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Oral history interview with William Keyser, Jr., 2003 April 25-May 2

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with William Keyser, Jr., on April 25 and May 2, 2003. The interview took place in Sudbury, Massachusetts, and was conducted by Ned Cooke for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America.

William Keyser and Ned Cooke have reviewed the transcript and have made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

NED COOKE: This is Ned Cooke. I am interviewing Bill Keyser at his daughter's home in Sudbury, Massachusetts, on Friday, April 25, 2003, and this is disk number one.

Bill, I'd like to start off talking about your childhood, in essence, leading up to where you were as a furniture maker, teacher, designer, and now even a painter. When and where were you born?

BILL KEYSER: I was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 1936. My hometown was actually a little bit out of – sort of north of Pittsburgh, a little town called Perrysville, Pennsylvania. And my father was a cabinetmaker – well, actually he was a contractor in the early days of my life. He was in business building homes. He had two partners, two brothers that he was in partnership with. And my earliest recollection of his activities were, you know, working on houses. And I didn't have an awful lot to do with that. I was, you know, very young and – but later he –

MR. COOKE: But you watched him, or you were aware of the construction process and –

MR. KEYSER: Yes.

MR. COOKE: – sort of both roughing in, as well as finished work?

MR. KEYSER: Right, right. Of course, at that point I was very young. I think he – he then left the partnership; they dissolved the partnership. I must have been, I'm guessing, maybe first or second grade perhaps. And then he went in business for himself, and his business was based at our home. He initially had a small shop in our one-car basement garage.

MR. COOKE: I was going to ask whether he had a home shop or was it a –

MR. KEYSER: Yeah.

MR. COOKE: – what sort of tools and materials that you were aware of in the domestic realm.

MR. KEYSER: Well, he had a very small – like an eight-inch, early Delta table saw with a table that was about 15 inches square. Ironically, he's given it to me, and I've been tempted to throw it out several times, but for nostalgic reasons I just can't part with it. And eventually he ended up getting a thickness planer and a joiner and things like that. But he was – started out mainly doing renovation work: remodeling kitchens. Recreation rooms were a big thing. This was in the –

MR. COOKE: The basement recreation room or –

MR. KEYSER: The basement recreation room, and knotty pine was the material of choice. [Laughs.]

MR. COOKE: The early '50s, right.

MR. KEYSER: Right. And so he started doing that, and he built up a clientele that was just very supportive, and he – I think he ended up doing very well. He worked very hard. He was a product of the Depression. He had – he and my mother had just gotten married and they had built a home. That was when he was in the contracting business. And the Depression came along, and I think he told me they had a mortgage of maybe $3,000 or something, and they lost the home.

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. KEYSER: He couldn't come up with – you know, with the payments. So he was a very work-oriented person. He didn't want that to happen again and he had to make hay while the – you know, while he could.

MR. COOKE: So, I mean, it really results in a certain mentality to building and making instead of knowing how to apportion one's time, in essence.

MR. KEYSER: That's right. That's right. And –

MR. COOKE: People talk about the idea of a craftsman's mindset as opposed to someone who can just be self-indulgent at different points.

MR. KEYSER: He definitely had – most of his jobs had either self-imposed deadlines or client-imposed deadlines. You know, they wanted a recreation room for a New Year's Eve party or something, and he always had two or three jobs lined up. So he was – he kept very busy.

MR. COOKE: But he was still able to have you in the home shop in the garage too?

MR. KEYSER: Well, I can remember him coming home in the evenings, and he would come home with a list of materials that he – or moldings and things that he had to prepare for the next day to install on-site. So he would work in the evenings and I would go down – in the early days I would just go down and, sort of, watch, you know, and maybe ask some questions and that sort of thing. At that point I would be happy to just take some scraps over in the corner and do something with them, you know.

MR. COOKE: So he left you on your own to –

MR. KEYSER: Yes.

MR. COOKE: – explore?

MR. KEYSER: Yeah, he did.

MR. COOKE: – because he was too busy and thinking about what he needed to do for his job.

MR. KEYSER: Exactly. Exactly. And I guess I must have expressed some interest or something, or he saw that I was interested in this, and so my Christmas presents tended to be tools. I ended up – you know, he –

MR. COOKE: What did he start you with?

MR. KEYSER: It was a small jigsaw, a little vibrator jigsaw. I'm not even sure they make them any more. But it was something that I could cut, you know, up to eighth-inch-thick wood with maybe – or something, you know, I'd cut some little parts out. At one point he made me a little disc sander out of a – I think it was a fan motor with a little faceplate mounted on the front of it, and he made a little table that – I'm not sure if it angled or not. And so he must have sensed that I got a lot of enjoyment out of these things, and so he sensed that I was interested. Later I got a bigger jigsaw [laughs]– a real one.

MR. COOKE: You knew you had arrived.

MR. KEYSER: A real Craftsman jigsaw, you know.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. KEYSER: Yeah, I knew that I had arrived at that point.

MR. COOKE: So was the association of it, you know, the smell of sawdust, the tools, and the level of activity that was really –

MR. KEYSER: I tell people that I was weaned on sawdust. I really did participate at a very early age, if not actively at least passively, you know, watching and asking questions and things like that.

I can still remember the first Saturday – it must have been maybe second or third grade, something like that, when I was a – when he took me out on a job with him on a Saturday. You know, my mother packed lunches for both of us and we went out on a job. I can still remember vividly the client whose home we were in and that whole day, that first day on the job so to speak. From then on I went out pretty regularly with him, and, you know, as I got further along in grade school, I was able to be of more help to him. And then during high school I used to work, like, vacations and weekends and things like that with him.

MR. COOKE: And you were trusted at that point, you know, that he knew your standards were equal to his and that you knew –

MR. KEYSER: Well, I'm not sure my standards were –

MR. COOKE: – with a little instruction or –

MR. KEYSER: Yeah, yeah. He would tell me what to do and watch over me and guide me, and more and more he trusted me with, you know, more and more responsibility, I guess. But I'm getting ahead of myself a little bit, I guess. Somewhere along, it must have been seventh or eighth grade, I became very interested in building my own projects, and the first was the Soap Box Derby. That must have been around the late '40s or early '50s.

MR. COOKE: I was going to say that's usually when you're about 12 or so. Is that –

MR. KEYSER: Yeah.

MR. COOKE: That's the age – I think there's an age limit usually for –

MR. KEYSER: Yeah. I've forgotten what it was. I know there was a specific time period that you could be in. I think I entered a total of maybe five years and built a new car each year. And he was not discouraging, but he was not actively encouraging either. To him – you know, he was very pragmatic and very practical minded, and I don't think he could see where this might lead. To him it was –

MR. COOKE: A little bit frivolous or –

MR. KEYSER: Frivolous or –

MR. COOKE: – leisure time and –

MR. KEYSER: To use his phraseology, it was, sort of, "damned foolishness." And so I found myself actually sort of withdrawing from him for a while. I mean, I would – I can remember working on these things like after school, say from 3:30 to 5:00 or something like that.

MR. COOKE: Did you work at school or at your home shop?

MR. KEYSER: At my home, yeah. At that point he had built a shop connected to the house, but a separate building. The equivalent of a one-car garage – well, an enlarged one-car garage, but it had a basement and it had an attic in it, and he used the basement and the attic for storage, and then his work area was on the one ground floor. At that point I inherited his bench in the garage portion of the house basement, and it had a built-in bench against one end, behind where the car pulled in, and I had my jigsaw there and my bench and, you know, hand tools and things. And I can remember, sort of, cleaning up and putting away my things before he got home because I didn't want to subject myself to his criticism, I guess, or –

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. KEYSER: Not that he was – he wasn't discouraging, but I had the feeling that he didn't appreciate what I was doing at that point. Later, when I achieved some notable success, I guess, or recognized success in a couple of other competitive things, I think he got more appreciative of what I was doing, or more – you know, realized that it could be leading somewhere. Neither my mother nor father went to college. My father, I don't think, went beyond third or fourth grade. He was pretty much a self-educated individual. His father was a plumber. He was in a railroad accident and had lost both legs, and so my father and his three brothers had to – or at least my father – my father was the second oldest son. His oldest son and my father – his oldest brother and my father immediately, sort of, went into the plumbing business with my grandfather, and my father told stories about him pulling my grandfather on a wagon to the jobsite, and then he would, sort of, supervise. Apparently he was a very large man. He died before I was born. And my father and his brother did not get along well, and so my father decided he was not going to pursue the plumbing trade as a profession, as an occupation, so he started out working for other carpenters, contractors, in the area.

MR. COOKE: Learning from them.

MR. KEYSER: Learning from them. And then he attended Carnegie Tech [Carnegie Institute of Technology, Pittsburgh, PA]. At that point they had, like, an industrial, or an occupational studies, evening program on construction, house construction, and they used to make models, I guess, you know, with – two-by-four stick models of the structure of a home, and then they would mock up full-size complete sections. They would have a – you know, the bricklaying – the carpenter crew would come in and stud up a wall or a section of a home, maybe involving a corner and some windows, and then the bricklayers would come in and lay the brick around it, then the electricians would come in and wire it, and things like that. Then they'd tear it down and the next class would do the same thing.

So he went – I don't know how long it was, but he did attend classes out there where he learned more about the construction business. And that led then to him going into business for himself.

MR. COOKE: What were you thinking about in terms of building these soap box cars? You were intrigued with motion, other kids doing it? Was it the project basis?

MR. KEYSER: I think it was the project that formed the motivation. The competitive part of it, I guess, was part of it. I mean, it was something that I could see how I was doing against other people who were doing similar things.

MR. COOKE: And it was a competitive sphere that you felt comfortable in, as opposed to sports or necessarily, sort of, grades in the classroom or something like that? I mean, it seemed to be that this was – you had a sense that this was your sphere, or –

MR. KEYSER: It was something that I enjoyed doing and something that, I guess, I thought I had the potential of doing well at. I made decent grades at school, but I had to work hard. The grades didn't come easy. But during high school and so forth – I mean, I think I was on the honor roll my share of the time. I was probably –

MR. COOKE: I didn't mean to say it was one or the other, but there is this idea – sort of pleasurable, that it seemed enjoyable, an enjoyable form for competition in some respects.

MR. KEYSER: It was very much so. And it also kept me very busy. I talked about my father maybe looking down his nose a bit at some of my early building experiences, but he very much discouraged sports or athletics. I mean, that was really foolishness, you know, to go out and kick a ball around and – that sort of thing was just – and so I – this was something that I could gravitate to with some promise of being good at, I guess.

MR. COOKE: How did you – I mean, you were talking earlier about the way in which – you know, there weren't kits for doing soap box cars or anything. How did you come up with some ideas? Did you have friends, did you read magazine articles, and then – how do you come up with your own ideas?

MR. KEYSER: I was –

MR. COOKE: I'm just curious about the process.

MR. KEYSER: I was an avid reader of technical stuff. I had an uncle who subscribed to *Popular Science* and *Popular Mechanics* magazines, and while I never asked my parents for a subscription, he used to save all his magazines and recycle them to me.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. KEYSER: And I had huge cardboard boxes with, you know, years worth of these magazines that I saved, and I could – I had sort of a category system in my mind, I guess, where I could remember an article, and I could almost go to the exact magazine, you know, remembering the cover, and pull out the article. And I think the Soap Box Derby, after the Second World War, started up around '46 or '47, and that's when I first – I found out about it through one of these magazines that my uncle had given me, and I thought, boy, that would be really neat. I read about this kid out in San Diego, I think, that had won the first one after the war, and it talked about his car and the construction and gave, you know, exploded-view details. And I thought, boy, that would be really neat to be able to build those. And that was two or three years before I was eligible, age-wise, to compete, and so I started just constructing cars in –

MR. COOKE: Wheeled things.

MR. KEYSER: Wheeled things in this basement shop that I had.

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. KEYSER: – and without access to axles and good wheels and things like that. I mean, it was just, sort of, wagon stuff that was around and that sort of thing that I cobbled these things together with.

And so I – and I started scrapbooks on Soap Box Derby articles, you know, that had been in the paper. The local newspaper was a sponsor of the local race, and every week they would have something about the Soap Box Derby. And the thing that interested me, I guess, was the idea of designing something, coming up with a design. I never tried to pattern my cars after something that I had seen. I thought, well, now there's – you know, is there a better way to do this, or is there a sleeker way, or what would this look like if it were a little different? I didn't know – I knew nothing about design.

Art was kind of nonexistent in our home. I was never taken to museums or anything like that. There were none in the immediate vicinity of my home, and so I wasn't exposed to an awful lot of that sort of thing. And I can remember later when I started designing other things, I thought, gee, there ought to be some texts available or something that would help with this. And, you know, I got into some basic three-dimensional design stuff later, but that was much later. But there wasn't an awful lot available at that time on designing, so it was a kind of a

seat-of-the-pants sort of thing.

My father –

MR. COOKE: That's interesting because in some respects Carnegie was one of the first industrial design programs in the 1930s.

MR. KEYSER: Exactly.

MR. COOKE: And yet this is a universe that is unknown to you.

MR. KEYSER: Right, right. Yeah. It was a whole sphere that I had no idea of.

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. KEYSER: Now, the Carnegie Museum, which is down the street from Carnegie Tech, Carnegie Mellon, had a Saturday art class for high school students that you could go to. I think you had to qualify in some respect. But I never participated in that. I never got the particulars on it or the motivation to do that, so the Soap Box Derby was kind of my initial thing –

MR. COOKE: You were really driven by design – both mechanical design as well as product design and, you know, the exterior in some respects, and wood just happened to be an easy material you could work with.

MR. KEYSER: I could work with and I had the advantage of a supply of materials. [They laugh.]

MR. COOKE: Thanks, Dad.

MR. KEYSER: That my father did furnish me with. And he never hesitated in doing that. You know, he always gave me whatever I needed – didn't get an awful lot of instruction. I can remember my first racer was basically a stack laminated, which I had read about in *Popular Mechanics* or something, and he didn't give me an awful lot of – as I remember – an awful lot of guidance. I was pretty naïve at that time. I had never driven anything, you know, in terms of – other than maybe a tricycle and a bicycle and a wagon.

But I can remember my father – my very first race my father – my uncle – my uncle had a pickup truck, so we loaded my car. And then there was an older – a kid who was a little bit older than I was, and his father owned a gas station kind of around the corner from our home, and he had entered – I think my first year was his second year in it, because I had seen his car and was really interested in, you know, what he was doing. So the two of us, they were going to take us out to the course one evening for a trial run. And they stopped traffic, and then we started – the two of us started down the hill. I mean, I was really naïve and I – you know, the childhood experience of driving a car is like [laughs], I mean, I started out and pretty soon I was going this way –

MR. COOKE: Compensating and –

MR. KEYSER: – and each time I – you know, I was zigzagging sharper and sharper, and I crashed into the curb, and it broke the axle and bent the wheel and stuff like that. So we had, like, two days to the race. So we brought it back to the shop, to the basement shop where I was working, and talked about it. My uncle, who is a plumber, and my father, you know, the carpenter, and they suggested some things to do. So I went out the next day and bought some new turn buckles for the steering system, and I think the Chevy dealer furnished me with a new set of wheels or something. So I got it done in time for the race. And then they said, "Don't over-steer." [Laughs.]

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. KEYSER: Slight adjustments.

MR. COOKE: Right, just a little bit.

MR. KEYSER: And the steering action was pretty quick on those things. You know, you'd turn like this and the axle went like that.

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. KEYSER: So the ratio was pretty quick. At any rate, that was kind of the first designing and building involvement that I had.

MR. COOKE: And then that was followed, you said, in high school with some of these projects in terms of automotive design and some of the models?

MR. KEYSER: Yes, Fisher Body Division of General Motors sponsored a program every year, and they had a junior and a senior division. The junior division was – it seems to me it was – I did my first one maybe when I was in eighth grade. And I think it was eighth, ninth, tenth, and eleventh were the four years that I entered. That would have ended up around ’53, I guess. And it was to design and build a model car, and they gave us some basic specifications, that it had to accommodate, you know, so many people and have so much room for legroom and vision angles out the windows and things like that.

So there was a basis to start from. And then they published, periodically, a leaflet that went out to all the people who were registered, giving tips on model making, various techniques and what kind of clay to use for your clay model. So we started with sketches and then a full-size clay model. When I say full size, full model size, which was about maybe 16 to 18 inches long. And, you know, you did a clay model, and then you decided how you were going to build it and how to construct it. They were solid. There was no interior furnishings or anything. And my first ones were extremely crude.

My third year into it I placed – I guess it was -- first in my region, which was Pennsylvania and New Jersey, I believe, and I was awarded a trip to Detroit. And it was like a long weekend perhaps; it may have been as long as a week. And we toured some of the General Motors plants and saw what was going on there, the way metal was fabricated for the bodies and things and the engines. And also there was a recreational aspect. They took us out to Mackinac Island, or something, and we had the tour of the resort area there, and there was a swimming pool. And then they had a banquet when the national award winners were announced. And of course all of them – the models of all of the youngsters that were there, the regional winners, were on display. And so it was mind-boggling to see the level of craftsmanship that these models incorporated.

