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Oral history interview with Wayne Thiebaud, 2001 May 17-18

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Wayne Thiebaud on May 17, 2001. The interview took place in New York City, and was conducted by Susan Larsen for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

WAYNE THIEBAUD: The date is the 17th?

SUSAN LARSEN: Yeah. That's what I am finally figuring it at. Ok, I guess we are recording. It is May 17th. We are in New York City. I'm here- (inaudible) I'm here with Mr. Wayne Thiebaud, and it's May 17th, 2001. We are in New York City, and… It's more important that we hear you, so I'm going to put this over here. Most important that we hear you. Ok. Our technology seems to be in order, yeah.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: (inaudible)

SUSAN LARSEN: We're lucky this morning...

WAYNE THIEBAUD: The equipment is working.

SUSAN LARSEN: ...which is good. So it's odd we are a Californian and a former Californian, and we're speaking in New York City.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Born in Arizona, but came to California when I was six months old.

SUSAN LARSEN: So that…

WAYNE THIEBAUD: I didn't come, I was taken.

SUSAN LARSEN: (Laughs) You were taken. So it was Mesa, Arizona, where you were born?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Right.

SUSAN LARSEN: In 1920?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: 1920.

SUSAN LARSEN: And your folks were… What were they doing there at the time?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: My father was working as a mechanic.

SUSAN LARSEN: Mm-hm.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: My mother, I think, was working for the telephone company.

SUSAN LARSEN: Ah.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: They came to California because my grandfather had moved from Arizona out to Southern California.

SUSAN LARSEN: Really.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Retired. He was a former superintendent of schools in Indiana, and came first to Arizona, homesteaded, then moved to California.

SUSAN LARSEN: And where did he move in California?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: A place called Wintersburg, I think. It's just not very far from Seal Beach.
Inland. And he made sort of experimental… He had a little farm, two or three acre farm. And he fooled around, like Luther Burbank, with agricultural crops, I remember.

SUSAN LARSEN: Was that his background?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Not really. He really was a kind of, I guess, intellectual scholar. But he took that up as- as an

interest. And interestingly, sold some of the first berry plants to Knott's Berry…

SUSAN LARSEN: Oh, he did.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: …Farm owner.

SUSAN LARSEN: Wow. So was he a- was he a person you spent time with as a- as a youngster?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yes, I'd go there- I'd go there often in the summers, ordinarily, school holidays, and spend time on his- he- he and my grandma's- he and my grandmother.

SUSAN LARSEN: And where were you living? Where was your family living?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Long Beach.

SUSAN LARSEN: In Long Beach, so- so that's a long association with Long Beach, it seems.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yes, quite a long association.

SUSAN LARSEN: Yeah, you had a- One of- you were- you were born Morton Wayne Thiebaud?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Right.

SUSAN LARSEN: Named after your father?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: My father's name was Morton Guisti(sp?) Thiebaud, yeah.

SUSAN LARSEN: Mm-hm. And- and when did you begin calling yourself by mainly Wayne? Was that early?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: I was always called Wayne, I think to separate me from- So they'd know who they were calling.

SUSAN LARSEN: Sure. (Laughs) So- so that- that's always been such; that's not a decision on your part?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Pretty much. At one point, shortly after my father died, I started calling myself Morton again for some reason, for about a year or so.

SUSAN LARSEN: Uh-huh. Well, it's an- it's an unusual name that you don't hear too much. And so… I read… In reading some of the literature on you, I've- I've read varying accounts of the influence of the- the Mormon experience that you had as a child.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yes.

SUSAN LARSEN: And some- some seem to emphasize it, and some seem to not emphasize it very much.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Well, I think it was a very important kind of experience growing up. My mother's family were Mormon. And my great-grandmother walked across the plains pushing a handcart with Brigham Young.

SUSAN LARSEN: Wow.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: My grandmother had, I think, eleven children. She lived to be 99. And my father, coming from another religion - Baptist, I think, if I remember - joined the Mormon Church, and was eventually an enthusiast, or was a- It's a lay ministry, Mormonism, and he finally became a bishop. So I was a bishop's son.

SUSAN LARSEN: Did the-

WAYNE THIEBAUD: But the Mormon community is very, very intersupportive. And- and so it was a very nourishing environment. I was what you'd call today, I think, a spoiled child.

SUSAN LARSEN: Mm-hm. Did you have a lot of people around you and people caring about you?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Lots of aunts and uncles, that large family, so that it was- it was a wonderful kind of way, I think, to grow up, psychologically. In terms of the intellectual tradition, Mormonism has a very strange association with that, so it's… That division occurred later on, and I'm no longer involved very much at all with it.

SUSAN LARSEN: As you started to explore the world, you- you went beyond the- the boundaries that they…

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Certainly different from the kind of Mormon doctrinaire world.

SUSAN LARSEN: The- the California that you knew as a child, how would you describe its- your picture of the world? Was it rural? Was it urban? Was it suburban? Or do those not really apply?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Kind of- actually, a kind of retirement community.

SUSAN LARSEN: Really? Oh.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: It was... Beautiful beaches, long beaches, and pretty beaches, before they built the breakwater. And quiet, rather small in feeling at that point, as I remember.

SUSAN LARSEN: Was it safe?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Lots of people came there to retire from places like Iowa and so on. And... But we did do lots of drives in the country, through orange groves, cherry groves. Places like Palm Springs was just a little palm spring. Even in some cases, the- the sand would blow over, so they'd put- I remember, put boards down to drive over to get there, in some parts. So it really was a whole different world.

SUSAN LARSEN: And was it a quiet way of life, or...?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Pretty much, yes.

SUSAN LARSEN: Did you go into L.A.? Did you go into the big city?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: We did. They had the big- those big Red Cars that ran. Very effective kind of communication at that point. And we did go in. Not often, but... It was there, and it was a kind of experience of the big city.

SUSAN LARSEN: Did you- were you aware of the sort of Hollywood and movies and (WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yes, that too) the media and that?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: A little bit, yeah.

SUSAN LARSEN: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: But Hollywood, for some reason, seemed far away from Long Beach. I don't know if that was just a- not so much a physical fact as a kind of mental fact. It seemed like another world. But we would drive there, and I remember going down Hollywood Boulevard and so on.

SUSAN LARSEN: In your family circle, was there much interest in culture, either music or art or pop- popular culture?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yes, on a kind of- a kind of very basic, almost folk level. The Mormon Church sort of encourages all kinds of performances. People get up and talk, and we were often encouraged to do, like, what they call one minute talks or three minute talks.

SUSAN LARSEN: What were they about?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Mostly- well, mostly kind of hearty and humorous and religious or... little talks.

SUSAN LARSEN: Uh-huh, right.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Lots of plays, dances. But very family oriented always.

SUSAN LARSEN: And so this was a- a factor in your weekly life, and things to look forward to and take part in? You took part in these?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yes, oh yes, very much so.

SUSAN LARSEN: Yeah, yeah. Uh-huh. It wasn't just watching, but participating.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yes, pretty much- pretty much centrally involved. Even if I were, for instance, to go in the - which I eventually did - become a scout, the scout troop was in the Mormon church. And if you went to a dance, it was at the Mormon statehouse- or church house. So it really was a- a community, a rather close knitted, intersupported environment.

SUSAN LARSEN: And your family, from what I could read, your family seemed to have run headlong into the Depression.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yes, it did, mm-hm.

SUSAN LARSEN: And- and that forced a displacement in your- in this childhood that was- was- Are we talk... Was the Depression... The time you're speaking of now, was that before the Depression or afterward?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Speaking so far before.

SUSAN LARSEN: Mm-hm.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Actually, and after. So it was in between. The 19- I guess 1929 or so, after that- after the beginning of it, my father was employed rather well. We moved from Long Beach to Los Angeles. And he became an overseer of what they called the motor pool. (But it was an executive position, so he got stock in the Golden State Milk Company, which then came to be worth practically nothing. What money he had saved, they- we bought a farm in - along with other family members - in Southern Utah.

SUSAN LARSEN: Wow.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: So we moved there, and were there during the center of the Depression.

SUSAN LARSEN: Was that a developed farm that was a safe haven or...?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: It was a sheep ranch, actually, between St. George and Cedar City, owned by Mr. Thorley, who leased it, or was gonna sell it to the family over a period of time. Of course, we never... We lost that and- and then so on. But we farmed there for two or three years.

SUSAN LARSEN: And you were really- you were then about eleven?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yes, that's right. Eleven to about, I guess, thirteen, eleven, something like that.

SUSAN LARSEN: And so- so you were very well aware, probably, of your circumstances and what was going on? Or- or were you?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yes, pretty much. Again, the family would come and work on the farm. Another fam- we hooked up with another family, and... Sort of more distant relations, from a place called Hurricane, Utah. But we raised all kinds of wonderful products, agricultural products, which we couldn't sell. And... But it was a great experience. I thought that's the way I would end up.

SUSAN LARSEN: Oh, really? Uh-huh.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: As a farmer or a rancher. I had an old horse. We worked very hard, early in the morning 'til late at night.

SUSAN LARSEN: What about school?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: So it was a great work to- great way... Well, and then in the fall would come - this was a lot during the summers and vacation. I went to school first in Hurricane, Utah, and then in St. George.

SUSAN LARSEN: Mm-hm. Did you go to a Mormon school or a regular secular school?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: No, it was a regular school, yeah. The Mormon, I don't think have any schools - that I know of. A university, maybe.

SUSAN LARSEN: I don't know.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: University. But no, just regular public schools.

SUSAN LARSEN: Mm-hm. And what- what if... Were things be- beginning to emerge that you were good at that you- that were encouraged, that people noticed?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: I was mostly interested in sports. I think basketball, primarily, and other sports. I was a kind of bored student, not very active. School was... I liked a lot of the things about it, but it seemed always sort of boring to me.

SUSAN LARSEN: Were- were you a reader?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yes, sort of. But not- not like I am now. (Laughs)

SUSAN LARSEN: Yeah, you are- you're very much a reader now, I think. So- (Laughs) so it just took a while, huh?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yeah, I just- I'm- I'm a very later starter, in that sense. Teachers were always- My poor

mother would always get these communiqués that, "He should be doing better. He's not dumb, he just won't do anything." So…

SUSAN LARSEN: And then you…

WAYNE THIEBAUD: 1933 was, I think a crucial time in our lives, because we- we lost the ranch, and we moved. My sister and my mother and I moved to St. George, in a hotel, the Snow Hotel.

SUSAN LARSEN: Where is St. George? Oh, Utah?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Oh, it's near the southern border of- of Utah, close to Arizona and- and Nevada.

SUSAN LARSEN: Mm-hm.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: But interestingly for me was that my father then had to do something, and the only job which he knew about was in Long Beach. He heard that there was some construction work that he thought he could get hired onto, so he went on, left us in St. George. And that was the time when they had the big earthquake in Long Beach, 1933.

