said, "Why don't you come down and work for us instead?" It took me very little time to decide that's what I wanted to do.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really? Why—

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Well, there were several reasons for it. One, practically all the time that I was editor, most of my time was taken up by our program, the Book of the Month Club. Do you remember the—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, yes, the series.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: —miniatures that started then [ph]. Al Gardner, who was a good friend of mine in those days—he's long since dead also—I remember his remark about the miniatures. He said, "You know, I don't know very much about art, but I know what I lick." [Laughs.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, that's terrible.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: This may be of some interest to you. I had a hell of a job keeping that program going, practically all my time. I had international correspondence, among other things, and getting authors. [00:36:02] Francis would blow hot and blow cold. First thing you know, he'd say, "Why don't you take some money, go out and buy yourself the best authors you can get?" The next minute, said, "No, no, we don't want to build up an overhead on this sort of thing, so let's just keep it quiet, and do the best you can from month to month."

PAUL CUMMINGS: Was that program profitable for the museum?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: You're damn right. You're damn right it was. I'll tell you more about that in one second. After this had been going for several years, I ran out of juice. That is to say, I couldn't get anybody to write anything. I was then restricted, for the most part, to museum people, who did not write very well, unfortunately. I went to see Francis and said, "What am I going to do?" He said, "I'll tell you what to do. There's a fellow down in Philadelphia museum. Can't remember his name, but he writes wonderful stories under the name Matthew

Head. I can't remember his name, but you'll find out. He's in the education department down there." I learned that that was John Canaday. I went down to speak to John, and he agreed to do one on some very esoteric aspect of early Italian painting, and it was quite brilliant. So I asked him to do another. I got enough money to pay him modestly. The next thing he did was to write an article on French academic painting of the 19th century. A world apart from the other article, but he handled each one with equal grace. Then Harry Sherman, who was the chairman of the board of the Book a Month Club, decided that there wasn't enough system in the program. He wanted something new. That's when we started to organize the Metropolitan seminars.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I see.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Rorimer was then director, I guess. But in any case—I think it was Rorimer who was director then. Rorimer decided these would be house-written, period, and my heart sank, because what Harry Sherman wanted was something that would be read by a large public, and would be read with interest by a large public. [00:38:09] So we had a couple of runarounds with curatorial staffs at this thing, and for my money, it just didn't work at all. It didn't work. Harry Sherman, bless his late heart, quite agreed, and he said, "No, this is crap. We can't use it." So, when that realization became quite obvious, I said to James, "Why not John Canaday?" So we got John up, and he wrote one or two samples for us, which I liked very much, Harry Sherman liked very much, but the staff didn't like. [Laughs.] This man coming in and doing it well, and you know, Ted [ph] was so criticized.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What reasons? The writing approach?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: [Inaudible.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, just competition?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Yeah. Here's a guy who knows a lot about art, that can write. You can't have him around. [They laugh.] That's bad. I worked with John on this for its several years duration, and Harry Sherman—you asked about its profitability. Harry Sherman once told me that in terms of their investment, they never had a more profitable operation.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really? That's fantastic.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: It counted up in the millions of dollars, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So it made a lot for the museum?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: It made a lot for the museum. Then, the end of that story was the art editor of the*New York Times* quit, and they went to James Rorimer to ask him for advice about who to get. I put a bug in his ear, said, "Why don't they get John?" John became the editor, art editor, of the *Times*. We've been very firm friends ever since.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, that's terrific.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: He's now retired, John. [00:40:00]

PAUL CUMMINGS: I know. What's he doing now? Because I haven't seen him for a while.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: I saw him the other day at a party. Doing little bits of this and that. I think he's a little bit lost in his retirement.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So he needs a project?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: The shift from your curatorial activities into publications—had you had much experience, except with catalogs, of exhibitions, in editing or any of that? It was all—

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: No. I must say, Mr. Kent had the iron-hold, while he existed, on all the museum publications. He was a man of such prestige and such knowledge, as a bibliophile and a typophile, that he was respected by everybody for this thing. Old hat, old-fashioned, sure, but within that limitation, almost perfection. He got the museum trustees to the point where they were eating out of his hand, practically. If a distinguished visitor sneezed on the front steps, he'd run off and get some special, handmade Japanese paper, and print dampened, with a new typeface, designed by Bruce Rogers or something like that. He installed—he had a monotype machine there, two Linotype machines. He had a color type press in there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: In the museum?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Yeah. Haughty Jayne, Howard Furness Jayne, came as Francis's vice director. When Kent quit, Haughty took his place. The miniatures idea was Haughty's photography exhibit there. Haughty took Kent's place, actually, as secretary of the museum, as well as vice director. [00:42:03] He didn't have Mr. Kent's expertise by any means, but he had a lot of imagination. Very shortly after we got into the miniatures program, Haughty left the museum. His responsibilities in connection with publications fell on me, but without any of his authority. So I had a struggle there. Kent could do what he wanted, and Haughty, in a sense, could do what he wanted, but I was just the editor of publications and I couldn't do what I wanted at all. I had to fight out every situation. And finally, Francis Taylor came to me one day and said, "Marshall, would you look into this print shop? It's costing us a hell of a lot of money." I looked into it. I got the New York Printers Association to come up take a look at it. They said, "This is ridiculous. Get rid of it quick." He said, "In our business, if you can't keep a Linotype machine running at least 20 hours a day, you're losing a lot of money." You're losing $800 [ph] a week. It's crazy. But in the meantime, Kent had some very distinguished typefaces up there. He commissioned Bruce Rogers to do the Centaur type, for instance. And Frederick Ward to do the [inaudible] type, both very distinguished typefaces.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, he was the Centaur patron?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: That's right, yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's a marvelous face.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: It is indeed. Of course, now it's in Linotype and everything else. This was hand-set type, all this stuff. He died the other day, a couple weeks ago—a couple of months ago, down in Florida. He had a very, very serious drinking problem, which is one of the reasons he left the museum. But he licked it, and he was actually abstemious in his later years.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Hmm. How did you develop your interest in writing? Because you've written a lot.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Well, that was self-germinating also. I must say that Mr. Kent had, under his wing, a bunch of virgin ladies who were very strict editors, and very, very proper editors. [00:44:08] And I must say that those girls put me through a course of sprouts [ph]. It was very helpful. They made me quite aware of what the proprieties of writing were. They couldn't help me write well, but they could keep me from making serious mistakes, and I learned a lot from them. So, when I started on *Life in America*—this was my first publication of any consequence whatsoever—I had done one piece for *Vogue* magazine, which surprised me by being as good as it was. [Laughs.] I couldn't quite get over it. I said, maybe I can write. That was the first real indication I'd had, aside from these bulletin proofs. But when I got involved—the *Life in America* deal was rather amusing, because Houghton Mifflin was scared to death, because I was untried as a writer, really. So when the contract was signed, it was between the Metropolitan Museum, Houghton Mifflin, and me, with um—oh, what's the name of the Pulitzer Prize-winning—Paul Revere and his circle of women? Esther Forbes. She was put on also, with royalty attachment. In case I should fall on my face, she'd pick up all the pieces and put them in proper order. The first chapter I sent in as a trial, I got an enthusiastic telephone call from Paul Brooks, the director, saying, "This is wonderful." He took Esther off immediately and gave me her part of the royalties. I learned while I was writing that book, and Paul kept encouraging me, saying, "You're turning out to be a writer." That idea has sunk very deep in me, and I like the idea, so I kept working at it. Then my experience with *Heritage* only compounded my interest in getting myself on paper. [00:46:00]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you like writing, the activity of writing?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: You know what what's his name says—the—E.B. White. In one of his letters, he said, "That summer, I built a stone wall." He said, "Writers always build stone walls, because it's so much easier than writing." It's true. I'm having a hell of a time with the thing I'm doing here at the moment, but it will work out. I always go through a spasma difficulty. Eventually it works out.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you use outlines and rewrites, or do you just—

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: I change line by line by line by line. I can't just erase it out and then go over it again. I have to have the assurance that what I've done is right before I move ahead with the next sentence. So I constantly revise line by line, not page by page.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So it's very long and tedious?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: That's one way of doing it. Some people do it differently. Some people put their thoughts down as quickly as they can, and refine it once, and then refine it twice. But I can't do that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So you do one sentence at a time, another paragraph, and then a sentence and a paragraph? Is it quick, or does it take you hours to write a page?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: It all depends. It all—I can't say. I remember, some years ago, I was still at the museum at the time, and we had been asked by somebody working at the museum to come up to Newport for the weekend, and my wife has never been in very good health, and just before that she had a setback, so I canceled out. *Harper's* magazine had asked me at that time to recommend them, yay or nay, whether they should put out a Civil War centennial based on all the material in *Harper's* magazine. I went over to the New York Society Library, where they had a whole set of those things, and looked through them, and decided that it was too slanted. [00:48:00] We'd get a very one-sided picture of the Civil War from those things, interesting as it was. But I did come across one article, in one of the issues, about the time in 1862 or ['6]3, when the Russian fleet was in New York. I said, gee, this would make a wonderful article, and I sat down. I wrote it in about two or three hours, gave it to *American Heritage*, and they gave me $500 for it on Monday morning. [They laugh.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, marvelous. This is true. Sometimes the quick ones are the most fun.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Sometimes you know too much to be quick about it. You can fall over your own knowledge. And I—

PAUL CUMMINGS: How do you sort that kind of situation out? When you keep saying, "Oh, I've got to put this in. No, I've done that."