MR. COOKE: And people were using different materials too?

MR. KEYSER: Different materials.

MR. COOKE: I mean, you used wood, but other people might be using plastics or –

MR. KEYSER: Yeah, exactly.

MR. COOKE: – metal, you know, entirely metal or –

MR. KEYSER: Exactly, and various finishing. You know, I was brushing on the enamel whereas others were spraying lacquer and rubbing it out with rubbing compound and everything. And it really opened my eyes to the level of craftsmanship that I was up against. So I came back from that with a goal to raise the level of what I was doing.

MR. COOKE: And the way it played out where in some of these models, the fabrication plants and – I mean, that’s where some of that precision and, really, finesse work came through in terms of some of these science fair competitions?

MR. KEYSER: Well, actually before that, the next model I did then was a quantum leap in terms of skill level. As I look back on the models now, it kind of amazes me where I had gone from one year to the next year in terms of just the quality of the work. And it was a result of seeing the competition and the challenge of rising to that. And that was my last year in the junior division, I guess. I was a junior in high school, I believe – sophomore or junior level in high school, and I ended up winning third national that year, and then I was no longer eligible. But in the senior division, you know, a lot of those people ended up at that art center out in Los Angeles and places like that, industrial design.

MR. COOKE: I mean, really in mainstream, you know, working with Harley Earl or going out to Pasadena to the art college [Art Center College of Design, Pasadena, California]–

MR. KEYSER: Exactly.

MR. COOKE: – in terms of some of those real centers of automotive design.

MR. KEYSER: Yes.

MR. COOKE: But yet you chose to go in a different direction.

MR. KEYSER: I was very naïve and lacked a lot of counseling, I guess, or exposure at that point. Along about that same time, junior and senior year – well, sophomore, junior, senior year in high school, I started participating in a science fair that was sponsored by the Buhl Planetarium in Pittsburgh. It was the local planetarium there and they had various divisions: engineering, biology, science, that sort of thing. It was pre-computer days, so there wasn’t a computer section. But –

MR. COOKE: It's interesting. I mean, the planetarium rather than the museum is the pull for you –

MR. KEYSER: Yeah.

MR. COOKE: – from the shop into something different.

MR. KEYSER: Right. And so my first exhibit was a towing tank, which they used for – which I had read about in *Popular Mechanics*, again – that they used to test boat hulls. It was a tank, like a long thing that – they had an overhead trolley that, sort of, dragged the –

MR. COOKE: MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA] I think had one.

MR. KEYSER: Yeah, yeah. And so mine was a model demonstrating what one of those might look like. And it had water in. It was a circular thing, so that it went around in a circle, and it was a little propeller-driven boat that ran around. And then the second year I did a – as a result of having gotten that first trip to Detroit for the Fisher Body competition, I decided I wanted to do an automotive plant. I entered the engineering division, and I did a scale model of what I could remember or perceive as a stamping plant, which had stamped out automobile bodies.

And so it consisted of a number of these stamping presses, and I actually rigged it up so that it would stamp out a tinfoil fender, and it was kicked out of the press then by a couple of little fingers onto a conveyor belt that ran along and changed directions, and then the part dropped down and the tinfoil advanced through the press, and another one came down for the next cycle. And it had a superstructure of what – it was like a skeleton of a building. And a lot of it was constructed, you know, from looking at pictures of industrial plants and just sort of speculating on how it might look, and having seen some of it in Detroit. And that was – it was very successful. I took, I don't know, five or six awards that year in the engineering division.

The following year, my senior year, I did a model of a steel rolling plant. And there I actually contacted a local engineering firm that designed rolling mills for the steel industry, which of course at that time –

MR. COOKE: Which was still active at that time. [Laughs.]

MR. KEYSER: It was still active, right. We still had it. And they furnished me with a complete set of blueprints for the rolling mill, and then I did a scale down and did a scale model.

MR. COOKE: Out of wood?

MR. KEYSER: Out of wood predominantly, but it involved some metalwork and some plastic work and things like that, hooking up motors and mechanisms to achieve the automation – or the animation -- that I wanted. And I took a number of awards that year as well. All of these things led people to believe that I – and I believed them – that I ought to be an engineer.

MR. COOKE: And being in Pittsburgh, the natural step was thinking about Carnegie Mellon [Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania]?

MR. KEYSER: Yes, yes.

MR. COOKE: And probably a mechanical engineer of some sort? Is that –

MR. KEYSER: That's what I went into, yes, because a lot of these early things involved mechanisms and motors and devices to achieve results. And I went to a parochial grade school, a Catholic high school, and I was on an academic track in terms of my high school program through college –

MR. COOKE: Right, as opposed to vocational/technical sort of thing?

MR. KEYSER: Yeah. And they had an art department – you know, like an art room, and that was not open to anybody in the academic – in the –

MR. COOKE: The college track.

MR. KEYSER: The college track.

MR. COOKE: Amazing.

MR. KEYSER: I can remember passing the room and looking in and seeing what they were doing, and I saw – you know, I would see some figurative sculpture, some painting going on. I never really made the connection, I guess, between that and what I was involved with, with Fisher Body and the –

MR. COOKE: And the engineering and the plants?

MR. KEYSER: Yeah. And I enjoyed math, and everybody – friends of my family and my mother and father, you know, who were – one particular fellow who was working as a draftsman for an engineering firm, he said, "You ought to be an engineer."

MR. COOKE: And that appeals to your dad in terms of, sort of, it's measurable, it's understandable and –

MR. KEYSER: It was, quote, an education.

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. KEYSER: And he really insisted –

MR. COOKE: You know, with a practical goal.

MR. KEYSER: With a practical goal and a future of employment.

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. KEYSER: So I stayed on campus. Carnegie Tech at that point was at the opposite end of town from where we lived, and my parents thought that I ought to stay on campus and experience that life. And so I stayed on campus, and it was the first time that I realized that there was – that I was exposed to the whole idea of art, architecture, music, theater, because they had a wonderful fine arts department, which covered the whole gamut from theater to music to architecture, graphic design, industrial design, sculpture, painting, and it was all in one building at that point.

MR. COOKE: So all those different parts were in a single building?

MR. KEYSER: In one building, right. It was like a four- or five-floor – including the basement – building that I used to just love to roam through there and see what these people were doing. And I can remember as early as halfway through the first semester of my freshman year saying to my parents, "You know, that's what I would like to be doing."

MR. COOKE: Did your engineering major give you much freedom to sort of cross over into that? Or was your curriculum really strict in –

MR. KEYSER: No, it was very lockstep at that point. And Carnegie Tech at that point was very theoretical, no hands-on, kind of, making things and figuring out how things worked.

MR. COOKE: No real shop component to the engineering?

MR. KEYSER: Exactly. I can remember they had a metal lathe in one of the – in the basement of the mechanical engineering building that was over in the corner, covered with dust and debris and stuff. I don't think anybody had touched it for years.

MR. COOKE: That's the whole association with trade, right? You know, that's the trade –

MR. KEYSER: Yeah. It may have been a leftover from that, yeah.

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. KEYSER: And so, I could not get excited about working for a week on a theoretical problem and ending up with a stack of papers and a theoretical answer which, you know, had no tangibility to me. And what I came to realize from then on was what motivated me was the tangibility of making something, seeing something through from conception to finished product and then having the tangibility of that.

MR. COOKE: Yeah. I mean, it's a material or physical sort of process that you're engaged in problem solving; it's not a theoretical problem solving.

MR. KEYSER: Exactly. Exactly. I've often said since then, if I could redesign my education –

MR. COOKE: We always want to when we look back.

MR. KEYSER: Right [laughs]. I would start out, I think – well, I always said – before I started painting, I've always said that what I would do is study architecture, because there you get the combination of the math and the theoretical and the structure and the aesthetic end of it.

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. KEYSER: – and end up at furniture, but through the journey of architecture. And of course, you know, some of the well-known industrial furniture designers have gone through that.

MR. COOKE: So how did you come to grips, you know, sort of realizing halfway through your first semester wandering through this building? Did you just tough it out in terms of your engineering, or did you –

MR. KEYSER: Well, that –

MR. COOKE: Did your summers sort of compensate for the strictness of that curriculum?

MR. KEYSER: Well, I talked to my parents about switching as early as halfway through the first semester, and they said, “Gee, the architects we know don’t make much money,” and, “What does a painter and a sculptor do?” And of course they were right. [Laughs.]

MR. COOKE: That really flew in the face of what your dad was thinking about, right?

MR. KEYSER: So, you know, it had no employment or practical potential to it in their eyes.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. KEYSER: So they discouraged me from doing it. I think if I had had the intestinal fortitude to say, look, you know, this is what I really want to do. I’m not worried at this point how I’m going to make a living, but I think I can get an education. If I’d had the foresight and the intestinal fortitude to take that stance, they probably would have gone along with it, but –

MR. COOKE: But your exposure was just, sort of – you know, it’s incremental.

MR. KEYSER: Exactly.

MR. COOKE: You’re getting a little bit more aware and a little bit more aware of –

MR. KEYSER: And I didn’t know what was beyond that next step, you know.

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. KEYSER: And so I just toughed it out. In those days – or at least in those days I felt an obligation to, kind of, when I started something, to finish it. It was – you know, each time I started a Soap Box Derby racer, regardless of any difficulties that I might have along the way, I felt an obligation to finish it in time for the race.

MR. COOKE: That’s a postwar mentality in some ways, you know.

MR. KEYSER: Oh, yeah.

MR. COOKE: Grin and bear it, right?

MR. KEYSER: Exactly. So I grinned and beared it. I made – I could never see myself being anything other than a mediocre engineer. My grades were mediocre; I had very little interest in what I was doing. I mean, studying internal combustion engines – not how the pistons work and all that business but rather analyzing the fuel that went into it, the dynamometer reading of the power delivered from it and the temperature heat loss of the gases out through the muffler and the exhaust pipe and figuring out the efficiency, you know, that was, quote, the internal combustion engines course.

MR. COOKE: Right. So what did you do to tap into something that was developing inside of you?

MR. KEYSER: Yeah, I did everything I could to try to occupy myself with things that I was really interested in. I belonged to a fraternity. I pledged a fraternity in my first year there, and I think they rushed me because they had known of my Soap Box Derby involvement.

MR. COOKE: Your reputation preceded you. [Laughs.]

MR. KEYSER: Right. I can remember the housekeeper of the church of the parish that we belonged to had a nephew who belonged to this fraternity. He was a couple of years older than I was. And I think she put the message in his ear, you know, you ought to try rushing this guy because he could help you with your – they called them buggies. Carnegie Tech had an annual competition held during – Spring Carnival they called it -- and mainly the fraternities each designed at least one buggy. It was a combination pushed-pushing event, the buggies. It was like a Soap Box Derby, but they had a push bar on the back of them and a team of pushers

pushed it up a couple of hills and – so about half the race was uphill pushing or level-stretch pushing. The actual finish line was on a level stretch, so that ended up to be a sprint to the finish line – a combination of that and free-roll, downhill free-roll.

And so I got the job of – I mean, I didn't need to be encouraged much. I took on the job of being the buggy chairman for my fraternity and –

MR. COOKE: As a freshman even?

MR. KEYSER: Yes. During my freshman year we used the previous year's buggy and just, sort of, updated it a bit and changed it a bit. Then between my freshman year and my sophomore year, that summer, I built another buggy pretty much single-handedly in my home shop, because the fraternity house didn't have a shop or anything to work in. So that was one of the activities I participated in.

MR. COOKE: I call them "sanity keepers," you know –

MR. KEYSER: Exactly right. Right.

MR. COOKE: – as you're forcing yourself into something else. It's obvious that there's this inner spirit that's moving you in a different direction at this point.

MR. KEYSER: Exactly.

MR. COOKE: So how do you sustain that?

MR. KEYSER: That was one of the things. I started thinking about sculpture, I guess. I can still remember the day I went into the bookstore and I had seen this book. I think it was Carola Giedion-Welcker, her book *Contemporary Sculpture: An Evolution in Volume and Space* [New York: George Wittenborn, 1955], I think it was called. You know, it was a book about an inch-and-a-quarter, inch-and-a-half thick.

MR. COOKE: Uh-huh.

MR. KEYSER: And I plunked down – probably at that point it was, maybe, 20 bucks. [Laughs.]

MR. COOKE: A significant amount.

MR. KEYSER: And I bought this book and I digested it. I mean, I – you know, it was my first introduction to the world of sculpture. I got to know a lot of the names of the sculptors that were working and what they were doing. The curriculum in engineering was very lockstep. Our senior year was the first time we had an elective.

MR. COOKE: Oh, joy. [Laughs.]

MR. KEYSER: And the choices were Near Eastern religion and a couple of other, sort of, humanity-type electives. And I went to the dean of engineering and I said, "I would like to take a sculpture class at night. It's something I'm very interested in." He said, "Well, we've never had this request before." [They laugh.]

MR. COOKE: Thinking outside the box, right?

MR. KEYSER: Right. So he had to get together with the dean of fine arts to okay my proposal to take this elective. So I took a full year of sculpture at night with a fellow by the name of George Koran, who was a local sculptor. I think maybe he had gone through the Carnegie program. He was middle-aged at that point. He had some work on campus. I remember one was for the Industrial Management building, kind of an exterior mural of low-relief, bas-relief – a mural that he had done. It was, sort of, WPA [Works Progress Administration]-type –

MR. COOKE: So he was still figurative –

MR. KEYSER: He was figurative.

MR. COOKE: – working in the figurative tradition?

MR. KEYSER: But interestingly enough, he approached the class not from any point of view. You went in and it was pretty much a plaster class. He said, "This is how we mix the plaster, and you can use an armature if you'd like, or you can just start building with the plaster." And I really got a lot out of that fella. I owe a great deal to him. I talked to him about drawing. I'd done, you know, mostly mechanical drawing at that point through the engineering and – but I had a sketchbook and talked to him about these very primitive sketches I was doing. He said, "Well, there are ways of developing ideas." He said, "Just put a mark on the paper and then in response to that mark put another mark and then gradually build it into some type of a format." And then he said, "Then you

can translate that the same way into materials. You know, you can start with an element and then decide what you're going to add to that and how it's going to relate to that" -- [END TAPE 1 SIDE A.] "and then maybe add a third one and how it's going to relate." And so, as a way of sort of getting going –

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. KEYSER: – getting started.

MR. COOKE: So you don't have a creative block or anything like that.

MR. KEYSER: Yeah, exactly. And I really enjoyed his class. It was one night a week for three hours, so you didn't get a lot of exposure to it.

MR. COOKE: Did you work through problems based on what you had read in this earlier book on modern sculpture? Did you set – assign my task, oh, I want to understand the way somebody is doing this, or were you really –

MR. KEYSER: No.

MR. COOKE: – just unencumbered and tried different things?

MR. KEYSER: No, at that point I think I was – as a result of my experience with the Soap Box Derby I didn't want to have mine turn out looking like one of the ones in the book. And yet I studied them, you know, in great detail.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. KEYSER: I also, that senior year, started – you know, I had to start thinking about job interviews and things, and I decided that maybe what I would do would be to go with a company that made consumer products that would have an industrial design department in-house, that maybe somehow I could work myself into a position where I could, sort of, bridge the gap between engineering and industrial design.

MR. COOKE: Right – slowly, sort of, stretch a foot out. [Laughs.]

MR. KEYSER: Exactly. Exactly. And so I thought, well, gee, I ought to know something about industrial design. So I went to the industrial design department and talked with a fellow by the name of Richard Felver, who was teaching the seniors at that point, and told him what I was interested in. And I may have even had some photographs of some of the things that I had done at that point to show him. He said, "Why don't you come into our senior industrial design class and, sort of, be the engineering consultant for this class?" And so I did that during my last semester there. And I didn't get much experience functioning as an engineering consultant. They were designing ranges or something when I first got into the class. It may have been a leftover from the previous semester project or something, but they were already, kind of, started on it. And they were pretty much just working appearance design with a pretty standard range format, so there wasn't an awful lot of – well, is there room for the burners, and that kind of –

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. KEYSER: – thinking in –

MR. COOKE: They were in the final leg?

MR. KEYSER: Yeah. So there wasn't much that I could contribute there. But I ended up doing a project. The last project was a packaging assignment, and it was to pick a product that was pretty nondescript whose package would have a real influence in the marketability of the product.

And so I did that project, and it was – I'm sure – we never had a final critique or anything that I participated in. I can remember taking my project in the last class meeting, or maybe it was even the last – during finals week or something I took the project in and showed him. And I'm sure, you know, in terms of senior industrial designers that it had to look pretty damn amateurish. But I kind of went through the steps and so that helped some. But the sculpture, I think, I got more out of than anything else.

MR. COOKE: So you – as you finish up at Carnegie, you've got – you've done your engineering degree – that's been your major – you've got a little bit of sculpture, a little bit of industrial design. Did you already have your next step in mind at that point?

MR. KEYSER: Well, at that point I had taken ROTC [Reserve Officers' Training Corps], so I had an obligation – an active-duty obligation. At that point there were two choices: six months active duty, and something like nine years Reserve or two years active duty. And I was not an armed forces type person, so I –

MR. COOKE: This is right at the Korean War?