SUSAN LARSEN: Oh, my goodness.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: My mother was terrified, and- But he got… Happily, got a cable right away that everything was alright, except that there was this sort of terrible rubble all over the city. And that's where my father got a job, cleaning up the- after the earthquake.

SUSAN LARSEN: Construction. Yeah.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yeah.

SUSAN LARSEN: He was in the right business at the right time.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Which- Yeah. (Laughs) So that- that allowed us, after a little while - soon as school, I think, was at some kind of point… He came up and we loaded up the truck with what few things we had, and drove to Long Beach. So we were back in Long Beach at that point.

SUSAN LARSEN: And where did you live in Long Beach, do you remember?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yes, we lived on Temple Avenue, by a place called Signal Hill.

SUSAN LARSEN: Oh, yeah. Gosh, I know it very well. I think there's a big Home Depot (Laughs) near there right now.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Is that right?

SUSAN LARSEN: I think so.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yeah. All the derricks are down; they've got those mechanical things now.

SUSAN LARSEN: Mm-hm. So that you were back- back again to Long Beach. Did you (WAYNE THIEBAUD: Back to Long Beach) pick up life as- pretty much as it had been?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Pretty much, back to the church again, lots of church activities. By that point, I think I was in junior high school, I guess. And then finally in high school.

SUSAN LARSEN: Usually by high school, people start to sort themselves out. Were you getting a glimmer of interests?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Well, I had some things that really interested me. One was working on the stage crew in drama, and making scenery. I remember having art class, which I didn't- wasn't too interested in, but very pretty girls in the art class.

SUSAN LARSEN: Oh.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Playing a lot of basketball, other sports. But as far as drawing, I- I was very interested in cartooning, got very interested in cartooning.

SUSAN LARSEN: Can you tell me what cartooning was for you? I mean, what… Was it what you picked up on the corner or something… Did you have access to a bigger purview of it?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: I think mostly just the American comics in the newspapers. For a long time, I remember I cut out strips and kept them around. Then I would copy them and so on. And- and got more and more interested. By the time I was maybe sixteen, I guess, fifteen, I started sending in cartoons to magazines. They had these contests where they'd have a situation of… In a magazine called Open Road for Boys. And they would say what- "Draw a cartoon in which you would say how this problem is solved." And so I did that, and I remember having them- had a couple of things published, and (SUSAN LARSEN: You did?) I was very excited and so on.

SUSAN LARSEN: Oh, that's- that's pretty- that's pretty great.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: I think I got a dollar, a dollar prize, you know.

SUSAN LARSEN: And what did your- what did your folks and peers think of that, anything?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: They were- my parents were great that way. I mean, they encouraged me. They had… I had no trouble with having, you know, very undistinguished report cards; they just didn't really chastise me or anything.

SUSAN LARSEN: Boy, you're lucky.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Very lucky, yes.

SUSAN LARSEN: You are. (Laughs)

WAYNE THIEBAUD: And they would say something about college or something, "You wanna go to college?" I'd say, "Never. Never. I wanna have nothing to do with school once I get out of it."

SUSAN LARSEN: Oh, boy. Isn't that funny? Look at your life; you've been (WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yep) in school for a lot of the time, haven't you.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: You never know.

SUSAN LARSEN: Yeah. So…

WAYNE THIEBAUD: But that was… So I did that. I really, then, became more and more interested in cartooning, and- and was very, very taken with it. Still am. Still have a lot of respect for- for cartoonists. And all- and graphic designers, as well. But I began, also, to do things like sign painting and…

SUSAN LARSEN: Advertising, or…?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Sort of parallel. Yeah, well, you couldn't call it advertising so much, because it was at a very low level.

SUSAN LARSEN: Right, yeah. Yeah.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: I mean, we'd do…

SUSAN LARSEN: But for an individual store or something?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: That, painting a sign for a shoeshine parlor, or… And I'd go and watch sign painters, I remember. And…

SUSAN LARSEN: What- what years would this be, now? Where are we in…

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Fifteen, sixteen years old, I guess.

SUSAN LARSEN: Yeah, so we're about…

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Maybe fourteen, I guess.

SUSAN LARSEN: Sort of…

WAYNE THIEBAUD: I also did… The church was responsible, in some sense, because they would buy materials for me to do posters for the dance, I remember. And I'd… And at some point, I- I… And I don't know how this happened, but I went up to Los Angeles. I used to hitchhike a lot. My friends and I would hitchhike to one place or another. And one time, in hitchhiking to Los Angeles, went to the old Disney studios, I remember. And then to a school called, at that point, the Frank Wiggins trade school. And they had, at that point, a number of trade courses, like sign painting, cooking, nursing. And one in commercial art. But I was mostly interested in the sign painters, the way they were teaching people to paint signs. I'd go and watch them. They'd take the classified ad

section and they'd practice strokes, you know.

SUSAN LARSEN: So this- this had to do with a certain look of- a certain way of handling the material, or a certain…

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yes, brushes, certain kind of brushes, certain kinds of materials, a way of paint called one shot, where you're supposed to do it in one quick stroke. But in the process, someone says, "Well, why don't you go up and see, there's some people doing some cartoons and advertising up on the next floor." And I went up and saw that, and asked somebody there… I was a little bit, I think, too young to get in. But there was a nice- a wonderful kind of old advertising man and a lady who taught these classes. And they- they said, "Well, you have to apply," and you know, so on and so on. Well, my wonderful father took what sketches he could find around the house, and actually went up and asked them if they would let me come.

SUSAN LARSEN: Isn't that something?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: So they- they said, "Yeah, he can- he can come here." And they- it was a class which had already started, I remember. But that was a- that was really a very helpful experience. A wonderful, old fashioned illustrator, a lady, who was a- a kind of stylist, and she- she'd show- show us how to put a hat on a head, and how to put- how to paint shoes, or draw shoes, so that you started with the sole, I remember, and then you added that and made sure that you… But those were very basic and very helpful kinds of things.

SUSAN LARSEN: It was- it sounds like it was not just a formula, it was…

WAYNE THIEBAUD: No, it really had to do with the sort of basic principles of what something like… Making something happen very direct. It wasn't anything to do with art or any of that
fancy stuff It was just very practical, very straightforward information, which I found amazingly - still find amazingly helpful.

SUSAN LARSEN: Mm-hm. And what did they- what did they think of you, and what did they say to you?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: I'd say they indulged me and let me go along with the others.

SUSAN LARSEN: Uh-huh. Who were…

WAYNE THIEBAUD: We'd all put our work up on… We'd make mock advertising for signs or- I mean for posters, you know, (inaudible) And then he'd give criticisms. And at that point, I met two cartoonists in there, two wonderful, very- very facile draftsmen. I was very intrigued.

SUSAN LARSEN: And how old were they?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: They were a little older than I was.

SUSAN LARSEN: Well, most people were.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: And… (Laughs) But they were helpful. They were very… They'd show me what, you know, what to try to do, what kinda pencil to try or things like that.

SUSAN LARSEN: Uh-huh. And so how- how long did that go on? One- one semester, or longer?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: I think about a- maybe a… Gee, maybe a semester, yeah. Hard to recall at this… I was hitchhiking up and back from Long Beach. In that process - which is interesting in itself - I used to go through Watts. And I watched Simon Rodia build some of his… Oh, they were just about, you know, not very high then, but…

SUSAN LARSEN: What did you see?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Somehow I'd get stuck, you know, how somebody would take me only to South Central, or however far. And at one- couple points, I was right there, and I stood around watching it while I was hitchhiking.

SUSAN LARSEN: What did you think of it?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: That- It was just a puzzle to me, you know. Sort of a strange, eccentric character.

SUSAN LARSEN: Did you know it was there, or did you stumble on it, or…?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Just came upon it.

SUSAN LARSEN: Yeah, yeah.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Had no idea. I mean, it was not even known at that time, I think, except it angered a lot of the people around him that he was doing that.

SUSAN LARSEN: Sure. It is an extravagant thing. (Laughs)

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yeah. (Laughs)

SUSAN LARSEN: It's a wonderful thing. I love it. I love going to see it.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: It's amazing, yes, it is.

SUSAN LARSEN: Yes, it is. Done with such care. It's really well- it's actually well made. It's beautiful.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yeah, they tried to pull it down and everything, tried to get it down(?).

SUSAN LARSEN: Oh, isn't that fun? That's great. Well, in the- in the whole sense of Southern California, though, I mean, what of Art with a capital A were you exposed to? Museum art or…?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: I think- I think we did take one trip to the Huntington Library, a church outing. And I remember being very impressed with that. I think that's… Isn't that where Pinkie and Blue Boy are there (inaudible)

SUSAN LARSEN: Yes, Blue Boy and Pinkie are there, yeah, right.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: I remember that vividly, and I remember the- They had a kind of sculpture garden, as I remember. But maybe- maybe they were just like Roman copies or plaster copies of everything(?). But I remember thinking of that as a sort of different world, or another world of sorts. But it was interesting, and- and I think I… I remember getting books out of the library. I went to the library a lot. And…

SUSAN LARSEN: Which- which one, school or- or the…?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Public libraries.

SUSAN LARSEN: Public library, yeah.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yeah, one was in Long Beach; I remember going there very often and- and
Mostly cartooning, books on cartooning, books on drawing. But in the process, I remember picking up biographies of artists. I remember reading Lust for Life and VanLoon's[phon.sp.] Life of the Artists and Life on Rembrandt, I remember.

SUSAN LARSEN: And you did- this was all of your own volition; no one was counseling you or pushing that.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: No. No. We were still sort of playing music and a lot of sports and things, but this was something that I was interested in. Then I had a friend who was- whose father was a frame maker. Had a frame shop. Norman Hart. And he was a- also a painter. And he… We were studying the guitar, I remember, and he asked me one time, he says, "You're interested in drawing?" I said yeah, he says, "Well, I'll tell you what, if you want, if you're interested, I go down to Palm Springs and paint." He painted little desert pictures, in addition to his frame shop. And he said, "If you want, you can come down and watch me paint." So he nicely took me. We drove down, I remember, and he talked about things like, "How many greens do you see in that area there?"

SUSAN LARSEN: Huh. Wow.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Then I watched him paint. He set up in the desert with his easel. And I was sort of astounded, because he started… I remember he started at the top, you know. And it was like he pulled down a curtain, just like…

SUSAN LARSEN: Oh, and just worked down?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Just worked right down. And then- then he'd put the cactus in front and… I remember the sort of blue mountains and…

SUSAN LARSEN: Did he put- did he show them in the frame shop?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yes, he did. Yeah.

SUSAN LARSEN: Yeah, yeah. Great. Sort of touristic views of Southern California?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yeah.

SUSAN LARSEN: Yeah.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: And that was... I remember, when we came out... And I remember this with my folks, 'cause we drove down there frequently. Outside of Palm Springs, there'd usually be a series of those old touring cars with running boards. And several artists would be out there, with their paintings on the running boards for sale, outside of Palm Springs. They were all sort of typical desert- little desert landscapes.

