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Transcript

Interview

ORAL HSITORY INTERVIEW WITH
MR. ROBERT ASURE
INTERVIEW BY HARLAN PHILLIPS
Brookings Institution, 1775 Massachusetts Ave
Washington, D.C.
Thursday, October 7, 1965

RA: ROBERT ASURE
HP: HARLAN PHILLIPS

HP: Probably the rapier way to get into it is to try to put you back in the context of '34. What were you doing? What were the prospects?

RA: For me personally? This I'm clear on. I graduated from college at the depth of the depression. I wanted to write. There was no chance of getting a job. I went down to various newspaper offices, and they all said, "Here's the list of reporters we've let go in the last few years." I worked my head off free-lancing and made a few dollars here and there. This was no living, but I was in a position to be able to go back to graduate school, the University of Chicago. I had a part time job while I was getting my Master's Degree with the American Public Welfare Association. During that time, Washington was seething with new proposals and programs, and Harry Hopkins who had come to Washington to start a Federal Relief Program, used to be in touch with the American Public Welfare Association in Chicago, and one day there was an opportunity for what he said, a young man to come to Washington for six weeks to do a special job. Frank Bayne, the director, turned to me and said, "Can you get out of here by tomorrow? If you can, get back in six weeks." I got out and came back twenty years later. The rumor and the fact that there were jobs in Washington at fantastic salaries like $1700 a year just about cleaned out the Graduate School. I won't go into all the details of - you know, who snapped up these opportunities and how they came out, which ones did go into teaching and which made government careers and so on, but I was one of those who came in that early excitement. We were working six or seven days a week, working until midnight and thinking that we were well, if not reforming the world, doing great things, and the organization was small enough, the spirit was such that at least I never felt the same sort of hierarchial relationships that later seem to characterize the bureaucracy. I sort of felt myself part of the management, and even though I obviously could have been thrown out any day. I was one of the lowliest of employees. I came fresh from school to the government.

HP: Was this six weeks stint carefully defined?

RA: Yes. This thing may be irrelevant to your thing, yes. Hopkins said correctly that there were states that had some relief funds and had some criteria by which they distributed them to counties and municipalities. As one went into a big federal program, could any of these criteria be borrowed, could somebody take a look at what sort of principles, if any, they followed. Did they give consideration to rural-urban distribution as to numbers of people on relief, to prevailing standards of wages, or living, or what? Out of all of this could somebody see whether there would be a sort of formula that the federal government could use as it got deeper into the relief business in making distribution between states.

HP: This was a research job?

RA: It was a research job and, although, you know, there wasn't anything written, this was a job of calling up some people, finding out and so on, and I got a half a secretary and a telephone and called up people in Pennsylvania and Michigan and two or three states that were in this business and prepared what I thought was an important document for Mr. Hopkins which made the deadline, but by that time, in effect, he said I wasn't present when this paper was presented. "Thank him very much and tell him all the money has been committed." Every governor was at his doorstep. The first appropriations obviously weren't going to be enough to do the job, and he just wasn't that worried about whether Pennsylvania got 100 thousand dollars too much in the first distribution, and some other state a little bit too little. If both got going quickly, this was more important to him. As a sort of social scientist, it didn't seem to be to be very scientific, but recognizing the political realities, in retrospect, I can see that it made a lot of sense. At the time I was kind of hurt that my first effort was regarded as a nice thing to put in the Archives somewhere, but not very useful for the purpose for which I had come to Washington, and I was prepared to go back to Chicago and was told "But we want you to stay around. There are a lot more things to do" I said, "Well, if this is the use to which they're put, why should I stay?" I was told "Well, we're going into Work Relief Program. We've experimented with one they had, a shorter program, called the CWA, and there just, you know, in effect, anybody with any half a brain could be very useful in this effort." I said, "Well, I've got my professional pride, and I ought to get my doctors degree" and this and that, but I sold out for

$300 more than I was getting for the first six weeks - $300 more per year. In fact, the girl I was going with, I called and said, "There are jobs in Washington" and she came and she got a job, and we got married the next February. We're still married.

HP: Life changed?

RA: Life changed remarkably, and it was very exciting period. It was a period as I said, in which all of these sort of organizational lines were first of all not respected in any event by Hopkins and Williams who just didn't work according to an organization chart. Harry Hopkins wouldn't allow one to be drawn in the WPA for a long time, and he was asked once why he wouldn't, and he said, "Because the only thing you can learn from them is who drew the chart, and the only way you can tell that is because he's always at the center." He didn't care about this. I remember a very young guy being in the office one Saturday afternoon, and getting a call directly from Aubrey Williams, who was then the No. 2 man in the thing, asking for some information and bringing it over to him and meeting him and so on, and this is quite unlikely, I think, in the present government to happen. That's how a youngster in the sort of bowels of the organization, gets yanked up and brought forward, talks things over with the deputy administrator, and is sent back for some further information and establishes a contact and so on.

HP: This was the land of opportunity for many people, in many walks of life - lawyers, young lawyers, were doing all kinds of things.

