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Oral history interview with Ronald Alfred  
Slayton, 1984 August 22

Funding for the digital preservation of this interview was provided by a grant  
from the Save America's Treasures Program of the National Park Service.

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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Ronald Alfred Slayton on August 22, 1984. The interview took place in Montpelier, Vermont, by Robert F. Brown, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

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

## Interview

ROBERT F. BROWN: Interview with Ronald Slayton, in Montpelier, Vermont. This is August 22, 1984, Robert Brown the interviewer.

[Audio Break.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: You were born here in Vermont.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: In Vermont, right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Where were you born?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: I was born in Barre, on East Street, in Barre, Vermont.

ROBERT F. BROWN: The famous granite quarries.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Granite quarry, yes. My father was a carpenter and a builder, and he worked with many of the buildings, some of the buildings. And in his older days, when I used to go see him, he'd say, "Ronald, I'd like to have you take me around, see what these buildings look like." And I'd drive him around and he'd come to a building, and he'd look at it and say, "Well, boy, that still looks pretty square don't it?" [They laugh.] He was a very good builder and that's one of the reasons why he never made very much money.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Why, he spent too much time with it or?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Yes, he was too careful, too careful, no slapdash work at all. He was trained in the old tradition of craftsmanship and was a very fine craftsman.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mainly house building?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Mainly house building and he did some construction of heavy, heavy buildings like stone sheds, you know, and that sort of thing. He was very highly-regarded, but he had this trouble with his hip at age, around 50. I can remember him coming home with his dinner pail through the snow, and my mother would say, "Ronald, go down and get his dinner pail," and I'd run down and get his dinner pail, and when that happened he would—when I got home, he took me in his arms. I thought it was the greatest thing that ever happened and I was willing to suffer this kind of compliment and pleasure for a while, but then I had to tell him that mother had told me to do it. [Laughs.] [00:02:04] He wanted to be a farmer. He loved farming, he loved growing thing, so he bought a little farm in Fairlee and he got along quite well there. He had a filling station there and an ice cream stand, sold hot dogs and that sort of thing, and when I was in high school, we moved to Fairlee, and I went to school in Bradford. In those days, they had no buses to pick you up and very often, when the old Buick wouldn't start or wouldn't run, we'd have to walk. We walked six miles sometimes, and I can remember some very memorable occasions of that walk, because we used to go on the railroad track, because the railroad track, you have to be clear, you know, in the spring of the year, and on one of those occasions, my brother and I learned the shooting of Dan McGrew as we traveled along the railroad [laughs].

ROBERT F. BROWN: You mean you were memorizing it.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Memorizing, we memorized it, and we could both say it to this day and it's been a source of pleasurable recollection, let us say [laughs]. The schooling was never—not always a very pleasant affair for me, because I seemed to have had a very independent mind and had a way of learning, which I later learned, in studying education let us say, that this is not as unusual as I thought it was at the time, and I had more of a visual approach to things. Although—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Hmm. Were you drawing and things like that, as a little boy?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: I drew quite often as a little boy, and I would make a drawing and lay it on my father's desk, and when he would come home at night he'd look at it and praise it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: [00:04:12] It sounds as though he was quite a compassionate man, was he?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Yes he was. He was superintendent of schools as a young man, in the town of Wolcott, and—Wolcott Vermont, and I think that he had the magnificent salary of about \$12 a month, and it was there that he met my mother, who was a schoolteacher. [Laughs] I have to—may I tell an anecdote about that? This is getting kind of longwinded I'm afraid. His mother told him one day to pick up some yeast cakes in the city, in the town, the town of Wolcott, when he went through on his inspection of the schools, you see, and so he stopped. In those days, he wore a coat that split, a split-tailed coat, and he wore that because he had to wear that because of the horses you see, and one flap would go on each side of the horse.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Right.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: But in the pocket of each—in the tail of each pocket there was a little pocket, see? So he got the yeast cakes and he put one in each pocket, and then he promptly forgot about them and his mother apparently forgot about asking him, and as he went his rounds, he would open the door of these little schoolhouses and he'd say to the teacher, "Now, Mrs. Coles, it seems rather close in here, I wonder if you would be willing to open up some of the windows and kind of air it out." And he found that this strange order seemed to be in every school that he went. [00:06:00] So, you have already guessed the sequence of that. One day he put his hand down in the pocket and found these rotten yeast cakes. [Laughs.] But anyway—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Both your parents then, had some interest in education, did they?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Yes indeed they did.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But your father later went on for a while, to be a carpenter.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: He came to be a carpenter that's right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Is that perhaps because it was more lucrative?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Yes indeed, there was no way of making a living in those days, I don't think, in country education or in superintendent of the schools.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Do you have any memories of Barre?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Yes, I have many memories and very many pleasant memories, because we lived on East Hill and we spent a lot of our time on skis, and I just loved the snow. I can remember when I was about 10 years old, I think—10 or 11—I used to go out at night all alone on my skis, to a big drift. There was a huge drift that was nearly 20 feet high and I had a little World War I trench shovel, and I would dig a hole in this drift and I'd dig and dig until I had a big room in there, and then I would make a little shelf and I would set a candle on there, and I would sit in there and look out the window of my house, and one of the most pleasant things that I saw as it darkened, the night came on, would be the lanterns of little sleighs in the distance as they—in those days, the milkman or the farmers, took their milk on the back end of these little sleighs, down to the creamery, and then the horses all had bells and the sleighs had bells, and you would see these little sleighs bobbing along and the cheerful sound. [00:08:02] That was a very pleasant and poetic thing that I remember so distinctly.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Do you remember much of Barre as an industrial place, the granite quarries?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Yes, I do, I remember it as a child and as having grown up, because I ran into some difficulties in school, in high school, and my father said, "Well, if you're not going to go to school then you're going to have to work." So I worked with him while he was working on the repair of some of the stone sheds, and it was a job which I had no great love for. It wasn't the physical part of it, it was just that it seemed so dull to me, because I did such things as, "Steady the ladder, boy," [laughs] and "Hand me the hammer, son." [Laughs.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: That was a pretty dreary business, but the dreary part of it was that I had been turned out of school. I tell everybody I was turned out by some of the best schools in the country, and I had been turned out of this school because I had made myself something of a nuisance in school.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Really? Do you mean just refused to go along with things or distractions?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: No, just general nuisance, you know. Well, I can give you an example. While they were teaching algebra, I'd get my work done and then I'd pull out a little pack of cards, a little miniature pack of

cards, and play a game of solitaire in class, and that would infuriate the teacher and they'd send me to what we called Room E. [Laughs.] I'd get to Room E and I would start cutting up there, and if you cut up in Room E you've just about had the radish, you know?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Huh.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: So anyways, that phase of my childhood or adolescence was a very miserable one, because I didn't want to see any of the youngsters that were in my class.

ROBERT F. BROWN: [00:10:04] Oh you didn't?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: No, and I would try to sneak around the back ways. I didn't want to see them, have them see me carrying a dinner pail, and I just didn't want to—

ROBERT F. BROWN: I see. But once you were out of school, you were working.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: —out of school, you know, so it was so embarrassing to me, and so it was a very painful part of my life, until finally, my father gave up trying to do anything with me as a budding carpenter or workman, and so I stayed home. I stayed home and I made things in the little shop that I had, and then I tried to learn the Charleston and things of that sort, you know.

ROBERT F. BROWN: This was back in the '20s, the 1920s.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Uh-huh [affirmative], that's right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you get to know any of the—there were some designers, Italian designers, with the stone works. Did you get to know any of them?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: No, I never did, I never got to know any of them. I think—I didn't know any of the designers, but I have two recollections in connection with it. I was aware of the fact that there was a big body of very skilled sculptors, and that was brought home to me in an arch which was made—a victory arch, which was made at the conclusion of World War I. They made a beautiful arch, victory arch, with figures and all kind of things out of—I think it was probably out of plaster, in the city of Montpell—of Barre. And also, the other association was the statue that they have in the park, the Soldiers Monument. This was a monument which created quite a bit of controversy, and we had a popular name for it and we called it "Bozo." There were many people who were sort of upset because it wasn't, in its time at least, a very modern concept, a modern piece of sculpture, but I had no other great association. [00:12:15] A little later on, if I can skip ahead, I had an association with Orozco, the artist who did the work at Dartmouth College, the murals there. I used to go there, because the teachers in the school, I think, sort of had given up on me the way most teachers had and [laughs] so they sent me to the library.

ROBERT F. BROWN: This is when you were in Hanover?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: In Hanover, in high school.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You went to high school there.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Yeah. They sent me to the library there and in the process, I read all the imagists and I read all the modern plays Eugene O'Neill, so on and so forth, and at the same time, that was at the time that Orozco was doing the great murals. Now, Orozco was a very short, stalky, four-by-four type of character with a big head, big lion, lion head you know, and great glasses, magnifying glasses, and he had only one arm, and he did this tremendous work, sitting on a scaffold most of the time, working in wet plaster, which is the fresco medium and a very—most difficult medium, doing this tremendous work. I watched him, day after day, and he got to know I was there, but he was a very taciturn man and he never spoke to me. At the same time, I was doing part-time work as a waiter in the restaurant and so he, through his interpreter, Carlos Sancho, his name was, he asked to see some of my work, and so I was pretty excited about that and I got together some sketches and two or three little pine sculptures that I was doing at that time—well, sort of an advanced whittling you might say. [00:14:21] I put them on the table and then retired. Orozco picked up the sketches and put them down rather quickly and picked up the sculptures, and sculpted pieces, and turned them over carefully in his hand, and looked at them—spent a very long time—he was quite a meticulous man. And then after quite a while, he turned to Carlos Sancho and said something to him, and of course I was at a distance, spying, watching what was happening, you know, and I thought this is just absolutely tremendous. He probably said this young genius should be sent to Italy to study or France to study, and I was just so excited about it. So after he had left, I asked Carlos Sancho what he had said and Carlos said "Well, he looked at the work and he said, 'Nicely stylized.'" And that was it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: It wasn't even very clear to you what he meant.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: No, no, I hadn't much of an idea of what he meant. But I remember one of the pieces I had was a piece of the founder of Dartmouth, Eleazar Wheelock. I had seen his picture in the books and I had made a pine sculpture of it you know, which I think it was stylized, quite nicely stylized probably. [00:16:04]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well how did you happen to get to Hanover? You came from Vermont, to high school there?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: No. I—as I mentioned before, I sort of bugged out on the Spaulding High School in Barre, and I went to the school in Bradford.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. When your father took up farming, right.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Yes, when my father took up farming. At that time, I was having a poor time getting along with my family, and I left the family and I was about 15. I ran away from home actually, and I started out down the highways, and I worked as a farmhand and then I worked on ice carts, and I got back into White River Junction and I worked in a bowling alley, setting up pins, and then someone told me "Well, there's a bowling alley up in Hanover that's hiring pin boys," and so I went to Hanover. One of the pin boys I met there wanted me to go to high school and be on the football team. He was an athlete, a marvelous, devoted athlete, and hell, I'd never played any football, and I was not very clever in any sport. In basketball, I was a little too clumsy, and baseball, I was not too highly coordinated, but anyways, I said "All right, I'll go back to high school and I'll play football since you asked me to." He was such a nice chap and a good friend of mine and I thought I'd do it for him. [00:18:00] Well, I went back and I took to football, I liked it. I liked the rough and tumble of it and the contact of it, and I was strong, if not clever, and so I made a good tackle for them, and eventually became captain of the team. And then later on, in the senior year, I was made the president of the class, and so on and so forth.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. This is about 1930 or so.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Yeah. I achieved a little bit of success in education, which I had never achieved before.