SUSAN LARSEN: Mm-hm. Goodness. Well, out of- for a- for a lot of us in America, an awareness of art comes out of all these different pores(?).

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yeah, that's right.

SUSAN LARSEN: It's- You know, not many of us are marched in the front door of the Metropolitan at the age of five.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Oh, no.

SUSAN LARSEN: You know, so...

WAYNE THIEBAUD: No.

SUSAN LARSEN: And maybe that's a good thing, you know, that...

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Probably builds some variety and some- some other- other offshoots, I guess.

SUSAN LARSEN: Mm-hm. Well, very often in this country, we've thought of art as something that came from Europe, or that- or is something that you- you learn from models, from elsewhere.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yeah.

SUSAN LARSEN: Or that it wasn't something that could grow up out of the place where you were.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Seems like foreign, almost.

SUSAN LARSEN: Yes. And- and- Or that it had to be old.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yeah, that's true. I guess there were things going on. I- I remember sub- subsequently learning about things that were going on that I had no idea at the time. Like, there was something called, I think, the E-Bell[phon.sp.] Club or the- the California Art Club, or something, where they went out and painted together.

SUSAN LARSEN: Right.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: I imagine they had little exhibitions and things.

SUSAN LARSEN: There was a lot in Hollywood, with Aline Barnsdall and Frank Lloyd Wright, and...

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yeah.

SUSAN LARSEN: And there was a circle of painters and photographers and designers who (inaudible)

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yes, that- I got to know about that later on.

SUSAN LARSEN: Yeah. That was going on in the twenties and-

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yeah, that's right, yeah.

SUSAN LARSEN: -and later. But many of the things seemed to rise and then fall; might make a small imprint, but not a big one.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yeah. Yeah, there- I think that support system, the environmental support system is- is crucial. And that's always pretty tentative, and you're lucky if that happens, but if not, it - as you say - tends to die away.

SUSAN LARSEN: In- in L.A., it can be kind of frustrating, because the access to the history is not terribly easy. (WAYNE THIEBAUD: No) And much of it's disappeared.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: That's- I guess that's true, unfortunately. It's interesting now that there is this kind of

renewed interest in California- early California painting.

SUSAN LARSEN: There is, yep.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Which is, I think, wonderful.

SUSAN LARSEN: Yep. No, but that's... So we're- we're... So there you are, and you're about to- you're about to emerge from high school or...

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Right.

SUSAN LARSEN: In '36, I have that you were involved in an apprentice program in animation at Disney.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yes.

SUSAN LARSEN: You would've been still in high school, though, right?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: For a very short- This is the summer time; I'm still in high school. And they had several different kinds of options. At that point, they'd put out a book where you could submit drawings. They had a test: Draw Mickey Mouse doing so and such and such. And you were accepted in different ways. You- you could be accepted just as a kind of probationary employee, like a messenger or... Or you could be a... And you could go there, continue to work... 'Cause he had a sort of school system, as well, there, where he trained animators. And subsequently, they farmed that out to other schools, like Chouinard, which then became California Art, as you know. But at that point, It was still pretty much a rickety-tickety kind of operation.

SUSAN LARSEN: And did you see Walt Disney walking around?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yes, on occasion; I saw him a couple times. Never met him or anything. So I got hired as a in-betweener, which as you know is a... Well, the animator will draw Mickey Mouse here and there, and you draw all the in-between (inaudible) there, so... You just trace them, you know, one over another, change 'em slightly. But the- what happened there was a sort of tragedy of- of Walt Disney's very conservative sort of nature.

SUSAN LARSEN: Let's flip this over. Yeah.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Very anti-union, very anti... I mean, my payment was something like fourteen dollars a week. But... And that wasn't so bad, 'cause I was learning things; it didn't- you know, it was terrific. I mean, a big opportunity for me, in that sense. But people with families trying to get by on twenty two dollars a week and... I remember one time the window washer outside was looking in watching the guys who were... "You guys must- That's terrific," he says. "What do they pay you to do that? You must have terrific jobs there." (inaudible) you anticipate the window washers making more money than the animators. (Laughs)

SUSAN LARSEN: Yes. Right. Well, I (inaudible) artists all my life; I know.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: So the union was (inaudible) Yeah. (They laugh) So anyway, the upshot was that... And I- actually, I was, at that point, becoming sort of socially conscious, I guess. I hung around in Long Beach in a place called the Spit and Argue Club.

SUSAN LARSEN: Uh-huh. What was that?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: It's a group of... It was in the public park, and these guys'd get together and, you know, (SUSAN LARSEN: Stand on a soap box?) shout at each other and argue and- and that fascinated me, the- that kind of argument and the sort of dialectical interchanges. I was just fascinated by it. And that proposed a kind of challenge ... to read a little more and read books and so on, 'cause I had this sort of Mormon- very limited Mormon kind of upbringing. But...

SUSAN LARSEN: Were they from the- were they from the Port of Long Beach? Did it have to do with union organizing, or...?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: There were some union people there. Lot of religious fanatics. So it was a mixed kind of... They subsequently became quite famous, and they built a little special place for 'em. The Spit and Argue Club then moved out on- by Rainbow Pier, there. But anyway, so by the time I was at Disney's, I was already interested in union... I was even- thought at that point maybe I'd become a union lawyer. And I- I had no scholarly qualifications, even, to do that, but I had this, you know...

SUSAN LARSEN: You had the passion.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yeah, I had this fantasy that I... Oh, I think I'll become a union lawyer, and so on. So when

they were talking about their- the union organization, that interested me. And- and they were very interested in me, because I was so young; you know, I was just sixteen or something. So they took me into their confidence and- and… Actually, went with them to some of their bargaining things. But they hired at that point- we… This is my first experience with knowing what a spy was. We hired somebody that came in and befriended us, and then pointed us out as union people, and we were all fired. So… I was only there maybe- I think less than three months, so it was a very short kind of tenure.

SUSAN LARSEN: Well, that's a very profound experience. So you watched- you watched adults with family to support being tossed out on the sidewalk, and…

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yeah.

SUSAN LARSEN: For… Yeah.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: And that was happening all around, as you know. I had a friend who later I met, who was, at the same time, involved in the Lockheed strike, a sort of tragic union problem, as well. Later on, we met at Rexall Drugs. This is Robert Mallary.

SUSAN LARSEN: He figures again and again in your biography, doesn't he?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yes, he was a- he was a very important part of my- my life.

SUSAN LARSEN: When did you first meet him?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Met him first when I went to work for Rexall Drug Company, after the Army- after the Air Force.

SUSAN LARSEN: Well, we'll- we'll pick that up, and I'd like to hear about him, 'cause I- (WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yeah) one sees him again and again. (inaudible)

WAYNE THIEBAUD: My daughter is- is named after him. (SUSAN LARSEN: Oh, [inaudible]) Mallary Ann.

SUSAN LARSEN: So I- I- We're at about 1930 to '40. And you would've been coming out of high school?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Right.

SUSAN LARSEN: And as you came out of high school, what did you… Did you…

WAYNE THIEBAUD: I- I worked at very jobs. I- I've always sort of worked. I remember selling newspapers early on, magazines, then- then worked as a- worked in a creamery, washing boxes- washing dishes. Then I got a job as a theater usher, and worked for a number of theaters.

SUSAN LARSEN: In Long Beach?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: In Long Beach, yeah. Also worked then as- I got hired as a sort of an apprentice sign painter for Sears, Roebuck.

SUSAN LARSEN: Oh, my. Did they have a- a studio where you went to work?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yeah, they had a little- a little office they had, a little sign shop, yeah.

SUSAN LARSEN: And where was that store?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Long Beach.

SUSAN LARSEN: Still in Long Beach.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Around Atlantic Avenue, yeah.

SUSAN LARSEN: Long Beach almost seems like it was bigger and more lively and more distinctive then than it seems to be now; it seems to just be part of a long continuum of…

WAYNE THIEBAUD: It was- it was quite a little unique separate entity then, I think. My recollection of it, at least.

SUSAN LARSEN: Mm-hm. Not so much now.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: So then… Let's see, where are we?

SUSAN LARSEN: Well, you're working at Sears, it's- Did you- did you get out- you graduated from high school and you- and you'd gone on to this job; but did you believe that that would then be your work, or…?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: I wanted- yes. My idea was to try and get- to become like a commercial artist then. I became interested in that.

SUSAN LARSEN: Oh? And…

WAYNE THIEBAUD: I did spend some time at the City College, Long Beach Junior College, then, it was called. And I went there with the idea mostly of playing sports. But I remember I think I took all these units, and didn't get credit for anything, except one, which was public speaking and athletics.

SUSAN LARSEN: You didn't get credit for them 'cause you didn't finish, or…?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: I didn't finish; I didn't do the work. And it was terrible.

SUSAN LARSEN: Yeah.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Let's see, then…

SUSAN LARSEN: So then at that point, the war is brewing. And…

WAYNE THIEBAUD: That's right. And I remember being in church, as a matter of fact, December 7th, when they bombed Pearl Harbor. Then I- I did- I found out about a job which you could get if you went to night school. And it was in ship fitting school, and learning welding and ship fitting, how to- how to do that. And another friend and I signed up for that, went to school and got a job at Terminal Island building those liberty ships.

SUSAN LARSEN: Oh. So you weren't in danger of being drafted that point, or were you?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Not quite, I guess. I knew it was coming up.

SUSAN LARSEN: Yeah.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: And after the ship- during the shipyard thing, I guess, that's when I enlisted in the Air Force.

SUSAN LARSEN: Mm-hm. So you had that skill in hand that you could offer, the ship fitting skill? You had…

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yes, except I went in the Army, really, to become a pilot. And you could go in and go to mechanics school, air- air mechanics school, first, and then take a… When they called you, you could take your pilot training. Well, when I got in the Army Air Force, we… In mechanics school, you also do mechanics work on the line. And when I saw what was happening to those planes… (Laughs)

SUSAN LARSEN: Mmm.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: It was the navigation school (inaudible). I thought: God, this getting up in the morning at four o'clock in the morning and servicing these airplanes, this is- this is pretty tough stuff. I learned a lot about the airplanes and so on, but… One morning, coming back, I looked in a Quonset hut and saw these guys all in their uniforms with ties, drawing and painting.

SUSAN LARSEN: Ah-ha. The light dawned, huh?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: How do guys do that? So I went and knocked on the door and a nice fella came over and… I asked him, "How'd you get- what is this going on?" He said, "Oh, we're making- we're doing posters and things for the (inaudible) assistance(?). We do navigation posters, and safety posters, that kinda thing." Said, "Why?" He says, "Are you interested in that?" I said, "Yeah, certainly." He said, "Well, can you draw?" "Sure," I says, "Well, I can do cartoons." He says, "Can ya?" "Yeah." Say, "Well, let's see you do one." I remember… (They laugh)

SUSAN LARSEN: Like an audition.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: So that day, I was transferred into the headquarters squadron and- and we went to- I went to work on that. And from there, I went into special services. Gave up the whole idea of- of the other, and stayed in the Army with that, almost 'til the end of the…

SUSAN LARSEN: And you didn't go overseas, you stayed in California?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: No, didn't go overseas. At the- near the end of the war, the Battle of the Bulge, they gave us- they pulled us all out that hadn't had that kinda service and put us in commando training.

