



Smithsonian
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Oral history interview with Thomas Wardell,
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Thomas Wardell on March 30, 1965. The interview took place in Phoenix, Arizona, and was conducted by Sylvia Loomis for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

SYLVIA LOOMIS: This is an interview with Mr. Thomas Wardell, 1602 W. Whitton Street, Phoenix, Arizona on March 30, 1965. The interviewer is Mrs. Sylvia Loomis, of the Santa Fe office of the Archives of American Art, and the subject to be discussed is Mr. Wardell's work as Director of the Federal Art Project in Arizona during the late 1930's and 40's. But before we discuss that, Mr. Wardell, would you tell us something about yourself, where you were born and where you received your art education?

THOMAS WARDELL: I was born in Denver, Colorado, and was raised as a child up through high school in northern New Mexico near Taos. And then went to Carnegie Tech and took all my formal education in art at Carnegie Tech in Pittsburgh.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Did you have any special teachers there that influenced you?

THOMAS WARDELL: I wasn't easily influenced, I resented -- one of my instructors, Costello, always claimed that that was my trouble -- that I wouldn't follow him and be another Costello.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I think that was very good.

THOMAS WARDELL: Mr. Hyde and Rosenthal were probably the outstanding teachers at Carnegie at the time. I was influenced a great deal in changing my curriculum from staying completely in fine arts into the industrial field by Fred Clater who was a silversmith and designer/instructor at Carnegie, and later followed more into the crafts. I always painted, but I followed later into silversmithing and later mosaics.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see. What were you doing before you became involved in the project?

THOMAS WARDELL: Well, I had just moved to Arizona. Having lived in the West and gone East, I wasn't too happy in the area, but immediately after graduation from Carnegie Tech I went to Wheeling, West Virginia, to teach art there, taught at Wheeling. Wheeling of course is a great center of the pottery industry along the Ohio and we concentrated a great deal because we were training students who could go right from high school -- of course this is during the depression -- into the various pottery factories along the Ohio River. And then I coached there but I just wasn't too happy in the East and headed West not knowing just where I was going to end up, and came to Phoenix.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: When was that - that you came here?

THOMAS WARDELL: August 1939.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And how soon after that did you get on the project?

THOMAS WARDELL: Well, I no more than arrived when my father died and I immediately had to go back to Pittsburgh. I got back here just at Christmas of 1939, and I was interviewed shortly after the first of the year as Director of the project, and took the job approximately in mid-January of 1940.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Who interviewed you for it, do you remember?

THOMAS WARDELL: Dr. Jamieson - or I'm sorry, W.J. Jamieson, was Director of the state project; Ray Vine was administrative assistant; Agnes Park, and Ross Santee, who was head of the Writers Project. I was interviewed by those. There were a great number of applicants but I was selected as director. There had been a gap from the time Phil Curtis left -- a few months gap in there -- before I was hired.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes, that's what I understood. You said before that there was a period when Ross Santee was --

THOMAS WARDELL: Yes, Ross Santee was head of the Writers Project, sort of handled the ...

SYLVIA LOOMIS: The administrative end...?

THOMAS WARDELL: Yes, he was sort of administrator, well, I mean he could have handled it, could have done

quite a good job, because you know Ross is an artist, not only a writer but an artist.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: How many employees were there on the project at the time you took over, would you say?

THOMAS WARDELL: The project would vary, as you know, in those days. It would vary from oh, a low of 45 up to as high as 80. It was a little broad in this respect. We were doing a great deal of work out at the University of Tempe, we had quite a few very fine cabinet men assigned to the project who may have been assigned to other WPA projects, but we needed their help to do the cabinet work and the many, many things we were doing for the University.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see. So it varied.

THOMAS WARDELL: It varied. The project always fluctuated because we ran a school along with it -- we had a staff completely of our school.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: What was that? I didn't know you had a school.

THOMAS WARDELL: Well, it was sponsored by -- well, it was a group of people headed by Walter Vinson you may know is probably one of the foremost people in Arizona interested in art and who you might say helped the artists of Arizona develop. And we had morning, afternoon and evening classes, and then we were on two circuits in our gallery where we were showing a great number of WPA shows, shows of photography, local artists, so that we always had a show with our gallery.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Where was the gallery?

THOMAS WARDELL: Just off the corner of 7th Street and Monroe.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: It didn't continue as an Art Center?

THOMAS WARDELL: Not as such. We continued it in a barn where the present complete cultural complex is located now in Phoenix -- the Library, the Little Theatre, and the Fine Arts Museum. There was a barn there on the corner and we went out from there and carried it on and of course then the war came on, and we had started a bond drive -- not a bond drive -- but a drive for funds for what eventually ended up as the Phoenix Art Center, which is a fantastic thing today.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Is that right?

