



Smithsonian  
*Archives of American Art*

Oral history interview with Kathleen Curry  
regarding John Steuart Curry, 1990 and 1992

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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Kathleen Curry on December 19, 1990 and July 1, 1992. The interview took place in Uncasville, CT, and was conducted by Robert F. Brown for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Funding for the transcription of this interview provided by the Smithsonian Institution's Women's Committee.

The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

## Interview

ROBERT BROWN: Interview with Mrs. John Steuart Curry in Uncasville, Connecticut. Robert Brown the interviewer. This is December 19, 1990. Mrs. Curry, perhaps we could begin at your beginning. Maybe you could talk a little bit about childhood, anything that led say to your eventually coming to America, your being married to an artist.

KATHLEEN CURRY: Well, my childhood was rather - well, it's not a secret like most children's lives are. My father was in the British Army and he was an Englishman. And my mother was an Irish girl and very pretty, I've been led to believe. When Father was stationed I think in Dublin he saw this Irish girl walking down the street and was captivated by her, followed her. And that's how their love affair started, just like that. And when he proposed to her he said, "Now, I don't have any money and I can't buy you a ring but I will give you my grandfather's signet ring. And if you change your mind I want that ring back again." There was no doubt about that, you know. And he went off to the Boer War and I stayed with my grandparents in Ireland, which I only have one slight recollection of a small child being put on a horse. I was that small child and I must have been very, very young.

MR. BROWN: Did they live in the city or was this in the country?

MS. CURRY: I beg your pardon?

MR. BROWN: Was this in the country someplace?

MS. CURRY: Yes, in the country. Yes. He raised horses for the British Army and they were magnificent horses, I can assure you. Then my next period and the only thing I remember about anything was visiting - this is childhood - visiting my aunt, my father's sister. I've got a picture of it somewhere. And sitting on a window seat overlooking her garden. I came back to that same house. We went to India again. And many English children are sent back to England to be educated. And also I had malaria so it was a matter of go to England or die. And so I went to live with my aunt and I must have been about seven I think then. And when I was sitting in her bedroom on that same window seat looking out at the garden I said, "You know, it seems to me I've sat here before." Now, I must have been, I might have been two when I remembered that. When I returned I was seven. That was one impression I got. Well, I lived in England and was educated off and on, this school, that school, some school.

MR. BROWN: Do you remember India at all?

MS. CURRY: Remember any of it?

MR. BROWN: No; India.

MS. CURRY: India? Yes. We lived in Mhow, which was central India, had a very nice house there. Then I don't remember much of that except I might have been four when we went to [inaudible] which is another important place in India. Now, what would I remember about Mhow? I know, that little boy [inaudible] that's my brother George in his sailor hat and that is this person you are looking at today. And that little boy was drowned in India. We had lots of gardeners and there was a well, small well where the natives used to go and take their baths and wash their feet. And my mother with the ayah was bathing this new child, my new sister, and she said, "Kitty, go out and see where Reggie is." And I went out to see where Reggie was and there he was, lying over the side of the well. Now, whether he had - he didn't fall in because there were steps to go down. I never quite found out what. But when the natives came to bathe their feet he might have been in there then drowned, you see. And they must have picked him up and hung his little body over the side. That's one. That's about the only deep memory I have of India, which is rather a natural one.

MR. BROWN: Certainly.

MS. CURRY: We used to ride to school on our ponies. School, probably two or three. And I don't remember seeing a white teacher. They were all East Indian, our teachers were. But it was a schoolroom around not as big as this room.

MR. BROWN: It was a small room?

MS. CURRY: Very small. And there were hardly any children there. I don't remember any English children there; all native children.

MR. BROWN: Was the instruction in English?

MS. CURRY: Beg your pardon?

MR. BROWN: Was the instruction in English? Did they speak in English?

MS. CURRY: Oh, yes, the teacher, yes. Although we as children spoke Hindustani. All children speak languages. There's nothing unique about that. That was that. Then we went to Rawalpindi. Now, what did we do there? Rawalpindi. Rawalpindi.

MR. BROWN: That's a big place, yes.

MS. CURRY: Then I was older then. And that's interesting. Read the back of that.

MR. BROWN: Mm hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. CURRY: What did I do? Rawalpindi. Not much there. School. From there I went to England. That was the age of seven.

MR. BROWN: Did you feel very sad that you were leaving your parents?

MS. CURRY: No, I didn't. No. You know, I don't know, children, American children are made a great deal over. Now, I'm sure my father and mother felt sad seeing two children go off on a liner in charge of the captain and [inaudible] person. And then my aunt came to meet us. And we'd never, we'd never been closed in in our lives, never seen a hansom cab, nothing like that, you know. Though we had a carriage, you know. But a public hansom cab, no, nothing like that. And went to live with her in London. Now, she had prize Chow dogs which I don't think too highly of, but that's all right. And my brother and I had never been shut in before. We'd always stepped out. So the first thing we did was to open the front door before the maids were up, step out into London with two dogs. We didn't know anything about addresses or lanes or anything. Two children. You can imagine the stir that caused.

MR. BROWN: [Laughs.]

MS. CURRY: Well, then I went to school in England off and on because I was sick a lot of the time recovering from malaria. Then finally my parents went to Africa and they thought it was time that we came back. So once again I was 13, I think. My brother might have been 14. Put on a cargo boat to Africa, and the name of the boat was Umpschloti [phonetic], which is a Kaffir name. You know about Kaffirs today?

MR. BROWN: Mm hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. CURRY: That took a long time, about five weeks. Five weeks. Eventually we landed at Capetown. Yes, that's where Table Mountain is.

MR. BROWN: Mm hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. CURRY: Now, how many people on that ship? The captain; his wife; a nurse; a baby; a doctor; a young man and the girl, his fiance - they were going to be married when they got to Africa - my brother and me. That was the passenger list. Very interesting, really. And then my parents came to meet us and we went to live in Potterstrum [phonetic]. You're hearing a lot about Potterstrum today from Africa. And how did I get to school? Rode a bicycle to school.

MR. BROWN: Now, your father was still in the Army?

MS. CURRY: Still in the Army, yes. And then I went to a convent there. That was the best they had. And anyway, my mother was a Roman Catholic.

MR. BROWN: Were you mostly there English or British people? Were you mostly British people there or were there a number of Afrikaners as well?

MS. CURRY: Well, mostly British. Some -

MR. BROWN: Some of the -

MS. CURRY: Africa what? What do you mean?

MR. BROWN: Afrikaners.

MS. CURRY: Yes. And in this convent it was always rather interesting. And at a certain time every day a very handsome young man would pass. It was a dirt road like this. Pass on his beautiful horse. All the lessons would stop. Everybody would look toward that window. Even the nun would look toward that window. And the young rider was Louis Botha, prime minister later in years. Years later. Don't you think that's interesting?

MR. BROWN: That's marvelous.

MS. CURRY: And a beautiful young man, just like a Greek god really. But we all stopped and looked. That was that. And then my parents left the Army. The war was just beginning in England.

MR. BROWN: The first war, yes.

MS. CURRY: Yes, the First World War. And life was very, very, very difficult. Father had only his pension, you know, but he'd given half of his pension to send these two young children to school in England. So we were very, very poor and we looked for new things to do but the war was on, just beginning.

MR. BROWN: Did you stay in South Africa? Were you in South Africa?

MS. CURRY: When the war broke out?

MR. BROWN: Mm hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. CURRY: We just about left Africa when the war was breaking out in England in 1914. And that was a terrible, terrible period. When you think of all the brilliant young people, young men that were killed in the trenches, thousands of them, thousands of them. Well, in 1916 Britain was calling for people to help. Come and learn acetylene welding. Come and learn this. They had no men, you see. I was 16. So I thought, "All right, I'll go learn to be an acetylene welder." And they taught you to be an acetylene welder and then they found a job for you. And my job, acetylene welder, was in the most difficult part of London just off Bow Common Lane, just off Whitehouse. You've heard of Whitehouse? Terrible part of London.

MR. BROWN: Mm hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. CURRY: But my companions in welding, one girl was the daughter of the bishop. One lady, she had a daughter exactly my age. She was the wife of an American submarine commander, Bibby. There's a very famous shipping line called Bibby Line of steamers. My next companion, charming girl, was the daughter of a blacksmith. You see, we were a pretty different group of people. Now, what were some of the others? There were about five people. There was one girl there, strange girl. When we stopped for lunch, which we brought and there was very little of it, she would get out her Ouija board. That was her form of escape. Well, London at that time, it was a very sad time for us all.

MR. BROWN: When you worked with these various girls was this about the first time you'd worked with people from such or been around people of such different backgrounds?

MS. CURRY: Oh, I'd had different backgrounds before then, you see.

MR. BROWN: But in South Africa were you mostly among the other children of the military?

MS. CURRY: No, I had very few companions really. Our companions, I don't remember many children in Africa either. And you know, I think that's the reason that I've never had many companions. I didn't have to rely on people for entertainment. Even when I was in England when I went back for the summer I had no companions. But we never thought anything about it. We didn't think we were abused or deprived or any such thing as that. And my aunt that brought me up, their life was very, very interesting. No children. But we mixed with the grownups. We listened but we never spoke, you know.

MR. BROWN: What did your uncle do, her husband?

MS. CURRY: He was a barrister but he didn't practice very much. He had enough money not to. And Aunt Kitty said to me once, "You know, it's a great pity that he doesn't work. He's got just enough money to live on." But her idea - but he used to go off to London now and again if he had any business up there, any case or anything

like that. So it was a very mature life for young, for me. And my brother lived with my other aunt, whose husband was a doctor. I think he had the first motorcar, the very first motorcar. It was a village, very nice village. And his brother lived in the red house, big house. And every Boxing Day - now, England has Boxing Day. Do you know about it?

MR. BROWN: Yes. After Christmas.

MS. CURRY: They would have a meet. All the people around the countryside, those that had a pink coat and those that didn't all would meet under these trees in this great open entrance and collect there with the dogs. Everything was there. And then when the time came for them to go off we could follow the hunt as long as we could walk, but we didn't have any horses or bicycles or anything. But it was wonderful to follow these meets, you know. That was sort of the life I had in England. It was quite different.

MR. BROWN: But the wartime was different?

MS. CURRY: Oh, wartime. This was before the war. This was before the war. Wartime, oh, that was a terrible time.

MR. BROWN: Maybe I could ask you here. Maybe you could describe sort of in a general way your father and your mother. What were they like as personalities?

MS. CURRY: Oh, my father was very musical. What else? He loved the theater. He was always in all the regimental plays, always in all of those. And he was quite a, well, he was a very good actor as a matter of fact. And my mother was just my mother and very pretty. But whenever there were any plays and they needed women, you know, in the play, my mother was there. She couldn't sing. She loved to dance. She was full of all kinds of stories, which I'm sure were not true. But always everybody was very entertained by her. She could go on and on with stories. In one of the plays that were put on there was a drinking scene of Champagne. My father saw that my mother was drinking Champagne. No fake thing about it. She had her Champagne. But she was very gay, lively. Always there were a lot of Indian women coming into the house. They always had tea, you know, and that sort of thing. She was not highly learned but she had this charm, you know, that all the learning in the world wouldn't have made any difference, see. And as I say, she made up these stories that I'm sure weren't true but they were entertaining.

MR. BROWN: How was their life when they came back to England? You said that you were rather poor.

MS. CURRY: To England?

MR. BROWN: Yes, in England was their life -

MS. CURRY: Oh, that was very sad and very difficult. My brother had joined the Army and I think he was only 17. Nobody knew he'd joined. He joined the Army and he appeared one day in - he'd been out to France putting barbed wire before the trenches, before the soldiers. That was a difficult time. That's hard to talk about that. You know, he then was, then he went to - he was on one of the transport ships going to Egypt, I think, at the time. They were torpedoed, the whole ship torpedoed, and he was one of 50 survivors. He floated around all those hours until eventually he was picked up. That was that. But that was, talking about the war is difficult. And this last war my brother Dermott was in. Where did he -

MR. BROWN: This was another brother?

