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Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with C. Carl Jennings,
1994 Dec. 20

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with C. Carl Jennings on December 20, 1994. The interview took place in Sonoma, California, and was conducted by Paul Karlstrom for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose. This is a rough transcription that may include typographical errors.

Interview

What follows is a DRAFT TRANSCRIPT, which may contain typographical errors or inaccuracies. The content of this page is subject to change upon editorial review.

MR. KARLSTROM: Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. An interview with C. Carl Jennings, the blacksmith, at his home outside the town of Sonoma, California. The date is December 20, 1994. For the Archives, the interviewer is Paul Karlstrom.

Well, first of all, I'm going to ask you about your name. It's C. Carl Jennings; is that right? And so what's the C for?

MR. JENNINGS: Well, it stands for Cecil.

MR. KARLSTROM: Oh, okay.

MR. JENNINGS: When I was a kid everybody kidded me, that's not a boy's name. I just put the C in front of it, Carl.

MR. KARLSTROM: And so you decided to go by the Carl, that was your middle name?

MR. JENNINGS: That's right.

MR. KARLSTROM: Let's -

MR. JENNINGS: C. Carl Jennings.

MR. KARLSTROM: Okay. Well, good, now we have that straight. When were you born, what year?

MR. JENNINGS: April 10, 1910.

MR. KARLSTROM: And where you born?

MR. JENNINGS: Marion, Illinois, the southern part of the state

MR. KARLSTROM: And I would be interested to know something then about your background, and your family, and how they got to Marion, Illinois, what they did there.

MR. JENNINGS: Well, my family, going back to my great-grandparents, they lived in the vicinity of Marion. My father and mother were living in the town of Marion when I was born.

MR. KARLSTROM: How did they get there? Where were your ancestors from?

MR. JENNINGS: Marion is a mining community. My dad was working as a blacksmith doing - in the mines at the time.

MR. KARLSTROM: So then really you of course are a blacksmith, a metal worker, and so this is really a family tradition in which you -

MR. JENNINGS: My grandfather, my paternal grandfather, was a blacksmith. He operated a shop, a little shop down south of Marion called Simpson at one time. I have no recollection of that. He had cancer on his skin and I only saw him about two or three times in my life. My dad would take me down there. But he went to the Mayo Clinic, it must have been in its infancy, and they grafted some of his skin over his eye. He lost one eye. That's my memory of him. It's not a pleasant sight to look at him. But he was - when my dad finally got me down there must have been six, eight years old, in that neighborhood. He was retired I guess, his status, because he wasn't practicing blacksmithing. But as I said my father worked in the coal mines in and around Marion in my younger

years.

MR. KARLSTROM: And how did you - how were you introduced to what then became your life's work really, your career as working -

MR. JENNINGS: Well, I'll have to start back to the beginning.

MR. KARLSTROM: Okay.

MR. JENNINGS: I wasn't around my father until I became - until I was around 17 years old, with the exception of a short period of time. My mother didn't regain her strength after I was born and she died when I was about seven months old. I went to live with my maternal grandparents. My grandfather, I don't recollect him, but he must have died before I was about four years old. My maternal grandmother raised me until she died when I was 16.

MR. KARLSTROM: Was that also in Marion or was that elsewhere?

MR. JENNINGS: In Marion, yeah. They lived on the outskirts of Marion, a little - my grandfather was a farmer before that and my grandmother gave birth to 12 children, raised 8 to adulthood, and then she took on me, a child. They say I was a pretty poor looking specimen. They didn't expect me to live. She started pouring cow's milk down me and they never did wean me. I'm still drinking it.

MR. KARLSTROM: Well, it seems to work.

MR. JENNINGS: And as I say, when she died my dad was living in Amarillo, Texas and I went to live with him and his third wife. I have a half sister who was born to a second marriage, which didn't last very long. He was single up until the time I was about - well, he had just married within a year when I went to live with him.

MR. KARLSTROM: Now did you say - how old were you did you say when you went to Amarillo, to Texas to join him?

MR. JENNINGS: I was 16 year.

MR. KARLSTROM: Sixteen? And you hadn't had contact with him before?

MR. JENNINGS: Oh, no, that isn't true. He lived around until I was older, so around 1918 or 19. He lived within about 24 miles from my grandmother. He had moved to West Frankfort near his work. He worked for the Peabody Coal Company there as a blacksmith and later as a crane operator. He helped set up a huge clamshell crane for the mine to move the coal. It sat on four sets of tracks, was two stories high. There was some pictures of it but they were lost. He helped set up the crane and later operated it. But around 1918 or 19 he moved to Colorado. Another uncle had moved there. In fact it was two uncles that were living there in Ardway, Colorado. He moved there and lived there for a while, and finally he married and moved to Texas. We only stayed in Texas through my first semester of my ninth year in school. They called it the ninth grade. They only have three years in their high school in Texas at that time. I don't know if they still do. But he later moved to Borger, Texas.

MR. KARLSTROM: To what? To which?

MR. JENNINGS: Beg your pardon?

MR. KARLSTROM: To what was that town in Texas?

MR. JENNINGS: Borger. It's about 60 miles northeast of Amarillo. At the time it was a boomtown, oil boomtown.

MR. KARLSTROM: How do you spell that, that town?

MR. JENNINGS: B-o-r-g-e-r.

MR. KARLSTROM: Okay, got it.

MR. JENNINGS: And he was working in the blacksmith there for the Marlin Oil Company. We - my stepmother and I he moved there in a little two room house that the company had furnished him. Hardly big enough to cuss a cat in. My stepmother gave birth to my first other, another family that they started at that time in this town. He was laid off the following - it must have been around June. We stopped off at Rocky Ford, Colorado on our way to California. Her parents lived there. She was a Hoover.

MR. KARLSTROM: This was your stepmother's -

MR. JENNINGS: Yeah.

MR. KARLSTROM: - family was from California?

MR. JENNINGS: No, they were from Rocky Ford, Colorado.

MR. KARLSTROM: Oh. But you were on your way to California?

MR. JENNINGS: That's right. We stayed there for, oh, a month or two, and we - and there was still another stop in Twin Falls, Idaho. My dad and I worked in the potato and apple harvest, August to September I think it was.

MR. KARLSTROM: What years were - what year was this?

MR. JENNINGS: This '26.

MR. KARLSTROM: Oh, okay.

MR. JENNINGS: It could have been '27. I went back there in '26 and I was 16. This could have been - yeah, it was '27 and we stayed in Twin Falls, Idaho until the following January. My dad had worked there in the blacksmith shop and there was no more for him there so he then finally went into, came to California.

MR. KARLSTROM: So you were really for a few years then really pretty much an itinerant or your father was, finding working in different places and then with you tagging along. Were you working yet at that time?

MR. JENNINGS: I worked over there in Rocky Ford for with - for her [inaudible] of my stepmother's father. He was just harvesting cantaloupes at the time. Also I worked for an uncle of hers, to haul the corn crop. But that was my employment. It was just during the summer at that time. We landed in Twin Falls in August and stayed there until the following January.

MR. KARLSTROM: It must have made it difficult for you finishing up your schooling moving around like that.

MR. JENNINGS: Well, that - we landed in Twin Falls and he later blamed me for not going to school and I blamed him for not insisting on me going to school. That was the last schooling had, ninth grade in Texas. My dad only went through the third grade in school.

MR. KARLSTROM: Again getting back to your origins, what is the family background in terms of your nationality? Where did your grandparents come from originally?

MR. JENNINGS: I've been able to trace my great-grandparents back, as far back as I can go, and I have - as far as I know they were all born in this country, to the best I can determine. I have Scotch, Irish, Pennsylvania Dutch, numerous.

MR. KARLSTROM: So basically Western Europe I guess?

MR. JENNINGS: Yeah. The Jennings is from Ireland.

MR. KARLSTROM: Was there much in your early years, especially when you were living with your grandmother, any talk about family traditions, and origins, and customs or not?

MR. JENNINGS: Not a great deal. I don't know why - many a times I wish I could have asked her this and that and my father also. It's just that -

MR. KARLSTROM: You can't.

MR. JENNINGS: They were a very religious family and most of the Coxes family settled in and around Marion.

MR. KARLSTROM: These are the Coxes, that's your mother's, the maternal side are the Coxes?

MR. JENNINGS: That's my mother, right.

MR. KARLSTROM: So Jennings and Coxes.

MR. JENNINGS: But the Jennings, they lived in Metropolis when I was a youngster. It's down near Paducah, across the Ohio River, from Paducah, Kentucky.

MR. KARLSTROM: Well, let's get you to California then. I gather that these travels you went on visiting, going to different places, finally your dad was finding work for periods of time several different places, but that did end you up in, ended the family up in California?

MR. JENNINGS: After leaving Twin Falls we stopped in Chico, California. My stepmother had an aunt living there.

We lived there until -

MR. KARLSTROM: That's where my family is, Chico.

MR. JENNINGS: Oh, yeah?

MR. KARLSTROM: Yeah.

MR. JENNINGS: That's where my father got a job for PG&E. They were winding up a construction job there and they were just starting the construction of the two natural gas lines from Cattleman Hills up to the Bay Area. This first - they moved the shop to PG&E, they moved the shop to Station A in San Francisco. It's in Visitacion Valley. It's the substation there, it's still there, and they put up some temporary structures for welding and the machine shop, and also my dad put up a little temporary structure, shed like structure actually, for the blacksmith shop.

