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Oral history interview with Ronald H. Pearson, 1979 May 31-1981 Nov. 23

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Ronald H. Pearson on May 13, 1979, and November 23, 1981. The interview took place at the artist's home and studio in Deer Isle, Maine, and was conducted by Robert Brown for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America.

This transcript has been edited for clarity, and the reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

ROBERT BROWN: This is an interview with Ronald Pearson, Deer Isle, Maine. It is May 31, 1979.

Could we begin by your-give me some idea of your childhood, some earlier memories? Who were your parents? Where did you live, things like that?

RONALD H. PEARSON: Well, I was born in New York City, and the first few years were spent in-well, in and around New York: Ridgewood, New Jersey, and Nutley, New Jersey, and then we moved into the city when I was three or four years old and lived there until I was in about 10th grade of high school, whatever year that is.

MR. BROWN: Probably for your-was your father [Ralph Pearson] in business, or was he moving around?

MR. PEARSON: No, my father was an artist, and he had been an etcher for a long time, trained at the Art Institute in Chicago and in the academic school and in-what was it, 1913-saw the Armory Show, and that was a turning point for him.

MR. BROWN: In what way?

MR. PEARSON: Well, in the way he worked. He started to, you know, in a modern way instead of traditional. And I guess he had been real-very successful as an etcher, selling all over and making lots of money. And there is a story-there is quite a story to his life, actually, that I like, before I was ever seen or even thought of, but-do you want to go into that?

MR. BROWN: Yeah, I would like to hear a bit more as you heard about it, and then talk about him as you knew him as an artist. Yeah, please. So he trained at the Art Institute of Chicago?

MR. PEARSON: Right.

MR. BROWN: Did he come to New York fairly early in his career?

MR. PEARSON: Well, to trace it without giving dates or anything-I am not sure of those right offhand, but he trained at the Art Institute and he was-as an etcher-and he also, while he was in school, had started-he had a paper route to start with, ended up with a business hiring kids-had three stores.

MR. BROWN: Good God.

MR. PEARSON: And put himself through school that way. I guess he did fairly well. And he had-there were a lot of interesting aspects to his life that have nothing to do with art, but one of them was that one of his regular customers-he always kept a newsstand under-I think it was Jackson Park.

MR. BROWN: In Chicago.

MR. PEARSON: In Chicago. And one of his regular customers was Thomas Preston Brooks [sp], who was a bandleader, contemporary of [John Philip] Sousa at the same time. And Brooks was also a genius, and he was building planes, and had been building-at the time the Wright Brothers were flying their machines, he had already enclosed the body with an engine on the front, instead of pushing.

And one day he just said to my father when he came by-he said, Ralph, why don't you-would you like to see something, and took him off to a big barn-and I think it was in Jackson Park, which outskirts of the city then, as I understand it-and unlocked the door and took him in, and there was this fully developed aircraft.

And so Dad got involved with that, helping him to raise money, not in the-he wasn't a mechanic, so he wasn't involved in that end of it.

MR. BROWN: But helped him to raise money-how?

MR. PEARSON: Well, trying to get money to build another one and whatnot. So there is a whole story, which there is documentation on, by the way.

MR. BROWN: Okay, so your father is involved?

MR. PEARSON: He wrote it down and he has actually tried to get that printed. Again, I'm not sure where all of that is, but-

MR. BROWN: But was he a teenager by this time, still a young man?

MR. PEARSON: No, he wasn't a teenager. This was in his 20s.

MR. BROWN: I see, after he had been in art school or was going to-

MR. PEARSON: It was probably more or less the same-

MR. BROWN: The same time?

MR. PEARSON: -period in time. But he stayed with him for a long time. They-well, I really have to refer to those-that history of that-for dates and things, but I know that it-it spanned quite a period of time from-when were the Wright Brothers?

MR. BROWN: Nineteen oh-three or so.

MR. PEARSON: Anyway, he goes up into the teens and when they-because Brooks had developed an engine that counteracted gyroscopic force. Planes at that time were crashing, and they didn't understand that. And that was another period where Dad went around with him to fairs to demonstrate to government or whoever would listen, the reason for this-show them the engine and-in fact, there is a photograph of him giving a-

MR. BROWN: But the planes did fly. I mean, these were-

MR. PEARSON: They did fly, but one of the problems was that the guy was a perfectionist-never had much money. So when he finished one, he would tear it down to rebuild, because he had all new ideas by then.

MR. BROWN: [Laughs.]

MR. PEARSON: But the McCormick family was involved in financing it, and they demonstrated them before the-to the government, and the navy turned it down. They didn't see any use for planes. [They laugh.] And this was a-what do you call it-pontoon.

MR. BROWN: A pontoon, a seaplane.

MR. PEARSON: Yeah, which they did fly. But I think there was some problems, because it didn't actually get off the surface of the water or something.

MR. BROWN: [Laughs.]

MR. PEARSON: Anyway, it was quite a story.

MR. BROWN: But was your father beginning his artwork by this time, too?

MR. PEARSON: Yeah, he was-

MR. BROWN: He started as an etcher?

MR. PEARSON: -at a studio. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

And I have to do one other story, too, because also in that period of time he started building a 35-foot motorboat in Jackson Park, which, I guess, took a couple of years. And he finally launched it, and then proceeded to sail from down through the Mississippi and the Gulf and the East Coast, around the eastern half of the United States, and there was a lot of publicity on that trip, which was something at that time.

MR. BROWN: Your father and Brooks?

MR. PEARSON: Mm-hmm. [Negative affirmation.] Brooks wasn't involved in that.

MR. BROWN: Oh, I see, your father.

MR. PEARSON: This was Dad's-his own-his involvement with Brooks as I understand it was not a full-time thing.

MR. BROWN: Was your father a pretty persuasive person?

MR. PEARSON: I guess so. [Laughs.]

MR. BROWN: Do you think he was fairly flamboyant?

MR. PEARSON: Well, I wouldn't say that he was flamboyant, but he was an impressive person-quiet; very-he was very well liked by people, very thoughtful thinker and also a doer. And he was always involved. And then later on-it's after this trip, he moved west, went to Taos and had a ranch there and lived there for a number of years-did time in Taos, right after that early group of Taos artists that had moved in.

MR. BROWN: And this was still before you came along, wasn't it?

MR. PEARSON: Yeah.

MR. BROWN: And what kind of-was he doing etchings? What sort of subjects? How did he begin to get well-known?

MR. PEARSON: Well, he was well-known when he was doing the earlier work, the academic work-through exhibitions and-let's see-*50 Prints of the Year*-he had written or edited that book, which belonged to the Society of Etchers [*Fifty Prints Exhibited by the Institute, 1926*. Introduction by Ralph M. Pearson. American Institute of Graphic Arts. New York: The John Day Company, 1927]. I don't know, he just-somehow he developed a good reputation, but as his work started to change, his following dropped radically. And so I think this was happening when he was in Taos.

MR. BROWN: Which was in the teens?

MR. PEARSON: Yeah, it must have been. It was a time of the First War. And there is some in the other room-

MR. BROWN: In what ways did it change, his work? Had it become simpler or a little more-

MR. PEARSON: Well, instead of doing an accurate reproduction of the scene that he was looking at, he was designing it and changing-it wasn't exactly the way he saw it. It wasn't abstract in the sense of, you know, Picasso and so on.

Anyway, then he went on to the West Coast. He was there for I don't know how many years, in Taos, and raised hogs to support him while he etched. He said it turned out the other way: he etched to support the hogs. [They laugh.] He had a lot of stories. He spent a lot of time with the Indians. He was taken into one of the-into one of the Navajo-what do you call it-

MR. BROWN: The tribe? Society?

MR. PEARSON: Tribes. Yeah, societies. He was into certain-he used to go off-I was out out there some few years back and ran into some people who had known him then. I didn't remember it, anyway, but evidently he had two strawberry buggies and a carriage of some sort, and he used to take off and be gone for weeks up in the mountains there drawing and sketching. And I guess he was quite-well, you know-in his character or something.

MR. BROWN: Vividly remembered?

MR. PEARSON: I do remember stories in his adobe dwelling, which I saw. I found the place and talked to people who were living there and who knew him at the time, and he had-the stories that I remember he was telling us when we were kids-like, Indians riding in at sunset, you know, coming across the plain and dropping off and coming into set down and gradually start singing and dancing-stay all night long, and ride off at the daybreak.

MR. BROWN: Did that have a lasting effect on him, do you think?

MR. PEARSON: Oh, yeah.

MR. BROWN: And then on you, on your family?