MS. CURRY: Then he went to Africa to fight in the Second World War. He was captured by Rommel and he was one of the men that was on this 700 - mile march when Rommel captured them. And Dermott had a beautiful voice and he had a group of men under him he was in charge of. And when he could see that they were beginning to flag, you know, then he'd burst into song and that would revive them all day. They eventually got there. He said the worst - how long was he in prison there? I don't know. But he managed to escape toward the end of the war. He said to his other friends, "I'm going to escape. Do you want to come along with me?" I don't know whether they did or they didn't. But he escaped and he got into the American lines. This is in Europe. I don't know what part they were in. But that's where he escaped from. He was a very interesting young man. But that war left him - when he came, when he eventually got to England he was so shattered really. He needed clothes, he needed everything, but he couldn't go by himself to buy them. My sister used to go with him. He overcame a lot of it but not completely, you know. All of those fearful periods that they went through. He said the Italians were the most cruel. They took up their gun and broke his ribs and all sorts of things like that.

MR. BROWN: What did your father do when he came back to England? Did he eventually -

MS. CURRY: I beg your pardon?

MR. BROWN: Did your father eventually take up a profession or have a job in England?

MS. CURRY: Well, yes. He decided that he would try and - there were not many jobs that you could get at that time. But he was a very good coordinator, very good manager. And he ran a hospital in London, a big hospital there, which was a terrific job during the war to get the food, you know. But he did that very successfully. Then after a while I came to America; they went back to Africa.

MR. BROWN: Oh, they did?

MS. CURRY: And lived there with my sister, my two sisters and my brother. Both of those boys, though, died from the result of war, George with his heart, Dermott with his - now, Dermott was a very clever boy. He in South Africa - let me see. Johannesburg, the cathedral there has a beautiful stained glass window that Dermott made. Beautiful, beautiful window. He almost died of lead poisoning from that thing. But it's a very, I gather a very well - known window. That was one of the things he did.

MR. BROWN: What was your father's name and your mother's name?

MS. CURRY: John Garnet Gould. John Garnet Gould. A very interesting man. Disciplinarian. Rather like my nephew in Australia, who is a retired sea captain of the merchant marine. And they were here visiting me not too long ago and his wife said, "You know, Patrick never gets over being a ship's captain, even when he was bringing up his children."

MR. BROWN: [Laughs.]

MS. CURRY: You see, and when the boys were going to school they had to do their work. There was no, anything about it. He'd take them from there and, "Get back to your work." And when one of these boys graduated from, well, he's now running a diamond mine, I might add, in Australia. But when this boy graduated he went to his mother and said, "Thank you for all you've done for me." She said, "Don't thank me, go thank your father."

MR. BROWN: And your father was a bit that way too, was he?

MS. CURRY: Yes, the father was. This was the wife telling the son, "Go and thank your father." That's Patrick, who is now a consultant and comes every year to America. He goes all on these pilots' meetings. There's an awful lot being done in the merchant marine. Nice, nice man.

MR. BROWN: And how long were you welding during World War I? How long did you stay with that job of welding?

MS. CURRY: Until the war ended.

MR. BROWN: And then what did you think you would do?

MS. CURRY: I hadn't been trained for anything, you see. But there was a very beautiful shop, old shop in London, and somebody said, "They're trying to find a certain kind of person." They were rather particular about it. "Why don't you go and see if you can get something to do there?" And I said, "But I haven't been trained for anything." So they said, "Well, go try." So I did, and they looked at me, talked to me. And then they said, "Well, I think you will do." Not right like that, but that's it. And I was there in there very, very - all their silks, you know, their silks were all designed up there. And I worked in one of those departments, sometimes on the silks. Sometimes I'd go down and wait on customers. And you couldn't wander around as though it were Ames; nothing like that.

MR. BROWN: Not like a discount store.

MS. CURRY: You really waited on people and you had to know how to do that. They trained you for that because, well, the kind of people that went into Liberty's was not as you - it was a very nice place. I think it's still in existence.

MR. BROWN: Mm hmm. Mm hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. CURRY: And everything was the finest. These beautiful silks, beautiful, beautiful silks. Beautiful [inaudible] beautiful clothes; a very special place. And I stayed there until I came to America.

MR. BROWN: Do you think you perhaps developed a love of beauty while you were working at Liberty's?

MS. CURRY: A?

MR. BROWN: A love of beauty while you worked. Did you acquire a love of beauty there, do you think?

MS. CURRY: Oh, yes. It was very nice. Then a friend of mine was here in America. She came, she had some friends and the friend said Kathleen - her name was Kathleen - "why don't you come to America with us? Come as a governess to this child. That will be a good way to come." So Kathleen went and was governess to this little child. So friends of friends said, "Do you know of another English girl that would like to come to America?" Kathleen said, "Oh, yes, I've got a friend." I'm the friend. So I came and had -

MR. BROWN: You were willing to come?

MS. CURRY: Yes, I came. The children were charming little things.

MR. BROWN: Where did you come to?

MS. CURRY: I beg your pardon?

MR. BROWN: Where did you go to?

MS. CURRY: I came to Chicago. That's where I landed, in Chicago. And my daughter is named for my erstwhile employer. She was always my friend.

MR. BROWN: What did you think of America when you first -

MS. CURRY: I beg your pardon?

MR. BROWN: What did you think of America? What were some of your first impressions?

MS. CURRY: My impressions of America were cars. Everybody, everybody had a car. I'd never ridden in a private car. We didn't have cars, you know, then. I think they do now, but not when I was young. And if we ever went anywhere when I was young you either walked there or if it were a long way away you hired a cab, see. That was it. But there wasn't much of that, I can tell you. Mostly walking. Mostly walking. But I liked my life in - I learned a lot. All of these miscellaneous things that I've done have all been things that have made for a development. You have lots of different - from there I went to work in Marshall Fields' fine book department. Didn't know a darn thing about fine books. But they thought I was capable of it, so I was in the fine book department. Well, I caught on.

MR. BROWN: Well, you must have.

MS. CURRY: And all of the authors, you know, you meet all the authors there. And I remember - I can't think of his name. Who wrote Spoon -

MR. BROWN: Oh, Edwin Arlington Robinson. Edwin Arlington Robinson, right, "Spoon River Anthology"?

MS. CURRY: Moon River.

MR. BROWN: Spoon River.

MS. CURRY: Spoon River?

MR. BROWN: Yes.

MS. CURRY: Now, what was his name?

MR. BROWN: Robinson.

MS. CURRY: Robinson?

MR. BROWN: Edward Arlington Robinson.

MS. CURRY: Doesn't sound familiar, but that's all right, whoever it is. He bought a lot of books from me and I wasn't too quick in adding them up so I said, "Do you mind adding that up?" while I go and get some book that he asked for. And he added it all up fine and then he said, "If you'll go and get a book of mine I'll autograph it for you."

MR. BROWN: [Laughs.]

MS. CURRY: So I got a book of his and he autographed it to me.

MR. BROWN: Do you think at that time - you must have been quick. How would you characterize yourself at that time as a young woman?

MS. CURRY: Well, how would I?

MR. BROWN: What was your personality like, would you say?

MS. CURRY: Well, I was pretty unsophisticated, I'll tell you. I really was. I don't know how I ever survived, truly. And in the other part of Marshall Fields' book department so many of them were graduate college students, all wanting to be writers. And they came there to work there getting the flavor of writing, meeting the authors, et cetera, et cetera. I remember one young man. But this was purely accidental. It was a beautiful day, a beautiful day, and I thought, "I cannot go into that place today." So I came in at the right time and I just went right out onto the pavement and lo and behold, there was one of the young men up there too. He just followed me out, went out. He said, "Let's take the bus and go for a ride." We took the bus, went. Never said we weren't coming in. We just did it. Went to the theater in the afternoon. That's where I saw Leontovitch. She was a great actress. And the next day the head of the department called me and she said, "Where were you yesterday?" I said, "I just, it was such a beautiful spring day I just could not come in. I just couldn't do it." She said, "Don't do it again."

MR. BROWN: [Laughs.]

MS. CURRY: I never did it again. That was it. She said, "What did you do?" And I said, "We went to the matinee and I went back to my apartment." I don't know what happened to the young man. It was sort of nice in a way, wasn't it, really. But he felt the same way that I did, couldn't go in there. I don't know how many people would dare to do it, but I didn't know any better, really. I didn't. I don't know why, but I didn't.

MR. BROWN: Well, Chicago was a pretty lively city then, wasn't it? Quite a lot going on?

MS. CURRY: Yes, there was a lot going on. I suppose so, really. But that's a different, that's a past life. A past life.

MR. BROWN: Did you make a number of American friends? Did you have casual -

MS. CURRY: No. Oh, yes, I did. Yes, I did. They were mostly advertising people, mostly advertising. One was an artist whose father has a very nice piece of monument in, what's a great park in Chicago?

MR. BROWN: Grant Park?

MS. CURRY: Grant Park, yes.

MR. BROWN: So his father was a sculptor? His father was a sculptor?

MS. CURRY: Yes. What was his name? I can't remember.

[END TAPE 1 SIDE A]

MR. BROWN: So how long were you in Chicago?

MS. CURRY: Oh, probably two years, and then I came to Westport.

MR. BROWN: Connecticut.

MS. CURRY: Yes.

MR. BROWN: What led you to Westport?

MS. CURRY: Yes, Westport, Connecticut. What led me?

MR. BROWN: Mm hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. CURRY: I was married, but it was on the rocks. And I came to my husband's brother, who was a sculptor and a painter in Westport. He has quite a nice memorial figure down there.

MR. BROWN: What was his name?

MS. CURRY: Shepard, Clifton Shepard. Then I dissolved my life. I was pretty poor, I might add.

MR. BROWN: In Westport there were a number of writers and musicians and artists.

MS. CURRY: Oh, yes. Yes.

MR. BROWN: So it was in that sense very pleasant, an interesting place.

MS. CURRY: Oh, yes. That was an interesting life in its way. And then, of course, there was the Depression. And I met John then at that period. And then he went to - he was married. John was married then to Clair. A dear, dear girl, awfully nice girl. They went to France and that's when John did so much of the Schoukhaieff, when he was studying at the Russian Academy with Schoukhaieff. Then they came back and Clair didn't live very much longer, I don't think. She died in was it 1932?

MR. BROWN: Thirty two, yes.

MS. CURRY: Thirty two. And my life had ended, you know, before then. And then I was not married anymore and John's wife had died, and that was a sort of a meeting of the minds.

MR. BROWN: This was a very busy time for him, wasn't it?

MS. CURRY: I beg your pardon?

MR. BROWN: This was a very busy period for John?

MS. CURRY: A very busy period. He'd just come back from the circus, being with the circus then.

MR. BROWN: And he was teaching too, I think. He was teaching in New York?

MS. CURRY: And he was teaching in Cooper Union and he was teaching at the Art Students League at that time. Not making very much money. Very, very poor, as a matter of fact. Then in 1936 John was offered, you know, that artist in residence at -

MR. BROWN: At Wisconsin.

MS. CURRY: Wisconsin.

MR. BROWN: When you first met him what did he like to talk about?

MS. CURRY: What, John?

MR. BROWN: Yes. What would you talk about?

MS. CURRY: Oh, I don't know, mostly - I don't know. Just talked. His work. I don't know.

MR. BROWN: Now, some people have said he was rather quiet spoken.

MS. CURRY: He was very, very. Didn't talk very much, and I don't think I did very much talking. But I used to go and sit in the studio and visit my friends. I had friends that were not friends of John's but they were people in the theater. For instance, Moffett Johnson, he was a Shakespearean actor and Winifred Johnson was a Shakespearean actress. And they had a very nice little theater in Westport and the Johnsons were often there. They were both English. So that was my kind of life. And then John met them. And when he did his murals in the school in Westport -

MR. BROWN: In Westport, yes.

MS. CURRY: In -

MR. BROWN: Nineteen thirty four.

MS. CURRY: "Tragedy," yes. In "Tragedy." Winifred Johnson is in one of the boxes. Moffett Johnson is in the other box. That was "Tragedy" and there were things from Shakespeare that John did in that mural. And this was "Comedy" and John was in that box and I was in this box. If you look at the - and that was, yes, "Comedy." And in that he did, let's see, Charlie Chaplain, Rose O'Neil. You've heard of her? All right. She lived in Westport, too. And he put Rose O'Neil in one of the boxes with her kewpie. I've forgotten all of those who used to be there. But one of the - now and again John would say do thus and so, whatever part it was, for "Tragedy," you know. Then I'd have to go through all the gestures.