SUSAN LARSEN: (inaudible)

WAYNE THIEBAUD: We did that for... But I didn't- I almost got shipped out and- until I got a call from the commander to show up at this office. I was worried about what I'd done, but it was... He- he asked me if I could do a portrait of his wife from a photograph.

SUSAN LARSEN: Oh, boy. (They laugh) Sounds like you were on the right path. Saved your neck, (inaudible)

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Have I- have I been lucky, or not?

SUSAN LARSEN: Yes, you have, you have. Make sure everything's, yes, moving right along, that's good.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yeah.

SUSAN LARSEN: So... As the war wound down, then you were- you were released, and...?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: One other experience was that near the end of the war... I had a very good friend, a Chinese-American, named Monroe Lee Young. We worked together doing cartoons in the Army, with the newspaper services, and so on. And he went on- He got a job in- that he'd heard about from some- some friend of his, in the first motion picture unit of the Air Corps in Culver City, Venice California, near Venice. And he said, "Oh, you should come down here," he says, "There's a terrific project on." He says, "I'll see if I can get you transferred." So some- some people came in and did a- did a security check on me, 'cause it was a secret project. And then gave me orders, sealed orders, to proceed to Culver, California.

SUSAN LARSEN: Far away Culver City, huh?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: And as we drove over the- the grapevine, or came down- actually, came down Avenue, there were extras on the street, the V-J Day was... August the 2nd or something. So I went to the- went to the base in this old Hal Roach studios, where I was housed. And they said, "Go away. Come back in a week." Everybody was drunk and disorderly. But it was quite an interesting project. It was a project where they were making mock-ups of the whole- various islands of Japan, in detail. They had artists hired to- to do these-

SUSAN LARSEN: Models?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: -replicas, right.On a large sound stage. And then they'd make simulated bombing runs over this, so that the pilots would feel like they were- They had clouds coming under and everything. And that project was cited for- for an award because of its effectiveness in helping the bombing of Japan.

SUSAN LARSEN: Much as the video (inaudible)

WAYNE THIEBAUD: And Ronald Reagan was our commanding officer.

SUSAN LARSEN: And did you see him?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Oh, yeah.

SUSAN LARSEN: Yeah? Now, wasn't he- wasn't he a more open thinker at that point, and changed his politics?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: He was just changing. He was just changing. He- he- he was married to Jane Wyman, I remember; we were mostly interested in that. But he was then becoming a kind of martinet and not a very... It wasn't a very pleasant experience. He had been... As you know, his background is quite different.

SUSAN LARSEN: Yes. That's why I was wondering if he was...

WAYNE THIEBAUD: But he somehow saw opportunities that were different from what they were.

SUSAN LARSEN: Were you pretty shocked at the outcome of his career?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yes, I was.

SUSAN LARSEN: Yeah, (inaudible)

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Not a big fan of Ronald Reagan. (Laughs)

SUSAN LARSEN: Especially as- even as governor.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: I couldn't believe that they would...

SUSAN LARSEN: Yeah. What he did as governor to the universities-

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Terrible!

SUSAN LARSEN: Is still a very bad legacy.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yeah.

SUSAN LARSEN: It- it was the beginning of it.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: That was when the decline actually began.

SUSAN LARSEN: Yeah. My husband taught, too, all those years. And- (WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yeah) and (WAYNE THIEBAUD: So we know) went to the University of California, and, you know, just heartbroken. (WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yeah) I mean- So to watch-

WAYNE THIEBAUD: It was- it was a great system. Had a great potential. It was sad to see.

SUSAN LARSEN: A model for the rest of the country.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yeah, that's right.

SUSAN LARSEN: Yeah. I know. We're… It's one of the things that brought us together was just that, you know, we met at a faculty thing, and we started talking about this we thought: We think the same.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yeah. (They laugh)

SUSAN LARSEN: So- so in, let's see, 1943 you- you were married? Is that right, or…?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yes. 1943, I think.

SUSAN LARSEN: Well, that's what I have. I mean, that could be wrong.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Well, yes. My first wife, Patricia.

SUSAN LARSEN: Yeah.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: We met, actually, on the base at Major(?) Field. I don't know the date; I guess it is '43.

SUSAN LARSEN: Well, this is what some of the biographies say, that's why, that, you know-

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yeah. Well, then that's probably-

SUSAN LARSEN: -I'm asking, but… And then you had- your daughter was born in '45, you daughter (inaudible name)

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Right, Twinka.

SUSAN LARSEN: Twinka.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: I had a step- step-daughter, Jill. Yeah. That's right, Twinka.

SUSAN LARSEN: I noticed Twinka had illustrated or published a book that- I looked up Thiebaud on the internet, and I found Twinka Thiebaud as illustrating something or other. Is she an artist?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: No, she's painting now, but she helped- she was- she was interested in acting and so on. And then she posed a lot for-

[BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE 2]

WAYNE THIEBAUD: -and the other experience she had, which is pretty amazing, is she helped take care of Henry Miller in the end of his life. She was friends with his daughter.

SUSAN LARSEN: It was a book about Henry Miller.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: And she wrote a book about-

SUSAN LARSEN: Ok, that's what it was.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: -recollections of Henry Miller, yeah.

SUSAN LARSEN: That's what it was. Did- did you know Imogen Cunningham?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yes, well, I knew her slightly, mm-hm.

SUSAN LARSEN: She seems like someone you would've loved to have met.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: And her- her two sons, you know. He made a film on- early doc- kind of documentary on the work.

SUSAN LARSEN: She's a- quite a person.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: On Cunningham.

SUSAN LARSEN: Yeah, I love her work.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yeah, mm-hm.

SUSAN LARSEN: It's great, it's good.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Amazing.

SUSAN LARSEN: Yeah. Amazing lady, a wonderful presence.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yeah. (Laughs)

SUSAN LARSEN: Yeah. So... Here the- here the biographies that I've poured through are kind of- They list moving around, doing things. You worked in L.A. and you worked in New York.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: After I got out of the Army?

SUSAN LARSEN: Yeah, yeah, and I don't- I don't know what you were doing, exactly.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: I first went to- when I first came out of the Army? Yes, let's see. I worked for Eastern Columbia, Broadway at Ninth, doing little spot illustrations in the retail advertising department. We were sort of living hand to mouth, and... We went... Let's see, then... Oh, I mentioned earlier Monroe Lee Young and I went to New York to try to sell cartoons. I was still trying to do that.

SUSAN LARSEN: So that was the- that was the reason, then.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Magazine cartoons.

SUSAN LARSEN: It was not in search of the New York school or any such thing.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: The what?

SUSAN LARSEN: It wasn't in- in search of the New York school or any such thing.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: No, no then, no. This was in search of trying to sell cartoons.

SUSAN LARSEN: Yeah. Mm-hm.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: In 1946, I think that was. And we came and sort of lived almost as homeless people. I remember we found a flop house for seventy five cents a night.

SUSAN LARSEN: Goodness.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: And we'd take the drawers out and turn 'em upside down, use 'em for drawing boards, and go around with the cartoons. Every Wednesday, you could take 'em around to magazines. So we did that. And we were staying together in this little room. (Laughs) He was very uncomfortable with it. And finally, he just couldn't take it, he went...

SUSAN LARSEN: How long did you stay here then?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: I stayed here almost a year.

SUSAN LARSEN: You did, doing that?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: And he... Yeah.

SUSAN LARSEN: That's awesome.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Well, I finally, then, went to work for an advertising agency. Went to work for Womenswear Daily, in Fairchild Publications, in the art department. He went back and got married to Rosie. He missed her terribly, so... I was just left there. And then stayed a year. And then came back to Sacramento.

SUSAN LARSEN: Now, you- your wife was inL.A., though, is that right?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Well, she came to New York, also.

SUSAN LARSEN: She came to New York with you.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yeah.

SUSAN LARSEN: Ok.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yeah.

SUSAN LARSEN: So- but it was hard... That sounds like a hard period here.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: It was, very hard. It was- it was difficult. So we... I mean, we'd be like... We'd take the Greyhound bus, finally, back into Sacramento.

SUSAN LARSEN: Mm-hm. So now, your- your whole life has been in Long Beach, and suddenly Sacramento enters the picture.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Well, that's where I came, you know, to go in the Army Air Force. Major(?) Field. And that's how I got acquainted with Sacramento.

SUSAN LARSEN: And your- the draw there was that you liked it, you liked what you saw?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: I liked it. And plus, there was an opportunity to- to go back to school, so I decided that I was finally gonna go back and get an education. And I went to San Jose first. And they looked at my record and were sorta horrified, and... I remember sitting... The guy says, "Well, what do you wanna do with your education?" I said, "I wanna- I think I wanna become a teacher." And he- I remember him saying, "Oh, God," he says, "Why in..." Said something about, "Why us?," or something. Why- why... (They laugh) It was really...

SUSAN LARSEN: What- what was he objecting to, the commercial art, or the cartooning, or...?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: No, he was- My record as a-

SUSAN LARSEN: Uh-huh. Oh, as a student.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: -as a student, you know.

SUSAN LARSEN: I see.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: He didn't... He says, "Well, you know, you have to be on probation." So... But then I was really ready to try and- and learn, and it was terrific. I mean, I became a front row student, it was terrible.

SUSAN LARSEN: Mm-hm. And how old were you at that point, in your thirties?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Well, let's see... Not quite, I don't think.

SUSAN LARSEN: No. No, no, no, no. No. Let's see. So we're here...

WAYNE THIEBAUD: '47, was it, or so?

SUSAN LARSEN: Yeah.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: '47?

SUSAN LARSEN: Yeah. So you were 27.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yeah. 27, 28.

SUSAN LARSEN: Yeah. (inaudible)

WAYNE THIEBAUD: So I stayed for a year at San Jose.

SUSAN LARSEN: Mm-hm. Who was teaching there? Do you remember anybody in particular?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: There was a rather large art department. There was a fella who actually was a kind of Prix de Rome winner, a nice old academic classical painter, in the department; and then a whole group of very helpful people. There was a fella that taught sculpture, I remember, and a fella that taught lithography; that's where I had a chance to do some lithographs.

SUSAN LARSEN: Were you on the GI Bill?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: On the GI. Bill, right.

SUSAN LARSEN: Bless it, boy, that was a great thing.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yeah, thank goodness. Boy, I couldn't have done it otherwise.

SUSAN LARSEN: Yeah.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: And then… I heard about Sacramento having- starting a school, starting a state college. And went up, and they were wonderful. They said, "Well, if you come up here, we can give you some credit by special examination for your- for your portfolio. We'll cross off classes you don't have to take."