MR. KEYSER: Just before that, I guess.

MR. COOKE: Just before that, so ’53 or –

MR. KEYSER: This was – well, when was – this was ’58 when I graduated.

MR. COOKE: Okay, from high – from college? Okay. So it’s after Korea.

MR. KEYSER: Okay. Yeah, it was after Korea. I chose the six-month, and I interviewed in a number of consumer product companies and I got a job offer from – I think it was Schick electric razor company and Hoover vacuum cleaner company. I know I applied to Kodak, but I don’t think I got an offer from them. I interviewed with them, but I didn’t get an offer from Kodak. So I ended up going with Hoover vacuum cleaner in Canton, Ohio. It was within traveling distance to Pittsburgh. I was – my wife and I were – had met at Carnegie Mellon and – Carnegie Tech and had gone pretty steady from my sophomore or junior year on.

And so I started at Hoover, and I think I worked through the summer of my first year out of college, and then my active duty was – I had to leave and go to Fort Belvoir, Virginia, for my six months' active duty. While there I worked at the post – they had a post hobby shop kind of facility, and I tried doing some sculpture kind of things there – didn’t have a lot of time and didn’t do an awful lot. Went back to Canton, Ohio – North Canton, Ohio – and decided I was going to see what Kent State [Kent State University, Kent, Ohio] had to offer – they were within travel distance – in the way of an evening class. I wanted to get into a drawing class, a freehand art –

MR. COOKE: Drawing from life, yeah.

MR. KEYSER: – drawing-from-life kind of thing. I remember I had photos of some of the things that I had done in high school and college, and I started knocking on some doors up there, and the drawing instructors that I talked to said, “Well, you know, have you done any drawing?” “No. Well, I’ve done some mechanical drawing, but” – “Well, you’re not qualified to come into our drawing class.” So the last door I knocked on was a jewelry class, and a fellow by the name of Mel Someroski was teaching this jewelry class. He taught – I think his main media was textiles or ceramics, or maybe both, but he obviously taught a number of different media and this jewelry-making classes. And I showed him pictures of what I had done, and he said, “Sure,” he said, “come on into my class,” he said. “I’d be glad to have you.” And I owe him a great deal.

After class I stayed on a couple of evenings and started talking to him about my dissatisfaction with engineering. I didn’t enjoy the job. You know, my parents had said, “You get out and you’re making money in engineering, you’ll enjoy it a lot more.” Well, wrong.

MR. COOKE: Not. [Laughs.]

MR. KEYSER: I lived for the weekends when I could travel back to Pittsburgh and see Joan, and I just – you know, I hated to get up at 8:00 in the morning and go to work, and I thought to myself, this is insane. I mean, I’m going to be a street person or an alcoholic or something going through life this way.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. KEYSER: So I started discussing with Mel Someroski my dissatisfaction with engineering and my thinking that there must be something in the creative field that – and I’ll never forget the evening he went over – and it was a typical classroom with these bookcases built in along one wall with masonite sliding doors. And he slid open this door, and it was stacked with old magazines, and he brought out this old *Craft Horizons*, it was called at that point – shook the dust off of it, and he leafed through, and in the back he said, “Here’s this place called RIT [Rochester Institute of Technology, Rochester, New York].” He said, “You ought to go up and check it out.” He said, “They have furniture and they have metal.”

MR. COOKE: So he hadn’t been a product of RIT, but he was –

MR. KEYSER: No.

MR. COOKE: – just aware of it from *Craft Horizons*?

MR. KEYSER: He was aware of it, yeah.

MR. COOKE: Just sort of knowing that the School for American Craftsmen was there.

MR. KEYSER: Existed, yeah. And probably was aware of some of the faculty. He’s deceased now, but I know he’s a Fellow of the American Craft Council, so he was recognized as an educator, I guess. I never saw much of his

work, but –

MR. COOKE: So he was the one who –

MR. KEYSER: He was the one that planted the seed. So I went up to RIT, interviewed with Harold Brennan. And Harold Brennan had come from an architecture program at Carnegie Tech, so that was sort of a bit of a bond there.

MR. COOKE: That made it easier to talk.

MR. KEYSER: [Laughs.] Yeah, right. And, again, I didn't have a formal portfolio; I just had, sort of, a collection of snapshots of some things that I had done. I think I maybe had taken a couple of pieces. I had – in this metals class with Mel I had done, sort of, a hollowware form, sort of a candy tray kind of form, with a metal tray and a lignum vitae wooden base, sort of a – kind of a Calderish form set on a Henry Moore [laughs] was what it looked like.

MR. COOKE: Or not?

MR. KEYSER: And I think it was small enough that I could carry – you know, to take that on the bus with me, and a couple of other things. I think maybe I had taken some jewelry that I had done with him. So I talked with Harold Brennan, Tage Frid, and Hans Christensen.

MR. COOKE: So it was wood and metal that came up because of your experiences in the materials?

MR. KEYSER: Yeah. And it was at that point I can – I mean, I can remember, you know, thinking pretty seriously, well, this is a toss up; I've got to make a – and at that point there was not a chance – it wasn't obvious to me that there was a chance of maybe combining the two or taking a dual major or something. It was, you know, you major in this area and that's it. You don't even take electives at that point. It was very lockstep.

MR. COOKE: So it wasn't even a foundation program or anything like that? You were just right into that medium, and, you know, it was wood or metal?

MR. KEYSER: You decided before you got there what you wanted to be, which is a little bit absurd thinking about that, but that's the way it was.

MR. COOKE: And this was for an MFA that you would be going on for?

MR. KEYSER: No, this was for – I knew nothing about MFAs at that point. I was intending to stay two years. My liberal arts were all finished because I had done those at Carnegie Tech.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. KEYSER: I was figuring on trying to double up my freshman and sophomore year in terms of the studio and try to get a bachelor's in two years –

MR. COOKE: Okay.

MR. KEYSER: – or two years plus. I know I was – I went the summer between my first and second year. Ironically, I think it was my first year there that it was the first year that the School for American Craftsmen was – that's what it was called at the time, Craftsmen –

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. KEYSER: – that a master's was offered. And it was a one-year MFA program, pretty much just studio of your choice. You know, you majored in one studio.

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. KEYSER: A written thesis, no thesis show. So that was the –

MR. COOKE: It was pretty undeveloped.

MR. KEYSER: Pretty undeveloped at that point. That was the first year that they offered them. I know one of my close friends that I'd made during that year, he was in the master's program, so he was there for just one year. He came from an interior architecture program out in Oregon, I believe.

MR. COOKE: So you ended up interviewing with Harold, with Tage, and with Hans?

MR. KEYSER: Right.

MR. COOKE: What were your interviews like with Hans and Tage? I mean, was there a way in which the interview helped, sort of, push you in a certain direction?

MR. KEYSER: I don't remember much about the interview with Hans. Maybe it was because I couldn't understand him. [Laughs.] He spoke very broken English.

MR. COOKE: Okay.

MR. KEYSER: But I don't think – I mean, that's just – I don't remember an awful lot about my interview with him. I remember being very impressed with the hollowware that was being done, with the quality of the metalwork that was being done. I mean, the students really learned how to move metal. I remember much more in detail the interview with Tage, and I remember asking him, "Is it possible to make a living at this?" And he said, "Most certainly, yes." And he had me go over to Shop One. I don't know if you've heard of Shop –

MR. COOKE: Yeah, yeah.

MR. KEYSER: He said – it was within two blocks of the school. He said, "Go over to Shop One and see the things that they're marketing there." And at that point Shop One was started and owned by –

MR. COOKE: It was Hans and Jack and Tage.

MR. KEYSER: Yes, and I think maybe Karl Laurell, who was teaching textiles. I think he may have had a hand in it as well. But it was, yeah, Jack Prip –

MR. COOKE: Jack Prip –

MR. KEYSER: And I think Ronny [Ronald] Pearson was –

MR. COOKE: He actually came – I think he came into it as well, and then Hans – and Wildenhain was the other person.

MR. KEYSER: Frans Wildenhain.

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. KEYSER: Yeah. I don't think Hans Christensen – he wasn't one of the – I think it was Jack Prip.

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. KEYSER: Jack Prip, Tage Frid, Frans Wildenhain, and possibly this Karl Laurell were the ones who started it.

MR. COOKE: So seeing those things at Shop One –

MR. KEYSER: It was a revelation to me. I mean, I – you know, I had not seen – had not been exposed to a retail outlet like that before.

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. KEYSER: And it was one of the early ones I guess.

MR. COOKE: It was incredibly important. I mean, in some ways people from that area talk about it being more important than America House in terms of, sort of, the quality, the range of work that could be shown.

MR. KEYSER: And he had also, with a former student, started a company called Hardwood House [Rochester, NY], which was a – strictly a furniture designing and building firm. And I think there was just Tage and this fellow Bob [Robert] Donovan.

MR. COOKE: Bob Donovan?

MR. KEYSER: Yeah, who had started it. And then they took on – at a later date I think they took on a couple of more graduates. I know there was a fellow by the name of Jack [John] Stevens was involved. He had been a graduate of the school. A fellow that ended up the president of the company after – many steps later; I'm trying to think of his name. He's out on the West Coast now; he's retired. Jim Bailey – Jim Bailey was his name, and then Dick [Richard] Wakamoto. And at the time, I guess, when I was a student there, there was Jim Bailey, Dick Wakamoto, Jack Stevens, and I think Tage had sort of separated himself somewhat from it because of his teaching obligations. But he was still, I think, somewhat active.

MR. COOKE: Yeah, it's a nice link between what's going on in studio, in school, as well as sort of practical concerns.

MR. KEYSER: Exactly. Exactly.

MR. COOKE: It's one of the things that I keep hearing about Tage's influence is, you know, instilling, again – like your father, instilling these values that you've got to be efficient, you've got to make every motion count, and the idea ultimately is to have accountability for your time and having goals and – I mean, I hear it from Hank Gilpin [furniture maker; Lincoln, Rhode Island] and various other people that, you know, it's – you've got to make a living, you've got to make a living out of this. So it resonated well with you.

MR. KEYSER: Yeah. I can still remember, it had to be my second year there, I decided I was going to do a stool, and I came in with some drawings and showed them to Tage. He said, "How long do you think this is going to take you?" I said, "Well, I think I should probably be able to get it done in maybe a week, week-and-a-half." He said, "Design a stool that you can make in a day."

MR. COOKE: That's what you can charge for a price, you know, for a stool.

MR. KEYSER: I said – yeah. He said, "Who's going to be able to afford a stool that you spent a week-and-a-half on?" I went home and I – you know, I revised – I designed and came up with something I thought – made out cutting lists and procedure lists and everything. Damn, I was – well, it took me two days to build it, but it was, you know, one-third of the time it would have taken me had he not provided the challenge.

MR. COOKE: Yeah, exactly. So after you interviewed there and, sort of, walked around in the shop, in the studio, saw Shop One – I mean, it was instant that this is the place to go in terms of getting out of Hoover?

MR. KEYSER: It was – I went back, talked it over with my parents, and decided to apply to RIT and to Carnegie Tech. I guess I heard first from RIT. Well, I think I pretty much knew coming back from talking with Brennan that I would be accepted. I heard at a somewhat later date Carnegie Tech put me on a waiting list. It was – this was, like, during the summer, I believe, so –

MR. COOKE: For that fall?

MR. KEYSER: For that fall. So, you know, it was late and they were probably full. Well, I'm – at any rate, I was put on a waiting list.

MR. COOKE: For industrial design or architecture at Carnegie?

MR. KEYSER: I think it must have been for industrial design. I don't remember. Again, I was interested in an undergraduate – I mean, you know, I didn't know anything about graduate programs.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. KEYSER: So it may have even been for just fine arts – you know, visual arts kind of thing.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. KEYSER: You know, I may not have had to specify at that point. I guess I was a bit put back by being on the waiting list, thinking, well, gee, I graduated from there in engineering and, you know, I'm accepted at this other place; why didn't they accept me? So I immediately turned in my acceptance to RIT. My father's opinion sort of was 180 degrees from where it was back when I was a freshman studying engineering. I had gotten the, quote, education, so I had satisfied his criteria. And I decided in talking it over with him, and pretty much decided myself, that it was going to be wood. I was, you know, in his realm and so there was a – you know, and from then on I think my father had never been – we've never been closer, because we had things that we could talk about and experiences we could bounce off of one another. So I went ahead and got my army out of the way and finished up at Hoover, and in September I went up to RIT.

MR. COOKE: So you arrived, and you were there at one of these great moments, in essence, in terms of the history of RIT, in terms of some of the students who – this is fifty –

MR. KEYSER: This was 1960.

MR. COOKE: So it's 1960. I was going to say '59 or '60.

MR. KEYSER: '60 -'61 academic year.

MR. COOKE: Okay, we're all set. So you arrived at RIT in the fall of 1960?

MR. KEYSER: Correct.

MR. COOKE: Ready to go.

MR. KEYSER: Ready to go.

MR. COOKE: Thinking, this is finally it. [Laughs.]

MR. KEYSER: Yeah. And it was a wonderful time. In contrast to my undergraduate work in engineering, I was really into what I was doing, whereas in engineering I avoided doing class work as much as I could, you know, seeking diversion in things that I was really interested in. Here I could immerse myself in what I was doing. Joan was back in Pittsburgh; she hadn't graduated yet, so other than going out for a beer now and then with some of my fellow students and stuff, I could pretty much immerse myself in what I was doing.

The studios were set up – the School for American Craftsmen, as it was called in those days, was located in an old mansion-type home that had been divided up into the various studios, kind of a labyrinth-type environment where you, sort of, walk in. I remember the ceramics students had to walk through the woodshop to get back to the – what was, sort of, the carriage – not the carriage house, but, like, the stable or the garage section to the rear of the building. We had a small exhibition area in the front and the dean's office was right there and there was one receptionist, his secretary; no copying machines, no computers.

MR. COOKE: Not even a fax machine. [They laugh.]

MR. KEYSER: Not even a fax. They had a – what do they call those things?

MR. COOKE: Mimeograph machine?

MR. KEYSER: Mimeograph machine, yeah. I guess it was an older building. It was very informal. If you wanted to hang your coat up, you just drove a nail in the wall kind of thing. Not that it was abused, but it was informal and it was a livable environment. It wasn't pristine or offensive in any way. The work schedule was like 8:00 to 5:00. The studios were closed in the evenings. There was an evening school program, which was taught by a separate instructor, and that was off limits. Day school students had to be out of there by 5:00. So I used to utilize the evenings either in the library or designing, or I would take my drawings home with me and make out cutting lists, procedures – a procedure list for the next day. I found it was advantageous to do that. I wouldn't spend time standing at my bench scratching my head and figuring out what I was going to do next; I would kind of know what I was going to do.

MR. COOKE: Pre-plan and ready to go.

MR. KEYSER: Right. So I tried to maximize the use of my time in the studio at that point. During my second year there you could apply for a job, kind of as an assistant to the night school, and gain access to the studio that way.

MR. COOKE: Sort of being a shop assistant and –

MR. KEYSER: Right.

MR. COOKE: – keeping track of the machines and help out.

MR. KEYSER: Yeah. The main job, as I remember, was sharpening circular-saw blades, [laughs] keeping them sharp.

MR. COOKE: And truing joiners and making sure the band-saw blade was –

MR. KEYSER: Actually it didn't even go that far.

MR. COOKE: No?

MR. KEYSER: We kind of did that during the day school in, sort of, a regular machinery maintenance session. But it was mainly, kind of, taking care of the circular-saw blades and taking care of anything that the particular instructor might, you know, want done. But it got a few more – so I applied for that job and got – I think I had it maybe one semester, or something, my second year.

MR. COOKE: In terms of the curriculum in your first semester there, what – you know, what sort of studio time versus drawing class or furniture history, or what –

MR. KEYSER: Okay, that is a good question. First of all, we majored as freshmen, and I was kind of on an

undergraduate track. I was trying to do freshman and sophomore work –

MR. COOKE: In one year you said?

MR. KEYSER: In one year.

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. KEYSER: I did not have to be out of the studios. I remember most of the liberal arts classes were scheduled, like, over the noon hour or evenings. I can't remember – students obviously had to take off – or maybe they were scheduled real early in the morning or something. But basically, as I remember, we had good blocks of time. Like, it was 8:00 to 12:00, kind of, in the morning and maybe 1:30 or 2:00 till 5:00 in the afternoon.

The faculty set up a system of – we had a break in the morning, like at 10:00, and we had a meeting room down in the basement of this little mansion. It was called the coffee room, and we went down there and the janitor made coffee – he sold coffee and there was a Coke machine there. So we would take – it was, like, 15 minutes and it was pretty well adhered to. You know, people went down at 10:00, and at 10:15 they started coming back upstairs to their studios. And it was a time when people from the different studios could get together and mingle and exchange ideas and so on. In good weather we got our coffee and went outside, you know, on the porch or something. There was a lot of camaraderie and a lot of interaction amongst the students from the different shops, which years later in a different environment on the new campus, that sort of went by the wayside, I think, or a lot of it.