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: It's a constant reassessment, actually. I was doing a book, which is half-done, and sitting down in *American Heritage*, on naturalists of the American West, a subject about which I know absolutely nothing. That went on reasonably. My wife said, "You know, you write much better if you don't know anything about a subject." [They laugh.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: What do you do, then? Go out and research and do index cards, or make notes?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: My notes are the most disorganized bunch of notes you ever saw. Little pieces of paper—I put them together to keep them away from your sight today. But otherwise, they'd be all over the floor, and I'd have to look for them and find them. I can't be systematic about it. In the long run, in spite of the real mental pain involved in the thing, I do enjoy the creative aspect of writing, and I do like to get, as I did with *Life in America*, get a subject which I knew would interest me, but about which I knew nothing. That's the way the American naturalist book was beginning to turn out. [00:50:00]

PAUL CUMMINGS: So the challenge is almost as interesting as the—

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Exactly. Can you master the subject to satisfy your own intelligence and interest in it?

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's interesting how many writers I know follow a similar pattern. They really don't—"Well, I wrote about that. That was last year. This is something new." They prefer the challenge.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Well, now that's one of the difficulties I'm having with this book. It's a book—really be a pocketbook for Bantam on early American furniture. I wrote three books on American antiques for *American Heritage*. I wrote that piece for the journal at the Metropolitan Museum. They've now asked me to do the American Wing again. So I'm falling all over myself, worrying about plagiarizing myself. If I said it so right the first time, how can I say so different this time now? If I said it over here, I've got to say it in this book also, but I can't do that. I had a—

PAUL CUMMINGS: What do you think you'll do?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: I'll sweat it out. I'll sweat it out. There are forms of plagiarism you can get around. Make something sound un-plagiaristic—although it's essentially the same premise—by changing the sentence structure and rearranging the sequence and that sort of thing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's almost, maybe, a more difficult challenge than using things you don't know about.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Well, it's a different kind of challenge. That's certain. I remember once, several years ago, we were putting out, at *Heritage*, a book on the '20s and '30s. The author conked out with two unfinished chapters, and they came to me, said, "Could you give us these two chapters in two weeks?" I said, "Yeah, that's my heyday." I know we're talking about speakeasies. Well, that's what I'm into, speakeasies. We were talking about the earthquake out in California. [00:52:00] Well, I was in the earthquake in California. We were talking about the bank closing. I was at a teller when the banks closed. So it came sort of easily.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Autobiographical.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Well, yeah. But to make the thing easy, and there was a great need for haste in this thing, I turned to *Life in America* and used some of that material. On my manuscript, I noted where I got this, and sometimes it was verbatim. The editor said, "You can't do this." I said, "Why not? I wrote it in the first

place." They said, "Yes, but you're not the author of this book." I said, "Oh, I hadn't thought of that."

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, that's right.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: "I'll tell you what we'll do. We'll put my name on the title page as co-author." [They laugh.] I can't do this again. He accepted that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's fascinating. Did you find, though, as you got into the—going back to the Metropolitan briefly—into the activities and publications that you missed the kind of experiences you were having with objects?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: No, not a bit.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It was a change in that—

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Not a bit, and that was the end of it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That was the end, and now this was something new?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: That's one of the funny things about this American Wing business. When I finished the—when I left the American Wing, I said, well, that's that, and we closed the door. Then comes the idea of these antiques books for *American Heritage*, sort of opened the door again. In the meantime, I've sold half my library, and I said, well, I never want that anymore. So I finished the third one in that, and put it aside, so that's the end of that. Then this museum thing comes in [inaudible] thing and I'm starting all over again. Three times, I've put the American Wing behind me.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Keeps coming in the window.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Yeah, can't help it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What do you feel that the curatorial experience gave you, in terms of the objects, in terms of history, in connoisseurship, selection? [00:54:00]

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: It gave me an immediate impression of history, because my approach was broad, as I say. I wanted an understanding that the society produced these things. Why did they make a chair like that, for what purpose? Why was it any different than any other chair that somebody else did? That got me to the study of social history as such, because without that, I couldn't find out what I wanted. One thing led to another, and the farther I got into the social history, the farther the objects themselves disappeared from my sight and thought. And here they all come back again.

PAUL CUMMINGS: They keep floating around. [They laugh.] It's amazing. You really—how, in your first years at the Met, had obviously no sense of where it was all going to go.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: I had no idea whatsoever.

PAUL CUMMINGS: No. There was, every so often, a great shift, but still using the same—

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: You never know what little thing—

PAUL CUMMINGS: —material.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: —completely changes the direction of your life. If Francis Taylor hadn't had this notion of asking me to write *Life in America*, I might be, now, a retired curator from the Metropolitan Museum, instead of being in full flight, you might say, with a dozen projects at once. [They laugh.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: What did you do in the publications? You were the editor? You were the—what—try and define that, exactly.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Editor of publications was the title as listed.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Which meant you worked on all the catalogs, the bulletin, everything?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: I had a staff, and as I say, it might have been my salvation that this Book of the Month Club program came up just at that time, and I had to devote a great deal of my time to it. [00:56:00] Otherwise, I would have got sucked into cataloging and that sort of thing, and I think my direction would have been—I might have gone down the drain for that matter. Because this gave me—I was dealing with a professional writer, with John Canaday. I was dealing in large international aspects of the art scene, and with the techniques of book

production and that sort of thing, in a way that the museum had never been involved before. So in a sense, that was the salvation. Otherwise, as I say, I might have really got stuck in a rut there, for sure.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you think that outside influence, just to elaborate on it, informed what you did at the museum in terms of publications produced there?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Say that again, please?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Your activity with the Book of the Month Club. Did that new experience, information, direct what you were doing at the museum in terms of the institution's own publication?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: To a degree. It led me to try to use this new insight in museum publications, but there was an awful lot of inertia there. [They laugh.] I didn't have the time to fight it if I wanted to, or if I could have. I remember the long editor of publication was a Ms. Howe, a very chaste maiden lady of certain years. She left, retired, and when I got the job, I made some small change in routine, and somebody said, "What's Marshall trying to do, make a silk purse out of Ms. Howe's ear?" [They laugh.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why is it, it seems, that it's so difficult to make changes at museums unless one just sort of chops it off and starts totally new?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: He's done it since, and to a degree Francis did. Haughty Jayne is responsible for the miniatures program, as I say, to start with, but it started almost as a disaster, because nobody was really watching the thing. [00:58:01]

PAUL CUMMINGS: That was a museum-generated idea, then?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: It had precedence in Europe. Some of the German tobacco companies did things like this. They gave you little alms [ph] [inaudible] reproductions of works of art. So it wasn't all together original or novel, but its application in terms of a museum publishing policy, it certainly was unique. Haughty was just wavering at that time. When the first trial went on press, it was something like four million, and there was never any certainty as to who was watching this operation. I wasn't that far involved. Haughty wasn't doing anything about it. Book of the Month Club sort of thought we were doing it. And as a consequence, they'd run off two or three million of these things and put them irretrievably in the mail. Well, somebody found out that the things were so far out of [inaudible] that sometimes the blue plate and yellow plate were side-by-side [inaudible]. And I came to my office one day after these mailings had gone out, and found my desk piled with complaints. Piled with complaints. Just by chance, I opened the top one, and it was from Howard Milford [ph] Jones. Francis was the director at the time. "Dear Francis, we love you. We admire you, respect you. But this is too much." [They laugh.] That whole thing almost went down the drain right there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, I'm sure.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: They quickly recovered, and we got organized, and then it became my responsibility. Haughty was out, and I got to know the Book of the Month Club people very well, and we worked together.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Sherman seems to be a very interesting fellow in publishing terms, because—

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Well, he's dead, of course. But he started his career—you're too young to remember this, but when I was a child, these little 10-cent pseudo-leather-bound copies of classics and things like that. [01:00:00] I forget what they were called, but they were just about so big, and about so thick, and had imitation leather covers on them. They were limp.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It was kind of a spin-off of the Roycrofter idea.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Sort of. Harry made quite a bit of money on this. Then he started the Book of the Month Club, which was an original idea. He was a very sharp, shrewd man. I remember when we were renegotiating the Book of the Month Club contract at one point, Roland Redmond sat in for the museum, Harry Sherman for the Book of the Month Club, with assorted dignitaries, and me in the background as technical advisor, assistant, or something like that. I've never seen Harry Sherman lose his poise, except for this instance. Roland was a very suave Wall Street lawyer, the whole New York stock. Every time Harry would make a suggestion about doing something, Roland would say, "Harry, I don't think you quite understand how much the prestige of the museum means to this program, and how you are dependent upon it." After he said this about the third time, Harry Sherman got up and stamped his little foot. He said, "I can't stand this, Roland. Every time I try to make a constructive suggestion, you throw the prestige of the Metropolitan Museum in my face." Roland said, "Harry, I admire this little drama of yours, but it will not get you anywhere." [They laugh.] And Harry sat down and signed the contract.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Redmond was an incredible influence there for a long time, wasn't he?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Well, he's still trying to be, but [inaudible] this time. He's not a chicken. He's—

[Tape speed begins to play very fast.]

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: —I saw him about a year or two ago at one of the Century functions, and [inaudible] quite different from the old Metropolitan [inaudible] days, isn't it? [They laugh.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: How old is he now?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: He's in his 80s. He must be. The trustee [ph] I sat with the other day was Arnold Kittredge [ph], and he's in his 80s also. He's still writing, British history illustration. [01:02:01] I think he goes to Yale occasionally. He's a very spry 80.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Terrific.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: And he's Worthington Winters's [ph] nephew, I believe.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I think so. Who was one of the founders, wasn't he?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Yeah. [Inaudible] delightful gentleman.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Okay, well, that's the end of my tape.