MR. KARLSTROM: So he -

MR. JENNINGS: And he got a job for me and I came down that way.

MR. KARLSTROM: Okay. So you ended up then finally in San Francisco, you were -

MR. JENNINGS: That's right.

MR. KARLSTROM: - in Chico for a while.

MR. JENNINGS: I went to work for PG&E May 20, 1928 in the blacksmith shop with my father.

MR. KARLSTROM: Okay. So that then in effect started you out -

MR. JENNINGS: That's right.

MR. KARLSTROM: - in a career that you have stayed with right up through now.

MR. JENNINGS: Well, it's - I haven't been at any job except in the four years that at the California College of Arts and Crafts that wasn't connected to metal work.

MR. KARLSTROM: So you were really then launched as a metalsmith in 1928?

MR. JENNINGS: That's right.

MR. KARLSTROM: And drawing upon, I guess moving quite naturally into that work because of your own family background, including your father and grandfather?

MR. JENNINGS: My father and my grandfather and I call a plain blacksmith. They do - they did - my grandfather I'm sure did agricultural repair work, and sharpening plows, and whatever, anything that a farmer had to do that required metal, whether it was repairing a buggy or whatever they - shoeing a horse, that's what they did.

MR. KARLSTROM: Now you used the term "plain blacksmith."

MR. JENNINGS: That's right, nothing decorative to my knowledge that they did.

MR. KARLSTROM: Well, let's jump ahead, we may as well. Remember I am being educated as we speak because I don't know a whole, a great deal about this craft of metalworking. We may as well establish early on this distinction. You talked about your father and grandfather and you referred to them as plain blacksmiths, and that I can understand, which it's a very functional, necessary kind of work to be done. But you contrast that to what you eventually came to.

MR. JENNINGS: That's right.

MR. KARLSTROM: And the term you use for -

MR. JENNINGS: Decorative iron worker.

MR. KARLSTROM: Decorative iron worker.

MR. JENNINGS: That's primarily what I label it.

MR. KARLSTROM: Well, let's -

MR. JENNINGS: Non-functional.

MR. KARLSTROM: Non-functional. Well, I think this is an important distinction and we'll get into that a little bit more because you asked the question in the very beginning when I arrived, you know, how do we, the Archives of American Art think of you and what you do in terms of American art, fine arts. I think you're already beginning to answer that question yourself because you see your work as it evolved, and we can talk about how that came about and you can maybe sort of walk me through it, this development but -

MR. JENNINGS: Up until around the latter part of the last century, even up to around 1920 every little wide place in the road in this country had a general store, a post office, and a blacksmith's shop. It was a necessary part of the agricultural community. A farmer just couldn't go to a store to get parts for their tools and implements that they had around the farm. Either the farmer did it or they had to go to the blacksmith shop. That's what my grandfather and my father did some of that too before he ended up working, where I had contact with him for PG&E.

MR. KARLSTROM: Well, I don't want to get ahead of us here but of course the question immediately comes to mind for me in trying to track this evolution, your evolution as a craftsman or an artist, whatever term you want to use, how did this change come about? I mean, obviously you didn't start out with examples in terms of your own background and a tradition. You were simply playing with metal. What happened? Can you -

MR. JENNINGS: Well, I always had an artistic leaning. I was always drawing.

MR. KARLSTROM: Tell me about that.

MR. JENNINGS: When I was working for my dad in San Francisco every Saturday afternoon - we worked five-and-a-half days - I went down into San Francisco and always stopped at an art supply store called Walburst on Market Street.

MR. KARLSTROM: What was it called?

MR. JENNINGS: Walburst, Walburt's Art Supply. They had a gentlemen there and his job was not only to sell art supplies in the store but he also went around to the art schools and artist's studios drumming up trade. I would get - I would just pester the life out of him I'm sure. I would buy a few pastels or something from him, but I spent a lot of time in there talking to him. He was very kind to help me and he always told me if I - I was inquiring about some art school. He told me the California College of Arts and Crafts would be his suggestion, but it never dawned on me that I would ever be able to attend it. It's a private institution.

And I worked for 19 years in various shops, including four years at the art school, which I had to work there because I didn't have the - well, I had enough money for the summer session but not for fall semester, but later I had to come up with the other. But these shops that I worked in, the first one was for a fellow by the name of John Foster. He was a Hungarian, learned his trade in the old country by the apprenticeship system. He had done the largest decorative iron commission in the Bay Area at the time as far I know. There's nothing even comes up to it today. It was Temple Emanu-El in San Francisco, out on Lake Street. It was a \$25,000 commission and that time, 1927, but by today's standards it's no comparison. He introduced me to art smithing.

MR. KARLSTROM: John Foster?

MR. JENNINGS: John Foster.

MR. KARLSTROM: So he was really the key, he was the culprit in the story that -

MR. JENNINGS: I guess you could say that.

MR. KARLSTROM: He set you off in this direction.

MR. JENNINGS: Yeah.

MR. KARLSTROM: Now tell me again how did you meet him?

MR. JENNINGS: Well, I graduated from the art school and I -

MR. KARLSTROM: So did finally complete the course of study at CCAC?

MR. JENNINGS: A three year course to get a, what I wanted. They teach - you can get a teacher's credential.

MR. KARLSTROM: And so that's what you -

MR. JENNINGS: I wasn't. [Inaudible] got her teacher's credentials there but I wasn't interested in teaching.

MR. KARLSTROM: Your wife has a teacher's credential?

MR. JENNINGS: That's right. She graduated from UC, majoring in art and minoring in botany, but she wanted to get her teaching credentials so she came to the art school and that's where I met her.

MR. KARLSTROM: So that's where you met, at CCAC. What was your degree then?

MR. JENNINGS: It was just a bachelor - not a bachelor's degree, an applied arts certificate. That's what they call it.

MR. KARLSTROM: And so at that time, shortly after that or at that time is when you met John Foster?

MR. JENNINGS: It was right after I graduated from there. You had to - in fact I had talked with John Foster before, but you had to be in the union to get, to work there at the time. It was a very tight union situation in San Francisco.

MR. KARLSTROM: Yes.

MR. JENNINGS: It was I don't know how much later that I finally got into the union and they sent me over to a job in Alameda. They were building filling stations at that time. They were sheet metal structures with an angle of structural iron frame form. That was my first job. But that job it kind of folded up during the process. We didn't finish the job. The employees quit working. I went to work for John Foster, got my money, and the rest of them went back and finished the job, but I got this job with Young & Foster.

MR. KARLSTROM: So what - in what capacity did he hire you? It sounds like that was an unfortunate hire for you.

MR. JENNINGS: A helper.

MR. KARLSTROM: Just an assistant?

MR. JENNINGS: Yes.

MR. KARLSTROM: Okay. But then that gave you presumably the opportunity to learn what he knew, to really learn the trade.

MR. JENNINGS: At that time welding was just coming into ironwork. He didn't know very much about welding and I had gotten some experience with my dad. One of the first things he got was an acetylene torch. I spent a lot of time practicing welding, acetylene welding.

MR. KARLSTROM: So prior to that the activity, the experience was heating the metal and hammering, is that right, the old -

MR. JENNINGS: Heating in on a forge and hammering it out on anvil, that's right.

MR. KARLSTROM: And so the key thing or one of the key things in moving on into this application, the decorative metal working was really the introduction of welding, the torch.

MR. JENNINGS: That's right. He was in - John Foster the senior he had - his son-in-law ran the shop, the foreman in his shop. My experience with the acetylene torch, probably because of his inexperience, but he thought I was a pretty good welder.

MR. KARLSTROM: Were you?

MR. JENNINGS: Well, fair to middling. He put me to work - he was making some decorative sconces and the like that he sold in department stores. They were acetylene welding. That's the job he put me on.

I remember the first day I went to work for him, during the morning, and that's what he put to me doing. Well, that went off without a hitch. That afternoon he put me on the forge and he didn't blacksmith like my dad did. My dad if he - when he started the fire in the morning he took a door knife and drew off a bunch of shavings from the wood, a 2x4 he had laying around, and that's what he started the fire with. John Foster, he started a fire with two pieces of newspaper. He just wadded them up and put them in the fire and turned on the blower and he would have a fire going there before you could shake a stick. He had his office up in the front end of the shop. It was a built on a 25 foot lot. There was room for his office up there and just enough room to get a truck on the side to bring equipment and supplies into the shop and take the work out.

But the forges were way back in the back of the shop. I don't know how long it was but it wasn't a big shop. He put me to work on the forges. That's when the sparks started flying. He would sit up in the front end of the shop in his office, in a dimly lit shop where the windows are and he knew everything that went on in the shop. He was semi-retired at that time. But he would see me working back there and he would storm out of the front end of the shop, grab the hammer out of my hand, "This is the way we do it." I really sweat blood for a while there working with him but I learned an awful lot about hot iron work from him.

[End side A, tape 1.]

MR. KARLSTROM: Continuing our interview with Mr. Jennings and this is tape 1, side 2.

Carl, you were talking about your early experience now having arrived in California and after attending, getting a degree at California College of Arts and Crafts, you were -

MR. JENNINGS: It wasn't what they call a degree.