RA: Yes, I don't know if it was '36 and '37 or '37 and '38, or which of those years exactly, but I remember being included in list of people invited by the President to the Reception for Federal Executive, or whatever it was, but a big affair, but nevertheless, it didn't cut down to those levels later I can assure you. At the time I had started, they had not had any census of the occupational characteristics, people on relief, and although people were perfectly aware of it, after such a census, they realized that they had a fairly sizeable group of artists, musicians, writers - who were our other -- theater people, yes, and if they went into a work relief program, while the country was familiar with the techniques and problems involved in building roads and airports and bridges, what you do with artists and theater workers and writers, created some quite different problem.

HP: Is that the rationale for Federal Project No. 1?

RA: Well, there were two. Well, the real rationale, of course, was, is that they were trying to shift from a direct relief program to a work relief program and a work relief in accordance with previous experience and ability and to some extent prospect - that is, there was no use perpetuating completely obsolete skills - that they would have to devise a variety of projects and that this involved also a non- construction projects and projects that would employ women. There were all kinds of women on relief who weren't particularly skilled and then these highly professional people. The other side of Federal Project No. 1, as I recall it was a more bureaucratic interest that was served. In the original appropriation, the big first appropriation for work relief - four billion eight hundred million, or something like that, which in those days was just enormous, was being drafted, some of us -- one of my fiends in particular, I think, Sol Osser, was concerned that there should be some kind of kitty that the federal government could hold for projects of its own, and a provision without really knowledge of how it would be used, was written into the legislation for federal projects - twenty-seven million, or some such figure. The marriage of these two ideas was facilitated by various - well, an interesting proposal that Halley Flanagan, then at Vassar, sent in to Harry Hopkins for a theater project and other proposals that were coming in for use of other professional types and out of these, and I'm not just sure, or at least I don't recollect at the moment just why these, were combined into a single thing called Federal Project No. 1, except that they all seemed to occupy professional people in the arts field and created a sort of special set of problems. Problems were really quite special. I still - you've just been here for ten or fifteen minutes, and it's hard to put myself back into the spirit of a procurement division and a treasury department and all sorts of people, who as I say knew what you do, you get the corp of engineers, or you do something when you want to build a road, or build an airport, but how do you put an artist on a payroll? Should he be paid by the hour, or by the yard, or who should supervise him, what constitutes production - it was just endless.. I remember negotiating with the Treasury for hours and hours about the purchase of paints because they thought you write specifications like you do for tons and ship loads and train loads, car loads of other things, and the notion that one artist wouldn't like the kind of paint that some other artist wants, or that they might have to import these from abroad, or something -

HP: Beyond them --

RA: Yes, sort of beyond them, not that they were incompetent or stupid. It just hadn't come to him, and the same thing with the fact that theaters charge admission, or they feel more professional and they're in business when they're playing to an audience. We did a lot of stuff in the public parks, free concerts and all that, but when you're in New York City, and you've got other problems of competition with those that are still running and having trouble, so you are pressed on the one hand not to have everything free, and on the other hand the government says "Well, we have miscellaneous receipts of the Treasury. They can go into there, but to

negotiate an arrangement under which the WPA Theater Project could get some use for its special purposes out of those receipts was again a six to eight weeks tough negotiating. All through this business we were breaking new ground which again doesn't really seem as complicated as somehow it was made to seem in those days, when government had been traditionally small, had not been engaged in welfare functions anyhow, and least of all, in these odd activities, like decorating buildings with murals and so on. The question of what you did with finished paintings, who had them and how you could circulate them and how you kept the records of them, because federal property is something that in this federal bureaucracy is thought of something pretty sacred. "People get put in jail for losing a piece of property. Here you want to circulate some picture all over the country," this required some procedures. On the other hand, Mr. Hopkins, Mr. Williams and the directors of these projects themselves were least eager, and understandably so, to get involved in a lot of this procedural negotiation. They wanted to unleash the creative talents of these people and rehabilitate them, make the country more beautiful, improve the interests in the arts, and build up an audience for future -- a market for the products of these people in the future and all that. It was a really fantastic thing, and then for the normal work project -- I don't know if any of this is relevant to your business or not?

HP: Sure, because this is the time it seems to me that the old line government was asked to speak a language it had never been instructed in.

RA: Exactly!

HP: Not that the people who were involved in it could speak the language.

RA: That's right --

HP: That is convey what they really wanted to do. I've often thought -- I don't know how true this is, that FEra had for example, had established in the states an institutional framework through which funds for relief had previously gone. These were still, so far as I'm aware, in existence.