[END OF TRACK AAA_davids77_3341_r.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: —it's the 10th of January, 1978. This is side three. Paul Cummings talking to Marshall Davidson, in his apartment on 83rd Street.

[Audio Break.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: One is—Rorimer was there when you were there, wasn't he?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And he came when, about, now?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: He came almost directly out of the Fogg art school, back in the early '30s, if not before. I can't tell you exactly, but [inaudible].

PAUL CUMMINGS: So he was there a long time before—

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Yeah. Back in the early '30s, there was one big umbrella over the decorative arts that covered everything. It was in the early '30s, around '31 or ['3]2 or ['3]3 that they started breaking those up into separate categories. One of the categories was medieval art, and that's where he stepped in as the first curator of that segregated—pardon the expression—department. Joe Downs came in shortly after as curator of the American section, and Preston Remington came in, in charge of the Renaissance, and Maurice Dimand in charge of Near Eastern art, and Steve—well, Steve Grancsay always had his own department, in the arms and armor. He was quite a character, that fellow. He came to the museum as a youngster. He had just exactly 10 cents in his pocket, enough for a subway ride out to Flushing, each direction. He got the job. From there on, I don't think Steve had a thought. He ate nothing, he slept about nothing, he dreamed about nothing, he talked about nothing, he read about nothing but arms and armor. He got himself so thoroughly saturated with the whole subject that he became a real authority. He had no other cultural qualifications whatsoever, but he knew arms and armor backwards and forwards. He just stuck on as a little boy, and that was when—what was his name? [00:02:02] He was curator of ichthyology at the Natural History Museum, and also curator of arms and armor at the Metropolitan. But he would say all fish have arms and armor, and that's what their scales were. What was his name? It will come to me in a minute. He was quite an important man. Come to me in a minute. Let me just ask my wife. She'll remember.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Is that [inaudible]?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: No, no. His name was Bashford Dean. He was quite an important person. Rorimer came in on that wave of splitting up, and was the first curator of medieval art. I think he was the first. If he wasn't the first, he was very—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Pretty close.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Soon became—yeah. To what degree he was responsible, actually, for getting Rockefeller to put up the dough for the—I don't know the history of the operation. James would take all the credit for getting the Rockefeller money, whether he got it—whether he deserved it or not, he took it. I dare say, to a larger extent, he deserved it. That was when they took over, oh, what's his name's collection up there—you know. Didn't you write an article on—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, the sculptor, right.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: That's right. It used to be in mumbly-jumbly collection up there. When the plans of the Cloisters were generated, James was put in charge of the entire operation. So this was a very important move on his part.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That was his great springboard.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Exactly. It was from there he ultimately became director. It took him a couple of jumps to get there, but he finally made it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: He was very involved in the museum in a rather interesting way from what I've observed, in terms of directors, because he seemed to have practically no interest in any other institution, except the Metropolitan. [00:04:10]

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: I think it was his whole life.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That was it. Yeah.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: He was really devoted to the institution, as seen through the eyes of James Rorimer. He had a very sensitive entity, and he wanted credit for whatever he did, or whatever happened that he thought he could get credit for. I think he got into a brush or two with Tom Hoving over that, because when they—I remember having cocktails with Tom before he was director, and he told me the story of the 11th-century cross they have up in the Cloisters. What's the name?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, the Bury St. Edmunds?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Yeah, Bury St. Edmunds cross. Tom told me a very dramatic story of his acquiring that, having to arrange a check for $15 million or something in his pocket, and sitting in a hotel until the clock struck midnight, when somebody else's option [ph] was up, you know? He claimed, at that point, that he did all the necessary research that proved that it was, indeed, what it reported to be. But James will tell another story, that he told him the information. Tom went on from there. Maybe a bit of truth in both of those. [They laugh.] But they did say it quite oppositely.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, that's marvelous.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: James was a very interesting person, and very calculating person. If you'd meet James at a cocktail party, he'd hardly look you in the eye. He was looking around to see who was really important there. [They laugh.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Always working, as they say. One thing that's always intrigued me, because I guess the size of the institution, is how well did you come to know other people in other departments, or was it pretty much who you happened to work with? [00:06:01]

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: In the course of time, I got to know them quite well. I see [inaudible] over here.

[Audio Break.]

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: In the course of time, I got to know them all quite well. I miss a lot of them. The bonds of friendship weren't awfully close, but there was, at least in my mind, a sort of paternal feeling in the relationship. Naturally, there was a lot of bitching going on, as there is in any institution, but I would say not more than in any other institution. There was a number of the people there that I got to be very fond of indeed, others just friendly, and have no bitches of my own, except in a few instances. Maurice Emand almost ran me up the wall once. They collected a—that's when I was editor. When I became editor of publications, of course it was my business to know these—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Then you worked with everybody.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: I just went in rounds every once in a while, mending my fences and making friends, just to get them to write an article, which was the hardest thing in the world. Almost impossible. Since half of them couldn't write anyway, it wasn't all that rewarding, except those pages had to be filled every month or so. No, I

was terribly fond—I told you last time that Francis Taylor once told me that my fault was that I was born in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. [inaudible] I almost was, because I was—when my father worked there, back in the early days, I used to go in as a very small child, and was known to a number of the people.

PAUL CUMMINGS: When did your father begin working there?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Around 19[0]6, I think. Something like that. And he had various connections. He came because he had been secretary to Robert DeForest, who, at that time, was president of the museum. [00:08:04] He came up in that guise, and then became associated with Caspar Purdon—you know he'd been with Sir Caspar Purdon Clarke. Then he was director, that's right. He became the secretary to Sir Caspar Purdon Clarke. Then he became secretary to Henry Watson Kent. Then he became registrar, and that was it. He kept on being registrar. They extended his retirement age, because it was during the war and they felt they needed the continuity to get all those things back from Whitemarsh and so forth, so he stayed on a couple of extra years.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So he was there quite a while?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: For 40 years. Almost 50, I guess. There were a number of people like that. Steve Grancsay was, I think, there 50 years. Gisela Richter was there a very long time. Some of them died in harness like Bryson Burroughs. Died a bit too young. He, in turn, married one of the young ladies there, Louise Burroughs, who's still alive down in Baltimore. I guess she is. Which reminds me, one of the social aspects—didn't involve me at all—was that these lady curator-types had luncheon clubs.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Yeah. It was Hannah [ph] Bannister and Louise Avery, and Gisela Richter and Louise Burroughs, and who else all? They'd have either regular or periodic lunches together. Sort of a pre-lib [laughs] movement.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Sit around and talk and conspire and gossip. Oh, marvelous.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Gisela was the only one who was really on top of things. She made the top rank. What a girl she was.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But what do you—was there a lot of competition between one department and another in terms of whatever was available in funds, space? [00:10:01]

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: I don't think it was bitter at all. I think that things were pretty well-regulated. I think there was a certain amount of competition for money to buy things with at the time of the trustees meetings, when the curators had to go up and explain why this should be bought. I'm sure there was a lot of haggling for more money the next guy got. That's an actual—you'd expect it but, sure. Sure.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, right. Absolutely. From the first years when you came there, until you left, there must have been enormous growth in staff, changes in people.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Well, there was. There was a growth in staff when Francis Taylor came in, because he had his own separate ideas of what the museum should be, which were entirely different from what Herbert Winlock's or Ivan's had been before him. He stressed education, and he brought in Callason as dean of education from Williams College—or Wesleyan College. He brought in a restorer. They never had a full-time restorer there before.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: No. They had a chemist, who blew himself up one day in the basement. He literally did.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You're kidding.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: It was the day I was down at Whitemarsh, and I remember I came back, and apparently he had blown himself up experimenting with something.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, how amazing.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: But there was nothing like—the restoration department now there is huge. There was a specialist for paper, and a specialist for paint, and a specialist for medals, and everything else. The only place where you could say that there was a complete laboratory was in the arms and armor department, where they had—I can't remember his name. He was an old German who really got in there and made armor, just the way it was made in the early days. [00:12:00] He was a very capable man with that sort of thing. It was he—what the hell is his name? It was he who worked with Steve Grancsay during World War II, developing body armor for the