MR. COOKE: Do you think the domestic nature of the building sort of promoted that as well, and then also the evenings that you couldn't get into the studios and therefore that fostered some of that time?

MR. KEYSER: Yeah. I think people were more willing to schedule their activities pretty precisely: to work for two hours in the morning, and then to go down and have coffee for 15 minutes and, sort of, get rejuvenated again, and come back out and go back up and put in their time. The – you've mentioned the residential. Probably that – I never thought about it, but that may have had something to do with it. It was a very homey-type atmosphere.

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. KEYSER: And I think probably the students responded to that.

MR. COOKE: It wasn't sort of institutional or –

MR. KEYSER: Exactly.

MR. COOKE: You know, people sort of – you're marched along here, there and –

MR. KEYSER: Right.

[Audio break.]

MR. COOKE: This is Ned Cooke interviewing Bill Keyser at his daughter's home in Sudbury, Massachusetts, on Friday, April 25, 2003. This is disk number two. And we were just talking about Bill's initial time in the fall of 1960 at RIT, and talking about the physical layout of the School for American Craftsmen and about to delve into some of the curricular issues.

MR. KEYSER: The schedule was, as I remember it, Fridays, I know we had – as a freshman/sophomore, we had two- and three-dimensional design and drawing. One of those must have been on a Monday, too. I think perhaps, like, Monday morning or Monday afternoon was – may have been three-dimensional design, and then, I think, on Fridays we had – in the morning we had three hours of drawing and in the afternoon three hours of two-dimensional design.

MR. COOKE: When you're in those drawing or two- or three-dimensional design, is it only the wood people who were there, or is it people from all the different shops?

MR. KEYSER: They were all the – they were all Craft School students.

MR. COOKE: So that was another chance where you were mingling together?

MR. KEYSER: Yes, yes. The sort of – I think one of the deficiencies at the time was that we were not in the same classes as the art majors, so we were segregated in that respect. And, I think, the length of the time in those classes – it was a shorter scheduled class time than what the art majors got.

MR. COOKE: Who were in a separate building entirely?

MR. KEYSER: Well, we went to it – the two-dimensional and three-dimensional drawing classes were all taught in a separate building from the Craft School.

MR. COOKE: Okay.

MR. KEYSER: The only thing that was taught in the Craft School were the shop – were the studio classes.

MR. COOKE: So the main emphasis, really, is the shop curriculum, which is Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and then even part of Monday?

MR. KEYSER: Part of Monday, I believe, as I remember. And there was a reluctance among a lot of students to pull away from the shop and go over to these two- and three-dimensional design classes that they – I think a lot of them viewed them as being unnecessary, nonproductive time.

MR. COOKE: Right. Time was tight; they'd much rather spend it at the bench with the machines, et cetera.

MR. KEYSER: Right, making sawdust.

MR. COOKE: Right.

What was Tage's approach? He was obviously the head, but then Michael Harmes was there as well working with him at that point?

MR. KEYSER: He was perceived, I think, as the head but mainly because he had been there longer than Michael. When I arrived as a freshman, I think Michael had been there only one or two years prior to that. I did not meet him when I went up for the interview.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. KEYSER: It must have been on a day when he was not teaching. So I think Tage was perceived as being the head, but you would not know it from any organizational chart or anything other than sort of thinking, well, he's kind of in charge. The two of them were just a wonderful team in terms of seeing eye to eye on what should be done, how it should be approached, and supporting one another. Also, on an informal, kind of friendly basis they were – you know, we had annual parties out at Tage's house. Michael was just living in an apartment close by the school, so most of the social activities revolved around Tage's house, who lived down in Victor at the time – Victor, New York.

But it was the first time that I perceived a department as being an organized group of people, more than one. I mean, in engineering it was – you know, somebody taught thermodynamics and another person taught statics and another person taught strength of materials, and there was never – I was never aware of a cohesive department as such. This was the first time that I had experienced that and I was taken with the coordination between the two of them.

MR. COOKE: So they really complemented – I mean, did they each have individual strengths that –

MR. KEYSER: Yes.

MR. COOKE: – together sort of –

MR. KEYSER: Yes, I think so. Tage was very much the – very well versed on the technical side of things. I mean, he knew wood inside and out. He had been trained in Denmark and had come from the apprenticeship program and everything. I guess he had had some design training over there, but it was mainly Danish-modern type influence. Michael was trained, I believe, at the Royal College in England [Royal College of Art, London, England] and – but he was a maker as well as a designer. I gathered over the years when I've talked to people about the Royal College that they have a team of technicians who do nothing other – I mean, they're perfectly willing to execute a student's designs for them.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. KEYSER: Is that correct?

MR. COOKE: Yeah. I mean, I think by and large its main focus was in the design end of it rather than – you know, RIT and the School for American Craftsmen had always had that reputation of designer craftsmen, like, somebody who does it all and you had to get both parts of the equation.

MR. KEYSER: Right.

MR. COOKE: Or in some ways even more of an emphasis on the making of it in those early years.

MR. KEYSER: Well, Michael, I think, was certainly versed in the design end of it, and either he came with experience at making or he gained that through Tage and the other students within a couple of years of being there, because he was actively building furniture. And he did not have a shop of his own, so he used the school facilities on Saturdays.

MR. COOKE: During the day, not at night. [They laugh.]

MR. KEYSER: Well, we could only work in the shop on Saturdays if Michael was there, so we had to have a sign-up sheet for Saturdays if he was going to be there. So we would always press him on Fridays, you know, "Are you going to be here tomorrow, Mike?" So he would open the shop. And he was actively involved in producing mainly commission work during that time.

MR. COOKE: With their pedagogical structure was it cumulative in terms of building up skill and – you know, from what I understood, sort of Tage doing demos and then trying out an exercise to use that and build up your skills. Was it project-oriented in terms of how to develop designs and work through that? Can you talk at all in terms of how it goes together?

MR. KEYSER: Well, each quarter or each grading period we had an assignment, and they were usually oriented around either a – in the early years, at the beginning, a technique.

MR. COOKE: So it would be a dovetailing technique or a carving technique, or something like that?

MR. KEYSER: Yeah. And then later as you got a few of those techniques under your belt, then the assignment was usually an item – a particular item of furniture, a chair or a table. At the beginning the first-year curriculum involved hand tools mainly for the first – I think we were on the quarter – we must have been on the quarter system at the time, like an 11-week quarter – three 11-week quarters comprising the academic year. At least the first quarter we spent strictly with hand tools. And the projects were – and we made our own drawing board, kind of a breadboard-type drawing board, with side cleats to control the warpage, and then we went into a dovetail box and – to start getting function into the thing. I guess it had to hold our drawing supplies. And the third project may have been either a stool or a small table.

MR. COOKE: Only if you could do it in one day, though, right? [They laugh.]

MR. KEYSER: No, that was later.

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. KEYSER: That was later.

MR. COOKE: So you did a stool or seating – you know, small seating. Is that it?

MR. KEYSER: Well, as I remember it was a table. At least, I did a table.

MR. COOKE: Okay.

MR. KEYSER: The first furniture piece was a table.

MR. COOKE: Okay. Do you remember what came after that?

MR. KEYSER: Well, I was trying to do the freshman and sophomore together. I know the whole sophomore year was devoted to a dining room ensemble.

MR. COOKE: So you had to do a whole table, set of chairs, and sort of sideboard or credenza?

MR. KEYSER: It was a – ideally, it was an expandable dining table, a set of at least six chairs, a veneered cabinet piece, whether it be sideboard or china closet or whatever. And, I believe, they tried to get a solid wood construction, a solid wood carcass piece, as well. I found myself kind of hitting the high spots. I never did do the drawing board; I went right into the dovetail box for drawing supplies and the – we had to plane a board, I guess. We had to plane a –

MR. COOKE: Hand-plane it? You know, not use a joiner or a surface planer, right?

MR. KEYSER: Right. Hand-plane and true, you know, to get a six-inch, parallel-sided board, uniformly three-

quarters of an inch and exactly 24 inches, or some such thing.

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. KEYSER: And I did that, and then he said, “Well, why don’t you forget about the drawing board and go right into the dovetail box?” I did that and I did a table. During that first year I did a turned stool that was kind of a monolithic, kind of just a U-shape, but in plan view it was circular, so it – and I did the dining chairs; I did the expandable table; I did the veneered sideboard. I did not do a solid wood carcass. I did that – that was my first piece that I did –

MR. COOKE: Sort of in your –

MR. KEYSER: – the summer session between the first and second year.

MR. COOKE: Between most people’s sophomore and junior year. [Laughs.]

MR. KEYSER: Yeah, right. I picked up this solid wood carcass piece, chest of drawers. And I’m trying to think what else was in that freshman year. I can’t recall now what else was in that. I don’t think they did a chair. I think the first chair they did was as a sophomore, and it was a prototype for the production chairs.

MR. COOKE: Well, they would do it for the dining room ensemble.

MR. KEYSER: The dining room ensemble, yeah, but it was a dining chair.

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. KEYSER: I can’t recall what the other first-year projects were.

MR. COOKE: I mean, that makes sense in terms of, I mean, just knowing what some of Tage’s students then went on to base some of their work –

MR. KEYSER: Yeah.

MR. COOKE: – projects.

MR. KEYSER: And, you know, it was logical, too, in terms of progressing from the simpler to the more complex. You mentioned demonstrations. I can remember, I think, the dovetail demonstration Mike Harmes did. So he –

MR. COOKE: Interesting.

MR. KEYSER: He demonstrated some of the techniques as well. One morning a week we had design. It was sort of a separate, graded class, and it was called production planning, or something, and we – there was one drawing room in the building and the woodshop –

MR. COOKE: For everybody, all the different media?

MR. KEYSER: Yeah.

MR. COOKE: And you sort of rotate – you had your certain drawing time?

MR. KEYSER: Exactly. Right, and that was conducted by Tage and Michael. I think that was on a Wednesday morning when both of them were there, and so they were both in on that and they, sort of – it was to work on the designs for your next project, basically, and so they circulated around the room. It was not a very structured thing, and it was – again, the students were – had anxiety attacks about being up there. They would much rather have been down in the wood – it happened to be on the second floor.

MR. COOKE: Yeah, much rather be in the sawdust –

MR. KEYSER: Yeah, right.

MR. COOKE: – than in a drawing studio.

MR. KEYSER: And that was a hard thing to combat, even later when I started teaching there, you know, to get them to realize how important the design phase was. So that was a separate class and it carried –

MR. COOKE: And they shared it? I mean, it wasn’t as if Michael was, sort of, a little bit more active there? I mean, I’d always imagined –

MR. KEYSER: I can remember Michael giving mechanical drawing demonstrations. I remember him giving a watercolor illustration or rendering class during the year. But it wasn't very structured in terms of coming in in the morning: "Now, this is the assignment for today and you have to have it done by 12:00" kind of thing. It was much more open. And resource material at that point was extremely limited. I don't know whether – slides, for instance, were nonexistent – slide presentations. Exposure was mainly through *Mobilia* magazine and *Domus*, and the department subscribed to both of those, and those magazines would be around. So when the typical student would sit down to design something, they would, sort of, immediately go to *Mobilia* and start paging through to find the chest of drawers, you know, that were being done.

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. KEYSER: So that was, sort of, the main point of illustration – the main source of illustration, or inspiration I should say. I was – I don't think I was unique in that there were a number of other students there who were trying to make themselves – trying to expose themselves to more influences, but I would spend a considerable amount of time in the library. They had a fairly decent periodical subscriptions section, and the bound volumes were – I guess at that time they were as extensive as I was aware they should be.

MR. COOKE: Right. Did that fly in the face at all in terms of – I mean, when you read Tage Frid about, you design around construction, one could almost get a sense that he wants you to be on the shop floor and figuring out ways of doing something expediently, practically, you know, and that's, sort of, the basis of design. Was the library considered different to him, or –

MR. KEYSER: No, I don't think so.

MR. COOKE: That just wasn't his own style.

MR. KEYSER: Yeah. His own style, I guess, was working more from the materials, from the construction and from the Danish modern, you know, in a vogue that was going on at the time.

MR. COOKE: Yeah, because he seems to have, sort of, a repertoire of images that he works off of at that particular point in time.

MR. KEYSER: Yeah, right. [END TAPE 1 SIDE B.] I think as he went along, I think he expanded his vision as well over the years. I mean, I didn't keep up with a lot of his work but I – you know, a few key pieces that I've seen, I think he, sort of, pushed out a little bit further. Michael, I'm not sure how much furniture he did after he left RIT. He went up to Canada and was teaching at the Ontario College of Art [Ontario College of Art and Design, Toronto, Ontario]. He may have started at a different college up there, but he ended up, I think, at the Ontario College of Art.

MR. COOKE: When did he leave RIT?

MR. KEYSER: He left – let me get this straight. Okay, I graduated in –

MR. COOKE: Sixty-two?

MR. KEYSER: '61. Yeah, the end of the '60-'61 school year.

MR. COOKE: Now is that right, because you said you started in the fall of '60, so that would have only been one year.

MR. KEYSER: Oh, I guess I started in the fall of '59.

MR. COOKE: '59. Okay.

MR. KEYSER: So I was there '59-'60, '60-'61.

MR. COOKE: Okay.

MR. KEYSER: Yeah. And they left one year after I had graduated, so they left the end of the '62-'63 school year [June 1962].

MR. COOKE: So he and Frid both left at the same time.

MR. KEYSER: They left simultaneously, yeah.

MR. COOKE: Which we'll come back to – when you were there was also – you know, thinking back to Frid's, sort of, expanding some of his vision or thinking about what Frid and Harmes as a team were encouraging, you were

there at a point when the student body had some extraordinary makers who went on to also become well known teachers and makers, that some of the people who were there at the same time were –

MR. KEYSER: Jere Osgood was there, Dan Jackson – Jere was finishing up his last year there, I believe, the first year I got – I'll take that back; I think he was a junior when I got there.

MR. COOKE: That sounds right.

MR. KEYSER: I think he was a junior. I think he graduated the same year I did. Dan was only a sophomore.

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. KEYSER: Then that summer, between my two years, Skip [Clifford R.] Johnson came. He had been teaching at Buffalo State [Buffalo State College, Buffalo, New York], and he came for that summer session, and then I believe he stayed on in the fall and went at what was my second year, and I think he and I graduated together.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. KEYSER: There was another fellow by the name of Don Dean who – we came together. He had done some time at Cornell University, was older, and I think had been in the army. And so we were about the same age, I believe, and a year or two older than most of the students other than Jere Osgood and Skip Johnson. There was another fellow, Bob Howe, who had been a high school teacher up in Vermont, and he had gotten a associate degree from RIT years before, had taught high school and had come back to pick up his bachelor's degree, so he was there for two years. Those are mainly the –

MR. COOKE: Did you feel as if that was a special group of people? I mean, could you have anticipated that these would be major contributors to the field? Did you get a sense of them pushing boundaries at that point, how they related to the curriculum, or sort of, a thirst for knowledge in terms of the library and in the shop?

MR. KEYSER: Well, Jere was very impressive. He was obviously a cut above most of us. He had been in business – he had studied architecture, I guess, for a couple of years out in Illinois, I believe.

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. KEYSER: I think he had been – I got the idea that he had been in business and selling through America House and stuff, either before he came to school or concurrently with being a student. I know he was producing production items and marketing.

MR. COOKE: Trays and things like that?

MR. KEYSER: Yeah. And his design was very – it was more sophisticated than most, and his technical ability was pretty good. I don't think it was as outstanding as it is now, but then none of ours were. [They laugh.]

MR. COOKE: Right, exactly. It's early on.

MR. KEYSER: It was a learning situation.

MR. COOKE: You were students, come on.

MR. KEYSER: Right. But he was very innovative and had a good command of drawing skills. When I say innovative, it was certainly based on historical furniture forms, but he had his own personal twist that he put on things, which I think was very unique, at least amongst students that were working there at the time. I think he was well respected, too, in the shop by the other students.

MR. COOKE: Yeah. Quiet and going about his work.

MR. KEYSER: Yeah.

MR. COOKE: Yeah, I always thought that he's somebody who had a concept of three-dimensional design, for instance –

MR. KEYSER: Right.

MR. COOKE: – and how he could – you know, he thought with depth, whereas sometimes people have a hard time sort of thinking about design, going from two-dimensional to three-dimensional.

MR. KEYSER: Yeah. He also, I think, benefited greatly from his year or two in architecture in terms of his grasp of volume and form.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. KEYSER: Dan and he were roommates. They rented a house together with – in fact, the house was owned by Ronny Pearson, the metalsmith. It was right off campus, very close, and I think they shared it with, I believe, a weaver, Leroy – I can't remember – Wilce I think was his last name.

And so Dan and Jere were very close. Dan, at the time, was doing furniture, but he was also –

MR. COOKE: Still doing his fish sculptures and things like that.

MR. KEYSER: Yeah, he was doing some early sculpture.

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. KEYSER: I think he had done – he done, sort of, the fish forms and things, but I think he was on the verge of moving on beyond those into some sculpture which, of course, matured later. Not too many people were doing sculpture.

MR. COOKE: But he also had a sense of historic furniture as well.