RA: The spadework was, and it was a major problem too, because Federal Project No. 1 was initially set up outside of this framework, and it was set up, I think, on the sound belief that the departure from the established local custom involved in setting up this kind of project would just be too great, and you had to have some kind of federal standard and operation directly. At the same time, the local officials, the local politicos, and the people who had to take the heat locally on dissatisfaction with the program were very concerned that long-haired artists would come in and I don't know, paint nude women in the public streets, or something and that the wrong kind of plays would be given, and strange music would be played, and all of this would reflect adversely on their own local political and in some cases, not political in any short term sense of the word, damage them, but really by and large they were dedicated to the purposes of the program of putting people to work and were uneasy about these sort of left field activities. In the end, as you probably know, considerable compromises had to be made with the federal concept and progressively more say in these projects given to regional and local FEra and WPA personnel. But I don't think they could have ever gotten started if we'd said "Well, only start a project where there's a firm local demand, and -- we'll be governed almost entirely by local considerations." This was really too much of a departure to get by with that.

HP: Yes. Whoever had the idea, or whoever wrote into the piece of legislation the vague thing with respect to the federal project, must have had in mind the limitation of the local management who if an artist arrived might suggest to him, "Yes I would like to have my walls painted, paint them green."

RA: Yes.

HP: So far as the artistic aesthetic, it might not have been very deeply ingrained in these old line institutions that were handling the relief in the states, so it made sense in terms of getting something off the ground.

RA: Yes.

HP: It was developing a kind of momentum which couldn't be interfered with initially. Later, and I suspect it may be traceable to the kind of furor which was aroused because of the theater project, probably more than --

RA: The theater project more than the others and one or two plays in particular, if I recall correctly.

HP: Yes. But I suspect that is the design, an extension of what Hally Flanagan was, a flaming sword with respect to her own interest, and not necessarily organized, along public relations lines, at least with respect to the Congress -- you know, where she quoted --

RA: Quite correct.

HP: Something had to be done to reverse this sort of looseness, this freedom for - you know - but it had already

written in --

RA: Yes, and my recollection is that Eddie Cahill, Holger E. Cahill, I guess it was, was almost from the beginning considerably more sensitive to the general social environment in which he was operating then. Hally Flanagan, who really thought it was absolutely unreasonable for anyone to be concerned with the content of a play, such as the "Living Newspaper" which was an innovation and a good one in the theater, but also obviously, sort of potential dynamite.

HP: Well, in part, I'm not sure, did you get any notion as to whether Congress, this is hard, was whole souled in support of this? Generally, to the WPA approach?

RA: Well with the WPA approach, or with the federal projects? I think there should be --

HP: With the program as a WPA.

RA: They were not. They were not. The President was immensely popular. There was a great deal of support in Congress for putting these people to work, and it seemed more in keeping with the American tradition that they should work than that they should draw funds without working, and as I say, certain kinds of conventional work had, I would think, wide support. Everyone wanted post offices, airports, roads, and some other types of construction, but they were very afraid of the use of surplus cotton for mattresses and so on, all these possible competition with industry angles. They were uneasy about using writers and musicians and artists. They were unhappy about the standards by which some people got work and others didn't and the government wasn't sensitive to the wishes of every Congressman, couldn't be if they would like it to have been, and like foreign aid, like a lot of other activities by the time it had been business for some months and everybody began to know, or thought he knew of some silly project, or some person who refused another job because he was on a work relief project, or some hanky-panky somewhere, an official was alleged to have had his own driveway paved and so on, this cumulated into progressive dissatisfaction with the program, and it was far from popular. Each return to Congress was harder, and these white-collar and professional activities were among the most vulnerable.

HP: I find it not a little ironic that Congress, in a nation that believes in free enterprise and wisely so, could not compete with established industries, but could support the building of public buildings, public roads and so on and also the arts, which are the --

RA: Last strong hold --

HP: Yes.

RA: -- of free enterprise.

HP: Right. And also the most volatile that is the most suspect, in the sense of once you do something, it's right out there in the open.

RA: Well, it was not easy for Congress to prohibit this particular kind of activity -- that is, this is what they would have to do if they were really particularly dissatisfied with it. The president came forward with a program, and as I say, he was an immensely popular president. The country was in horrible shape. There were the fears of revolution and such and so forth, and there had been such things like a bogus Army march on Washington, just a couple of years, the year before. Yes, and there was a further thing after I got to Washington, some effort of the unemployed to converge on the city so that Congress sort of accepted a program which was supposed to keep these people busy, and the essence of the program was not to go to Congress and ask for a lot of different kinds of projects, except to put through a Work Relief Program, and to employ people on useful public projects in accordance with their skills and abilities, and to pay them for the work done, and pay them initially less than prevailing wages, and then later on we got into some hassles on that, and our hourly wage rate became sort of the prevailing rate, but the number of hours they worked per month was so small that they would still have an incentive to leave the WPA Project for other work. So that Congress' unhappiness with particular kinds of projects, I think came through in hearings and so on, but it was to reflect it in a collective action, through singling out some part of the program and proscribing that.

HP: Yes. Did you tie in entirely with the Federal Project No. 1 - - that group?

RA: No, we had a Mrs. Woodward, whom you've evidently heard of --

HP: Yes, Ellen Woodward.