troops, for the U.S. Army. There was a long, *Bulletin* article about that once, I remember. It wasn't Helmut, whatever his name was. Actually have these things out in the anvils up there for the government.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Fantastic. [Laughs.] How did you—the shift, going to publications, did that change your attitude about it, about the museum very much, or was it just another phase of what one did there?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: No, I would say it enlarged my attitude toward the museum rather than changed it. I did, perforce, have to become not so much involved as concerned and interested in the activities of the various departments as part of my function. Although, as I think I have mentioned last time, the years that I was editor coincided almost precisely with the years that we were involved with the Book of the Month Club, and that took so much of my effort. It kept me in almost a special category, and I had a bunch of old maids and young beauties who did most of the editorial work, which suited me fine. I was having fun with the Book of the Month Club program, and it took me out to the world theater, negotiating for things in Russia and all sorts of places.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Well, one of the deals we had was to have a set of the miniatures, I guess it was—yes, the miniatures—on the Kremlin—I don't mean the Kremlin. Um. You know, the museum in Leningrad.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh. [00:14:00] I can't remember.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: It will come. It was a rather complicated mechanical problem, because we had to, ideally, get eight different subjects shot in the same focus, so we could make one plate of eight. I wrote a long—first, I had to negotiate with a cultural person here, first in New York, and then in Washington. That took months and months and months and months and months and months. Then, when that went through, I had to clear with the museum in Leningrad to make arrangements to that end. Out of courtesy—what I thought was courtesy for them—I asked them if they would take the photographs. For one thing, how could I get money to send a photographer over there? I gave them a very complete set of specifications of exactly what I wanted. Months and months and months and months went by, and finally, one day, I got, in the mail, a little lead box, and I opened it up, and the film curled right up like that. It was just lousy film. Every color reproduction looked as though it had been dipped in weak coffee. Speaking of which, would you like some coffee?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Not really.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: It's there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: No. A little later.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Which meant it was absolutely unusable.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, God.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Then I was embarrassed, because I hesitated to write them a letter saying, look, boys, this sort of amateurish junk just won't do. So I wrote a very complicated letter, pulling out every mechanical trade term I could possibly use, trying utterly to confuse them, and succeeded in confusing myself at the same time. But it was just about that time that Frank Lerner, from *Life* magazine, who had photographed the Sistine Chapel ceiling—I think we talked about this last time. [00:16:03]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, yeah.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: And they had that huge, one-quarter-sized reproduction down at Radio Center, and it was at the Metropolitan also, and several other places. Frank was contracting with some of the shelter magazines to go over there and do a job in Leningrad. So we got together, and he said, "While I'm there, I'll do this for you, and it won't cost you all this transportation expense," so he did. They could not have been kinder to him, or more helpful. They gave him his own laboratory there so he could develop everything before he left town. They were so impressed by the quality of his work that when he got back, he told me that they urged him to phone me from Leningrad, to see if we wouldn't do 24 more subjects. And Frank got off the hook [ph], [they laugh] he knew that it was just too much of a good thing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It would go on and on and on.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: That was the time when Frank brought his transparencies home, and they were super, that Roland Redmond, then the president, came to my office and said he'd heard they'd arrived, and could he see them? I showed them to him. He said, "I'd like to borrow these to show them to my friends." It turned out he left them in a taxicab.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, you're kidding. [They laugh.]

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: They were found.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's amazing.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: But after all that trouble—several years work, you know. I had visions of them going down to lost articles and ending up in the East River. But they found them, and it all went off very well.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's amazing. As you had said before, that was an enormously profitable venture for the museum to be involved in.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Harry Sherman once told me that, in proportion to their layout, the amount of money they put into it, it was the most profitable thing they've done. That went for the miniatures, and then, by extension, into the seminars that John Canaday did. [00:18:02]

PAUL CUMMINGS: That was really the largest publications project you've worked on at the museum, wasn't it?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Oh, yes. We were dealing in the millions, yes. That sort of thing. It was ideal in many ways, because the Book of the Month Club approached this thing with the utmost care in planning, and by the time they'd committed—after they committed themselves, up to the time when we actually got into production, almost two years passed, and in that time, I had an opportunity, and time enough to do it, and the money to do it, to hire photographers who could go from England, to Portugal, to Spain, to Italy, to wherever else—Austria, Germany, France—and plan enough in advance so there would be no conflict with weather conditions, or holidays, church holidays, and that sort of thing. I worked through Thames & Hudson, the English publisher, with Walter Neurath, who was a good friend of mine until he died. He had a lady photographer who had a—what we referred to as a built-in scaffold. She did have some sort of classical scaffold, so that when she got into a church where there was a fresco on high, she could just mount her little old portable scaffold and take the picture. By that time, also, I had opportunity in the time to work out with John Canaday a full program for the whole 24 albums. This was after the miniatures and the seminars.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Was the 24 arrived at ahead of time, or did it develop?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: The success of the first 12 automatically brought in the next 12. So I guess I must have done that in two bites. In either case, it was done in the same way, with ample time to plan, and opportunity to plan not only the writing and the formulation of the book, and the books themselves, but to get all that photography done under variable conditions all over Europe. [00:20:10] The museum, as you may know, in both the case in the miniatures and the seminars, shared some of its profits with the institution whose materials they used. I forget how much it was, but if we used something from the Louvre, let's say, we'd send them a check for whatever the amount was, $50 or $100 a piece, up to the point where we got to the museum in Madrid, where the—generally, Spaniards felt that it was vulgar to deal with money, and wouldn't accept it. I think it was $6,000 that was due to them, something like that. Maybe [$]9[000], I forget, but it was well over $5,000, and I couldn't get rid of that money. Finally, I tried to work out a deal whereby—I knew their lighting system there was—the Prado—was just horrible, and I thought maybe I'd give them money to put in some electric lights, but that never went through. I don't know what they finally did with that money.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It may still be sitting there. [They laugh.] That's fantastic. That's incredible. I was also curious about, oh various—Bob Hale, for some reason, you mentioned him—

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Yes, I did.

PAUL CUMMINGS: —before, and said there was more you wanted to say about him. And I don't know what that means. I just have a note to that effect.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: I think we've got a lot of this on the record, because I told you that one of Francis's big schemes was to marry the Whitney and bring it up from 8th Street, where it was at that time, and put it on the 79th Street cut there, where the Temple of Dendur is now going, right? [00:22:01] I think that's where it's going. Well, in any case, on the 79th Street side. For two years, while negotiations were preceding, Francis stopped buying any American art at all, although they had this huge fund to do it with. Then, suddenly, the honeymoon was over. I was not on the inside. I don't know what blew up, but it did not come to pass. Then, suddenly, Francis realized that not only had he been bitched out of the Whitney deal, but he hadn't made any acquisitions for a number of years. That's when he called in Bob Hale to act as a hurry-up curator, and for Christ's sake, get us some nice modern paintings in here, quick. Bob did exactly that. From all his years at the Art Students League, and also from his own personal acquaintanceships in general, Bob knew his way around very well indeed. He was a man of, I would say, excellent taste, and a very easygoing disposition. I can't imagine Bob getting unduly excited about anything. He handled everything with sort of a mellow humor. Sometimes it seemed to be almost indifference. He sort of lived above any battle clouds whatsoever, as he still does. One of the reasons he came to mind was because he is such a very genial, entertaining raconteur, and he was right in the middle of things, in

the intimate sense that I was not, in that area. You can tell many a funny story about him, and many an interesting story.

PAUL CUMMINGS: One of the—I guess as one goes on editing and working with various departments like that, a certain amount of repetition occurs. You didn't write very much during those years, did you?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Not in those years, no. [00:24:01] Although it was during those years I wrote at home. It was during those years that I was working on *Life in America*. That was a nighttime/weekend/holiday extent, and that's one of the reasons it took me so long, because during the days, I was learning the trade of being editor and so forth. It took all my time, really.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You won the Carey-Thomas Award in 1951.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. There's a little certificate over there to prove it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How was that? That was your first sort of great award.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: At the risk of seeming extremely immodest, when *Life in America* came out, it hit the front pages of all the book reviews—*New York Times Sunday Book Review*, *New York Herald Tribune Sunday Book Review*, the *Daily Commons* also—and it was generally hailed by a lot of very important people, whose opinions had weight, as marking a new departure in historical compilations, or writings, if you wish. On two occasions, subsequently, it has been singled out as a turning point in this whole business, and one—what's the name of that publication? The *Carnegie American Panorama*. This is a selection of ex-hundred books on American history that are of the utmost importance. You see, this is Russell Lyons, apparently. He ends by saying, "For the purpose of establishing America in the eye of the mind, there is no other volume in this collection of books so useful as this one." [00:26:00] Now, this last season, at the Library of Congress, they put on a series of 76 seminal books in the American field, arranged chronologically, and mine was number 66. So there 25 or 30 years after, it was still considered, in perspective, as being an important publication.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Is it in print still?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: I might get profane over this, because two years ago, Houghton Mifflin did reprint it, and remaindered it almost immediately. They put nothing into it whatsoever.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How strange.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: No, I can see what happened. When I worked on that book, my editor was Craig Wylie, who finally became editor-in-chief up there. On the brink of his retirement, he decided he'd push this through, which he did, but his successors, I don't think, had the slightest interest in it. They were all much younger. He'd been through the mill with me, and he knew—he was certain the book was worth keeping in print and that sort of thing. The new people apparently did not catch that idea, and as a consequence, put no money into promotion at all. I'll tell you one funny little story about this. When the first copy of the new edition came, I was looking at it one day when one of the young chicks in the office came up, and she said, "Marshall, what are you doing?" I said, "Well, I'm reviewing my lost years. That's all." I said, "I'll show you what I mean." So I showed her the back flap of the first edition, when I was relatively young, and the back flap of the second edition, where I had my white beard, and I said, "You see what I mean." She said, "Oh, Marshall, you don't have to renew or relive your youth," with which she gave me a big smack on the whiskers. When I stepped back in astonishment, she said, "I'm so glad you're not anti-busing." [They laugh.] She got a raise. [00:28:00]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, that's marvelous. That book was in print originally for quite a while, wasn't it?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Yeah. They printed—they started with 25,000, selling it for $20, and before the edition was released, they printed another 25,000. In 1951, $20 was a lot for a book, quite a lot. They had some difficulty in getting rid of them all quickly, quickly enough to justify a reprint early in the game, that is to say, but they did, finally. For about five or 10 years, you had to go through an auction or an old bookshop to get a copy. And now with the damn thing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It was keystones. A little bit about the evolution of your involvement with *Horizon.* I wonder if we could get more involved with that. You became an editor on *Horizon* books in '61, and then on *Horizon* magazine in '64. What was the progression? What was the shift? How did that all come about?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: To start with, I told you, I think last time, that—