MR. KEYSER: I believe he did, yeah.

MR. COOKE: Apparently he'd been restoring furniture and –

MR. KEYSER: I didn't know that.

MR. COOKE: – an antique dealer back in Wisconsin.

MR. KEYSER: Okay, okay.

My second year I just sort of scratched the surface on some sculpture. There was a competition to design a mural for a local company, R. T. French Company, and I entered that and did a wood and metal and lacquered wall relief, non-objective-type design. I think that was the only sculpture that I got into.

MR. COOKE: Yeah, because it does seem – I mean, and Skip was doing some of his turnings with the little mountain men and things like that –

MR. KEYSER: Yeah, exactly.

MR. COOKE: So that there was this little whimsical aspect of using some of these furniture techniques but not necessarily looking at sculpture as sculpture.

MR. KEYSER: Exactly. Yeah, he was doing those mountain men and things. In fact, I think his thesis may have been turned figures or something to that effect.

MR. COOKE: Yeah, exactly.

MR. KEYSER: You know it's funny; we never had, like, a thesis show. It was a one-year master's program. I guess maybe I'm getting ahead of myself here, because I spent the first year as an undergraduate trying – my objective in coming to the school was to get another bachelor's degree. I knew – I was unaware of a master's, and during my first year there was, I believe, the first year that RIT – that the School for American Craftsmen -- offered a MFA. It was a one-year program. There was a written thesis and a body of work, but there was no thesis show. The wood shop had no critiques – and I'm not sure whether any of the other shops did either – but I do not remember, you know, sitting in on a critique, like, at the end of a marking period or after finishing a project.

MR. COOKE: Would Tage or Michael give you feedback at the end or anything?

MR. KEYSER: Yeah.

MR. COOKE: I mean, you said you knew where you stood, but it was more just the instructors talking to you individually or –

MR. KEYSER: Exactly, exactly. And it was pretty much a combination of, well, now you've done this, and you've, you know, you've done these aspects pretty well. Now on your next project I want you to concentrate on this kind of thing, kind of a reflection on what you had done plus some suggestions for the next kind of thing. But that may have been a five-minute conversation at the end of finishing a piece prior to starting the next thing.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. KEYSER: So there was no in-depth critique as such, and I didn't know what we were missing at the time, [laughs] as I had never been exposed to critiquing before.

MR. COOKE: Right. One could say there are trade-offs either way.

MR. KEYSER: Exactly, yeah, yeah. They did have a walk-through at the end of each – I believe it was at the end of each grading period, but it was more for the instructor's use than it was the students. All the work that had been done that quarter was put out. The students had to leave the building and the instructors walked through.

MR. COOKE: In all media?

MR. KEYSER: My impression was that the instructors from all the media got together and as a group circulated through the building.

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. KEYSER: And that, you know, we did not know what took place. Apparently it was a time when they could reflect on the curriculum and how things were going in terms of, you know, achieving their – what they perceived as their educational goals or whatever.

MR. COOKE: Right. Do you feel that the absence of a critique affected not just the idea of reflection and trying to understand what you were doing, but did it affect that or did it also affect the way in which you might communicate with one another, knowing what was going on with other people's work? Do you feel like a lot of the work – that you as a student were working in relative isolation, and if anything just with the two instructors? I'm just curious as to the chemistry.

MR. KEYSER: Yeah, to some extent perhaps, but it was a small shop. There were only 18 students maximum, as I remember at the time. Well, that's what our capacity was, and perhaps the bench room wasn't even full at that point.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. KEYSER: But, you know, it was one room. The bench room was one room, and then we had a machinery machine adjacent to it. And then down in the basement was the wood storage area with a trapdoor to shove planks up. And so, you know, you may have been somewhat isolated but not by a great distance, you know –

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. KEYSER: – because you could look right across the bench and see the one across from you, what he or she was doing.

MR. COOKE: Do you feel like there was a lot of learning from each other and talking about the field at all?

MR. KEYSER: I think so. Yeah, I think so.

MR. COOKE: I mean, I'm just thinking about where all those people then went on to teach, you know; it seems like it's almost one of these formative years, and you could almost see everybody at their bench and sort of thinking, boy, if I have a chance to teach, you know, this is what I would do or I'd respond in this way, and whether there were conversations that would foreshadow that direction.

MR. KEYSER: I don't know if any of us thought we would ever teach at that point.

MR. COOKE: Or whether you had a certain, you know, drive to do something in the field, that you were going to be setting an agenda in the field, in essence, through your work?

MR. KEYSER: Well, I think all of us had had thoughts of doing something in the field. They probably differed from individual – I'm sure they differed from individual to individual. But my own thoughts at the time were pretty much to get the knowledge that I needed, and go out and open up a shop.

MR. COOKE: So your goal was a one-person – one-person or a small shop –

MR. KEYSER: Yes.

MR. COOKE: – coming out of that, that you were getting the type of skills and input that were finally tapping into what you considered yourself ideally talented for?

MR. KEYSER: Exactly, exactly. And it wasn't until toward the end of my second year that I started thinking about teaching. I had taught a little bit during that six-month stint in the army, and I can't remember the context of it, but I know I had to do some teaching there.

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. KEYSER: Then Tage, with his advanced students, was, like, the seniors. He had them prepare a class and teach it to their peers. And it was usually a tangent or a more in-depth study of what they had been taught in one of the classes that either he or Michael had given. And so I had done that during my – I think it was my second year. And I thought, gee, this is kind of neat. I enjoy, you know, the researching on – I think I did mine on solid wood carcass construction or something, and kind of organizing my thoughts and putting together a presentation that I could give to the students.

And so those two things, along with, I guess, a growing feeling that, gee, I'm just sort of scratching the surface design-wise and I want to keep growing, and I wonder if I'm going to get out and, having to pay rent on a studio and all this business, whether I'm going to be able to have time to experiment and grow, you know, form-wise. I guess I've always thought of myself as kind of a form-maker; always been from Soap Box Derby days on.

MR. COOKE: To the car designs and then even thinking about the stamping plant that you're stamping parts for forms?

MR. KEYSER: Exactly, yeah. And then I thought, gee, the teaching, you know, on one hand I'm very interested in and I think it would be a really rewarding career to do that, although I don't think I was thinking, you're going to spend the next 30 years doing that, but I thought, well, gee, that would offer a real possibility and then afford me some time to also do my own thing and continue to grow. I don't know if I'm getting ahead of myself here in terms of –

MR. COOKE: Well, it seems to be logical, I mean, talking about your two years getting your BA at RIT. Some of that is starting to come into shape in your second year.

MR. KEYSER: Yeah, at the end of my first year I went – I was going to go to summer school between my freshman year and my sophomore year because I wasn't able to pick up everything that I needed to get to become a full-fledged junior, so I had registered for the summer session. But it was like – it was a month or a month and a half open time there between the end of the regular school year and the beginning of the summer session. And I know Hardwood House had offered a couple of us summer jobs if we wanted them.

But my father was in business down at Pittsburgh, and I decided to just go down and work for him. And he was – his retirement program, being self-employed, was to buy single-family dwellings, convert them into multi-family dwellings, and then rent them, and that was his retirement plan. And so he ended up – when he retired – he, quote, retired at 62, but he's 96 now and still puts in at least four or five hours a day in the shop. He'd like to put in more, but my mother is in a nursing home and he likes to go to visit her daily. But he ended up at, like, 62 with, I don't know, six different individual pieces of property.

At any rate, to make a long story short, he was, I think, siding the house, one of these places during that summer. And I went home and worked for him, so we were up on scaffolding, you know, putting on siding. And it was a wonderful switch that sort of turned on in my development. During that first year at RIT it was very meticulous and, you know, worrying about everything fitting absolutely perfectly and the ultimate in craftsmanship.

MR. COOKE: Close tolerances.

MR. KEYSER: Close tolerances. And then suddenly to be immersed in this siding project, which, you know, if it was a 16th of an inch, it was super close; an eighth of an inch was just fine.

MR. COOKE: Right, caulk will be fine. [They laugh.]

MR. KEYSER: Caulk will be just fine, right. So I finished up a month or month and a half with him and came back to the summer session, and it was like – I liken it to a switch that turned on. It was sort of a combining of the close-tolerance work with the desire for speed afforded by the siding job. They sort of came together, and suddenly the processes started falling in place that this would be the normal flow of a way a project should go, and I think my speed increased tremendously without any losses. Kind of like a speed-reading class, you know, where you can increase your –

MR. COOKE: Your Evelyn Wood, right.

MR. KEYSER: – your speed, you know, by threefold without any loss in comprehension.

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. KEYSER: Well, it was the same thing with this. So I think that was kind of a terminal point for me, that summer session. I came back and did a chest of drawers, and then I did a dressing table and stool. I don't think I completely finished that by the end of the summer session, but it was a very productive time for me, and it was also, I think, a time when my designs started – I started to see some progression in the design. During that – as I remember, during that spring quarter of my first year in that production planning class that I talked about –

MR. COOKE: For the dining room suite, or –

MR. KEYSER: Well, I'd already done the dining room – or I was finishing up the dining room suite. I think the assignment for the next project for the juniors may have been a bedroom ensemble, because I had done the production – I had done a series of boards, illustration boards, with orthographic drawings and a rendering of each piece that I was proposing to do. And so then I started on executing those during that summer, my chest of drawers and the dressing table.

At that same time, I guess it was during that spring quarter, I was suddenly aware of the graduate program at RIT and the requirements for entry into it, and at that time it was a bachelor's degree in some discipline -- it didn't have to be in furniture or even in art or design -- but a bachelor's degree in some field plus a minimum number of credit hours in, quote, the field. And I had achieved the minimum credit hours during that first year and I had the bachelor of science degree in engineering.

So I applied for the graduate, but I thought, well, gee, that sort of coincided with my beginnings, thinking about teaching, and I thought, well, gee, you know, I'm getting the same training, I might just as well get the master's degree as the bachelor's.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. KEYSER: So I applied and got into it, so my second year then was at the graduate level.

MR. COOKE: You're accelerated. [Laughs.]

MR. KEYSER: So I had – not only had I not completed all of the sophomore work, but I never even got into the junior or senior.

MR. COOKE: Junior or senior, right.

MR. KEYSER: So I began immediately then on my thesis, which was kind of a takeoff of the dressing table – kind of led into the thesis.

MR. COOKE: Which was on what, since you had to do a body of work that was thematic?

MR. KEYSER: It was an investigation into structure as a design element, thinking about something other than four legs, or certainly something other than four vertical legs, to hold up a piece, thinking about more dynamic configurations.

MR. COOKE: Radical at that time for –

MR. KEYSER: Yeah, yeah.

MR. COOKE: – for the wood program at the RIT.

MR. KEYSER: Yeah, and I know one of the pieces was a sculpted easy chair that I ended up lacquering, and it was like that was the first – colored lacquer, opaque lacquer. That was the first time that I think any opaque lacquer had been used on furniture at RIT.

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. KEYSER: I did some molded plywood. Frid came to me at one point, I think it was during my second year, and he said "You're an engineer." He said, "I've heard of this technique of vacuum forming." He said, "Why don't you design a press?" So I thought about it a while, and he had already bought a rotary vacuum pump, and he said, "I think we can use a rubber blanket on it." So I essentially built a plenum chamber with holes in the top surface and a gasket around the top, and then we put our forms on there and put an opaque eighth-inch-thick rubber blanket, thinking – well, my thought was that that would stretch and come down around the mold for vacuum forming.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. KEYSER: And I had done a couple of pieces of molded work on that which tied into my thesis using a curved plane as structural support for furniture.

MR. COOKE: It's interesting, because Frid was very interested in veneer and basic ordinary veneers –

MR. KEYSER: Yeah.

MR. COOKE: – more so than people, you know, probably give him credit for, that I know – I think he was showing zebra wood veneered objects and, you know, was encouraging Hank [Gilpin] to find a niche within the veneer market. So that it was always on his mind, so it's curious how he's put your background together, in terms of form giving and engineering with this interesting veneer to, sort of, encourage you to go in that direction.

MR. KEYSER: Yeah. Yeah, he was perceptive. He sensed that I might have the ability to do that and sort of planted the seed. And then it wasn't until later one of my students said, "Well, you know, it would be a whole lot better if that blanket wasn't opaque, if it were, you know, transparent, so we could see what the veneer was doing underneath." And I thought, yeah, it would be a lot better. So he ended up doing his thesis on vacuum forming and ended up writing an article for one of the early issues of *Fine Woodworking*.

MR. COOKE: On a clear vacuum-bag technology?

MR. KEYSER: Yeah. And he actually tailored bags to fit the item that he was veneering. And he also got into tailoring veneers so that – like a bucket chair or, you know, a seat which was – a seat, arms, and back could be essentially molded and then veneered by tailoring the veneers by cutting darts in it so that the veneer could be bent around –

MR. COOKE: Got it.

MR. KEYSER: – three-dimensional curves.

MR. COOKE: Yep.

MR. KEYSER: Very tedious work, but he did it.

I started – I wrote the thesis, got the body of work done, got the written thesis done before the end of school. I think that was sort of a retreat into academia for the last three weeks of the quarter, kind of, you know, not going into the shop and just working on the typewriter at that point –

MR. COOKE: Right, exactly, writing. Something very different.

MR. KEYSER: – yeah, and took it in. I don't think Frid ever read it. I'm not even sure he ever saw it. I turned it into Michael and I think he read – he probably read it or read at it. It was not a literary tour de force by any means. But I never got any feedback on it.

Tage did not want to teach that summer session.

MR. COOKE: '61 – the summer of '61? Because you said you graduated in '61, so –

MR. KEYSER: '61 or '62, yeah. He did not want to teach. He had a job, a production job that he was involved with, producing some spice racks, I think, or something, and so he wanted to work on that. So I don't know whether it was Brennan that approached me or whether it was Michael Harmes who approached me to teach with Mike that summer session after I graduated at RIT. And I had, you know – in addition to writing my thesis I had put together a portfolio and a résumé, and flooded the market with résumés for teaching positions.

MR. COOKE: At this point you are teaching – thinking of teaching, yeah.

MR. KEYSER: At this point I was thinking teaching, yeah. And so when the idea – when the opportunity arose to teach that summer session with Michael, you know, I jumped at the chance. I was getting married the fourth of July, and I think the summer session started on the third or something like it, and Michael said, "Well, I'll take the first three days and get them started. You come back the fifth," I think it was. So Joan and I had a two-day honeymoon [laughs], and we were back teaching. And it was a wonderful opportunity. You know, the more I think about it, the more my life has been a series of just wonderful things falling in place, and it always continues to amaze me the way things have fallen. I think I'm the luckiest guy in the world.

MR. COOKE: Serendipity. Why not?

MR. KEYSER: So, at any rate, I was teaching that summer session. Michael and Tage had taught the previous summer session that I'd taken as a student, so –

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. KEYSER: – so up until that point they were team teaching the summer sessions. And so Michael and I taught that summer session. I think a fellow by the name of Dan Valenza -- I don't know if you have come across that name?

MR. COOKE: Right. He went down to UNH [University of New Hampshire, Durham, New Hampshire].

MR. KEYSER: Yeah. Well, he was at U of H –

MR. COOKE: UNH.

MR. KEYSER: University of New Hampshire, yes. He was up there teaching. He had gotten an undergraduate degree from RIT, but I think they were probably putting a little pressure on for a master's. So RIT had this program where you could come, I think it was five summers or something, and get a master's degree. So he was one of our students. I think it was that first summer. And then I had him for a number of other summers up until he got his degree.

I remember at one point, it may have been after I came back to teach full time, there was a fellow that was taking a workshop, Don McKinley –

MR. COOKE: Yep.

MR. KEYSER: – did a session. It may have been just, sort of, a one-week workshop thing that he came – I think he was still a designer for Gunlocke [Wayland, New York] at that point. It was before he had gone to –

MR. COOKE: Before he went to Sheridan [Sheridan Institute of Technology and Advanced Learning, Oakville, Ontario]– or Alfred [Alfred University, Alfred, New York].

MR. KEYSER: Well, to Alfred. He went to Alfred first, yeah. So there were interesting people passing through that I came in contact with.

MR. COOKE: So the summer went well, sort of got your appetite – it gave you some stability there, and then –

MR. KEYSER: Yeah, it was a wonderful kind of reprieve from having to go out into the real, hard, cruel world, you know. [Laughs.]

MR. COOKE: Right, exactly.

MR. KEYSER: And I had the market flooded with applications. And I'll never forget the – I was renting a room – well, during the second year that I was a student I was renting a room adjacent to campus, or just off campus, from a couple. And then Joan and I, after we were married, we were renting a different apartment for that summer. And I was teaching, and along about noontime my former landlord came over and he said, "Here, you got this phone call," and it was from Ohio University [Athens, Ohio]. And it was basically offering me a teaching position.

And so I went back home for lunch and called the – I guess it was a director; he wasn't a dean, he was a director of the art school at Ohio University – you know, "What does this involve?" He said, "Well, you'll be teaching industrial design, jewelry, and a beginning two-dimensional design class." I said, "Well, I guess I could do that." I think I could handle the jewelry – I was probably most comfortable in the jewelry class because of my craftsman background.