MR. BROWN: [Laughs.] Was he pleased with the way that mural turned out?

MS. CURRY: Yes, in a way. But the man that he had helping him, you know, that story?

MR. BROWN: Uh uh.

MS. CURRY: No?

MR. BROWN: No.

MS. CURRY: What's his name? I can't think, and it's perhaps just as well because he was a shiftless, idle creature. He was a man, young man. I think he'd gone to Yale and he learned the art of fresco. He was an expert on fresco, and that's how John got him to put the walls on. And, you know, they had to go up at a certain time so that they're just right. Well, this man, Rubenstein, Louis Rubenstein, expert on it, but he made John's life very, very difficult. He was lazy. He wouldn't get up early in the morning to put the wall on so that John could start right away. So John, it was often he'd have to go down late and do his work because the wall wasn't dry. And I used to go down there and sit with him when he was up there all alone in this school and sit with him because it was very lonely. And I'd get a babysitter to come and sit with Ellen. Midnight often it would be, and I'd get tired. Of course, the school floor was dirty and you know you can't relax on those student chairs, not very much. The only place to lie down was the grand piano. And when I went down when they had this reception at Newburyport not too many years ago when I was here I said, "How long have they had that piano?" That was the same one that I used to sleep on.

MR. BROWN: [Laughs.]

MS. CURRY: Well, yes, he did. He enjoyed doing it. He would never do another fresco.

MR. BROWN: It was just too demanding? It was just too demanding? It took too much time, didn't it?

MS. CURRY: Too demanding, yes. And Rose O'Neil used to come down there at times and watch him paint. She was a charming woman, just enchanting. And she would sit there and here was John with his shirt off. And she was a good sculptress, too. Do you know her things?

MR. BROWN: No.

MS. CURRY: A very good sculptress, very imaginative. Little off, not quite being like a human being. They were fawns, you know. But very good. And one time she was sitting there with me looking at John painting and she said, "John, if only I'd had your back I would have been a great sculptress."

MR. BROWN: [Laughs.]

MS. CURRY: She was a fascinating woman, absolutely fascinating. Very gifted. She made \$1 million on her work, her drawings, \$1 million. And she started off to be, let me see now. She was a draftsman. Have you ever seen any of her things?

MR. BROWN: No, no.

MS. CURRY: Look at - try and get some. Her books are almost, well, they are out of print. But she was a very clever cartoonist. And she was 16 years old, I think, and a nun would go with her to the different advertising agents in New York and she would take her work. Sixteen, always with a nun. She was a fascinating woman, absolutely fascinating. And she had a very nice studio there and she had her sculpture out in her garden. And she had a brother, Clink, C l i n k. I don't know what it was short for. But he was brilliant but fey. He'd have these breakdowns now and again. And it was Winifred Johnson who said to me, "Now, if Clink ever asks you to come out in the moonlight and look at the sculpture in that garden, don't go. Don't go." And now and again he'd have a breakdown, you see, and he would go off again. But Winifred told me, "Don't go."

MR. BROWN: Do you remember some of the other artists who -

MS. CURRY: Do I remember?

MR. BROWN: In Westport.

MS. CURRY: Well, von Schmidt. You must have heard of him.

MR. BROWN: Mm hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. CURRY: He was a very interesting man and a very good illustrator. Actually I think his son is doing it now. Von Schmidt was a very interesting man indeed.

MR. BROWN: In what way? In what way? In what way?

MS. CURRY: In what way?

MR. BROWN: Yes.

MS. CURRY: Well, he was very interested in the Indians, for instance, American Indians. And he was very, well, I can't exactly - he was just an interesting man, good conversationalist, very good indeed. And his wife was charming. They had a very nice house there in Westport. Now let's see, who others? Oh, I don't know, don't remember. But the artists that I remember meeting after that group, then they were the ones with John. For instance, Waldo Pierce, Reggie Marsh, Kenneth Hayes Miller.

MR. BROWN: These were people he'd gotten to know in New York?

MS. CURRY: Yes.

MR. BROWN: In the 1920s?

MS. CURRY: Yes, in New York.

MR. BROWN: Do you remember Waldo Pierce a bit?

MS. CURRY: Oh, didn't you see those little drawings up there?

MR. BROWN: Yes.

MS. CURRY: Oh, I love Waldo Pierce. He came to live in Newburyport for a while, I think with his third wife. I'm not quite sure but I think so. A darling girl. And they were painting my daughter's portrait at the time. The same portrait, I might add, that turned out to be something. Waldo would work in the morning and his wife would work on it sometimes in the afternoon. Keep that quiet.

MR. BROWN: [Laughs.] But Waldo must have been a lot of fun?

MS. CURRY: Oh, he was an enchanting man, absolutely enchanting. He used to come over to our house in Newburyport and -

MR. BROWN: In Westport you mean? In Westport?

MS. CURRY: No, no, Newburyport.

MR. BROWN: This was much later in Newburyport, much later.

MS. CURRY: When he came to live in Massachusetts. He came down from Maine and got a house in Newburyport. But he had two young sons by his third marriage, beautiful children. Absolutely undisciplined, do anything at all. Lovely, lovely children. And to escape them he'd come over to my house, sit there. Here were all John's books. We had quite a lovely house. And he put himself down in that room where all the books were. And we had at that time brought back - see, it had never been opened, a bottle of Bacardi rum. I didn't like rum. And we brought it back from Cuba but it had never been opened. Waldo found it in that room and every morning he'd come drink his rum and spend the morning there with John's books. Then he'd leave and I would have to clean up all of the books, but that was all right. That was all right because he was interesting.

MR. BROWN: How did he and John get along?

MS. CURRY: Oh, fine, fine.

MR. BROWN: They were very different personalities, weren't they?

MS. CURRY: I never used to see them too much in that kind of an atmosphere, only perhaps if we met at the AAA or the [inaudible] or something like that. I didn't know Waldo then. I knew him much better - John was not in Newburyport, you know.

MR. BROWN: No.

MS. CURRY: So I knew Waldo much better than I ever knew him in New York.

MR. BROWN: Did you get to know Reginald Marsh a bit when you were in New York?

MS. CURRY: Yes, in New York I did. Not that picture but another one he gave. I was with John one day in his studio, summertime. And Reggie turned to me and said, "Would you like a painting?" I said, "Oh, I'd love a painting." So he picked out one that he'd been working on, still wet a little bit. He said, "Here." And it's in Chicago now. It was very typical. It was a, is it Coney Island?

MR. BROWN: Mm hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. CURRY: All these people in Coney Island and then the predominating figures were here a girl and a man over there.

MR. BROWN: On the side?

MS. CURRY: Nice hips on the girl. Reggie is my favorite American painter after John. I think he's America's Hogarth or Rawlinson. He's a - do you know any other one like him?

MR. BROWN: No, no.

MS. CURRY: No.

MR. BROWN: What was he like as a friend, as a personality?

MS. CURRY: Oh, a charming man, charming man. Talked in sort of a clipped way. No, I was very fond of Reggie. He was always awfully nice to me. No reason why he shouldn't be, but no reason why he should. But he was a cultivated man. He'd been brought up in Europe and his father was a painter. I don't know, he'd seen the world. He'd been to Russia with Kenneth Hayes Miller I think at that time, and Isabel Bishop, I think. Am I right about that?

MR. BROWN: Could be.

MS. CURRY: Kenneth Hayes - well, Bishop and Reggie went to Russia one time.

MR. BROWN: Was Miller a good friend for a while too? Was Kenneth Hayes Miller something of a friend of yours and John's?

MS. CURRY: No, I wouldn't say. Always, you know, they got along but not the kind of intimacy, you know. Well, I suppose if John had lived in New York all the time they would have been, because that was the circle.

MR. BROWN: Do you remember Miller? What was Miller like? How do you recall Miller, what was he like?

MS. CURRY: Oh, I hardly knew him. Hardly knew him at all, no. I have no recollection. Of Reggie I have. I've got a - there was a dinner. John had died by this time. Oh, given by the Limited Editions Club. And Reggie was there and brought a very nice program book and Reggie made a little sketch for me in it and he said, implied that he wished that he had done something like "The Boar" because he drew a boar in this book. I'll have to find it for you some day. But he's a very dear man.

MR. BROWN: Reggie was very admiring of John and his work.

MS. CURRY: Yes. Yes, he was. Yes, yes, he was. And a very entertaining man. Of course, he was very bright, you know, very entertaining. But I remember, who was it? Was it Benton, Tom Benton? He was visiting the studio in Westport and John was working on "The Fugitive" and Benton said, "I wish I had painted that." But he said, "I will. I will." But he said, "You won't know it." He couldn't have done anything with that same understanding that John put into "The Fugitive." He just couldn't do it, you know. That to me is one of John's great paintings. Do you know it?

MR. BROWN: Mm hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. CURRY: You know it. That, and all of those colors, hiding colors, you know. The Negro melting into the tree that if you went by you wouldn't know it was a Negro there that he so melted himself into the tree. I thought it was a great painting. And that little touch, that butterfly that was so free, and this individual hiding, hiding. A magnificent painting, I think.

MR. BROWN: Well, your husband did so much of his art because he seems to have very intense experiences of things.

MS. CURRY: Yes. Yes.

MR. BROWN: And this get expressed in his work, doesn't it?

MS. CURRY: And, of course, John had a great understanding of the Negroes, you know, because that's what he heard all the time in his home at that time, you know, of freedom and so forth. And there were - wasn't there a trail? What do you call that, an underground, wasn't there?

MR. BROWN: Underground Railroad.

MS. CURRY: From all over the country and they all went - not all of them went through Kansas but many of them did, you know. Many of them did.

MR. BROWN: His family were from the South originally, I guess. I guess his family, I gather, were from South Carolina originally.

MS. CURRY: Yes, yes, yes.

MR. BROWN: Was there any discussion of the North or the South and the southern attitudes?

MS. CURRY: Yes, yes. John was very understanding. I once had - there was another experience before John in Westport. I was invited to a party. I don't know why I was invited. It was an afternoon party. My daughter Ellen was with me and she was a lovely looking little girl.

[tape stops, re starts]

MS. CURRY: I was invited to that party and I took Ellen. Ellen, as I say, was a lovely child, soft golden hair in curls, an enchanting child. And I was, you know, talking around and here was this beautiful man, beautiful man, enormous beautiful man, magnificent looking creature. Then he came over, spoke to me because of Ellen. And he turned out to be Paul Robeson. And we found a couple of chairs and we sat and talked. And Ellen, this was such a picture. This beautiful little thing and this enormous magnificent man. Here she was, sitting on his knee and he was talking to her. And I said - and I didn't know very much about Paul Robeson. And I said, "Do you have any children?" He said, "Yes, I do. I have a little boy and they're living in England now, in London." And he reached into his pocket and pulled out a picture of his little boy, just the same age as Ellen. And the little boy was swinging on a railing in London and looking this way. Charming child. And for years and years and years I wondered about that little boy, and I heard about him the other day. He's still alive. Now, is he writing? Don't know. But that was very interesting.

MR. BROWN: Did John ever talk about possibly moving back out West or was he quite happy in Westport while you lived there? Was John quite -

MS. CURRY: Yes. I think at one period when we visited his mother in Arizona I think he liked Arizona. But no, I don't think John would - how can I say this? He had to go to the city periodically or go to - like Bill does, you know.

MR. BROWN: Bill McClellan?

MS. CURRY: He goes to - yes. He goes to New York and see what's going on. But I'm sure he would never care to live there. And of course, John wouldn't have liked it at all. John liked Madison quite a lot. It's a very nice life there, you know.

MR. BROWN: Before you went there I want to ask you a couple of things. In 1935 and '36 John did murals sponsored by the Public Works of Art Project for the high school in Norwalk, Connecticut.

MS. CURRY: Yes.

MR. BROWN: And do you recall when he was doing those?

MS. CURRY: I didn't really because that was rather like Norridge from Uncasville.

MR. BROWN: Yes.

MS. CURRY: And there was -

MR. BROWN: So he did the work?