PAUL CUMMINGS: You had been writing pieces for the magazine.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: I had been writing pieces for the magazine. I was on retainer. It was in '61 that Joe Thorndike and Dick Ketchum suggested that I just come down and work full-time, because *American Heritage*, as

an institution, was expanding at that time, and Dick Ketchum had been running the book program, in getting out the first book, which was—what was it? [00:30:02] The Renaissance. Then it turned out that there were so many other things for him to do, he really couldn't handle that program, and they asked me if I'd come down and handle it, which I did for two or three, four years, something like that. I forget how many.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Sixty-one to '64.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Is that what it was?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Then, one day, they came to me. *Heritage* was still expanding, and they went off on two big flights. The first one was actually called *Flight*, which was to be a giveaway publication to put in the pocket of airplanes, which, just from advertising, would make its way in making millions and millions and millions of dollars, which it didn't do, because it never got off the ground, although its name was flight. They had the whole thing practically on press and ready to go, and it collapsed. They decided they just couldn't put another penny into it, and they stopped the whole thing and took their losses.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you have any qualms leaving the Metropolitan to go and work for a publication?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Yes, I did, because for one thing—one thing that endeared the museum to anybody who worked there, in those days in any case, was the security. They never fired anybody, and you would get a pension. There were minor fringe benefits otherwise. It seemed like a nice way to spend the rest of your life, in continual company with interesting people doing interesting things, and with the opportunity, too, for self-expansion, if you had it in your guts to do that. I felt that I did, and I enjoyed it. But when the Book of the Month Club program was finished, it wasn't finished as a program, but my work on it was finished. Then it went on its own momentum. [00:32:00] I would have had to readjust myself. So it was good timing in that, if I was going to readjust myself, I might as well readjust myself down at *Horizon*, where I'd get more money, which was fairly important, because I got about 50 percent more in salary there than I was getting at the museum.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, that's a substantial change.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: It wasn't a million dollars, but it was [they laugh] let's see, my first book was *Lost Worlds*. The second book was *The Age of Napoleon*, with Christopher Herold, J. Christoper Herold, who was a wonderful, wonderful author. I've never seen anybody like him. He would just take his typewriter, type a script, and give it to the printer, and that was it. And a more genial and pleasant companion, I don't know. I never have met anybody so entirely [inaudible].

PAUL CUMMINGS: I don't know him.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: He wrote several very good books. He was fascinated by women. He wrote the famous biography of Madame de Stael.

[Audio Break.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Discussing some of the books that you began working on there.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: I did *The History of Christianity* with Roland Bainton, Yale.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did those books appear? Where did the ideas come from? General editorial meetings? Were they your ideas? People you knew would write to you, say? It was a rather different kind of book to appear, for one thing.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: That type of publishing means putting an awful lot of eggs in one basket. Just promoting one of those big books took hundreds of thousands of dollars, and you had to be, within your own conscious, pretty damn certain that you were going to publish the right type of book, with the right title on it, and promote it right, in the right fashion, before you took off at all. [00:34:00] So it was a matter of prolonged deliberation, actually, in which many people shared discussion. There might be 20 ideas at once, which gradually bubbled on the back of the stove until, suddenly, something had to be done. It was decided, well, this is it. A certain amount of testing was done beforehand, but nothing like the Time Life program, which kills books like flies. They don't test properly. In other words, as venturesome, imaginative publishers, the then-editors and the publisher of *Heritage* wouldn't speculate if they had faith, and that is not true at Time Life at all. If the figures don't show you're going to come out clean and make money, no dice.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, they just drop—

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: If that had applied to some of these other books, they'd never have been published at

all.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: I think that's true. For instance, the last book I did, with Kidder Smith, on American architecture, all his photographs, Duvine's [ph] sold it for $40, was it? But that never tested out, but it worked out. It was a very distinguished publication in its way.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What strikes me also is that those are books that have a lot of information and lots of illustrations. The design, even, the presentation and the layout, the format, different from other books that have a lot of illustrations. Was that something you evolved? Was that the designer? Was that their intent?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Every book was handled in a slightly different fashion, depending upon the editor/author/designer relationship. [00:36:00] It was my wish and my habit, my conviction, that I should be deeply involved in all aspects of it. In other words, I sat in on every layout session, and had the final word, actually, as to whether we were going to use a picture or not, according to a variety of considerations. Now, there were some publishers who threw it at the designer and sort of make it work. But I got much too much involved in the whole thing. It meant too much to me. I think it has been true, and probably not to my advantage, that I probably always put more into something than I got out of it. Not in terms of satisfaction, but in terms of reward for it. But I enjoyed it, and I enjoyed the conflicts, the tension, with a designer. I really did. You can have very hot arguments, but they're in a good cause, and it depends upon who made the most sense under the various conditions that were imposed, that the final decision would be made.

PAUL CUMMINGS: One of the things, in looking through several of those books recently, I realized that they seem to be almost an extension of your earlier projects. As much as it is a topic, let's go at it and see what there is. Rarely got the feeling there was a great deal of sort of preconceived ideas. There obviously had to be outlines and designs and some thought, but the books have a kind of freshness about them, which is quite—

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: I think, basically, that the one basic thing responsible for that is an editorial concept. I approached each one of these with a growing concept in my own mind, not always complete at the beginning, but something I grew with. [00:38:04] It grew with me as we—in other words, you're starting a subject about which you know practically nothing, and month by month, to get to know more and more and more, by the time this book was finished, you wish you could start all over again, because then you know the subject. That is quite true, though. I've seen some of these books, like this antiques book, which just grew as it went along, and I got new ideas almost every week, which didn't mean changing what had been done, but would mean a new angle to approach it with in the pages to come. I wish I could show you—it would take too much time to find it, probably, but somebody had the bright idea down there, those years ago, that it would cost, let us say, $500,000, or $250,000, to promote a book. Why not promote two books at once to save $250,000? It worked. The first book that I did under that system was the first of a series of three antiques book. Now, these were the tail that hung onto the companion volume, because they have to do with a certain period of history, and the antiques followed that. Nobody at *American Heritage* knew or cared about antiques. Of course, I had the background for it, my days in the American Wing [inaudible] since. But they were scared, because although, basically, in theory, the idea of promoting two books was fine, but can *American Heritage* sell a book on antiques, after all? It must be a pretty specialized audience. As I say, I approached this—the first thing I did was to sit down and take a pad of paper, and fold it up into a little dummy. I can't draw for beans, but I made a 48-page dummy, with little squiggles, showing just how the book would finally look. [00:40:03] That's the way it did look, finally. [They laugh.] Not with the little squiggles, but with the four-color reproductions, my squiggles. They had turned out to tail wag the dog, because the antiques book tested better than the other books. They were better books, I must say. That's one of the things I mean without modesty or gain, to say that I do put a great deal of myself into these books, or did so.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What do you mean they were more successful than the regular history books?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Sold more.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Yeah. They're out of print completely.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's fantastic.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: As to their merit, I repeat to you, the current editor of the magazine*Antiques* said he uses them all the time, plagiarizes them violently. [They laugh.] Just fine, that's flattery.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But also, that's the accomplishment.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: True.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How many books did you come out with on an annual basis? About two or something, wasn't it? Or did it vary a great deal?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: I'm trying to think. There were about 12 in 10 years, I think. Something like that. Some of them were on the outside. I was telling my wife the other night that this is the first year—or last year was the first year in many years that I didn't come out with a book, but I completely forgot that I did indeed. I came out with that pictorial history of New York. I had forgotten about it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It is strange, though, how one gets so involved with the next thing, that when the book appears from the printer, it's lost. It's become—

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: You write a book and forget about it, really. One of the things I like about what I have been doing is I like to tackle a subject about which I know very little, because then I'll get to know something. If you rehash the same old things, as I'm afraid I'm doing with these antiques books now, it gets a little bit boring. Oh, God, I've said it, I've said it, I've said it, I've said it. [00:42:03]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, look at that. Not that teapot again.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: I remember, in one of the antiques books, I had a designer who was a very, very beautiful girl. She wasn't all that good as a designer, but she was a very beautiful girl, and she used to come in with a little leather thing that stopped just below her genitals. She had beautiful legs. One day she came into my office in this outfit, and I had—I wanted to lay out Queen Anne chairs. I had about 20 or 30 pictures of chairs there, and she looked down and said, "My God, look at all those legs." I turned around and stared at her legs and said, "Look who's talking." [They laugh.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, marvelous. You then went on to be involved with the magazine, which was—

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: No, no. We skipped—

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did that go?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: We skipped. When *The History of Christianity* came out, we were getting involved with the dictionary, and we were getting involved with that *Flight* magazine. Up to that point, Joe Thorndike had been the founder and editor of *Horizon*, and decided that he no longer could spare the time to do that, and wanted a new editor. They came to me and asked me if I would take the job, and I was somewhat reluctant, because I didn't know whether I was really up to it, and I didn't know how much freedom I was going to have to do it, and I dragged my feet and finally said I would do it only on one condition, and that is if the wish for me to be editor of *Horizon* is unanimous. They assured me that this was so, and it turned out to be not true. [They laugh.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: How could it ever be?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Yeah. After about—I don't want to go into the politics of this—but two or three years, it became evident that people were intruding on my prerogatives. [00:44:05] It may also be true, although I can't see it clearly myself, that I wasn't doing the best job in the world as editor. Maybe I was and maybe I wasn't. That's anybody's opinion, actually. It came almost to a knock-down-drag-out. I got up out of one meeting and just stormed out. Couldn't take it. Thorndike was at that meeting and came down to my office a few moments later, and said he got the idea that I was thinking of quitting. I said, "Where did you get that idea?" [They laugh.] "Don't, because we've got other things for you we'd like you to do here." That's when this antiques deal came out. So then there was *Antiques I*, *Antiques II*, *Antiques III*, *Notable American Houses*, *The Artist's America*, *The Writer's America*, *Great Historic Places of Europe*, *The Year 1776*. God knows what else. Then, on the side, the Olivetti book on tools, *A Concise History of France*, which was done for *Horizon*, but as an individual operator, not as a staff member, and so on.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, that's what I was going to ask you, because that seemed to be different in a way.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Well, it was. I chose the illustrations, but it wasn't—no, it's a small book. It isn't one of those gorgeous things.