MR. KARLSTROM: Well, a certificate I think you said, okay. At any rate you were fortunate enough, or it sounds as if this was fortunate to go to work for John Foster who as you told us had sometime before that one of the biggest decorative metal art projects up to that time, Temple Emanuel. So this was obviously - he was one of the leading figures no doubt in this field.

MR. JENNINGS: Well, he wasn't the biggest shop by far. There were a lot of other shops that were bigger, but he had gotten the commission to do this particular commission for the -

MR. KARLSTROM: That was before you actually went to work for him?

MR. JENNINGS: That was in 1927.

MR. KARLSTROM: Well, tell me, you were starting to tell me what you actually learned from him. You said you learned a great deal and presumably there was a technical side to it, but what all did you - let's just pick up after this little interruption.

MR. JENNINGS: At that time I was working for him his primary work was doing miscellaneous ironwork for new homes out in the, near Fleishhacker [Pool], between there and 19th Avenue. The Stoneson Brothers were one of the larger developers out there, where Stonestown is.

MR. KARLSTROM: Oh.

MR. JENNINGS: They put some iron on most of the buildings, the homes.

MR. KARLSTROM: So that was the main work or one of the main -

MR. JENNINGS: That's right.

MR. KARLSTROM: -- jobs there.

MR. JENNINGS: And my chore was to start scrolls. They used a lot of scrolls on this ironwork. You always had a little balcony out the - they're still there - out the front window that they have on the - you had the stairs going up and a garage, a one car open garage underneath. You always had these little balconies. You couldn't step out there but they put potted plants out there.

MR. KARLSTROM: They're still there.

MR. JENNINGS: There's quite a - there's a railing that went up the stair and also some railings in the house. They all had scrolls on them, practically all of them had scrolls. My job was to start the scrolls. By what I mean starting, it has to be done in the forge and hammered out on the anvil, that part of it. You only put a small part of the scroll that's done hot. The rest of it is done cold. My job of it was primarily to start the scrolls. They had two or three other mechanics in the shop that were doing these and I did some of the welding and working on the forge to do this work.

MR. KARLSTROM: How long did you work for Foster?

MR. JENNINGS: I didn't work for him very, too long. I worked for him twice. The second time he had gotten the commission to do the Phoenix. It sat on top of the Tower of the Sun at the 1939 World's Fair out on Treasure Island. This tower was 425 foot high. It was the theme of San Francisco rising from the ashes, the Phoenix was. It was 22 foot high. It was made out of sheet steel, copper bearing sheet metal. I worked for him, I'm not quite sure how long, for a number of months completing this piece of sculpture.

Then I went to work for another firm that also had commissions for the World's Fair.

MR. KARLSTROM: So the World's Fair actually provided quite a bit of work for the metal smiths?

MR. JENNINGS: Yes, it was - the other firm that I worked for they had the commission to do the metalwork for the crescent shaped administration building. As you come down from Treasure Island on the - come down to Treasure Island from Yerba Buena Island it's the first structure on the right. It's still down there. It's a crescent shape. They had the miscellaneous ironwork to go in that structure. I worked for them completing that. The firm, the name slips me right now. I forget. It was on 7th Street.

MR. KARLSTROM: This was in '39 I guess, huh?

MR. JENNINGS: That's right. We also did work in the two hangars in the back where they - they're also permanent, permanent structures that were built there for the fair. The two hangars were used for clipper ships that went across the Pacific. They were hangared there in the rather large hangars.

MR. KARLSTROM: Well, was this now, was most of this work functional or again decorative that -

MR. JENNINGS: Well, you could - the -

MR. KARLSTROM: Probably both.

MR. JENNINGS: - the pipe railings I spoke of that went in the hangars they were just plain pipe railings, nothing decorative about them, just functional. The work that I did for the administration building you could call decorative. It was bronze and iron.

MR. KARLSTROM: These were the scroll work again?

MR. JENNINGS: There's no scroll work on this. It was 11 large, 22 foot high windows in this, inside of this arch, this crescent. They were bronze but they anchored onto the steel structure building. Inside there's also 11 railings and a balcony if you've ever been in there. It's a rather large room. There's a balcony up there and my job was working on them. They were bronze castings. No, there was no scroll work.

MR. KARLSTROM: That must have been interesting because that was a pretty exciting time. You know, there were a number of artists and sculptors working on these big oversized monuments, a number of sculptors in the Bay Area.

MR. JENNINGS: Oh, yes.

MR. KARLSTROM: Did you meet some of these people? Do you remember much?

MR. JENNINGS: Oh, I remember one particular fellow named Jacques Schnier.

MR. KARLSTROM: Sure.

MR. JENNINGS: Do you know him?

MR. KARLSTROM: Absolutely. Yeah, we have his papers in the Archives.

MR. JENNINGS: No fooling?

MR. KARLSTROM: Yeah.

MR. JENNINGS: Yeah, he taught at the Arts and Crafts and I visited his studio.

MR. KARLSTROM: Did you ever have a class from him when you were a student?

MR. JENNINGS: Yeah, I had a class from him, sure I did. Yeah.

MR. KARLSTROM: So you studied sculpture -

MR. JENNINGS: That's right.

MR. KARLSTROM: -- as one of the things that you - well, you're sounding more and more like an artist to me.

MR. JENNINGS: But I - I'm afraid I would have starved to death if I had to rely on sculpture.

MR. KARLSTROM: So you remember Schnier working on the -

MR. JENNINGS: He did some rather large pieces for the fair.

MR. KARLSTROM: Yeah, he did, indeed he did. And what about Stackfull on some of those?

MR. JENNINGS: I only heard of him. I never had any contact with him.

MR. KARLSTROM: Did you -

MR. JENNINGS: I studied metal smithing at the Arts School under a fellow by the name of Harry Dixon. He was a younger brother of Maynard Dixon who did some large murals for the fair. I never met Maynard, but I got quite close with Harry.

MR. KARLSTROM: Now what was Harry's - what did he teach, what did you say?

MR. JENNINGS: Metal smithing, copper smithing primarily and silver smithing. That's all they taught there at the Art School. They didn't teach ironwork or anything. They had a little blacksmith shop, but they didn't teach it. I spent a lot of time out there in the forge but my first, in fact the first iron railing I ever made I made there after I graduated from art school. It's still used. They redid the Treadwell Hall at the Art School. I don't know if you ever, know anything about the Art School.

MR. KARLSTROM: Well, I've been over there a couple of times. Which is the Treadwell?

MR. JENNINGS: Treadwell made a lot of money in the gold rush in Alaska.

MR. KARLSTROM: And so what building was this? Was this -

MR. JENNINGS: Treadwell Hall was the home of the Treadwells.

MR. KARLSTROM: I see.

MR. JENNINGS: It was the office and some of the classes were taught there at the time I was there. But they redid the whole Treadwell Hall four or five years ago.

MR. KARLSTROM: And you worked on that, I mean earlier.

MR. JENNINGS: I put this railing in there before, when I was still there.

MR. KARLSTROM: Right.

MR. JENNINGS: It was on a wooden stair and they tore the whole wooden part out and they duplicated in concrete and they put my railing back on and it's still there. I was quite amazed. But I did a few pieces for the school, some gates, hardware for gates I should say.

MR. KARLSTROM: So this in part how you worked your way through I guess. You --

MR. JENNINGS: That's right.

MR. KARLSTROM: So they give classes in sort of exchange, it was like an exchange for the work in lieu of tuition?

MR. JENNINGS: My first position I got Mrs. Meyer was the registrar. She was the wife of one of the founders, Frederic Meyer. She got me a job for a lady by the name of Stroud. She had a play school they called it then and a nursery school today. She had young children for the day. I would drive the car, pick up these youngsters, but my primary job was repairing the toys, and cleaning the house on Saturdays was the other chore she had for me. She had recently lost her husband and she had opened this play school.

MR. KARLSTROM: What a varied career background you have then.

MR. JENNINGS: Well, the following summer - I worked for her during the summer and fall and the spring. The following summer Mr. Meyer gave me a job at the school and I worked there the rest of the time.

MR. KARLSTROM: What about this contact with some of these people at CCAC and then a little bit afterwards when working at least on the Golden Gate International Exposition, did this - did you feel that you were to some degree part to this artist's community? Did you think about that at all? You were working for John Foster and then other metal smiths but you, on the other hand you had gone to art school and you had contact with like Harry Dixon, Maynard Dixon's brother.

MR. JENNINGS: I never thought of my work as being art even up until you sent this letter to me.

MR. KARLSTROM: Is that - well, that's - okay, really, that's true?

MR. JENNINGS: Well, I've been doing these - you see some of them up there. I call them seamless hollow forms. Those are the pieces that I exhibit.

MR. KARLSTROM: But at that time, we'll get up of course to, closer to the present in a bit, but at that time even though you've gone to art school -

MR. JENNINGS: That's right.

MR. KARLSTROM: -- you still didn't think of yourself as an artist and what you did or could possibly do as art? In other words this wasn't a career direction for you at all?

MR. JENNINGS: Well, I didn't consider it art. All of my experience up until we moved up here in 1969 when I had, I semi-retired, I still did work for stores, some wholesale, but they were primarily functional pieces, not what I would consider a creative statement of an artist.