ROBERT F. BROWN: How did you do in the classroom?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: I did some things that were quite well and others very poorly. I had no penchant for mathematics whatsoever, and I think the mathematics teacher was very kindly and sympathetic, and she was the one that used to send me to the library.

ROBERT F. BROWN: At Dartmouth?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: At Dartmouth, during mathematics period you see, and when the test came, I couldn't do anything, the final test, but she passed me, and she knew that I had been doing other things and in the process, I did very well in writing. I wrote a poem and was given the school prize, and I wrote a second act, a third act, or a final act, to Hamlet, and so on and so forth. I did a bit of writing.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You displayed a real flair there. You said earlier, you did a lot of reading at the Dartmouth library.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Yes, indeed.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Literature mainly.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Yes, indeed.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You said you read all the imagist thoughts.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: All the imagist poets I read and also, Eugene O'Neill, I read down through almost all his plays.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What do you suppose there was that attracted you to each of those?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: [00:20:03] I had no idea. I had no idea. I don't know, it was a strange twist of fate, let us say.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were you given some encouragement by any of the teachers?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Yes, I was given some encouragement by the teachers but again, I very often ran

into problems. Now, one of the problems I had was that I had to work for a living, I was on my own, you see, and supported myself by setting up pins. I would be so tired in the morning that I'd sleep through the classes. I would put my hand up in such a way and prop the book up in such a way that I could get away with sleeping, and usually when the bell rang, if I didn't hear it, my classmates would nudge me and wake me up and I'd go, I'd go to another class. But I think—there were no art classes. The only art class I can remember in my life, was a silly little class in Spaulding High School where a bunch of us who were supposed to have some talent, were herded into a room without windows, literally a closet, around a round table, with a single electric light bulb coming down, and we were given a picture out of the *Saturday Evening Post* and a piece of paper and said, "copy it." That was it, that was our instruction. Looking back, further back, I could remember very well in the very first grade of school, what happened to me when I saw one of the young students there who could draw, who could draw at a very early age, and he could illustrate such things as Robert Louis Stevenson's poems, and they were so stimulating to me that I felt this urge, oh I wish I could do it, I wish I could do it, but I couldn't, I couldn't do it very well until a little bit later on, it began to come through to me. [00:22:28] I remember one day in the third grade, we were asked to bring a flower, and I brought a trillium and began to draw it, and I discovered that how you could draw a leaf. You could draw a leaf on the top and then you could show the bottom part of the leaf, too, you see, and this was a great excitement, a great revelation for me and stimulated me. I wanted to draw, draw, draw, but there was no art, no art education anywhere along the way, not in high school. Of course my good friend was the editor of the *Indie*, [ph] the school paper, he wanted me to illustrate. You saw some of those very crude illustrations, you know, that he wanted me to illustrate the *Indie*, which I did. I enjoyed it, loved to do it and I thought I had an ambition in high school, to teach children how to draw. This was a great desire on my part and when people asked me, "What are you doing to do?" "Well, I'm going to learn to teach children to draw and paint," that was my ambition. So, I was at one of the summer—am I taking?

ROBERT F. BROWN: No, no, so go ahead. This is while you were still in high school. One summer. [00:24:00]

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Yes. One summer, I had—the last summer there, I think it was after I graduated, the last summer there, we had a little cabin, this friend and I, had a little cabin down on the river, on Mink Brook, in Mink Brook, and I used to go there, out—and I loved to run, and I would run and run and dive into these—into the mountainous streams, and then run through the woods and run, and run, and run. Then I would come back and sketch, and draw what I could do, which was very, very primitive kind of thing I could do. I was not trained and I knew nothing about perspective or anything. Anyways, I had the desire to go to school and I wrote to several schools and finally, I got a reply from Pratt Institute and was asked to provide several drawings. Now, one of the drawings was a corner of a room, another drawing was to draw a piece of overstuffed furniture. Well, I didn't know what overstuffed furniture was. The only thing we ever had at home was wicker furniture and good old hard colonial stuff [laugh], you know, and so I had to ask my friends, "What's a piece of overstuffed furniture, what does that mean?" They said, "Well, it's got padding in it," [laughs] you see, so I learned what overstuffed furniture was, and so I did my best and I painted—I drew a corner of a room and gee, it was so puzzling to me. I couldn't figure out where the hell the lines were going, you know, to do that. One thing, I was asked to draw a plant. Well, I went out in the cornfield right next to the cabin and I sat down in a row, and I looked at that plant, and boy, I drew that plant beautifully. [00:26:08] I made the leaves curved, as I had learned to do in the third grade, you know?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: And you could see the under part of the leaves and the whole thing, and that was the only thing, I guess, that ever got me into Pratt, because the rest of the stuff was pretty safe.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you were accepted to go to art school then shortly after you got out of high school.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Yes, right, that was the following year. I had saved up quite a lot of money. I had worked my way up as a, as a—worked my way up as a—

ROBERT F. BROWN: In the bowling alley.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: —in the bowling alley. No, and in the restaurant, I transferred to the restaurant. I worked my way up to waiter in the restaurant and I made very good money. I made such good money as a kid, as a waiter, that it was more money than I made as a college professor later on, and I had a nice little pot of money. One of the things that I had at the end of the summer was a big bag of silver, and I had planned my itinerary. I was going to go out to Rochester to see my brother, who was living there, and so I had this big bag of silver that I had in my suitcase.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Money you mean?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Money. I didn't have time to change it for some reason or other, tip money, you know, and it was heavy too [laughs]. So I started to hitchhike with a suitcase with a big bag of jingling money inside you know, and every time I got a ride, I eyed the chap just to make sure he was all right, you know, and it

got along toward dark and I was over in New York, in New York State, and I was anxious for a ride and there were so few cars in those days. [00:28:05] Finally, this old, battered Dort came along with no top and this very rough-looking fellow driving and it looked like some cartoon out of Walt Disney you know, wanted to know if I wanted a ride and I said, "Sure." but I was apprehensive about it. So we went down the road a ways and he spoke in very broken English, he said, "We go up over the hills," he said, "I have to go back and get something to eat and we'll go over the hills, and I'll take you down the other side and it will be 50, 60 miles shorter than the way you go." I thought gees, this is it, he's going to take me out in there and bop me on the head and take my bag of silver. Well anyways, the car went up and up and up and the road got narrow and the grass in the road and finally, we came to this old house which was a Charles Adams house, you know what I mean? All goo-gah [ph], gingerbread and everything you know, very gray, very dark, and he said, "You come in, get something to eat," and I said, "Oh no, I'll stay here, I'm not hungry, I'll stay here." I didn't want to leave my bag or take my bag in there, you know, either one. So he finally convinced me that I should go in. I opened up the door and there was a long, long kitchen, and there were, I think it must have been at least 15 or 18 people sitting at a long table, all talking Polish. It was a Polish family and then they spoke to me in broken English and invited me to sit down, and they made sure that I ate and ate and ate, and they just plied stuff to me you know, and when I got through, I thanked them and I went out and he said, "Now we go down the hill and we take the shortcut." [00:30:10] So, sure enough, we got down to the road, he let me out and said, "Now all you've got to do, go on this road, you'll be all right, go to Rochester." Schenectady, I guess it was Schenectady instead. So I finally made it to Schenectady [laughs].

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well what about when you got to Pratt Institute, how did you find that?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Well, I took the bus from Schenectady down to New York, and I arrived at a station into Brooklyn, in Brooklyn, I got out, and I got in—I asked the directions, and I got in this trolley car and I sat right behind the conductor. I was very apprehensive of course, about someone stealing my suitcase, I kept that very close to me you see, and when the trolley would stop I would say, "Is this Ryerson or Dekalb, Dekalb and Ryerson?" and he would say, "No." And then stop again and I'd say, "Is this Ryerson and Dekalb?" He'd say, "No, it ain't." This went on for a long time and finally he turned to me and said, "Hey buddy, will you shut up? I'll tell you when we get to Ryerson and Dekalb." [Laughs.] So I finally got to Ryerson and Dekalb and I got out and went to the school, and I took a room. I had a little bit of money and I took a little hall room that cost three dollars and a half a week, and I kept that almost the whole full period. I had to buy all my own books and things like that, pay my own tuition, buy my own books, and I didn't have too much left, you see? [00:32:09] So, I got a job in a restaurant, in a German restaurant, waiting on tables, and then I had this little room, this little hall room just about big enough to turn around in, you know, for three dollars and a half, and so I kept on.

ROBERT F. BROWN: This was the fall of 1930? Yeah.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Yes, right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was the school like, how did you find it and what did you take?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Well, I was pretty excited about it because I had never had any formal art education at all, and it was a little difficult for me to begin with and yet, I began to excel in two areas. One area was the area of figure drawing and I gradually began to get the feeling of drawing the human figure, and the other area that I excelled in, began to excel in, was in the area of watercolor. It was during that time that the school asked to keep one of my watercolor paintings as a part of their permanent collection. The other subjects were pretty difficult for me and particularly, mechanical drawing, I had a terrible time with mechanical drawing. Of course, the other thing that was difficult for me was the fact that I didn't have a very good place to work. I had this little dark hall room with hardly a drawing board. I think I did have a drawing board, but I had quite a lot of homework to do, and my homework was not very good, very much up to tops. [00:34:04] And then we had areas, other areas like design, which gradually came to me little by little, but I'll have to confess that the first drawings that I made were extremely primitive and they involved such country things as maybe a log cabin, but I had learned, somewhere along the line, how to draw a log cabin [laughs].

