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Oral history interview with Sargent Johnson,
1964 July 31

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Sargent Johnson on July 31, 1964. The interview was conducted at in San Francisco, California by Mary McChesney for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Also present are Leonard Pollakoff, Ruth Pollakoff, and Robert McChesney.

Interview

MARY MCCHESENEY: Sargent, first I'd like to ask you, where were you born?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Boston, Massachusetts.

MARY MCCHESENEY: What year was that?

SARGENT JOHNSON: 1888. [Laughs]

MARY MCCHESENEY: Where did you get your art training?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Well, I started out in Winston, Massachusetts, the art school in Winston.

MARY MCCHESENEY: How long did you go there?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Oh, I guess I went there about two years.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Then what did you do?

SARGENT JOHNSON: I came west to the California School of Fine Arts. I put in four years there.

MARY MCCHESENEY: What years were those?

SARGENT JOHNSON: At my age – you ought to be ashamed of yourself to ask a question like that.

MARY MCCHESENEY: This was the California School of Fine Arts in Oakland?

SARGENT JOHNSON: No. I am here. It was the old Mark Hopkins [Institute].

MARY MCCHESENEY: Oh, it was in San Francisco.

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yes. It was Hopkins here.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Oh, I was thinking of the arts and crafts school in Berkeley.

SARGENT JOHNSON: No, I was over here.

MARY MCCHESENEY: You went there four years?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Four years of that and I worked with the different people. Stern, when Maurice Stern came out, Bufano and Stackpole.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Were you studying mainly sculpture then?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Sculpture, yes.

MARY MCCHESENEY: How did you first get on any of the government art projects?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Well, I don't know how that was. I was living in Berkeley when they had the—what was the first one?

MARY MCCHESENEY: PWAP, I think it was called.

SARGENT JOHNSON: PWAP, and I was assigned to the Blind School in Berkeley to do a mural carved out of wood, you know, a wood carving sort of relief.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Oh, that was the carved redwood panel, wasn't it?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yeah.

MARY MCCHESENEY: How large was that?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Oh, I guess it must have been...

MARY MCCHESENEY: About forty feet?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Across the face of the organ [an organ grille].

MARY MCCHESENEY: Would you say it was forty feet long?

SARGENT JOHNSON: No, it wasn't that long, about thirty feet and the height must be about fifteen feet high. [8ft x 22ft]

MARY MCCHESENEY: And that was a relief carving.

SARGENT JOHNSON: A relief in redwood, yeah.

MARY MCCHESENEY: What was the subject matter?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Birds and little animals and deer and things like that.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Was it done in a high relief or a low relief?

SARGENT JOHNSON: It was a high relief.

MARY MCCHESENEY: How did you work a piece of wood that size? It must have been done in pieces, wasn't it?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Done in panels, yeah.

MARY MCCHESENEY: How large were the panels?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Why do you ask me questions like that?

MARY MCCHESENEY: Two or three feet, you mean?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Oh no, they were wider than that. They were specially made for me. I think they were all about three and a half feet.

MARY MCCHESENEY: How thick?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Four inches, four inches thick.

MARY MCCHESENEY: How did you join them together? Did you dowel them or something?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yeh, they doweled them together for me. I made the drawings and started carving.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Where did you carve it? There at the school or at your studio?

SARGENT JOHNSON: At the studio and part at the school, studio and school.

MARY MCCHESENEY: How long did this job take? Months? Years? This was a big job.

SARGENT JOHNSON: No. Well, I had somebody to help it along.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Who were your assistants?

SARGENT JOHNSON: There was a fella, I don't know where he is now, but he wasn't an artist or anything. [Watkins] He was just helping out. I don't know how long it took, about three or four months, I think, altogether. We were getting into the place where it was to go only once in a while, you know, at the Blind School. That was in the music hall, in the music department.

MARY MCCHESENEY: This was to be placed in front of the organ?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yeah.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Is it still there?

SARGENT JOHNSON: I don't know. I haven't been up there for quite a while.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Who was the director of the project when you started this job?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Ah....

MARY MCCHESENEY: Danysh?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Oh, the art project when I began?

MARY MCCHESENEY: Yeah. I was just wondering who was your boss on this project.

SARGENT JOHNSON: No, it was somebody over there. I've forgotten the name.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Somebody over in Berkeley?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yeah.

MARY MCCHESENEY: What did you use to finish the wood? Did you just oil it or wax it?

SARGENT JOHNSON: I oiled the wood and then when it dried out a little, I went over it with some wax so that dust and all would drift down and not stay up there. 'Cause it would fall off the wax, you know, if it is good hard wax.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Is this placed up high in the building?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yes. It is up—well, I guess from here to there, about that high.

MARY MCCHESENEY: This was about fifteen feet high?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yeah, about fifteen feet high from the floor to the panel.

MARY MCCHESENEY: This was on the PWAP, before the WPA?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yes, before the WPA.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Were you on relief when you got this commission?

SARGENT JOHNSON: No.

MARY MCCHESENEY: You were sort of a sustaining artist then.

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yes, they wanted me to do it.

MARY MCCHESENEY: How much were you paid? Do you remember?

SARGENT JOHNSON: It was little pay then. It wasn't much pay that time.

MARY MCCHESENEY: That was the first government-sponsored project you were on?

SARGENT JOHNSON: That was the first one.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Where did you go after that?

SARGENT JOHNSON: I came over to San Francisco and well - then I met Hilaire Hiler. He wanted to know why I wasn't on WPA and I said, "Well, I went down and they wouldn't take me." But he said, "All right, you go with me tomorrow. I'll see that you get on." So, I went with Hiler and I was allowed on, given a job.

MARY MCCHESENEY: What was the first job you were given?

SARGENT JOHNSON: The first job, I worked with Benny Bufano for a couple of years or whatever it was, three years. I don't how long.

LEONARD POLLAKOFF: The Aquatic Park job?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Oh no, I was away from Bufano then.

MARY MCCHESENEY: This was before you did the Aquatic Park job?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yeah, that was before.

MARY MCCHESENEY: What did you do with Bufano? What were your first jobs with him?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Well, I worked statues and did the modeling for him and things like that.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Did he have a studio where he was working?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Oh, yes. He had one out on a little alley back of the—I think it was the Daily News on Mission Street and Third or Fourth.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Somewhere in that area?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yeah.

MARY MCCHESENEY: About how many other sculptors were working with him at that time?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Well, he had about five people there. A man was doing the stainless steel for him. Another man was doing copper work. There were about three or four of us modeling clay.

MARY MCCHESENEY: What did you do, model in clay for the...

SARGENT JOHNSON: Modeled in clay and made small statues, you know. And then we had to enlarge them from there on.

MARY MCCHESENEY: You enlarged them?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yeah. Into copper and sheets of copper. We had men there to do the welding.

MARY MCCHESENEY: What subjects were you working on? Where they all Saint Francises?

SARGENT JOHNSON: No. [Laughter] Let's hope not. No. That's my statue. I'm trying to remember.