SUSAN LARSEN: That was appealing, huh? (Laughs)

WAYNE THIEBAUD: I cheated my way all through… I got through school without being educated at all.

SUSAN LARSEN: Aw. What did you- what did you think of the advertising world, as you had been in it and out of it and- and that whole- the whole set up in America (inaudible)

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yes. Well, what happened, we've missed a very important part, you remind me. When I came out of the Army, I worked… When I came- so back from New York, I guess, right? I went to Los Angeles. And that's when I went to work for Universal Studios. And worked there until, again, there was a labor dispute, and I had to go and follow my think of not- of respecting the line. By- by that time, I think I'd bought a house on the GI Bill. And with house payments, and then the two children… See, I can't do this. So I applied for, then, Rexall Drug Company, and worked there. And that's where I met Robert Mallary.

SUSAN LARSEN: Ok, so- so Rexall had its own art department, and they had a lot of stores?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yes. Had a lot of stores.

SUSAN LARSEN: And- and so you would…

WAYNE THIEBAUD: And that might be a good place to pick up next time.

SUSAN LARSEN: Yes, yes.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: To start there with that, because that was a very crucial experience.

SUSAN LARSEN: Ok, let's…

WAYNE THIEBAUD: That's where I decided to go back to school.

SUSAN LARSEN: Ok. That works for me, too.

[BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE 1]

SUSAN LARSEN: -are recording on the 17th of May, in New York City, with Mr. Wayne Thiebaud, for the Archives of American Art. Ok, everything seems to be moving along nicely; yep, we have good volume.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: This is the 18th, isn't it?

SUSAN LARSEN: Oh, is it the 18th? You're right, it's the 18th, yeah. (Laughs) It's Friday the 18th.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Not that it matters that much.

SUSAN LARSEN: When I get on the road, I get a little mixed up.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Easily done.

SUSAN LARSEN: Mm-hm, true. Alright. Did you have any thoughts about what we covered that... Anything occur to you that we didn't...

WAYNE THIEBAUD: We just got some things out of sequence, I think. And we were returning, as I remember, to working at Rexall Drug Company.

SUSAN LARSEN: Right, and that seemed to be a-

WAYNE THIEBAUD: And that was a kind of- that was a very-

SUSAN LARSEN: -a critical time there, yeah.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: -Yes, it was a critical time.

SUSAN LARSEN: Mm-hm, mm-hm.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: And I had worked at Universal Studios, and they had, also, a labor problem. And I got this job with Rexall Drug Company. Rexall Drug Company was in the process of changing. They merged, I think it was, with Walgreen. And they came in with a big plan of operation to upgrade the whole system and so on. So they had a rather active art department. And so fortunately, I got hired right away, as a layout art directing kind of making- making layouts.

SUSAN LARSEN: Signs, or- or product- product things?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: No, this- All kinds of things. Redesigned the logo, a lot of image development, and package design, graphic arts. We'd do things like annual reports, adverti- advertisements for the magazine - they had a little in-house magazine; I did a cartoon strip there.

SUSAN LARSEN: Gosh.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: But the main job was doing layout work for ads on the national level. And that's where I met Bob Mallary. And Mallary was hired, actually, as a typography... You know, he would put together the typography. When he received a layout, which was fairly rough, he would, from those indications, specify the type and so on. And he... We didn't get on well at first at all. He criticized my layout.

SUSAN LARSEN: Uh-huh.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: And since he was a- by that structure, a- an underling, I told him, "Well, why don't- Maybe you should do the layout then," and so on, so- smart alecky.

SUSAN LARSEN: How- how old was he and how old were you?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Pardon?

SUSAN LARSEN: How old was he, and how old were you?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: He was a little bit older, not much, maybe two years. But in terms of intellect, probably fifteen years.

SUSAN LARSEN: Uh-huh. (Laughs)

WAYNE THIEBAUD: But he... Eventually, we became quite good friends, in talking about fine art, which he knew a great deal about.

SUSAN LARSEN: What was his background? Where did he learn all this?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: He grew up in Berkeley. His father was a professor of history at Cal.

SUSAN LARSEN: Oh.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: He ran away- he- he became very interested in social activities, and was elected president of the Young Communist League of Berkeley. So he had that background, socialist interests. He went to Mexico and worked with Siqueiros- particularly Siqueiros, but also Orozco, and with the Taller Graphica Popular.

SUSAN LARSEN: (inaudible) Popular, yeah.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Worked there and made prints, and was actually there when Trotsky was assassinated.

SUSAN LARSEN: Goodness.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: He came back, and he was pursuing a career in sculpture, and very- very interested in avant garde art. But he- he... We became friends slowly, and I developed terrific admiration for him, because he was like a mentor; he knew so much more. He told me I was ignorant and I gotta get myself together.

SUSAN LARSEN: And so what was the program, to- to...?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Mostly just referring to things. "You don't even know the difference between Freud and Jung," and... Or, you know, it'd be things like that, and... The difference, you know, what- what... When they say something, dialectical materialism, what does it mean? I had no idea. And it was a kind of... He introduced me to the idea of the life of the mind and- and the world of the mind. And challenged, and told me that I should... If I were- particularly if I were interested in being a painter - which I was beginning to do then. And he gave me...

SUSAN LARSEN: But it made it appealing, obviously.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Pardon?

SUSAN LARSEN: He somehow made this very appealing and compelling.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: He did, and he was also an example of one of the best analytic minds I've ever encountered. Whether it was painting or sculpture or literature or ideas, political ideas, he was... He had this sense of inquiry and a capacity to make terrific- he had terrific analytic skills - including talking about painting. That was the first introduction to what something like serious criticism of work, in the sense of connoisseurship - complicated, insightful, how to develop alternatives, how to extrapolate. And that was tremendously impressive to me, and very helpful.

SUSAN LARSEN: Oh, I would think

WAYNE THIEBAUD: So it was... I really received my first real critical sense from him. And we became...

SUSAN LARSEN: And did this happen at work, or afterward, or (inaudible)

WAYNE THIEBAUD: We'd take walks- walks at lunch time, and then finally we'd see each other at night, the families would get together. His wife was an advertising executive for Cole of California. And he was starting to exhibit at that point, and made quite a good record of exhibitions, with he and... I remember he built what was called a stroboplane[phon.sp.].

SUSAN LARSEN: Oh. Stroboplane, huh?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: It's a- was essentially a... He was very interested in receiving illusions of dimension. And essentially, it was a big fan that dropped in front of a window, and stopped an image and- and it depended on the retention of memory to build this image in depth. He bought a huge milling machine, I remember, and did work- early work with cast plastics and... From there, went to New York, was in one of the Sixteen Americans shows at the Museum of Modern Art.

SUSAN LARSEN: Now it's starting to click. I've seen reproductions of his work, (inaudible)

WAYNE THIEBAUD: And then he- he went to the University of New Mexico, was a professor there, then became very friendly with Elaine de Kooning. Elaine de Kooning painted his portrait one time on the cover of *ARTnews*. And came then to live in New York. And had exhibitions at the Allan Stone Gallery.

SUSAN LARSEN: Oh, yes. Yes, that sounds-

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Allan was just starting, and he showed... When I said I was gonna try to come to New York at a later date, he said he would show the work to Allan, and that's when - as we said, I think, earlier - that Allan wasn't interested, but became interested eventually.

SUSAN LARSEN: Well, Allan showed such a wide variety of things, (or- in the- The times I've been up there, I've seen early de Koonings, works by John Graham, (WAYNE THIEBAUD: Right, exactly) (inaudible) Moore's. I- I don't... Wonderful things, but they're- it's- it's not a- it's not a slice of history, (WAYNE THIEBAUD: No) it's a- a person's realm of inquiry, it seems.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Allan really is a- has a collector's mentality, more than a... He doesn't like dealing, he doesn't like the art world, doesn't- doesn't like to do any of that; he's very uncomfortable with it. But he has quite a bit of

admiration in the art- so-called "art scene," because he's his own person, own man, does what he wants. He, you know, he has a house up in Purchase. A 55 room house that is- was the guest house for what is now Manhattanville College. A Stanford White house.

SUSAN LARSEN: And it's filled with things he's...

WAYNE THIEBAUD: And it's not just filled, but crammed with things.

SUSAN LARSEN: And he has a place in Bar Harbor, Maine, I guess, too, (inaudible)

WAYNE THIEBAUD: That's right, yeah, he has a place up there, as well, and a place in San Francisco, so...

SUSAN LARSEN: Oh, how nice for both of you.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: All of- all of them filled up with stuff. I mean, like seventeen Bugatti automobiles.

SUSAN LARSEN: Goodness.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Thousands of pieces of African tribal sculpture, lots of de Kooning, Gorkys, John Grahams, Cornells. He's a pack rat, actually. (Laughs)

SUSAN LARSEN: But- but such im- such interesting, incredible taste.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yes, he has very, very good- very good stuff, yeah.

SUSAN LARSEN: Yeah. He seems to pick things that are challenging to figure out, as well as things that are beautiful. That- that- that engage your mind and...

WAYNE THIEBAUD: He likes- he likes it really... Allan's a very wise and intelligent fellow. He- he wanted to be a painter.

SUSAN LARSEN: He will tell a perfect stranger that. He told me that once, when I went up as a student.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Uh-huh, yeah.

SUSAN LARSEN: He'll tell- you don't- you've talked- seen him for five minutes, and he'll tell you.... (Laughs)

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yeah.

SUSAN LARSEN: Which I think is interesting. (They Laugh)

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yeah, so we've become more than just dealer and artist; we really are fam- friends.

SUSAN LARSEN: What did- what did... When you brought him some work with... Did you go with Robert Mallory or (inaudible)

WAYNE THIEBAUD: No, I came... We drove across country, with the kids, and- and came to New York, and I went around a lotta galleries here. And because I heard from Allan- heard from Mallary that he was not interested, I didn't go. He- actually, he had just- he'd just come onto the art world scene.

SUSAN LARSEN: Yeah. He opened up in '61, I think.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: That's right, yeah.

SUSAN LARSEN: (inaudible)

WAYNE THIEBAUD: And so I was- I tramped the route, trying to get people interested in the work, couldn't find anybody. One person in a vanity gallery wanted me to pay for an exhibition, and I learned about that stuff. But no one really was interested, and we were just- decided: Well, we'll just go back. And I called Bob Mallary in the meantime; he wasn't there, he was... He'd gone on a vis- art visiting thing up in Pennsylvania. But his wife said, "Well, you're- you know, you- did you call Allan Stone while you're here?" And I said, "No, I heard he wasn't interested." Says, "Well, I think there was a letter sent as you were coming across country, and he said to definitely contact him before you go back." So I says, "That sounds kinda strange." But I did. And went to see Allan. He was on, then, just up the block on 82nd Street. And he... (Laughs)

You probably know that story, 'cause it's sort of been around a lot, but he... I had 'em rolled up, and- and there were- there were some big paintings leaning against the wall. And so he unrolled one and thumb tacked it on the stretcher bars of this large painting. And just said, you know, "I- the work puzzles me, but I can't get it out...