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you were drawing from memory part of the time.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Yeah, yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was it about figure drawing that you did so well, why do you think you did well in it?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: I think I was always interested in sports and in the figure, the human figure, and I was interested so vitally in sports. The human figure was always some—something beautiful and great for me.

[Audio Break.]

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: The other thing about my perception is that I had and have, it seems, the ability to

look in beyond the surface of things, to understand the structures, and this particular concept has helped me in drawing extensively from memory. Now, everything that you see here in this room, these paintings were all conjured up out of my mind. I had no models for any of them, and that was partly because I think it was natural for me to see beyond the temporary outer shell, let us say, of the human being, seeing the structure and understanding how the muscles work.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But on the other hand, when you did figure study, you were drawing directly from what you observed, didn't you?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Yes indeed, that's right, but in this too, I was able to—I meant to say that I could see through the outer layer— [00:36:04]

ROBERT F. BROWN: I see, yeah, yeah.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: —see the inner layer and the structure of the bones, and how the muscles—it always interested me very much because of my interest in sports.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were the teachers quite good at Pratt that you remember?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Yes, most of the teachers were excellent. I had—we had a problem there when I was there, and I guess that again, the problems in education seem to have haunted me, because we had one professor there that everybody disliked very much and I disliked especially, because he was a person who told us blatantly that he thought war was great. War was great because in the war, he had come back over no man's land and in that walk he had made up his mind that there was nothing that he couldn't do. This kind of devotion to war was very disagreeable and impossible for me to accept, because I had started my whole chain of feelings, anti-war feelings and anti-military feelings.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Perhaps even while you were still in school.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Even at that early time.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What began that do you know?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: I think what began it was partly an interest in philosophy. I had, when I worked in the restaurant, I had a very good association with two or three honor students at Dartmouth. They were students who, at that time could take and study almost anything they wanted to without—and they had quite a lot of time on their hands. [00:38:07] I used to go with these chaps, swimming in the White River, we had special places to go, and also in the Connecticut, we did a lot of swimming on a summer day, because I worked in a restaurant nights, you see, and I had a lot of time, and I made these fine associations with young men who had studied philosophy and they conveyed a good deal of this to me and I began to read. I read the, *Story of Philosophy* by Will Durant, for example, and this made a profound effect upon me. One of the things that came out of that study or interest in philosophy, was a natural abhorrence of war and the military. Well, this stayed with me and stayed with me all of my life and has stayed with me today, because you have seen my recent painting—

ROBERT F. BROWN: The *Last Supper*.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: —the *Last Supper*.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was this teacher an American?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: He was an American, yes, he was an American.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was his name?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: I would rather not. I think he might be still alive, I don't know.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. But at any rate, he's someone who repelled you because of his views.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Yes, and he repelled a large group of students. Now, we had another professor there that did just the opposite that attracted us so greatly. These two men were in kind of a power struggle in the department until finally, the person that we were so fond of and we got so much out of his lectures, they were just so stimulating and thrilling to us, that then we—he was instrumental in having the good guy turned out, you know?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. [00:40:00]



RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: So, we formed a little cell where we went every, I think it was every Friday night, and we met with this ousted professor, and he carried on with his lectures that had stimulated us so much in a home, one of the homes of one of the fraternity clubs actually.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was the gist of his lectures do you recall?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: The gist of his lectures were largely literary, poetic, and some geographic descriptions. He had been to South America and in the jungles and all this.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was he talking about the arts in these lectures?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: No. He steered away somewhat from the arts. I don't think he was too familiar with them actually, but he'd been very well-versed in science.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So he was a general—what sort of position had he had at Pratt?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: He was a teacher, he was one of the instructors.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But not in art, in something else?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: No that's right, because you see at Pratt, we had other subjects. We had American history, and this particular subject of his was a general science subject that had to do with psychology and zoology, and so on and so forth, a very broad subject that gave us a smattering of the scientific approach.

ROBERT F. BROWN: These were times, were you pretty aware of what was going on, the Depression?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Yes indeed, very much aware.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were you concerned about this?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Very much aware of it and aware to the extent that we knew what was happening in the city of New York, with Jimmy Walker, who was the mayor at that time. And in the restaurant, we brushed up against it too, because there would be an inspector that would come in and look around the restaurant and say, "You've got to build a partition here, you've got to put on four doors here, you've got to do this, you've got to do that, or we can't qualify you as a restaurant." [00:42:08] Then, if you passed \$100 under the table everything was fine. We knew that corruption was widespread, very widespread, and it was in those days—you may want to check me up on my timing, but it seems to me that it was in those days that Roosevelt had just come in and established the NRA and we were aware of the marches, and we were especially aware, I was especially aware, of the conditions in the country as it was exemplified in Times Square and on Broadway. You would go down Broadway and block after block there would be these poor characters selling apples or pencils or selling chestnuts, you know? It was just, there were so many, so many, many unemployed, and then, that was in the time when it was passing over. That would probably be 1932 wouldn't it, wouldn't that be the time?

ROBERT F. BROWN: It could be around that time.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: It would have to be divisible by four, you see.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Yeah. I was aware of both the Hoover situation, where it was just around the corner, you know so called, but the corner never—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Prosperity was just around the corner.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: —prosperity, yeah, it never did arrive. And then there was this tremendous poverty and then I had [laughs] several, several interesting experiences in the restaurant. Am I getting too detailed or—

ROBERT F. BROWN: No, this is good.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: —longwinded? Well, anyways, one of the chaps that came in was a drummer in an orchestra and he wanted to know if I wanted to go to a dance. [00:44:01] Of course, I didn't have any recreation to speak of because I didn't have any money, you know, to speak of either, so I said, "Sure, that's great." He said, "You can carry my drums," he said, "Just go in and carry my drums and you can get into this dance." I said, "Well, that's fine." So I met him and we went to this old beat up, abandoned house in Brooklyn and I carried the drums in and he set them up and pretty soon, all of these weird characters, gangster characters, began to congregate, and gangster malls began to congregate, and in the bathroom, the old, decrepit bathroom, they had

used the bathtub, filled it full of ice and had bottles of beer you see, and booze was floating all over the place. Of course this was during prohibition, you see. So anyway, pretty soon the merriment began, the orchestra began to play like mad, the old jiggery tunes you know, and people were hopping around like mad, drinking as they hopped [laughs], and all of a sudden in the middle of this there was a great commotion near the door. I looked up and here was a man in a slouch hat and a long overcoat shouting, he says, "Everybody against the wall, stick 'em up, this is a stickup!" He had a gun in his hand and he's waving this gun around, everybody was backing up against the wall of course, and right beside the door—

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RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: —his head was sagging and lolling and he looked up and he saw this gun right near him, so he reached up and grabbed the gun, and he pulled it right down, and then a struggle ensued, and he pulled this fellow down, eventually to the floor, and the banjo player came up with his banjo, and he brought it up over his head and banged it down on the guy's head, and broke the drum of the banjo right off. So the stick of the banjo, the drummer had this expression oh my gosh, what have I done, what have I done to my beautiful banjo, because the stick was up this way and the drum was hanging by the strings below [laughs]. And then they began to pummel the guy with beer bottles and it was a gruesome sight. I could see, standing right close by, they hit him with a bottle, it would break, and the blood would fountain out of his head, you know? Then, they began to shout about someone down on the curb and sure enough, they began to get up near the window, and began to fire beer bottles down on the curb, someone on the curb was holding the crowd back. Well gee, I was pretty alarmed, because I was thinking about my career, you know, if I got caught or thrown in jail or something, I'd get kicked out of Pratt. So anyways, I crowded myself down the hall, and the hall was jammed full of screaming women, I crowded myself down, I got to the door, I looked out and there was another gangster out there lying in the gutter, there was a pool of blood around him and they were still bombarding him with beer bottles. So I cut out and just as I got around the corner, "Rrrrrrr, Rrrrrrr, Rrrrrrr."

ROBERT F. BROWN: The police were coming.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: The police were coming. I just barely made it, you know? [00:02:00] Well, anyways, I got up in the morning and I could hear them crying over on the main street there, I could hear them yelling, "Mobsters—gang—mobsters kill gangers, mobsters kill gangsters," that was the headline that came streaming out across the paper. The guys, two of them were killed, two of them had died.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you saw life in the raw there, didn't you?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Yes indeed, yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You continued at Pratt through 1934, I believe.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you took a series of courses, what were some of the later courses you took at Pratt?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Well, I can't quite remember the sequence, but I think that what we gradually did, we grew out of the drawing stage into the painting stage, and I do remember [coughs]. Excuse me. I do remember an oil painting class that was conducted by Mr. Cimiotti, and the watercolor class, advanced watercolor class, by Mr. Starkweather, who was a famous English watercolorist. And uh, then—

ROBERT F. BROWN: They were both good teachers were they?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Excellent teachers. I remember one incident in the watercolor class, I had a buddy sitting beside me who was a class clown and he was always doing such outrageous and silly things, he kept half the class in stitches, you know, his mutterings and his sayings, and his performance. So, Mr. Starkweather, he had a strange way of teaching that we think of as strange in terms of modern education, because he would go from one person to another and sit down and paint on their painting. [00:04:00] Well, this actually, it was a pretty great method, because you see how the expert could handle that difficult medium. So he came to this Schwartz and [laughs] he said, "Well, Mr. Schwartz, I see you've been very busy." He's an Englishman you know. Schwartz was beaming, yes, yeah, smiling to all his friend, and he said, "Mr. Schwartz, would you please stand up," and so he said, "Now I'd like to have you hold your watercolor in one hand like this," and he held it. He said, "Now, let me take your other hand," and he took his other hand and he doubled it into a fist, and he said, "Now Mr. Schwartz, you put your fist right through that watercolor." Bang! And he made him do it [they laugh].