RA: Ellen Woodward headed something called a Professional and Service Projects which basically were the non-construction activities, and although there was a considerable variety of activities, there's one substantial slug of projects which were primarily sort of women's activities -- unskilled and semi-skilled women's training of house

keeping aides and all sorts, sewing projects, mattress projects and so on. The major professional effort, which was this Federal Project No. 1 there was some in-between-types of things -- and I was in something that headed her unit called, "Procedures, Finance and Statistics", which was a kind of service unit for all of this activity.

HP: I think what is amusing to me, and I didn't know her, was that I doubt very much that anything in her background prepared her for the likes of Henry Alsheep...

RA: Nothing did. No. Were you involved in any --?

HP: No. No. I was in school --

RA: Well, no, she was a political appointee, and a fairly insecure one really. She did not come through as a close friend of Harry Hopkins. She was a protege' of Senator Pat Harrison, I think it was, from Mississippi, and she was a woman of tremendous energy and -- thank God, some willingness to rely on some other people to collaborate with her at times. This Federal Project was a constant sort of worry to her because, as you say, she wasn't at home in this business, and she really didn't know how to deal with the likes of Alsburg and Flanahan, and Cahill and so on, but she was, I guess, a kind of broker, if you want to think of it that way, between what we would now call the egg heads and the general public, or the Congress. She wanted to protect her domains, so this gave her a kind of incentive to keep the project alive, prevent it from getting too severely criticized, and it was prestigious too, to be in charge of this work, you know.

HP: Oh sure, I think her ego was massaged, but what comes out I think, just in terms of reading her testimony is an enormous sense of loyalty she had to these, her children; she didn't understand it -- almost a mother's kind of approach.

RA: Yes. Yes.

HP: It must have been extremely effective with the Congress, because while they kept these projects, it seems to me, on an economic snaffle bit most of the time, nonetheless, even when there was criticism, and the press is filled with it -- California papers quoting something that happened in New York, that couldn't be checked, or New York papers publishing something from the mid-west -- just sort of conveying this sense that maybe all of this isn't quite as right as it should be -- and with increasing ferocity, depending upon the publication, like the Hearst Press, for example -- you know the leaning on the shovel bit.

RA: Yes.

HP: Well, there weren't enough shovels for people to be employed. Nobody bothered to take that kind of a survey, but she was right down the pipe in defense of these, her children --

RA: She was, and she did her homework for these things. They used to be agonizing sessions. We had, before she went up on the hill, in which she almost rehearsed her act. She was a striking, looking person, and the kind that used her personality. She was known to have sent herself flowers on occasion to appear in the right way with her apparent admirers in her appearances before Congress, and so on. She sort of memorized this testimony. You know, it wasn't the kind of thing that came easily to her, but she mastered it, and as you rightly detect, I think, from the testimony -- I haven't seen it for years -- she gave the impression and she did feel very protective about this part of the program. The testimony was polished up, as it always has been -- I don't know if it was any more so in those days than later, but the transcripts were sent back, and we used to arrive on Sunday morning, Saturday night, whenever the transcript came through -- it could be Tuesday afternoon, too -- then you had, I forget, whether it was 24 hours or 48 hours, or something to go over the transcript and make what were supposed to be editorial changes. Well, there was no censor, to my knowledge of these changes so that a Mrs. Woodward, or anybody else -- Harry Hopkins, Aubrey Williams and the Congressmen -- could be made to look better in the printed testimony than they were in fact. Sometimes the curious result was if a Congressman modified his questions slightly, and at the same time with the other copy of the transcript the answer was being modified somewhat by the person who gave it, the result is -- when the printed testimony occurs -- a question that wasn't asked and an answer that wasn't given -- and the two don't fit together.

HP: That's when you read carefully..

RA: Yes. And Hopkins and Williams believed, at least they told us they believed, that they would answer questions up at the hearing, wherever possible by saying, "Well, I'll submit a further statement on that for the record", and so on, and then you get these blanks and these small printed, single space things, which we wrote late at night to fill in those places. I'm sure that this is perfectly legitimate. You can't know all about every project --

HP: Oh sure. Certainly not on the spur of the moment.

RA: No.

HP: Did Hopkins have good relations with Congress? Or did he really care?

RA: He didn't care enough. He had excellent relations with the President, of course, and strange relations with Ickey, who was running a big public works program and was the Secretary of the Interior at the start of the WPA and it wasn't as you may know from reading the records contemplated anyhow, that Hopkins himself would be a big employer. The initial concept of WPA, and the reason it got that odd name before it became the Works Project Administration -- called the Works Progress Administration -- was that it was really thought that the principle employers in the physical sense would be the Forest Service, the Department of Interior, Agriculture, the Indian Service and so on, and what the WPA would furnish some sort of residual employment for these odd characters who couldn't fit in the projects that were run by regular government agencies and regular was the kind that had been in operation too for a long time, but Hopkins had the drive, energy and desire to see these people get to work, but as the regular agencies were slow in putting people to work and he was fast, he began to have a base that could be expanded, it was in the end -- most people working directly for WPA and a few people working for other agencies. But Hopkins, I think, was not respectful of Congress, not public relations conscious about this, about any other aspects dealing with the public as public officials have since learned to be sort of felt that he had a job to do, that the important thing were the poor people of the U.S. and something should be done about them and can't spend all your day answering Congressional mail to do this, or to get testimony ready. I think some of this came through in what Congress felt was a kind of lack of participation on their part, and a lack of respect for them, no enthusiasm for it. We developed it gradually by having them announce when a project had been approved, and all these little things that help build them up and make them a part of the program.