MR. PEARSON: Oh, certainly through him it was-you know, it was a major part of his life. He was married there, and then that marriage broke up, and I have a half-sister from that marriage, and when they broke up, he moved to California, and he was then just traveling, camping up and down the coast and-[Edward] Weston was

doing the same thing. They had made some contacts. There were also some photographs in there of Dad that Weston took. Now, that was in the early '20s, because he met and married my mother and probably '23-'22, '23.

MR. BROWN: Met her out there?

MR. PEARSON: Yeah, she had-she and her sister had a tearoom in Carmel [CA]. He walked in one day and wanted trade meals for etchings-[they laugh]-which they agreed to, so that started a romance which ended in a very happy marriage for them both. And then they moved back east, and we went to a place called Elverhoj [Art Colony], which is half way up the Hudson and Milton, and it was a colony-Andy Anderson. I'm sure that is not first name, but we called him Andy as kids. He had a sort of an artist's colony. There was a silversmith there; there was a theater. I can't remember if there was a potter. There was a couple of other people. Anyway, Dad was there for a while, built a cabin there. We lived-the first few years of my life were spent there.

MR. BROWN: Did your mother settle into this well?

MR. PEARSON: Mm-hmm [affirmative], oh, yeah, as far as I know. I'm sure-oh, she always did. Of course, there were lots of things that were hard. We never had much money-that was one thing, but she was just terrific as far as helping and doing things that were needed. He always said that she practiced while he preached. [They laugh.] She really did in a way. She made-well, he did a great deal. He was a doer; he wasn't just a talker, but he would talk a lot, but my mother did things in a way that was really special.

MR. BROWN: You mean, did she have a particular sense of design?

MR. PEARSON: Yeah. I mean, meals were terrific; she loved gardens, flowers. Everything was sensitively done. She was just-

MR. BROWN: Would he be, then, in touch or sending things to New York City for exhibition or sale or both?

MR. PEARSON: Well, when he came back to the east, or came to the east, I think just about the time I was born, which was '24, he stopped being an active etcher and never was again, and he started teaching and writing. And his-at some point-I'm not sure-well, the early teaching was done-we were in the Elverhoj for a while, and then we moved to Ridgewood and then New York City, as I recall-Valley Cottage, New York, which is up near Nyack, where we later lived.

These were all short times. And while we were in Ridgewood, he had his studio and the art community, and then he traveled quite a bit doing lectures. He and another guy, another artist, would go off and then-they had an agent and then they would go off in a lecture tour in [an] old touring cart, camping, you know, and travel around.

MR. BROWN: Really? You mean, would this be, sort of, as a part of a cultural improvement?

MR. PEARSON: I guess so. They were booked to clubs and organizations and museums or wherever, I don't think as a team necessarily, but they planned them together.

MR. BROWN: He was gone quite a bit then, when-

MR. PEARSON: Well, I'm sure this would be, like, two trips a year-I'm guessing. I was too young to remember it. And that continued well through life. I mean, he did a lot of lecturing and a lot of special programs.

[Audio break.]

MR. BROWN: Then did he-I think you told me earlier he started a school himself, didn't he?

MR. PEARSON: Right. Well, when he moved into New York, at some point he went to the Bank Street School and taught there, and I think he was on his own, because he had a studio space and started teaching. I remember there was an exchange. The teachers or the people involved in Bank Street School were students in exchange for his being there or something. I vaguely remember that kind of-also at some point, but it was a little later on, he taught at The New School for Social Research for some time, not permanently-I mean, not full-time. And in that early period he developed his own school, which was called the Design Workshop, which grew, and he carried on through the rest of his life.

MR. BROWN: And what was the purpose of that school?

MR. PEARSON: Well, he would have classes where he was teaching painting and modeling, as called them, and drawing, and I'm not too sure in those New York days, the early days, how it was set up, because we were in school and had an apartment, and it was all separate.

But in the summers, when I was four years old, we went to Gloucester-to Rockport, excuse me-and he found and purchased an old granite schooner-100-foot granite schooner-that was sunk at the central dock in the harbor of Rockport. There were three of them there. And all three were eventually raised. Two were refitted and sailed off later. My mother, I remember once during the war, sent me a clipping of one of them being lost somewhere, and they were three-masted schooners.

And he raised this thing, caulked it, built a cabin on it-this was intended as a houseboat then. This was the one that was in the worst condition. And that was one summer. The following year, towed it around to Gloucester and paid for the trip, by the way, by making bets locally. Everyone said it would never make it around, and so he took bets and I guess he paid the towing bill-[they laugh]-came in around Eastern Point, and students were out there-they had a little group-there was always music in the family; although my parents weren't particularly musical, somehow it was always part of their life. And there was a woman playing her flute, one of these students in the end of the breakwater.

MR. BROWN: You mean, as you came around. [Laughter.]

MR. PEARSON: As we came around-a small group. Then it was docked for 11 or 12 years at Rocky Neck. And then every summer there were classes, and he would have about, I think it was, 30 students.

MR. BROWN: And they would live there?

MR. PEARSON: They would not-they lived ashore, but the classes were on the ship, and people came from all over the country. I mean, it was summer school, and it was terrific. Of course, it was an absolutely fabulous way to grow up. [They laugh.] We were-

MR. BROWN: What were some of your memories of-

MR. PEARSON: First of all, we had scholarships to the School for Ethical Culture in New York-a private school. So that meant that we got out early. As I recall, it was some late part of May, and school didn't start until late September. And so we had this long span-as soon as school was out, we would go to Gloucester. What is that, four months, roughly-we would spend there. And, of course, for kids, it was terrific. I mean, everything: the water aspect, the boats, the people, you know, it was a-well, I never actually did the whole course until I was 16 and there was this wonderful young lady who was a student, and all of the sudden I signed up for the summer. [They laugh.]

MR. BROWN: Wow.

MR. PEARSON: But we would always do parts of it. You know, we would paint and draw and do things. And then one summer-in fact, this is sort of the beginning of my interest in metal-there was a fellow, Dick Meredith [ph], who-I'm not sure how-where the contact was with my father, but he came and ran a metal program in the hold of the ship, and I was one of his few students. And-

MR. BROWN: Would you start with iron?

MR. PEARSON: No, we were working with pewter, primarily, with copper. And looking back on it now, I realize that his knowledge of metal was extremely limited, but he-whatever he had was enough to stimulate my interest in working with material in that way, and I think from then on, I have always been interested not just in metals, but in the working wood, and I used to shop things in school later on and at home.

MR. BROWN: So at that point in Gloucester you just sort of had a good time, right?

MR. PEARSON: Yeah, yeah.

MR. BROWN: What was the school like in New York, the School for Ethical Culture?

MR. PEARSON: Well, it was a private, progressive school. It was when Allen Adler was-I guess, a well-known educator-was the founder of the school, and it didn't have any particular religious orientation. It was for all groups, all kinds of people. But it was just very progressive, I thought; a wonderful school. So I went through from the first into ninth grade, when we moved to Nyack on the Hudson, and it was a great experience, great preparation for life.

MR. BROWN: You liked the-you liked going to school?

MR. PEARSON: Yeah, I did. Sure.

MR. BROWN: But did you-were you getting more into doing things, art, at all at this time? You mentioned the woodworking course, or rather, the metal working, Gloucester. About how old were you then, starting on that?

MR. PEARSON: I probably was in, maybe, 14-somewhere around that period. The Gloucester experience ended when I was-after our 12th summer. I was about 16 when we got the telegram one winter day that the Hermit, which was the name of the ship, had sunk. [They laugh.]

We had a watchman who would take care of a number of boats; he was supposed to make sure everything was all right, and evidently it was a Saturday night and he was out celebrating and it was very cold, and the ice pulled the caulking out and she just started-and the water came in faster than the pump to take it out. So she settled at the dock, and my father-we went up to salvage what we could, and he decided to sell it. Somebody was willing to buy it for a very nominal fee, and he figured that was the end of that experience.

MR. BROWN: Did he feel that the school had accomplished a lot?

MR. PEARSON: Oh, I think so. Well, that was the end of the Gloucester part of it. The Design Workshop continued. We had moved by then to Nyack, as I said, and he then opened the-he rented a building, another house, and had a school there.

MR. BROWN: In Nyack.

MR. PEARSON: In Nyack. And also during this time, he had been developing a correspondence course, which he eventually turned to entirely, and-

MR. BROWN: What was it in?

MR. PEARSON: It was the same thing. It was just doing what he had been doing before.

MR. BROWN: You mean basic design, and then they would learn technique.