THOMAS WARDELL: Then of course the war came on and we were all gone.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: But that did actually stem from that project?

THOMAS WARDELL: Yes, that stemmed, and the driving force behind that of course was Walter Vinson along with his committee. He has been a great believer in art because he has fantastic collections of his own, all the banks - the Valley National Banks - have a great deal of his work on display, in some instances they're almost art galleries in Valley National Bank because of his great interest in art.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Does he have a private collection that is open to the public?

THOMAS WARDELL: Well, he displays his work not as a collection per se but, as I say, he let's his own personal paintings, and he has a great deal of sculpture and wood carving by Philip Sanderson, who was on the project. He has work of Lew Davis's, he has some of my work. He bought a great deal from the people who were on the project during that period, bought a great deal of their work plus he has a fantastic collection of Remingtons, and in general, Western paintings. And, as I say, almost any branch of his is like an art gallery to go in because of the great amount of personal collection that he has made.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see. Now what about these art classes that you had? How many did you have? How many teachers? And what sort of classes?

THOMAS WARDELL: Well, let me see, I'll tell you the areas we covered, we covered: painting, drawing -- probably two or three classes of drawing at various stages, beginning, advanced -- beginning painting up through still life, life painting; then we had sculpture. We covered the crafts, also sculpture, classes in ceramics, metalsmithing, silver classes. Then on Saturdays we had a very full schedule of children's classes and these children were selected by the art teachers of various elementary and high schools for Saturday classes through the project. We had a staff - of course that was principally our headquarters, so we had the usual secretarial help that we needed for general project work - and we varied I'd say from 6 to 8 instructors at all times. I taught, Chris Baumgartner, Philip Sanderson, Christy Ray, Tenney, Radtke, strange how the names come back.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, it's remarkable that you remember these people.

THOMAS WARDELL: As I said, we'd shut down for about 6 weeks during late July and August; other than that we were on, as I say, two WPA art project circuits, plus shows that we built up of local artists, or craft displays.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: How far did these circuits go into the state?

THOMAS WARDELL: Well, not a great deal. We had a hard time getting sponsoring groups outside because, remember, Arizona was not the cultural center that it is today -- we're speaking now of 25 years ago. Strand Studios in Tucson - Major Strand circulated exhibits; Dr. Colton at the Museum of Northern Arizona took some exhibits, they didn't operate full time.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: That's at Flagstaff?

THOMAS WARDELL: Just outside of Flagstaff. And Prescott on occasions. Our own circuit was rather limited, because Phoenix 25 years ago was - it was the end of the depression, it wasn't cultural, it wasn't interested in any of the arts at that time, it was sort of an uphill fight in those days.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I should imagine so. What was the population at that time, do you know?

THOMAS WARDELL: I believe the 1940 census shows Phoenix as approximately 55,000 maybe 60,000 people.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: The taxi driver told me it was 700,000 now.

THOMAS WARDELL: It's over 700,000 people now.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Incredible, isn't it?

THOMAS WARDELL: Yes. And of course along with the growth fortunately, I mean, culture has come a long ways. There are many, many fine artists and craftsmen in the Valley now as compared to those days.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: What were some of the other projects - besides this art teaching?

THOMAS WARDELL: Well, one that was of a great deal of interest was the project at Pueblo Grande, which was being excavated in a joint project with the City of Phoenix by Odd Halseth, using WPA laborers and help to do the actual excavating, and we had a staff out there recording by silk screen from shards that had been pieced together, both the shape and the designs used by the Hohokarns. Well, as I told you a while ago, at that time we were thinking the culture went back from 600 to 1100 years in the past, but more recent excavations here in the state have even dated back farther than that. Now they know that culture here in the valley went back to about the days of Christ.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: How many of those plates did you do?

THOMAS WARDELL: We did a series of 52 plates by silk screen in which we tried to record as closely as possible the color - just remember this all had been buried under a very, very dry, warm bed, in other words the preservation was good and we were reasonably sure that the colors we recorded were pretty close to the actual color of the clays at the time. We did a portfolio - we had 52 plates and we did 75 portfolios - that we sent to museums, archaeological schools throughout the United States, as far back as, well, I remember Yale and Princeton. It's the series I showed you.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes. This one here.

THOMAS WARDELL: Unfortunately in those days the materials we used were not good. If the project had had money I think we could have used a little better paper -- see, it's quite crisp and fragile.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: How many were involved in this project, did you say?