HP: Well, you know his background, in parts, in social work --

RA: Yes.

HP: So it is understandable, that he would, I think, keep his eyes on the bird on the wing and if need be, overlook the niceties -- the public relations niceties. That doesn't jar me. But I thought that Ickey was to be the czar of public works and that he spent most of his time trying to design contracts for the letting of public works to keep political figures -- state and locale -- their hands out of the public trough, because he had that background in Chicago -- that --

RA: He was going to keep every penny spent honestly and for solid projects and every ton of concrete should be worth the number of dollars paid for it and no dollar should have slipped through to grease the finger of any particular politician. This is thoroughly admirable. But he did, as you imply, spend endless time negotiating these contracts, and policing them and assuring that the thing would be done so that no dollar would be wasted. I think Hopkins had a more chevalier attitude that the country was in terrible shape, the additional spending power which would be released through these programs should get into the stream as quickly as possible, that in the process probably a few bum projects would crop up everywhere, but the importance of having some millions of people at work quickly was much greater than having a 100,000 at work and 900,000 or so waiting to get to work, because you haven't made sure that it would all be done quite properly. He was sort of an impatient man.

HP: Yes, yes, that's what I have understood it to be.

RA: But his cumulative, you asked about the relations with Congress, and generally the handling of correspondence and office affairs and so on, in this sense he was alleged to be a poor administrator! I never subscribed to this, even in those very young days, because he obviously was so concerned with the heart of the program. When he left, and COL Harrington who succeeded him started putting out all these instructions, letters will be answered within 24 hours, letters that are sent to my office by 4 P.M. will be signed between then and 5:30, or whatever it was, and everything really stepped up wonderfully in terms of papers moving along, but the program lost its heart. It was quite evident really, that -- you know all this improvement in outward efficiency was at the cost of a meaningful substantive effort to get ahead with solving unemployment program. COL Harrington was a dedicated man. He was a fine administrator, a Corp of Engineer product of a most admirable kind.

HP: But no social worker.

RA: No social work.

HP: Any more than Sommerville was?

RA: That's right, that's it exactly. Yes.

HP: Would adhere to the letter and forget about its application -- or be insensitive to its application in human

term ---

RA: That may be a little strong, because Harrington was quite a remarkable person, too. I guess Sommerville was in his way, but they were also impatient with this kind of completely undisciplined attitude of creative people towards some of this.

HP: How did -- you know, within the four that figure in to arts of the arts Cahill, Sokolov, I don't suspect Sokolov spent so much time here in Washington, did he?

RA: Yes. He loved to conduct, as you know, wherever there was a change. He had terrific vanity, more than the other federal directors, none of whom were notoriously modest. Sokolov was out actually drilling symphony orchestras more of the time, but he was in Washington a good deal of the time. There was a kind of fifth project which got folded into this called, "Historical Records Survey", which Luther Evans ran, and Luther is still around and very articulate.

HP: He would be the kind who would know all about this project.

RA: Yes.

HP: All about every detail.

RA: Yes.

HP: Nothing would escape him.

RA: Yes.

HP: He has that kind of thoroughness but I don't associate thoroughness with Sokolov, because here again is brand new departure, breaking new ground, what do you do with musicians?

RA: Yeah.

HP: What do you do with this? What does Congress do with it? What does Ellen Woodward do with it? I mean, you know, this is a rough thing, and yet the --

RA: Sobator(?), I can't remember who was his deputy, but that person did stay pretty close to home and did keep the papers moving and the project funds going out. There was a man, to whom you were surely referred by Anne Cronin, or Ellen Woodward -- Lawrence Morris.

HP: Oh yes.

RA: Have you talked to him?

HP: I've talked to him, yes.

RA: Yes. And he was a very good sort coordinator of these people. In fact, they were sort of well-flanked at two levels. Larry Morris who, in a sense was serving them and Ann Cronin and Mrs. Woodward who formed the broker and a link at the upper end that a COL Harrington, for example, did not have to come into very direct contact with Nicholi Sokolov, because I think that might have been the end of the Music Project.

HP: Well, even like Henry Alsberg, you know, here was a man with an idea who was seized with an idea and literally put a form stamp on guide books in America.

RA: Yes.

HP: Where -- I guess all of the material was shipped to Washington.

RA: It was.

HP: Where it was read, carefully edited, suggestions made, sent back until it measured up --

RA: And Henry Alsberg was enormously helped by a then young man, Reid Harris, who I think is still at USIA, and a very fine guy who really again was present every day and was an intermediary in-between some of the less disciplined and some of the more disciplined spirits around there.