ROBERT F. BROWN: Shamed him right there.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Shamed him right there. He never bothered him again in that sense, I don't think. But you see, what we did is we stretched our paper on a canvas stretcher, a nice way to work, and as you see

here, many of these are stretched so that it makes a nice medium to work on because there's a little resilience, you know. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were there other teachers you remember there, that were of some fairly well-known?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Yes. It's very unfortunate at my age that names drop out of my head. I would have to review in my, uh—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did a number of your fellow students go on to be fairly successful artists?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Yes and successful teachers. I had the very fine friend, a very fine Russian Jewish friend, who was—lived in Brooklyn and a person of, let us say, the milieu, the Jewish milieu there. [00:06:11] He took me into his home as a friend and I learned a lot of the Jewish ways, and he was very, very kind to me, because I was kind of a country bumpkin, you know, not very well-dressed. I used to get my clothes out of the rooms, that the Dartmouth students had left clothing, you know, secondhand clothing always. I don't think I ever—I didn't have a piece of new clothing for years and years and years, it was all secondhand things that I'd picked up. I do remember my shoes particularly were terrible and there were big holes in the bottom, and I used to fill them full of cardboard, make cardboard, and then when it was rainy and wet, you know, the cardboard would absorb and would swell up a little, and [laughs] your feet would be very, very tight in there, you know? And things of that nature, I was very poorly dressed, and very poorly groomed, you might say. But he and I made a fine friendship and it was just a great boon to me, and I've kept that association up all of these years. We have written and he's been here in Vermont, and he's just an amazing, brilliant, and wonderful person. He's written 32 books.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What did he continue with, he became a writer?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: He became a writer and a teacher, a very successful writer and a teacher.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What is his name?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Harry Zarchy.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Zarchy.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Z-A-R-C-H-Y. Yeah. And he is really a magnificent person and I just—some of his accomplishments were just amazing to me. [00:08:02] For example, he travels a great deal. He's traveled to Bolivia and to China, and Portugal, but before he goes anywhere, he studies that language until he learns it, and so he can speak that language before he arrives. I was at his home about 10 years ago, in Brooklyn—in Long Island, and I just happened to turn on a tape recording machine there and out of it came this strange, strange thing, and I said, "Harry, what in the devil is this?" He laughed and he says, "Oh that's just me trying to learn Chinese." [They laugh.] I think he taught fluently in seven or eight languages.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So his achievement and his family and all, kind of showed you a model of what could be done maybe, even in the 1930s? Were they very intent and purposeful people?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: No, no, they were not. I would say they were rather middle-

class, run of the mill, but he was very, very brilliant and he was a marvelous dresser for one thing you know, and he showed me how to ride the subways, and how to do these things, and how to go to concerts, and how to, you know, things that as a country kid, it was really out of my bag, out of my field.

ROBERT F. BROWN: When you were a student there in New York, did you go to museums much?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Yes. I went to museums as much as possible. One of the things we used to do would be to get on the subways and ride all day on the subways. You see, in those days you could—if you got the right station, you could change right over and go uptown or change back again and go downtown, and we used to go sketching. We'd take a sketch pad along and sketch on the subway and it was a lot of fun. [00:10:00] And then we did visit the museums and I personally loved to walk along Times Square and see the different people, you know, and particularly in those days, when it was so colorful, the different kinds of things, the little wind-up toys that they were trying to sell. And chestnuts and all of that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you go to art exhibitions, to art galleries, do you remember that?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Yes, went to some.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Do you recall any exhibitions that you may have seen in museums or art galleries?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Yes, I remember in the Brooklyn Museum, there was a place that interested me very much. I remember seeing some marvelous watercolors there, they have a great collection of watercolors, you know, in the Brooklyn Museum. And then I had a girlfriend whose aunts, her maiden aunts, were interested in giving her a little broader education I guess, and so they would always come up with two tickets. So I saw—I went to the Metropolitan for example, and saw *Lohengrin*, and it went to the Madison Square Garden and saw the rodeo, and I saw the Six Mile Races—the Six Day Races, or Seven Day Races, bicycle races, and things of that sort. Then, we would have, very often come through the school, tickets to go to certain kinds of entertainment. I think later on, when I went back again to New York and studied at Columbia, I became very interested in modern dance, and I followed the work of Graham—Martha Graham very closely, and I had later on, quite a while later on, I had a very nice occasion when I'd tell people that she danced in front of my paintings, which is a great exaggeration of course, because we had a statewide exhibit in Middlebury one time, and Martha Graham danced in front of all those paintings, you see [laughs]. [00:12:20] But anyways, I was a devotee of modern dance, very much so.

ROBERT F. BROWN: By the time you finished at Pratt, did you have a pretty good idea of what you might want to do?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: I had a good idea of what I wanted to do but there wasn't any doing.

ROBERT F. BROWN: This was about 1934.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Yeah, now you see, one of the big problems there was that Pratt, at that time, only gave a three-year course on teaching, and the schools were beginning to require degrees. Now this was almost impossible or difficult for me to do, to get any kind of a job. My friend Harry Zarchy had gotten me into this Jewish camp, I mentioned I guess, did I not, and I worked one summer, that summer after school, after Pratt.

ROBERT F. BROWN: After you were—

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Yeah, in this camp, Jewish camp, and I was the only gentile in it, and it was a very great experience. They just gave me the most marvelous treatment all the way through, and then when the camp was over, the directors of the camp—the director of the camp invited me to come live at their house, he knew that I had no place to go and no job or anything, which I did. I went and lived in the house and did some incidental carpentry work for them, which didn't out too successfully, because I wasn't such a great carpenter at that time.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were you able to teach art at this camp or anything like that?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: [00:14:00] Uh, I taught crafts. I taught crafts.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And when you were in New York I guess, you told me you painted fabrics for a while.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was that, simply some mechanical process?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: It was something that I wanted to do and enjoyed doing, and because I think I had had some success in the school, decorating fabrics, you see, and particularly block printing. But then I also began to do large stencils, and I did big stencils of the jungle and all that sort of thing, you know? When camp was over, I went to stay with a friend in New York City, and I had no job. He was quite a remarkable person and in these times when there was no work at all, he went out and they got—he got himself six jobs in one week. Nobody could get a job. Of course, I was at a terrible loss to have a job, because I was a country kid without any experience. The only experience I had was waiting on tables, and I don't know why I didn't pursue that because waiting on tables might have been a reasonable approach, but I tried everything. I tried shoe salesman, I tried any kind of an ad, I'd go out in the morning and he would give me 50 cents, and I would get on the subway and try to find these places, you know, and some of those experiences were pretty horrendous. I applied for a job in Brooklyn, to pump gas, and when I got there I thought well gees, something's happened here. I looked down the road and there was a line of people that went down one block and took a corner and went down another block, and I stopped and I said, "What's this all about, did something happen here?" [00:16:06] They said "No, these people are applying for a job pumping gas." Well, I got in the line, eventually I got in the line, and it was nearly noon before I got up to see the guy and the first thing he said to me was, "Do you ever have any experience pumping gas?" I said, "No, I never had." [Laughs.] And I hadn't had any experience pumping gas. "Do you ever have any experience as a mechanic?" "No, no I never had any experience as a mechanic." He said, "Well, I'll tell you son," he said, "I'd like to give you a job," but he said, "there are a lot of people in that line that have more experience than you have, number one, but the other thing is, I'm determined that I am going to interview every person in that line." He said, "They've made an effort to come out here and I think it's only right that I should at least say hello to them." I thought that was fairly decent of him, and that was the extent, and it was quite often

like that. I'd go to a place and try to apply for a job. At one place, I remember they were having a strike of the elevator man, in New York City, and then they had the big ad that we were hiring elevator men, and I went to this loft, and this loft was filled up with people milling around, and in the—in back of a cage were two or three thug-looking guys, and they were taking guys out of the main room, bringing them in and asking them questions, so on and so forth, and getting their name and address. Finally, the crowd got so restless, they were rattling on the cage there, wanting to know what the hell it's all about, you know? And he said "Well," it finally came out, and I don't know whether he told them or not, they were simply taking the names and addresses of all the people who would be interested in running an elevator, so that they could go and present this to the elevator union and say "Look, we've got all these people that want a job with the elevator, what are you going to do about it," do you know what I mean? [00:18:12] It was a strike-breaking situation.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So these were very hard times for you were they?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: They were very hard times for me because I had no money, and I was dependent upon my good friend not only to feed me—and I did a little of the cooking and of course, I think back on it now, he used to come home from work and he'd look around the room and say, "Gees, this is a mess here." And I would have paint everywhere, because I was doing those fabrics you know. When I got started on those things, nothing would stop me, I mean, I couldn't stop to think about eating or anything, I just had to do it. And so he would—he had a rather poor time of it too, and then we shared, there was one little place where you share the kitchen, you know, and the place had this awful smell of sauerkraut and sausage, [laughs] and you know what, all these hundreds of people using a little gas stove for breakfast and dinner, and supper. But he was generally such a very good-natured, kind person, that he never let it overflow, until it finally got to the point where we could see, both he and I could see that there was no use in my carrying on, because I couldn't get a job, I didn't have the skills and I didn't have the money, and the best thing to do would be for me to hitchhike back to Vermont. So he gave me enough to get out on the highway.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What did you ever do with your fabric things, did you sell that?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: I carried them, I carried them. Oh yes, while I was in New York, I went to auction houses and showed them my fabrics, that's the only thing I could think of, and they would say, "No, no, no, we don't handle anything like that, we only handle antiques." [00:20:02] "No, we can't use anything like that, there's nothing there that we want to sell or we could sell." So anyways, I took them all with me, I took them with me in my suitcase and came back here to Vermont.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Where did you come back to, were you able to see your family or were you estranged from them?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Well, I had been estranged and as you may remember, I made up my mind that I was never going to go home again, but then I did go home. I went back to my father in Fairlee. I went first to my mother and she had separated from my father, and she had a little room in West Lebanon that looked out on the railroad tracks, and she was cleaning houses. She cleaned houses for a living, and her living was extremely meager. I have recently painted a picture which is called, *No Hunger, More Bombs*, in which those images come back to me and that woman, who was eating from a tin plate, a few pieces of fried potatoes, was an image that I had for my dear mother, but whatever she had, she shared with me. And the only money that I ever got in art school was the money that she would put—she would put a dollar bill on the top of my laundry—I sent my laundry back to her, to wash, and she would wash and iron it, and I'd open up the case when it came back and there would be a dollar bill. Dollar bills were something, you know, very hard for her to come by as a cleaning woman. She was a poet and she wrote beautiful poetry and yet, she had no knack of making money. In those days you had to do what you could do, and she was determined to be independent, rather than to live with my father, who was something of a curmudgeon at times. [00:22:12] But she too had her plights of indignation too, which caused them to separate. And I think that when all the children had left the home, mother was very lonely, very ill-at-ease, because she didn't have someone to take care of or fuss over you know? She had such love for the children, she spent her whole life raising us, you know, and that they were all gone, they had all flown the nest. She did several things. She worked as a cook in Hanover for a while, and then she had this little room in West Lebanon. She always liked to go home to her own little place, you know, and it was the most meager surroundings you could imagine.