WAYNE THIEBAUD (Cont.): Since I've seen it, I have trouble getting it out of my mind. And anything like that interests me." And asked me how old I was and- (They laugh) "And you've never had a show in New York?" "No." "God," he says, "Well, you ought to have a show." He says, "I'll- I'll tell you what, I'll keep the work around and- and work my courage up, and then we'll- I'll- I'll show you at some point. Just go back and send me work, and we'll figure out the time to have a show. Well, I was- I was delighted, of course. But he just said he- as I pinned the thing down, he turned a painting around, and it was a- a whole silk screened thing of Coca-cola bottles. And (Laughs) he says, "What do you think of this- this work?" I said, "Not much." And he said, "Well, that probably'd be what people will think of your work." And it was Andy Warhol.

SUSAN LARSEN: Yes, I would think so.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: He was trying to get Al- he was trying to Allan interested in the work.

SUSAN LARSEN: Mm-hm.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: But I- He came- a lotta the people came to the first show, and- and one of 'em was Andy Warhol. He came, Barnett Newman, and Elaine de Kooning, and Thomas Hale and a lot of people. So I was- there was that lucky incident, where there were people interested in that particular kind of thing. Lucky.

SUSAN LARSEN: But something was just turning a corner, wasn't it? In- in- I mean, the- the whole- the- a chapter was- the... How to put it. It's not that those painters weren't doing interesting work - I think they were - but that another generation was pushing in, and that-

WAYNE THIEBAUD: And people are in the sort of alternates to what's happening and that's... So I was one of those lucky- lucky people.

SUSAN LARSEN: This was in '62?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yes.

SUSAN LARSEN: Ok, so (inaudible)

WAYNE THIEBAUD: First show was '62.

SUSAN LARSEN: So that- that was the time when- when Warhol and Lichtenstein and Rosenquist and all of those people seemed-

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Oldenburg and so on, yeah, that's right.

SUSAN LARSEN: -to be almost simultaneously popping up in New York and...

WAYNE THIEBAUD: That's right.

SUSAN LARSEN: You went back to California; did you have a- an awareness of that? I mean, you had just- you had seen the...

WAYNE THIEBAUD: I had- I didn't really have any awareness of that series of thing. But see, we were taking... This is the time when we were taking students here. And that's the way we figured we'd get a free trip to New York, by taking twenty- if we could get twenty students, and so on. So we'd come and visit artist's studios. And museums, of course. And that's how I came... Allan coordinated the first exhibition with that. So we had- We came in with twenty or twenty five students. And he- I called him from the hotel, he said, "Well-" He said, "Didn't you hear about what happened to your show?" I said no. He says, "Well, it's all sold out, and there's some reviews, but you- You're supposed to be here at ten o'clock to talk to Time Magazine," and all that kind of thing, so...

SUSAN LARSEN: Great, wow. And so you...

WAYNE THIEBAUD: I thought he was kidding me at first.

SUSAN LARSEN: It sounds as though you weren't at your own opening.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: We were.

SUSAN LARSEN: You were.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yes.

SUSAN LARSEN: You were, uh-huh.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yes. He had- he had arranged it so that the kids could see this show. And so it was just one of those, again, strange things. But that was... So Allan really then became a friend. He was very, very careful with the work. He- he tried to ensure that it wouldn't be collected by people who were just interested in the kind of dynamics of the art world. And essentially, just sort of managed the work.

SUSAN LARSEN: And managed it very well, it sounds like.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yeah, he- I think he was terrific in the way in which he... He didn't ever involve me in any kind of relationship with clients or any of that thing, or ever tell me what to do or, you know, so... It was one of those (inaudible)

SUSAN LARSEN: A charmed life. (Laughs) I mean, (inaudible)

WAYNE THIEBAUD: That's putting it very mildly. (Laughs)

SUSAN LARSEN: Yeah, yeah, it is. Very unusual, from what one...

WAYNE THIEBAUD: And so he- actually, he's the only dealer I've ever- ever had.

SUSAN LARSEN: Mm-hm.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: We had- we- we did our own little things, like artists cooperative galleries, and we did that kind of thing on a local level, and showed at places, but he's the first dealer that I ever- only dealer I've ever had.

SUSAN LARSEN: But in your life in California, however, you- you very much engaged with that community and that world, (WAYNE THIEBAUD: Right) in that you- you went for and- and had a teaching credential, and you did your masters degree. And then you started to teach?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yes, started teaching at the City College, junior college then.

SUSAN LARSEN: And when did you start teaching?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: '51.

SUSAN LARSEN: Ok, so...

WAYNE THIEBAUD: 1951.

SUSAN LARSEN: So there's a ten year period of teaching and painting before this happened. Is that...?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: That's right. Yeah. And we showed locally. When I came back from taking that time off in 1956, from the City College, went back and lived for almost a year. But it was so expensive I had to go back and do commercial work as well. So I worked at a couple of advertising agencies. But the nice thing was I went to the club every Friday night, where the people met. And that was, at that time, a real community of- of intersupport. And...

SUSAN LARSEN: And what- what was, for you, the atmosphere? Did... When you walked in the door and... Did you immediately see some of the people you recognized?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Oh, yes. Yeah.

SUSAN LARSEN: And- and...

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Right away. 'Cause they all were almost always there. You'd go to almost any opening, and de Kooning would be there, Harold Rosenberg, Clement Greenberg, Barnett Newman, all kind of arguing and talking. 'Cause they also all

WAYNE THIEBAUD (Cont.): met at the club very often on Friday nights. They had panel discussions. One very moving experience I remember was- that was- they had a- a kind of memorial for Jackson Pollock.

SUSAN LARSEN: Was that at the club?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: At the club.

SUSAN LARSEN: At the club. And what happened at that? I remember that you'd been there, I was fascinated to hear that.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yes. People- people got up and talked about Jackson Pollock. Women would get up, sort of tearfully talking, recounting stories. Barnett Newman spoke, Clement Greenberg spoke about him. Something about being out on a limb. And someone else got up and talked about how… Well, he really is not dead, he's alive, and among all of us, you know. And de Kooning interrupted and says, "I saw 'em put him in that hole. Of course he's dead. Don't get this thing all out of…" You know. Then he told a very funny story, and he said- got up, he said, "Everybody was talking about Jackson Pollock," he said, "I- I didn't know him; everybody said he was very good and so on, but… So I go to his studio, and to tell the truth, his work didn't look so goddamn good to me. But the trouble was I got- got back to my own studio, and my own work didn't look so goddamn good either, so…" (They laugh)

SUSAN LARSEN: That's great. That sounds like him.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yeah.

SUSAN LARSEN: The really was a matter-of-fact Dutchman.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: He's also… de Kooning was, as you know, very bright, and in a curious way. He- he… He would bring conversations from seemingly left field, which would be suddenly centered into (Laughs; inaudible) Funny kind of…

SUSAN LARSEN: He wrote an odd combination of things, but some quite difficult philosophical things that he took to heart, and brooded over, it seems.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yeah. Yeah, we became quite good friends, finally, with Elaine de Kooning. We taught together in Paris. And my wife made a film on Elaine painting a portrait of Kaldis. That was his name, Kaldis. And he…

SUSAN LARSEN: So- so you didn't- you didn't, then, feel like a stranger from California who couldn't enter into thinking(?) in this…

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Well, it's almost difficult to realize how approachable those people were. It was really not- they not had gotten into that other kind of world of- of over-attention and all of that. So they were very… Everybody… It wasn't just me, but WAYNE THIEBAUD (Cont.): anybody could speak with 'em, talk with 'em. I went to the Ce- Cedar Bar a lot, and sort of hung around. But…

SUSAN LARSEN: And what did you take out of all this for yourself?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Several things. I took one thing to heart: How different, often, the critical preoccupation and focus was, compared to how they talked about their work. Surprise to me to hear how de Kooning was so interested in art history, for instance, and how much he was interested in Rembrandt, and in what way he was interested. Talked about Picasso, Picasso, Picasso. He says, "I… Yes," he said, "He's there(?), but my- I love Soutine. And it makes perfect sense. I mean, talk about why that. So that interested me. And they- and they talked a lot about genuineness; how easy it is to say… And they used terms like, "Oh, he's making the signs of art, rather than dealing with what he should be doing, trying to- trying to make art out of it, and what he should be doing is - or she should be doing, is…And Elaine de Kooning would talk about how… She studied with de Kooning, apparently, as a young girl, and she was… (Laughs) She said, "I was painting a sort of bleeding Madonna one time, and bright colors, and he- he come around and he looked at it, he says, 'What are you painting that for?'" And she says, "Well," you know, and she's trying to qualify why, and he- he says, "Here." So he went over to the corner and brought back a- (Laughs) a cube, put it down here and he says- he says, "Paint that, forget the Madonna. I wanna see if you can paint that." (They laugh)

SUSAN LARSEN: That- that…

WAYNE THIEBAUD: But he was practical like that, and he talked about a lot of formalist ideas; but more than that, in terms of: You should find something that you really feel genuine in terms of your experience, so that your focused in some way against this… All the influences of the art world can trip you up. And while it's very important to understand art history, it's very important- not so important to be interested in what's happening today. That made a very big impression on me.

SUSAN LARSEN: Do- do you still believe that?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: I do believe it.

SUSAN LARSEN: Mm-hm. Do you believe that for students?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: I do. And I'm a very old fashioned teacher.

SUSAN LARSEN: Mm-hm, mm-hm.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Much more interested in painting than I am in art, for instance. And that's been my- sort of my focus. And that largely came out of the experience in New York. That was very…

SUSAN LARSEN: Now, we kind of… We're- we're… This is like a loopy Pollock timeline, but that's ok. But when you decided to bolt and leave the Rexall Drug Company, did you have an epiphany, or did you grow out of it, or…?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: I think it was my experience with Bob Mallary, to see what life could be. And the advertising world, I found also to be… I had a lot of - and still have - a lot of admiration for good works from that. But they were mostly interested, those people, in masterworks. They were really interested in Matisse and Mondrian and… And what came out of most advertising design - I think this is true - really, generally, are like the difference between pure research in science and applied science. And that made a difference, in terms of what I felt I wanted to try and pursue.

So the way to do that, I thought: Well, I've got a family that I've gotta find a way to support. So I went into teaching for all the wrong reasons, but fortunately, I… It was something that meant a lot to me finally, and- and I became a kind of committed teacher.

SUSAN LARSEN: Well, you've been a very successful teacher.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Well, I don't know what success in teaching is. (Laughs)

SUSAN LARSEN: Well, students who go out and be- and be- and are artists. And stay- and are able to stay to be artists.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yeah.