THOMAS WARDELL: Well, there were two men out there at all times. Chris Baumgartner and John Kelly, and then when work was piling up then I'd send George Elman out, who was a very, very fine craftsman with cutting experience, to help them. But usually, besides Kelly and Chris we'd send one or two other people to help them do the screen.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Did they do the cutting of the screens right out there on the site?

THOMAS WARDELL: Yes, we did it right on the site.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, what other forms did the work on the project take?

THOMAS WARDELL: Well, we had several sections, for instance, there were several elementary schools where we did murals in cafeterias we did some mosaic, just some small projects, mosaics, for instance a panel depicting the early excavation or digging of the canals by Jack Swilling here in the valley for a fountain at City Hall, which of course has been torn down, destroyed since. One of the largest projects we had on hand at the time was work over at Arizona State College at Tempe - at that time it was a college, now it has university status - there's a completely new building over there called the Women's Activity Building, that we took over, did the mural work - I'll give you the photographs of that. Then we had several men - from 4 or 5 up to possibly 8 or 9 - very, very fine cabinet men, to do the furniture. We built all the furniture for this complete building, all the rooms. Incidentally all that was designed by Phil Sanderson on the project. Then at the old Phoenix Indian School under the direction of Jean Edmund - who I hope you get a chance to talk to - handled the weaving project. That would vary from, oh, six to eight up to possibly fifteen weavers; they carded and spun both cotton and wool, and then wove all the draperies and upholstery materials that we used in furnishing the Women's Activity Building.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Were there any Indians on this project?

THOMAS WARDELL: We never had an Indian on the project all the time I was there.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I know you were not supposed to have, because they were wards of the government, so they weren't eligible for WPA.

THOMAS WARDELL: No, there weren't any. The closest we came, we did have a lot of technical advice by a young man at that time who was going by his white name of Lloyd New, who was teaching at the Phoenix Indian School. Later Lloyd took his Indian name of Lloyd Kiva. And he has, of course, done a great deal of wonderful things in designing clothes, leather, in general in the crafts, in Scottsdale.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: He's now, I think, art director for the institute of American Indian Art in Santa Fe.

THOMAS WARDELL: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Now he's using his white name.

THOMAS WARDELL: Is he back to New again?

SYLVIA LOOMIS: That's right.

THOMAS WARDELL: I've always needled him about that - but he was a great deal of help. How we happened to be out in the school is they had facilities, large rooms they weren't using, and Lloyd was a great deal of help out there as a consultant, not as a worker on the project.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, I suppose you had easel projects too, didn't you?

THOMAS WARDELL: Yes, we had - there again that would vary. We had people working on easel all over the state - Wittenberg, Tucson, Prescott, Flag, several in Phoenix - John Leiper, on the West Coast, has since made quite a name for himself - Stephen Vestee, Burdell Tenney, who has done quite well as a painter on the Coast. And let me see, there was a man by the name of Upton in Wittenberg. I'm just trying to recall who was on the project down at Tucson at the time. I drew a blank there.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, Mark Voris was.

THOMAS WARDELL: Mark! Mark was on the project. I guess Mark was on and off the project. I guess you have found that a great many of the artists were on and off depending on what success they had. Now Phil Sanderson, for instance, was on and off. Phil did several maritime commissions - do you recall back in those days they were designing those larger ships, they commissioned, I can't remember - Phil could tell you in a little more detail - but he had two that I know of, large commissions in completely designing art, wood carving and so forth for the Maritime Commission.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: What sort of work would that be?

THOMAS WARDELL: Well, Phil is a sculptor but his primary and great love is wood carving and he would do -- there would be large, oh, I want to use the word scone wall decorations, doors, woodcarving principally that was used, and it was, I'm sure, through the Maritime Commission.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I wonder if that was through the Treasury Department?

THOMAS WARDELL: Yes, it was part of that...

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Because I know those projects went on all during this period.

THOMAS WARDELL: Interlocking. I mean that's why Phil would be off for months doing one of these, and then he'd be back on the project. There were a great many that were on and off the project.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: There were competitions a good many times.

THOMAS WARDELL: Yes, there were always competitions. They'd submit sketches and of course once you would break through they seemed to keep on. Phil was working around and, of course, got the jump on the others.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Now in the sculpture section, did Mr. Radtke - you said his name was - did he work as a sculptor, or was he part of this group that worked on that elementary school?