MS. CURRY: I think he must have done those canvases in the studio, so there wouldn't have been much reason for watching him work. But one interesting thing, at one time there was some big celebration. I'm not sure whether it was the Centennial or what it was. John did a magnificent canvas. You've probably seen it. Have you? It was a beautiful thing for Washington, whatever it was for. Then he came back to his studio. It must be somewhere. I don't know. But he offered that [inaudible] he offered that canvas to his school in Kansas and they didn't have any use for it. Well, I can understand it but not quite. So he kept it in the studio. Then one day it got a tear in it when he was out in Wisconsin. Oh, it was a lovely thing. And I just got there in time. He'd torn up, torn the whole thing up except "The Plains Men." I hope that that's what Mr. Wunderlich - because it did go into storage with all of that stuff. But it's "The Plains Men." It's not in Schmeckebeier's book?

MR. BROWN: Mm hmm. [Affirmative.] It's in there, yeah.

MS. CURRY: It might be. I can't remember.

MR. BROWN: And he was tearing up the rest of the mural?

MS. CURRY: He'd torn it all up. He'd torn it all up, except this one bit, into big shreds. I was lucky to be able to persuade him, "Oh, don't. Save that, John. Save it."

MR. BROWN: Was he angry or what?

MS. CURRY: No, I don't know why. I think he in his way probably wanted the room. You know, just - I don't know, frankly, but I don't think it was any reason except that he thought, "Oh, what's the good of that," you know.

MR. BROWN: Well, was John ever moody?

MS. CURRY: Moody?

MR. BROWN: Mm hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. CURRY: Oh, yes. When he was working, yes. He didn't talk very much, really. I can't remember. It was perfectly easy, you know. I didn't feel I had to talk all the time, and I didn't because I was busy. And I never asked John ever to do anything in the house, never. He never in all the years we were married, he never lifted a plate off the table. I never asked him. I never asked him to move a piece of furniture. I remember once his brother in law and Margaret came to visit, his sister, and it was summertime. We were going to have supper outside and, you know, there are always chairs to move, benches and so forth. And Ellen and I and probably another person, we were moving the chairs and Margaret said, "Why don't you get John to help you?" I said, "I don't think it - it's easier to do it yourself than to ask John to do it," because he'd just move it over there and think that would be all right. His mind wasn't on that. I really never asked him to do - only once did I ask him, and it was getting to be winter and we had those storm windows to put on, carried them up the stepladder. And I said, "John, I think we ought to get the storm windows on." So he got the ladder and he tottered up the ladder with the storm window. And I looked and I said, "John, I think you'd better bring that down." And I thought, "Now, I know what I'll do. I'll call the fire department. They know all about climbing up and down ladders and so forth." So I called the fire department. I said, "Do you have anybody that would care to come and put on some storm windows?" "Oh, yes." That's how we got the storm windows put on.

MR. BROWN: [Laughs.]

MS. CURRY: He was a good shot, crack shot. But this is funny. He was in Kansas a lot of the time on those [inaudible] and I was rather isolated and so he thought I ought to have a gun. So he came back. I've got it upstairs. A very nice little revolver. And he said, "Now, I want you to come outside and I want to teach you how to use this gun." I said, "I don't want to learn how to fire a gun." He said, "Come along." So we went out and he set up a tin can there and put the bullets in. And he said, "Now, shut your eye." And this is my favorite eye. He said, "Not that eye, the other eye." I said, "I can't shoot with the other eye. I see better with this one." There's nothing wrong with my eye. Well, I took a pot shot, made the can. And then John took the revolver and he didn't make, he didn't hit the can.

MR. BROWN: [Laughs.]

MS. CURRY: We laughed about that, you know. But he was a superb shot. And when we first went to Madison many of the people that we grew to be familiar with thought they can do clay pigeon shooting, you know. Oh, and they all thought they were such crack shots and here was the artist, he didn't know very much about anything. So they invited John out that day and they kept tossing up and bang, bang, John got every one. They had a different idea about John's shooting.

MR. BROWN: [Laughs.]

MS. CURRY: I remember, talking about not asking John to do anything, we were sitting out one summer's evening and John was having his drink. He liked that rolling hill between us and the next house. He said, "Go and ask Mrs.," I've forgotten what her name was, "if she would care to sell that piece of land." They weren't using it or doing anything with it. It came right up to our driveway. "Go and ask Mrs. if she would sell that piece of land and whether she would take a payment of a painting as part payment." So I went up the hill to ask Mrs. so forth and I said, "My husband, John Curry, would like to know. He likes that piece of land very much. Would you ever be interested in selling it? And whether you would take a part payment of it for the land in a painting? She said, "I don't know what I'd do with it if I got it."

MR. BROWN: [Laughs.]

MS. CURRY: So we never got it. And that same thing happened to Bill the other day.

MR. BROWN: Bill McClellan?

MS. CURRY: Patricia - did she tell you? Oh, it was very funny. A relative of his who he hadn't seen for a long time came and they'd been married and he hadn't met the wife or whatever it was. So Bill took them up to his studio and he thought he'd give them a present. He hadn't given them a wedding present. And said, "Well, why don't you pick out a canvas that you like?" And the man replied, "Well, we don't have any wall space." Patricia began to laugh. She said, "Now I know."

MR. BROWN: [Laughs.]

[END TAPE 1 SIDE B]

MR. BROWN: While you were still in Westport John was having regular exhibitions at the Farragher Gallery.

MS. CURRY: Yes.

MR. BROWN: Would you go to the openings?

MS. CURRY: Oh, yes. Yes, yes. Then I wasn't too familiar, you see, with the American painters then. No, I can't - I liked Maynard Walker very much. He and I've forgotten what the other man's name was. But Maynard was the one that was the pusher for John, you know. He got, he had great faith in John. Maynard was a very nice man.

MR. BROWN: Was this when he had his own gallery, Maynard Walker?

MS. CURRY: This was before his own gallery, when he was with the Farragher Gallery.

MR. BROWN: Mm hmm, mm hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. CURRY: And it was Maynard who took the business of pushing John. That was before John was really known at all.

MR. BROWN: But at the openings would quite a few people come to the openings?

MS. CURRY: Oh, yes, yes. I remember one opening, I was young then and this lady must have been 65 or so. She came up to John. She must have been very familiar with his work. She didn't know him but she knew his paintings and admired them. And I was standing by John there. She came and touched him lightly on the shoulder and she said, "At last I've touched you." Isn't that something?

MR. BROWN: Yes.

MS. CURRY: "At last I've touched you." Well, I used to tease John a little bit and I'd go by him and I'd say, "At last I've touched you."

MR. BROWN: [Laughs.] How was he about openings, was he very jovial? Was John very jovial about those openings?

MS. CURRY: Oh, he had a marvelous sense of humor, a marvelous sense, and he would tell the most ridiculous stories but they were hilariously funny, hilariously funny.

MR. BROWN: Can you remember some?

MS. CURRY: Well, not really. Not really. But not obscene stories, nothing like that. Nothing. Didn't have that kind of thing. He was not a vulgar, not nothing like that. And I don't have it either, nothing. Never an obscene, never ever. No, his jokes were, I don't know. I can't really tell you. Ask Bill. He'll probably remember. But I never heard even when other people were telling little, never heard - I never heard John even say anything like that, never. Never swore. He might say - what would he say? I don't know, he'd say, "Oh, damn it all," or something. But as for vulgar terms - I was just an ordinary girl since school but I'd been working and they never let me hear it, you know. But that was part and parcel of their conversation. But I can say I'd heard it from other people but I never heard any of those girls even say "damn." Now, that's quite something. I don't say they were like that among themselves but never in front of me, ever.

MR. BROWN: This is when you were at Bradford College?

MS. CURRY: What?

MR. BROWN: This is when you were at Bradford?

MS. CURRY: Yes. This is when I was at Bradford. Bradford.

MR. BROWN: Bradford, yes, years later.

MS. CURRY: I liked that place. That was a good place. I learned a lot from that experience. This is why I say it's interesting to me about the kind of life that I've had. Each has been a little oasis all its own, really. And each thing has been so completely different, completely different from any of the others. And my friends in Chicago were newspaper people. Now, Doris Flees, and you may not know of her.

MR. BROWN: I've heard of her.

MS. CURRY: Do you know of her?

MR. BROWN: I've only heard of her.

MS. CURRY: Doris Flees, one of my good friends when I was young. And Kathleen McLaughlin, who died the other day, very well - known newspaper woman. A great friend of mine. I was quite at ease with newspaper people. Last Saturday there was a man in -

MR. BROWN: In 1936 John began the - before you moved, I guess, to Madison he began the Department of Justice murals.

MS. CURRY: Yes.

MR. BROWN: How did that project get going? Did somebody come to him or -

MS. CURRY: Oh, he had an awful lot of -

MR. BROWN: How did it begin?

MS. CURRY: How did - well, now, let me see. I should think you have correspondence of that.

MR. BROWN: Yes, but do you remember? Did he go to Washington and talk to somebody?

MS. CURRY: I don't remember how it came into being, really. I remember meeting all the people, you know, that he was working with. But I can't quite remember. But I remember when he put them up we went to Washington, Ellen, John and I. And again, he had to put them up when there was no traffic through there because he had all his scaffolding there. So again, I would go at night and leave the maid at the hotel on my floor with Ellen. Her desk was right outside. So Ellen must have been about 10 or 11. I'm not quite sure. Anyway, again there was nothing to sit on there. And John would be up on the scaffolding and I would be lying, midnight, lying on the floor, on the cold marble floor, because he was completely, we were completely alone there.

MR. BROWN: In the Justice Department building?

MS. CURRY: That's the Department of Justice building.

MR. BROWN: Now, that was after they had turned down the -

MS. CURRY: That was after they were installed on the wall.

MR. BROWN: But he had difficulty over the subjects.

MS. CURRY: Oh, yes. Yes. That was -

MR. BROWN: Particularly the freeing of the slaves.

MS. CURRY: Yes, that's right. No, I just remember all of that and all the unpleasantness going back and forth and the constant new idea, new idea, new conception where he did justice defeating mob violence. He wasn't happy about that, not a bit. That's what he wanted. That's what he should have had. But it's a good mural. It tells - it is mob violence and here is the man escaping up to justice, you see, and there's the judge. It's a wonderful conception.

MR. BROWN: Indeed.

MS. CURRY: And there's the old automobile and the lights and so forth. I think that young man that posed, that young man that posed is an artist in Westport still. Ask Bill McCloy his name, will you? Because Bill was at Andover, I think, with that young man when they were both - check with William, will you?

MR. BROWN: And he would have posed in Westport?

MS. CURRY: He posed, this young man posed for John as the fugitive getting to Justice and now he's a well - known artist in Westport. I think his father was an artist too. Things escape me. It's hard to remember all these fine points of things.

MR. BROWN: But John was having a very busy career in New York even despite the Depression. He was -

MS. CURRY: Before he went to Wisconsin?

MR. BROWN: Yes. How did he decide on going to Wisconsin? Who approached him to suggest he go to Wisconsin?

MS. CURRY: What made him go?

MR. BROWN: Mm hmm. Did someone talk to him?

MS. CURRY: It was a good chance, you know. And I think, if I'm not mistaken, it was Grant Wood who recommended him.

MR. BROWN: He had known Grant Wood for a while, hadn't he?

MS. CURRY: Well, out in Iowa, Stone City, at one time. John - this is before I was married - was out there in Stone City. I think - I don't know whether he was studying or - I don't know. It was before my time so I couldn't say. But it was Grant Wood, if I remember correctly, who recommended. I'm not sure that Grant Wood wasn't offered the job, see.

MR. BROWN: Mm hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. CURRY: But he was quite happy in Iowa, so he recommended John. That's how that came about.

MR. BROWN: And you say John was pleased to have the offer?

MS. CURRY: Oh, delighted. Yes, he was. But when we went out there to be interviewed - you had to take your wife along because she's going to be part of it - Phil La Follette, Dean Christensen and a couple of other people from the faculty were there. Now, the person who had that job before John, that position before John, that came out of the Brittingham Foundation. Tom Brittingham was a very wealthy man and he - that was it. So when - who was the man that came there before? They had a man in that position under the Brittingham Foundation. Well, he'd been there for five years and I don't think Tom was very happy with him. He was either a philosopher or whatever. Tom Brittingham wasn't particularly interested in keeping that man on another five years. So then John came and it was out of the Brittingham Foundation that John was to be there. Now, the previous man got \$4,000 a year and when John went up he was offered at this meeting after they'd interviewed him \$3,500 a year. And John came out and we sat and talked. He said, "They've offered me \$3,500 a year but I don't want to go for that." So I said, "John, go in and tell them that you don't want the job for \$3,500 a year. Nice of you to offer it to me, but I couldn't possibly come for that." So he went in and told them and he came out and sat with me again. And then Phil La Follette, governor -

MR. BROWN: Governor of Wisconsin.