MR. KARLSTROM: So that's how you would draw the distinction then?

MR. JENNINGS: That's right. It has to be something of the person put into it. I was working for someone else product-wise. They came to me and I would usually put - I always had this little notebook. Quite often that's all I did was a little sketch in that for the client.

MR. KARLSTROM: And you still carry it around?

MR. JENNINGS: Oh, yeah.

MR. KARLSTROM: You never -

MR. JENNINGS: I carry it with me always.

MR. KARLSTROM: You must have a whole - do you save these?

MR. JENNINGS: I have quite a few of them, yeah.

MR. KARLSTROM: Well, those are papers then.

MR. JENNINGS: But I've exhibited my work when I - for 22 years, during the 22 years that I did do the work in Lafayette. I did do exhibition, some exhibition work. You would have to kind of stretch the imagination in my estimation that it was artwork. They were craft shows.

MR. KARLSTROM: Yeah, sure.

MR. JENNINGS: They had a number of them around the Bay area and they were craft shows. That's what they called them.

MR. KARLSTROM: Well, what -

MR. JENNINGS: I did very few sculptures before I moved here. In fact I don't think I did any sculptures in Lafayette to speak of. They were primarily functional pieces, craft pieces.

MR. KARLSTROM: So most of your work was really then on order, commissioned or simply objects that were requested, were ordered, and you would sit down with the client I gather with your little book and, you know, talk with the client and say, well, this is, what about this and draw a little picture?

MR. JENNINGS: I tried to keep a portfolio after I got in business for a while and I would show them that or I might even have a book or something. But you - it started right here in that little book.

MR. KARLSTROM: What were most of the kinds of things that you produced? I gather that this, we're talking especially after the time when you set out on your own, when you weren't working for somebody else, I gather this was the case in Lafayette, you had your own business.

MR. JENNINGS: That's right. 1947 I opened up the shop there.

MR. KARLSTROM: So until '47, from - well, from the 30's, through the 30's and through the war years you were actually working for -

MR. JENNINGS: Well, my last job was working for Alameda Naval Air Station as a welder.

MR. KARLSTROM: Okay. And was that during the war I guess?

MR. JENNINGS: That's right. I had applied for the position a year earlier but we moved to Oakland and - that's right. I had applied for the position, a civil service position, a year earlier but they had called me to work December 1st, seven days before Pearl Harbor. I worked for them five years to the day. I had stayed another year I couldn't have - another day I couldn't have collected the money I had put in for my retirement. I needed that to open up my business.

MR. KARLSTROM: Oh, I see. So you were in a critical industry basically, a critical job in terms of the war effort?

MR. JENNINGS: Well, I like to think so.

MR. KARLSTROM: Yeah. But, I mean, it was in effect exempt from serving. Well, of course, how old were you then? Let's see, I'm trying to think.

MR. JENNINGS: What year are we talking about now?

MR. KARLSTROM: Well, '41, and you were born - you were 31 years -

MR. JENNINGS: Ten years younger than the century, yeah.

MR. KARLSTROM: So you were 31 years old and I guess ineligible for service.

MR. JENNINGS: Beg your pardon?

MR. KARLSTROM: Ineligible for service.

MR. JENNINGS: I had what they called a C1 rating I think at the time, but I had always had the belief that if I could get myself a civil service job I would be set for life. It didn't take me long to find out this wasn't -

MR. KARLSTROM: You didn't like it? I mean, it was just -

MR. JENNINGS: No, no.

MR. KARLSTROM: It didn't suit you?

MR. JENNINGS: No, it - it's just not the way - I just have to be doing something and it was too much politics connected with civil service work, at least there was at the time.

MR. KARLSTROM: Well, let's see, I apologize. I'm asking you several questions at once. We were trying to get you set up in your own business, which happened I think - was it '47 you said that you collected your -

MR. JENNINGS: That's right. Well, at that time as I said I worked 19 years, including 4 years at the Art School, in five different shops around the Bay area, the last one Alameda Naval Air Station.

MR. KARLSTROM: And then you said -

MR. JENNINGS: I did various different things, but they all had something to do with metal work.

MR. KARLSTROM: And so then finally you said enough and you wanted to set out on your own. You cashed out the money that you had put into your retirement, is that right, which gave you the funds to open up shop?

MR. JENNINGS: Well, we had saved a little but -

MR. KARLSTROM: So what did you call yourself? I mean, how - tell me about this, how did it come about? How did you -

MR. JENNINGS: Well, it was always a dream that I would be working for myself. It just seemed to be the time to do that. I didn't feel confident enough to do it earlier. We bought this property out on Diablo Boulevard in Lafayette and it had a house on the back part of the property and I built the shop on the front part of the property. I called it El Diablo Forge.

MR. KARLSTROM: Devil's Forge.

MR. JENNINGS: Devil's Forge.

MR. KARLSTROM: The Devil's Forge. Oh, I like that. And tell me about the business.

MR. JENNINGS: The biggest part of the work was doing fireplace equipment, tools and fire screens. I did a lot of lighting fixtures along with gates, railings, grills. That pretty much covers it.

MR. KARLSTROM: And presumably you just advertised that you were, that this is what you did and this is what you would make available. Did you do work then, custom work? I was asking you earlier the question was, you know, what kinds of things did you make at the shop and you just described these, but was it pretty much custom work?

MR. JENNINGS: I didn't get that.

MR. KARLSTROM: Custom work, I mean did you do specialty order kind of -

MR. JENNINGS: Yes, that's right. Primarily I did - all of the work was custom work, yeah, yeah.

MR. KARLSTROM: And so your clients would come in and tell you what they wanted. So did you feel in some ways that this was a little bit of a creative collaboration? I mean, you had certainly -

MR. JENNINGS: Visually I put - I had some of my - I was able to use some of my creative ability, yes.

MR. KARLSTROM: Well, at what point then does it move into the area of some kind of expression? Earlier you were saying you didn't think -

MR. JENNINGS: Let me get back there a little bit.

MR. KARLSTROM: Okay.

MR. JENNINGS: I took on any job that came in the shop whether it was a lawnmower or a Deere tractor, I did anything, I was hungry, along with the decorative work. I always hoped that I could get to a point that I could say, turn these clients away and do that, the decorative work, but I never did reach that point.

MR. KARLSTROM: They were -

MR. JENNINGS: The repair work was usually more lucrative than the other work.

MR. KARLSTROM: So even up to the time that you moved, left the shop, you still - it was the basic functional jobs that paid the bills?

MR. JENNINGS: Uh-huh.

MR. KARLSTROM: And yet you -

MR. JENNINGS: I couldn't tell anybody no frankly. A friend would come in and they had some problem, whether it be a BBQ grill they needed that weekend or - I would stop everything and fix it up for them.

MR. KARLSTROM: That sounds pretty democratic. You're right, it doesn't sound, that doesn't sound like high art.

MR. JENNINGS: Well, I get a lot of satisfaction in taking a manufactured product and reinforcing it, making it better than it was originally I felt. It showed a weakness in it or it wouldn't have been in my shop. But my desire always was to do something more creative but I only got to that point when I moved to Sonoma.

MR. KARLSTROM: Okay. Well, let's - maybe we should talk about that. You - did you say it was in 1969 that you moved here, am I right on that?

MR. JENNINGS: We bought the property in 1969. It was just a pasture.

MR. KARLSTROM: And of course for the benefit of those who are reading the transcript of this interview this is where we're sitting right now, in the house that you built on this property. In other words this is - you moved exactly to this place when -

MR. JENNINGS: That's right.

MR. KARLSTROM: -- you came out here in '69.

MR. JENNINGS: We had a trailer, a 35 foot mobile trailer that we lived in for five years.

MR. KARLSTROM: And began working on this?

MR. JENNINGS: That's right. I started in 1970. I went to the county to get a permit and I told them I wanted to

move a trailer on the property to live in while I constructed it. Okay, we'll give you six months to have the trailer on the property. I told them at the time I wouldn't get started in six months. I might not have said it quite that blunt. I was tickled to death they gave me six months. So after six months I went back and they gave me an extension, I don't know how long but I think maybe a year, and I still wasn't very far along. The third time I went back they didn't want to give me an extension. I had taken some photographs of how far I had gone. I think if it wasn't for one member of the board - I think he was an architect and he was instrumental in getting another year's extension. I still was far from complete. The floors weren't - the tile wasn't in on the floors. It was just rough concrete. But I sold the trailer and moved into the house. The bathroom, you haven't been in there, but it was just a concrete tub. We didn't use it right away. But I worked pretty steady on it for quite a while, while we were still living in it.

MR. KARLSTROM: And how long did you end up staying in the trailer?

MR. JENNINGS: How long what?

MR. KARLSTROM: How long did you end up staying in the trailer?

MR. JENNINGS: We lived in there about five years.

MR. KARLSTROM: Five years, you said that, that's right. By which time this incredible place done enough to move into? You moved in -

MR. JENNINGS: Well, it had a roof over it and the walls were in, but it was from complete.

MR. KARLSTROM: Well, you know, my sense, you know, Carl, is that for all your protesting that you never really were able to in your earlier work to find an artistic expression, you don't view it as expressing yourself, that in fact at the very least this house then represents your great opportunity do that because there's no question that, and I want to talk about this further, that this house seems to embody just those very qualities that is a creative statement and -

MR. JENNINGS: Well, it's been said by a number of people that the like it the best of my work.