MR. PEARSON: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.] And he had-really bears no resemblance to the correspondence courses that are offered today. This is totally personal. I mean, he did have printed instructions-that wasn't so much instructions, but lessons. But from that point on everything was personal letter. I mean, he really did it all of it himself; he didn't even have a secretary-sit there and he was always up at practically dawn all of his life, as far as I know, and he would just write away. And you would see him in there-someone had sent in the paintings they had done, and they were watercolor, tempera, and inexpensive paper, and he would clamp them up on the board; he would be throwing them back, you know, they were numbered, and he would respond to each one. So he would go on that way. Then he would send them back and then they would-with comments and suggestions of this printed painting, and then do more and send it back.

MR. BROWN: Did you think about it-did it develop some people fairly effectively?

MR. PEARSON: Very, I think.

MR. BROWN: Some people went on to be fairly serious artists?

MR. PEARSON: Yeah, quite a few. I can't-I'm not sure that-whether people who are, you know, developed real reputations-I mean, the finest artists in the country-whether or not people fell into that category or not, but he had this strong belief that everyone-that we all have a creative ability and a spark within us, but for most people it had been squelched and was not able to function, or they were not able to function in a creative way, and this was-he tried to develop these people-so it provided a great deal of joy. He wrote seven books, and the *New Art Education* was one which really describes-develops this philosophy of teaching [Ralph M. Pearson. *New Art Education*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1941.]

MR. BROWN: Do you recall-how in a class, were they fairly structured classes, lectures? How would he bring this out or create confidence or at least awareness in people of this innate ability that he felt people had?

MR. PEARSON: Just, I think, through doing, entirely.

MR. BROWN: He would set you to drawing or painting from something?

MR. PEARSON: Well, he had a system. I hesitate now to try and explain, but there-I haven't thought about it for a long time.

MR. BROWN: Sure, whatever you might be able to remember, that is all.

MR. PEARSON: But he would talk about whatever his point, and then people would-then they would paint, start painting. And he was just constantly moving around and talking and helping them to free up a new-you know, he was talking design, and they were all basic things: design, color, space relationships, and all of this he went to.

MR. BROWN: That is what he did on the Bank Street School with those people, too?

MR. PEARSON: I would imagine. Of course, that was earlier. I don't know how it developed and how it changed. My consciousness of it comes from my later years, when I was more interested.

MR. BROWN: So you went to schools in Nyack then, after you-

MR. PEARSON: High school.

MR. BROWN: How did that work out?

MR. PEARSON: Oh, fine. It was a good school. It was quite different. I was, in a sense, scared to death. I had this idea that public schools were awful. [They laugh.] I remember going and being nervous about the first day, but it was wonderful.

MR. BROWN: Were you taught to be tougher kids or-

MR. PEARSON: Yeah, I guess so. I don't know. It was fine. I never did much in art in school, but I was very interested in political things and was active in lots of High Y groups outside of school. Our group was particularly interested in developing programs and we went to all of the meetings. I don't know if you are familiar with that program.

MR. BROWN: No.

MR. PEARSON: Well, they were High Y groups-high school organization in the Y.

MR. BROWN: YMCA.

MR. PEARSON: And very often they were simply social organizations-an excuse for getting together-but a number of them were much more. We did things, and we would decide to research drugs, narcotics, as they called it at that time, which was a problem-I mean, that was one thing. And, oh, a variety of things. And then once a year the High Ys had a gathering in Albany where they would take, over a weekend, the state legislature, and certain of the representatives would be there to stay and people-staff and what not-to advise and help them speak, and we would just go through the whole process. We-

MR. BROWN: Pretend you were a-

MR. PEARSON: Right. You would say-your group would come with a bill, and you would present it and argue for it in committee and get voted on out onto the floor or not. You would see it developed-you would follow all-[inaudible]-and then all of the ones that were-I guess-well, all of those that were passed, anyway, turned over to the legislature, so they had an opportunity to see what the state was thinking. [They laugh.] You know, I don't know whatever came of it.

MR. BROWN: And were you-did you take this quite seriously?

MR. PEARSON: Yeah, I was president of the group, our group, for several years, and went, I think it was, three years, three different times, to Albany.

MR. BROWN: So you were pretty outgoing, social, young man?

MR. PEARSON: I don't know if I was all that social, but it was-I was interested in that sort of thing. I did a lot of outdoor things.

MR. BROWN: You mean hiking or that sort of thing?

MR. PEARSON: Yeah.

MR. BROWN: Were you into athletics, too?

MR. PEARSON: Oh, not to any serious extent. I played tennis in-played for fun-I was never on a-well, I was on a wrestling team for the school, but otherwise I wasn't-I didn't go out for football and basketball.

MR. BROWN: The school itself didn't offer much in art. Did you know what you wanted to do by the time you-

MR. PEARSON: No, I-well, when I-

MR. BROWN:-through high school.

MR. PEARSON: Yeah, I wanted to go into political science, and applied to and was accepted at the University of Wisconsin, because at that time, and perhaps still today for all I know, they had a fine political science department-and went right after high school and was there only one semester, a little bit more than a semester, and that was 1943-yeah, it was January or February of '43 and I had learned from the draft board that [my] number was coming up, so I decided to-well, I had planned to enlist in the army, and on the way I hitchhiked back to school for Christmas vacation, and I met a fellow who had been in the merchant marine, and that sort of interested me.

And then when I left school, I decided to take a trip, which I knew they had told me, I think was March, that I would be drafted. So I had few weeks or a month or something. I decided to take a trip down to the south, so after the semester was over, our school was five below zero when I started hitching. And I remember passing through-I think it was Jacksonville, Florida-and there was a big clock and thermometer in the center of town, and it was 85 and I was in my clothes that I had worn-[laughs]-it was terrible. I mean, I shed some of it, but I didn't have summer clothing.

MR. BROWN: What did you learn on that trip?

MR. PEARSON: Just that I decided to go into the merchant marine and came back and signed up.

MR. BROWN: Were you pretty apprehensive?

MR. PEARSON: No. The reason I did it wasn't to escape-the army wasn't-it wasn't the same thing that it is today, or in the Vietnam War. I felt this was something we had to do and I was going to do it. The question of it was how do you do it, and for some reason I never liked the navy, but I loved the sea, and I had not considered or known anything about the merchant marine.

MR. BROWN: And you could join that easily at that time?

MR. PEARSON: Yeah, you do.

MR. BROWN: And what do you-

MR. PEARSON: You did it, you joined it, and you were deferred from service as long as you serve in the merchant marines. I went to school for three months.

MR. BROWN: Where was this?

MR. PEARSON: In Sheepshead Bay, New York, and it was boot camp-was essentially what it was, and then we got shipped out. So I actually started sailing, probably, about April or May '43.

MR. BROWN: Forty-three.

MR. PEARSON: Yeah, and-

MR. BROWN: What-were they giving you any special skill, or were you just-

MR. PEARSON: Well, I was deck-and just an ordinary seaman to start, an able body, and I got interested in doing deck maintenance work, and eventually I ended up the ship's carpenter. And all of the time I had been-that was for about a two-year period, roughly-maybe two-and-a-half, and I had been studying navigation and all of the things that were necessary, and I had some good coaching from one of the officers whom I served.

And we went onto-I went in and took my exam and got my license. So the last two more years I sailed as a third mate. I was very interested in navigating.

[Audio break.]

MR. BROWN: We were talking about your time in the merchant marine. What did this eventually lead to after you became an officer, or a mate, rather?

MR. PEARSON: Oh, the-it didn't lead to a great deal; it was just a chance to spend time doing navigation, which was what I liked to do, even though the third officer doesn't do a great deal. You can if you want to and just-I used to do all of the navigating that was done on the ship. They didn't count on me for doing it, but I just could do it on my own.

MR. BROWN: Were you in dangerous waters most of the time?

MR. PEARSON: Oh, yeah, it was-

MR. BROWN: Was this a convoy to Europe or Asia?

MR. PEARSON: Yeah, convoys. We were in many convoys across the Atlantic. One of them was the largest one, I guess, that we went across, and then after the war we were running to Sweden and Denmark and those areas that had been so heavily mined during the war that there were only channels. So you would have some hairy times there. I remember a storm that was-we had a fine old skipper who was the commodore of the Moore-McCormick fleet. I was sailing with the Moore-McCormick Company then.

And he had been real tough. He was probably the finest teacher I had had, the most demanding when we got into a difficult situation, as we did there with the storm. He just turned it over to second mate and myself and called us up and put us on for the night and never questioned anything. Prior to that he questioned everything; you had to do it twice. He never believed a thing. [Laughs.] But when the-you know, when a serious situation came, he just gave it to us and he had faith and we did it.

And it turned out, we didn't fully realize it, but he was almost blind. He had a real sight problem. He was elderly. And he knew what he was doing. You know, he was training when it was calm and nice, and he was training us for just such an occasion.

MR. BROWN: So is this maybe a turning point, at least in terms of confidence?