MS. CURRY: The state, said well, they would make up the extra \$500, so John got his \$4,000. I can't think of that other man's name.

MR. BROWN: Well, the other man wasn't an artist, was he? The other man was not -

MS. CURRY: No. No.

MR. BROWN: But John was -

MS. CURRY: John was the artist.

MR. BROWN: Probably about the first artist in residence?

MS. CURRY: He was the first.

MR. BROWN: In this country.

MS. CURRY: That was the first chair that had been created for an artist in residence. No working, no teaching. And whatever he did there, if they wanted him to do something he was paid for it.

MR. BROWN: On top of his salary?

MS. CURRY: On top of his salary. Now, I think he did the murals in the biochemistry building. He was paid for that. That was that. Then privately he did a decoration for a bank, but that was nothing to do with the college. That was outside. But they did pay him for that. No reason why he shouldn't, why they shouldn't pay him. That was the stipulation. Oh, but at the end of his day when he'd finished what they liked, you know, let's say if somebody wanted to come in the afternoon, if the student wanted to come when John had finished painting, just call up, make an appointment, and John would visit with him, talk to him. Many, many students did that. But his day was his own until let's say 3:00 or 4:00. After that the students. And then, of course, now and again the state would invite him to come and make a lecture. He would do that. It was not a thing he enjoyed doing. He didn't. It really, it was nothing that he wanted to do. But when he made his first speech at Wisconsin it was a fine speech. You have a copy of it, haven't you?

MR. BROWN: Mm hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. CURRY: In the archives. If you haven't, I think I still have it. And I can even give it to you, I think, in his handwriting. I am not sure, but I think I have it if you -

MR. BROWN: Sure.

MS. CURRY: That would be nice to have.

MR. BROWN: Mm hmm. [Affirmative.] Well, I'm just curious. Why was this appointment in the College of Agriculture?

MS. CURRY: Why?

MR. BROWN: At the University of Wisconsin.

MS. CURRY: Why was he? Because Dean Christensen was a Dane and in Denmark - if this is correct; I think this is - the rural people, it was something to do with the rural people. And he was a Dane and he felt that they should be brought in to get another portion of education. And I thought that was very enlightening. And he was dean of the Agricultural College. John knew agriculture, knew about farming, knew about cattle, knew about this, perfectly at home with the rural people. And Chris was delighted. They were very good friends. And Chris fought tooth and nail for John when anybody said, "Well, he's getting \$4,000 and not teaching. What's he getting his money for?" Chris took over that. There was never any question about it. And he was the first one in the country, and that was quite unique. There have been many since then.

MR. BROWN: What was Dean Christensen like?

MS. CURRY: I beg your pardon?

MR. BROWN: Dean Christensen, what was he like as a personality?

MS. CURRY: What was he like? He was a Dane. Tall, very outgoing; at least he was with us. I don't know. A sophisticated man in a European way. I don't know whether I've made myself understood on that. A very, very nice man. He resigned from the - or was he still dean? I think he wanted to be governor and ran for it but he didn't make it and left, went somewhere else.

MR. BROWN: Now, you mentioned the money for John's salary came from Tom Brittingham, his foundation.

MS. CURRY: It came from the Brittingham Foundation, whatever it was.

MR. BROWN: And they had some affiliation with the university? They had some affiliation with the university, the foundation did?

MS. CURRY: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Tom was very much on the ball about that. And also I think - in fact, I think lots of the -

[Audio Break.]

MS. CURRY: If I think of what it was. Scientists were working on something and it was a very private thing, you know, but they needed a sponsor. I think that was the sort of thing. Now, I'm not sure who - you know -

MR. BROWN: This was a -

MS. CURRY: And I think that [inaudible] is -

MR. BROWN: [Inaudible.]

MS. CURRY: What the scientists were working on, chemical things, chemistry.

MR. BROWN: And did the Brittingham Foundation help support the research?

MS. CURRY: Yes. And I think some of that money from the Brittingham Foundation would go into projects like that, science.

MR. BROWN: Mm hmm, mm hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. CURRY: Legg [inaudible] or Professor Legg. I can't think of it. I'll have to ask [inaudible] I think was the substance that they put in - rat, to kill, rat poisoning. When he was working on that he was out at the house and he said, "You know, I'm not very popular with my family now." And John said, "Why not?" He said, "Well, I want to try this -

[Audio Break.]

MS. CURRY: To see if it [inaudible] and he said, "I'm not going to go to the pound and get a dog." He said, "I can't do this. I must try it on my own dog first." The scientist, try it on your own child first, you see.

MR. BROWN: Mm hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. CURRY: So his wife didn't think much of him and his children didn't think much of him because he was going to try it on his own dog first. He wouldn't go and take a stray dog. Well, that's a scientist for you.

MR. BROWN: Sure, it is.

MS. CURRY: See, that's the way. I can understand that. I can understand that very well. But my -

[END TAPE 2 SIDE A]

MR. BROWN: Our interview with Mrs. John Steuart Curry and this is Robert Brown, the interviewer. We're in Uncasville, Connecticut. July 1, 1992. We talked somewhat about your marriage and your early years in Westport, Connecticut. Then John got an appointment at the University of Wisconsin. How did that come about?

MS. CURRY: Well, that came about through, I gather, Grant Wood. I think it was Grant Wood who suggested it but it had something to do with Christensen. No, Mrs. Nesbitt. Mrs. Nesbitt.

MR. BROWN: Mrs. Nesbitt. And who was she?

MS. CURRY: She was the wife of Dr. Nesbitt and she had known Grant Wood in Iowa, the University of Iowa. And I think that's how that appointment came about. And it was suggested to Christensen, who was a very enlightened man, Dean Christensen.

MR. BROWN: Dean of the School of Agriculture.

MS. CURRY: Yes, and he was a Dane. In Denmark I presume that all - I'm a little hazy about that. But he wanted the farm people to get a feeling of art; other things, you know, besides farming, and have hobbies. And that's how that came about. And John used to go and visit the farms, talk to the farm people. And when they had Farm and Home Week they would bring in, if I recollect correctly, their paintings, and they would have a big exhibition. And one picture I remember, one painting by the farm wife was a very interesting one. Here was the sow - that term.

MR. BROWN: Mm hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. CURRY: There was the sow with all her little piglets. They were all nursing. And the title of that painting was "They're Cute When They're Little."

MR. BROWN: [Laughs.]

MS. CURRY: Which I thought was quite - it applies to so many things, cute when they're little.

MR. BROWN: Mm hmm. [Laughs.]

MS. CURRY: So that was that one.

MR. BROWN: Well, would John be away for some -

[Audio Break.]

MR. BROWN: - reluctant to leave the New York area?

MS. CURRY: Oh, not a bit. Not a bit. And when - this was very interesting because when [inaudible] first came for an interview before John was - they interview first of all to see if you'll work out. Then I think it was the same time Nesbitt, Phil La Follette, Chris Christensen. Phil La Follette was governor. Now, the previous man who had held this position, this chair, before John, his salary was \$4,000 a year. So when it came to the time they'd like to have John they offered him \$3,500 a year. So John came out rather disgruntled and he said, "They offered me \$3,500." I said, "Don't take it, John. Just say no." And he said, "We need the money." I said, "We don't need it that much. Don't compromise." So he went back in for another round of chatter, and John came out again. Finally they decided, Phil said that he would get the extra \$500 from the legislature and that's how he got his \$4,000. Now, that was -

MR. BROWN: That was a fairly small amount, although it was a fairly good salary for -

MS. CURRY: Oh, it was a great -

MR. BROWN: - the middle of the Depression.

MS. CURRY: It was a splendid salary. And the obligations that went through that, he didn't have to teach. Students would come at the end of the day and John would talk to them, advise them, bring their work, et cetera. That was all part of it. But to get back to the \$3,500, it was from the Brittingham Foundation.

MR. BROWN: Oh, a private foundation?

MS. CURRY: Private foundation. Tom.

MR. BROWN: Tom Brittingham.

MS. CURRY: The Brittingham Foundation, B r i t t i n g h a m. A very, very rich man.

MR. BROWN: Was he a local man in Wisconsin?

MS. CURRY: I would think the family was local, and I believe that they were lumber barons in Wisconsin.

MR. BROWN: Northern Wisconsin.

MS. CURRY: Yes. So, you know, that part of the life didn't come into my part, you know. That was something else.

MR. BROWN: They did have you go out with John for the interview?

MS. CURRY: I went out with John. But I gather they decided that perhaps I was all right, too.

MR. BROWN: Did you like them immediately, the people, Christensen?

MS. CURRY: Oh, yes. He was a very warm man, very nice man. I think they didn't quite know much about an artist. Grant Wood was different. That was quite a different thing. They weren't quite sure as to whether - I don't know. But we were -

MR. BROWN: Who was his predecessor? Who was John's predecessor there?

MS. CURRY: Now I can't remember his name. He wasn't very successful. I don't know what department he belonged to. I don't think - he may have come under agriculture, too. But he had some very strange ideas about agricultural students. One time he said to the students, "Now, get close to the earth." This is how I remember it was explained. "And bring in some of the earth with you into the dormitory to fertilize."

MR. BROWN: [Laughs.]

MS. CURRY: Christensen was horrified but he didn't say anything. So the students, agriculture students smeared their dormitory with this.

MR. BROWN: Fertilizer and dirt, soil and everything.

MS. CURRY: Soil, manure. And Christensen just let it go. They spent the night in that dormitory, and were they glad to get that cleaned up the next day. Now, that was one of the suggestions of this, of John's predecessor. I don't know whether it was psychology or - I don't know.

MR. BROWN: So when it came time to interview John they were being very careful and cautious?

MS. CURRY: Very careful for the next one. Well, they couldn't have had anybody more matter - of - fact than John, you know. Both of us were. But those were the things that were part of it.

MR. BROWN: So when you moved out there where did you live in the beginning? Did you live in the city?

MS. CURRY: We lived on Arlington Heights for one year and then they sold. It was a faculty house and then they sold that house and we agreed, let's get a place of our own. Well, the Nesbitts and that group were well - to - do people and lived in a very fashionable, rich area of Maple Bluff and it was called Maple Bluff. Well, that wasn't going to be my idea of how to live.

MR. BROWN: Why, it was too elaborate or -

MS. CURRY: Too elaborate. It just wasn't what John would have liked because there would have been - well, it was just not for us. And so we found the house in the country, and perfect setting for him.

MR. BROWN: Well, you've mentioned that the first house you saw was in the middle of the university arboretum.

MS. CURRY: Oh, the arboretum. A very [inaudible] garden house, you know.

MR. BROWN: And John was interested in moving in, is that right?

MS. CURRY: Yes. So I think it was the terrain that captivated him at the arboretum. And, you know, people would be always going in and out of the arboretum and so forth, and it was nothing that interested me at all. That's when I said, "Well, John, buy it if you want to but I won't be there."

MR. BROWN: [Laughs.]

MS. CURRY: Well, of course, he loved the house that we got.

MR. BROWN: Which was near the arboretum, wasn't it?

MS. CURRY: Not too far. Not too far. But -

MR. BROWN: And could you describe that house and its surroundings a bit?

MS. CURRY: The one we lived in?

MR. BROWN: Mm hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. CURRY: Well, I would say it was about 100 years old, an old farmhouse, nicely built. A solid house. Old fashioned kitchen with something I presume you call a cellar kitchen, which had a black sink and a pump and you could hear the water running in the cistern underneath, which rather frightened me. So to be sure that I couldn't fall through the floor - it wouldn't have happened, of course - I had the whole place covered in linoleum. Nothing like that would have happened but there was always the feeling. You could hear the water down there. Obviously a well. But spacious rooms, high ceilings. What else?

MR. BROWN: How did you furnish it? Did you bring things from Connecticut with you?

MS. CURRY: We brought what we had. And as you can see the furniture that we have here today, it was the same kind of simple furniture. I'm a simple person. I like good furniture, some semblance of tradition.