MR. KARLSTROM: Well, and so then I think that it would be really appropriate to, you know, to concentrate on this. If you'll pause just a moment I'll turn, put on another tape so that we don't have to interrupt while you're talking about the house.

[End side B, tape 1.]

MR. KARLSTROM: Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, continuing an interview with C. Carl Jennings at his wonderful home here in Sonoma. It's December 20th. The interviewer is Paul Karlstrom. This is tape 2.

Carl, we were - we finally got you moved out here to Sonoma in 1969, to this very property, and we were beginning to talk about this terrific project of yours that you were finally able to turn to, and that is the building of - you had been doing custom work to one degree or another for many years for others and I view this as finally in a wonderful way being able to do a custom home for yourself and for your wife. I gather that that was very much a specific ambition of yours, that this is something that you really wanted to do and finally somehow had this opportunity. Is that right, is that a fair description?

MR. JENNINGS: Perfectly right. It's been a desire of mine to build my own home for a good many years. It was only after I - I think my health problems are the primary reason plus the fact that we couldn't, I didn't feel we could afford to do business in Lafayette at the time. So we made the move and bought in a Quonset hut for the shop and told some of our belongings. We moved into a trailer and designed a home. It's a round home, 50 foot in diameter, constructed from stone. I used a technique that Frank Lloyd Wright used, if you've ever been to Taliesin West near Scottsdale, Arizona. I'm not a stone mason and this technique seemed like something I could handle. You lay the stone in there both inside and outside and fill the center part with concrete, along with the reinforcement which has to be put in to make it earthquake proof and all.

MR. KARLSTROM: Is that rebar?

MR. JENNINGS: Absolutely, yeah. It looked like a birdcage before we started it, started actually putting in the rock. The roof is tile, Spanish tile roof. It's a material that - I like the natural materials and I like the permanency of tile. I put tile in my shop in Lafayette, which was adobe, so I continued to do that with the home.

The fireplace is the central part of the structure. It's chimney is a structural member that supports the radial arm of the rafters that come into the center and attach to the roof. The County of Sonoma required that I had to have an engineer okay my plans, which I did, and he told me what I had to do to bring it up to be a structurally sound home. Actually I put in things that he thought wasn't necessary to make it structurally sound. I put in some

posts around the fireplace and he said you don't need those. I'm pleased that I didn't have to but I didn't know whether I would have to with that span.

MR. KARLSTROM: You said that the roof is very, very heavy. What did you say it weighs per square?

MR. JENNINGS: It weighs 2,000 pounds per square. A square is 10 foot by 10 foot. So it's rather heavy as roofs go.

MR. KARLSTROM: You were telling me about these timbers, these rafters.

MR. JENNINGS: I specific a 6 by 10 timber. I had no idea where I would get it. I thought I might have to go to the mill to have them, you know, especially to the length and size. I was fortunate enough to pick up the timber, those 10 by 12 timbers, and there was a sawmill in town with a blade, a band saw - the blade was eight inches wide and they agreed to saw the timber down the middle, which gave me two 6 by 10 timbers.

MR. KARLSTROM: They came from Mirror [Mare?-ed.] Island did you say?

MR. JENNINGS: That's right. The timbers - only the [inaudible] could afford the quality. People at the sawmills were amazed at the knots in the wood. Most of them - I would have liked a little more character in them, there were a few knots here and there, but I had no choice in it.

MR. KARLSTROM: What were they used for do you suppose?

MR. JENNINGS: You got me. I don't know.

MR. KARLSTROM: Just surplus they had?

MR. JENNINGS: They were in some structure. You can see the nail holes in some of them up there.

MR. KARLSTROM: Yeah.

MR. JENNINGS: But I - the floors in the home are tile, ceramic tile floors. They're 6 by 12 tile, similar to what people use in their patio.

MR. KARLSTROM: And they're circular, they're laid in a circular manner radiating out from the fireplace and the central support.

MR. JENNINGS: I gave that a lot of thought. How could I lay them in the floor to give a pleasing effect and I ended up with this radial pattern.

MR. KARLSTROM: Did your wife consult with you on any of these decisions or did she -

MR. JENNINGS: Oh, yeah, we talked a lot of things over. Sometimes she would agree, sometimes she didn't. The floor has copper tubing in it for radiant heat. It circulates hot water in the floor, which I put in in the shop in Lafayette and it had to be, go into the home because there's nothing like the comfort you get, especially if sit on the tile floor and it can be rather damp and cool through your feet. If you have warm feet it goes a long way, through your whole body. Radiant heat, the temperature doesn't change much on the floor and in the ceiling because it doesn't have to be circulated with a blower like most traditional furnaces do.

MR. KARLSTROM: This is an amazing fireplace. Your own design?

MR. JENNINGS: The reason it was a fireplace, I had a hood on it, but a fireplace is not a very functional piece of heating equipment. To heat, get any heat out of it, you have to suck in some cold air from the outside in order for the fireplace to burn and most of the heat goes up the flue. The chimney is an 18 inch diameter, which is a rather large flue. That's one of the things that the engineer specific. No problem for Santa Claus to come down. But it also sucks a lot of the heat from the fireplace up the flue.

So I decided I would have to put in a stove that you can have some control over the burning of the fuel, which is wood. Most of the material I use is a eucalyptus wood, which is a very satisfactory material to burn in the fireplace, very fast growing compared to oak or most other woods. You can get a pretty good sized eucalyptus tree in five, six years. But it's a very satisfactory wood. It burns fairly clean, puts out a lot of heat.

MR. KARLSTROM: Now is this your own design?

MR. JENNINGS: The stove is my own design.

MR. KARLSTROM: You fabricated it?

MR. JENNINGS: Yes.

MR. KARLSTROM: Because it's really quite spectacular. It's big.

MR. JENNINGS: A copper is a very - it radiates a lot of heat and I decided I wanted it to be copper -

MR. KARLSTROM: And it's nicely decorative.

MR. JENNINGS: -- along with the fire unit, stove itself it steel, steel plate, with an air space between the stove itself and the copper on the outside. It's pretty functional. I didn't start a fire in it today, I should have just for -

MR. KARLSTROM: For the atmosphere.

MR. JENNINGS: -- appearance sake. I just love to sit and -

MR. KARLSTROM: Well, it's nicely decorate too. I mean, this is a case where you bring your decorative instincts and interests.

MR. JENNINGS: That's called reprozza. It's working your metal from the back and turning it over, reprozza, which I do some of that sort of work in my vessels that I make.

MR. KARLSTROM: And then here, here we have -

MR. JENNINGS: A friend of mine made that.

MR. KARLSTROM: Really?

MR. JENNINGS: Yeah

MR. KARLSTROM: It's quite nice. This is -

MR. JENNINGS: Yeah, it's a skewer or a fork, whatever. If you're BBQ'ing large pieces of meat you can -

MR. KARLSTROM: So this is clearly a friend who is a metal smith?

MR. JENNINGS: That's right. He works in Indiana for another friend of mine.

MR. KARLSTROM: In fact this is something that we'll save for a few minutes because I do want to ask you about shall we say a fraternity or a community of metal smiths. But first we should say a little bit more about this - or I would like to ask a few more questions about the house itself. Do you feel that it's done? Are you still, is it still -

MR. JENNINGS: It will never be done.

MR. KARLSTROM: It will never be done. What kinds of things - I mean, it looks done to me. What kinds of -

MR. JENNINGS: Well, I have a design for two stained glass windows, one over the bathroom and one over the bedroom. They are still - they've been in the planning stage for some time. I have a few lighting switch plates to go on around. But I'm always coming up with some thing I want to do.

MR. KARLSTROM: I'm sure there are refinements, refinements. There are circular windows. Everything is arched or a semi-circle all the way around, which really opens up the structure even though it's made of stone. These windows really are quite dominant and let a lot of light in and presumably the work on the glass windows themselves is your own.

MR. JENNINGS: Oh, yes. I designed the windows and the arch, the arch shape for structural purposes, plus I like circular things.

MR. KARLSTROM: I guess so. The house is circular.

MR. JENNINGS: Yeah. I spent a winter pretty much, at least the winter working on the windows and doors for the structure.

MR. KARLSTROM: Did you have much assistance, certainly with some aspects of construction?

MR. JENNINGS: Oh, my son helped me occasionally and I did hire a man to help me pour the concrete floor, also a young man to help me put in the partition, the wooden partitions, and put on the roof, the sheeting on the roof. He was a husky man and he came in very - some of those - those 2 by 10's I bought at the same place were 22 foot long. I would have had a big job just letting the end up it get it on the roof. No problem for him. He was

going to do, help me on the construction of it, but I soon found out that - I took over the sawing of the timber and he would give me the measurements, which worked out very nicely on the sheeting. He would give me the detail and I would saw them.

MR. KARLSTROM: Well, what about this? Let's take a look at some of the other elements within the house, furnishings and so forth. You have that lamp, that must be your work as well, right, the lamp over by the chair where you were sitting. Is this the case with most of the decor?