ROBERT F. BROWN: There was no chance of her teaching again, as she had as a young woman.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: No that was far gone, far gone, there were new requirements and new kinds of roles for the teachers.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you stayed with her for a little bit?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: I stayed for a couple of days.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were you able then, finally, to get something going up here in Vermont?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Yes. I got to—I went to my father's place and I stayed there a while. And then about that time, the VERA was beginning to get enforced, which was a federal program, similar to the FERA.

ROBERT F. BROWN: The Emergency Relief Act.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Emergency Relief Administration. So I stayed with my father and I made a good rapport with him. We had ironed out our differences, and we had a very quiet spell playing checkers, and he was alone in this farmhouse, you see, and very simple foods and things that he raised, and things that grew on the farm. [00:24:07] It was leading nowhere, as you probably could see, that I would never realize any ambitions sitting around playing checkers with my father [laughs], so I went to stay with my brother in Montpelier, who was an accountant and he thought there might be something in the VERA, and I began to hound them for a job, and eventually, there was a request that came through, to teach a variety of subjects in the town of Brandon, Vermont. So, I was sent to Concord to study the New Hampshire Guild of Old-Time Arts and Crafts, the New Hampshire Guild of Crafts, I guess it was called.

ROBERT F. BROWN: It was being set up.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Yeah, just being set up.

ROBERT F. BROWN: One of the first in the country.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: It was indeed, the very first I think. It was kind of curious in a way, because when I was in art school, I had written up a dossier and sent it to President Roosevelt, outlining this whole procedure to put the young people to work in these centers that were to be set up, craft centers were to be set up all over the country. I think I had a letter, I remember yes, I had a nice note from Mrs. Roosevelt regarding it, but anyways, here it was, the thing that I had been talking about you see, pretty much. They were doing it a little differently than I had.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Who had requested it, did somebody in that town had the idea, or was a government—

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: I was trying to think. Yeah, it was—I think it started out as a state program and I'm trying to think of the name of the chap that ran it, and I can't think of it right now, but he was a very charming and efficient man. [00:26:05] He had a little office about half as big as this room, that was just full of knitted goods and snowshoes, homemade skis [laughs] and all kinds of things, and there was hardly room for him to work around it. He was on the telephone buzzing away and talking.

ROBERT F. BROWN: This was the man in Brandon?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: No, this is the man in Concord, who was head of the New Hampshire—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh, the arts and crafts.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: —New Hampshire Arts and Crafts. I had a very fine chat with him, sort of got a feeling of how this thing was set up, and then, the purpose of my going there was to learn weaving, because the request had been to teach weaving in Brandon, you see. Now, at Pratt, we had—Harry Zarchy and I were the only men in the weaving class, and Mrs. Webb, who taught that, or Ms. Webb, I believe it was, who taught the weaving course, was very kind to us, because she'd let us disappear when the class was in session. She knew we didn't have any great interest in learning to weave, and I think in those days, it was a fairly heavily-drawn line between women's work and men's work, do you know what I mean? I remember one of the very great puns that Harry got off, that created such a roar of laughter, was that when Mrs. Webb would send away for the yarn to thread the looms, there was a rapping at the door and someone said it's the delivery man with the yarn, and Harry yelled out, "The wolf is at the door." So we enjoyed that one of course, but anyways, we never did— [00:28:00]

ROBERT F. BROWN: What did you learn from the League of New Hampshire Craftsmen? Did you learn how—

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: I learned a little bit of the structure, but there was a woman there, I can't remember her name. It was Mrs. Campbell, that's what it was, who was one of the few weavers who were left in the area. You see, weaving nearly had died out.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Sure.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: And she had trained many weavers and was a person that knew, and that's where I was detailed to go. So I went there and in two days and two nights [laughs], it's a cram course, I took up the weaving, and she taught me how to order the materials and all this and everything, and then it went to Brandon

and set up a program there. But when I got to Brandon, Vermont, I was a little amazed that they had such a weird collection of looms, I'd never seen anything like it, looms that had just loomed out of nowhere as far as I was concerned, they were strange looms and so on [laughs].

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, and then you taught other things there as well.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Yes, I taught a course in painting and a course in art appreciation. I had quite an interest in art appreciation at Pratt and I had done a fairly good job at that. I had gotten an A on a notebook, I think on, and I had—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was the aim of this, in Brandon, Vermont to what, to simply teach people to do things they might go out and make money with?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Both, money and hobby. There was the key person in that community, Mrs. Bush, was a very stout, formidable-type woman, in my estimation at least, and she scared the hell out of me [laughs]. [00:30:00] But I remember, I committed a great faux pas in her house. I went to have an interview and talk with her about the things we needed to do, and publicity and all this sort of thing, you know? I reached down, I was smoking a pipe, I scratched a match on her floor, and she really lit into me about that, you know? [Laughs.] But anyways, she was really a fine organizer and she had things whipped up to a fairly good lather there in terms of public response. So I taught this course in art appreciation in the library, and I started in with the Egyptians and came on down through [laughs] the Greeks. I don't know whether I ever got to the Renaissance or not, I can't remember, before things withered away.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What sort of people came to that course?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Oh, they were housewives, you know.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh, I see.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: They were searching out, hopefully searching for a little culture, but not necessarily getting it from me.

ROBERT F. BROWN: In some of the studio courses though, did you have younger people who might go on and learn to do these things?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Yes. Yeah, but really, the response was primarily older people and housewives in particular. I did teach them painting and drawing, and art appreciation, and so on and so forth, as mentioned, and weaving.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was it very satisfying to you?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Uh, it was. Well, I have to say yes and no to that one. I think the tenths dropped off, as it usually does in a lot of these adult courses, I found out. When the tenths begin to drop off and people were apparently not getting what they thought they were going to get or hoped to get, it was not too satisfactory for me. [00:32:08] Then again, there seemed to be a little bit of friction going on in the organizational structure of the whole thing too, so that that spring, the whole thing dried up. I had one or two interesting associations there though. My brother Foster, at that time, was a business manager for George Fiore, who was a pianist or an artist, you know, who had traveled through the United States and Europe giving concerts and so on. And so he told me that George Fiore was going to come to Brandon. And at that time, I had organized a statewide exhibit of children's work, and I had the town hall, an old wreck of a town hall, set up on a bank, a really decrepit old building, but it had a lot of good wall space. So I had this exhibit up and they—I was working on putting it up and my brother and George Fiore came about 10:00 in the evening I guess, and so there was a piano there in the hall, and so George began to play and it was absolutely stunning, you know, brilliant thing, and it was in the spring of the year, and the doors were open, you know, the windows were open, and all the sound going down Main Street, just directed towards Main Street, you know, and this beautiful music floating out. And I could see lights going on and people coming out, "What's this, what's happening, what's going on?" You know [laughs]. It was really good, a very good experience. [00:34:00] But anyway, George wanted me to—he was, at that time, associated with the Boston Conservatory of Music, and he had made arrangements for me to have an exhibit, he made or said he was going to have an exhibit of my work in the Boston Conservatory. Well, this is a pretty good step for me, and I was pretty happy about it, so I went and got things in shape, you know. And I had an exhibit.

ROBERT F. BROWN: In Boston.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: In Boston. And it was reviewed by the *Christian Science Monitor*, Dorothy Adlow, I don't know whether you remember her, and I do have that clipping.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you were painting there or you must have been painting a bit during that year then. Or you had—

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Yes, yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —you brought things back from New York.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: I was painting, yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were they mostly figurative paintings or what were they political in any way, or what were they?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Yes, they were somewhat politically-oriented. I remember one painting—I have a feeling that maybe I've skipped a little time sequence there, because I think that the paintings that I exhibited in Boston were exhibited a little later on, when I had joined the WPR art project and had more time to paint, you know what I mean, and had a sizeable collection, yes. There was a little time slip there.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You were at Brandon through, I guess the spring of about 1935.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Yes, that's right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But then you said you worked briefly at a camp.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Yes, I worked that summer.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And then you went to Burlington.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: I went to Burlington and—

ROBERT F. BROWN: You apparently enrolled in the University of Vermont.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Yes that's right, that's so interesting that you should know so much.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was it that it—what was it that you enrolled there for, for what purpose?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: To further my education—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Right.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: —you see, I had no degree, I was not qualified to teach in the changing standards, out of Pratt. [00:36:05] So, that was another very interesting experience for me, because I had a chance to work in the art department at the university, as a student assistant. I don't know whether I ever told you how I—did I ever tell you how I [laughs] met my first wife?

ROBERT F. BROWN: No.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Well, I don't know if this is the kind of thing I want on the tape or not but anyways, I was giving this talk to all of these beautiful young students, girls, you know, and they were all girls, taking the teacher education, giving this talk about color or something like that. In those days, and for a long time for that matter, I always wore things I'd picked up at church sales and that sort of thing, and I had just acquired a pair of striped trousers I thought were pretty sharp, but when I got up in front of that class, I could feel something happening on the fly front, and it began to slip down and down and down [laughs]. So I cut short my lecture and went out sideways, out of the door, and went down the hall looking for somebody, for God sakes, that had a safety pin, so I could carry on with my lecture. I rapped on all these doors, different doors, there were men in there, mostly you know, I didn't dare to ask them anything, and finally I came to this—opened this door and here was this beautiful girl, tall girl with black hair and great oval eyes, a lovely complexion, and she was typing one finger at a time, rapidly on a typewriter, you know, and I stopped her and I said, "Hey, by any chance do you have a safety pin," and she said yes that she did, and then she reached in her handbag and found me the safety pin and I told her what had happened, and she thought it was the greatest joke, and we had a wonderful laugh, and I got myself pinned up and went back, and finished my lecture. [00:38:06] But anyways, that's how I met her, and so I began to date her and we eventually were married. She was a lovely girl, beautiful, and a poet. Her poems are collected by the University of Vermont, in the archives there.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What is the name she goes under?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Dorothy Kennedy.



ROBERT F. BROWN: Dorothy Kennedy.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Dorothy Kennedy. Yeah. Uh-huh [affirmative].

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you take courses at the university yourself?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Yes I did, oh yes that was the point in going there.

ROBERT F. BROWN: In what sort—

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: I took a course in sociology and I took a course in botany, I took a painting course, and a course in creative writing. I did very well in the creative writing and I did moderately well in the sociology, but I had an experience in botany which bugged me a little. I was able to look into a telescope, into a microscope, and draw exactly what I saw, you know, because I had art training and I could do that. I had a guy who was working beside me that couldn't draw a whit you know, a whit's worth, but he used to make these diagrammatic sketches which he had memorized out of the textbook, see? Well, every time when the professor came by, "That's just exactly right." Well, then he'd come to mine you know and he 'd say, "Well, it's not very clear, what you're trying to draw there is it?" You know, and that bothered me. But I never succeeded very greatly in that type of education anyways.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Now, do you think it bothered you because he was denying your powers of observation and well, your limited way of creating, right?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: He didn't want that so much, just feeding back. [00:40:02]

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Feeding back. What was supposed to be there, you know.