LEONARD POLLAKOFF: The Peace Statue?

MARY MCCHESENEY: The Peace Statue. Where is that?

SARGENT JOHNSON: That's down at the airport.

LEONARD POLLAKOFF: That long ago you were working on that?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Oh, that was in the works a long, long time. Changed hands.

LEONARD POLLAKOFF: In the early thirties?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yeah, it changed hands many times. Of course, St. Francis was his big thing. Then there are a couple up on this side of the bay, I think, in stone which we didn't finish.

MARY MCCHESENEY: This must have been after 1937. According to my notes—

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yeah, yeah. The dates, I don't want to go into dates.

MARY MCCHESENEY: According to my notes, the redwood panel at the Berkeley Blind School was done in 1937. So you must have been gone from '37 to '38, to work for Benny.

SARGENT JOHNSON: Oh yeah, that's right.

MARY MCCHESENEY: What is the Peace Statue like? How large is it?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Let's see...

MARY MCCHESENEY: It's a big thing, isn't it?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yeah, he built it up since I worked on it.

LEONARD POLLAKOFF: It was down at the airport?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yeah. The one at the airport.

SARGENT JOHNSON: He's changed it all around.

LEONARD POLLAKOFF: About twelve foot.

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yeah, about twelve foot, high.

LEONARD POLLAKOFF: Stone—it's inlaid with—

SARGENT JOHNSON: No, no, that's part stainless steel too.

MARY MCCHESENEY: The whole body is stainless steel?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yeah. He has made a couple of those things.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Well, could you describe the one you worked on? What was it like?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Well, I don't know what to say. You don't know my *Forever Free* piece?

MARY MCCHESENEY: No, I don't.

SARGENT JOHNSON: Well, I was working on that and Benny had been in Europe. When he came back he said, "You know that you are not allowed to do that." It's just a straight log. In relief on the log was a mother and two children. And then he wanted to build this piece and so I stopped work on what I had, this mother and child, *Forever Free*. And that's the development of the *Forever Free*.

MARY MCCHESENEY: That's what, a tall piece of wood?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yes, just a tall - like a bullet with a head on top, and now he's painted a figure on it. I think it's painted on there now.

LEONARD POLLAKOFF: This is nothing like it?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yeah, I painted something on there, not a child's figure.

LEONARD POLLAKOFF: Just a head and then painting underneath.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Was this all steel?

SARGENT JOHNSON: It was all stainless steel at the time. He's gone over those things many times and change them. That time he changed.

MARY MCCHESENEY: But the original one that you worked on was—

SARGENT JOHNSON: It was the Sun Yat Sen I worked on.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Where is that now?

SARGENT JOHNSON: On the Saint Mary's Square.

LEONARD POLLAKOFF: Oh no, it's in back of a little church, you know.

SARGENT JOHNSON: Well, it's across from Saint Mary's Church and you go right across and there is a little park there.

LEONARD POLLAKOFF: Right.

SARGENT JOHNSON: Off of Grant Avenue.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Oh yes, in San Francisco's Chinatown. That's quite a large piece too, isn't it?

SARGENT JOHNSON: That's quite a big one. The head is marble, the chains are marble, the hands are marble and the rest is stainless steel.

MARY MCCHESENEY: What did you work on? The stone carving? Or the stainless steel?

SARGENT JOHNSON: No, I worked in the shop there with the man who was good in the stainless steel. That's about the first stainless steel piece of Benny's I ever saw. Hell, we had a lot of fun on that.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Were these done in clay first? Did you have a clay model?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yeah, in clay first.

MARY MCCHESENEY: What size clay piece would you work in?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Oh, we'd make them about a foot and a half.

MARY MCCHESENEY: What were the other pieces that you worked on, when you were working with him?

SARGENT JOHNSON: With Benny, oh, there are so many I don't remember. So many animals. I did some modeling on the animals. All those animals we had.

MARY MCCHESENEY: After you had done a model in clay, then to enlarge it into the stone, would he do the enlargement in stone or did you do that, too?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Well, he had the men there. I didn't do it but they had a fella there, with Benny. He was always in trouble. [Laughter] He almost choked him to death once. He got him by the throat and the poor guy was turning white and everybody had to go up, had to take him away from Benny. He was going to kill him.

MARY MCCHESENEY: What had he done that was so terrible?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Oh, well.

RUTH POLLAKOFF: He had taken the marble when he shouldn't have.

SARGENT JOHNSON: He had insulted Benny and Benny at that time was pretty wild. Pretty strong and wild. But this fella got him right by the neck, you know, and would have choked him to death.

MARY MCCHESENEY: You mean the other fella was choking Bufano?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yes.

MARY MCCHESENEY: I was going to say, Bufano was pretty small to be choking somebody.

SARGENT JOHNSON: Pretty strong, though. He didn't like to fight.

LEONARD POLLAKOFF: How about that thing at the high school, Sargent?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Which one?

LEONARD POLLAKOFF: That thing that you and I drove out to see one day.

SARGENT JOHNSON: Oh, the George Washington High School. Well, Bufano had a lot of work, you know. They seemed to give everything to Bufano and all the rest of the sculptors had nothing and so he had this one for the George Washington High School and so Phleuger, the architect, said that he was going to take it away from Bufano.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Was Timothy Phleuger the architect?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yeah, Timothy Phleuger. So I think it was Johnny Maganni who came over to me first and said, "You know, they are going to take that thing away from Benny and you ought to apply for it." I said, "No." So then I think it was Danysh who saw me and said, "Why don't you take it?" I accepted it and that's when Benny and I fell out, of course. Because I took his pride and glory. It was his big statue.

MARY MCCHESENEY: What was the problem? Why were they taking it away from him?

SARGENT JOHNSON: He had so many things going, he couldn't finish them all. It was like he wouldn't let any of us have a job - sculptors. We got all the work for him we wanted. But on our own, no.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Had he actually started with it?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Well, he made a drawing. A large drawing, but it was in the corner there, and so they decided to turn it over to me. Of course, I had a lot of trouble on that. I was called every name in the world. But the right one.

MARY MCCHESENEY: This is a wood panel that goes around the stadium?

SARGENT JOHNSON: No. It's cast stone.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Oh, it's cast stone.

SARGENT JOHNSON: It's 185 feet long and 12 feet high.

MARY MCCHESENEY: That's at—

SARGENT JOHNSON: George Washington High School at 33rd and Geary.

MARY MCCHESENEY: 33rd and Geary Street in San Francisco?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yeah.

MARY MCCHESENEY: What was the subject that you used in this?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Well, sports. High school athletics, sports; you know, racing, basketball, football, baseball, and so on.

MARY MCCHESENEY: This is still in place?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yeah, it's still up, I think.

LEONARD POLLAKOFF: Sargent and I went to see it.

SARGENT JOHNSON: When was that? Long time ago.

LEONARD POLLAKOFF: Ten years ago.

SARGENT JOHNSON: I saw it ten years ago, too. This thing goes way back.