PAUL CUMMINGS: In the large volumes, when finally the board and all the people involved decided to do a particular topic, did you then work all the way through with the author, with the designer, publicity, advertising, the whole—all the way through?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. I must say that it was almost impossible to make any sort of a dent on our promotion people. This is characteristic, I think, of the whole business. [00:46:00] Advertising people have an argot of their own. You don't speak the same language, that's all. They'd much rather distort their fact

in order to get an effect, than stick to the truth and do it legitimately. This was a battle, frequently. It cut down this irreverent opposition to the truthful word. It worked out in the end, but sometimes it was quite a tussle.

PAUL CUMMINGS: They never tested your books the way Time Life did, and some of the others, Doubleday.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: They have certain tests, but compared with this sort of thing, they were completely in form [ph]. And really, the decision of what to do was made in the last days by Paul Gottlieb and his associate, Marge Dyer. As I say, Paul, as the last president before the current crop came in, was a man of imagination and venturesome, and he had faith. If he and his associates, with the support of the editor, could decide that a book was worth doing, he'd go ahead and do it, unless it was a sure disaster.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What would they print in the first printing of a book like that?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: It varied considerably. In the beginning, when these books had very little competition, we might print as many as 200,000 or more.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Yeah. I think *Lost Worlds* was up around that figure. I'm pretty sure it was. It also had foreign editions, at least two foreign editions, maybe more. But gradually, the success of those books did bring on the competition, and this meant that a stranglehold on the public was diminished by just that much. [00:48:07] Gradually, the circulation went down, print went down, until, most recently, they talked about trying to clear at 30,000, something like that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And the prices have gone up because of—

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: And the prices go up proportionately. Of course, the more you print, the lower you can price the thing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's amazing. Most of their books were sold through the mail, weren't they?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Yeah. Not entirely. Every edition had a trade publisher who would see to the bookstore sales, and it varied according to the best deal that could be made with a certain person, a certain firm. It was Simon & Schuster at one point, Doubleday at another. I forget—I'm blanking. Somebody else at another time.

PAUL CUMMINGS: McGraw-Hill entered, didn't they?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Then McGraw-Hill, of course. And most [inaudible] leads back at Simon & Schuster. Except there aren't any books anymore. [Laughs.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: You had said foreign editions. Were there foreign editions of the ones devoted to American life?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: No.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Nothing?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: No. No, but in a book like *Lost Worlds—Il Mondo Perduto* is the Italian version of it, and of course that had a great deal of Italian background in it, necessarily, with the Etruscans and so forth. Cosmopolitan interest, in other words. But no, not the American books at all. They were strictly native market.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did they keep them in print very long, or was it really the first big push?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: It was usually one big blast, and that's it. But every once in a while, we had a sleeper, and go back to press. A certain amount of cannibalism came in, too, because when it was very difficult to find a new title for a particular season or a year, the temptation was to go back and pick up a book that had been sold out 10 years before and redo it, maybe bring it up to date a little bit, but in general, the same thing, assuming that a new generation of readers had grown up in the meantime. [00:50:18] To a degree—to what degree, I don't know—but to a degree, that worked, too.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you—we really didn't say much about the years on the magazine. It somehow didn't interest you as much as making books.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Well, it did and it didn't. It didn't, because my personal involvement wasn't so complete. That is to say, when I'm doing the book, I was the center of everything, and I did everything. To run the magazine, it was impossible to do it that way. You had to rely upon your associates for a lot of vital work and ideas and so forth. And to the degree that I didn't have hold of all of those, I felt a little bit perturbed. I liked to

do my own thing, and do it completely.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How many books a year did you work on, then? It was just one book or—

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: No, just one. After all, you start from scratch in one of these books, and as I say, starting from scratch means knowing nothing about the subject, except as far as any normally informed person would know about it. But to know about it in that degree of depth, whereby you could work out an editorial concept and flesh it out in the end, required one hell of a lot of studying. I remember, when I was working here—I used to have to work nights as well as days—the son of one of my classmates paid us a visit, and he came in and saw what I was doing, and his father wrote to me and said, "My son"—whatever his name was—"said you were working as hard as any sophomore in college." [00:52:06] I said, oh, for Christ's sake [laughs] if I worked that hard as a sophomore, I'd have been Phi Beta Kappa or magna cum laude.

PAUL CUMMINGS: All of the projects would entail an enormous amount of reading, wouldn't it?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Yeah, a tremendous amount of reading, and hurried-up reading, too. You didn't have time. For instance, when I did *The World of 1776*, now that's a pretty damn big, broad canvas. I was dealing with the Orient, and with Europe, and with Africa, and India, and South America, and Mexico, and the United States, and Canada, and every other damn thing. To keep the whole world picture in some sort of order required a lot of highly miscellaneous reading. It would be impossible to read as much as you should read in order to do it. It would be impossible to read the books you had in front of you completely and intimately. You had to learn how to scan them and figure out what was right, and hope to God you got it right. I was doing that up until very recently. Part of that phone call had to do with the naturalist book that I was working on, and had written 50,000 words on already. But now there is a subject about which I knew practically nothing. I knew the historical background, and that was easy, because I had done that over again. But exactly what zoology and botany and all that sort of thing included, I didn't know. I had to be awfully, awfully careful. The terminology itself was so damn treacherous. In this case, I did have a professional backstop, a botanist down at Maryland, who would review what I had done, and tell me where I could put my foot in my mouth. [00:54:02]

PAUL CUMMINGS: What about the books where you had an author, or somebody else's writing?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Well, no, that varied, too, because my first author I considered quite irresponsible. He was a popularizer. I can't even remember his name at the moment. After he sent his text in, he would lead—he would conduct tours to ancient Greece and that sort of thing, and he wasn't available for consultation. And in the end, I said, "Oh, the hell with it. I'll rewrite the book," which I did, to a very considerable degree. Then came Christopher Herold, and I didn't touch it. Letter-perfect. Then the Christianity book, which was sort of midway between Roland Bainton, who was very knowledgeable, but he lacked any sense of humor, and got pretty grim-going sometimes. But in those books, you have opportunities to compensate for whatever you think the author lacks, and you have—they're interlotted [ph] with special essays and illustrated sections, where you can get a lot of incidental information, and treat it in a most convincing passion that you could. That compensated for a lot of dead weight that you sometimes have to get into the book, because you couldn't do anything else other than that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You could do things graphically and visually, too, to make points like that. One thing that intrigues me, *American Heritage* was, what, sold a few years ago, or went through another—

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: It was sold to McGraw-Hill, what, six years ago? Something like that. In the course of time, we all moved over to the McGraw-Hill building. McGraw-Hill's interest, I think, it's fair to say, was in what they could get out of it. They weren't interested in the—well, it was prestigious for them, too. [00:56:04] They were impressed by the strange thing they'd taken under their root, because they had no other publishing enterprise, in all their varied things, that corresponded in any way with what we tried to do. I think they were a little bit mystified. But that did not prevent them from charging us overhead on everything. You had to pay a certain percentage of the shoe-shine salary downstairs, and a certain percentage of the cafeteria, a certain percentage of the drinking water and so forth. The first thing you know, whatever profits there were just went over to McGraw-Hill as upkeep. If it had not been for that drainage, *American Heritage* would still be operating quite successfully. Modestly, but successfully.