MR. PEARSON: It could have been. I don't know. I don't know if it was the first time, but I certainly realized the value of learning to do a thing thoroughly, and it was-you know, it's hard. A lot of it was dead reckoning. Channels aren't very wide and you have mines on both sides. You can't see lights, or you don't see them until the last minute, so you're going from buoy to buoy, taking into account currents in the wind, and we kept her right on, got through, and-

MR. BROWN: You left the merchant marine in 1947. Did you carry over a number of friendships or-

MR. PEARSON: A few.

MR. BROWN: Residual things you carried on from that era?

MR. PEARSON: There were only a few people that I see from time to time who I sailed with. It was such a different kind of a life that I think when you-when you make the break, as I finally did and went back to school, it's just totally different, so there really was a cutoff. I went into the merchant marine because I loved the ocean and sailing and boats and ships and all of that, so that only strengthened that love, although I didn't have much opportunity for a number of years, and, see, I eventually moved back to the shore-[they laugh]-because-

MR. BROWN: You are getting ready.

MR. PEARSON: The coast.

MR. BROWN: You'd been doing it your whole life.

MR. PEARSON: Right.

MR. BROWN: But then you went in that year. After you left the merchant marines, had you already arranged to go back to school?

MR. PEARSON: Yes, I had been trying to get in for, probably, two years, as soon as the war was over, I applied. I had been accepted and then-we never were in the country at the right time when school started.

MR. BROWN: Oh, I see.

MR. PEARSON: I was trying to sail up to-I remember the year before I left the-we were due to come back to New York in time for-so I could leave the ship and get to school, but there was a strike, a longshoreman's strike. So instead of coming to the States, we went to Canada, and in a foreign country you can't leave your ship. So I ended up making another trip, and then it was another month or two before we got back.

MR. BROWN: So you knew what you wanted to go into by then?

MR. PEARSON: Yeah, I had decided. I switched during-that was one of the results of the war experience. When I left high school and went to the University of Wisconsin, I didn't know exactly, by any means, what I wanted to do, but I wanted to get into public work, not so much politics, but government. And basically, the simplified version of it was I thought I could help reform the world and the country. And somehow during the war the whole attitude of mine changed.

I think one of the things that had something to do with it was the fact that we had-was the relationship in the United States and Russia. Here we had been allies, and yet after the war there was the Cold War and things changed.

MR. BROWN: That affected your interest in being in government work?

MR. PEARSON: Well, yes, in a way. I just became a little bit more, you might say, cynical or probably just a little more realistic about what life really was, and I sort of decided to pursue something that I had always been interested in, which was the arts: making things, doing things. My father had always in his life been working as an independent, although he would teach for a year here and there in the university system or whatever. Essentially, he had his own school. There was a sense in the reality of independence, which meant also that it was also hard up moneywise, but I had grown to appreciate that and liked it.

MR. BROWN: And you thought that through the arts you could become independent.

MR. PEARSON: Yeah. And I was interested in making things. So I had heard about the School for American Craftsmen while I was at sea somewhere. Somebody had sent me some information on it.

MR. BROWN: Probably by that-a very chancy route that you learned of it.

MR. PEARSON: Yeah. And I thought that-what a wonderful way to be. I was interested in metal and wood. As a matter of fact, I had a hard time settling on-the first choice was metal, but I had an equal interest in woodwork, and I almost switched into-and I have been able to do that. I have set for working for two years for the school at Rochester, but I was really part-time, two days a week-I had been self-employed and it's been hard, but it certainly has its rewards-

[Audio break, tape change.]

MR. BROWN: -to Reed & Barton in the summer of 1949. What was it of your training at Alfred that led you to want to go into this design program at Reed & Barton?

MR. PEARSON: Oh, there was-I needed it for the experience. Reed & Barton had set up a program through the-what was it? Well, I forget right now.

MR. BROWN: American Federation of Arts?

MR. PEARSON: Well, some group in Boston helped them organize what really was a competition, and Reed & Barton intended to employ several people for it, I guess. So it was a national competition, and I entered, and I was one of the four that was selected to go to Reed & Barton. So that summer, two months, probably-

MR. BROWN: But were these all newly graduated-

MR. PEARSON: Well, one guy was from Pratt and another was from another art school. I was the only person that was a craftsman.

MR. BROWN: Really? What they were looking for were new, young designers?

MR. PEARSON: Right, and they wanted-

MR. BROWN: But they only had one craftsman. The rest were-

MR. PEARSON: Right, had the design training background. And what we did-it was an absolutely unusual experience for me-is we spent the morning in the factory, really being instructed in all phases of their operation. And we had either the foreman or one of the men who was good-they almost all were old-timers-explaining and showing and demonstrating how the department worked and what it was. I was familiar with things like repoussé and spinning and whatnot. So it wasn't so new, but I learned a great deal about industry. And we kept notebooks. I still have mine-[laughs]-with the, you know, all the sources for compounds and whatnot, I mean, just all kinds of things. So I got to know the industry-the silver industry-really all the way through, and it's stood me an excellent state, in the sense that we designed in the afternoon.

MR. BROWN: Did this experience with Reed & Barton-or had you already made up your mind that you wanted to be in production rather than, sort of, do a few very exquisite, expensive pieces. Had you already thought in that direction?

MR. PEARSON: The first year after I was out of school, I had been asked if I would be interested in teaching somewhere in Texas. And I was torn. First of all, money sounded absolutely fabulous and so-

MR. BROWN: This is when you got out of Alfred?

MR. PEARSON: Yeah. It was about a year later. And so I wrote to my former teacher, Phil Morton, and asked him. I wrote a letter and I got a postcard back. And all it said was, the decision you have to make is, do you want to be a teacher or do you want to be a producer-[laughs]-which answered the question for me-[laughs.]

MR. BROWN: Well, this suggested that Alfred, the teacher, Morton, at least, was in favor of your being a producer.

MR. PEARSON: Yeah, and I'm not sure whether I thought of it this way at the time, but I since have. I think it's a mistake in the general sense for someone to go from school into teaching, because what you're doing in effect is just offering a watered-down version of what you got from teachers, so you need the experience. I don't have anything against teachers; I've done some teaching myself, but I prefer-

MR. BROWN: But when Morton said to you-be a producer-he meant looking for something that you said to me, that many people could afford. Is that what he meant by producer or-

MR. PEARSON: Well, let's say-be a craftsman. I'm not sure whether he used the word producer or not. But you can make it or you can teach it. And I just wanted to do it.

MR. BROWN: Did you feel you had pretty good foundation at Alfred?

MR. PEARSON: Well, at the time, I did. I only went a year. We ran out of money and applied for a scholarship aid and got turned down. And so, at the time, it was the best course available, I think, in the country. Well, I don't even have to think about it. It was. By today's standards, it was next to nothing. Well, not in all ways, but courses are much broader now. At that time, it was two years; now, almost all of them are four years. Any good program is four years. And they do things that we didn't even know about, such as electroforming.

MR. BROWN: Then it was all handwork.

MR. PEARSON: Yeah. But that part was good and we had two excellent-different but excellent-instructors and so-

MR. BROWN: Who were they?

MR. PEARSON: Well, Phil Morton and Charles Reese [ph], old Charley Reese, who had worked all his life as a silversmith, for other firms mostly, and was absolute master craftsman. And plus he built and played violins, a great musician. He loved his violins.

MR. BROWN: Were either of those men pretty good on design? Were they strong in that?

MR. PEARSON: Charley Reese was-that was not his strength. Phil Morton was, and I owe him a great deal, because he helped me. I don't know-you might be interested in one project he gave us- our assignment was to design a tea strainer at home, bring it in. And I went home-I forget the time we had to do it in-and I came back with my drawing of a tea strainer. And he said, where are the others? I said, what do you mean? He said, that's the only option you have? And so he didn't let me go for several weeks, and he made me really consider all the options, all aspects. I mean, it was the strainer part, which is made up of the bow and a handle and some piercing to strain or whatever-and then a cup, and then they all have to be related, obviously. And so I just had to keep at it, and it was a fantastic experience. Incidentally, the piece that came out eventually won an award.

MR. BROWN: So functionalism was an important thing with Morton?

MR. PEARSON: Very much.

MR. BROWN: Did he have any particular types of forms in mind? As you look back, was there a stylistic overlay in what he preferred?

MR. PEARSON: Well, I think he was very good because you didn't come away with your work looking like a Morton piece. He was very contemporary in his design. But he was broad and he encouraged people to go in certain directions, that they had a direction to go now in their direction. And I'm sure we were always, you know, anyone who studies with someone is influenced to some degree by them.