THOMAS WARDELL: Well, that was another project that was tied along with the university - it was a sort of nursery and experimental school that the College at Tempe ran. He did a number of sculptured pieces, sort of play type things for the children, for instance, a horse that children could get up and sit on, a hippopotamus and various type things were done for Tempe school. And another of the outstanding projects that Radke did, a very fine sculptor - he was a mason turned sculptor - and we marked the Father Kino Trail through the section of Arizona between Nogales and Tucson at various areas with sort of a roadside rest area or sort of a shrine in which we had a statue of Father Kino that was cast in terrazzo and then we had it finished by Radke. And they were quite outstanding. As I told you a while ago, the Mexicans being very religious people, I notice every time I go down there to Nogales from Tucson, just near Tucumcari -- which is one of Father Kino's missions -- I've never missed seeing flowers at this one particular shrine right close to a little Indian village there. Of course vandalism has completely destroyed a lot of the others.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: When I was in Tucson I remember hearing about this series of Father Kino statues and I understood there that they were all destroyed.

THOMAS WARDELL: The one south of Tumacacari about, oh, three or four miles, is still standing.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, it's nice that at least one of them is still there. Do you remember how many there were altogether?

THOMAS WARDELL: The figure twelve comes to my mind, that we did. I think twelve.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Now let's see if there are other projects that we haven't covered that you were involved with -- did you have graphic arts?

THOMAS WARDELL: Not a great deal, we did some etching, but a great many etchings, lithography and easel paintings were sent back to Washington at the time. We had trained two men who are in the silk screen business today in Phoenix. One boy worked just as an apprentice, not under WPA but just as an apprentice, to learn the silk screen business, and he has a big sign and silk screen business in Phoenix today, a young boy of 16 or 17 at the time. We did a great deal of silk screen work, we kept two men doing nothing but cutting screens and applying paint to the screen because we would cooperate with little theater or any groups that we could work with. We did their posters and displays, oh, we worked with the children's department here and did silk screen covers for all their reports, any agency that we would be allowed to work with we tried to help, put a little more appeal into their work books.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: About how many were involved in that?

THOMAS WARDELL: Oh, we must have worked for 20 to 30 various agencies.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I meant how many employees did you have on this?

THOMAS WARDELL: I had two people on silk screen work.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: They did all this, just the two of them?

THOMAS WARDELL: Well, we'd pull in other people to help run the screens, I mean to actually do the mechanics, to pull that screen for several hundred prints. That was before modernization of silk screen, and of course you had to stack and dry them. It's still the same process - there's no appliance for hand work - and we pulled in extra help on the project just to help out. Two men were kept rather busy just cutting screens and we did a small amount of fine art silk screen taking silk screen into the fine art medium - the lacquer process.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Was this in operation before you became director? The silk screen process?

THOMAS WARDELL: No. They were probably doing some silk screen but not as much as we were doing. As I saw the need for it...

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Because I was interested in the beginnings of it, because I understand that the first silk screen processes were developed by the WPA in New York and I wondered how it got out here.

THOMAS WARDELL: Yes, I recall some pamphlets and various things that they - they were doing some work I'm sure. But we went into it ...

SYLVIA LOOMIS: They were pretty well along by the time you took over?

THOMAS WARDELL: Yes. I had had some very experimental silk screen work at Carnegie Tech -- we were experimenting when I was there.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh! It probably was developed further then by the WPA?

THOMAS WARDELL: Yes, because I remember some brochures that were put out by WPA in regard to the New York project is taking it and developing it a great deal.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, can you remember anything else? Oh, yes, you said something about the Index of American Design.

THOMAS WARDELL: Yes, for that type of recording, the type of recording that that demanded - of course it takes a very, very fine, detailed craftsman - we had one outstanding one. I remember it was Elizabeth Johnson, I didn't know her age at the time, possibly in her early 60s. She did a great deal of work at the Heard Museum here recording the branding irons, the saddles of that period, guns of the period, these were of course in full color, quite detailed work. Then we did a series of the Indian blankets that were woven at the time back when they were using soldiers uniforms if they could get them - tear them down and card back to use the colors...

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Is that called Germantown?

THOMAS WARDELL: Germantown, yes. So we tried to record typical examples of certain periods with, for instance, Navajo blankets, and it was our best source of material here. John Leiper did a little work in recording at the Museum in Flagstaff, in Northern Arizona, under Dr. Colton, and I think that some work was done prior to my coming on the project at the museum connected with the University of Arizona. I don't recall ever seeing it but it strikes me there was some work done.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And these original plates were sent to Washington?

THOMAS WARDELL: As soon as they were finished they were sent right on to Washington.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: So they never made portfolios of those, or anything like that?