PAUL CUMMINGS: They recently went into the whole business of reproductions and all sorts of other things, didn't they?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: *Heritage*?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Yeah. Well, that's been true for some years, and it's becoming more true now, I think. What they call their catalog, in which they advertise these three-dimensional reproductions, and other things,

has been a successful enterprise. One of the—I no longer am savvy to what has been going on, but they had this fulfillment corporation out in Marion, Ohio, and we, *American Heritage*, could not keep them busy. So we drummed up business for them from other big publications, and the first thing you know, they were turning out loads and loads of money. I think—I could be wrong about this, but I'm fairly certain that that operation was profitable enough to keep the whole enterprise going quite successfully. Paul Gottlieb was quite content to run a relatively modest operation, where everybody did his best and had some fun doing it, without any hope of making a million dollars or taking over the whole world.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It never had a large staff, ever, did it? [00:58:00]

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: There were big programs, or—

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: No, if you look at the masthead of any of the books I did, the personnel involved in those is about one-tenth what appears on a Life Time [Time Life] book. We had what I used to refer to as a pregnancy period to put out one of these books. It was about nine months from start to finish. That meant working like hell, especially when you have a modest staff. But it was part of the game, that at least all the people I worked with—one of the reasons I was reluctant to go to *American Heritage* was that I felt that I was going to lose my cultural status leaving the museum, and that I would no longer have to do with people—cultural pretension and that sort of thing. It wasn't true at all. These people down there were just as avid for intellectual—full of intellectual curiosity and purposefulness as anybody at the museum ever was, naturally, working at this pace. You couldn't devote your life to a pinhead or a suit of armor or something like that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Because you had deadlines and budgets and all sorts of other—

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Everything, yeah. All the practical considerations, which the editor, if he's doing his job properly, has to sort of keep all the strings in his hand.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So in a way, it was very exciting, but quite different from—

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Entirely different. It was entirely different from anything at the museum, aside from the Book of the Month Club program. Everything else up there, up until the time I left, in any case, and for some years later, was geared to other, more basic needs than museum. In other words, if there was a catalog of French painting, let us say, work out a schedule. The personnel—Harry Whaley, Margaret Salinger, people like that—were putting it together. If a big exhibition suddenly came on, they'd stop work all together, because that took priority. [01:00:00] Then, after three or four months, when the exhibition was over, then they'd have to tidy up the exhibition, and then it would take them a month or two to get back into gear. The first thing you know—I went overseas with Joss Durling, who Francis Taylor brought over from the Louvre, to—a French paintings catalog. I remember his complaining to me, not with bitterness, but almost amusement, that it took something like nine years to get that book out, after he had finished it. [They laugh.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: One interruption after another.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Some of the curators wanted to take a look at it, and they figured, well, he's wrong here, he's wrong there, and this isn't said very well. Then the same routine would happen. An exhibition would come, so they'd have to stop editing his work. And the pace up there in those days was not that fast anyway. It didn't frequently matter whether a publication came out on time or not, with the possible exception of a bulletin, which sometimes was late anyway.

PAUL CUMMINGS: The bulletin has become so grand in the last few years.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: They must have a budget about 20 times the one I had. James Rorimer would never have allowed us to sink that amount of money. I had to watch my color expenses. Just getting a color cover on it was expensive, in terms of how Rorimer saw it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I just wonder if it really supports itself, or—

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: I don't—I would doubt it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Or brings in enough money, or support, or whatever.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Well, the readership has gone up tremendously, of course, and now it's only four times a year, or occasionally, whatever the case may be.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I think it's only quarterly.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Is it? Something like that.

[END OF TRACK AAA_davids77_3342_r.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: This is side four. This is Brad Kelleher, who came—what did he come there as? Something else?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: He came from the sale shop. The sale shop used to be a little cubbyhole by the front door—I don't know whether you remember it—run by some maiden ladies. There were very strict injunctions about what they could and couldn't sell. They wouldn't sell books unless they were specifically related to museum activity and museum collections. The postcards were either made by Max Jaffe, in Vienna, who, in those days, had almost an anomaly of a first-class color postcard business, or they were made up in the photography studio and sold as photographic postcards, individually made. Yeah, really. You'd frequently see 10 or 20 people in the shop. [They laugh.] As I say, it was—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Amazing.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: —run by little ladies. When I became editor, in a sense, that operation was supposed to—could have come under my wing, but I wasn't interested. I had no merchandising instincts, and no inquisitive instincts, I'm afraid. As one consequence of that, I sort of let it go by default, and it was decided that somebody really should pay attention to the shop. Perhaps Taylor had growing ideas about its importance. First thing you know, we hired Brad, who had been—I think he had something to do with a radio station up in Worcester. He came in, and inch by inch by inch by inch, he built himself an empire. Now he's publishing—they're building a whole building for him over there, a whole publications building, right from the center of the complex, where there used to be a lightwell.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Little did you know. [00:02:00]

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: He can have it. I was at a party sometime in the last year, in which somebody told me that Hoving had referred to Kelleher as his genius. I think the word is well-chosen.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's interesting. Taylor really had a lot of influence there, didn't he?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Oh, yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: In all sorts of ways that aren't necessarily apparent.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Well, he certainly stirred it up. There's no question about that. He had an opportunity to sort of take a fresh start when the war ended, and all the stuff came back again, what to do. Let's not go back to the same old pattern. Let's do something. So we had a building program. When that phase of the building program—phase one, let us call it—was completed, he had what he called balloon ascension, and he had an international congress of museum people, with a week's session of seminars and lectures and discussions and that sort of thing. It was museum people from Japan to Russia to South Africa, and every place else. Callason ran that. He was the fellow who was in charge of the mechanics of the whole thing. But that in itself was quite a novel undertaking for the museum, and it was indicative of the excitement that he caused. Nothing like it had ever happened up there before.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, it became much more international, too, after.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: As I think I said the last time, he had the great opportunity, then, also, of getting international loans, because a lot of these people wanted to get their stuff away from the Russians, the Cold War deal and all and that's how the Berlin treasures came, the [inaudible] treasures came, and I forget what else. The French tapestries came. Those were huge successes. The Van Gogh exhibition, which was, in its day, a great success. [00:04:00] There again, nothing on that scale or magnitude had been—I don't think had been attempted before. There had been loan exhibitions, but they were relatively modest compared to these things. These whole museums came overseas, practically. Francis had the big opportunity, and he took it. As I say, he did bring in people like Charles Sterling to write the French catalog. He did set up a laboratory, which we grew until it became what it is today, a very complex, multiform operation, and he stressed education. It was under his aegis—although he was not the direct inspirer of it, he was a supporter of it—that we got involved with the Book of the Month Club. He brought with him Horace Howard Furness Jayne, otherwise known as Haughty Jayne, who had been the director of the Pennsylvania museum. Not the Philadelphia, the Pennsylvania museum. And he, Francis, being an old Philadelphian, knew Jayne and all [inaudible] and he brought him up as his vice director. Well, Haughty died within the last year or so. Very genial, very pleasant person. He, as I think I also said the last time, was, in a sense—he inherited Mr. Kent's mantle, that he didn't have the stature of Kent, nor the longevity, in terms of his association with the trustees and support [ph]. But it was Haughty who started the miniatures program, with Francis's support. As soon as the thing got started, Haughty got drunk and was fired,

and I was put in charge of the whole operation. That was the way that worked.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What do you think of the museum in terms of its new shift into multi-headed situation and—

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: I don't know of anybody who agrees that that's a good thing, that is on the staff, or among other associates that I—or people interested in this sort of thing that I have talked with at the Century, let us say. [00:06:09] And yet, I am not ashamed to confess that when they were looking for a new director to replace Taylor after his retirement from the museum—who was it? Arthur Houghton or Robert Lehman interviewed all the responsible members of the staff, and it was my suggestion to him, at the time of this interview, that we have a—troika?

PAUL CUMMINGS: A troika.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Troika, in which there would be a man who would watch after the overall policy of the museum, fund-raising and that sort of thing. There would be a scholar, who would be in charge of curatorial matters, and there would be a money man to watch the books and mechanics. Of course, it came to nothing. I'm sort of ashamed to mention that to anyone, my old friends anymore, because now that that has come about, they don't like it at all. [They laugh.] I think it's possible that they work out quite naturally.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Several museums have tried similar programs, and it hasn't worked.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Chicago, I don't think, worked at all. I could be completely wrong.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Two or three other ones have tried, and it hasn't—

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: No.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It seems there has to be a man who can be all things to all people at the head of it.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: That's one of the arguments that they use against this current thing, that people who are going to invest money in the museum, or give big collections, want to talk to the one person, and that should be the director, who knows all about these things.

PAUL CUMMINGS: There's art history or accounting, to know the whole thing.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: James Rorimer did know all these things, incidentally, in ways that Francis never knew. James knew where every iron beam in the building was. [00:08:01] He knew where all the nails were loose. He knew where the wiring needed fixing. Down to that level, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Somebody once told me—I can't remember who—how actually involved with the building he was, and that he would come in, and he would say, "Oh, I missed those two windows up there." Astounding, like a building superintendent, almost.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: He got a lot of that training in putting up the Cloisters, of course, because he had to work with the architects, hand in glove, for all of those years that it took to build that structure. He must have learned one hell of a lot about that. Then he was also chairman of a little committee they had called the house committee, something like that, which was supposed to look after the upkeep of the structure itself at the main building, so that before he became director, he'd had both those two experiences behind him.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You know, you just mentioned the Century a minute ago. Why did you get involved with that group of extraordinary people? [They laugh.]