MR. BROWN: Can you recall, did you have a particular direction, style, or forms you preferred at that time? What were you looking at? Were you influenced by things you were looking at, other work or illustrations or-

MR. PEARSON: I've had people say that I've been influenced by organic forms, you know, or natural things. I don't really believe that's totally true. I don't feel that at all. I think that I'm sensitive to all kinds of influences at different times. I can't say that I derive my forms from rock, let's say. You know, that's too narrow.

MR. BROWN: Are you conscious when you're doing forms-are you consciously working out the particular result, or do these things just flow?

MR. PEARSON: I think they tend to flow. If there is an influence, it's probably the process, working with the metal. For instance, in the later years here, I've been almost exclusively doing forged forms. And the fact that you're working with materials that come in certain forms-bar-that is an influence. And with a hammer, shaping it with a hammer-what I've tried to do is use forms other than the bar style. So I've worked with plate.

MR. BROWN: With sheet?

MR. PEARSON: Well, sheet, too, but it-that's not so much forging as it as hammer. But anyway, I'm trying to be not too limited. And so that-I don't know whether that-I mean, so that's an influence. The technique is an influence.

MR. BROWN: Was that particularly true when you were new, in this time when you were going to Reed & Barton?

MR. PEARSON: God, I hadn't much of a style. I don't know.

MR. BROWN: You'd only had a year's training, is that right?

MR. PEARSON: Right, and so skillwise, I was just a beginner. In the sense of ability, some have more of an ability than others to work with their hands. That's never been a problem, so things came easy. It's just a matter of developing that skill.

MR. BROWN: By the time you went that summer to Reed & Barton, you were pretty set on being a silversmith, because you'd had options earlier. At Reed & Barton, were you pleased that you went there? I mean, were you impressed by what they were doing? Were you chagrined by any shortcuts they might have taken?

MR. PEARSON: I think I was probably full of prejudices at that time. And you know, awful design, archaic stuff. And it is, in a way, really poor design and not original, just reworking. But I think I was smart enough to keep my mouth shut and to realize that the value of the experience was far greater than-and it turned out it was an absolute eye-opener. I saw how they designed. For instance, I saw them in a meeting designed a compote. And it was, oh, let's take-we could use the bow from a number-the 862-and we'll take the stem from 941 and we'll put the number 32 base on it. That kind of-and that's the way they came up with it.

MR. BROWN: Who was saying that?

MR. PEARSON: It was one of the engineers. It wasn't even a designer. That's how they did it, in a number-now, they didn't do that across the board. They also did other-they had a design department of about a dozen people.

MR. BROWN: So what role would an engineer have had?

MR. PEARSON: Well, he was a big-probably a vice-president, knew something in the company.

MR. BROWN: He had clout. So that was disappointing to see that.

MR. PEARSON: Well, it was instructive. I would never have known that. And also, since Reed & Barton, I'm sure, is fairly typical of the kind of industries I've been dealing with over the years, it was invaluable to understand how they function. And it made it so much easier. For instance, later on, I did some work for International Silver. So really, although that's a different type of company, in a way it's younger-Reed & Barton was older, a little more staid-still, I had a basic understanding not only of the processes but in the way they operate. I've always been able to get along with people that I've dealt with.

MR. BROWN: You realize, really, that in a commercial, a large silver company, substitutions are often made by a group of people or by someone who is not a designer.

MR. PEARSON: Well, I don't think that's typical of industry as a whole, but it was an interesting one example.

MR. BROWN: Now, that summer, you were the only one who was a craftsman. The others were merely designers. Was that a problem, as you saw it, in silver design at that time, the fact that so much design commercially was not by people who were craftsmen? There was this divorce between design and production?

MR. PEARSON: That was probably-at that period of time, I'm not sure that I was necessarily the first one, but industry was just beginning to show interest in making use of people who were trained in working with the material, rather than designing on paper, for their material. And it's been done more and more. Jack Prip was a good example of someone-

MR. BROWN: Who was at Reed & Barton for some years.

MR. PEARSON: Some years, and did an absolutely excellent job, a lot of-some of which were bestsellers. And so it was a definite advantage. But that doesn't mean that other people can't design, but it's knowing the job. Of course having only worked with the material for a couple of years, I wasn't able to add very much.

By the way, I chose-at the end of that period, I assumed that I had the option of working with them. They took the other two. But I, in the process of being there, I'd come to a decision that I didn't want to stay on, that I wanted to go back, and to my new shop.

MR. BROWN: Was this that first job you had that you-

MR. PEARSON: In Alfred-

MR. BROWN: In a chicken coop, that you felt-what problems were there, perhaps, though, with designers that weren't also craftsmen? Would they design things that couldn't be made, or would they make things that weren't-in what ways weren't they appropriate, say, to the material?

MR. PEARSON: Well, of course, this is speaking generally, across the board. But I would say that one who knows how metal reacts from having formed it has a distinct advantage over an individual who only has read about it or has been told or figures it out in his head. And the question, of course, what do you do with that knowledge?

MR. BROWN: And at that time, there weren't many options. But now, this must have been-made difficulty for the craftsmen, at say, Reed & Barton, when they were getting designs-paper designs-would they ever come running back? They were treated merely as artisans, I suppose. The designers were a higher level?

MR. PEARSON: Yes, right. And there, I think, always has been that case, you know, where-especially young designers. The more you've been doing it-the old-timers-they have pretty good understanding. But you know-

MR. BROWN: Then you went back in '49-the fall of '49-at Alfred to your own shop. And with what in mind? What did you live on?

MR. PEARSON: Well this-remember I went there, it was the second year, '49, and I started the shop, actually, while I was still in school, in January of '48. And so I'd already gotten started, and I'd been doing spinning.

MR. BROWN: Spinning is something you picked up pretty early?

MR. PEARSON: Well, the school had had a spinning lathe, and I'd used it. We hadn't been instructed on it, but it interested me, and so I learned while I was there how to do it. And for me, I felt early on that I wanted to reproduce things, as opposed to doing one-at-a-time pieces, and that I would like to do them and they'd have to be special, so that they were different from what industry offered. Otherwise, there was no reason to do it by hand. And one way that I realized, I guess-probably why I was still in school-that I could do something, was to use the spinning lathe. And so right after I got out of school, I borrowed $500, went to New York, and bought a used spinning lathe, and the tools, and several hundred pounds of bronze. I used bronze almost exclusively.

MR. BROWN: Affordable material.

MR. PEARSON: Yeah, I like the color better than copper, straight copper, and it was a little harder, more sturdier material.

MR. BROWN: In making the decision, were you sort of a populist? You wanted a number of people to have things, or was it partly economic success that-

MR. PEARSON: It was both. I always had this feeling that I wanted to do things that were in a low price range so that people could afford them, which meant-I hoped anyway-that I would sell a number of them. It was very hard. And as I said, the times then were so different for individual craftsmen from today. There were, you know, very few shops to sell them. In fact, we used to guard our list of shops. That was the most valuable asset you had practically. And not only that, you weren't as free to give the names out to anyone, because it wasn't a case about you didn't like this one, you could go over across the street or something or on the other side of town. It just didn't exist. And you didn't want to-there was some concern about competition, I guess, moving in.

MR. BROWN: But, for example, in New York, there really weren't many outlets at that point.

MR. PEARSON: Very hard to work.

MR. BROWN: And there was competition from a preference by many people for Scandinavian things, weren't there?

MR. PEARSON: Right.

MR. BROWN: Georg Jensen had set up.

MR. PEARSON: That was a major influence.

MR. BROWN: And that was a severe competitor to an American craftsman at that time.

MR. PEARSON: Oh, very much so. And not just Jensen, I mean, Mill Silver [?] in New York, and there were many. There was actually a tradition in this country of handmade metalworking, and, of course, it goes back into the early days of the country, but also in the '30s and '20s. But it was a traditional type of work. There were some very skilled craftsmen. And what was new, I think, in the '40s, was this contemporary feel, in this what we called contemporary design. And so that was the visible difference, as well, so it stood apart. And then in the years that followed, people began to pay more attention to it, and there was sort of a movement and things stood out.

MR. BROWN: Do you recall, were there any exhibitions to speak of in the late '40s?

MR. PEARSON: The major show of that time that I can recall was the Wichita show for crafts. And in fact, while I was in school, I won first prize in silversmithing, which meant a great deal and was a real encouragement for me and made me feel that I could do it. I don't know, I'm sure it's true for everybody, but at the time I often had doubts about whether I was wasting my time. Also, I was interested in woodworking, too, and I really wanted to go to a school and do both, but you couldn't do that. You had to make a choice.

MR. BROWN: You really had to at the School for American Craftsmen. You really didn't do any woodworking to speak of.

MR. PEARSON: No, no, I've never studied. I'm not a cabinetmaker or anything, but I enjoy the material. I love wood, use it occasionally.