THOMAS WARDELL: No, the original itself - this one that I have here was not too good an example, I mean, I felt that the quality of the one that I'm letting you take is not the quality of the work that we were putting out. I don't know how she missed on it.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: That was one of hers?

THOMAS WARDELL: Yes, that was one of hers.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Did you have any other artists doing it besides these two?

THOMAS WARDELL: The other name just came to me - Margaret Cahill - was the other woman on the project. You see it takes someone who has a great deal of patience for detail to actually do that type of work. A lot of the other artists of course were much freer in the use of the medium.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Probably would have driven them crazy.

TWO Well, a person like John Leiper - it would have driven him stark mad, just completely mad, to try to get that tight.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, in the East there were a good many academic artists who never moved over into a more modern style and they were very good at that type of thing.

THOMAS WARDELL: Well, as I say, both of these people on the project Margaret Cahill was a woman at that time of, it's hard to judge, I don't like to judge her age.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: That's pretty dangerous!

THOMAS WARDELL: Yes, it is - I just hesitate to guess hers, but I know Mrs. Johnson was in her 60s, and one who

had done, for instance, probably china painting, very, very tight. That's what it took to be able to handle that sort of thing. I know Chris Baumgartner or John Leiper or Tenny or any of those people would tell em to jump in the lake if I had asked them to do something like it, because while they were capable they just were much freer.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: You said there were some other murals that were done? I took notes on those.

THOMAS WARDELL: We did some murals, for instance, in elementary schools. I think those in a couple of photographs I showed you were done in the cafeteria at Creighton Elementary School. There were some others. I mean we didn't take it as a big, intense project, we would go in and decorate, do something that the children would readily enjoy. I mean we didn't spend a great deal of time, it was more just as you would in a nursery type thing -- just as something to enliven a room.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: The three I had down were all at Tempe, the Women's activity Building.

THOMAS WARDELL: Well, those were getting into the more serious mural. These were just sort of livening it up a little for children, we didn't spend a great deal of time on them, we did them as quick as possible -- going in and measuring the area and drawing and making sconces, with several people working on it, not as a work of fine art, but more as something...

SYLVIA LOOMIS: To brighten things up.

THOMAS WARDELL: To brighten up a very, very drab room for the children.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: What about this one at the Fine Arts Building?

THOMAS WARDELL: I think that's still there.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Who did that one?

THOMAS WARDELL: I think John Leiper worked on that, I'm just not sure. John was doing a great deal of them, he did all the murals in the Women's Activity Building. Someone else worked on that...

SYLVIA LOOMIS: So the mural project wasn't very extensive then?

THOMAS WARDELL: No.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Serious murals?

THOMAS WARDELL: No, not a great deal.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Can you think of any other type of work that you did on the project?

THOMAS WARDELL: No. We did have a part of the project that was interesting -- to go back again -- and that was the fantastic reception that we had in the school because those were days, of course, when money was still short and we had actually to limit the number of students we could take and that meant at one time I was teaching life painting and I had to break life painting into three sections, because I don't like to work with more than about 20 students. In those days - remember Phoenix was pretty small - we'd get registrations of 40 or 50 for life painting, which of course is quite far advanced. They possibly went through still life and drawing first and were taking drawing and life painting too. We had - for as small as Phoenix was and as small as our project was - we had a fantastic reception.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, my next question is, how did the people of the area react to the art projects?

THOMAS WARDELL: Exceedingly well. I saw a man in the hospital one day last week, who's a doctor, almost retired since, or semi-retired, and we went up in the elevator and he said, "Tom, you were the director of Phoenix Art Center. I can't remember your last name but I can remember a painting that you had," not meaning my own painting, but a painting he had seen in one of the shows. It was because it was, you might say, the first cultural program of any size that Phoenix had had up to that time. There was no art center or shows. Since then, of course, Phoenix has become quite an art area, with some very fine artists. But it was hard work.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I expect so. Then there wasn't any of the criticism that there has been in a good many parts of the country, about it being boondoggling, or make-work, or that sort of thing?

THOMAS WARDELL: I came here from Pennsylvania and West Virginia, as I said, I went to school in Pittsburgh - Carnegie Tech - later was down in Wheeling and I heard that in both West Virginia and Pennsylvania, but I didn't hear that out here. I heard it about the road program, incidentally. It could have - I'm not saying that it wasn't, but I can honestly say that the reception by the public in general was very good here.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I would think so, if there was that much interest in the classes.

THOMAS WARDELL: You see, there was nothing here before, and they were hungry -they were hungry. We had probably the wealthiest people in town in our classes, and probably the poorest people in town because they were hungry for that type of thing.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, that's very interesting.