LEONARD POLLAKOFF: They'd have to remove the whole yard to take that away. It's part of the wall.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Go ahead.

SARGENT JOHNSON: Go ahead.

MARY MCCHESENEY: I was going to ask, is it around the outside wall?

SARGENT JOHNSON: No, it's on the field out there. You can't see it from the street. You have to go about half a block and then look over into the field.

MARY MCCHESENEY: But it's not on the interior of the building? It's on the outside.

SARGENT JOHNSON: No, it's on the outside.

MARY MCCHESENEY: What were you going to say?

SARGENT JOHNSON: But, before that I – that was the last big job I had – I did the Aquatic Park. I did the slate on the outside and the tile work in the back.

MARY MCCHESENEY: According to my notes, you did that George Washington High School frieze in 1940 and you had done the redwood panels at the Blind School in '37, so the Aquatic Park came sometime in between.

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yeah. The Aquatic Park came in between and I was given the job of carving the slate on the outside, you know.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Did Hilaire Hiler pick you out to do that?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yes. He wanted me to work with it. Then I did the tile work in back, which is not finished.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Up by the stairs?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yeah. When you look at it from the outside, it is in the back, there, on the back. You know the one on the deck.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Oh yes, very large.

SARGENT JOHNSON: It's not finished yet.

LEONARD POLLAKOFF: Also on the entrance.

MARY MCCHESENEY: That's the slate carving.

SARGENT JOHNSON: That's the slate carving.

MARY MCCHESENEY: That's a very handsome thing. We saw it just recently.

SARGENT JOHNSON: They don't take care of it.

MARY MCCHESENEY: No. They don't take care of anything there.

SARGENT JOHNSON: Everything goes to pieces.

MARY MCCHESENEY: I talked to the man, Max – not Max, but Bill Kortum, who is the head of the museum, and really complained to him about it, because the murals are all peeling off from the wall. Water is coming down around the windows and they are all rotting away. It's ridiculous.

SARGENT JOHNSON: You see, that building had to go up quick. I think the appropriation had to use up that money in a certain length of time. Otherwise the government would take it back.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Oh, yeah.

SARGENT JOHNSON: If it falls to pieces—well, it's all right.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Considering that, it stood up pretty well, then. Almost thirty years, anyway. How did you do that carved slate panel? Was that done in your studio or there in place?

SARGENT JOHNSON: No, that was done on Mission and – what's the next one over, Howard – well, about 14th and Howard. There was a large studio out there and we worked on part of it there and part of it at Gardina's, Mr. Gardina's workshop.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Who was Mr. Gardina?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Well, he used to have a big monumental studio for monuments and he had the job of supplying the slate. So he would cut the pieces out and then we'd carve it.

MARY MCCHESENEY: What size pieces are they?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Well, they run about three by four, some of them.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Where did the slate come from?

SARGENT JOHNSON: I think it's a Vermont slate, comes from Vermont.

MARY MCCHESENEY: How thick is it?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Two inches.

MARY MCCHESENEY: What sort of tools do you use to work on that kind of material?

SARGENT JOHNSON: The same as you work on stone, any other stone.

MARY MCCHESENEY: It has a very nice finish, very soft.

SARGENT JOHNSON: It's nice, yeah.

MARY MCCHESENEY: What is the subject matter of that, Sargent?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Don't ask me.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Fish?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Well, it has something to do with the waterfront somewhere, boats—I really don't know. I just carved the thing.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Did you have any assistants on that project?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Oh yes. I had two other men with me.

MARY MCCHESENEY: How did you put it into place on the building?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Well, it's cut to a certain size and it fits, you know. It's like any other big job you put on a

building. You always have to have the size so that you can cut and finish the slate off before it goes on the building.

MARY MCCHESENEY: How does it actually attach to the wall?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Well, it's attached with wires and plaster of Paris. That's what you put up stone with, wires and plaster of Paris.

MARY MCCHESENEY: About how long did it take you to carve that? That's quite a big job. It must be, what, about twenty-five or thirty feet across? It goes up over the door and down the sides of the doorway.

SARGENT JOHNSON: I don't know how long we were working on it, because at the same time I was taking care of the tile work at this building down here across from LaRoca's on the corner there. We called it the Pickle Factory.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Oh, yes.

SARGENT JOHNSON: Do you remember the Pickle Factory?

MARY MCCHESENEY: Yes.

SARGENT JOHNSON: Well, I was doing the tile work upstairs and Hiler was downstairs painting.

MARY MCCHESENEY: What was the tile work for that you were doing at the Pickle Factory?

SARGENT JOHNSON: For that Aquatic Park.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Oh, I see.

SARGENT JOHNSON: In the back of the porch.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Were you actually making the tile?

SARGENT JOHNSON: No. We'd buy the tile and we had a Moroccan who was an expert cutter and I would have to - each little piece, I would mark it out and then he'd cut it and we'd grind it and put it in place.

MARY MCCHESENEY: That's done in very large pieces of tile, isn't it?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Four by four.

MARY MCCHESENEY: You mean four by four inches?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yes.

MARY MCCHESENEY: And that was put into place in the actual building?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yeah. Well, you get a man who can set it in place, you know.

LEONARD POLLAKOFF: Tile setter.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Did you have any assistants when you were doing the tile project?

SARGENT JOHNSON: No. Except the man who was doing the cutting. There were about four of us altogether. Each piece of tile had to be marked and put in place in trays and put away until the whole of a certain section was finished. Then you'd start from the bottom with each tray with this number and put it in place until the top. But, the man that was cutting, this Moroccan, he was first class. He could cut anything out of tile.

MARY MCCHESENEY: He was on the WPA too?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yeah. Sid Mohammed Diag that was his name.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Sid Mohammed?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Sid Mohammed Diag.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Oh. Whatever happened to him?

SARGENT JOHNSON: I think he's in New York. He's the one who wanted to take me back and get me five wives—and I told him I was married. I told him, "Come over to my house and see what I'm doing with this one. I can't handle five." [Laughter]

LEONARD POLLAKOFF: When did you make that head? That small head of the little boy? That's in the museum.

SARGENT JOHNSON: Oh, that was after the job at the Blind Home. That kid used to come to my studio.

MARY MCCHESENEY: This was still on the WPA?

SARGENT JOHNSON: No. This was my own.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Oh, this was on your own.

SARGENT JOHNSON: I had time, you know, to work. They gave me time to work.

LEONARD POLLAKOFF: Isn't that part of the permanent collection?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yeah, they have that in the permanent collection, Chester. And the other one in New York is Sam and was bought by—I can't think of the man's name. He was the German ambassador to Italy at the time, at that particular time.

MARY MCCHESENEY: I also have a note that you did something at Fort Ord? [near Monterey]

SARGENT JOHNSON: Oh, I made a large plaster thing, a little longer than this, of a hippopotamus. But it never went through into permanent material.

MARY MCCHESENEY: This was a relief or in the round?

SARGENT JOHNSON: No, it's in the round.