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. KEYSER: And, you know, with Mel, and the confidence of working with materials. My next class that I probably felt sort of quasi-capable of was the industrial design, and then the two-dimensional was my weakest area.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. KEYSER: And so I said, "Well, do you want me to come out for an interview? When can we schedule an interview?" He said, "Well, you don't have to come out for an interview." He said, "You've got the job if you want it." [Laughs.]

MR. COOKE: Different climate, right?

MR. KEYSER: I had sent him a portfolio, you know. Apparently he had responded in some way for me to send a

portfolio, and I had three portfolios that were circulating. And apparently he had seen enough from the portfolio. But it was, like you say, a different climate, and the program, it was a professional stage, which was not of the highest caliber, I guess, at least in terms of the industrial design program. But I said, “No, I think I'd like to come out and look at it.”

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. KEYSER: So Joan and I drove out over the weekend and looked at the program and I ended up taking it, so it was a – you know, it just sort of fell in my lap. That was an interesting year.

MR. COOKE: But that was a one-year – I mean it ended up being a one-year appointment.

MR. KEYSER: It ended up being a one-year appointment. We rented a house that had a second-floor apartment and then an unfinished attic. The reason I wanted to rent it was because I could use the unfinished apartment, or the unfinished attic, for a studio. I think I only built two small pieces that year. I was really – you know, I was keeping, like, one day ahead of the students.

MR. COOKE: Right. First time teaching is always –

MR. KEYSER: It’s just unbelievable. I had visions of doing all kinds of work, you know. My own power equipment was basically nonexistent in terms of stationary power equipment, and the industrial design department was in a basement which flooded periodically, this old house, and a Sears jointer was about the best piece of equipment they had and then a Sears not-quite-so-good table saw, and that was about it.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. KEYSER: So, I wasn’t able to work that much, and I was keeping one day ahead of the students. I'm not sure whether I would have stayed beyond the first year or certainly beyond the second year or not.

MR. COOKE: Right. Well, it seems like that’s what a lot of people were doing. I mean, I remember that Dan [Jackson] graduated and then took a job at Illinois for one year in which, again, limited resources, he could do some carving and that was about it. It was a sculptural time: some teaching within – and it began more within an industrial design sort of curriculum.

MR. KEYSER: Right. I can’t remember. I think the industrial design people that I had were – I think there only three of them and they were all seniors.

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. KEYSER: And they were basically paper designers. They could render much better than I could, but in terms of knowing how things worked and knowledge of materials – so that’s what I tried to impart with them the one year I was there, tried to give them some idea of investigating how things worked and figuring out how things could be fabricated.

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. KEYSER: And working with three-dimensional models rather than strictly two-dimensional sketches.

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. KEYSER: So I think I provided some value to them, but beyond the one year, I'm not sure how much more I could have added to the program.

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. KEYSER: Jewelry, I think I did fine there. Two-dimensional design – I was sort of keeping one day ahead of the students.

MR. COOKE: That was the hard one, yeah.

MR. KEYSER: Yeah, because of – you know, my own background was limited in it.

MR. COOKE: So what were you hearing about Rochester at this point, with the School for American Craftsmen, because this is just prior to a shift in terms of what they were doing curricularly?

MR. KEYSER: I had no – I don’t think I had any communication. This fellow, Don Dean, who I mentioned, was a friend of mine; we maybe exchanged letters a couple of times during the year. Beyond that I wasn’t aware of

what was going on. One afternoon I was at home, I guess I didn't have class – I may have had class in the morning and then I was home in the afternoon – the telephone rang and it was Dean Brennan. And he said, "Are you interested in teaching here?" And I said, "Well, let me think about it a minute." [Laughs.]

MR. COOKE: So this was in the spring?

MR. KEYSER: This was the spring –

MR. COOKE: The spring of '62? Yeah.

MR. KEYSER: The spring of '62, yeah, because – yeah. I said, "Well, gee, that sounds awfully good." And I had entered the – one of the pieces I had done during that year I entered in the "Young Americans" show in 1962 [Museum of Contemporary Crafts, New York] and had won a prize. And I think the piece was purchased by Lee Nordness, who ended up curating the "Objects" –

MR. COOKE: "Objects: USA," [1969, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC] a couple of years later.

MR. KEYSER: Yeah. And Wendell [Castle] had also entered "Objects" –

MR. COOKE: "Young Americans?"

MR. KEYSER: "Young Americans," yeah. And I believe his piece was pictured in *American Craft*.

MR. COOKE: I'm trying to think of what it was. It was the –

MR. KEYSER: The scribe stool.

MR. COOKE: Adult high chairs and scribe stool thing.

MR. KEYSER: Yeah, right.

MR. COOKE: And yours was?

MR. KEYSER: It was a small chest of drawers, very industrial designish looking. At that point I guess I had – what little of the Danish modern that had – that I still had in my work after the two years there, I think I had pretty well shed by that time. And so I was into a more international hard edge, so it was a walnut three-drawer chest, sort of a jewelry chest size, with aluminum handles.

MR. COOKE: Almost like George Nelson – you know, sort of a Herman Miller edge to it.

MR. KEYSER: It was certainly an influence there, yeah. Even the handles had an industrial look to them. I mean, it was eight-inch-thick aluminum that had been profiled and then bent to form a handle that protruded out from the surface. It extended across the entire drawer front – it was, sort of, embedded into the drawer front.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. KEYSER: And then aluminum legs that lifted this off of a dresser or a table where it would sit.

MR. COOKE: So Harold had seen your work in the "Young Americans," or –

MR. KEYSER: I'm not sure he had seen it. He was probably aware, you know, through – it was pictured, I think, in the same article where Wendell's piece was pictured in *American Craft*. But I think he had remembered me from a year before when I was a student and teaching that summer. So he had invited me back, and it was obviously the best place I could be at the time.

MR. COOKE: So Michael and Tage had left, or were leaving.

MR. KEYSER: They were leaving. They had left by the time I had gotten up there.

MR. COOKE: I mean, that was on their own initiative? I was always unsure as to whether Brennan decided to take the program in a different direction, or whether Tage was already being offered a position at RISD [Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Rhode Island], or what was going on.

MR. KEYSER: I don't know what happened. I got the impression from talking with Tage later that he had left RIT before he had the RISD position, that the RISD position turned up after he had either resigned or had been let go or whatever happened.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. KEYSER: And I think that may have been – I think maybe Jack Prip may have been his – because I think Jack was already at –

MR. COOKE: Was already at RISD.

MR. KEYSER: – at RISD. So that may have been some – how should I put it –may have had an influence on his going there. But my impression was that it was after, because I remember him saying, "I went home to Emma and I sat down on my porch and I thought, what in the hell have I done?" [Laughs.]

MR. COOKE: Right. So he might have felt like RIT was going in a different direction than he was comfortable, or something?

MR. KEYSER: I don't know.

MR. COOKE: The fit wasn't there, or –

MR. KEYSER: I don't know what the situation was. And I never got into detail – I never felt it was any of my business to ask him, and I never opened the subject with Michael.

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. KEYSER: So I don't really know –

MR. COOKE: Because Michael went at the same time?

MR. KEYSER: Yep. And they were both out of town by the time I got there. I think we started teaching a summer session.

MR. COOKE: And you and Wendell came in together?

MR. KEYSER: Yeah, we came in simultaneously. So I don't know what happened in that whole thing. I mean, I've heard different stories, but I would be just adding to the rumor.

MR. COOKE: Yeah, I mean, I wasn't asking for conjecture; I was just trying to fill in pieces from the sequence of what you remember.

MR. KEYSER: I always had the impression that the two of them were very close-knit and that whatever transpired, they felt it should be done together.

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. KEYSER: That's been my impression.

MR. COOKE: Their two fates were inextricably connected.

MR. KEYSER: Yeah, yeah.

MR. COOKE: So then you and Wendell come into town, and there's – did you feel like the program became very different than it had been, or –

MR. KEYSER: Well, from the outset I think the two of us looked at the program and decided that some changes needed to be made, that more emphasis needed to be put on the design.

MR. COOKE: In integration with the art students or just in terms of making the design serious?

MR. KEYSER: I'm not sure – having the students take the design phase more seriously and looking beyond *Mobilia* and *Domus* for inspiration. But I don't think we ever got down to programming the curriculum to achieve that.

MR. COOKE: So it was mainly through your input, working one-on-one with the students, of getting them to look at different things, to pay attention to art magazines or to, you know –

MR. KEYSER: Exactly.

MR. COOKE: – use the library time you've talked about, or with Wendell, thinking about his way of looking to see what sculptors were doing.

MR. KEYSER: And also that production planning course still existed, and I think we tried to use that as a time to

look at what they were doing in terms of sketches and things and suggesting, well, had you thought about it this way or –

MR. COOKE: So it becomes more of a crit session, at least with the faculty, than production planning.

MR. KEYSER: Yeah, yeah.

MR. COOKE: I've always thought that there was a shift, you know, from this notion that you were production planning or working in a limited production shop or as a foreman, overseeing an operation, which was almost – you know, when it was started in the late '40s and some of the early '50s, that seemed to be one of the real philosophies that [END TAPE 2 SIDE A.] was part of the SAC.

MR. KEYSER: Do you mean your impression was that the faculty were sort of like foremen overlooking the workers?

MR. COOKE: No, that they were – there's some literature about the founding of this school, and in the late '40s this notion that you were creating small shop-makers or even sort of foremen for limited production runs that, you know, you had the sensitivity as designer craftsmen, and so that production element of planning, of justifying time, was a really important part of what was being taught with the skill base.

MR. KEYSER: Yeah, yeah.

MR. COOKE: And all of a sudden, by the time you get up into that '62-'63 academic year with you and Wendell coming, that there's a real switch over the course of the '60s that is much more about crit sessions rather than production planning: you know, how good are your ideas versus how efficient is your time?

MR. KEYSER: Yeah, I guess so. There was – I would say in those early years when we taught together, there were more unfinished products at the end of a grading session.

MR. COOKE: Yep.

MR. KEYSER: At that point the school was furnishing materials free of charge. You could essentially go through four years of training and not spend a dime on materials, other than incidental for hardware and stuff. But the school would keep the pieces, would keep all the work. Well, you know, most students ended up buying them. You could – at the end of a project you added up the materials, and that went on record, and if you paid that bill, then you could take the piece.

MR. COOKE: Cash and carry, right.

MR. KEYSER: Otherwise it went to a storage room up on the fourth floor, I guess. And more and more unfinished work started going up to that fourth floor storage area, you know, and the following quarter would be a new problem assigned, and I guess all the students figured, well, I'll get back to that piece sooner or later. Well, a lot of them never did.

So I don't think we had – I think it was not the emphasis, the emphasis on a finished product. I think probably there was not the emphasis put on it that there was whenever Mike and Tage were there.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. KEYSER: We were, I think, figuring out how we could get them to think beyond the obvious in the design phase, to pursue design past the first idea that came to their mind and look beyond the things around them for inspiration. But I don't think we were – neither one of us having – well, I had taught the one year and I guess Wendell had done some teaching during his graduate program, but I don't think either one of us were involved with – had experience with, like, curriculum development and that sort of thing. And so I don't feel we ever came up with a systematic plan.

MR. COOKE: So you just sort of inherited something and then tweaked it a little bit?

MR. KEYSER: Yeah, yeah. The actual projects, with a few exceptions, were pretty much based on what I had experienced in my two years there, in terms of the items of furniture and going from the more simple to the more complex during the four years and that sort of thing. I'm not sure whether we required a production dining chair – I think maybe we did stick with the production dining room assignment. I don't think we did the dining room chair assignment; I don't think we required the whole dining room ensemble, but I think the production chair was one of the things we thought was important during the four years.

MR. COOKE: Yeah, grapple with the chair.

MR. KEYSER: Exactly, grapple with parts.

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. KEYSER: But early on we sat down and, you know, decided that there should be some changes made, like, you know, the first time we met to work on what we were going to do that first day, we decided that there would be some – and it was – I don't know how Wendell's transition into it went. Mine was sort of mixed, because I still had students who I had been fellow students with two years earlier –

MR. COOKE: I was going say the people who were freshmen or sophomores would still be there.

MR. KEYSER: Right. Yeah. And so that was – I didn't have a lot of problems with it, but I think it was in the back of my mind some of the time, and it was probably in the back of their mind thinking, you know, here's a guy that's only a couple of years older than we are –

MR. COOKE: Right, passing judgment on –

MR. KEYSER: – passing judgment on what we do here. But I can remember – you know, one of the problems, one of the assignments that was different than Tage and Mike had was a chaise lounge. And we felt that that would be a piece where there were fewer ready-made examples, and so they would have to start thinking from scratch about, you know, what is a chaise lounge and how does one use it and how should it look and what are the possibilities for holding it 14 inches off the floor?

MR. COOKE: Materials and comfort, yeah.

MR. KEYSER: Yeah. And so there were – we were able to get a lot of, I would say, fairly inventive structural solutions. It involved some – you know, some involved joinery and that sort of thing. That was one of the early – I think that was maybe the first class that we – the first year we taught, we gave that problem.

MR. COOKE: Did you pick up the same sort of informality in terms of the way that Michael and Tage were just, sort of, interchangeable or complementary with one another, that – one person taught one thing, one person taught the other, but you and Wendell were pretty much, you know, developing the project together?

MR. KEYSER: Yes. And we both handled all the students, freshmen through graduate student, which was a difficult thing in terms of any input in the way of demonstrations and that sort of thing that you would want to do for the various groups because, you know, you may only have 18 students, but they were at five different levels; you know, there were freshmen through graduate students. And so to do a demonstration each week for each group, I mean, you'd be doing nothing but demonstrating –

MR. COOKE: Right. Yeah.

MR. KEYSER: – for three days, which would allow no time to go around and see what they were doing and react to what they were doing and what they were thinking.

So it became a pretty frustrating balancing act, or at least I found it so, to handle it that way. Later, when Jere and I were teaching, and Doug and I were teaching, we split the responsibilities up. We still would interact with all the students on an informal basis, but formally we were responsible for, like, freshmen and sophomores, and then juniors and seniors, or vice versa. You know, we split it up different ways. So I found that much more manageable in terms of a coherent curriculum.

Those early years were – it was pretty fly-by-night. It was a question of giving some – particularly the beginning people who were working with hand tools – some basic instruction on the use of those hand tools, how to tune them and so forth, and then introducing them to machines as time went on and, you know, worrying about making sure that they were instructed properly on the machines because, you know, safety, certainly in my mind, was paramount.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. KEYSER: But trying to do that and also deal with other levels of students – and at that point, too, we were doing our own ordering of materials. And since I was kind of familiar with the area, I got the job of doing the ordering. We did our own machine maintenance; we didn't have a technician.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. KEYSER: I think we had a common machine maintenance time, even in those early years. I think Tage and Mike had that, too, when we were students. I think we took, you know, an hour and a half or two hours once a week and everything shut down, and the students were assigned to a machine and performed preventive

maintenance.

MR. COOKE: Proper maintenance.

MR. KEYSER: Yeah. So I think we had that going for us, but it was still kind of a responsibility of overseeing that and making sure that was done. It was – the school got their money's worth out of the faculty in those days. [Laughs.]

MR. COOKE: Did you get a feeling – I mean, the 1960s were also at a point where various other programs came into being. I mean, RIT was really the only game in town –

MR. KEYSER: That would give rise –

MR. COOKE: – in the '50s –

MR. KEYSER: Right.

MR. COOKE: – and then all of a sudden, RISD, PCA [Philadelphia College of Art, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania], these other programs start to come up. Did that affect the type of student that you got, or were there ways in which you were aware of – sort of, certain people went to RISD or certain people came to RIT, or did that free you up to try different things?

MR. KEYSER: I don't think we were aware of admissions. In those days we had a waiting list; we always had a waiting list. For the first – I'd say through the '60s, maybe even into the early '70s, we had waiting lists. And so there wasn't the awareness, at least on my part, of competition with the other schools for students.

MR. COOKE: Or whether certain people – because Wendell was a highly visible person -- whether RIT sort of attracted a different type of student at that point.

MR. KEYSER: Right. Right. Yeah, I don't – I was never aware of the difference in what type of students we attracted versus what type of students RISD attracted. It might have – you know, obviously ignorance on my part, maybe naiveté or –

MR. COOKE: It might have been too early. I mean, I was just always curious whether such a thing was even – became noticeable. But it sounds like later on, you know, as a wait list subsides, then that would seem to indicate that things were shifting around, that there was a greater awareness instead, a sort of shopping the different programs for some people.

MR. KEYSER: I know we were not always pleased with all the students that we got. [Mr. Cooke laughs.] You know, you always want the best students, and there's always sort of a cross-section, a bell curve of student types. And so I think we always were trying to figure out how we could attract better students. You know, when someone came to look at the program –

[Audio break.]

MR. COOKE: This is Ned Cooke interviewing Bill Keyser in his daughter's home in Sudbury, Massachusetts, on Friday, April 25, 2003, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This is disc number three of our interview, and right now we are talking about RIT and the School for American Craftsmen in the 1960s, a point where Bill and Wendell Castle are teaching, and just trying to get some sort of sense of – of an oral history of what's going on within the furniture program at that time.