MR. BROWN: Well, you continued your-you had a little production line going. Did you find outlets for these spun-bronze bowls?

MR. PEARSON: Yeah, it started it in my little chicken coop. Did it for seven years, actually, and up to and into the Rochester years. And then it was taken over by a company, and they produced them and I got a royalty. So in those seven years, it went from point zero to where I had an agent.

I had two agents during that time and they were sold across the country. And not only in the small specialty or contemporary shops, but in department stores. And then it was a good business.

And I didn't start out making jewelry. I hadn't even studied it in school. In fact, at school, not Phil Morton, but the philosophy of the school as far as the metal department was that jewelry was not an acceptable area to work in.

MR. BROWN: Really? Why not, do you suppose?

MR. PEARSON: I never understood it. I mean, one can study jewelry only, but it's much better to study metalsmithing in the broad sense, because you learn techniques that the jeweler can make use of. And very often someone studies jewelry, they're just skipping the fundamentals. In other words, you should understand hammer work, but a jeweler doesn't necessarily have to-it's really helpful.

MR. BROWN: And they work more with files and clamps, and-

MR. PEARSON: Yeah, you can saw and, of course, solder and put things together, but if you understand all of the basic techniques, even if you're not a perfectionist-able to prefect them a great degree, it's still-that is valuable.

MR. BROWN: Because you took up jewelry.

MR. PEARSON: Yeah, after I-as I was doing the spinning, I would start making jewelry-playing around with it.

MR. BROWN: In what?

MR. PEARSON: In silver.

MR. BROWN: In silver?

MR. PEARSON: Yeah, I probably did some things in other materials first. I don't remember quite how it started. I have a few of those pieces-were my mother's, and then she died. I just decided I would keep them.

MR. BROWN: Now, the bowls, were you ever bored at doing this, or did they take many different sizes and

shapes, the spun bowls?

MR. PEARSON: There was a group of them-what-I can't remember. There must have been-eventually, I would say, two dozen different designs, and they were offered as a line. They were numbered, and so-and I did all of the work-my first year-myself; I didn't have help, and I had a system that went something like this: one day for cutting out disks-buy the metal and sheet coil form. And let's see, one day for spinning and one day for trimming and stamping, and whatever, and three days for buffing. [They laugh.] That is about a week, and so it worked; it turned out to go that way. And it was a lot of work.

When I-actually, just prior to coming to Rochester, I started working with a buffer up near, in Rochester, then I illuminated them. He did all of his rough work. I did the finish.

MR. BROWN: Can I ask for a moment, you were around Alfred, then, for four, five years?

MR. PEARSON: I think it was approximately five.

MR. BROWN: What was it like as a community for you then?

MR. PEARSON: It was a fairly remote place and small. Well, a university town, so it wasn't-it was in certain aspects there was a lot going on-

[Audio break, tape change.]

MR. BROWN: This is side two.

Were you married at that time? Did you have family in Alfred?

MR. PEARSON: I was married, yeah.

MR. BROWN: So you had-I mean, as small as it was and remote, you had a community of friends.

MR. PEARSON: Yeah, there were other craftspeople. The school moved out in 1950, I think it was, to Rochester and RIT [Rochester Institute of Technology]. But the New York State College of Ceramics was there and a lot of potter friends. So it was wonderful. I mean, I always liked the country. I used to go a lot to New York, and my parents were still living outside of New York City, so I was down there a lot.

MR. BROWN: So could I ask just for a moment about that-what kind of design was it, and did you have anything in particularly in mind-these rings, pendants; did you have an array of things?

MR. PEARSON: Oh, I'm sure that I started and did mostly pins in the beginning and then, out of necessity, earrings, but I think pins, because even though I was working with the material, I still drew and always have drawn a lot, and, you know, it's-my things were very two-dimensional in the beginning, which reflect the fact that they were drawn on a piece of paper. [They laugh.] It was design-design exercises.

MR. BROWN: You simply cut the first stamp with the-

MR. PEARSON: Yeah, well, they were a combination of things, but all of that was just a learning process.

MR. BROWN: But with a pin you were very free to-and the size and the shape and things like that-perhaps why you like that-

MR. PEARSON: Mm-hmm [affirmative]-not much of a functional problem as long as it would go on someone; stay there.

MR. BROWN: But did you attempt to market these in the same fashion as the bronze bowls?

MR. PEARSON: Eventually. I didn't right away.

MR. BROWN: They are more precious material.

MR. PEARSON: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.] I got into it rather gradually, and I had a small retail showroom in the chicken coop. [They laugh.]

MR. BROWN: Did you?

MR. PEARSON: And so I gradually got some business from Alfred faculty and students. The first year I made-I grossed $800 in eight months, from the time I got out of school. The second year was, I believe, $1,200 or $1,500, and I had a lot of spaghetti and peanut butter, which was cheap. It was close going, but I didn't have

other resources. I mean, I didn't have income; my parents weren't able to help out. I wasn't getting money from anybody, and it was good; I knew I had to make it on my own, and in those first years I did get some other income, but it was-for instance, I became a mason's helper when they were building kilns for the ceramic college and did some-would help build chimneys and things for people and-or whatever work I could get-rake leaves. [Laughs.]

MR. BROWN: As you look back, do you think that was good, the fact that you had to make your money as could?

MR. PEARSON: Sure.

MR. BROWN: And not be a teacher?

MR. PEARSON: Right.

MR. BROWN: You didn't regret having not gone-

MR. PEARSON: No, no. Mm-hmm. [Negative affirmation.]

MR. BROWN: How did it happen then-[inaudible]-I guess it was your spinning, your bronze work, that was exhibited over the five years or so at the Museum of Modern Art's Good Design exhibition. How did that come about? Did you simply submit it?

MR. PEARSON: No, I assume that I-actually, I don't recall whether someone suggested it or not, but I was aware of them; they were a big thing. It was co-sponsored by the Merchandise Mart in Chicago. And I forget if I was in it for five years, but the-I was in it for a number of years and entered and always had something. And then at the end of that-they ran for five years, and then the last year, the fifth or sixth year, the Museum of Modern Art put on a show-best work for five years of the design-and I had two pieces in that, which I assume are still-they are a permanent collection of the museum. I have never seen them shown anywhere, but I assume they are still there.

MR. BROWN: Did you get down to any of those exhibitions?

MR. PEARSON: Oh, yes, I always saw them.

MR. BROWN: They were pretty important events for you.

MR. PEARSON: I think so. I think it was important in the-generally, I think they were very important because, again, the contemporary work was not-you know, either you loved it or you hated it. It was much talked about, and these Good Design shows, there was-a very small amount of the work included in it was made by individuals. It was industrial, commercial production. But it was extremely interesting to see what was going on, and it was very valuable.

MR. BROWN: The Modern, then, really wasn't showing that many individual craftsmen.

MR. PEARSON: No, there wasn't.

MR. BROWN: Mostly industrial-

MR. PEARSON: I would have to go check the catalogue, but I don't think there were many-there might have been some potters. I'm sure there were others, but I don't think there was-

MR. BROWN: There were at that time a few other important individual craftsman shows. Did you get to any of them-like, the Brooklyn Museum, there was one about them, I think in the early '50s, and another in Los Angeles.

MR. PEARSON: Well, the one in-I remember the one in Los Angeles, and I was in a number of those and also won awards. They were very important then because those-I mean, the prizes were-it was unusual to have a prize of more than $100 or some that exist, and even first and second were $25 and $50 or whatever were-I mean, that was good money, and it helped a lot and often sold a piece, too.

So, let's see. I don't remember the one in Brooklyn right offhand, but there were-oh, I'm not sure when they started, but western New York had what was called the Finger Lake shows.

MR. BROWN: And you entered those regularly?

MR. PEARSON: Yeah, before I even got to Rochester, I started entering those. And again, that was very helpful. I was lucky there-won a number of those awards.

MR. BROWN: With silver design or, again, with these spun pieces, or both?

MR. PEARSON: Probably in-well, not probably. I was mostly entering things other than the spun work in the shows, so it would be either jewelry or some other type of piece.

MR. BROWN: And you were coming to think of a spun piece as a sort of second-class in your-

MR. PEARSON: No, no, but, you know, I would add a couple of new pieces or so a year to the line, but there is a limit to-it is isn't so much a limit; there is a place to show those and there is not a place. I have always felt very strongly about them and never apologized. I think the shapes were good; evidently so did the Museum of Modern Art-[laughs]-and some much more, much stronger than others. But I did some hollowware-had pieces that got attention and were accepted for shows, and I was doing a fair amount of ecclesiastical work.

MR. BROWN: As commissions?

MR. PEARSON: Both commissions and for showing.