MARY MCCHESENEY: This was going to be placed at the Fort Ord Club for enlisted men, wasn't it?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yeah.

MARY MCCHESENEY: How did you get that commission?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Well, they spoke to me about it, on WPA and finally put it out. You know, you had many little things going, your hand in this one and this one. The idea was to keep men working. So, the more projects you had, the more men you could employ, the better off you were to stay on WPA.

MARY MCCHESENEY: I was wondering about the technique. Suppose they needed a piece of sculpture for a building. Who would approach you and what—where would you go?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Either Gaskin, Bill Gaskin – gosh, he was there. You know Bill Gaskin?

MARY MCCHESENEY: Yes, he's been interviewed.

SARGENT JOHNSON: Bill Gaskin and Allen, I think, at that time were the supervisors.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Joseph Allen?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yeah. Joseph Allen.

MARY MCCHESENEY: They would come to you themselves or you'd come to their office?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yeah, they would call you in and say, "Well, I have this thing to do. Would you like to do it?"

MARY MCCHESENEY: How much freedom did they give you? Did they give you a subject to work on or size limitations?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Well, they would name the subject, what the people would like in a particular place, and you'd go ahead and work on it.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Then you submitted drawings or designs?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yeah. You submitted a little something for them to look at, a technical aid.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Did you ever have any designs turned down?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Not one.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Not one?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yeah. I was good. I don't know if I was that good but I hadn't been turned down.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Well, you were pretty good, let's face it.

SARGENT JOHNSON: [Laughs] When I look back on it, I think they should have turned some down.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Well, your work stands up very well, I think.

SARGENT JOHNSON: They should have dumped it out in the ocean. [Laughs]

MARY MCCHESENEY: Why was it that this hippopotamus that you designed for the Fort Ord enlisted men's club was never put into the final material? Was it going to be cast in stone?

SARGENT JOHNSON: It was going to be cast in stone or even carved out of granite but I think we couldn't get appropriations at that time.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Was it going to be placed outside?

SARGENT JOHNSON: No, it was going to be placed inside.

RUTH POLLAKOFF: What happened to it?

SARGENT JOHNSON: I never have found out. It just—

RUTH POLLAKOFF: Disintegrated?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Well, I don't think they got the money. The government wouldn't pay for it or something like that. They cut jobs, you know, every now and then.

RUTH POLLAKOFF: No, I mean what happened to the plaster, the mold, the thing you made?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Oh. I don't know. I didn't go back out to see it.

RUTH POLLAKOFF: You abandoned the poor hippopotamus.

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yeah. That was the end of it as far as I was concerned.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Where did you do it? Was it done in San Francisco?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yes. It was done in a studio.

MARY MCCHESENEY: The studio out near Mission?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yeah.

MARY MCCHESENEY: I was going to ask you something more about this George Washington High School panel that you did. The big one, 12 feet by 185 feet. This was done finally in cast stone?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Cast stone, yes.

MARY MCCHESENEY: How did you work that? Did you do a clay model?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yeah. We did it in three sections. We built a - what's the word? Well, we built some place to put the clay up, anyhow, and then I put up four inches of clay and Portonova - he's dead now, an Italian sculptor of the old school - he helped me with it, cutting out the clay, you know. Then we had men to make the molds from it.

MARY MCCHESENEY: In plaster?

SARGENT JOHNSON: In plaster. After the molds were made, then we had men to put the aggregate and the cement together, you know. It's cast stone.

MARY MCCHESENEY: The sections must have been pretty large, then.

SARGENT JOHNSON: What's that?

MARY MCCHESENEY: You did it in three sections? So they'd be about sixty feet long?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yeah. That's an awful long building and we could only put up so much clay because during

the summer you had to keep wetting the clay down. It dries and falls off, you know. Every time you'd get started, part of it would come out of the – what do you call it?

MARY MCCHESENEY: I don't know what the word for that is. It's a form.

SARGENT JOHNSON: It's a form, anyhow. Which kept me—I was always the last man at night. I would go and take a hose and wet the whole thing down.

MARY MCCHESENEY: You did it there at the high school?

SARGENT JOHNSON: No, no. This was in the studio.

MARY MCCHESENEY: I see.

SARGENT JOHNSON: In Gardina's studio.

LEONARD POLLAKOFF: How did you put those sixty foot pieces into place?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Well, we'd divide it up in squares about, I think they were three by four.

RUTH POLLAKOFF: Like a jigsaw puzzle.

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yes. Just like a jigsaw puzzle.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Then they were cast from the three by four sections?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yes.

MARY MCCHESENEY: I see.

SARGENT JOHNSON: That was quite a project, all right. We had a lot of men working there.

MARY MCCHESENEY: There must have been. You don't remember how long that one took?

SARGENT JOHNSON: I think that was very nearly a year, from the time we started making the drawing and putting up the wall to hold it, getting in the clay and the aggregate, and all that had to go into it. Finding out which man would be the best man suited for each certain type of thing.

MARY MCCHESENEY: When you cast the stone, how thick was it?

SARGENT JOHNSON: That stone is four inches thick.

MARY MCCHESENEY: It must weigh quite a bit, even though it was only three by four.

SARGENT JOHNSON: Weight? Don't go into the weight.

MARY MCCHESENEY: That was the last project?

SARGENT JOHNSON: That was the end of the project.

MARY MCCHESENEY: You started that in 1940, so you must have been on till the very end.

SARGENT JOHNSON: I was on to the very end.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Did you do any other smaller jobs while you were on government projects?

SARGENT JOHNSON: This takes a lot of thinking to go back to the WPA—oh, I made some animals for the housing project, about three feet long – a camel, a hippopotamus, a duck and a few other things, about three or four of them.

MARY MCCHESENEY: What project was this? What housing project?

SARGENT JOHNSON: I just made the animals up so they could place them around at different housing projects. It is something on the order like Benny's things out there now, you know, big black granites. They wouldn't allow me granite. Only Benny could have granite, so I had to use terrazzo, cast stone. They have pretty much gone to pieces. Kids break them up.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Are any of them still around in San Francisco?

SARGENT JOHNSON: There may be one out by the Cow Palace. Last time I was out there they were all smashed. The kids had taken rocks and thrown rocks at them and beat them up.

MARY MCCHESENEY: You just made one copy of each one?

SARGENT JOHNSON: That's it, yeah.

MARY MCCHESENEY: That you'd make in clay and then make a plaster mold and cast it in stone.

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yeah.

MARY MCCHESENEY: And then polish the stone?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Polish the stone. Some in red, some in black.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Those were done in your studio?

SARGENT JOHNSON: In the main studio down there on 14th and Howard.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Was that where most of the sculptors on the project worked?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yeah, that's where most of them worked.

MARY MCCHESENEY: But Benny Bufano had a separate studio.

SARGENT JOHNSON: Oh yes, he had to have a separate one.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Who were some of the other sculptors?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Couldn't get him to work with just anyone. [Laughs] He had four or five places, Benny had, because he was the kingpin on there, the favorite.