SUSAN LARSEN: A lot of people go through the process, but find they can't- they can't endure.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yeah. But that's- that's- that was what happened, and…

SUSAN LARSEN: Did- Now, when you- when you ended up at- at Da- at University of California at Davis, that was a new department at that point?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: A very young department. There was Richard Nelson, who began it by himself; hired an art historian, Joseph Baer Junior; and I think one painter. And I think, if I'm not mistaken, it was Roland Peterson. I think. Just at first, the two or three of 'em. Then Seymour Howard, another art historian, came; and they all taught all the courses.

SUSAN LARSEN: Hm. So they taught both art history and practice.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yep. And I remember…

SUSAN LARSEN: (inaudible) it was art and art history together at that time?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yeah, right. So it was a very small department. But he put together, by his predilection, he- he wanted to get people who were very different, and people who he had seen already, had exhibited quite a bit.

SUSAN LARSEN: Different from one another, or different from the usual?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Different from one another. Yeah. But strong in some area, or what he thought of. So he really grew that department. And- and he was an interesting administrator. You might have called him an abstract expressionist administrator. I mean, he ran it out of the hatband of his hat. He'd ask you what you thought, and then he'd do exactly what he wanted. Never had meetings. He advised us to… Yeah. He- he- he advised us not- not to send in nominations for other people, because they would not- they would get you on the committees. He was trying to com- he was trying to keep us from committee work. He was also very democratic. He put, always, everybody forward at once. So it made for a very wonderful atmosphere.

SUSAN LARSEN: So you didn't have a sense of competing with (WAYNE THIEBAUD: Right) one another, which is brilliant.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: We were lucky. Because so many departments become terribly misaligned under funny circumstances. But we were lucky at Davis, and had a lotta fun and a lotta close associations, a lot of admiration for each other.

SUSAN LARSEN: Roy De Forest is there, too, or was there?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: De Forest, Manuel Neri, Bill Wiley, Ralph Johnson, Roland Peterson, Ruth Vorstein.

SUSAN LARSEN: Any ladies?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yes, Ruth Vorstein…

SUSAN LARSEN: Well, you had a lot of visiting artists, too.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yes, we set up a visiting artists program and we had interesting people come out. That helped a lot. Elaine de Kooning came out, Robert Mallary came out, Richard Artschwager, Don Nice, Paul Waldman. We had quite a nice period, which, when we did do our masters programs, MFA program, we'd get as many as three- 350 applications. And we could only take- it was very small, so we could only take about eight or nine people, but we had very good people, generally, very interesting students.

SUSAN LARSEN: And from the sound of it, all of you were able to maintain, or many of you were able to maintain a serious presence, a serious career as- as artists.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yes. That was- that was part of his demand, as well, that, you know, be sure that we'd keep our own work going. So it was a two day schedule, usually, and- and… There was never any real checking on each other; everybody came and went as they went, taught the way they wanted, very differently and…

SUSAN LARSEN: Great.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: (Laughs) It was…

SUSAN LARSEN: (inaudible)

WAYNE THIEBAUD: It was chaotic, but- but we'd all go around, everybody… We didn't have, like, a committee thing. Everybody would go to all the graduate students together and talk with them and criticize and direct them, and then have parties afterwards with the graduates. So there was a- a good non-sort of separation between the hierarchies. It was- it was a pretty amazing sort of period of time.

SUSAN LARSEN: It's really more of an art school atmosphere than a university sounding atmosphere.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yeah.

SUSAN LARSEN: You know, it's like an art school within the university.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Right.

SUSAN LARSEN: Yeah. When… I mean, having lived in California, I mean, I had a sense that there was the California art world and there was the New York art world, and then there was a sort of national/international scene that sort of bridged over all of that. You were- by the early sixties, you were doing- making a mark in- in New York and in the national art world, and yet your life was in the California art world. Did- how did- how did that feel and… Oops. Did that present any paradoxes, or was it entirely comfortable?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: I think it- it went ok, because the other people also were getting quite a bit of attention. Robert Arneson, Bill Wiley, De Forest were all showing in New York.

SUSAN LARSEN: Did you show much on the West Coast?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Some, yeah. There was a- there were shows out there. Quite a few shows that would- you'd be part of, maybe.

SUSAN LARSEN: … I'm awkward in phrasing this. I mean, there- there just seems to be sometimes a different mindset about art in the Midwest or the West or the East, and…

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Well, I think there is, yes. I think it mostly, though, is a- is New York against the world, sort of, without any kind of consciousness of it, or much consciousness of it, anyway. I don't think they mean to do that. But they become a kind of provincial art scene, and view everything else very differently. I mean: If- if you're gonna be an artist, why aren't you in New York? What are you doing there? Or what are you doing so and so?

We have a hell of a time getting people in to the American Academy of Arts and Letters on any kind of comparable level with New York artists. And I think that's… They're trying to change it. They produce surveys

where they show (Laughs) everybody here, and there are two people in California, and you know... So it's- it's an indication, if nothing else, that it is seen as, they feel, a kind of- of center of sorts. But my- I've been very fortunate, because the- I've had amazing indulgence from the critics and...

SUSAN LARSEN: New York's been a friend, in a way, you know, the New York structure has.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: I feel- I feel very lucky and very friendly towards New York and the critics and people like Brian O'Doherty and Max Kozloff and- and today, people like Adam Gopnik.

SUSAN LARSEN: That was a wonderful essay.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: He's [Adam Gopnik] such a good writer.

SUSAN LARSEN: Fabulous.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yeah.

SUSAN LARSEN: That was such a good essay.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: So I've been really amazingly fortunate. And so that people often will say, "Well, I didn't know you were from California," although now they've began to say that all the time.

SUSAN LARSEN: Well, some years ago, I did a show of Edward Hopper's work at the Whitney, from their collection.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Oh, yeah.

SUSAN LARSEN: And as I looked at- at some of your work, or at least the way you- you look hard at things, and the way you put things out and together... And in Hopper, there's a kind of transcendent Americanness that comes forward. You know, a kind of Everyplace America that can be a specific place, but he looks for things that are a lot of places, that many people experience. And I don't, know, I- I feel that there is this thing in your work that transcends- it- it's... It is a place, but it- it gets into that larger Americanness that many people experience in the- the commonality that we have across the country.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: I think that's true. I think it was one of the things, also, coming to New York and talking with people like we mentioned, that... And they would... I mean, Barnett Newman, I remember talking about the gumball machine. He said it's a... He says, "Those European surrealists are boys compared to what you can do with a gumball machine. That's a real surreal object in you." And he went on, as Barnett Newman would do, to talk about the glory and beauty of those, a bouquet of sweets, and you- you transform that from a really sort of ugly copper piece of- Then you put that in and out comes this magenta ball, and... You can look in the mirror and sort of comb your hair. And sometimes you can get your fortune out of the same machine.

SUSAN LARSEN: And all- all on a public street.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Well, he... Yeah, he was very... He says, "That's American. American," he says, "It's an American idea." And I think it's true. I think it is. I love Hopper's work a great deal, and take a lot of joy in American painting, and- and what- what they've been able to do.

SUSAN LARSEN: To me, the recent landscapes have another fascinating realm of, you know, their own. The- the classic still life paintings that you've done often seem to feature comfort food or middle class kind of things that most people can access, that most people have access to, or have tasted or have...

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Right, and they're available in almost every place in America. Same buffet spread in almost everywhere.

SUSAN LARSEN: Is that something that- that is important in the choosing of things to your, or was there...

WAYNE THIEBAUD: I think maybe part- certainly, part of it. But I start out with these very formalist problems. But certainly, toy counters and restaurants, which I've worked in, those experiences always, for me, have to have some footing in them, in that world that I, you know, I've lived in. And people will often ask, "Well, you never painted pizza, you never painted spaghetti." And I'll say, "Well, it's not..." Yes, now everybody has pizzas everyplace, but my things have a lot to do, I suppose with nostalgia. I think Allan Kaprow once said that they're very nostalgic paintings. They go, really, back to the WAYNE THIEBAUD (Cont.): thirties and forties. And the evolution of, let's say, European influence on the decoration of pastries doesn't really reach Medicine Bow, Wyoming; it's just not the same. So there is that part, I think, which is crucial. Gumball machines, gambling machines, automobiles Even American cities and the juxtaposition of strange architectural differences, all the way from gothic to modern, and that the cities sort of grow up without plans, like Paris and so on. And even

American agriculture, I think, was seemingly different in terms of its mechanization. But also, it's sort of artfulness, in terms of how they make fences or design roads or…

SUSAN LARSEN: Is there a lot of- is there a lot of difference in that artfulness? You go to Holland, and you kind of see this beautiful clarity, and it's as though everyone knows what the rules are and they just do it. Whereas…

WAYNE THIEBAUD: There's a lot more awkwardness in American (inaudible) and that's much raw- much more raw, I think, and it's… At least that's… I don't know, I suppose I don't know that much about it. But I think of the difference in, let's say the South of France and the grape vineyards, as compared to grape vineyards in America, which seem sometimes endless (inaudible). And different because they're newer and- and… But anyway, that's…

SUSAN LARSEN: Sounds like the Simon Rodia and the Watts Towers, (inaudible; WAYNE THIEBAUD: That's right) making it up as, you know, each person (WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yeah) owns their part, and they do it the way (inaudible)

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yeah, I think that is kind of an American character, as I see it, at least. Yeah, even in the young man who will take a- a new car in America and just sort of tear it down and rebuild it, you know: I don't want it to look like it came out of (inaudible) We have hotrods and- and those jumping cars and…

SUSAN LARSEN: People seem to take enormous immediate pleasure in your paintings. (inaudible)

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yes, that's- I think that's an inherent- can be an inherent danger, I'm supposed. But I'm delighted when people are able to smile at the work, and I- I hope it has a sense of humor and- and joyousness; that would be my- my hope.

SUSAN LARSEN: It seems because those things are in most of our common experience, I think there- there's almost a kind of endearing welcome that- that the subject matter proposes to a lot of viewers. It's- it's as though you were there when they were a kid. You remember those tastes, those things. And there's- those are moments of inexpensive pleasure that is available to most people. Very democratic, kind of. Better than showing something special and strange that only…

WAYNE THIEBAUD: It's an interesting question, isn't it, about how that comes about. I don't think it can be faked. Like people who, say, try to fake… We were talking earlier about misery or- or inhumanity to man. That's… I mean, if you're raised in an atmosphere of continuing WAYNE THIEBAUD (Cont.): support and no troubles, then it's very hard to make agony a real thing, or to affect primitivism or…Or in the case of even something like joyousness. If your life hasn't been joyful, I don't know how you'd ever get it into your paintings.

SUSAN LARSEN: There's so much in the world, though, that isn't accessible and pleasurable.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: That's true, and- and I think painters who follow that are genuine in that pursuit, and make an important- important work. And that- so that work, I think, is tougher to be enjoyed. And… It's like…

SUSAN LARSEN: I guess what I was trying to say is that there's room for pleasure. There's room for welcome.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: I think so. And I think, also, there's room for a sense of humor in the art world, which is not very apparent, usually. We're sort of scared of humor, in a way; it just doesn't seem serious or something(?).