MR. BROWN: Did you find the churches were more apt than many a private customer to want something contemporary?

MR. PEARSON: Some. That was a good marketplace; it wasn't great at that time, but it was definitely-and made a number of chalices for individuals.

One value of these shows, while we are on this, is simply-and not just simply but very much so that they helped one to build a reputation, and that was important. Now I am not so interested. I have my reputation, whatever it is, but I don't-I'm not so interested to enter shows, and I do it from time to time, but it's not as important. Then, I think it was critical. I doubt that I missed at least trying just about everything that came along. And, you know, you start with a blank sheet of paper; you don't have a resume.

MR. BROWN: And the number of showcases then was pretty small, wasn't it, as you said earlier, not only shops but exhibitions as well.

MR. PEARSON: Yeah, they were very limited.

MR. BROWN: In the '50s, I'm aware that there was sort of a brewing conflict between those who felt the craft should stress their hand roughness and then those who felt that crafts should be given the stature of a fine art form, equal to painting and sculpture. Do you recall any of that?

MR. PEARSON: Oh, yeah.

MR. BROWN: I think sides were chosen, weren't they? There was a bit of heat at the time.

MR. PEARSON: Yeah. I guess I felt that those who were connected in one way or another with a fine art area drew the distinction; I don't think it was the other way around. It never really bothered me particularly and I never made any pretense of-I don't like [to] draw a line; whatever lines are there, are there. There are some craftsmen who are doing-they are really more what would you would call an artist, in the sense that their work is non functional, with sculptors or whatever, and that was a problem-didn't really exist in those early days. It was a traditional approach to the crafts: functional.

MR. BROWN: So you say much of this conflict was in the head of the fine art people.

MR. PEARSON: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. BROWN: And you never in your work felt that you went-deviated very greatly from the functional as some craftsmen did; they did things that are validly sculpture?

MR. PEARSON: Well, I have done a number of sculptural things and I liked to do that very much. I don't do it enough, actually. But I try to make a distinction. If I am doing jewelry, it is sculptural in a sense, but I felt very strongly about the fact that-or to put it another way, I don't consider that the human form is a pedestal to put a piece of sculpture on; I think that it is the other way around. The piece may have sculptural qualities, but it should function to enhance the beauty of-if it's on a woman, the female form-in whatever way. And so I try not to do things that clash with it.

MR. BROWN: You had-in '52, you helped to organize Shop One in Rochester. Had you by then come up to Rochester, by '52?

MR. PEARSON: Well, I came up because of Shop One, and that was Jack and I-Jack Prip and I hatched that idea.

MR. BROWN: Now, did you call him when they came to Alfred?

MR. PEARSON: I knew him-he came to the school to teach the year that I left. Phil Morton left school and he was replaced by Jack, and I sort of got to know them there; I didn't know him too well in Alfred. The school moved out in 1950, and I would go to Rochester every once in a while, and more and more often-actually, it was, I think, if I remember, 60 miles from-Alfred is 60 miles from Rochester or something like that.

And when I did, I would often go to the school. Jack would invite me to his home for dinner, stay over perhaps, and so we started talking a lot and we became very good friends. And in those long evenings of talk we sort of decided that it would be valuable to have a retail shop, a place where we can sell our work and establish it or sell it in the community that way.

MR. BROWN: And you evidently talked quite a lot about the status of the craftsman in America or how to better your own careers or-what did he like to talk about?

MR. PEARSON: What did we talk about? Well, you mean in relation to Shop One?

MR. BROWN: No, or just in general as you were getting to know him. What was he like at that point-newly arrived from Denmark, although he had been born here.

MR. PEARSON: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Well, it is hard to say what we talked about. It must have been right across the board. The important thing is that whereas I had started in my early 20s doing metal work, he started at age 14; he started as an apprentice in another system-type of training camps in Europe.

MR. BROWN: Very long training.

MR. PEARSON: Long training. And he was very thoroughly trained in working since 14-he's a couple of years older than I am. So I had a great deal to learn not only about what was going in Europe but about-just about how to do the work. And after I moved up and we started Shop One-I forget if it was a year [or] two after that-he left teaching and joined me in my workshop; we were sort of partners. We were partners, I think; I would say that is fair to say, and we worked together for three years, both producing and selling through Shop One and other shops, but-and also we undertook some design work for companies to visit as a team-Hickok [Hickok Manufacturing Company, Rochester, NY] being one.

MR. BROWN: Were you mainly learning from him, would you say?

MR. PEARSON: Yeah, what I was going to-I was trying to remember what I was leading up to when I mentioned this, and that was my second period of-or third, I think-school was one aspect of my training. That Reed & Barton experience, although short, was very important, and very, very important were those three years with Jack. You sit across the bench from somebody who has had all of that experience and developed all that skill.

Well, one thing, he didn't have to say a word. If I'm sitting there and making something, and I look over and I-we weren't doing the same thing, but I see the quality of his work and I looked at the quality of mine, and I found out that one-that quality has a great deal to do with what the eye sees and recognizes. Most people's hands can follow-if they demand more of their hands, they can do it, but you first have to recognize it can be better.

So that was one thing, and the other was just learning from Jack how to do things. I learned how to forge-I had been doing this forging, and one of the early pieces was a very simple little salt spoon, and I think it took, like, an hour to make one. Then one day he said, it doesn't take an hour. I said, how long does it take? Fifteen minutes. And I said, cut it out, Jack, you know; I had been making them. [They laugh.] Jack said, well, let's try it, and he did it in 15 minutes from start to finish, which was a very reasonable time. But anyway, so I learned in many different ways.

MR. BROWN: But he set a standard for you so you could detect quality. You hadn't really any-

MR. PEARSON: He didn't set a standard, but he made me set a standard that was higher than what I had set for myself before.

MR. BROWN: By seeing what he was doing. You were very, very fortunate then-

MR. PEARSON: It was a tremendous experience.

Also there was another side to that, too. We-I think-I hope it will work both ways, but we challenged each other, and we were foils, so we were throwing ideas out. It's hard to do things in isolation, but ideas bounced off of each other, and at some point you would say, well, let's do it, or why don't you do it, so things happened that would not have happened otherwise.

MR. BROWN: So you both are pretty congenial and you worked well together.

MR. PEARSON: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. BROWN: Was he trying out with many different things at that time?

MR. PEARSON: He was-yeah, he did a lot of different things. He did hollowware and jewelry. He hadn't done much jewelry before, so this was a fairly new area for him. And he started doing some prototypes for flatware. He probably didn't sell-we went to New York once and he tried to sell them to various people and they didn't take them. In fact, when he went to Reed & Barton, the design he had been working when we were together became their Lark, which was highly successful.

MR. BROWN: Yes, one of the very first American production modern designs.

MR. PEARSON: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] By the large companies.

MR. BROWN: By the large companies. Well, the Shop One-they had moved it-the other people in it were people you got to know once you went to Rochester.

MR. PEARSON: When we got the idea, we were first going to do it together; then we thought, well, what-we really need a larger group. So we asked Tage Frid, who is a cabinetmaker-

MR. BROWN: So you wanted to go beyond metal.

MR. PEARSON: Yeah, right.

MR. BROWN: And you thought that would be interesting.

MR. PEARSON: And Frans Wildenhain. And what we envisioned at that time was just the work of the four of us, and that seemed to be a better presentation than just having two metalworkers. So they were enthused in the idea, and we did; we started out the four of us. We did not take in other work from the beginning, but shortly, I would say within a year or two, we felt that it was going well, and we felt that it would be an advantage to having more people involved. So we never had money. It was going well, but that didn't mean that it was in the black; it was still in the red.

MR. BROWN: And had you planned it out beforehand, that you thought Rochester might be, because of the school, for being there.

MR. PEARSON: That is because we were there.

MR. BROWN: At that time. Did you think it might be a pretty good market? Had you done any kind of inquires?

MR. PEARSON: We had been told by a guy who was very helpful to us, actually, who had started a contemporary shop, that we would never make a go of it. Rochester was too staid and too reactionary and whatnot. But, you know, if you have an idea, you do it anyway, and we did it anyway, and we were-my involvement-I mean, I was there 19 years, until I came here. And although I continued to be involved in Shop One until its demise, it was very successful. We never made lots of money, but I think it took us through four years or five to get out of the red, and-but it was a successful venture.

Anyway, we took in then-we had what we called associates after a couple of years, and then we had-I think we had 12 people who became associated-they weren't owners.

MR. BROWN: Were these people-they drew all of it from the school or independent-

MR. PEARSON: Largely, I would say probably most of the people from the school who were teaching there were included, and I really-I have to stop and think about that list.

MR. BROWN: Would you have just things on display, or did you do special shows during the year?