MR. JENNINGS: All the iron, I did all the iron in the place. I didn't do that piece right up there. That was done by a very dear friend of mine who lives up near Seattle, but all the iron that went into the place I did. This lamp here, I needed a lamp but I also - the National Metal Museum [National Ornamental Metal Museum] in Memphis gave me a one person show back in 1988. I believe it was '88, '88 or '90. I needed things for the exhibition. That was one piece that I made. I made a number of other pieces but -

MR. KARLSTROM: Some of those are -

MR. JENNINGS: Some of those were seamless hollow forms back there. They asked me in January and the show was from September to November. I worked all during that time, from January to August making projects for the exhibition.

MR. KARLSTROM: Where is that now, it's in Memphis did you say?

MR. JENNINGS: The National Metal Museum in Memphis.

MR. KARLSTROM: Well, you know, by this time and with an exhibition like that clearly you had to acknowledge that some people were thinking of your work as having some artistic quality.

MR. JENNINGS: Well, I had been awarded a few awards and that might have had something to do with it.

MR. KARLSTROM: What about the possible inspirations for this house in terms of models for it? It reminds, it could remind one of perhaps certainly an Indian structure.

MR. JENNINGS: I'm afraid I can't associate with that that much. I do have a friend, he's a woodworker, Esplanay, over in, he lives over in Bolinas, a very fine woodworker, he lives in a round house that he built. I kind of think that might have been my inspiration.

MR. KARLSTROM: What's his name?

MR. JENNINGS: Esplanay. His name is Carpenter [Arthur Espenet Carpenter].

MR. KARLSTROM: Carpenter?

MR. JENNINGS: A woodworker. He built a round house, a little larger than mine. He has a kitchen right in the middle. But he's one of the top woodworkers around the country.

MR. KARLSTROM: And speaking of woodwork as you mentioned that you're good friends with Sam Maloof, you were talking about him -

MR. JENNINGS: Yes.

MR. KARLSTROM: -- a little earlier. How did you - how did you come together, how did you meet these people? You've met some pretty interesting -

MR. JENNINGS: I participated in a number of craft shows around the country, not - yeah, some of them traveled around the country, but primarily around the Bay area. But a lady by the name of Adora Moore put on the design shows in Pasadena.

MR. KARLSTROM: Right, that's right.

MR. JENNINGS: And I was invited through a very dear friend of mine who is a jeweler to participate in this through her. She was a jeweler down there and she relayed this information to Adora Moore and she invited me to participate in the Design 11 show. It was the only one that they had in the Pasadena Museum. You're familiar with it I'm sure. That door here was the only window on Colorado Avenue in the Pasadena Museum. It's practically windowless, the museum is, and the only window that faces Colorado Boulevard. If you've ever seen the Pasadena Rose Parade usually they have one of the TV cameras right across the street from the Pasadena Museum and this window was set in that for the Design 11 show along with a number of other pieces of mine.

MR. KARLSTROM: Now that window, that big window?

MR. JENNINGS: Yeah.

MR. KARLSTROM: One of the windows of your house?

MR. JENNINGS: Yeah, before we -

MR. KARLSTROM: Before it was installed?

MR. JENNINGS: -- installed it. I had to go down there and replace a number of windows, the glasses in it.

MR. KARLSTROM: Was that in the early 70's then?

MR. JENNINGS: 60's. I have the Design 11 book over there if you want specifics, but I'm not sure.

MR. KARLSTROM: That's interesting. So -

MR. JENNINGS: But Sam has exhibited his work in these for a good many years. I actually met Sam through another friend of mine who is a wood turner, a fellow by the name of Bob Stocksdale.

MR. KARLSTROM: Stocksdale.

MR. JENNINGS: He lives in Berkeley. They're very good friends, Bob and Kay Sakimachi who is a fiber artist, a good friend of Sam and Frieda Maloof. But he had seen my work down there and we got together out of that. In fact that book has one of my pieces in it. It's in one of the rooms there, one of my pieces similar to it. We've seen each other a number of times since.

MR. KARLSTROM: So you visit and back and forth. Have the Maloofs been up here?

MR. JENNINGS: They've been up here more times than I've gotten down there I'm afraid, but we have visited them, in fact I guess only once. Yeah. We haven't gone down there more than once, have we, kiddo?

MRS. JENNINGS: I didn't hear you.

MR. JENNINGS: Have we visited Sam and Frieda more than once? I don't think so. But they've been at our place a number of times along with Bob and Kay. They come and visit them quite frequently.

MR. KARLSTROM: Now who was this other fellow? Tell me one more time this friend of yours, the carpenter.

MR. JENNINGS: He goes by the name of Espanay.

MR. KARLSTROM: Espanay.

MR. JENNINGS: But his name is -

MR. KARLSTROM: How do you spell Espanay?

MR. JENNINGS: His name is Carpenter and he has his studio in Bolinas. You go into Bolinas and you go right by his place. In fact you turn off of Highway 1.

MR. KARLSTROM: Now he has a round house that -

MR. JENNINGS: Right.

MR. KARLSTROM: -- may be one of the inspirations for you.

MR. JENNINGS: He also has a round display facility that he displays his furnishings. He does quite a lot of furniture work.

MR. KARLSTROM: It seems to me that this area, I guess the West in general but certainly the Bay area has an awful lot of this kind of activity going on -

MR. JENNINGS: Oh, they do.

MR. KARLSTROM: -- crafts and -

MR. JENNINGS: Not only - all kinds of crafts. It - ceramics, I think if I hadn't been an ironworker I would have liked to have been a ceramic person.

MR. KARLSTROM: Really?

MR. JENNINGS: I assisted the ceramic instructor one summer at the art school.

MR. KARLSTROM: Did you? Do you remember who that was?

MR. JENNINGS: Yeah. Do you remember the instructor that was teaching? Have you been around the Bay area very long?

MR. KARLSTROM: Well, about 20 years.

MR. JENNINGS: He operated a facility in Berkeley. He fired work for other people but he also did ceramic work, making - he did molds for Bufano. I know he had a figure that he sold multiples of and this -

MR. KARLSTROM: Oh, well, if you think of it later. No problem.

MR. JENNINGS: But he had operated - California Fans, that's what it is.

MR. KARLSTROM: Oh, yeah.

MR. JENNINGS: It was just a block over from University Avenue, right - Santa Fe went right along his facility there. He taught there that summer and he couldn't be there the full time and I would take over and start the class and help me, whatever he needed to do.

MR. KARLSTROM: Well, did you - you mentioned Bufano, did you ever met him? Did you know -

MR. JENNINGS: I have.

MR. KARLSTROM: Did you?

MR. JENNINGS: Yeah. He participated in some of the crafts shows. I know in the Walnut Creek Art Festival he brought one of his sculptures over there and I demonstrated there at that particular time. I ran into him over at Moore's Restaurant once. You know the story about that, his mural that's in there?

MR. KARLSTROM: No, tell me about that.

MR. JENNINGS: He did - he agreed to paint these - or not murals. They're mosaics for the Moore's Restaurant in exchange for his meals there for the rest of his life. I met him in there once. We went in there quite frequently because it's a cafeteria style restaurant and we were in San Francisco. Once we met him. It was after we had met at the Walnut Creek Art Festival.

MR. KARLSTROM: Now where was Moore's Restaurnat or where is it?

MR. JENNINGS: It's not there anymore. It's where the cable car turns around there at Market Street. What is that conjunction -

MR. KARLSTROM: [Inaudible.]

MR. JENNINGS: Yeah, I thought it was [inaudible] but it come down from the Saint Francis area and turns around.

MR. KARLSTROM: Do you know, Carl -

MR. JENNINGS: It just up about two doors there on [inaudible] Street.

MR. KARLSTROM: You know, it sounds to me as you talk that over the years you've actually had quite a bit of contact, some friendships with people involved in various aspects of the arts.

MR. JENNINGS: Well, the art school had employed a number of - Buvano taught there once. A funny story happened that Mrs. Meyer would tell about him. He had agreed to teach a summer session in there, and she contacted the artist usually a couple of weeks before the summer start. Buvano was in China. He had forgotten all about it.

MR. KARLSTROM: So he never showed up?

MR. JENNINGS: I can imagine why, because he was all involved in his creative processes.

MR. KARLSTROM: That's funny. Did you keep up with Bufano at all? I mean -

MR. JENNINGS: No, no. I would like to think I did.

MR. KARLSTROM: But you didn't -

MR. JENNINGS: He was acquaintance. He wouldn't recognize me from Adam.

MR. KARLSTROM: Did you ever visit his studio?

MR. JENNINGS: I never did. I never just had never enough to go in there to tell you the truth.

MR. KARLSTROM: Well, why is that, just -

MR. JENNINGS: Oh, I just didn't feel that I - he's such way up here and I'm right down here. He's recognized worldwide for his artwork.

[End side A, tape 2.]

MR. KARLSTROM: Continuing the interview with Carl Jennings on December 20, 1994. This is tape 2, side B.

You were talking, Carl, we were talking about some of the interesting people that you have known. Whether or not you thought of yourself as an artist, nonetheless you did have occasion to interact with a number of people that we do consider artists, including craftspeople that maybe at one time were thought as crafts, in the crafts, but not necessarily the area of art. Well, as you know that whole notion is being reexamined anyway. We're not quite so absolute about these divisions between, you know, making things and if they're too functional then, well, it's craft, or making useless things and because it's useless it gets to be fine art. So that distinction isn't quite as strongly applied now. I think that - my guess is people now would certainly think of you and some of the things that you have made as certainly within the crafts movement but, you know, very much works of art, or that the - your impetus, your motivation certainly to a certain degree, has been towards an artistic expression.