HP: What sort of estimate do you have Holger Cahill As an administrator?

RA: Well, as you said Luther Evans certainly was sort of the tightest administrator of these, but it was a special

kind of project. They were unearthing these records, rescuing them from the pigeons. I think Eddie Cahill was the most human and probably -- I don't know; I was in a poor position really to judge effectiveness -- the easiest to talk to for those of us who were outside of the program, to get any understanding at his level. You couldn't expect Sokolov to understand things that Cahill seemed to understand readily about the fact that there would be a real problem on how to pay an artist, what kind of a time sheet he should turn in. Sokolov, and I think Flanagan too, were somewhat inclined to groan when we came around with this and if Eddie Cahill groaned, he did it a little more to himself and he said, "Ah yes, this is an interesting problem, I can see, well" and you could talk it over with him and make proposals. There too, we had a couple of special projects, like the Index of Design that were sort of analogous to the Guide Book concept. Well, I liked him very much and looking back this far I can't remember really the extent to which my fondness was a personal affection and the degree to which it was conditioned by how easy, or difficult he was to deal with. I have the recollection of Nicholi Sokolov being, you know fairly mercurial and difficult to deal with, and Hallie Flanagan -- I'm never sure what kind of an understanding one had come to after one had left and pretty confident that when you talked something over with Cahill there would be a follow-though, that he wouldn't forget the next day what was said and be off on some other thing. He had been an administrator. Yes, this was really one difference. Hally came, of course from Vassar, and Skolov had just been a conductor.

HP: On a podium.

RA: Yes. But Cahill had been in a job where you do have some --

HP: Well, he had a background at the Newark Museum and Charles Dana.

RA: Yes, yes, that's right.

HP: Which I think gave him sensitivity to the public.

RA: Yes. I think so.

HP: So he was very much interested in managing to the extent he was able, a project which would find acceptance, not one which would fly in the face of the public.

RA: Yes, you had this sense all the time with him, being a kind of balance wheel. I even felt lots of time when the four Directors were -- the five with Luther -- going over the preparations for testimony or budget for next year, or something that Cahill who often spoke first on this sort of things, set a little bit of a common sense tone which was picked up by others, might not have been were they the leaders.

HP: Yes. Let me turn this over.

RA: My sister, she paints under the name of Elise Asher, but she is Mrs. Stanley Kunitz, and that's in the Village, 12th Street.

HP: Did you, let's see, come to deal with Tom Parker?

RA: Yes.

HP: And he has a sense of stability?

RA: Yes. What's happen to him. I had that good fortune on our 25th anniversary which was six years ago, five years ago, to be in New York, and my sister gave a sort of party for us, and Cahill came to it. It was the last time I saw him. He was not well.

HP: I never met him. I get this sense of him, that this is a man with a kind philosophical commitment to what was going on, a broad vision of what might emerge out of it, a man perhaps more careless of detail, than Tom Parker would be.

RA: Oh yes. Tom Parker was the guy who came around every day and checked through these figures and sat along and Tom was involved in the whole procedure of working out what was oddly called a permanent loan system under which the Federal Government could allocate a piece of art to Cleveland and let them keep it for quite a while, indefinately. This was worked out with Tom Parker. He, as a matter of fact, kept the records for a long time on where these things were. Yes, yes, yes he was a great source of stability in that office.

HP: There wasn't any precedence, really, for this arts project. What is of interest in retrospect is that this is a period -- the 30's -- in which American eyes turned toward Washington for the answer and solution to their problems, and the big cry, politically,was centralization, and so on, you know.

RA: Yes.

HP: But the WPA, particularly, the art project reverses this trend. Because you had to cut and tailor make the program in "X" state to fit the people on the rolls, and this means that you didn't have a kind of central organization really, that dictated style, approach, paint, format, and so on.

RA: Exactly, yes.

HP: You had to find in the local areas, sufficient astuteness to get together a program to put the local artists to work, and this would vary and it does vary.

RA: Well, it does. And as you know, we have some distinguished state directors particularly in the art program motherwell and others and some undistinguished ones too, and this made a tremendous difference how good your so-called state director was.

HP: Sure. Like fellows like Morris in Massachusetts there, Danysh from the West Coast --

RA: Yes.

HP: Invarity from Washington. It's just that in the very nature of the federal project required a different kind of communication with the local agencies than through the old FEra agency. Well, the Index, for example, is the only national program. It became national simply because there was diversity of approach from Massachusetts and New York, so they brought Cook Glassgold down as supervisor.

RA: Yes, that's right.

HP: But other than that, the riches and variety turns up wherever you go, whether it's Washington or Iowa, or Minnesota, or Wisconsin, Michigan (where I've been). It depended on what was founded locally on the local rolls and how astute the local person was, to create that kind of program, to put these people to work and to keep them at work, whether it was the design of furniture, or a rug, hooked rug, or whatever it was, it was a local proposition so Cahill in this kind of sense would have the overall approach and hopeful approach, but I suspect would be weary of dealing with the kind of explosive problems that might come up, like Benney Buffano in --

RA: -- in San Francisco --

HP: In San Francisco, what would he do with him - you know?