ROBERT F. BROWN: That kind of lockstep education you never liked.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Yeah. And then the other kind of rigmarole on that was learning these long lists of Latin names of certain fungi and all that. That was pretty—

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you told me you taught at the university, and you also taught under a National Youth Administration program. I thought you said that. Was it—student relief program.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Yeah, now, I think yes, I think that may have been. I did begin to get a check from the National Youth Administration, yes, and I think it was for those services perhaps. But eventually, or gradually, I worked into the WPA program, which I don't think had been established when I first went there. In this WPA program, I taught—I first started out by teaching a course in anatomy and I taught another course in woodcarving, I believe. These were adults, and I enjoyed that very much and found it quite successful, and I had reasonably good success, in a little more cosmopolitan area than say, at Brandon, you see.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you got some people who were somewhat serious about this.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: That's right, yeah, and then that eventually worked into my promotion of a center, which we called the Burlington Art Center, and then I set up programs there that were more extensive, for children—we had a Saturday morning school and we had just droves of children coming in—and I had set up a system there that I called the cafeteria style, with tables that were set up for children in about six or eight different media. And they could go to what station they wanted to and create in things they wanted to, you see. [00:42:12] It was a very creative thing and we tried to stress always, the creativity, creative angle there.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You mean to allow them free expression?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Yes that's right, exactly.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Would you come around very often and monitor them or were you fairly—

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: There was a person at each station you see, that would see that they didn't eat the paint or throw it against the windows, or break things up, or cut their neck off with a tool or something like that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: On the WPA, of course you were able to paint, as you said earlier, you had more time for it.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You would get a stipend, I guess.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Yes that's right, and I think the stipend was \$18 a week.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And you found a studio.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Yeah, well, I had a little problem there. When I first started, I painted in the apartment that we—a group of us—

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ROBERT F. BROWN: —WPA.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Yeah. I was thinking about the apartment. [Laughs.] We had several apartments, because we seemed to have the capacity of getting thrown out of about every place we got in, because we were a noisy, boisterous bunch.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh there were several of you that—

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Yeah, that got together. My brothers, Harold and my brother Foster, and their girls, and so on and so forth. We would sometimes collect animals, dogs and cats and that sort of thing, so we weren't what you would call a happy affair for an ordinary landlord. So anyway, one of the things I can remember, I don't know whether I should be diverging so much from the point, but I do have in mind what you asked me. One of the things I remember, we had a room at the top of a great old Victorian house, a whole floor on the top of that, and we had the dining room table set up for ping-pong, and we would begin ping-pong generally about 10:00 at night, and we'd have these violent battles of ping-ping. The room had an open—it was open so it could go—the stairway went down and all of a sudden the ball would get loose and it would go, *ping-ping-ping-ping-ping-ping*, down two or three flights of stairs, and I remember the doctor would come out with a harried look on his face, in his gown and say, "You cannot make that kind of noise, impossible, now you stop doing that." We'd go back there and we'd try to play ping-pong quietly, but that's kind of a trick, you know? But anyways, it didn't deter us much, but we had an awful lot of good times. I remember one time we got so many people in our apartment that one of us had to take a mattress and tuck it in behind the stove and sleep behind the stove. Another one had to sleep out on the porch, and so on and so forth, because we had a capacity of collecting people somehow or other. [00:02:11] This was a lively group that was interested in the ideas of the times and the politics, and the issues of the times. I think we were probably half socialist in our outlook, and then we were all avid chess players, and so on and so forth, so we had a very lively group.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you or some of them get involved in political or social betterment things?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Yes, very much so, and got involved to the point where, as I guess I mentioned to you before perhaps, that we nearly got thrown out of the WPA on account of it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was the reason?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Well, we were—there was, at this time, a great surging movement in organizing the milkmen or the dairymen of Vermont. And the organizer of that was a communist, and we knew several communists. They used to come to the house and talk to us about organization and talk to us about various things. So, I got very much interested in, probably as a matter of association of the Spanish situation, the Spanish war, you see, where—the Spanish Civil War, where Hitler had segregated these—saturated these towns with bombs, to test out the dive-bombers and all that sort of thing, and it really fired me with indignation and so on. Of course my work was, as you know, politically-oriented, some of it, at that time, particularly well, take the two pages I'm working on now, or restoring, *Men at Work, Men at Rest*. [00:04:10]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Those were meant to be what?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: They were meant to be social commentary of some sort and perhaps the *Men at Rest*, if you notice, [laughs] is really not men at rest, it's men at unrest, the rising of the working class, that kind of concept, you see. I think many of us had that thought, that democracy was going to spread into, and be effective among, the working people, and they would eventually move the world, you know.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, were most of you in Burlington working, not working class though, or were you people who one way or another had or did have, other kinds of jobs, or you had a little broader education?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Yes. Most of us were persons of—I think most of us arrived at it from a somewhat intellectual point of view—as an egghead point of view if you want to call it that, but we had some—I had some friends who were real workers that worked in the factories, and the situation in Burlington was so appalling at that time. There were slums and there were some of my friends that had to build cages to keep the rats from eating their children at night, and the slums were just so terrible, it's hard to describe them. You could go look

around the floor and everything was grime and dark black, grime, and you'd see holes along the baseboards where the rats had come, pre-access you know, just a terrible situation. Some of my paintings did reflect that. I had one painting, which is now owned by Bobby Ghosh, it was called *Pie in the Sky*, which was a direct result of that family that I knew, I knew the family and was intimate with them. [00:06:12] And so there was some contact with people who had these terrible situations to endure. So we—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you help to organize some way to try to help them?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Yeah, we did indeed. My good friend, Francis Colburn, who is since recently deceased, do you have a dossier on, or anything about him?

ROBERT F. BROWN: No. Was he at the university?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: He was at the university. He was, I would say on the surface, a much more famous person than I, and he was at the university and taught at the university. He and I did organize the city and tried to overcome the slums.

ROBERT F. BROWN: How did you go about that?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Well, we went about it by contacting people in each district, you see, and getting them to provide cars to bring people into the polls to vote. I remember the terrible, shocking situation as I went around to the polls to see how things were going, you know, to get some kind of a feeling of what was happening in the voting at the different polling places, and I came to this polling place and it was dark, at night, and I happened to be just behind a tree for some reason or other and one of the persons that we had hired—now, we had a little money given to us by Joseph Winterbotham, who was a philanthropist and a liberal—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was he here in Burlington?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: In Burlington, yes. We had a little bit of money to work with, and so we gave people some money for gas to bring people in, that was the amount of money. [00:08:09] We had given him money for gas and so on and so forth, and when these people got out of their car, one of them said, "Gees, if old Slayton hears about that he'll flip his lid won't he, huh?" And I heard them talking about it and the reason, what this chap had done, he'd taken our money and gone out and got the opposition and brought them in, you see, and this was a terrible blow to me. It was such a blow that I didn't recover psychologically, I think, for about a week, after I wandered about the city of Burlington, staring at the slums and wondering how this could have happened, and why we hadn't have done this, and why we hadn't have done that. It was just a terrible blow to me and I had given up all hope that human beings could be civilized in any way, and I was just really down. I finally snapped out of it, however, but we did work, we worked our tails off on it, and we got out publicity, and we went on the radio and gave programs on the radio about the slums. We discovered and turned up a lot of very, very shocking things, and one or two of them was that the head professor at the university that owned the slums, now he had owned a chunk of slums. Then another thing that we discovered was that the banks didn't want to really do anything about the slums, because they're profitable you see? They didn't have to pay for fire insurance, they didn't have to pay for upkeep, and so on and so forth, they just let them rot and let the people rot in them, you know? So they were perfectly happy to let things go and they were fighting this issue in good shame. They had people running around the town, pounding on the desk, "You let those people drive a nail, you let that go through and you won't be able to drive a nail in your property without their permission," and so on and so forth, you know really rabid stuff that was going on. [00:10:12]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Let what go through, was this a referendum?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Yeah, let the referendum go through. It was really a rough and tumble kind of thing, and we lost badly. Well, it's interesting to note that 50 years later, they did what we wanted them to do. Fifty years later, in Burlington.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You mean with the coming in of a socialist mayor, or partly that?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Partially that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Just gradually.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: The gradual recognition that these slums were a detriment to the city.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, but it took that long before they were really—

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: It took that long to really crank it, you know? And then on the other front, we organized meetings and had forums. We had three or four forums on the invasion of China by Japan, that was a big issue with us, and we were incensed on the fascism in general, the fascist movement into Spain, you see,

and the whole rigmarole of what was happening in Germany, the persecution of the Jews.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did quite a few people come out for that?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Yes, we had good turnout, fine turnouts, good crowds in all of it. I remember the kind of feeling there, the indignation that we had, the kind of zeal that we had, there was nothing that we would deny ourselves doing, work long hours and paddle the streets and do what we could to do, and paint pictures—and paint pictures that would satirize it or point out the errors, the social errors of it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Now could you show these paintings, were there outlets for that?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Uh, yes. [00:12:00] I think there was a little—I had one or two commissions there that were, indeed, very pleasurable, and there are some remnants of those commissions. It was a painting, a series of 24 paintings for the FFA—Future Farmers of America—FFA, and there was a very charming gentleman at the head of that, a very devoted man at the head of that, that believed in what I was trying to do and what I was trying to paint. I had a series of 24 topics that I painted upon—on.

ROBERT F. BROWN: This was for—

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: The FFA.

ROBERT F. BROWN: For them to have in their office?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: For them to have it, and then I painted things for the fairs, they were to be shown at fairs and to meetings, at public meetings, and so on and so forth.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What were they to illustrate?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: They illustrated various things like community services. They illustrated—they were abstract titles.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, but symbolic.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: I had to dream up, but they were literally—fairly literally drawn. And then, community improvement and soil conservation, and the rotation of crops, and improvement in the dairy industry and milk production, how to improve milk production.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So they were somewhat instructional.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: They were instructional, yeah they were topics that they dealt with and then they used these in teaching the young people different topics. Then there were one or two other things that I did for them, for the FH[F]A panels, I did two very large panels, mural panels, that were four-by-six, that depicted the whole range of FH[F]A activities.

ROBERT F. BROWN: FHA what was that?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Future Farmers. Oh, FFA. [00:14:00]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Future Farmers of America.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But was the Future Farmers of America also a New Deal creation?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: No, I don't think it was.