But at any rate, you know, we can return a little bit to that whole idea of craft and art and what's the difference, is there any, but for sure in terms of some of the people that you've become friendly with or gotten to know over the last few decades like Sam Maloof, definitely being viewed as artists. I would like to talk a little bit more about that group, but before doing so you, before we turned the tape over you mentioned Harry Dixon as being especially influential on you. I wondered if you would expand on that, just how so. I know he was your teacher.

MR. JENNINGS: Harry Dixon was one of my copper smithing instructors at Arts and Crafts. He was the younger brother of Maynard Dixon, the mural artist. He lived in the Montgomery Block in San Francisco. Any artist that has run in front of the Transamerica Building they knew the Montgomery block.

MR. KARLSTROM: Yeah, they called it the monkey block.

MR. JENNINGS: That's right. It was a two story structure. It took over the whole block. The artists, writers or whatever, a lot of them lived there. It was quite a community, the monkey block. At the time that Harry was teaching at the art school he had a space that he rented from Dirk Van Erp who in recent years has really gained a great deal of stature for his art and craft type copper work that he did in the teens, and 20's, and 30's when I knew him in the mid 30's, the early 30's.

MR. KARLSTROM: So you did know him?

MR. JENNINGS: I met him - Harry would take a class over there and I had occasion to go over and meet Harry at Dirk Van Erp's shop. It was up on Gary Street. But Harry had had a shop of his own in San Francisco at one time, but at this time he was working out of Dirk Van Erp's shop and I had occasion to visit him over there, to go to his home, his room at the Montgomery Block. Through him I did meet a few craft people.

MR. KARLSTROM: This was in the 30's now you are saying?

MR. JENNINGS: That's right, during - between '31 and '34, when I went to Arts and Crafts.

MR. KARLSTROM: While you were studying. Well, what did you think of Dirk Van Erp?

MR. JENNINGS: Well, I -

MR. KARLSTROM: It must have been interesting for you to see somebody working in that way, to meet these kind of people. Did it suggest a direction, a possible direction for you? Did this reinforce your interest in the more decorative side of work?

MR. JENNINGS: His work was the sort of thing that they were doing then. That's very true. Harry was similar. But

Harry was starting to get, branching out and doing things that were a little more simplified in the later years of Arts and Crafts, back to the time that I knew Harry. My first art and craft instructor, a fellow by name of Herman Steinbrun.

MR. KARLSTROM: Steinbeger?

MR. JENNINGS: Herman Steinbrun.

MR. KARLSTROM: Steinbrun.

MR. JENNINGS: Steinbrun. He did that tea kettle up on top of the -

MR. KARLSTROM: Oh, over there to the right. He came before Harry Dixon?

MR. JENNINGS: Yes. He did a little different, took a little different approach. He did portraits of people in a repose. I know, I remember one that he did of his brother in his studio near the Stanford campus. A very attractive little place with his home next door. Very nicely done, nicely landscaped place, their home.

MR. KARLSTROM: What was it about the work of some of these people that you met at that time that interested you?

MR. JENNINGS: Well, it -

MR. KARLSTROM: Or maybe had an influence perhaps.

MR. JENNINGS: Copper smithing was new to me actually. Anything in art copper, I would like to think of it was art copper, but it was intriguing. I never gave it much of a thought until I went to art school, though. I didn't have any other choice. I used to have a little argument with Mrs. Meyer. Every time I registered for a class she wanted to get me into the bookbinding, or the weaving, or - no, I want to take some more metal. She couldn't -

MR. KARLSTROM: What was her name?

MR. JENNINGS: Letitia Meyer.

MR. KARLSTROM: Letitia Meyer?

MR. JENNINGS: Yes. That's right. She was - Babs had the same thing, the same name, his daughter.

MR. KARLSTROM: This is -

MR. JENNINGS: But she ran the registrar.

MR. KARLSTROM: That's M-a-r?

MR. JENNINGS: Meyer, M-a-y-e-r.

MRS. JENNINGS: M-e-y-e-r.

MR. KARLSTROM: Meyer. M-e-y-e-r, okay. Thanks, because that means the transcriber now can spell the name.

MR. JENNINGS: Meyer. He was like a father to me. As I say I worked there and I had had a little experience with, probably getting off of your subject, working with metal. He was a collector.

MR. KARLSTROM: Oh. Collecting?

MR. JENNINGS: A lot of it was junk.

MR. KARLSTROM: Yeah. But he was interested in -

MR. JENNINGS: Every junk collector in the Bay area knows Freddie Meyer. If they had something they wanted to get rid of they would go and see him. He would usually buy it. I got away with a lot with him that some of the students who were a little younger than me, not much - I was 21 when I started there. So he placed a lot of credence in what I said. He collected the scrap copper and brass and of course silver from the shop, metal shop. He would collect them in five gallon square tin cans and he always had the idea that he was going to sell them to junk but he never did as long as I knew him. They always went back in the room, on the floor, the basement of Treadwell Hall. He would have these students sitting around segregating the brass, the copper, the aluminum and other things. Once in a while he would come to something he didn't know whether it was brass or copper. "Got get Carl." He thought I knew. I had to go to ask Elizabeth myself. I'm color blind. I couldn't pass the color

test at the Naval Air Station.

MR. KARLSTROM: Are you really? You're color blind? No. Is that right?

MR. JENNINGS: Well, I still have problems with the brasses and coppers when they're oxidized a little bit. But he - I had a special niche and he gave me one of the - it was the Guild Building. It had the auditorium in it and a few classes and then a classroom and a few class - yeah, that's what I said, a few classrooms in it.

MR. KARLSTROM: Tell me his name again, Mr. Meyer.

MR. JENNINGS: Frederic Meyer.

MR. KARLSTROM: Okay, good, I've got it, Frederic. I thought you called him Eddie or something.

MR. JENNINGS: He was a typical German, goatee, beard.

MR. KARLSTROM: Now Letitia was his wife?

MR. JENNINGS: Wife.

MR. KARLSTROM: And they basically ran the -

MR. JENNINGS: The three of them, and their daughter. Babs they called her.

MR. KARLSTROM: Okay. That's interesting. Again what - you've now mentioned really a number of names of people and some of the names are fairly familiar, pretty well known. These are individuals you began to meet fairly early on and then over the years you've met more, participated in crafts fairs and so forth. How would you describe the kind of community? Would you say that there's a kind of community that you participate in or have come to be part of that is made up of people in the crafts, people working in metal or working in other materials as well? I mean, do you have that sense of a kind of family?

MR. JENNINGS: Oh, I think it's a very strong bond between craft people. It's usually - craft and art there's always a debate which is craft and which is art, but particularly craft people I know that more than the other field. But, oh, yeah, there's a strong guild like relationship between craft people, one another, yes. The monkey block there, it was very strong.

MR. KARLSTROM: Was it?

MR. JENNINGS: It was just one big happy family.

MR. KARLSTROM: And a number of them were crafts people?

MR. JENNINGS: Yes, and they had dock print parties there. I'm trying to think of one very well known woman. She later moved up to Mendocino. But, yes, there is a relationship, a very strong relationship between craft people. There has been as far as I've been, as long as I've been involved with it and still is.

MR. KARLSTROM: Do you - are there meetings? For instance the metal smiths there's an organization, right?

MR. JENNINGS: Oh, yes.

MR. KARLSTROM: Because I think our director, Richard Watenmaker, is a member of that organization as well.

MR. JENNINGS: Yes, we - I was one of the founders of the California Blacksmith Association. We have around 425 members.

MR. KARLSTROM: Wow, that many?

MR. JENNINGS: The international organization, ABANA, you might have heard of it, Artists Blacksmith Association of North America, they're international. We have biennial affairs, four years. No, it was only two years ago this summer. We had it down in San Luis Obispo, at Cal Poly. This year it was in St. Louis, at the Washington University in St. Louis. The next one will be in New York State. The one they're planning I found out on my visit to Santa Fe they're planning, starting out the new century with the conference being in Santa Fe.

MR. KARLSTROM: How often do they have these conferences?

MR. JENNINGS: Every other year.

MR. KARLSTROM: Every other year. And you've -

MR. JENNINGS: I've gone to four or five of them. That first one I went to we, CBA, California Blacksmith Association with ABANA had it at Santa Cruz.

MR. KARLSTROM: When was that founded, the CBA? You said you were one of the -

MR. JENNINGS: 1977.

MR. KARLSTROM: You were one of the founders?

MR. JENNINGS: Yeah.

MR. KARLSTROM: And so when these groups get together - did you say that the ABANA is called Artists Blacksmith Association -

MR. JENNINGS: Association of North America.

MR. KARLSTROM: Well, see, that's interesting.

MR. JENNINGS: I had nothing to do with the name of it.

MR. KARLSTROM: What do you think about the artists -

MR. JENNINGS: They call it ABANA, A-B-A-N-A.

MR. KARLSTROM: What about, though, the artist part of that, artists, blacksmith? What do you think of that?