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Well, in a way, it's a funny story, because when Francis Taylor was still alive, he came by my office one day, when I was laying out something on the floor, something like that, and he just stood there, and his big corporal [ph] body and started at me. I said, "Good morning, Francis." He didn't say a word. I said, "Good morning, Francis." He suddenly looked pensive. He said, "Marshall, I think you're ripe for the Century." I said, "You mean I'm starting to smell already, Francis?" [They laugh.] With which he gave me a copy of the Century yearbook and asked me to check off the names of the people that I knew who were members. He'd process it and see that I got brought up for membership. But I wasn't that interested, frankly. I didn't see myself going downtown, and did not feel like a joiner in any sense of the word, so I just drifted, let go. Then when I came downtown one day, Jimmy Flexner stopped me on the street. [00:10:04] I had known Jimmy for many years. He said, "You ought to be a member of the Century." I said, "Oh." Said, "No, no, no. I can't do anything about it. I'm on the membership committee, but we'll get your name up." The first thing you know, I was a member of the Century, and it's become my second home. Now that I'm working at home, I don't get down there as much as I would like to or used to, but I find the companionship agreeable and stimulating. You can almost see anybody who is anybody there at one point or other, from John Lindsay to Kissinger, up and down, and the heads of various museums, and curators, and so forth. *New Yorker* writers, and *New York Times* people.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Flexner is there all the time.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: He's there all the time. You know—what's his name? Tough cop. Um. Kojak. I went through a Kojak phase about a year ago. There's another story connected to that, which I won't tell you, but in any case, twice in the course of the sessions, Kojak would call one of his adjutants in and said, "Look, we're looking for this guy. Go to the Century, and get there at noon on Saturday. If he ain't there, he's dead." Well, the point is, if you go there on noon, Saturday, there isn't anybody there. [They laugh.] And that sort of person wouldn't be allowed in the Century anyway.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. Oh, that's funny.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: I love the place. I'm on a number of their committees. I was on the house art committee, and now I'm on the house exhibitions committee. I'm on the admissions committee. It takes one hell of a lot of work. What keeps that club going is the activity of the committees, and I'm very pleased and surprised to see the sense of dedication that goes with membership on the committees. [00:12:06] It's hard work, and it's expensive in a way. You have to pay for your own dinners and that sort of thing, but it is stimulating.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It always intrigues me, some of the people who really almost live there, like Flexner, for example.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Who?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Like Flexner.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: He's there—if he isn't there, you get worried. [They laugh.] Except in the summertime, when he's up at Norwich or wherever it is. But there are—I'm pretty close to Flexner, or I was when I was downtown more, because I found it such a sanctuary to go into that bar without ever knowing, really, who was going to be there, except a few constants, like myself and Flexner, and pick up a conversation. The first thing you know, you're having the time of your life, on a fairly high intellectual level. And uh, must be [inaudible].

PAUL CUMMINGS: He never wrote anything for you, did he, Flexner?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Flexner? Not for me, no. He wrote a bulletin article once. I think that's about the end of it. One difficulty for a person like myself dealing with Flexner is you have to deal with his agent. Jimmy would wring every dollar dry, at the expense, sometimes, of repeating himself over and over again.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, that's true. One of the things, to kind of go back to the *American Heritage* books—again, there were very few books, illustrated books, about all those aspects of American life, and certain properties of American life. You know, the houses, the furniture, these things. [00:14:00] Do you think that augured for the success of the books? People were interested, but they couldn't find out? The fact that they were lavishly illustrated.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: I think there are several reasons for it. One is the topics were chosen, as I've said, with care. When I say with care, it had to be not only that we had some sort of assurance in our guts that the book was going to sell, but the other thing is we felt it was worth doing. A lot of dedicated effort went into those things. I think the quality of the performance was, generally speaking, quite high, higher than a lot of the imitations that have come up since. The standards, I think, were extremely high, actually. The checking, and the copy editing, the production. It was all scrupulously attended to.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. But did you have a lot of freelance people, or was it pretty much full-time staff?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Full-time staff, largely.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It was?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Largely, yeah. There developed a tendency for freelance people coming in so that you could go the ups and downs of pressure, and when there was nothing doing, you didn't have to pay Social Security and everything else for somebody on regular staff. That became very awkward sometimes, too, because it's intimate and service [ph] always have that sense of continuity that you had if somebody was there all the time, that you've been dealing with all the time.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Knew your problems.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Exactly. That's another thing that the Time Life people brought in. They jockeyed people from one post to another, in almost seconds, and you'd lose all sense of continuity of working with somebody. [00:16:00]

[Audio Break.]

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: —somebody from the museum, clock museum.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Time Museum?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: I forget what it is. It's up in Bristol, Connecticut, in any case. In which my picture researcher asked him for certain pictures, and he wrote back an ungrammatical, misspelled letter, saying they wondered about this, they knew nothing about anybody named Davidson, and they were very concerned about the quality of what was done in their name, and they would like to see the written text before they would send any pictures. Little son of a bitch. [They laugh.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: That happens.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: I had the same trouble with Frank Lloyd Wright place done at the last minute [ph]. I wanted some early drawings of Japanese manor, and they said, "Show us your text first." I said the hell with that. I'm not going to write a text until I see the photographs. Got around it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I find, every so often, that does turn up. The thing I haven't discovered a great deal of are magazine pieces in recent years. You really haven't had time to do a great deal of that.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: I'll tell you one incident in that connection. Back in 1957, ['5]8, or ['5]9—I can't remember that—I had an idea for an article on Jacquier, the great 16th-century financier, who, in his day, was the richest man in the world, I guess, and who was the one who provided the money for Joan of Arc's employ [ph] by Charles, and whatever his name is, VI, VII.

[Tape speed begins to play very fast.]

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: In any case, I called [inaudible] on the phone one day. I was still at the museum. I said I got this idea for an article. [Inaudible.] I said, "Will you send me a letter saying that you're going ahead with the article? Because I'm going to France, and I'm going to put this on my expense account for Social Security—for tax." [00:18:03] So I made a trip down to his home at Bourges, wonderful city. One of the first magnificent city palaces in France. I made two other trips there, and I never got around to writing the article. I just didn't do it, and then I got involved in so many other things, I didn't get around to writing the article. Finally, about seven years or eight years later, I sat down and wrote the article. I sent it down to the then-editor, who stashed it away, and Thorndike came back to the magazine, and he didn't like it very much, so he put it on a shelf someplace. Then somebody else came in and said he liked it very much, and would I accept $1,000 for it? I said, "Oh, sure." The next day, he called me up and he said, "I've learned from our accounting department that when you were on a retainer, you were supposed to have written this article, and we've already paid you $500 for it." Said, "What do I do now?" I said, "There's no problem. My fee just went up to $1,500." [They laugh.] That was Chuck Mane [ph]. Chuck retired from the magazine, and finally Shirley Tomkievicz came in, and she found it on the shelf and liked it very much, and it was printed last year or the year before, about 12 years after I first agreed to do it. I have written quite a number of articles for both magazines over a period of time, on all sorts of subjects.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I was talking about other magazines, other publications.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: The first article I ever wrote was for *Vogue* magazine, of all things.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, you told me that. But then, really, once you got involved with the whole *Horizon* situation, they really kept you going, didn't they?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yes, it was a—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Total—

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Understatement to say that it was a full-time job, because it was more than that, if you put that amount of work into it, and sometimes it was absolutely necessary. If you didn't, somebody did—had to.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Where do you think those books fit in sort of American history, in terms of representing the point of view of a certain position in contemporary thought?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: I don't think that any of them could be considered revisionist, for one thing. I think they're mostly safe, middle-of-the-road compilations, entertainingly presenting the known facts that are of interest and importance. [00:20:06] In other words, I think you could summarize the importance of this book here as a book that would tell you, in a way that would delight you, all you need to know about this subject, unless you're an expert and a specialist of some sort. I think that's basically what they accomplished, and did it

very well. They were well-written, they were solid, they were accurate, agreeably presented, and they did cover the field.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What do you do with all the accumulated knowledge and information?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Ah. That's when my plagiarism comes in. [They laugh.] It's irrelevant, but when I became editor of publications, the museum—Billy Ivans, William Ivans, had retired. He was a brilliant writer, a brilliant man, had a brilliant brain. I kindly wrote to him in his retirement. I did my homework first. I found out that there was something that he had been very interested in, but had never put it into print. So I wrote to him and asked him if he wouldn't write another book, and I mentioned here, as a possibility, something like this, for instance. He wrote back and said how flattered he was to be wanted, but no. He said, "I can't write anything more. I can use a pencil, but I suck the end of it, and I can't put anything down on paper." He said, "When you get to be my age, men usually do one of three things. They tell you what a great man they were, they rehearse their childhood, or they repeat themselves." He said, "I will not do that." So I wrote back and said, "Oh, now, let's not be silly. I can think of three men who are a lot older than you, who are still doing pretty well. Now, there's Winston Churchill, Samuel Hopkins Adams, and Robert Frost." He said, "You fell right into my trap. Winston Churchill is telling you what a great man he is, Samuel Hopkins Adams is writing about his childhood, and Robert Frost hasn't had a new idea in 30 years." [They laugh.] End of correspondence. He was a very funny man. Nothing more to say. That's all right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Anyway, but now you're dis-affiliated from *Horizons*, right?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: The burden of that telephone call is to find out just what this means. I think I can't very well tell you the accounting that's going on, because it's more or less confidential, but I am dying to see the letter that he said was on his typewriter because I want to know how they spell out this agreement. [00:22:03] One of my friends told me the other day, he said, "Get it in writing." He said, "An oral agreement isn't worth the paper it's written on."

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's right. Absolutely.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: So I want to see this letter.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But you have several books underway, and lots of projects?

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: Well, the several books that are underway aren't going to pay me anything this year, so I'm going to have to live on my fat for a while. Then, next year, when some of these projects will have matured, the money will come in for them. To what degree, I can't be sure. In the meantime, I will qualify for Social Security, as long as I don't make too much money. But next year, I'll be 72, and I can make a million dollars and still get Social Security.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, that's right, it's about it.

MARSHALL DAVIDSON: So I'm trying—I'm not very good at this sort of thing, but I'm trying to arrange everything that I will, in fact, as best I can, live off my fat until next year, and defer anything that I do make in the way of cash, payment, until next year, when I can accept it without losing my security. It's very intricate, and I don't know whether I'm doing it well or not, but I'll try.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Okay. Well, why don't we stop on that point, because I've got—

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]