ROBERT F. BROWN: It was already in progress.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: It had already been organized, yeah. But they used the WPA, he solicited the work through the WPA, you see, and so some of those, the remnants of those are now at the university, they have a few of them.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did they in any way comment against war or on social situation, or they were really simply —

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: No. They were very directly—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well those paintings, such as you're painting about, against Japanese aggression in China,

was that ever exhibited or would that be—

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: That was not exhibited extensively. And I had a—

ROBERT F. BROWN: But it was shown.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: —yeah, it was shown. I think I gave you an illustration of it, and I think it was shown at the Burlington exhibit, the Fleming Museum exhibit, I had a one-man show there at that time.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh, in the 1930s?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Yes I did. [Coughs.] Excuse me. Then, it had a very sad demise. I think it was one of the paintings that was attached for my nonpayment of storage, I think it was, and there were several of those that were very good paintings, that were attached, and I never knew what happened to them. To tell you the truth, I had no idea where this painting, *Unemployment*, had disappeared to, you see, and suddenly it cropped up just recently and it was acquired by the Fleming Museum, you see? So someone gave it to the Fleming Museum, that had [laughs] had it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you feel you were painting quite well at this time, you were pretty pleased with your progress?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: I was painting fairly confidently, and I think the culmination of that probably is the painting that you saw, which was the China painting. You know, you saw the painting.

ROBERT F. BROWN: [00:16:08] But were you concerned to make a career as an artist, or were you at this point quite bound up in social betterment?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: No, I had that ambition, but it was a fairly impossible road to hoe in those days, I mean, you couldn't make a living painting in those days at all. You're lucky if—I don't think I ever sold a painting, I can't remember that I ever sold a painting in those days.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, in Vermont also, in those days you wouldn't have expected very much, there wasn't much in the way of an art culture community was there?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: No. No, there wasn't. No, my friend Francis Colburn however, he had a different route, and he sold some paintings. He had one or two good patrons. He painted a picture of my mother, which I want to find if I can somewhere, and it was really, a really marvelous portrait of her in a red dress.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What were his paintings perhaps more conventional, I guess?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: They were more conventional and they had to deal primarily with the landscape, largely landscape painting, I would say. They had a retrospective show of his at the Fleming Museum just a few months ago, it may be on yet, I don't think it is on yet.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was there ever any possibility of your being hired on at the university in the 1930s?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: No. I had no qualifications that would warrant that, you see, I didn't have my degree then, I had no degree.

ROBERT F. BROWN: I see. Did that even matter, if you were to teach studio art? Well, they didn't have simply teaching studio art, or that you taught art education, or art appreciation.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Art education, one course I think they had one course in painting, and I participated in that course and once in a while, I would assist the teacher in that course, but no, there was no chance for my —[00:18:17]—and the chance really came, you see, and then I moved out of the whole business of art, into advertising, at Sears Roebuck.

ROBERT F. BROWN: While you were still in Burlington.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: In Burlington. I went to Sears Roebuck a display artist, and I remember the first display I made was in the fall of the year and I filled the windows up with bright colored leaves. Unfortunately, it was so hot there and the second day they all turned brown, [they laugh] but I did succeed as a display artist and do work for them and the display manager. And then I worked into advertising manager. I had learned in the meantime, the whole business of layouts and all that sort of thing, and so I did the work in Sears Roebuck and then I moved from there, Sears Roebuck, into the newspapers, into the daily news, I became the advertising manager of the *Times Argus*. No, the *Burlington Daily News*, I think it was called, the *Burlington Daily News*, yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you enjoy that work or was it tedious?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: It was easy for me, and I did like to make layouts, and I liked to make promotions, I enjoyed that very much.

ROBERT F. BROWN: These managers at Sears Roebuck or at the newspaper, had no difficulty with the fact that you were a community organizer, an activist?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: No.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Not in those days.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: That didn't bother at all, no. That didn't bother at all.

ROBERT F. BROWN: I think you told me the editor at the Burlington newspaper was William Loeb, who later became—

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Manchester.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —noted as the owner or publisher of the Manchester, New Hampshire *Union Leader*, a very extreme conservative. [00:20:07]

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Yes indeed, but he was a person that I genuinely liked and he was a fine person to work for, and while I worked for him, he never manifested that deep conservatism that he later became known for in the *Manchester Union*. He was a flamboyant type of person, and I think what he did, he probably put the newspaper ahead of maybe his own instincts, I don't know, but he turned out to be a very terrible-type person, but with me he was a marvelous person to work for and I was very fond of him. He used to come in in the morning and say, "Ron, you got any good ideas today?" I'd say "Well, I thought about this and this and this," and he'd say, "That's good, no I don't care for that, or that's"—you know, and he'd pick it right up. One of the things, he supported me very much in my work as a salesman, as an advertising salesman—we had a very reactionary group of people in Burlington at that time, and a real nest of it was one of the larger stores there, had a very snotty advertising person there who distributed advertising, who made the remark to me one time, I mean, I was trying to sell advertising and said "Well, I think this is the kind of ad that would reach a lot of working people," you know, because the paper was a little different from the *Burlington Free Press* in that respect.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What do you mean it was a little more— [00:22:01]

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: No, it had a different readership.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Readership. It was more for the working man?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Yeah, yeah. And she said, "Well, we don't want any dirty old workmen in dirty old clothes running up and down Main Street, Church Street here," and I took that back to Bill and he made an editorial out of it and he slammed it, you know what I mean? So that he supported me in many of the things that I—many of the snags I ran into. But you see, the paper was never a going paper, it never could make its way, simply because the *Free Press* was a morning paper, it was too powerful, too deeply entrenched, and in a sense it was more conservative, you see. But I think Bill finally threw in the sponge, gave it all up, you know, because it was not a moneymaker, and I think he made money in the Manchester *Union [Leader]*, had a bigger paper there.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Hmm. Well, you then, I guess about that time, signed on with the WPA, in this enterprise down in Weston, Vermont.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Can you tell me a bit about that? Apparently—what kind of a program was it, apparently you were rehabilitating an old mill—

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Yeah, right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —in Weston. How did that relate to the WPA Program?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Well, I was on the WPA and I was painting at that time.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You were in the easel painting program.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: The easel painting program, I was painting at that time, the FFA paintings. I took them with me, and it was a bitter struggle that I had, because I just assumed that I could go anywhere, you

know, and paint anywhere I wanted to, as long as I kept turning them out, and I never even checked with my boss, my superior or nothing, I just hauled off, took my family to Weston. [00:24:07] I wanted to go to Weston because it seemed to be a kind of lively little town that was reviving itself.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Who was your supervisor by the way?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Pierre Zwick.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Peter Zwick?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Pierre.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Pierre Zwick.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Pierre Zwick.

ROBERT F. BROWN: He was a painter himself?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: I think he thought he was a painter.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But he really wasn't.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: He was, in many of our estimation [laughs], a very, very poor painter, and he used painting in a sense, to—he used painting to win favors and that sort of thing. I never felt I was very close to him, and I never really was very fond of him. Anyway, he was a person who, if he wanted a favor, he'd go and paint one of his crummy paintings and then ask them the favor, you know, that kind of thing.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you didn't—he was based here in Montpelier, Vermont?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: He was based in Burlington.

ROBERT F. BROWN: In Burlington. So when you took your family, or proposed going to Weston, what was his reaction?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Well, I just went and picked up and left you know, and he came down, and he threatened to fire me [laughs].

ROBERT F. BROWN: He said you couldn't be down here?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: No, he said we couldn't be down here, couldn't be down in Weston. I don't know if he gave anything very positive as a reason, but he liked to have everything right under his fingers, you know, there in Burlington. But anyways, I had at that time, I was fairly desperate, because my wife was on leave from the university for the summer, you see, she worked only in the summer, she only worked in the winter. She was a public relations person at the university, and so her salary had disappeared and here, I had a son, and my salary was about to disappear, and it was a pretty rugged spot for me. [00:26:17] We had rented the little cabin up in the hills, for \$25 a month or something like that, you know. But the whole adventure in Weston was so exhilarating and fruitful in many ways.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What happened?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: In Weston?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Well, in the first place, I was able to convince Pierre that I could paint here just as well as I could paint in Burlington, because I was painting on these panels, you see. It was a miserable place to paint. There was a little dark room that was probably about eight-by-ten, and poor light and everything, you know, but if I take it out on the porch, I could see what I was doing and so forth. Anyways, I convinced him that I could do it there just as well as I could do it in Burlington, you see, but then the subsidiary part of that was that I was approached by a member of the board of the Vermont League of Old-Time Crafts and Industries, that was the name of it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was that new organization?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: That was a relatively new organization that was centered in Weston, the point of which was to revive the manufacturing, to revive the whole culture as a tourist—possibly as a tourist thing, but probably more specifically as a means of helping the local people make a living. The person in charge of that,

who made the original contact was Vrest Orton. Vrest Orton is a whole world in himself, and I think he's still living, he must be. [00:28:06]

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was his background?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Well his background was that he was a feature writer for one of the slick magazines, I think it was *Vogue*, and during the Depression, he sheared off and he came to Weston, and he opened up a little bookstore there. Vrest also wrote articles and he wrote articles to the local newspapers, for which he got a little something, you know, and he had his bookstore, which he got a little something out of, but he was pretty tight up against the wall. I remember one time, he was writing a series of articles about pollution of Vermont streams. He was taking off in great style, about how they shouldn't pollute the Vermont streams and who was doing it and why. So, he invited me to supper, invited me and my wife to supper, and during the evening I asked him where the john was, you know, and he said, "Well you go out through there and you go out to the garage, and you turn to the right there, and you go along that old barn and you'll see a toilet there." So I went out and I opened up the toilet, and I looked down through the hole in the floor, the hole in the toilet, and the river was there, the river was right under me [laughs].