MR. JENNINGS: These, both of these organizations are I would say - CBA it's 95 percent weekend smiths. ABANA may be a little bit more. A very small proportion of them are professional. Of course they run the organization, the amateur end of it, which is very disappointing to me in a lot of respects, but they've done a remarkable thing for the rebirth of the craft of working iron. It's just phenomenal what has happened to iron since 1970. I have a magazine put out by the American Craft Conference, 1970, where they had a get together of some of the sculptors, craft people that were working in gold, and silver, and even bronze and copper when the price of these materials kind of went up at that time. They were looking for another material to work, so they had a meeting at Carbondale, Southern Illinois University in Carbondale, which happens to be 18 miles west of my hometown of Marion.

MR. KARLSTROM: Full circle.

MR. JENNINGS: I wouldn't participate in it. I didn't know it was going on. In 1935 I would say, the depression, the working of iron practically disappeared until this time, 1970 in California and I didn't know until this article came out in American Craft magazine that something was happening back there. A fellow by the name of Alex Bealer.

MR. KARLSTROM: Bealer.

MR. JENNINGS: He was an advertising man and he took up blacksmithing as a hobby and he wrote a book on it. That was - in fact they have what they call a Bealer award that they gave me in 1988. It was kind of instrumental in getting the craft, rebirth of the craft going. He participated in this meeting they had there in Carbondale, a fellow by the name of Brett Kington. You've probably heard of him. He's head of the metals there at the Southern Illinois University. Then after that they had other meetings and formed ABANA. Georgia actually it started a little later, around 1974 or something like that.

MR. KARLSTROM: But this is quite a different phenomenon I suppose than this trade that your grandfather and father were practicing. I mean, this is a far, far different -

MR. JENNINGS: Well, as I say, all of these smiths strive to do creative work. A lot of them of course failed, but I think - but the amateurs don't - they call their work craft and the artists, the ones that do exhibition quality work, we like to them think of them as an art expression.

MR. KARLSTROM: Sure. Well, in wood certainly Sam Maloof would qualify. He's not a furniture maker. He would definitely be called an artist. The same thing in metal I gather from what you're saying that - who are some of the major figures in the metal field besides -

MR. JENNINGS: Well, my friend Tom Joyce, I think he's one of the top. I might be prejudiced.

MR. KARLSTROM: You mentioned him earlier I think, didn't you? I think you mentioned him earlier. Tom Joyce, where is he?

MR. JENNINGS: He lives in Santa Fe. I stayed with him when I visited there. He built their house and shop. It's in this, also in this book and it features Sam Maloof. It has a hand in the name of the book but it's artist's homes is what it deals with. It just came out.

MR. KARLSTROM: And these are all kinds of artists presumably not just people involved in the crafts, right?

MR. JENNINGS: Oh, what do you call them first?

MR. KARLSTROM: These are in the book, artist's homes, this is inclusive, all kinds of artists are in there -

MR. JENNINGS: Yeah.

MR. KARLSTROM: -- painters and so forth.

MR. JENNINGS: But they do feature Sam and Tom's homes very prominently in this book.

MR. KARLSTROM: Who are some of the other major figures that -

MR. JENNINGS: I'm trying to think of the biggest one and he operates out of Syracuse, New York. Albert Paley, he deals in multimillion dollar commissions.

MR. KARLSTROM: Oh, boy.

MR. JENNINGS: He really - he's probably considered the finest. He had started out as a jeweler. He was quite well known for his jewelry work. He's gotten into this and big - he did - well, you probably know his work in the museum near the White House there, the Smithsonian Museum. What do they call that? It has this large iron gate.

MR. KARLSTROM: You mean the Renwick?

MR. JENNINGS: Yeah. He designed that, put that - it's one of his first pieces. But he's also gone on to do some rather large gates for the state capitol, New York state capitol, a huge thing. He makes them big and heavy, massive, tons some of them weigh. He's done a lot of large commissions.

MR. KARLSTROM: Now do you have much interaction with - do you communicate with some of these - well, you've mentioned of course your friend in Santa Fe, but Paley, do you -

MR. JENNINGS: I've met Albert Paley. He attends most of these - he's very much in demand for demonstrating and I've met him, him and his wife, but he's not a close friend. He's still way up there as I said. But I know a number of smiths and I should have them written down anticipating what you're asking me. But I - kiddo, you can probably help me out on some of them -

MR. KARLSTROM: We're thinking - I was asking Carl about other smiths that, others in the field, metal smiths, some of the names.

MR. JENNINGS: Another very dear friend in Santa Fe his name is Hoss Haley. I met him the same time I met Tom at the DPARA [phonetic] conference in Wisconsin, DPARA.

MR. KARLSTROM: What's his name, Hoss?

MRS. JENNINGS: He's really good.

MR. KARLSTROM: Is he? Hoss like H-o-s-s?

MR. JENNINGS: That's right. Yeah, he's -

MR. KARLSTROM: Hoss Haley, huh?

MR. JENNINGS: That's what he goes by.

MR. KARLSTROM: And what's Tom's last name?

MR. JENNINGS: Tom? Joyce, J-o-y-c-e.

MR. KARLSTROM: Joyce, okay, in Santa Fe.

MR. JENNINGS: [Inaudible] knows them all very well.

MR. KARLSTROM: Oh, I'm sure he does. All of this would be old news to him but for me it's like -

MR. JENNINGS: He can really fill you in on all of that. Well, I - this exhibition they invited - you can keep one of those if you want. But there's eight of us that participated in this.

MR. KARLSTROM: Oh, yeah. Okay, good. Well, this is from - this is the exhibition that's -

MR. JENNINGS: It's going on now.

MR. KARLSTROM: -- going on now.

MR. JENNINGS: Phil Baldwin he is a very fine, a knife maker, but he did some vessels for this exhibition. David Seacrest, Gary Griffin, Rick Smith, Brad Silverberg. He did that box over there, Brad Silverberg. It's quite heavy. You can take the lid off of it.

MR. KARLSTROM: Oh, boy, that is heavy. Now who would think to make a box out of -

MR. JENNINGS: He starts out with a square piece of steel about six inches high and he does the ornament on it and he sticks a dye down there and he squishes it all out. Some of them have come way over to one side. He uses what they call a fly press. It's a hand operated screw press that comes down not as force. This vessel here was done by Rick Smith. He's a young smith and he made this, a vessel similar to this and he brought to our ABANA conference in Cal Poly. This went over with a bang. It's been shown quite a bit around the country.

MR. KARLSTROM: Now what work do you have exhibited in this show?

MR. JENNINGS: Well, there are vessels.

MR. KARLSTROM: Very much like those, you call them the seamless -

MR. JENNINGS: Seamless hollow form.

MR. KARLSTROM: Is this kind of your invention in a sense? I mean, this is your special -

MR. JENNINGS: I had the photographs of that here but I kind of cleaned up around here. I put it in the other room in there. I took some very crude photographs of them. Seamless hollow forms is just what the word says, they're seamless, there's no - these are made out of a sheet and weld down here. All of my - well, you've gone way back is - they made a seamless hollow form, some of them, that are helmets. They worked in material less than 1/16 of an inch thick. I start 1/16 of an inch thick and go up to 5/8 inches thick. I have a hydraulic press that I designed and built which enables me to do it. I couldn't have thought of doing it -

MR. KARLSTROM: Oh, you designed it yourself for your own purposes, to create these objects?

MR. JENNINGS: Well, I built it. I copied other presses, but it's adapted to my needs. That tall vessel, vase shape up there, it's made out of a 20 inch in diameter piece of sheet metal, about 3/32 thick. When I got - the material up at the top is over 1/8 of an inch thick at the top. It just compresses the metal. It's done by a process called angle raising.

MR. KARLSTROM: Angle raising.

MR. JENNINGS: Coppersmiths and silversmiths use the technique for making copper tea kettles. The Japanese make quite a lot of copper teak kettles. Scandinavian countries make tea kettles and vases and all sorts of - and they do it in this country too. As far as I know nobody has gotten into producing these out of iron. They make a copper vessel. They made that for instance. In a kneeling metal, kneeling it means softening it, and they would clean it and they work on it cold. Well, you can't move much iron doing that cold, even that weight. It just don't move, even with a hydraulic press. I heat it, working particularly in the heavier pieces of metal. That piece on the left, that vase there, it started out 3/16 thick and it was done primarily under the hydraulic press. The pieces I sent down here is made out of another piece of the same material, the same diameter. I did form it hand, by hand, but it's all heated. I heated it with a torch right where I'm working.

MR. KARLSTROM: Well, they sure look like art objects to me. I mean, again you in the beginning said the name -

MR. JENNINGS: I do them just for the joy of it. It's a challenge.

MR. KARLSTROM: Do you consider those sort of your signature pieces, though? I mean, this is pretty much - this could be -

MR. JENNINGS: The past ten years I demonstrated angle raising at this conference, ten years ago.

MR. KARLSTROM: I see.

MR. JENNINGS: I had just gotten into it about two years earlier. Since then it's gone through a lot of changes, my technique has.

MR. KARLSTROM: But you're still active as can be I gather. Do you work every day?

MR. JENNINGS: As active as I can be, but this place here is - it's a lot of -

[End of tape.]

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