LEONARD POLLAKOFF: How about Stackpole? How much work did you do with [Ralph] Stackpole?

SARGENT JOHNSON: On WPA?

LEONARD POLLAKOFF: Yes.

SARGENT JOHNSON: No, Stackpole wasn't on WPA.

LEONARD POLLAKOFF: Oh. Did you work with Stackpole?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Oh, I've worked with Stackpole, but not on WPA.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Did you do anything that was ever - through the government project that was on Treasure Island during the fair?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yes, did, but not for WPA.

MARY MCCHESENEY: They were done independently?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yeah, they were done for the—from Oakland over there, for Alameda Contra Costa Association. I made three large figures there about fourteen foot high. Industry and Family and so forth and so on, you know.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Where were they? Outside at the . . .

SARGENT JOHNSON: They were outside. Oh, the other one I did was the two--I had the South American front of the Pacifica, you know, the big fountain around there. Do you remember the fountain? Well, I did those two llamas. One was supposed to represent the rich man on the llama and the other one was the intellectual. [Inaudible] But I did two there.

MARY MCCHESENEY: They were on llamas?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yeah, right, because it was to represent South America. The llama is typical of South America. That's what they called it, South American.

MARY MCCHESENEY: But those were not done...

SARGENT JOHNSON: Not WPA, no.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Who were some of the other sculptors besides Bufano who were on the WPA?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Dave Slivka.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Dave Slivka, yes.

SARGENT JOHNSON: Oh, I can't remember.

MARY MCCHESENEY: But working with you in your studio, you don't remember any of those people?

SARGENT JOHNSON: No, I only had this Italian with me most of the time, Portonova.

MARY MCCHESENEY: What about Richard O'Hanlon? He was an assistant of Bufano's for a while.

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yeah, he worked with him for a while, yes.

MARY MCCHESENEY: But not on any projects with you?

LEONARD POLLAKOFF: Was Bob Shinn on the WPA?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yeah, he had a separate project.

LEONARD POLLAKOFF: Wasn't he a sculptor?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yeah, he was a sculptor.

LEONARD POLLAKOFF: I only remember one piece that he made. It was a woodcarving, reversible. It was redwood.

SARGENT JOHNSON: Clay Spohn did that big copper panel for some school over in Castro Valley.

MARY MCCHESENEY: That was done on the sculpture project?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yeah.

MARY MCCHESENEY: He seemed to have changed around from the sculptors' project to the painters' project.

SARGENT JOHNSON: Well, you know Clay.

MARY MCCHESENEY: [Laughter] With a great deal of ease.

SARGENT JOHNSON: He'd have corned beef and cabbage and then turn around and get ice cream or eat the ice cream before the corned beef and cabbage - and put in two donuts in between it. Funny as all -- oh, his eating habits!

MARY MCCHESENEY: When you were working on Aquatic Park, you must have been very well acquainted with some of the people who were on the project there. You mentioned Hilaire Hiler. Was he a good friend of yours?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Oh, yes. Hiler was a good friend of mine. Dick Ayer was on that project.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Ayer. That's A-Y-E-R.

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yes. He was there. Anne Medalie was there. She is in Israel now. She's not here.

MARY MCCHESENEY: She's in Israel now?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yes.

MARY MCCHESENEY: She also did some flower paintings.

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yeah, flower paintings. She worked for Hiler for quite a while, a lot of work for Hiler.

MARY MCCHESENEY: What sort of a person was Hiler to work with? Was he the supervisor of the Aquatic Park project?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yes, he was the supervisor of the whole building.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Did you get along well with him?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Oh yes. I got along.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Where is he now?

SARGENT JOHNSON: He is either in New York or in Germany, the last I heard.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Who were some of the other people on Aquatic Park. Were their other muralists working there? He was the main muralist, I guess, wasn't he?

SARGENT JOHNSON: He was the main muralist. Some of the other boys worked with him, you know, did the painting while he did the designing. And Anna Medalie was, I think, his assistant.

LEONARD POLLAKOFF: Was Wilma Clay ever on the WPA art project?

SARGENT JOHNSON: I can't think about it. It was too long ago.

MARY MCCHESENEY: You were on the projects, then, for a period about three or four years altogether.

SARGENT JOHNSON: That's how I got on, I had to be a supervisor.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Oh, you got to be a supervisor?

SARGENT JOHNSON: That's how I got on. I couldn't be anything but a supervisor.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Oh, you were a supervisor all the time?

SARGENT JOHNSON: All the time, because they wouldn't allow me on unless I could employ people.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Why was that?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Because you had to be able to employ—to be a supervisor—at least thirteen to fifteen people.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Well, this is a new ruling to me. How does this actually work?

SARGENT JOHNSON: You are a qualified artist and so they can give you a job but you have to employ people. That's how I got on.

MARY MCCHESENEY: You weren't, then, on relief at all? Were you ever on relief? On the relief rolls?

SARGENT JOHNSON: No, never on the relief rolls.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Did you actually have thirteen or fourteen people working for you?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Oh yeah. One time I had forty-five.

MARY MCCHESENEY: I see. On this big George Washington [School] Project.

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yeah. George Washington and the Aquatic Park and the whole thing. I had an awful lot of people on it.

MARY MCCHESENEY: What was the pay differential? How much more did you make as a supervisor?

SARGENT JOHNSON: My check came in around \$170, \$175, \$180, I think it was.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Compared to about \$95 or so that they made at top pay.

SARGENT JOHNSON: The others got \$95 or \$93, something like that.

MARY MCCHESENEY: What sort of responsibility did you have as a supervisor? Did you have to hire these people?

SARGENT JOHNSON: No. Most of these people were on the project and I don't know how they got over there. If I wanted somebody, I'd call up Allen and tell him I needed a man to do certain things. They'd find the man for me.

MARY MCCHESENEY: If you wanted a specific person by name, could you request them and get them?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yes. I had Big Dee, a fella named Big Dee and, oh god, I can't think of all those Italian

names now.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Did you have to give reports about the quality of the work of the people that you had working for you?

SARGENT JOHNSON: No, not about the quality of the work, but I had to give a report about whether they were working. If they were on the job.

MARY MCCHESENEY: What about their time reports? Did you fill those out?

SARGENT JOHNSON: No, I had a fella there named Wilson who took care of that for me, did all the reports, and kept charge of all the tools. We had an awful lot of tools on that project.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Who were some of the other supervisors?

SARGENT JOHNSON: This fella Fritz was a supervisor. Hiler was a supervisor. I think Clay Spohn was. Of course Bufano. There were a couple of others.

RUTH POLLAKOFF: Your voice changes every time you mention him.

SARGENT JOHNSON: That devil! More trouble over him then.

MARY MCCHESENEY: What was the trouble with Bufano? Everybody that worked with him seems to have had difficulty.

SARGENT JOHNSON: He was just a difficult man to work with.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Because of his personality?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yeah. I worked for him for years throughout the project, you know, and I worked in the studio—a lot of us worked in the studio. He was real nice at that time but as soon as he got where he could boss, he changed. Otherwise, he was a nice fellow to work for.