MR. BROWN: What did you become involved with while you were there in Madison? Did you participate in -

MS. CURRY: Not really. Not really.

MR. BROWN: Well, was there a particular circle of friends you developed?

MS. CURRY: Well, I belonged, I was invited to join a reading group and in the reading group was Ellen Garrison, Lord Garrison's wife.

MR. BROWN: He was then dean of the law school, wasn't he?

MS. CURRY: Dean of the law school. And he was the power behind the throne to get those John Brown - no, freeing of the slaves.

MR. BROWN: Oh, the Justice Department mural?

MS. CURRY: Justice Department murals.

MR. BROWN: John did those while he was in Madison?

MS. CURRY: John did those while he was in Madison. And Lord Garrison saw them. As you know the story, he was absolutely overcome by this conception of freeing the slaves. And he said - he knew the story, of course. They'd been refused by Washington, which was very foolish but there we are.

MR. BROWN: Was John very upset by the refusal?

MS. CURRY: Yes.

MR. BROWN: Or angry?

MS. CURRY: Yes, he was very upset by that. And when he got upset he was difficult, you know. He'd be so depressed. You didn't know - and moody, awfully moody because he was depressed, you see. Something that he felt was a profound piece of history had been rejected by this group of men who said that it was too controversial. Today it would be a very different story. And that's where that mural should have been instead of Justice defeating mob violence.

MR. BROWN: Which is one they accepted?

MS. CURRY: Which is the one they accepted. A splendid thing, but not what John had put his soul into. And there was a great deal of back and forth with the committee in Washington. And I was in the studio one day and John said, "Send a telegram. Send a telegram. Ask them do they want me to crawl to Washington on my belly." So I took it down but after a while he calmed down and I didn't send it. But that's what his reaction was. And if you look at the mural closely who triumphed from that? America was divided. Brothers were fighting brothers whether the North, whether the South. Fathers were fighting sons. A great, great tragedy. And if you look at the mural you will see at the foot of the liberated slaves - they are coming out triumphant - a North and a South soldier lie dead at the foot of the freed slaves. And, you know, I wish somebody would sometime point that out to the Afro Americans that are discontented. I don't - they keep talking about descending from the slaves. That's a great tragedy but look what's come, look where they've come compared to what they might be in Africa today. If a slave [inaudible] had not been their savior, as a matter of fact. Any sense to that? It is to me.

MR. BROWN: Mm hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. CURRY: Well, go ahead.

MR. BROWN: Did people come around and watch as John was doing these studies or did - he customarily had nobody in his studio, did he?

MS. CURRY: No, nobody, not when he would do a study. When he was painting, not people.

MR. BROWN: Students?

MS. CURRY: Students or very carefully - they always called up and made appointments to come after 4:00. And it was mostly students. Not many people from the art department. That was another bone of contention.

MR. BROWN: Oh, was it? They were not particularly sympathetic or close?

MS. CURRY: No, they were not. And John didn't come under the art department, you see. And when you're talking to Gene -

MR. BROWN: His brother Eugene, yes.

MS. CURRY: Yes. Ask him to tell you about his visit to Madison and what he said as a criticism to the art department. He really took them to task.

MR. BROWN: Oh, really? Eugene, Gene did?

MS. CURRY: Eugene did, of their treatment of John when he was there. Very antagonistic, very superior. Very superior.

MR. BROWN: Really?

MS. CURRY: Eugene -

MR. BROWN: This was on the part of the artists as well?

MS. CURRY: Yes. He was defending John, you see.

MR. BROWN: Yes. So neither you nor John got to know the people in the art department very well?

MS. CURRY: But there were a lot of, there was a lot of antagonism. I've forgotten the day but one professor from - was it the art department? Yes. I'll have to look it up and see for you. Who brought his students. By the way, in one edition of "Life" there is this one professor surrounded by his students looking at what John was painting. It's in a copy of "Life."

MR. BROWN: Mm hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. CURRY: You've got it.

MR. BROWN: Well, there was a Professor Watrice there who was interested in techniques and all.

MS. CURRY: Yes, but -

MR. BROWN: There was some antagonism there?

MS. CURRY: Yes. Very, very superior.

MR. BROWN: Now, I know also there was a German born art historian named Oscar Hagen.

MS. CURRY: Oscar Hagen. He was the -

MR. BROWN: Did you get to know him a bit?

MS. CURRY: Yes. John painted a portrait of him. He was the chairman of the art history?

MR. BROWN: I would think so.

MS. CURRY: I think so. Bill would know. Very, very German looking, but good.

MR. BROWN: Who were some of the people that you and John were closest to? Maybe you could describe them a little bit. People you knew at that time.

MS. CURRY: Well, we saw the Nesbitts frequently.

MR. BROWN: Now, who were they?

MS. CURRY: Dr. Nesbitt; ear, nose and throat. His brother, Mark; eye.

MR. BROWN: Another doctor?

MS. CURRY: Yes. Very close to Tim Brown, who was John's lawyer, who finally became one of the judges I think of the Supreme Court.

MR. BROWN: I'm not sure. But he became a high judge in Wisconsin?

MS. CURRY: A high judge in Wisconsin. A very, very true good friend, really. I was devoted to them, he and his wife. Very, very nice people. Then on the periphery other people in Maple Bluff, but I would not say intimate. Not intimate. The Garrisons, the Christensens, Clark. Paul Clark was biochemistry. And then Norris Halls. He was also a biochemist. He, by the way, worked on the atom bomb. Alice. They were both Quakers. And Hughes, Merritt Hughes. He was the authority on Milton. Now, what department would that be?

MR. BROWN: Probably English.

MS. CURRY: English Department.

MR. BROWN: But these were people you would -

MS. CURRY: These were the people that I felt at home with. I felt at home with the others but it was different. It was different.

MR. BROWN: Would you entertain quite a lot at your farmhouse?

MS. CURRY: Yes. Yes, quite a lot.

MR. BROWN: You knew also Don Anderson, the publisher of the paper?

MS. CURRY: Oh, and the Andersons. Yes. They were very great friends. Great, staunch people for John. And after

- as you know, John liked to hunt and he sometimes - I don't think he hunted with Don but we went to [inaudible] you know, with the Andersons. Not with Florence, with Don. But at one time John was very anxious to get away and it might have been hunting with Don Anderson. And I said, "Don, you won't arrange that, will you?" He said, "Don't worry. No. We'll just keep postponing it." Because John could have had a stroke any moment.

MR. BROWN: This is because John had a hypertension condition?

MS. CURRY: Oh, yes. Yes.

MR. BROWN: Throughout the time you were married?

MS. CURRY: Yes. And the last - and he had several little slight strokes, you know, before he had his later stroke. So that was that.

MR. BROWN: You knew also or did you see Frank Lloyd Wright and his family? They were around the Madison area.

MS. CURRY: Yes. We went out to Taliesin there.

MR. BROWN: Did you get -

MS. CURRY: Not intimate, no.

MR. BROWN: What was Wright like? How was he when you were with him?

MS. CURRY: Well, it's hard to describe him, really. A dynamic man. My only one criticism of his architecture was the house that we stayed in - in Henry J. Allen's house he built in Emporia. Henry J., not Adams.

MR. BROWN: This was in Kansas?

MS. CURRY: Kansas.

MR. BROWN: White, could it have been?

MS. CURRY: What?

MR. BROWN: There was a famous editor named White.

MS. CURRY: Oh, no. No, not - Henry -

MR. BROWN: Well, we can get it later. And you stayed and that was a Frank Lloyd Wright house?

MS. CURRY: That was a Frank Lloyd Wright house. And there was a window seat here but to look out of the window you had to stand on the window seat to look out.

MR. BROWN: [Laughs.] Now, and so -

MS. CURRY: Henry J. Adam? I can't -

MR. BROWN: And did you go out to Taliesin?

MS. CURRY: Oh, we went out several times.

MR. BROWN: Several times?

MS. CURRY: Yes.

MR. BROWN: Was Wright a very commanding figure or did you or John get to talk with him quite a bit?

MR. BROWN: John did. There was always a crowd of acolytes around. And I think we went there to supper once. You should have asked Bill McCloy this. We went there. Bill once went out. One time we went for supper there and Frank Lloyd Wright and Mrs. Wright ate at a separate table and everybody would wait on them. We were the audience. It was quite a show. But you can't dismiss them. They're very important people. I liked them. And she was a Montenegro. She was born in Montenegro. And she'd been his wife, not by the church but his wife anyway. And finally they had a little girl. I think she was six by this time. Then they decided to marry and they took the little girl to the wedding, of course. But it was quite a story about that. Very engaging. Very, of course, brilliant.

MR. BROWN: Madison was a fairly accepting community, wasn't it, a rather liberal community in those days?

MS. CURRY: Well, was it? I can't say that because I don't know. I really don't. Phil La Follette, of course, was very progressive. And they had their paper the "Progressive," so I countered that by getting the "Christian Science Monitor."

MR. BROWN: [Laughs.]

MS. CURRY: So my paper was the "Monitor." John's was the "Progressive."

MR. BROWN: I see. But did you and John discuss politics and things?

MS. CURRY: I beg your pardon?

MR. BROWN: Did you and John discuss politics?

MS. CURRY: Oh, I suppose I voiced an opinion now and again. But I was definitely Republican. John sort of wavered.

MR. BROWN: Was he very talkative, John?

MS. CURRY: Talkative?

MR. BROWN: Mm hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. CURRY: Silent. Silent.

MR. BROWN: Well, somewhat related to that you've mentioned his duties at the university. I gather he painted until about 4:00 p.m. and then after that people, if they had made an appointment, might come and see him?

MS. CURRY: Yes.

MR. BROWN: Did he ever have to give lectures or talks at the university?

MS. CURRY: Only, I think only the one. As far as I remember was the one when he was appointed. You've got that, haven't you?

MR. BROWN: I think so, but go ahead and describe it. Were you there at the lecture?

MS. CURRY: Yes, and it was a very good lecture as a matter of fact. And as he - they were, of course, mimeographed. And as he came to the next page he'd just drop that on the floor. He read that, dropped it on the floor. Somebody went around and collected them all after, and I think gave them back to him. But he'd finished with that, you know. It was an excellent, excellent speech. I have a copy. Have you got it?

MR. BROWN: I'm not sure. Was it very well received, the speech?

MS. CURRY: John's speech. Remind me. I'll give that to you and if you haven't got it you can make one.

MR. BROWN: Sure.

MS. CURRY: That's the one and only speech that I remember John had to make.

MR. BROWN: He made. He no doubt gave informal criticisms when the students would come around?

MS. CURRY: Oh, probably, probably. But, you see, I wasn't in the studio when the students were there.

MR. BROWN: Now, he had assistants. Were some of those students? Well, we know William McCloy.

MS. CURRY: Yes, Bill McCloy and Bob Harger. He came from Kansas.

MR. BROWN: And did they come along not too long after you came to Madison?

MS. CURRY: Yes. And how I met the McCloys, I think probably Bill had gone over to the studio but I wouldn't be sure. Then John said, "I've met a very nice young couple. I want you to invite them out." So we invited them over. And they were not very happy in the apartment in which they lived and we had a milk house on this farm. So I said, "If we design the milk house would you come and live in it?" And they said yes. So they said, "Could we see the milk house?" And I said, "No, because if you did you wouldn't come."

MR. BROWN: [Laughs.]

MS. CURRY: But it turned out very well indeed. It was just a concrete block house with a concrete floor and that's what you'd have in a big nice milk house. So we cut a big north window, the sort of thing that you have, that artists have, a big north window.

MR. BROWN: Sure.

MS. CURRY: A nice sitting room. Built the fireplace, dug the well and put in heating and plumbing. A small, a nice kitchen, a nice bedroom and a bathroom. And out the back there were rows and rows of asparagus that you could cut to your heart's content, wonderful asparagus. And that was that.

MR. BROWN: So you became very close then with the McCloys?

MS. CURRY: Yes. Yes, very. I'm very fond of them, very fond of them.

MR. BROWN: And John needed assistance because he was doing quite a few murals?

MS. CURRY: Yes. Yes. Bill was painting murals. He did one I think for a historical society. Bill was a great help. And I think there was another young man from the art department - I've forgotten what his name was - began an argument, take over a little bit. Bob Harger. Sort of belittling Bob a little bit. So John didn't say anything but sent Bob Harger out to buy some ice cream cones and bring them back. And in the interim John very quietly dismissed the other boy, but he did that very nicely. He didn't, not a word in front of Bob or between them. I thought that was a very sensitive way of tackling something sensitively.