MR. PEARSON: We started very early-not the first year or two but probably in the second year-doing shows. And actually, Shop One not only-I refer to its success [as] a business venture. It was successful in another way, and we were once publicly given credit for influencing the whole scene very strongly. There were three points that were-there was a museum, Memorial Art Gallery, the School for American Craftsmen, and Shop One, so it did a great deal to create the scene-a fertile territory.

MR. BROWN: You mean people could all through the year-

MR. PEARSON: Come.

MR. BROWN: -see not just a show at the Memorial Art Gallery.

MR. PEARSON: Right. And we did. We used to have maybe six shows a year. We had a very active schedule. And they were really important shows. They fell into several-or we did certain types of things. One of the purposes was to bring in the work of people from outside our immediate areas and to introduce them to the community, and, of course, to show the work of people in the community, and once a year, fairly regularly, we did a student show, which the school wasn't doing at that time.

MR. BROWN: Oh, they weren't?

MR. PEARSON: And so, that was a good function. Then not only did we have the shows, but several years after we started, we realized we had to get work from-that was outside of the group. So then we started originally taking work and consigning it and eventually buying it from all over the country.

And so-and we had excellent work. I mean, we had things that would sell, but also we were not afraid to buy things that were, say, high-priced-had maybe limited appeal but we felt were very good, because eventually you find a buyer for it, and we felt better doing that-we had very high standards. That was one of the strengths of Shop One. We felt better doing that than buying a lot of cheap, poorly made stuff that might sell faster.

MR. BROWN: And meanwhile, was the taste in the greater Rochester region looking up? Was there a fairly sizeable group in the community who were following pretty closely what you were doing?

MR. PEARSON: Yes, I think we were educating the public, helping, along with the Memorial Art Gallery; we were educating the public and stimulating their interest in things that maybe they hadn't known about, and this has to be done on a national scale, and people-I mean, there was no-there wasn't a great deal of understanding. ACC [American Craft Council] did that so well in those early years.

MR. BROWN: But your base was Rochester, although you bought things from all over.

MR. PEARSON: Right, we weren't functioning on a national scale.

MR. BROWN: As a community, as Rochester, how would you characterize it in terms of the receptivity to good design?

MR. PEARSON: I don't think-

MR. BROWN: Dominated by-

MR. PEARSON: You mean then?

MR. BROWN: Huge technical industries.

MR. PEARSON: Well, because there were a number of educational institutions, there were industries that were-you would say were based on skill-skills which included many scientists and so forth, that type of thing; there was a population that had an unusual amount of, say, more education, broader-you know, tastes were broader. So it turned out to be an excellent place. It is now an excellent place for all of the arts. Oh, music. How could I forget music? Eastman-there is a tremendous interest in music there, and Eastman House Photography was a very strong photographic-

MR. BROWN: Were you always quite close, the first four or five years, to Jack Prip? What was Tage Frid like, the furniture designer? He always wanted to be a woodworker, he said, on the side. [They laugh.]

MR. PEARSON: Tage is also Danish, very different personality from Jack, and an absolutely wonderful person-still is-an absolute comic. He is wonderful-a wonderful worker-I mean, a craftsman-he really participated in-I mean, we did all of our own work-installed our display areas and everything, so it was almost essential to have someone who had the skill to do that. I mean, our shelving was worth a lot in itself in many instances. It was well done. We really made handsome displays.

MR. BROWN: What about Frans Wildenhain. Was he somewhat more independent than some others were?

MR. PEARSON: Well, he was older, quite a bit older than us, the rest of us, and he, whereas we were getting known on a national level, he already had an international reputation. He came out of the Bauhaus. He had a broader experience perhaps, and he was a potter, but he was an artist and did sculpture as well.

[Audio break.]

MR. BROWN: Second reel, November, 23, 1981.

Continuing about Shop One in Rochester, I believe that you said it had things in from the outside on consignment or that you purchased. And for a while, didn't you have an ongoing arrangement with a New York gallery-Bertha Schafer Gallery?

MR. PEARSON: Frans was showing, too, at Bertha Schafer. That was his-the gallery that represented him

MR. BROWN: Just ceramics?

MR. PEARSON: Drawings, paintings, all his work. And he would have shows there. And she would-what did she do? She must have had shows that would go out on the road and then rent them, you know, pay a fee for it. So we brought in several of those shows.

MR. BROWN: Paintings mainly?

MR. PEARSON: No, one was sculpture, I remember, painting. And we'd do that. We didn't always show just craft work. Sometimes we'd, if the person worked in another medium, if he was a painter as well-for instance, Frans, when he had a show. We'd have shows of our own work, too, but Frans had perhaps more than the rest of us. And he always showed all his work.

MR. BROWN: You were with it until its early demise. Why did it finally fold, in the late '70s or '60s, didn't it?

MR. PEARSON: No, it was-

MR. BROWN: Mid-'70s.

MR. PEARSON: Yeah, mid-'70s. When I decided to leave Rochester to come to Maine-

MR. BROWN: And that was about when?

MR. PEARSON: In 1971. It was necessary then. Frans had become less and less active in the last years while I was in Rochester. And actually what happened and what triggered my move to Maine was the fact that I wanted-because Frans was less active, although still part of it, I made him an offer to buy half of his shares, because I was doing really all the work. And he never faced up to that. He never said no, which would have been perfectly all right and understandable. But he never said yes either. And it dawned on me-one day he went off to Mexico without giving me an answer. It dawned on me that, what am I doing? You know, this is an ideal time in my life to make a change, and so I left the next day to start looking for a place. And when Frans came back, I had already found this place up here. In fact, I think I had already committed myself to purchasing it.

MR. BROWN: Prip and Frid were meanwhile long-they were long gone.

MR. PEARSON: They had-right-they had left.

MR. BROWN: Gone to revive the School of Design [Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, RI].

MR. PEARSON: Right.

MR. BROWN: Did they sell their shares at that time when they left?

MR. PEARSON: Yes. So it was necessary then to-either to close the doors of Shop One or arrange that it somehow continue. So we took in two partners-not partners, but two additional people, Tom Markuson and Wendell Castle, and felt that it was only fair and right that we, although we were still a part of Shop One, that we let them go in the direction they wanted to go in, which was a change. We had to move at that time because of highway construction and found a new place, bought the building, and did a major renovation. And it just changed the whole character of the shop. It became a split shop, very nice still, but it was a different type of thing. And both Tom and Wendell had different feelings about the kind of work they wanted in the gallery, and they made those changes. The mistake they made was that they stopped showing the work that we'd been making that had been paying the way for the shop over the years and replaced it with untried things. And sales plummeted. They hadn't developed a market for-

MR. BROWN: They made too abrupt a break.

MR. PEARSON: Too abrupt.

MR. BROWN: Then they were really the most active when-

MR. PEARSON: Well, we were all there, but I was up here. I had already moved. Frans was involved, but we had to let them do it. It was their energy that was carrying it on, and we were going to be out anyway eventually, which they knew, of course. And also they undertook tremendous expenses, got them heavily into debt-Shop One into debt.

And in the process of buying all kinds of stuff for display and lighting and just fixing the place up-and the whole character changed. It no longer was the kind of gallery that we had-you know, old carriage house. It was now fancy, shiny, and bright. And they really-they lost the following, not totally, but gradually. And then after a few years, they took in a partner. Fifty-one percent of the shares went to a person who had a-what did he do? He built supermarkets-no, not supermarkets, but shopping centers. And that influence was another-I mean, that didn't help. And so eventually, I actually lost money. I never got paid for anything and actually lost money. They didn't pay off-they were unable to pay several thousand dollars.

MR. BROWN: The shopping mall developer had the majority share of things. They needed the infusion of capital.

While in Rochester, you mentioned Frans had pursued his exhibition, and I know Tage Frid had a large exhibition of woodworking, including custom cabinetwork. And Prip, of course, then left for Reed & Barton. But how did you-what was your bread and butter during those years, say in the late '50s, well, until you came up here?

MR. PEARSON: Well, I had been selling, of course, to shops around the country and probably in the vicinity. But Shop One had always been-was really, I think, my largest. I sold more through Shop One. America House gradually became-in New York-an excellent account, too. And I had other excellent accounts. But I did most through Shop One, and my sales accounted for the majority. I did more than anyone else in the shop. So jewelry supported the Shop One venture.

MR. BROWN: You also did-in 1954 or '56, you were a design consultant to the Hickok Jewelry Manufacturing Company. Could you describe that?

MR. PEARSON: Through our dentist, who-Bob Wadsworth [ph], our dentist, who made jewelry and was a friend as well as dentist-friend of all the art people-people in the arts-one of his patients was Hickok-owners of Hickok-

[END OF AVAILABLE AUDIO.]

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