MARY MCCHESENEY: What sort of problems did you have? Was it about design or just about...?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Design, and well, you know, when I was working with him, I should have had my own project but Allen sent me over there to help him out. Benny wanted me, so I had to go. So, I kept telling Benny, I said, "Gee whiz, I want to get something of my own, you know." But I wasn't able to do it until later on.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Hilaire Hiler was the first to help you. You said he was the one who got you—

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yeah, he got me on the project, you see. But after that I had to go to work with Benny.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Oh, after you'd done the Aquatic Park.

SARGENT JOHNSON: That's before I got on the George Washington High School.

MARY MCCHESENEY: You couldn't have been a supervisor when you were working for Bufano, were you?

SARGENT JOHNSON: No.

MARY MCCHESENEY: But you still weren't on relief?

SARGENT JOHNSON: No.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Did you ever have any social workers come to see you?

SARGENT JOHNSON: I only stayed a short time with Benny.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Oh, you did?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yeah, we couldn't get along.

MARY MCCHESENEY: It was a matter of months then?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yeah.

MARY MCCHESENEY: I haven't talked with him.

RUTH POLLAKOFF: You never tried to choke him.

SARGENT JOHNSON: [Laughs] No, I didn't want to choke poor old Buf.

MARY MCCHESENEY: He was very put out when you got the George Washington High School job.

SARGENT JOHNSON: Oh, yes. That's what [inaudible]. He didn't want to talk to me. All sorts of things. Oh, I wish I had the thing I sent it to my daughter, the newspaper clipping of what he said about me.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Oh, he said these things about you to the press?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Oh, yes. Finally Washington said, "Let Johnson do the job."

MARY MCCHESENEY: I heard a rumor that he was fired off that job because his drawings had not been approved. He had done drawings and that they were not approved for some reason.

SARGENT JOHNSON: Well, they may have done that because they were pretty Greeky at the time. The drawings were pretty Greeky. Which he was capable of doing.

LEONARD POLLAKOFF: How about Barr?

SARGENT JOHNSON: What?

LEONARD POLLAKOFF: Barr. The guy who does these Greeky things in all these movie houses. Was he on the project?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Oh. I don't know. Maybe a long time ago. He's with the Argonaut [phonetic sp.], you know.

LEONARD POLLAKOFF: What was his name? Wasn't it Barr?

RUTH POLLAKOFF: John Barr.

LEONARD POLLAKOFF: John Barr.

MARY MCCHESENEY: John Garth

RUTH POLLAKOFF: John Garth!

SARGENT JOHNSON: Garth was a painter, though, not a sculptor. Not John Garth, John Garth's a painter. He had fashionable place in the hills. A big hotel where he did society portraits.

MARY MCCHESENEY: He was on the project, though.

SARGENT JOHNSON: He was on the project.

MARY MCCHESENEY: I think so.

SARGENT JOHNSON: A short time.

MARY MCCHESENEY: But on the painting project?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yeah. Not on sculpture.

MARY MCCHESENEY: He did a mural at the Herbert Hoover Junior High School. In San Jose. Did you know many of the painters on the project? Was there much contact between the sculptors and the painters?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yeah. We all talked together.

MARY MCCHESENEY: You all knew each other pretty well?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yes. Was that Coit Tower on WPA?

MARY MCCHESENEY: PWA.

SARGENT JOHNSON: PWA, that's right. That was before.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Did you have any contact with them?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Well, I knew all kinds of painters up there, Howard, Stackpole, Hamlin—

LEONARD POLLAKOFF: Edith Hamlin is in Utah.

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yeah.

LEONARD POLLAKOFF: Bernard Zakheim.

SARGENT JOHNSON: And Ruth Cravath and, oh, a bunch of them.

MARY MCCHESENEY: That was quite a time before you got on the government project, in '33 and '34, and you didn't go on until 1937.

SARGENT JOHNSON: Around then.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Around that time, yeah. There wasn't much sculpture being done before then.

SARGENT JOHNSON: Wasn't there?

MARY MCCHESENEY: There wasn't any. Aside from Bufano, who were considered the outstanding sculptors during that period in this area? How about Puccinelli? Was he ever on the project? Wasn't there a Raymond Puccinelli?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yeah, but I don't think he was on. I'm not sure now, but I don't think Raymond was on there. Yeah, he was a sculptor.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Oh. Of the period, aside from yourself and Bufano, there weren't very many sculptors around.

SARGENT JOHNSON: There weren't many doing work at that time.

MARY MCCHESENEY: There weren't many doing work?

SARGENT JOHNSON: No.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Did you ever know a man named Roy Zolan who did a carving on the stairway at the Beach Chalet?

SARGENT JOHNSON: No, who is this fella? Another man worked out there with him. Another [inaudible]

MARY MCCHESENEY: Another sculptor?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yes. I can't remember his name. He was out there too.

MARY MCCHESENEY: You didn't do anything, though, for the Beach Chalet project?

SARGENT JOHNSON: No. I used to go out to watch them paint.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Did you do anything at the zoo?

SARGENT JOHNSON: No. I was given a job at the zoo but it never materialized.

MARY MCCHESENEY: What was that plan?

SARGENT JOHNSON: It was a whole series of animals on one of the squares, on each side, so when you went through, you could see all these carved animals like we had in the zoo. We couldn't get the money.

MARY MCCHESENEY: All you needed was money for it? A lot of that was done by WPA. Weren't a lot of those grottos built?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Oh, yeah, there was a lot of that was done out there.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Did any artists ever work out there or was it just laborers?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Except in the lion house. Who worked in there? [inaudible] worked in there. Somebody worked in there.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Was there a mural there or what?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yeah, I think there is a mural in there.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Of course, there is that women's lounge.

SARGENT JOHNSON: That was done by Dorothy Puccinelli and—

LEONARD POLLAKOFF: Edith Hamlin.

SARGENT JOHNSON: Edith Hamlin worked there with Dorothy Puccinelli. Oh, it was someone—I can't think of the name.

LEONARD POLLAKOFF: Andre Rexroth worked on the project out there.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Yes.

LEONARD POLLAKOFF: She submitted designs for Aquatic Park. I've got some at home. They took her off because she couldn't work on a ladder. I think Allen was her boss and he allowed her to work at home. She had epileptic seizures.

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yeah, that's right. I remember that.

LEONARD POLLAKOFF: That's why they wouldn't let her climb on the ladders.

SARGENT JOHNSON: Well, you didn't have to do much ladder work there.

LEONARD POLLAKOFF: Well, on the mural work.

SARGENT JOHNSON: I never climbed much of a ladder when I was—

MARY MCCHESENEY: At Aquatic Park, you mean?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yeah. I let the rest climb the ladders.

MARY MCCHESENEY: You didn't actually put the thing in place then? Well, you had so many assistants that you could let them go up.

SARGENT JOHNSON: Well—

RUTH POLLAKOFF: Yeah, you stood there and directed.