MR. BROWN: Yes. Did you or did John stay in touch with other people in the art world? For example, Thomas Hart Benton, did -

MS. CURRY: Oh, yes, John did. And when John was working on his mural in Kansas he used to go out and see the Bentons and stay with them. I wasn't there, you know.

MR. BROWN: Did you get to meet the Bentons?

MS. CURRY: Oh, yes. Yes, we stayed with them one time when they had a big [inaudible] ball, and that's when we stayed with the Bentons.

MR. BROWN: This was where, in Kansas City?

MS. CURRY: Kansas. I showed you that clipping of that, didn't I? The picture. I'll show it to you again when we go up.

MR. BROWN: What was Benton like? Could you describe him a bit?

MS. CURRY: Oh, well, there were a lot of people there. He played, they played their mouth organs and such things. It's very hard to give any real impression because there were a lot of people there. Nobody I knew, many John didn't know. But it was his field, you see.

MR. BROWN: Was Benton quite a gregarious person compared with John?

MS. CURRY: Oh, yes, he was very bubbly.

MR. BROWN: And what about the critic, you know, who helped so much to publicize the regionalist painters, Thomas Craven? Did you know him at all?

MS. CURRY: Yes. We used to go out and visit them in Great Neck, Long Island. Yes, John and he were very compatible. Good companionship. And I was very fond of Eileen. She did the publicity for - who could it be? Oh, some Hollywood -

MR. BROWN: Studio or company?

MS. CURRY: Yes. Her father was a music critic at one time. I'm not sure if he wasn't at the time, really. Very lively, very vivacious Irish girl. Very nice. I liked talking to her. Very good friend to me after John died, a great help.

MR. BROWN: Reginald Marsh, did you continue to see him now and then?

MS. CURRY: Yes.

MR. BROWN: He'd been a good friend, hadn't he?

MS. CURRY: Yes, and he was a good friend to me after John died. And I told the story when John and I went to visit him one hot summer and Reggie was working in his studio down on, you know, where the [inaudible] studios were in those days. And here was Reggie in his shorts, bare feet, painting. And he turned to me and said, "Would you like a painting?" I said, "Thank you very much, I would." So he handed me this one that he'd been painting on. The paint was still wet. He stuck a piece of paper on it and soon after that we left. We carried the painting. And went back to the hotel. Then John went out to see Reggie again. He said, "Well, this time he didn't have his shorts on." [Laughs.] Just bare naked looking out the window with his glasses.

MR. BROWN: Yes.

MS. CURRY: As he often did, you know. A very dear man. I liked him very much indeed.

MR. BROWN: Sort of a bohemian streak?

MS. CURRY: Yes and no. Yes and no. You know, rather like - not like, but Waldo Pierce. Bohemian but not really. There is that other side to the rich man's, you know [inaudible] and the same thing with Reggie. With that slight difference and yet being able, but yet being free. Do you know what I'm talking about?

MR. BROWN: Mm hmm. Mm hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. CURRY: That's what I felt about that. Quite at ease about everything and, of course, very bright. Both of those men traveled extensively.

MR. BROWN: Well, you in 1938 went with John to Europe, is that right? You took a trip.

MS. CURRY: Yes.

MR. BROWN: What was the purpose of that? How did that come about?

MS. CURRY: Why? I think he wanted to go and see Venice and all the great art that is there: Rubens, Rembrandt, Florence, Assisi. Then go to Holland and see Rembrandt, you know.

MR. BROWN: So it was mainly a touring?

MS. CURRY: Mainly an exercise. And, of course, he had security at Wisconsin so he had a job. And all I know is - oh, no, that's something else. But we had just enough money to pay the round trip tickets and live in the most economical manner possible. We didn't have money.

[END TAPE 2 SIDE B]

MS. CURRY: We didn't have enough money to last until he got his paycheck so John borrowed \$300 to carry us through. Gene gave him \$100. The Sterns, who did the sculpture of John, gave him \$100. And a friend of mine who was working on "Harper's Bazaar" lent him \$100. That was how close we were.

MR. BROWN: And the same applied to your trip to Europe. You had to be very careful.

MS. CURRY: Very, very meager.

MR. BROWN: Do you recall any highlights of that trip to Europe for yourself? Were there -

MS. CURRY: Well, for myself?

MR. BROWN: I mean, it was the late '30s. War was on the horizon.

MS. CURRY: In England it was very tense all the time when you were going back and forth on the train, filled with soldiers. Very, very tense. And of course, John was an isolationist. Very opposed to the war.

MR. BROWN: Mm hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. CURRY: And as I told you, when we were in Munich - I've forgotten the name of that very famous street there where a group of Hitler's troops were shot. They were [inaudible] there. So when we were there they always - I understand once a year or whatever the case might be they would commemorate that spot. And the day that we were there we were standing on the sidewalk. Down came the troops. And everybody, "Heil Hitler. Heil Hitler." And we were sort of wedged in the crowd. And I said, "I'm not going to 'Heil Hitler.'" I said, "I'm not going to do it." And there was a woman with her husband standing close beside me and she said, "Go back and tell them. Go back and tell them." And the man said to her, "Stop talking. Stop talking." And her husband said, "Heil Hitler." I said, "I won't do it," and I didn't. But you could see how tense everyone was at that time.

MR. BROWN: John was more accommodating or he didn't -

MS. CURRY: He, "Oh, what does it matter. Heil Hitler." I said, "I won't do it." It [inaudible] really. Rather than be conspicuous. Are you tired?

MR. BROWN: No. Did you have a chance to see your family when you got to England?

MS. CURRY: Yes, I saw my father and mother and my sister, my two sisters. One after the war migrated, they migrated to South Africa and lived in Kenya. And that was a very dangerous time, too. That was the time of the Mau Mau.

MR. BROWN: Oh, yes, the native terrorists.

MS. CURRY: Yes. And Richard's cousin was a rancher there and he was one of the men that the Mau Mau demolished. It was very [inaudible] indeed. And when the war came there was this very old house my father might have lived in. The bomb dropped and blew off all the front of the house. It was very close. They escaped, but lots of devastation.

MR. BROWN: Well, when the war came you and John were in Madison, right?

MS. CURRY: Yes. That was - yes, that was it. And that's when John was adamant about the war, adamant. And the people that we rented the house before we bought it from them, he was a German. It was a very pro German section out there, Wisconsin. And I was talking to her one day and she said, "No, we never never discuss the war." He was pro German, she was not. That would be very difficult.

MR. BROWN: Oh, yes. Yes.

MS. CURRY: Very trying.

MR. BROWN: Yes. Did John continue to work regardless? I mean, after World War II came did he just maintain his pace of working very steadily?

MS. CURRY: After the war? Oh, yes.

MR. BROWN: No, during the war. After the war began.

MS. CURRY: Oh, yes. Yes, he went on about his work.

MR. BROWN: He was a hard worker, hasn't he?

MS. CURRY: Oh, yes.

MR. BROWN: I mean, regularly was in there?

MS. CURRY: Yes, and that was another thing that was interesting to the people that we lived beside. They thought an artist would just work when the spirit moved him and they were amazed to see John leave the house at a quarter to 8:00, 8:00, 7:30, every day and come home about 5:00. That was something. That was a new experience for them, a new encounter, how artists work. They work very hard, you know, all the ones that I've ever known.

MR. BROWN: Were there any particular experiences you remember during World War II in terms of his work, any of the projects he was working on?

MS. CURRY: Well, didn't he paint "Parade to War"?

MR. BROWN: "Parade to War," yes.

MS. CURRY: Yes, "Parade to War." Now, look at the soldiers.

MR. BROWN: A good many of those are skulls, not real faces.

MS. CURRY: Of course. They all are. And here's the old lady. You won't see it in this one. These two little boys, you know, going off. I posed for that one.

MR. BROWN: Mm hmm. Mm hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. CURRY: Here's the old lady crying.

MR. BROWN: She knows, yes.

MS. CURRY: She knows.

MR. BROWN: Yes.

MS. CURRY: That was sold through, what's her name, before -

MR. BROWN: Oh, Kennedy Gallery?

MS. CURRY: Kennedy Gallery.

MR. BROWN: Did he have commissions at this time too? Was he working on certain mural commissions during World War II or did much of that slow down?

MS. CURRY: Yes, he probably was. The biochemistry, I would say; he worked on those.

MR. BROWN: The murals at the university?

MS. CURRY: Yes.

MR. BROWN: Now, did his health begin deteriorating and he had to have an -

MS. CURRY: Yes.

MR. BROWN: He had an experimental operation that did not work?

MS. CURRY: Well, he didn't know he had high blood pressure because we don't actually [inaudible] until he went to apply for life insurance after - and when he went to apply for life insurance he had high blood pressure [inaudible] you see. And it seemed to me as though that was the beginning of the anxiety of high blood pressure. Now, of course, he always had a premonition of not going to live very long.

MR. BROWN: He did?

MS. CURRY: "I've got a lot of work to do. I'm not going to live very long." Almost - he said 10 years and he died -

MR. BROWN: He died within the 10 years.

MS. CURRY: See, within - '36 and he died in '46. Just 10 years. Some people have premonitions.

MR. BROWN: That must have made you a bit anxious as well?

MS. CURRY: Oh -

MR. BROWN: The fact that he was brooding over this sort of thing.

MS. CURRY: Oh, you can't imagine. There's no feeling that you can imagine, constantly knowing and seeing the deterioration of what every little stroke will do. Yes.

MR. BROWN: Before he died, though, the project to write a book on him had come about, hadn't it, the book that became, "John Steuart Curry's Pageant of America"?

MS. CURRY: That was done while he was alive.

MR. BROWN: Yeah, before he died.

MS. CURRY: Before he died.

MR. BROWN: And this was Laurence Schmeckebier.

MS. CURRY: Schmeckebier, yes.

MR. BROWN: Who had been at Wisconsin at one time.

MS. CURRY: And there were some people that I was fond of while they lived there in Madison. He left to go to Cincinnati.

MR. BROWN: Yes, and Minnesota as well. Minnesota, mm hmm.

MS. CURRY: Yes, and that book has been invaluable. Some criticize and say not this and that and the other, but it's a catalog. It's invaluable. And the way John would talk to Laurence. Have you read it?

MR. BROWN: Yes.

MS. CURRY: Yes, of course you have.

MR. BROWN: So he worked there. John spent a lot of time with Laurence on that.

MS. CURRY: Oh, hours, hours. Laurence would come over to his studio and look at the things and talk to John.

MR. BROWN: So as John was dying on the other hand you had this tribute to him about to be published. Which came first, John's death or the publication of the book? About the same time, wasn't it? The same year, I think.

MS. CURRY: I think it was published when John was still alive. I can see by the book in there. I think it -

MR. BROWN: That's right, yes.

MS. CURRY: Yes, it was. It was, because John autographed it to me, one of them. That's right.

MR. BROWN: He was very pleased?

MS. CURRY: Yes, yes, he was. He had no criticism of it at all, not at all.

MR. BROWN: Well, when he died you and your daughter, what had you thought of doing? Because you knew his health was deteriorating but you were rather helpless at the moment, weren't you? He'd been the support.

MS. CURRY: Helpless, as you say. Because, you know, there's no life insurance, no money that you could save because even with all of these commissions that John had, big ones, it went in paying health, material, canvas. There was very little left, very little left. And I stayed in the house, eventually sold it, moved to a smaller house in Madison. Made a little bit of money; probably \$5,000, if that. Then I realized I just could not go on living there.

MR. BROWN: Why, was there too many associations?

MS. CURRY: Well, not that. Not so much associations. Close the book, move away, don't hang on the fringes all the time. That's very bad. And Ellen had finished her education. And I talked to Chester Norris Jones, who is related to Jones.

MR. BROWN: Yes, related to Wright, the architect.

MS. CURRY: Wright, and Carolyn Lloyd Jones is a great friend of mine. They had moved to Massachusetts. She said, "Come along down. We'll look around the countryside and you can branch out from there and stay with us." You know, so I went, stayed about a week. And I said to Ellen, "Let's drive down to Newburyport and see John Vancourt."