RA: Yes. It seemed to me for about a decade after the project -- in actual fact, most of the artists who were exhibiting and some of them had graduated from WPA project, but were not including this information in their biographies because the WPA project was still kind of a dubious experience to have lived through and they left this out of their biographies. Then it suddenly became quite respectable, and people were proud of having been in this. They felt left out if they hadn't been, and there was a whole change. I went to an exhibit two or three years ago at the gallery of Modern Art here of WPA art, and it was kind of fun to look back on, particularly since they had paintings of the "then" period with much later ones than some of the same painters.

HP: Well, from the art point of view I suspect that from the national point of view it was a good idea to keep skills alive --

RA: Of course it was.

HP: They, at long last had opportunity to do something they loved to do.

RA: And I don't know what historical perspective one should use for breeding these things. I suspect that the present, wide- spread acceptance of the White House concern with the arts ____? and the new bill and so on, really dates back to the WPA period.

HP: The handwriting for termination, I think, was on the wall. You know we have been internally concerned with ourselves -- Hopkins view I suspect was like feed them, get them a check by Thanksgiving and we'll worry about what their doing later on -- this kind of approach. But suddenly we, you know, those ugly voices abroad. Organization was in the air. Remember we never settled the problem in America whether a man could organize and bargain collectively until 1937 -- the court case.

RA: Ahem.

HP: Well, here were a group of artists in New York, and New York wasn't the window on America insofar as art is concerned, but having a frightful time in terms of organization, you know, trying to have a collective voice artist, individuals with a collective voice.

RA: The New York organized workers on the project, one from the public relations point of view, were a terrible

liability - - locking their directors into their offices and, as you said, trying to bargain collectively, about some of these things.

HP: Yes, Congress must have been quite sensitive to all that was going on --

RA: Yes. There was a communist movement. It was active particularly in these projects, and this was fairly plainly apparent. No, it was in trouble from very early, and God knows if we hadn't been -- I don't like to put it this way -- rescued by the War and general change in the employment situation which was brought about by Defense Expenditures, you know, I don't know what kind of a muddle this might have ended in. I shifted myself to the National Youth Administration. When that was made a separate organization, Aubrey Williams took me over to that. I guess it was in June, 1939, that I lost my direct contact with the Federal Projects. Mrs. Woodward had left by then. Mrs. Kerr had taken over, and the program was pretty well, I don't know if you call stabilized, or on its way out, it was no longer --

HP: Yes, I think that Congress had expressly excluded the theater project because the World's Fair came into the picture. There was an effort to create a theater at the World's Fair, in which the federal project would put on the shows, but Congress I think expressly said no funds for the theater project which terminated that. And I think they began the process then of turning a good bit of the direction to the states --

RA: Yes, they did a great deal -- this was, yeah.

HP: To local agencies, which changed the whole nature of the art program, although some of them continued to linger on, although -- to linger on in the sense of that there were still artists at work, but Michigan is the case in point. They had a lot of semi-skilled workers that they turned to furniture building, furniture design. This was at the bequest of the State Chairman, and the state person in control of the remnants of this relief had a lot of people that he pushed on to the art project, a lot of women too.

RA: Yes.

HP: "Can you do something?" you know -- and it then became necessary for the local people to get out of the pure aesthetic business and to get into the business of trying to cut new programs for these non-artistically inclined people. I think that's what happened ultimately. Although some artists still continued.

RA: Are you going to try to write a --- history?

HP: Essentially what is being done is to -- well, there are certain judgements made, that the times were such, the pace was such, that a good bit of the atmosphere that conditioned and help shape events has vanished. Nobody had time to jot it down.

RA: Yes, yes, yes.

HP: So, while people were still existent who were part of this, you can get some flavor, retrospectively, a reinterpretation of those days because it is long after the fact -- as to just what it had meant.

RA: Well, yes it was, so hectic, I wish again I keep thinking Saturday afternoons because it was long before the five-day week, but I remember getting a frantic call from someone in Ohio who said, "I have a theater unit that has been rehearsing now for six weeks and they haven't been paid." I said, "That's awful. What happened? Who put them on?" "I put them on" this person said. I said, "Who did you tell that you put them on?" "Well, I got my direction, I don't know whether it was from Hally, or from the State Director, but anyhow, in all of his enthusiasm, he had started people rehearsing and so on, but of course they weren't on any payroll officially. There are procedures and you have to get some pieces of paper out. On government, they couldn't be paid. You can't pay people retroactively, and we spent again days because these people in good faith had been rehearsing and this fellow, naive, but in good faith had started something, "How do we fudge the timesheets to get these people paid as quickly as possible by backdating somewhere or other, and so on, and we worked this out, but when I think back now, people have either gotten more sophisticated, or we all are were accustomed to records, or something, but no one could be stupid enough to start people rehearsing without writing their names down, and

the day, and checking with somebody, you know, or "These are the people who are on, and they've been referred to me by someone, I've taken them and they're off somebody elses payroll, relief load, and on here and will they be taken care of? How do I find out?" You don't just wake up suddenly a few weeks later, "I thought they were going to be paid weekly, and in six weeks they haven't been paid." But it happened!