SUSAN LARSEN: Right.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Like the Academy Awards doesn't- doesn't have a category for comedy. (Laughs)

SUSAN LARSEN: Well- well, we should; it would encourage more, wouldn't it?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: I would hope so.

SUSAN LARSEN: I think it would. So let's see, maybe we should think about… I want to ask you about the 1957 show that you saw in San Francisco, the… Contemporary Bay Area Figurative Painting, at the Oakland Museum. Was that…

WAYNE THIEBAUD: That was a very important one, very influential. There was another show at the Legion sometime around that time, also, of Richard Diebenkorn's figurative paintings.

SUSAN LARSEN: Now, did you know all these people were around?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: I- I didn't know them then. I got to know them later. But I admired them from- from their work. I even went to the Diebenkorn show- I remember going to those exhibitions and making thumbnail

drawings of their work. So they were very… Particularly… Well, all of them, in a way; particularly Bischoff and Diebenkorn were very influential on my own trying to get work together. Actually, of using some of the- the character of their work in my own work.

SUSAN LARSEN: Did it give you a boost of confidence that you were painting on the West Coast and such work was happening there?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: I don't think I thought about that so much, no. I've always thought of- of the art world as one world only. And a little- maybe I'm a little irritable, 'cause I saw what happened to Dick Diebenkorn. They continually tried to make him a kind of provincial artist, and you know, they: Well, he's a California artist. I remember an article where: Well, here's a good juxta… Typical New York writing. There was a show of Kenneth Noland at the same time as- as Dick Diebenkorn. And the- this critic says, "Well, it's like, in terms of the quality and the vigor of the work, Kenneth Noland is a shark and Diebenkorn is a goldfish." I mean, this kind of- of silliness. And they tried to kept- keep him a kind of, you know, stand off, you know. Some of them… I've even heard some of them say, "Gee, I can't understand why his prices are so high. (Laughs) He's not even in New York." I mean, it's a… california artist. But they don't realize how telltale evidence that is.

SUSAN LARSEN: His… Yes. His achievement had to be so enormous, so lengthy and so enormous, to finally get the spot that it deserved. And had it all- you know, had it missed by a decade or missed by… But why do you think…

WAYNE THIEBAUD: So anyway, I just think it's silly for 'em to do that, and to- to make a regionalism out of all these things, it's… And… (inaudible) I mean, there is such a thing, I suppose you could say, as Californ- early California painting. But it really is as much sort of impressionism and fauvism as it is anything else. So there's one kind of structured entity that drives important work to its conclusion, and that's a very general part of what painting is about. And to call it California painting is like referring to California mathematics; and it's just not- not possible to be that clear on it.

SUSAN LARSEN: Good. That's very interesting.

[BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE 2]

SUSAN LARSEN: -your style of inquiry.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Well, it's always been symbiotic, since I first did it. It relates so much to drawing and preparatory thinking of- of sorts. But basically, I do it because you can do things in printmaking that you can't do in anything else. It has its own unique powers of expression. So I was fortunate. I- I don't see myself so much as a printmaker, but a painter who lies to make prints. And those are the people in printmaking that I admire the most.

So I was very fortunate. I did some prints in- when I was taking courses, as we talked about, there, and also San Jose, and also Sacramento State, when I came up there. But they were mostly hand pulled, pretty grimy, lacking in technological polish. But the process was what's interesting. That several things about it, this- the idea of sequence, it's evolutionary character, it's reversing, the thing of having you see it suddenly differently than you've done it. But
WAYNE THIEBAUD (Cont.): sometimes just the power of something, and the- the beauty of a- that kind of dark, velvety dark line that you get with a really heavily embossed etching.

SUSAN LARSEN: 'Cause those are so- your paintings are so lush and so color- color saturated.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Well, it's… Yes. And it's…

SUSAN LARSEN: It's a different world than…

WAYNE THIEBAUD: It's also fascinating to see what happens when you make what I would call translations or transpositions; take a highly colored form, like a gumball machine, and reduce it in size and color, what- what can you do with that? So it's like maybe translating language or- of sorts. So printmaking has- has been a big- an interesting of- of work.

SUSAN LARSEN: And happily, there were good shops to work in on the West Coast.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Very good.

SUSAN LARSEN: Like Crown Point.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Mostly Crown Point, mostly was- that- She's been very, very helpful in terms of letting me make a lotta mistakes and throwing away most of the work I do. So she's been marvelous, and made a real

contribution to at least my efforts in that direction.

SUSAN LARSEN: Could- could I hear just a little bit about how you turned toward looking at Sacramento and the delta, and what prompted that? It's a big body of work by now, and becoming well known.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yes. It begins rather early, I think, back in my experience with farming, in a way, in Southern Utah, as we talked. Also, my grandfather's farm and his interest in that. But also, just driving around and looking. When we were very young, we'd go and see those orange groves, and for some reason, it always seemed very- like a very beautiful world. Then we had, when we moved up north- lived down… Sacramento, as you know, has these three rivers that come into it, so you have a wonderful water table and a great agricultural valley.

SUSAN LARSEN: This is…

WAYNE THIEBAUD: So we did- I did lots of river pictures, lots of river landscapes, going out directly and painting. Then we owned a home down below Sacramento, near the delta, for about three and a half years, a big old dilapidated mansion that we bought - which was a kind of a horror when we bought it - and fixed it up. But it was in the middle of pear orchards, and the river was right in front of the house. Did lots of series of those then.

WAYNE THIEBAUD (Cont.): The- the idea of taking on the later delta pictures had quite a different idea. They came after the San Francisco pictures. The San Francisco pictures being a kind of composite of several different things at once. I thought: I wonder if we can do that with landscapes, in a sense. I'd been going to the Metropolitan, looking at Japanese- I mean Chinese painting, the way in which that perspective is so different. So the idea first was- I made a whole lotta small pictures. Actually, I painted 'em in the Davis office space, just sort of thinking about that. Going out on the delta on those levies and looking, making direct paintings, some drawings; and, like with the city pictures, then coming back and trying to combine 'em to see what- The only added thing was to think a little bit more about the experience in that world. Various seasons, for instance. Sometimes you'd get this very brown, black, dark, baren atmosphere and environment. And then spring, of course, you get these great spring greens and the sort of flourishing, almost flower-like colors of the crops, the yellows and oranges. So the pictures try in some way to- to anthologize or balance, bring that together.

SUSAN LARSEN: That's a world that's changed so much too, with all the build up in Sacramento.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yeah, that's right.

SUSAN LARSEN: Were your relatives there?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Right.

SUSAN LARSEN: (inaudible)

WAYNE THIEBAUD: (Laughs) that's true.

SUSAN LARSEN: You're almost putting down something that- that's gone away.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yeah. The… People see them, I think, a little too quickly as aerial views, but they're- they're different in the sense that there are many different viewpoints simultaneously. I've never gone up and sketched from up high. It's always- it's mostly just invented with perspective structures played around with and- to try to bring it together into some sort of cohesive character. (Laughs)

SUSAN LARSEN: That's something people said about Diebenkorn.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yes, that's right. And I know he mentioned it, too. He mentioned flying. The Albuquerque, I think, series, (SUSAN LARSEN: Yes) he talked a lot about aerial views.

SUSAN LARSEN: But that was a very small piece of time. And I guess in Urbana, he went up in a crop duster.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: That's right, yeah.

SUSAN LARSEN: He saw some of that landscape. But- but it's not a constant in his experience. In the Ocean Park paintings, it doesn't explain that.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Oh, no, the- no.

SUSAN LARSEN: No, not at al.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: You can- you can get a sense of it when… I went often to his- not often, but several times, to

his Ocean Park studio, the one he built on top of the… And he had these transom windows. And you'd look out there and you'd see this little patch blue and green, or the concrete abutments that would come, and you could- you could see what he was processing and essentializing.

SUSAN LARSEN: That studio was a sculpture that was right into the painting.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yeah.

SUSAN LARSEN: It was a really special building, yet it was very- not obvious.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: No, that's right. You have to have that sense of ambiguity some- in some way, in order to make- to drive the painting into something other than something obvious and too predictable.

SUSAN LARSEN: So-

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Dick talked a lot about that, a lot about anomalies - I remember that word, he used a lot. Had to have a kind of- almost a character of almost mistake, or something that, you know…

SUSAN LARSEN: There was some sense of needing to discover something.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: That's right.

SUSAN LARSEN: To- to not- if- if the- if the- That maybe is a part of the whole ethos of the New York School, notions coming out of surrealism that- that you're- that the- the process is going to reveal something to you.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: That's right.

SUSAN LARSEN: And- and…

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Has to be in some way almost self-educating, rather than totally self-directed all the time.

SUSAN LARSEN: Yeah. Do you still feel that?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: I do, and talk to students about it. It's very hard, it's a difficult concept. 'Cause we don't- we don't have it in our, it seems to me, in our general educational notion. Like mistakes are- we keep trying to week 'em out rather than use 'em as a platform of- of sort of nerve. And someone wrote a little book called The Nerve of Failure, which I thought was a very good book, how important it was to fail and reconstitute yourself, make yourself vulnerable - all of which is, I think, is very important in painting.

SUSAN LARSEN: You've been your own best teacher, in a way.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: No, no, I've stolen from other people. (They laugh)

SUSAN LARSEN: It's- it's- it's a great thing, along life's path, to meet people of accomplishment and- and a kind of inner strength. You- you begin to understand what it takes and whether you, finally, yourself have it or not.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yeah, I think everybody's sort of self-educated, finally. You can do a lot of what you think of as teaching and all that; but finally, it only makes sense when they begin to teach themselves, or we begin to teach ourselves.

SUSAN LARSEN: Well, it's an- it's an odd- odd area of endeavor, where the point is to make something new that's your own, and no one- no one can finally give you that.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: I don't think you can do it on purpose, either. (Laughs) It's just… It's just fortunate if it happens in some way, but… It's- it's- it's a very odd, mysterious question, I think, how those individual voices develop, or what I like to call a- a new kind of visual species. Doesn't have to be a new invention, I don't think; I don't think it has to be some sort of- like in science, where something is significantly changed. I think it's just like a difference in, say, a botanical species, where it's just different enough. If it's too different, it just may be sort of uninteresting eccentricity. Mildly interesting eccentricity. But species different, that's… I mean Van Gogh really is a different visual species. You can talk all about where he comes from, and his influences, and…

SUSAN LARSEN: Dozens.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Dozens, right, yeah.

SUSAN LARSEN: And if he didn't have a root in something, you wouldn't care.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Yeah, right.

SUSAN LARSEN: Yes.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: I think you're- I think that's absolutely right.

SUSAN LARSEN: Well… Ok?

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Alright. (They laugh)

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