THOMAS WARDELL: We ran a very tight schedule, we didn't have the facilities we would have liked, we had three rooms, two basic rooms to work in, the third you had to sort of squeeze into but it was tight scheduling to run as many classes as we did. Doug Mumsford taught silversmithing and of course it would not take a student through a complete silversmithing course, I mean back to metals, many things that you would like a student to learn. In other words, there was the beginning of recreation, it was recreation to a great many of these people, not fine art jewelry, but "something I made." And of course, as I told you a while ago, here I am still in it, in recreation. But we ran our school not as loosely as you would in a recreation program, as people think of recreation today, nor quite as tight as a true art schedule. We strived for the highest degree in our teaching and that's why I say I think it was a success. Well, about four months ago I saw a student who must be about 65 now, Mrs. Williams, I haven't seen her in years, and she said, "Oh, Mr. Wardell, I have thanked you a million times. I just sold a painting the other day for \$350.00, a portrait."

SYLVIA LOOMIS: She was one of the students?

THOMAS WARDELL: One of the students. I mean of course there's been so much of that, but that was typical. As I told you a while ago, a boy who came down here just as a young man and hung around and hung around and now has one of the biggest silk screen and sign businesses in Phoenix.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, tell me more about what you did afterwards and how you got into your present work.

THOMAS WARDELL: Well, I went into the Navy after I was married - I skippered a PT boat in the Pacific and then came back to Phoenix, I think, in March 1945. I think this will explain it best: While my son (who was 24 years old yesterday) was in the hospital, I wasn't worried about the doctor because I knew he wouldn't worry about his fee, but I was worried about getting my wife out of the hospital. You know, they like their money. Just by chance, I had two paintings in the Midwest on tour and Walter Vinson, a man I mentioned a while ago, was considering a couple of paintings of mine, and the day before I got her out, I was notified by telegram that one of the paintings had been purchased, on this tour, by Walter Vinson decided to take it, so instead of being broke I had about \$600.00 to get her out. Well that's it - it was touch and go in those years. Of course I had two children and I just decided I had to look to them and do something for them so I went into business with another man out of service, I started a venetian blind part-time business which I didn't like from the beginning and got disgusted with, and eight years ago sold out. And I went with the Maricopa County Parks and Recreation Department to set up a cultural program in the Department. It's a comparatively new department, it had been formed only two years before I went in and set it up. I was able at that time to do some teaching myself, photography, painting, drawing, silk screen work, copper enameling, internal mosaics in general.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Where did you teach? Were these private classes?

THOMAS WARDELL: No. Again this is recreation, with Maricopa County Parks Department. I went with them to set up this cultural program. And then it expanded and it changed and, as I told you, I was born and raised in the West, and there I am now teaching people how to enjoy life. For instance, a week from tomorrow, as I told you I'm director of the project, but four years ago I started a camping clinic to teach people how to enjoy their leisure time. And it has snowballed and, oh, trail rides, I still have four gals that have been with me now five to seven years who are teaching crafts programs setup.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: How many do you have?

THOMAS WARDELL: I have five teachers.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I mean how many programs, or does each teacher have a program?

THOMAS WARDELL: Each one - in Maricopa County, we have over nine thousand miles - we're spread from beyond Wickenburg to Gila Bend, it's a very vast country, so I have teachers in various areas teaching silversmithing depending on the area, I mean, what people want. I've got well qualified people, for instance, Gerry Clayton can teach some of the finest copper enameling that I've seen in many, many years, for instance, she's a professional, she sells in New York, Chicago and Gump's in San Francisco. Gerry is capable of handling copper enameling, silk screen, and other work almost, name it, in mosaic and silversmithing. We don't touch too much on fine art because in recreation, people are there when they can be there, where if you take a student through painting, it's a long, long process. They can come into our recreation programs and then, given a

certain amount of ability, in a short time they can make great strides.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Do you have regular courses?

THOMAS WARDELL: Yes, we set up 12-week sessions. And then of course there's a short gap and advanced session, we're always beginning new sessions.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And you have five centers?

THOMAS WARDELL: No, we operate in schools, in other words we have a contract with all the school districts in the outlying Phoenix area where we use all their facilities. Any facilities they have we use, and then materials or equipment that we need beyond what they have then we furnish it. It's a real wonderful working agreement. The taxpayer, for instance people say to me, "Oh, we're in the Paradise Valley area, we're going to Paradise Valley School." They feel they're closer to the school, since taxes are a problem, a big problem here, they feel they're personally getting something out of the school. And it has been a point in the last few years that when they plan school buildings now they always call our department to see if we would be able to follow with our children's and adult recreation programs right into the school - in other words, while they are still in the planning stage.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: What hours of the day do you have these?