HP: Indeed it did. I've see collection of papers where precisely this problem is presented, you know, where in good faith they have been working, they have not been paid from the State of Washington. What do I do? It's a cry in the dark. Yet, at the same time, I'm rather surprised that artists who took positions of administrative

responsibility in the local areas did as well as they did. Aren't you in a way?

RA: Yes. We take care of them, and there are no great stories of people having made off with carloads of pictures, and people having starved, paintbrush in hand, so that they were artists who were in charge, State Directors. They did select, direct, and keep records, and do all things, all sorts of things that as artists they have very little experience doing and aren't temperamentally congenial to artists at all.

HP: Well, I talked to one in particular -- Burgoyne Diller from New York who was a deputy to Mrs. McMann, you know an artist who's fumbling on the lunatic fringe somewhere in his own work, and yet he had almost my "brother's keeper" approach toward how to get a mural accepted, how to farm it out so that it would be accepted, how to convey to an artist who was as independent and cussed as he was, the necessity for working within certain agreed limits that would make it acceptable. Suddenly he was pressed into service as an internal public relations man to keep the group together, experience, which but for this he never would have had and was quite alien to what he was, but the necessity. The desire to keep the working going, this sort of thing, with continuity made it necessary for artists to mouth attitudes with respect to art and their products which they would not otherwise have done. "It's important to get the school to accept the mural, so don't put that color up there if need be. Change this just a bit, you've got to sell it. You've got to market it. It's not something you can just do and they can go to hell if they don't like it, you know --

RA: But I can remember some of the late night conversations and so on in which you know this question of, do you respond to a request for a painting that fills a certain area in a certain way? Should this be recognized, or is this an unwarranted

interference? Is the person, or the agency that provides the wall space, got a right to do more than tell you this is yours? Can they indicate what's appropriate for the school, or the post office or something. This is a real, fighting question.

HP: I know, but --

RA: These guys did become quite sensitive to it, but it wasn't easy.

HP: No, but even Cahill had this point of view that it was better to -- I'm going to use a word which he never would have used - - to play it safe with reference to ideas and maintain the continuity than it would be to affront the sensibilities of some sponsoring organization.

RA: That's right, but we had a procession of the representatives of the unions and so on coming through Washington, and then those of us who could get out did and I remember it was exciting to go to a living newspaper, the Death in the Cathedral, or whatever that --

HP: How marvelous --

RA: The Mikado, and so on, or to see an exhibit of pictures and get these things. Like Mrs. Roosevelt came to the office a few times. When she came through , "I like this picture of Jones" and so on. We also got the other side. Cahill may have been quite happy to get this thing accepted on a less than one thousand ten percent basis, but there were others in the project and on the project who weren't so happy about this, who wanted to see every fight fought everyday to the finish.

HP: They even became this collective group.

RA: Yes.

HP: Which you know is unthinkable, like Steward Davis testifying.

RA: You know, I have a guy coming in a few minutes when I can stop, if you're going to stay, but I ---

HP: I think we've just about got the flavor that we got out of it --

RA: Well, another part of the flavor, you know that the headquarters were in something called the Melain Mansion.

Have you gotten any of that oddity? It's now a big office building that's on fifteenth and I street where that was, but at the time when the Federal Projects moved into it, we all moved in, it was set up -- it had been --Evely Walsh McLean's city house and its still had odd bits of classic statuary around. People always had their hats on them. Someone came to ask where Mr. Asure was, and the answer from the girl at the desk was, "he's up in the maid's room." Well the rooms weren't very well numbered, when you first came in, and there was a kind of bank of maids rooms on the third floor. You know, the whole sort of spirit of sending government people around to find someone in the maid's room was so different. This was an impressive home, had been occupied by one or two

people with a corp of servants, tRAnsformed in the space of a few days, or weeks, to an office building with I don't know how many -- a hundred people, say in the offices. There was still a case of champagne in the basement, we found. Now the government takes over one of these places, and there's a long period. I don't know. It's all revamped and sanitized before you get into it. Everybody's place is clear, and there surely is a directory, or something downstairs, a person set up to refer you to it --

HP: This is symptomatic of the day -- do something! This was an impulse abroad in the land. We were high centered economically, and someone said we ought to do something --

RA: Of course, the change was very sudden, because I was one of those guys who was marching up and down in the streets of Chicago, organizing the unemployed up until the time I came to Washington and reversed the roles. We felt that under Hoover, nothing was being done, nothing would be done; the only place in our area in Chicago that got anything was the Charlie Dewor's bank, and where did the poor people come out on it.

HP: Yes.

[END OF INTERVIEW]