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yes, I was the director.

MARY MCCHESENEY: [Laughter] Were there any other large jobs done by sculptors around in San Francisco during that period? Or any jobs at all?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Not any large jobs.

LEONARD POLLAKOFF: What about Bob Howard? Was he ever involved with the art project?

SARGENT JOHNSON: He was over in Alameda at the Officers Club over there, I think it was.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Oh.

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yeah, Bob was over in Alameda working.

LEONARD POLLAKOFF: Did he do that P.G.V.E. thing?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Oh, yes. He did that.

MARY MCCHESENEY: But, that wasn't on the project?

SARGENT JOHNSON: That wasn't on the project, no.

RUTH POLLAKOFF: And Harold wasn't on the project, either, I imagine.

SARGENT JOHNSON: No, no. [inaudible]

MARY MCCHESENEY: Did you do any mosaics besides the tile work at Aquatic Park when you were on the project?

SARGENT JOHNSON: No, no mosaics.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Were there any people around the area doing mosaics then?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yeah. There was quite a few over in Oakland, quite a few over there.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Marion Simpson did that large one in Oakland.

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yeah.

MARY MCCHESENEY: A marvelous mosaic.

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yeah. Then the one at the University. Johnny Fredricks had a group of them up in some park over across the Bay.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Did you ever hear of any sculptures that were on the government art projects that were for any of the outlying areas of California? Did you ever design for other towns?

SARGENT JOHNSON: I had all I could do.

MARY MCCHESENEY: You had all you could do.

SARGENT JOHNSON: All I could do.

MARY MCCHESENEY: What do you think the influence of the government sponsorship of art during that period was on your own career as an artist?

SARGENT JOHNSON: What?

MARY MCCHESENEY: What kind of an influence do you think the government sponsorship of you as a sculptor had on your career?

SARGENT JOHNSON: It's the best thing that ever happened to me because it gave me more of an incentive to keep on working, where at the time things looked pretty dreary and I thought about getting out of it because, you know, I come from a family of people who thought all artists were drunkards and everything else. I thought I'd given it up at one time but I think the WPA helped me to stay.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Had you done much work before the WPA project?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yes. Small sculptures. I sold them in New York.

MARY MCCHESENEY: So it was also your first chance to work really large.

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yeah, first chance for anything large.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Have you done any large sculptures or large commissions since then?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Well, I worked for the Matson liners a couple of times doing wood carving and two tile jobs there. And then I worked on that thing over at Harold's Club [Reno, Nevada]. Which I'm not the designer of, please know.

LEONARD POLLAKOFF: [Laughter]

MARY MCCHESENEY: That's Harold's Club in Reno?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yeah, you know, the pancakes and the Indians fighting up there in the woods. Well, I was employed as a consultant on color and enamel and iron, see, and I would mix up the colors and fire them until they got to a place where they wouldn't fade in the fire. Then I'd turn the [inaudible] paint over to the men and they painted from then on.

MARY MCCHESENEY: You did an enamel mural in San Francisco.

SARGENT JOHNSON: The one over Dohrmanns [a crockery and glass shop] down at the Union Square.

LEONARD POLLAKOFF: Union Square.

SARGENT JOHNSON: Union Square.

MARY MCCHESENEY: In San Francisco?

RUTH POLLAKOFF: At Dohrmanns?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yeah. Then I had one in the supervisor's room in Richmond.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Was that enamel and...?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Enamel and iron.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Did you have any contact during the WPA project period with any of the potters who were on the project? There was a pottery project.

SARGENT JOHNSON: Johnny Magnanni was the big man.

MARY MCCHESENEY: He was the head of the pottery project?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Pottery and the weaving went together with it too, you know.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Where were they located in San Francisco?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Out on Howard Street at the - I can't think of the name of the building. He was on the project out there, a project place.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Was that near the workshop you had on Mission?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yeah, about a couple of blocks away, two or three blocks away. Johnny Magnanni had that.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Did you ever do any pottery when you were on the project?

SARGENT JOHNSON: The only pottery I worked on was in the studio.

MARY MCCHESENEY: That was later?

SARGENT JOHNSON: That was my own work.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Oh. What do you think of the work that was done on the WPA? How do you think it stands up after, what is it, thirty years?

SARGENT JOHNSON: You'd mention that. [Laughs]

SARGENT JOHNSON: I think it's a pretty wonderful job for the time, considering we had to get these things out quick. We couldn't putt around for long. They gave you a design and you had to have the whole thing up in so many days, you know, or months.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Was there quite a bit of pressure at times? Was that a problem?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Well, pressure - no, you didn't get too much pressure from the project but you had a date that it should be there.

MARY MCCHESENEY: And the deadlines were pretty tight?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yes, on account of the money. I think they took the money back. If you hadn't spent the money in a certain length of time, the government took the money back.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Oh, I see.

SARGENT JOHNSON: A case of keeping the money, so you had to rush.

LEONARD POLLAKOFF: In other words, you had to spend that money within that fiscal period?

SARGENT JOHNSON: That's what you had to do. But if you couldn't get the people to do it, well...

LEONARD POLLAKOFF: Even if you started a project and had not completed it, would the money be taken back?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yeah. You had to be sure that you got it finished on time. That's why you could get all the men you wanted to work for you.

MARY MCCHESENEY: That's how you could get all the men?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yeah.

MARY MCCHESENEY: How were the relationships between you as a supervisor and people who were over you on

the project? Did things work pretty smoothly with that?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Oh yes, excellent.

MARY MCCHESENEY: You didn't have any trouble.

SARGENT JOHNSON: Never.

MARY MCCHESENEY: You never had any trouble with the people who were working for you?

SARGENT JOHNSON: No. Except my little friend.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Oh, except Bufano, yeah.

LEONARD POLLAKOFF: He was not working for you.

SARGENT JOHNSON: No. My friends were the worst enemies I had. You remember when he burnt down his apartment? His building? He had a little studio up there on Sacramento in that apartment building, what's its name? And he had a big studio. We all worked like that. It's a wonder we weren't all burnt up because at that time we didn't know much. We were using gasoline and rags and throwing them all over the floor. The place was made out of paper. It caught fire once and burned down. The firemen went up there and they were all helping Benny to help get what they could save out of there. The fireman came along and said to Benny, "Do you have any enemies?" He says, "Enemies? All I've ever had was enemies." He was quite a character. I could have killed him myself. Yeah, always somebody.

MARY MCCHESENEY: [Laughter] Sargent, maybe you could just give some general comments about the government sponsoring of art during that period. You were saying it was a lot of fun.

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yeah, I had a lot of fun on that. And I learned an awful lot from it. As far as that goes, I was glad to have the privilege of being on there. I think most people too, you know, like Dong Kingman, who is very successful now that [inaudible]. Clay Spohn too.