THOMAS WARDELL: All of our adult work of course has to be in the evenings. On occasion Saturday morning in certain areas. If there's a demand we will set up classes on Saturday.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And the children's work?

THOMAS WARDELL: After school and Saturdays, and then of course full time in summer. We run a full 11 weeks recreation program.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: It sounds as if it might be one of the most extensive in the country. Is that right?

THOMAS WARDELL: No, I think you'll find this thing done pretty well all over, but I think our working arrangement with the schools is probably as good as you'll ever find. In most instances we use for our general recreation area a teacher at that school and will supplement with any one of the craft instructors that I use, or any of the recreation people who are able to supplement the program. But we have had great success with Recreation. Remember one thing. Had you mentioned recreation ten or fifteen years ago people would have looked at you and said, "Oh, brother, he's flipped." Today everyone knows what recreation is. As a matter of fact in the outdoor recreation field we're seeing a new department form, for instance, Dr. Kraft heads outdoor recreation, the National Parks Service are pushing it - of course they've always been in the field, they're pushing more. Now you're getting - well, for instance the Bureau of Land Management - it's just within the last few months there that this district hired a recreation specialist to promote outdoor recreation of the Bureau of Land Management plans. And everybody today is well aware of what recreation is.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, not in New Mexico. Not at the state level.

THOMAS WARDELL: Well, neither are we at the state level here.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, just the county?

THOMAS WARDELL: Well, well as a matter of fact, Dennis McCarthy who is the Director of the State Park System, was Director of Maricopa County Parks and Recreation Department. It looked like a wonderful chance for Dennis to go into this job, but immediately the legislature hamstrung him because they didn't give him any money. So actually they're working at a disadvantage. We started five years ago under the direction of Ken Smith, our director. We acquired approximately 93,000 acres of land within 30 miles of downtown Phoenix that we're masterplanning now. Some of it is in use, Astronomount Regional Park is in use, and the Sierra Estrella Regional Park is in use, not facilities that we will eventually have but in actual use today. But our Department has been held up by Secretary Udall as probably the foremost county system in this state. It's progressive, I mean because we are planning it right now, all of our plans are being drawn on estimates of population taken to 1980 and beyond that.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, certainly the country needs it very much because people have so much more leisure time.

THOMAS WARDELL: It is. I mean when we first started the clinic four years ago, when we first started kicking this idea around about a camping clinic, I said, "Oh, I don't know." Of course I've lived in the West my whole life and I've camped probably from the time I was out of my cradle, I was born and raised on a cattle ranch, so the more I talked to, for instance, owners of sporting goods stores and talked to some of the people at the University over at Tempe, the more I talked to people the more I realized that people are actually neophytes when it comes to the outdoors, I mean they're a little afraid of it, but they want to get out. Well, for instance, a person may come

from Michigan, which probably has as nice parts, as beautiful parts as you'd want to see, but they were too busy back there, or for some reason they didn't get out to camp and enjoy the outdoors. They get to Arizona here and they see this big, vast expanse and they've got to go someplace. Well, they go down and buy a Coleman stove or a Coleman lantern or a tent, and they have no idea how to put it up, the person that sold them is a sales person and doesn't know any more about it than they do, so our clinics have been quite successful. But as I say, it's so much fun because here I am still in the cultural end of our arts and crafts classes, but teaching people to enjoy the outdoors is - I can't think of a more wonderful job. And there's a lot of challenge to it.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, we're about the end of our tape so I wonder if there are any comments that you would like to make in general about that period of the Federal Art projects, as far as you personally are concerned?

THOMAS WARDELL: I was trying to think of the man's name who was director of the California project. I wanted to say something about him. I think the people on our project got a great deal out of seeing what was being done in other parts of the country because we used to get a great deal on exchange from California, and your various area and those two WPA circuit shows we had here. I think it did a great deal of Phoenix at the time, it was a first step toward culture. As a matter of fact, the University of Arizona and Tucson were probably far more advanced in community culture than we were here. So the project I have always felt was something that was needed, and I think that was why it was accepted so well. I know Walter Vinson wanted me, when I got out of service, to go back and revive the Art Center but as I told you, I had the responsibility of the children and everything, had to earn a living, so after I earned a living and got them through college I got back into the field I love so well.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, I suppose you felt that it gave you at least a boost during that period of the depression, but maybe you would have made out anyway.