I had been asking a little bit about types of students that were coming through. Are there memorable directions in which – you know, Wendell's pushing a lot of his work in terms of stack laminated at this point; you're exploring some different materials as well as shaping techniques. What kind of interaction is there from the students? Are the students bringing ideas into it? What sort of student – if you had memorable students from the 1960s, that might indicate some of the ferment that takes place. One is always thinking about the 1960s as, sort of, a time of freewheeling craft, of really pushing boundaries or turning the world upside down. What was it like up in Rochester at that point?

MR. KEYSER: Well, there were a number of students that we had that were, I think, pushing – that were achieving – that were doing the kinds of things that led us to believe that we were making some progress in our goals of changing the program. I'm thinking of one of the first students, who was actually a freshman during my second year; his name was Aaron Rosenstreich. So when I came back to teach, he would have been a junior. And I think he was doing some pretty outstanding work.

He was – he came from Norwich, Connecticut – Norwich Academy, I think it was called, down in Connecticut, and he had a pretty good artistic foundation. He could draw, and he was – his weakest points were the humanities

classes. He was basically – he liked to be in the woodshop and could not have cared less, I guess, about humanities. And so he had a really hard time graduating because of that, but he did eventually graduate. He went into the Peace Corps to avoid – well, I shouldn't say to avoid. He went into the Peace Corps thinking it would be an alternative to being drafted for the Vietnam War. And he spent, I forget what it was, two or three years in Malaysia, I believe – did some work – developed a wonderful program over there, and we've had feedback from students and from administrators over there as to what he was able to accomplish. Came home and within months he was drafted and ended up being killed in Vietnam. But he was a student with real potential and quite a nice achievement before he graduated.

Tom Lacagnina, who was teaching at –

MR. COOKE: I was going to say Tom was –

MR. KEYSER: – who had taught at Alfred – he's now retired – was one of our students. A fellow by the name of Bob Worth, who taught at PCA –

MR. COOKE: Right, with Dan.

MR. KEYSER: – I believe with Dan for a while.

MR. COOKE: Yep.

MR. KEYSER: And since – I don't know what's happened to him more recently.

MR. COOKE: Joe Di Stefano was there.

MR. KEYSER: Joe Di Stefano was there, yep. In fact, he ended up at Yale –

MR. COOKE: He went to Yale in sculpture.

MR. KEYSER: – in the painting program – or in sculpture, yeah.

MR. COOKE: Yep.

MR. KEYSER: He was another one that came back and said, "All they want to do is talk about it [art] up there." [Laughs.]

MR. COOKE: Right. I mean, I look back at some of the work that was being done, and it's really quite extraordinary in terms of pushing the boundaries of the medium at that point.

MR. KEYSER: The interesting thing about Joe is that he spent one or two years in the fine arts program at RIT and then switched into wood. And so he had a highly developed sense of problem solving and – visual problem solving -- before he came to the shop. So he was able to progress very – was he in "Objects: USA," or –

MR. COOKE: No, he wasn't.

MR. KEYSER: No, I don't think he was.

MR. COOKE: Nope.

MR. KEYSER: But there was something that happened during his –

MR. COOKE: He was in *Newsweek*. *Newsweek* had some sort of –

MR. KEYSER: That's right.

MR. COOKE: – magazine article about the crafts in '69, summer of '69 or something.

MR. KEYSER: Exactly.

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. KEYSER: Exactly. I haven't heard much from him; I haven't heard anything from him.

MR. COOKE: I thought he was in New York.

MR. KEYSER: Is he?

MR. COOKE: I mean, these are people I ended up tracking down when I was interested in some of the different educational systems. And having seen some of their work and been curious, well, what happened to some of these people, that Tom and Joe both ended up sort of veering away from a mainstream furniture world and were really into the sculptural world.

MR. KEYSER: Right, right. Is Joe still doing sculpture?

MR. COOKE: Yep. He's in Brooklyn.

MR. KEYSER: Berkeley, California?

MR. COOKE: Brooklyn.

MR. KEYSER: Oh, Brooklyn?

MR. COOKE: He's in New York, yep. Because I just thought, you know, you go back and you look at some of that work and it's remarkable, and then you start to see the coming out of the same sort of spirit that you and Wendell are engaged with at that same time.

MR. KEYSER: I'm trying to think – there's a woman by the name of Ellen Swartz, and I think she –

MR. COOKE: She did all the plywood.

MR. KEYSER: She did the stacked plywood stuff.

MR. COOKE: Yeah. She was there in, what, the late '60s?

MR. KEYSER: Yes. It was – we moved to the new campus in, I think, Christmas of '69, and she was at the old campus. I don't think she moved – she never – I don't think she ever got a degree; I'm not sure about that.

MR. COOKE: Because she shows up in – is it "Expressions in Wood," the '85 show that's up in Rochester? And, you know, she is in – no, '75, sorry. But she's in some of these publications in the early '70s but then, you know, disappeared basically, and was one of the few women actually that – Cal State Northridge [California State University, Northridge] was very much a center of women's education in furniture in the '70s, but Ellen's one of the few people in the Northeast.

MR. KEYSER: I think she may have been the first woman student that I had.

MR. COOKE: Yeah, and yet somebody who's disappeared, again, from the historical consciousness.

MR. KEYSER: Yeah. Gosh, I'm trying to place another – well, Doug Sigler, that ended up teaching with me later on, was there; Jon Brooks, who has pretty much survived as a nonteaching woodworker with interspersing assistantships and things –

MR. COOKE: Some limited teaching along the way, yeah.

MR. KEYSER: Yeah. He's subbed at RIT on a number of occasions.

MR. COOKE: It seemed like it was quite a moment of experimentation – exploration in some respects. And then Wendell sort of seems to get tired of teaching in '69, I think, is it, that he –

MR. KEYSER: I was on sabbatical that year. I was – we moved to the new campus December of '69. The year – so I finished that year of teaching, and then the school year '69-'70 I had my first sabbatical.

MR. COOKE: That whole year, '69-'70?

MR. KEYSER: Yeah.

MR. COOKE: Okay.

MR. KEYSER: We had the option of taking, like, one quarter at full pay, I think it was, two quarters off at two-thirds pay, and three-quarters – the whole year off at half pay. I've always felt from the – I ended up with four different sabbaticals while I was teaching there, and I always felt that the full year was the only way to go.

MR. COOKE: Yeah. You need time to get up and running.

MR. KEYSER: Yeah, right. So I was on sabbatical at the time, and Jim Krenov was hired to come in and teach.

MR. COOKE: As your replacement? Did you have any input in that in terms of – I'm just curious how people – I mean, obviously his book –

MR. KEYSER: Brennan, I think, was still the dean.

MR. COOKE: Because he wasn't that well known. James Krenov was not known in the States, you know, in terms of his publications, until '76.

MR. KEYSER: Well, one of the earlier students that we had during the '60s was Craig McArt, and he came from an industrial design program at Syracuse. He had worked in industry, I think, for Goodyear, or something, for a few years. He was a somewhat older student and he came for an MFA. This was while we were still down in the old campus. It's somewhere between '63 and – well, he was there when Doug was a student, so it must have been – I would guess it was maybe the '63, '64 school year or something like that. But anyway, he got his MFA, and then he got a Fulbright to study in Scandinavia, and he discovered Krenov over there.

He came back to the States after his year over there and got a teaching job on the West Coast; I think it was at Berkeley [University of California, Berkeley]. It was in, like, environmental design or industrial design or something.

MR. COOKE: Right. Environmental design was actually this all-encompassing department.

MR. KEYSER: Oh, was it?

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. KEYSER: Okay. So he was teaching out there, and we started looking for – at that point I think it must have been – I don't know if it was Dean Brennan or whether it was Dean Johnston. It was a year when they were, sort of, together there. At any rate, they were looking for someone to head up the industrial design department. And if it was Brennan, he may have thought of Craig, but I almost think that I mentioned his name or put him in as a possibility, and he ended up getting the job. So he had known about Krenov and had sort of taken it upon himself to promote Krenov's cause in the States here.

So I think he was – he had talked to Brennan or – I'm pretty sure it was Brennan at the time – about Krenov coming over and being a replacement.

MR. COOKE: Okay.

MR. KEYSER: So Krenov was hired – I think it was to teach the summer session between the –

MR. COOKE: So summer of '69.

MR. KEYSER: Yeah, the summer of '69. And it was an oil-and-water mixture.

MR. COOKE: That's what I understood, just volatile.

MR. KEYSER: Nothing was right. The benches weren't right, the wood supply was not right, the machines were not right, the work that the students were doing was not right. It was just a lock-head kind of situation. I think he taught – I think he finished up the summer session – I think he taught the summer session. I could be wrong about that, but my recollection is that he taught the summer session, and about two weeks into the quarter, the fall quarter, he ended up leaving. And it was like this total dissatisfaction, not only with just the wood program, but it was, like, the secretaries and the school – you know, the institute administration and everything. It was just like – he just seemed to – every issue was a confrontation. He was very dissatisfied.

MR. COOKE: It happened again in '75.

MR. KEYSER: Seventy-five?

MR. COOKE: At BU [Boston University, Boston, Massachusetts].

MR. KEYSER: Oh, at BU, yeah.

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. KEYSER: But interestingly enough, I think it was a valuable time for RIT. I mean, I think – I can remember going back after sabbatical and a couple of years after that. There seemed to be a returned interest in craftsmanship.

MR. COOKE: Yeah. It was a way of refocusing energy in some respects.

MR. KEYSER: I think so, yeah. And maybe it was a – in some respects I'm thinking it might have been a relief from the emphasis that we put on – the early emphasis that Wendell and I put on innovation. It may have been a relief from that; I'm not sure. But –

MR. COOKE: So what happened? You know, two weeks into the – I mean, you can just imagine Wendell and Jim teaching together would have been – you know, it would not have been compatible. That would not have been, sort of, complementary interests, but you could sort of see everybody in their corners. So Krenov quits two weeks into the fall. What happens?

MR. KEYSER: I think Wendell finished off the year with a grad student that was there. His name was Bob Jorgensen. And I believe he was in the second year of his grad program. Yeah, because I remember he came to the downtown campus; he helped us move over Christmas, and then that following year would have been his second year, so he was finishing up. And he was a good – a real decent designer and a good craftsman.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. KEYSER: He ended up settling out in Colorado, I think, and I sort of lost track of him.

MR. COOKE: But, I mean, that whole experience seemed to have soured Wendell on teaching, you know, of being a full-time teacher.

MR. KEYSER: It may have, although he went into a full-time teaching position at Brockport [State University of New York College at Brockport, New York].

MR. COOKE: At Brockport right afterwards.

MR. KEYSER: Yeah.

MR. COOKE: But he just wanted to get out of RIT at that point.

MR. KEYSER: Yeah, I think – I don't know what – I never talked to him about that, even during the time it was going on. I was just informed that he was leaving and I never followed up on it. I don't know how he felt about the program at RIT, but I felt a real responsibility for the careers of these people, and I found it to be a pretty awesome responsibility, as I perceived it.

Later there was an elective program introduced where all the students took an elective in another field during their sophomore, junior, and senior year, I think. And that meant that the faculty had to not only teach majors, but they had to teach one day a week of electives. I ended up enjoying teaching the electives immensely, because you got people from different disciplines coming in. So there were, you know, more fresh ideas – fresher ideas – I shouldn't say fresher ideas, different ideas floating around as a result of the other disciplines.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. KEYSER: But I think the overriding reason that I enjoyed it so much was that there wasn't that awesome responsibility for their careers.

MR. COOKE: Yep.

MR. KEYSER: You know, they were industrial designers or they were printmakers or painters or something else.

MR. COOKE: Just get back to the pleasure of introducing them to this, right?

MR. KEYSER: Yeah, yeah. And maybe they could apply it – maybe they would do no more than learn how to plane a door down when they got out and were a homeowner or something. But there was that sort of relief from the responsibility. I mean, it didn't affect the degree that I approached the teaching, you know, the devotion to teaching, but it just lifted that ultimate pressure, and I think I did a better job of teaching the electives as a result of it.

MR. COOKE: So when you came back, you brought Jere in as your assistant? Is that right? Or there was Doug.

MR. KEYSER: I made a little timeline. Let's see here.

MR. COOKE: Your timeline of who you were with at that point.

MR. KEYSER: Okay. That following year, that would have been the '70-'71, I taught with Bob Jorgensen.

MR. COOKE: Yep, so he stayed on?

MR. KEYSER: He stayed on. At that point he had gotten a degree, so he was no longer a student. He stayed on for that following year. And I can't remember – I don't know, it might have been because I was on sabbatical and was kind of insistent on not getting drawn into faculty interviews and stuff like that, you know, or recruiting faculty to come and that kind of thing. I just said, "Look, I'm out of here," you know. So I think maybe they decided to go with Bob as an interim solution. So then Jere came in the '71, and he taught – the '71-'72 school year, and he taught with me through the '73-'74 school year. He was there for three academic years. And I thought he and I were a good team because I guess we were a little bit more like Tage and Michael. We saw, I guess, more closely eye-to-eye on what should take place. We were interested in the same kinds of things. And I thoroughly enjoyed teaching with Jere. He was – and he had a real good influence on the students. He had a way – his mannerism was such that he related very well to students, that low-key kind of approach.

I'm trying to think whether – I think Tom Lacagnina had – I think he had left before Wendell resigned. So it was the year that Jere came back that I noticed – well, to back up a bit, I think the hardest years of my teaching were the year we moved out to the new campus.

MR. COOKE: So that was '69?

MR. KEYSER: It was '69. Well –

MR. COOKE: So it would have been '68-'69?

MR. KEYSER: – '68-'69 school year, and also the '70-'71, whenever I was teaching with – when I came back –

MR. COOKE: At the new facilities.

MR. KEYSER: Yeah. It was a brand new facility. There were no trees on campus. They basically bought a farm that consisted of a lot of swampland and built a campus on it. And so there were not – there were basically no native trees. There were seedlings that had been planted, grass that had been planted. Everything was red brick.

MR. COOKE: I was going to say I always remember just the red brick.

MR. KEYSER: Yeah, and a very unified architectural style, and kind of mundane.

MR. COOKE: Much more of an institution than the domestic quirkiness that you'd been in.

MR. KEYSER: Exactly.

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. KEYSER: Exactly. And at the time – wasn't that – the Kent State year was right around there?

MR. COOKE: Yep, 1970.

MR. KEYSER: – and the Vietnam – and students were very rebellious, very uninterested in quality, as at least what Jere and I and Wendell perceived quality to be.

MR. COOKE: Attention to detail and follow-through.

MR. KEYSER: Yeah. We were teaching three days a week, and I can still remember the day I came in on a Wednesday, I guess it was, and one of my students, who was working on chairs, either a chair or production chairs, and I looked at this side frame for a chair that he had glued up and the mortise and tenons, you know, there was like a 16th of an inch gap between, and I said, "Gee, Ira, what happened here? Did the glue seize on you before you got all the – were the tenons too long and bottomed out in the mortises? Your clamping blocks, were they at wrong angle or something?" "No," he said, "I wanted it that way." He said, "If it was perfect," he said, "it wouldn't be handmade." And I think I left my conversation with him, I went into the office and closed the door, and I sat down on my desk and I said, what the hell am I doing here?

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. KEYSER: It was like the low point of my teaching career. And that was –

MR. COOKE: Values totally out of whack with –

MR. KEYSER: Yeah, with what I was perceived as what my goals were, or ideals were. And I think what happened

then, whether the residual effect of Krenov being there and of his writing at the time, I think students became more interested in quality.

MR. COOKE: It's like there was a conservative swing all of a sudden, sort of starting – you can see within the field a general sort of – in '72 or so, where the pendulum swung back. And I don't know what it was due –

MR. KEYSER: Craftsmanship-wise and also I think design-wise.

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. KEYSER: I think that, you know, the designs tended to be more traditional and less adventuresome and less inventive. And the craftsmanship, I think, went up a notch or two.

MR. COOKE: Yeah, very much, over the course of the '70s.

MR. KEYSER: Yeah.

MR. COOKE: I mean, you can see it in terms of your explorations with some of the vacuum veneering that you started to really explore –

MR. KEYSER: And the steam bending.

MR. COOKE: And the steam bending.

MR. KEYSER: Yeah.

MR. COOKE: I mean, that's what I see, that real transformation that your own work took off in the '70s with just that kind of attention.

MR. KEYSER: Right.

MR. COOKE: Was that a product of your teaching, or was that a product of – I mean, did you use that sabbatical year to, sort of, restock yourself, pushing forward into the '70s or were you responding to some of what was going on?

MR. KEYSER: No, I think I came back renewed. I came back thinking a lot more about curriculum and thinking about what do we want as the end product and how do we achieve that? You know, not that we want a unified end product across the board, but what – generally, what direction do we want to take? And, you know, I started reading books on educational objectives and curriculum planning and that sort of thing. And so I think maybe we were more focused on what we wanted to have.