MR. BROWN: Was he someone you had known from Connecticut?

MS. CURRY: Madison.

MR. BROWN: From Madison?

MS. CURRY: Madison. He was the art department at Madison.

MR. BROWN: He was a student or a teacher there?

MS. CURRY: Teacher, yes. So we drove to Newburyport and I got a real estate man. I said, "Show us some houses in Newburyport." So he took us to the usual conventional house and I said, "That isn't what I want. I would like an old house." So he said, "Well, I've got a very old house and it's in terrible condition but it's a fine house." So we looked and it was in poor condition. So he said, "It's \$10,000," so I said, "All right, I'll go back to Madison and I'll see if I can sell that house. If I can sell that house I'll buy this one." So I went back to Madison and put it up for sale. And I think I got \$25,000 for it. Paid off all that, the mortgage, et cetera, et cetera. Had about \$10,000 left. Came back to Newburyport and bought that house and paid cash. Then Ellen and I lived in it while - oh, we did it on nothing, absolutely nothing. It was a very nice house, as you can see.

MR. BROWN: Mm hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. CURRY: And that was that. Then -

MR. BROWN: And Ellen went off to school?

MS. CURRY: Ellen went to New York. She'd finished her education. And got a job as a fabric designer, did very well.

MR. BROWN: Had she been trained in art school?

MS. CURRY: Yes. She'd had an art - in Madison when she was in school there. Then Ellen got married, you see. Here was I, rattling around this big house. And talked to John Vancourt and he said, "Why don't you go and see if you can buy that concrete block garage there." So I went and approached them and they sold it to me for \$4,000.

MR. BROWN: And then you fixed it up as a house?

MS. CURRY: Yes, fixed it up.

MR. BROWN: This was in West Newbury, wasn't it?

MS. CURRY: Yes. Didn't you come there?

MR. BROWN: Yes, I did.

MS. CURRY: West Newbury, yes. Just a concrete block. And my next door neighbor who sold us the house, the building, her daughter was an architect at Harvard so she remodeled it. It was a very nice little house. Then taxes were going up and I wasn't - and Ellen was married. And I thought, "I'm going to move away from here." So I said to Patricia, "Find something here."

MR. BROWN: The McClellans, yes.

MS. CURRY: Right.

MR. BROWN: Who had moved to Connecticut, yes.

MS. CURRY: Yes. So then I sold that house and made \$25,000 from that. You see, it's always a sort of salvation. I keep making a little bit of money. So then I bought this for \$22,000, took the money, remodeled it and it's mine.

MR. BROWN: Yes. And this, interestingly, had been the house and studio of a woman painter, Beatrice Cumming, right? This had been built by -

MS. CURRY: Yes.

MR. BROWN: - a painter?

MS. CURRY: Yes. She was an artist and that's the reason for that nice arrangement upstairs. That's a beautiful room up there. But I did all the alterations in the windows and so forth and so on. And it was Bill who said when he was up there, he said, "Your view is there."

MR. BROWN: Toward the river.

MS. CURRY: Yes. The view is there. That's when I tore out that whole face and put in all of those windows up there so that you got that wonderful view. That's it. So being able to survive by this kind of thing. And it's only very recently that anything has been sold. Very little after John died. Nothing, really and truly.

MR. BROWN: There simply was no market to speak of?

MS. CURRY: No market. And he'd gone out of fashion.

MR. BROWN: Yes.

MS. CURRY: But that turned around.

MR. BROWN: So after - in the '40s then there was no real market for John's paintings?

MS. CURRY: No. No, not at all. Not at all.

MR. BROWN: You told us earlier -

MS. CURRY: You couldn't give it away.

MR. BROWN: You said earlier that people like Reginald Marsh and Thomas Craven and all were very helpful at this time.

MS. CURRY: They were helpful. And it was Tom Benton who suggested going to Graham.

MR. BROWN: The Graham Gallery?

MS. CURRY: Yes. But Graham didn't work very hard. And as he said to Dan, he said -

MR. BROWN: Your son in law, Dan Chester?

MS. CURRY: Yes. He said to Dan, he said, "You know, I didn't work very well."

MR. BROWN: At least he admitted it.

MS. CURRY: He was - he admitted it. He was lazy. A charming man, absolutely delightful. But what really provoked me was I was staying with a friend of mine in a house who did the same kind of job, who recommended me for a house advisor.

MR. BROWN: Oh, yes, that's what you worked as when you were in Massachusetts.

MS. CURRY: That really gave me a meal, that job. And I called up Graham and I spoke to the sweeper or something. It was Saturday. And I asked was Mr. Graham there. No, he wasn't. I said, "Do you expect him in?" "Oh, yes, he'll be in around 12:00." And I said, "Would you mind telling him that I will come to the gallery and see him?" So when I got to the gallery everything was locked. Phyllis, my friend, Mrs. John Firs, was with me. So I thought, "This is strange," and went up the staircase and saw a door and walked in. And here was the man doing the vacuuming, cleaning, and here was another man sitting at a desk. So I introduced myself. He was eating some soup out of a paper cup. And it turned out to be Graham's brother. He just sat on there, didn't - I explained why I was there. He was really quite rude. Quite rude. So when it came time - after five minutes I could see, you see. He didn't get up and show me out. The sweeper opened the door for me. I was very, very angry. Wouldn't you have been?

MR. BROWN: Yes.

MS. CURRY: And Phyllis was with me so this is no flights of fancy.

MR. BROWN: Right, right.

MS. CURRY: She witnessed all of this. So I came back and I called Graham on Monday and told him of this little incident. I've forgotten what - I think I expressed myself politely but firmly. Then some words were said and I don't remember what. He said, "Well, perhaps you would like to dissolve this." I said, "I would, thank you very much." I think he was flabbergasted, absolutely flabbergasted. And but I did, right away. Lord Garrison's firm were taking care of a few bits and pieces so I called them up and asked them to write a letter, which they did. That was the end of that. And here I was again, nowhere to go. Then I called Kennedy and got Mr. Wunderlich. He came out right away. That was my introduction to Kennedy. And they were splendid while Mr. Wunderlich was there but then a rift came and he left. And I felt destitute, as a matter of fact. I was not sure of Mr. Fleischman at all, not a bit sure of him. But I stayed on and finally nothing was being sold at all, absolutely nothing. So desperation, I knew that Mr. Wunderlich had a brother - no, son. His son ran the gallery in New York. And I called his son and I said, gave my story. I said, "Do you think your father would be interested in having John?" He said, "I'll call my father right away." Mr. Wunderlich called right away, came, and it's been idyllic, absolutely. I feel secure at last for the very first time. It hasn't been easy, not at all. And as you can see, all those years I had no insurance on that. I had no money for insurance. Just enough money to live and live very, very frugally. To eke out some of my existence, I'm a fairly good cook and I used to bake things and take them over to the, oh, this very fashionable place in Madison, and sell them. I've done sewing for my friends because I can sew quite well. There's no, I'm not saying this - this is something I can do. You do your job and you do it well. This is something I could do. And that's how I lived. I can assure you, very meager. Then Phyllis Firs, whose husband used to be head of the music department at Vassar, her husband died. She was dejected. And some friend said to her, "Why don't you get a job being house resident for girls?" So through her friend she went to Dobbs Ferry. And then she said to me one day, "Why don't you get a job like that?" And I said, "Heavens, how would I go about that?" She said, "I've got a friend at Bradford Junior College, Ms. Bell, president. I'll write to her." So she did. I got an interview, got the job.

MR. BROWN: And that job allowed you to keep going?

MS. CURRY: That lasted me and that got me my - I think very, very generous of the American government, my Social Security. They were \$500 a month. That's very, very generous for what I put in. And I had, I'm eternally

grateful for that. And so when I hear people fussing about America and this and that and the other I keep thinking, "You don't know what you're talking about. You have no idea how fortunate you are." So that's my tribute.

MR. BROWN: Just a couple more matters. You mentioned Ellen and Ellen going off to school. She first went to school in Madison. What were her relations with John, were they -

MS. CURRY: Well, just like mine, you know.

MR. BROWN: We have the marvelous -

MS. CURRY: He was very helpful to her.

MR. BROWN: She wanted to go into design or art, is that right?

MS. CURRY: No, but talk to Dan some day because Ellen talked to Dan about how she used to go and sit in the studio. Ellen was nicely brought up in this way. She didn't take over. When she went to the studio she knew you're quiet there. Don't carry on a lot of conversation, don't interfere. Do your work or do your studies until I can go and pick you up and so forth. No, not at all. But John was ill [inaudible] you know. Short. He was ill.

MR. BROWN: He was ill, yes.

MS. CURRY: He was ill, you see. So if he were abrupt or surly - even in that thing that I gave you that Lord Garrison wrote, the letter he wrote, he spoke about John's surliness at times.

MR. BROWN: Yes.

MS. CURRY: But that's part of the man.

MR. BROWN: Sure.

MS. CURRY: That's part of - he might not be conscious at all that you were there, his mind being off thinking how I can do this, how I can do that, you know. And I understood that. I never, as I told you, demanded anything at all ever. I just didn't. I never signed a check until John died. I had no private - wives today, the husband gives them so much money and they have a checking account. I didn't have anything like that. I remember once John going to New York. Then when he got there he called up and said, "Why don't you come on down?" And I said, "But I don't have any money except just enough to buy the food and so forth." Well, he said, "Call up the station master and see if he'll give you a ticket." So I called up the station master and everybody knew John. I said, "John's gone to New York and he said he'd like me to come down but I don't have enough money for a ticket." He said, "Oh, don't bother about that. Come on down and I'll give you a ticket." So I went on down and got a ticket, paid for it when we got back. Is that a funny story?

MR. BROWN: Mm hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. CURRY: It's true.

MR. BROWN: But you obviously were mightily attracted to this man who was very self willed and absorbed in his work at all times.

MS. CURRY: Oh, yes. Yes.

MR. BROWN: Because did you sense he was a very special person, very gifted?

MS. CURRY: Yes. I loved him very, very, very much indeed. Once - I've forgotten what we were talking - I said, "Look, John, I'll be your mistress, I'll be your wife, but I'm not going to be your mother." You see?

MR. BROWN: Mm hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. CURRY: Who made a great influence, as so often happened, you know. And she had catered to him, of course, everywhere. Well, that's how I felt. I couldn't do any better. I never argued with him, I never criticized him except that one time, because I understood him. You get a little resentful, but that's it.

MR. BROWN: He was suitably admonished?

MS. CURRY: What?

MR. BROWN: He had been suitably admonished by you?

MS. CURRY: [Laughs.]

MR. BROWN: Was his family something of a presence? I mean, was his mother in touch with him steadily? Was his mother in touch with John steadily? His mother.

MS. CURRY: Oh, yes. I don't know what - yes, I think she used to write to him.

MR. BROWN: Yes. But you saw, you met them all? You met them, all the Currys?

MS. CURRY: Oh, yes, I met them all. I think - I remember, is that on this?

MR. BROWN: Do you want me to turn it off?

MS. CURRY: No. I think that I was as perfect a wife as John could have had. When I looked over the other people that had, my predecessors, I was all right. Because I was willing to give, you see. I didn't demand any attention, anything like that, you know. So as I say, John never once said, "My, that was a good dinner party." It never occurred to him, you see. There are men like that. Inside he enjoyed it but it never entered his mind to say the little gracious thing, you know. Accept it. I suppose that's part of my English upbringing. The man was the one you catered to. I saw it in my father's sister's house, the husband, everything centered around that. And then my father, everything centered around him, you know. Cleaned his shoes, waited on him. He was your father, you know.

MR. BROWN: But in return the Englishmen were gracious?

MS. CURRY: I beg your pardon?

MR. BROWN: But in return these Englishmen were gracious, they had a graciousness?

MS. CURRY: It was sort of an accepted fact. I don't know. That was - I'm not saying that's so in every household, not at all. But that's how it was and it was at my other aunt's house, Aunt [inaudible] her husband was a doctor, a very good doctor. The house was run for the doctor, you see, and he was always referred to first. Is that wrong?

MR. BROWN: So you might say you were prepared then for it?

MS. CURRY: Yes, I was prepared. It never crossed my mind, you know.

MR. BROWN: You must -

MS. CURRY: And I wasn't subservient. I did run the house just as you do in an office. That's your job. It's a very ordinary existence, you know.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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