MARY MCCHESENEY: What would you think of the idea of the government in America beginning sponsorship of the arts again?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Well, I'd be all for it. I think it is one of the greatest things out. They should sponsor the arts. At the time, they were going to sponsor it, the government, not as the WPA but I think something like [inaudible]. They would be given jobs and paid for it. At that time, we had the Southern group that went up and were lobbying and they brought up girls - this has happened - and had them dancing the hula-hula and all that, and they said, "How would you like to see your daughter in some artist's studio dancing around?" So, they threw the whole thing out. They couldn't get it at that time.

MARY MCCHESENEY: When was this?

SARGENT JOHNSON: It was when the government was going to sponsor the artist. Those who were qualified, this would give them work to do, you know, on buildings, you see. They were paid so much money and they would have time to do other work. But a lobby from the South went up before the main man up there - I don't know if it was a senator or what he was - went up there and they decided that they would stop that. They brought a couple of girls up—you must have read this in the paper.

MARY MCCHESENEY: This was after the WPA was all over with, wasn't it? When was this?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yeah, that's right. It was after that.

MARY MCCHESENEY: I vaguely remember but I can't place it right now.

SARGENT JOHNSON: They brought these girls in doing the hula dance and said, "How would you like your daughter up there dancing on a stool?" It would have been nice for the artists!

MARY MCCHESENEY: [Laughter] I don't think there were too many hula dancers around, were there?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Well, it could stop them. I don't know what to say about...

MARY MCCHESENEY: At some of those Artists Union balls they had better than hula dancers.

SARGENT JOHNSON: Oh, those things are great, weren't they?

MARY MCCHESENEY: Did you belong to the Artists Union?

SARGENT JOHNSON: I don't know. I don't know about that.

MARY MCCHESENEY: That was quite active during the WPA period, wasn't it? It was quite an organization.

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yeah.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Did you ever participate in any of the strikes or demonstrations they had against the government?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Oh, I walked around a couple of times, yes.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Do you remember what they were all about? Most people I've interviewed remember being on picket lines or around demonstrations but can't remember what it was about.

SARGENT JOHNSON: I was on a picket line but I can't remember. You're talking to a man who can't remember.

MARY MCCHESENEY: You don't remember what the issue was?

SARGENT JOHNSON: No, I can't think of that now. It's gone.

MARY MCCHESENEY: I got the impression, interviewing people, that there was a feeling during this time that the funds might be cut off at almost any time.

SARGENT JOHNSON: Well, we were all frightened of that, that thing.

MARY MCCHESENEY: There was a lot of uncertainty, then?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yeah.

MARY MCCHESENEY: That there might be cutbacks in personnel or funds might be cut off.

SARGENT JOHNSON: Well, you were always contending with that sort of thing because, as I said, when they put up the money for certain projects, if you hadn't finished it or whatever it was, complying with the laws of the government, why they would take the money back. So you were always worried about it.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Do you think if a new project were set up that some of these difficulties could be ironed out? And how would you think would be the best way to go about it?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Gee, I don't know, I don't know what to say. The best way about it?

MARY MCCHESENEY: Well, when you worked on large commissioned projects, you didn't mention having any difficulty with design approval or any of that.

SARGENT JOHNSON: Oh no, I had no trouble there at all.

MARY MCCHESENEY: You didn't feel confined?

SARGENT JOHNSON: No, no, I was never confined. "Go ahead and do what you want."

LEONARD POLLAKOFF: It was always subject to approval of some board.

SARGENT JOHNSON: Well, they were able to override that thing somehow. I don't know how they'd do it. I know there were a couple of difficult times. One person wouldn't have the design and they'd talk about it and finally it was approved.

MARY MCCHESENEY: The schools and places where the design was going to be placed, they also had to give approval.

SARGENT JOHNSON: Oh yes, that's true. Victor Arnautoff, you know, worked on the George Washington High School.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Oh, did he work with you too?

SARGENT JOHNSON: He's got some murals out there.

MARY MCCHESENEY: I didn't know that.

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yeah, Victor Arnautoff and Howard worked out there. Howard has a couple of plaques up

there.

MARY MCCHESENEY: You mean Bob Howard?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Bob.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Then you think the way the project was run in those days was pretty successful?

SARGENT JOHNSON: I think it was very successful.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Do you think most of the best talent that was around in the area was being used by the government?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Oh, I think so, yes. They had about the best talent around at that time. I mean, for those who could get on the project. I mean, some of them couldn't get on, I guess. They had more money than you are allowed to have.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Well, as a supervisor, there were no restrictions on you.

SARGENT JOHNSON: Not as supervisor, no.

MARY MCCHESENEY: That gave a way for the project to employ artists like yourself.

SARGENT JOHNSON: We could employ other artists too, people who were studying, who wanted to get a chance at doing something in that field. That was a help by appointing supervisors to employ so many men.

MARY MCCHESENEY: And those supervisors were non-relief people. Do you think that the directing personnel in this area were competent and that they were as good as could be had at the time?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Oh, I think as good as could be had at the time. I think they were all incompetent. [Laughs]

MARY MCCHESENEY: They worked pretty hard, though, getting things lined up for the artist to do.

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yeah, it was a big problem. They had a big problem. Some of the artists, fighting for his little section, you know, or his little job.

MARY MCCHESENEY: During the time you were on the government project, did you feel that there was any public censorship? Did you feel that the WPA was being put down by the public as

SARGENT JOHNSON: Well, the Labor Department, but I don't remember the Art Department being criticized.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: There was plenty of put-down as far as the Art Department, too.

SARGENT JOHNSON: Well, I was just too busy to worry about that. All I ever heard about was the Labor Department.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Just down on the shovels.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Well, of course, I think the man on the shovel represented the WPA on the whole. Just because he was the low man of the totem pole, they used him as a cartoon.

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yeah, that's right.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: As a caricature of the whole thing. They couldn't use the artist as the caricature.

LEONARD POLLAKOFF: How about materials? Did you have a choice of materials?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Oh yes. You always got materials. In fact, I always got them but a lot of artists complained that—of course, Bufano would get the best of everything.

LEONARD POLLAKOFF: If you wanted a redwood log, could you get it?

SARGENT JOHNSON: They would get it for you, some of the other materials, plaster.

RUTH POLLAKOFF: But not granite.

SARGENT JOHNSON: No. We couldn't get to carve granite.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: I don't think that, in general, the artist could have any material, he wanted to work with.

Say, for instance, on the easel project or if you were an individual sculptor working at home, could you get any material then?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Yeah, they could get materials then.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Could they?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Oh yes, they could get it. It was only for a certain length of time when they first started up that "our friend" Bufano controlled it all.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: He had it all then.

SARGENT JOHNSON: [Laughs] I've said enough today.

MARY MCCHESENEY: There weren't many sculptors working in their studios though. They were working on big commissions, weren't they?

SARGENT JOHNSON: Oh, I think there were some. Some of the others may have wanted to do things but couldn't get the material.

MARY MCCHESENEY: I see.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Very few sculptors were working like the easel painters.

SARGENT JOHNSON: Very few sculptors, yes. You better put it off. We're talking too much, you know.

END OF INTERVIEW

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