THOMAS WARDELL: Well, I never felt about it that way because of my training - as I said, I was born on a cattle ranch, and by the time I was through high school and ready to go to work I was a journeyman welder and ironworker and I've climbed some of the highest buildings in the country, so I've never looked at it from my own personal point because I always figured that in our country I never worried about making a living, it wasn't the economy to me personally. I think I did help a great many people, I know John Leiper and Steve Golembeski were helped, and it meant a great deal to me to have been able to help these people. I probably made the most foolish statement of my life when I went to work for the Maricopa County Parks Department, I said that I would take the job and set up this cultural program if I would be allowed to teach at least one or two classes a week. Well, that was good. That lasted two years and then they found I could do a few other things, and I finally got worked out of that, otherwise I would still have been a teacher probably - a teacher of art - except that I was teaching back in the Depression in Wheeling, West Virginia, where you got paid with vouchers instead of money and you can't eat vouchers. My last year in Wheeling we got vouchers the last four months and took them down to the bank and they discounted those. And that's why I said I'm going to head West, I don't care where it is. I headed West and I didn't know where I was going. But I never had the fear, I always felt that in this country of ours that I'll make it.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: That you could find something to do. Well, with as many talents as you have, I think you're more fortunate than some. You're more adaptable than some, because I know that most of the artists I've talked to just wanted to go on with their painting and simply couldn't or wouldn't have been able to without some help. Otherwise, they would have to go into something else they didn't like.

THOMAS WARDELL: Yes, that was what the intent of the project was, and that's why it did do that good. Well, I don't know, I have never felt that world owed me a living. So that's why I get a little disgusted today with the trend of things. I've always figured that if tomorrow - I mean, I can make it.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, it's fortunate that you were able to get into a field though that you enjoy.

THOMAS WARDELL: Well, as it happened, it was a rather strange thing. I didn't know Ross (Santee) at the time I was interviewed. And Ross told me later that he had a personal friend that he would have liked to have had the job, and I think some other people had personal friends that they would have liked to have the job, but I think it's one thing that got me the job, and only one thing, is that my background and education, I mean the fact that I'm a graduate of Carnegie Tech and was able to produce, I think that was why I was chosen. As a matter of fact later when I got to know Ross quite well, he said, "I'm glad you got it." He said, "This man," - (I won't mention his name -- that he had in mind) "he couldn't handle it, I mean to the degree that you did." Of course Ross and I became very close friends. But I was lucky that that job was available at that time. When the war was over I had responsibility to my family. And there's nothing I like better than to get back into that studio, and I've done a lot of commercial work, and sold an awful lot of stuff, but I just felt that my first responsibility was to get those kids through school. As it's turned out I'm right back in the field where I was. But I've been a very lucky person.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: A very hard-working person, and very talented.

THOMAS WARDELL: I've had a lot of fun.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Do you still do easel painting? When you say "the studio" is that what you mean?

THOMAS WARDELL: Well, it's all torn up now, but I have done a great deal of mosaic work, and my love for silver designing is probably the foremost of what I've done. I don't know if you noticed when you drove up I have a camper out there that I got just about a year ago and this summer I'm going to spend my entire time on the desert and paint and get back because I've got a lot of things to say. But I have a very requiring job and once I get back into it I think I can do it.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: These few samples you've shown me of the way you've adapted these Indian designs to tables and to jewelry are certainly very interesting.

THOMAS WARDELL: Well, it's a culture that I think is one of the freshest things. I had a strange experience to wind this up. We have quite a large staff of landscape architects down at the Department, and since a great area of our parks, all of our parks, have a certain amount of Hohokarn culture, and evidence of culture, and they thought a Park symbol for our Department should be something along one of these lines in the Hohokarn tradition, so they took some copies off this portfolio and adapted them and came up with some ideas and presented them to the Parks Commissioner. And he said, "Oh they couldn't do that, it's too modern."

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh no! And here these designs...

THOMAS WARDELL: Were done 1000, 1200 years ago. That's why I think they're so fresh.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: They are just charming, and as you say, very fresh, and with a great deal of movement. Well, I can't tell you how grateful I am to you, Mr. Wardell, for this very interesting and informative interview. It seems I'll know all about Arizona without going any further, although I do have some others that I'm going to interview. And I'm very grateful to you also for letting us borrow some of this material which we will microfilm and return to you, because that really brings it alive - to see the pictures.

THOMAS WARDELL: I think it does. Some of the photos are not the best but I think by copying and leaving them in to develop a little longer I think they'll come out. The details are all right...

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes, they show the type of work you did, and it certainly was very valuable. And thank you again very much.

THOMAS WARDELL: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

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