ROBERT F. BROWN: So he was the prime polluter himself huh?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: He was the prime polluter. [Laughs.] He has a vitriolic style of writing and he created a considerable storm about issues that he raised. Many of them were excellent issues of course, because he was an early environmentalist, you see. [00:30:00]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Now did you get to work with him then at all? You mentioned rehabilitating an old mill.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What did that have to do with, reviving craft or something?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Yeah. They had this mill there that was attached to a dam of course, and they had a big overshot wheel there and they gradually restored that, and so they got power up into the main part of the mill, and they got a grist mill going up in there. They were working on other old time industries, old time things such as up and down saw, things of that sort, and one of the things that they had in the offing was an old-fashioned loom, a real foot-powered, heavy-beamed loom, an old-timer, put together with pegs you know? So I worked on that and got that threaded up, and I had to tie all the heddles by hand, because it was that kind of a loom, you know, a string heddle, and I had the help of some of the local people to advise me on it, and so on and so forth. We got that going. This one day, I had left the barn—had left the factory to go home to lunch, and in doing so, locked the place up. And when I got down to go in the place, I discovered that I had left the key at home, and so I knew a way to get into the old factory, and it was down under the foundation—there was a hole in the foundation, you'd come up through one of the holes from one of the belts, old belts that used to run. So I popped my head up out of there, out of that hole and I saw Vrest Orton, and he was filling up little bags with cornmeal. [00:32:14] Well, he made a very tremendous deal out of the cornmeal, the water-ground cornmeal you see, he plugged that, he was a great promotion—

ROBERT F. BROWN: He was selling it all over the States and everything?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: He was selling it, yeah, selling it water-ground. Well, what he was doing, he was filling up the little water ground bags with ordinary cow cornmeal, you know, [laughs] which was not water ground at all, so very cheaply.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So he saw that you had seen that.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: He didn't see me. I didn't make an issue of it, I ducked back down, went around to the front and rapped on the door, so he never knew that I knew.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well it sounds like the whole thing was a little preposterous, I mean, try to revive industries that could be undersold at every turn.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Oh yes, yeah, well, it was a tourist thing, you know, people would eventually pay money to see an up and down saw or to see some of these things, and we had several interesting characters there. One of them was an old man who had been in the manufacturing business and had had a stroke, but he was very knowledgeable of all kinds of machines, and they had on the premises, a tin smith shop that had been left in 1890, completely left with all of the most beautiful tools, mandrels and all the beautiful equipment for shaping tins and buckets, and that sort of thing, you know.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].



RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: So it really had tremendous potential. Well, in the process, Ralph Flanders, the Senator Ralph Flanders, you know, he was one of the trustees and Vrest wanted me to meet him one time, and so I had the pleasure of going to his house and up in the top part of his house, he had the most beautiful workshop that was all hidden behind panels. [00:34:18] As he said, he'd get up in the night and think about something that needed to be shaped, and he had little metal shaping tools, you know, the lathes and things of that sort. He was a very interesting man. He, in my estimation, was as close to Benjamin Franklin as anything we've ever had on the American scene.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Really?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Yeah, very inventive, very versatile. And if you remember, he was the person who was largely responsible for knocking down McCarthy. Do you remember that? No? He was largely the person who had the courage to stand up and knock down McCarthy, who was defaming all the young liberals in the country every opportunity he got. It was a period of great scare, everybody was scared, scared of McCarthy, afraid to be labeled by him.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Flanders struck you from the beginning, as a strong sort.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Absolutely, strong, just like Benjamin Franklin, looked a little like him too, a really remarkable man. So I had great admiration for him. He was an encouragement through that whole adventure, but he recognized it as—it was something of a lost cause, because in those days you couldn't get money to really make anything zinc, you know, you had to scrape.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But it wasn't going to be an employer really, for that many people in the end would it?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Probably not. I think some had that dream, you remember that kind of thing that prevailed at that time, back to the old industries, back to nature, the Borsodi movement, the green revolution, that kind of thing, you know. [00:36:12] But it was not really, you might say, a very functional idea, because that old loom would never manufacture cloth in any kind of efficiency, and there was nothing that was very efficient about the production of any of that old equipment. It was of great historic value, however, and a great curiosity, and in connection with that, they had also, the Ferrar-Manser [ph] House there.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was it called?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: The Ferrar-Manser House, which was a repository for the old equipment you know, and it was a tremendous place, they had some very fascinating things. I stenciled the ballroom in the Ferrar-Manser House.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What eventually became of the things in Weston? Did the league continue?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Yes, it continued in a kind of desultory way, but the person that [laughs] really made a growing thing out of Weston was Vrest Orton, with his country store. He created a country store that did a fantastic mail order business and also was a great drawing card, because he had a lot of curious and interesting paraphernalia in it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Hmm. Do you think you acquired some of your interest in collecting and selling that you have here when you were there?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: I don't think so, no. I don't think so. I think I always had a little curiosity over a bargain [laughs]. I always looked at something and said, "Well if I buy it for this much, can I sell it for that much?" [00:38:04] Part of the Yankee business I guess, but I don't think it started there. You see I was very much interested in the drama, and I took part in some of the Weston plays. They're very small parts, but they were very satisfying to me.

ROBERT F. BROWN: There was a theater company there.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Oh yes, very much so, and a very fine theater company. They had taken over the congregational church and made one of the loveliest theaters in New England there. And that was the—I love the theater people and I worked a little with them, not very much, on stage sets, but a little here and there. I took minor parts, and it was very satisfying for me, because I had, on one or two occasions, I had the audience shouting acclaim at me, for the modest little part I took. That was most satisfying to me, because as you probably guess, I'm an insufferable egotist. [They laugh.] But anyways, it was a very good experience and I met some fine people there, and one of the moving persons there, persons who moved Weston, was the postmaster, Raymond Taylor. My wife worked very closely with him in writing the history and wrote a little history of the, little history pamphlet of the—she was a writer you know, and she wrote this very nice little pamphlet, "The History of Weston," which I think they still use. The place is filled with lively intellectual people and it was fun to

be there. You felt that life was exciting and things were going on.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Had you continued with your painting all this time as well?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: [00:40:01] Oh yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What happened when the WPA then ended in the late '30s?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Yeah. Well, prior to the ending of the WPA, I had then received work at Sears Roebuck, you see.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You had?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Received work at Sears Roebuck.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh, right.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: So that the ending of the WPA didn't affect me too much financially. It affected me very little, because I began to get a little better of a salary. In those days, a salary of \$50 or \$75 a week was pretty good stuff, a hell of a lot better than \$18 a week on WPA, but the WPA period was one of the brightest periods in my life, because I had the opportunity to paint, and to paint as long, as many hours as I wanted to paint, and to have someone provide the tubes of paint. I had, for example, purchased a beautiful palette, and these things were so exciting to me that I felt that the world was my oyster, with all this nice equipment and this time—time is what I had. You know, when I was doing this, I began to paint in the top part of the Fletcher Library.

ROBERT F. BROWN: In Burlington.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: In Burlington. This was a huge loft, as large as this floor space of this barn, you know, but it had a beautiful highlight overhead. Well, I started painting in the fall, I was a single easel in this vast expanse of unfinished wood [laughs], unfinished area, and I would paint under the skylight, it was just so beautiful, and I would pant at least 10 hours a day. [00:42:00] My wife had to stop me, I probably would have painted more than 10 hours a day. It was a great burning passion with me to paint, to paint and paint, and I had this beautiful place to paint. And then in the fall it got colder and colder and colder, and I painted right through the winter, with an overcoat on, and I had a big fur coat with a fur collar, and I would get in there and paint with mittens on, keep right on going, and it was such a beautiful period of my life. It's hard to describe the kind of strength that I felt as a result of this. I felt so strong after a day's painting, not exhausted but just strong, and I felt I could see the world, see the world just right [laughs].

ROBERT F. BROWN: What happened your paint—a lot of the paintings were taken by the government weren't they?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Yes they were. I had a rather unfortunate experience with many of my paintings. I mentioned to you some of them, which I had painted by myself on my own time, I had them seized as a result of not paying for a rental. But I had another large group of paintings that went to the Bennington Museum, and at that time, there was a person by the name of Spargo—

ROBERT F. BROWN: John Spargo.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: —John Spargo, oh yeah, how did you happen to know him?

ROBERT F. BROWN: I don't remember.

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Oh that's wonderful, you have such a great memory. Well anyways, John Spargo had them as a result of an exhibit that I had there, and at that time, I just [snaps] went zap and wiped out everything, because I had a job, a good chance to go back to school, you see, and so I went to New York and I took a job teaching in a private school. So I left everything here, left the paintings, I left the exhibit at the Fleming, I forgot about the paintings that I had in storage, and I forgot about the paintings I had at the Fleming and so forth. I got a new life started, that's the way I felt, and I had to have a new life because here, I had some of the opportunity of getting educated, you see, and going to school. [00:44:30] And, I got myself a job, I got myself a day job on Madison Avenue writing ads, you see, and so I left all of that. Well, the things that were left at the Bennington Museum, I received a letter from John Spargo that said, "You either come after your paintings or I'm going to burn them." He was a fireball, you know, "I'll destroy them." And I wrote to Vrest Orton and asked Vrest if he could do something about it and he wrote some kind of a letter to Spargo but I don't think that ever did any good, and I think those paintings were eventually destroyed.

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ROBERT F. BROWN: Did John Spargo have much of a background in art or was it not that at all?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: He had not much background in art, but he had a very good feeling for history. He had a fine feeling for history and my dear friend, Roy Williams that I taught—that I painted with in Weston, I finally got into a nice studio with Roy Williams, who was a local artist, and I'd tramp across the fields, you see, and paint with him, and he was a delightful person. So he was commissioned by John Spargo, to do many historical paintings, and all of the historical paintings that you see in the Bennington Museum, as far as I know, are done by Roy Williams, as well as some very charming little murals that are done in the Ferrar-Manser House, and also murals that are in the theater there.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But Spargo though, he had a feeling for history, apparently had no feeling for contemporary painting? He was a sort of short-tempered man?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Yeah, a very short-tempered man, and I think he despised the federal government and the WPA and the whole shmu-el [ph] you know. So it didn't mean anything to him.

ROBERT F. BROWN: The Bennington Museum was largely his creation?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Yes it was, I think.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So those years in New York were productive at least, you went to school and you got further education?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: Yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: This was during World War II—

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: That's right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —were you in the service or were you exempt?

RONALD ALFRED SLAYTON: No. I originally, in Burlington, I registered as a conscientious objector, and then I changed my position later on, as I became aware, more aware of what was happening to the Jews in Germany. [00:02:07] I changed my position and realized that we had to do things, we had to support this effort to rid this terrible blight, this menace that was afflicting civilization, and particularly Europe, so I changed my position. When I was in New York, I was called up, and I went to have an examination and they passed me physically and told me to be prepared to be in the army in two weeks. Fortunately, during those two weeks, Roosevelt changed the rules and didn't let any married men in, see? So I was able to pass through that, but I did do a small thing, what I could do, was to—during the civil defense, I tried to do a little something there. I wasn't very effective because we weren't a very effective organization actually. Did I answer that question?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yeah, yeah.

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[END OF INTERVIEW]