MR. COOKE: You can see it sort of – talking about your own work, but then there's always this larger issue, sort of, the environment around you that was also doing the same sort of thing.

MR. KEYSER: Interesting enough, you gave me your perception of the early craft school and what you perceived as being the objectives at the – toward the latter part of the '40s or early '50s. And I think, at least in my mind – and I think in my mind of, like, Jere and then Doug, one of the things that we retained or perhaps went back to was the thought that people ought to be able to make a living at the end of this. I think –

MR. COOKE: Right. Self-expression, and some of the values of the '60s where you just focus on the process rather than the product and making a living, maybe had played itself out.

MR. KEYSER: Yeah, yeah. I think we would have – the best of both worlds would have been to retain the excitement and the experimentation and so forth while simultaneously gaining the skills and the speed and the drive to go out and make a living at it. That would have been the best of both worlds, I guess.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. KEYSER: Whether we achieved one or both or any of them [laughs], I guess, is up for discussion.

MR. COOKE: It's up for people to figure out, right.

MR. KEYSER: So we've got – you know, there's a pretty nice core of people that I can point to out there, you know, who are making a living at their craft, and in various ways, not just one mold, not just as individual craftsmen but as designers in industry or teacher craftsmen or independent craftsmen doing mainly production work or mainly commission work or mainly, like in Jon Brooks's case, exhibition – you know, exhibiting and selling through galleries and that sort of thing.

MR. COOKE: Yep.

MR. KEYSER: So I'm quite proud of that. But I think it was an objective that we came back to in the early –

MR. COOKE: Early '70s.

MR. KEYSER: Early '70s, yeah.

MR. COOKE: Yep.

MR. KEYSER: Now, Jere taught for three years, and I think that was the first time that we divided up the student body, the different levels, and decided to take responsibility. And I can't even remember how we divided them up now. It might have been – I think maybe he was teaching freshmen and sophomores; I was teaching juniors and seniors, or something like that. I can't remember now.

MR. COOKE: But it seemed to make sense to capitalize on that kind of close interaction and skill base.

MR. KEYSER: Right, and maximizing our effectiveness in terms of the time available. And I think we shared – I'm sure we shared the graduate students. We both – and when I say we were responsible, it was mainly in terms of designing and posing the problems, doing the demonstrations and the, you know, from-us-to-them communication in terms of what would take place during the quarter. But both of us would sit in on the critiques, the final critiques.

Sometimes we would even interchange teaching duties, like if I was in charge of the sophomores and was dealing with compound bent laminations, I mean, it would be ridiculous for me to do it when Jere was right here. So, you know, I'd bring Jere in on something like that, or if he was talking about steam bending, maybe he'd bring me in.

MR. COOKE: Right. Play to your strengths.

MR. KEYSER: Right. But it was mainly that idea of being responsible for the curriculum of those different levels and, sort of, the day-to-day processing of information.

[END TAPE 2 SIDE B.]

MR. COOKE: This is Ned Cooke interviewing Bill Keyser at his daughter's home in Sudbury, Massachusetts, on Friday, May 2, 2003. This is disc number four. And we had ended up last week talking about Bill's experience teaching at RIT in the early 1970s and wanted to follow up in terms of the development of a coherent curriculum and pedagogical point of view, and let Bill talk about what he was able to put in place in the 1970s. So maybe if you could just launch right in, that'd be great.

MR. KEYSER: Okay. Well, I guess I'd like to preface what I have to say about that by saying that the program at RIT, until the mid '80s, I guess, was always a two-person department. And we touched on that a bit in the last session, but there was never a head or an assistant. In other words, there were always two equal people teaching. And that was true for all the shops. Dean Brennan specifically made a point of that, that he wanted not to give the sense of a hierarchy in the shop. And so it was always a two-person department until somewhere in the '80s – I guess I'll get to that – whenever Rich Tannen came on board to handle the AOS [Associate in Occupational Studies], to teach the AOS program.

And so, the sharing of teaching responsibilities and the sharing of the responsibilities for curricular development was always a two-person thing. And the decision making and whatever laurels there were [laughs] at the end of the process, you know, is a shared thing.

I think we covered up to the point where I had – after coming back from a sabbatical I taught for a year with Bob Jorgensen, who was a graduate assistant at the time. He had gotten his graduate degree and he was hired – Wendell had left. The following year, '74-'75 academic year, I taught with – we decided to do a search for a second faculty member and to have three different people come in during the course of the school year. The first quarter was Jon Brooks, who had actually been a student of mine and Wendell's early in the '60s and had begun to make a name for himself as a studio furniture person. The second quarter was Ian Kirby, who was an Englishman who had come over and – I don't know how – I think he may have just sent a letter of application in or something, or perhaps Brennan had his name on file, and so we decided to go with him the second quarter. And then Doug Sigler, who at the time was teaching at Buffalo State, came in third – the spring quarter.

MR. COOKE: And was Doug an RIT graduate?

MR. KEYSER: Doug was an RIT graduate as well, he and Jon Brooks. I don't believe they were class – they were students, I believe, at the same time. I think they overlapped in the early – Doug and I were students together.

He was a freshman my last year at RIT as a student, and then of course he had Tage and Michael his sophomore year, and then when I came back to teach, he would have been a junior.

MR. COOKE: So thinking about this quarterly breakdown with Jon and Ian and Doug, was this after Jere had taught with you for three years? Two years?

MR. KEYSER: Oh, that's right. I'm getting out of phase here.

MR. COOKE: Because, you know, once Jorgensen finished up with Wendell, sort of, when Krenov wasn't there –

MR. KEYSER: That's right.

MR. COOKE: And then there was a point at which Jere came back and taught with you, and you talked a little bit the last time about that as really being a point at which you both had reflected on the changes that had occurred over the '60s and had a chance to, sort of, tune it back up.

MR. KEYSER: Exactly.

MR. COOKE: But then he left to go down to BU? Is that what –

MR. KEYSER: Yes. Neil Hoffman – he was an associate dean at RIT during the period when Jere was there; I'm not sure just when he came on board, but he had left then and went to BU and started up the program in artisanry at BU. And let's see, chronologically now, he – I guess Krenov was hired – he first hired Krenov, and I'm not sure how long Krenov was there. I don't think he was there –

MR. COOKE: He was there basically through the summer of '75, I believe it was.

MR. KEYSER: Okay, okay.

MR. COOKE: Does that make sense in terms of your chronology?

MR. KEYSER: Yeah, yeah. And then when – then Jere had decided at the end of the '73-'74 school year, I believe – he had decided he wanted to go back into his own shop and continue as a studio furniture maker. Yes, at the end of the '73-'74 year.

MR. COOKE: Okay.

MR. KEYSER: And as I remember it, his decision occurred somewhat late, and so we didn't feel we had the time to conduct a national search then.

MR. COOKE: So that's why you opened a quarterly replacement, which would have been '74-'75?

MR. KEYSER: That's correct.

MR. COOKE: Okay.

MR. KEYSER: At the end of that point I think maybe we even interviewed a couple of other people and ended up deciding to go with Doug. And this might be a good time to bring in – RIT at the time – it may have evolved a little bit from that now, but the entire institute was basically – well, they had this saying, "to earn a living and to live a life." And that was sort of germane to their whole basic philosophy of education. Mrs. [Aileen Vanderbilt] Webb, in the late '40s I guess it was, early '50s, when she started the School for American Crafts, her intent was to provide instruction to be able to earn a living from the crafts.

So the two coincided very nicely. And that, sort of, formed the basis of our curricular development. We felt that it was important to give the student some of the tools necessary to earn a living, and it was, sort of, a three-pronged endeavor. We felt certainly studio furniture making was one pursuit; the other would be working in industry, in furniture or allied woodworking industries; and the third would be teaching, which ended up being pretty much one of the goals of the graduate arm of the curriculum.

When Doug came, he and I sat down – well, one of the reasons why Doug became attractive as a co-partner was concurrently, with teaching at Buffalo State -- he may have not been teaching – obviously he wasn't teaching the quarter he came to RIT. I think what he had done, he had either quit or been let go by Buffalo State. Perhaps he didn't get tenure or – I'm not sure what the circumstances were. But at any rate I think he had terminated with Buffalo State, and in the meantime he had opened his own shop and he had opened a gallery, a craft gallery – it was called Benchmark – in Buffalo.

He had participated in the ACE [American Craft Enterprises] as well as other craft fair marketing venues, and so

he had experience in those avenues, which I did not have. So we thought that was a good complement. So we, Doug Sigler and myself, got together and basically designed a curriculum that I think took advantage of both of our strengths and was compatible with both of our interests and what we really wanted to do. A couple of the things we, sort of, focused on at the time was feeling that the designs should be – there should be a significant period of time spent on designs.

As it evolved – usually the grading periods were 11-week quarters, three 11-week quarters. Usually somewhere around five weeks was usually spent evolving a design, and then the latter part of the quarter was spent actually constructing the projects. We felt we wanted to maintain a high level of craftsmanship, and we wanted to, I guess, introduce a professionalism into the process – into the program in terms of meeting deadlines. We thought that was very important if people were going to be able to earn a living at what they wanted to do. I think I mentioned earlier that there ended up being a lot of unfinished work –

MR. COOKE: In the '60s.

MR. KEYSER: – In the '60s, yeah. And maybe that's to be expected when the emphasis is on experimentation. Doug and I wanted to, I think, form a foundation, starting with simple techniques and simpler projects, building towards more complex, and have a degree of experimentation, again pushing design but also working within realistic timelines.

MR. COOKE: So it's almost as if the experimentation comes in the design phase rather than the making phase, which was, sort of, where some of the experimentation took place before.

MR. KEYSER: Exactly, yeah. So, you know, encouraging students to design around the allotted time is, sort of, another parameter on the design process.

We started out; the first year was basically hand tools. It was very similar to the original program that Wendell and I had evolved, and actually that was sort of based on Tage and Michael's program. After the first year it, sort of, deviated. The second year was a chair problem, but not a production chair. We felt that for a student to do a set of six of his or her first chairs was expecting a little too much, that a student ought to have at least one solo chair under his or her belt before going into a production on them.

We felt it was important to have a plywood, or a sheet goods I would say, project, getting some experience using sheet goods, whether it be hardwood veneer, plywood, you know, commercial plywood, or particle board that the student would then veneer.

MR. COOKE: A lumber core that they'd build up themselves, or a number of different things.

MR. KEYSER: Yeah, right, right, but with sheet goods, where expansion and contraction was minimalized and the forms were a lot freer, I guess. And then, finally, a chest of drawers was one of the projects for the sophomores. The third year, our intent there was to try to expand the vision of the student, to try to draw in sources other than their own imagination through things like a found object problem, working using an existing sculptor's work, investigating a sculptor which appealed to them, whose work appealed to them, and doing a piece – not duplicating that but, sort of, influenced by that sculptor.

MR. COOKE: Sounds like your experience at Carnegie Mellon.

MR. KEYSER: Exactly, yeah, yeah. Then we also had a design for industry – a design for production problem, and we worked in conjunction with Gunlocke Furniture Company, with a designer there who helped pose a problem and give some resource and sit in on design critiques as well as final critiques.

MR. COOKE: Did they actually make something, or was that sort of, taking it right up to going into production?

MR. KEYSER: No. Well, they didn't do a production of the piece, but they did a prototype.

MR. COOKE: Okay.

MR. KEYSER: And typically – it varied from year to year; one year it might be a chair, and another year it might be a desk or a computer station or something like that, something which might be something that Gunlocke was currently interested in, that sort of thing.

And then from time to time we varied their curriculum. We ended up – toward the end of my teaching there we ended up doing a production chair problem, a set of dining chairs, and an expansion dining table during that third year as well. Most of these problems were – the more extensive projects would be 11 weeks. Sometimes on one of the smaller projects there might be – the quarter may be split up into five and five or six and four, or six and five or five and six, kind of, week things, to divide up the 11 weeks.

The fourth year, then, was sort of custom designed by the student in consultation with the instructors on what they wanted to do, what they thought they wanted to do once they got out. If they wanted to be an individual craftsman, we suggested that they take a commission, contact some local interior designers or architects and see if there was something on the boards that they might contribute to in the way of a commissioned piece. Sometimes the faculty members had contacts where they could point them in a given direction, or potential clients would call the school asking, you know, is anybody interested in doing a dining table for me? And so we could plug one of the students into that. Another thing we did was expose them to the craft fair marketing system. They went down to Baltimore [American Craft Council Fair] each year and ended up spending a week down there working – helping the various exhibitors man their booths. So they really got an inside look at the workings of the craft fair as a potential marketing system.

MR. COOKE: Right, the more polished ones, rather than the Rhinebeck outdoor fair [ACC Northeast Craft Fair, Rhinebeck, New York], but more –

MR. KEYSER: Yeah, oh, yeah. They were definitely – Baltimore was, I think, the only one that we actually took them to. And all of the seniors went, even the ones that went kicking and screaming because they didn't think they were interested. We thought, well, it was important that they at least be exposed to it. And by and large they all came back impressed, if nothing else, by the quality of the competition that's out there.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. KEYSER: If they thought they might want to go into industry, we had them work with a designer from Gunlocke on a project. We also had them do – another suggested project was an exhibition piece for the person who wanted to be an independent designer craftsman – you know, do a speculative piece. They could design – one fellow in particular designed a complete line of production items. He was interested in craft fair marketing. When he graduated, he had a complete set of production items, kitchen utensils, ready to go, jigged up and prototypes run and everything. He had his booth designed and built, some of his literature together; he was set to go.

MR. COOKE: So this is – you know, when we were talking about professionalism, it's not just meeting deadlines but it's actually almost having – this is resume building, in essence, that they've had that experience of the direction in which they want to go –

MR. KEYSER: That's right, that's right.

MR. COOKE: – which is very different than what had happened in the '50s or '60s which, you know, you might –

MR. KEYSER: It never quite got to that point, I think. It stopped short of what they're going to do once they get out. At least my perception of it was that.

MR. COOKE: Yeah, it's curious in terms of the way you described in the '60s a lot of the unfinished objects just heading up to the attic, and this whole notion -- is the '70s a point at which you actually started to have student shows at the end of the year in a more significant way than had occurred before?

MR. KEYSER: Yes, we started – we instituted the senior show, where the seniors were responsible for contacting a local gallery – it wasn't at the school – contacting a local gallery; drawing up a contract to have a group show there; designing or having designed an announcement and having that printed and a mailing list generated – well, gradually over the years we developed a mailing list, but sending those out – having an opening, providing for refreshments and things for an opening; writing an artist statement, each one; having a resume and a portfolio, both slides and prints, when they graduated; and having stationery, a letterhead, ready to go.

MR. COOKE: That's fantastic.

MR. KEYSER: So they were – I think they were pretty well – as well equipped as we thought we could do in terms of a four-year program.

MR. COOKE: Did you find that there were different students who were coming through the school at that point in the '70s versus the '60s, just in terms of the mindset or the type of student?

MR. KEYSER: I think the mindset was – well, they were more vocal about what they wanted out of a school, and I can remember one of the things that occurred in that year that I was on sabbatical was students started having meetings and wanting certain things specified and covered in the curriculum. And that was the first time any of that happened, that they took an active interest and wanted certain things to be taught. And so the curriculum, I think, was in a sense responsive to that.

Students during the '80s and later, I guess, were – I guess they were somewhat more focused. They were still

interested in experimentation; they still wanted that aspect of it. And in fact I think it's probably evolved even since the late '70s, early '80s to the point now where it might have come full circle. There might be more interest now in art and less interest, perhaps, in how I'm going to make a living at it.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. KEYSER: I'm only speculating, because I stopped teaching in '97, so a few years have gone by. But in attending a few of the walk throughs and things, I sense that maybe that's kind of a bit more of the direction that it's – and there seems to be more of a willingness to say to oneself, well, when I get out, I'll go and work for another craftsman for a while to bide time – to pay off my school loans and to bide some time so that I can get my own work on the side going.

MR. COOKE: Yeah, because oftentimes a lot of people are doing their own work at off-hours from working in some of these studios.

MR. KEYSER: Exactly, exactly, whereas, like early in the '70s – well, in the mid-'70s there -- when we first got started with the new curriculum, there was more interest, I guess, in going out and opening up one's own shop or going into industry. Graduates have always been interested in teaching, and from time to time that's been more or less realistic in terms of the positions available. But that seemed to always be an interest amongst graduate students.

MR. COOKE: Did you find that change – I mean, people oftentimes think about the whole way in which women come into the field. Ellen Swartz was one of the few – I mean, she was an anomaly in the late '60s in her program. When do you see changes occurring in terms of the composition of the classes, in terms of more women seeking out the field?

MR. KEYSER: I'd say toward the end of the '70s, I think our – the percentage of women in our program began to increase. One of the early ones was a woman by the name of Lauren McDermott. She ended up – actually I think she spent one year in art and design and then came to the craft school, spent the biggest part of four years as an undergraduate. Then she did her graduate work in the industrial design program at RIT under Craig McArt. She ended up – after graduating she worked for, I think probably, a couple of years with Hunter Kariher, who had his own studio in Rochester. And then she took a teaching position, first, I believe, at Notre Dame and then at Arizona, the one at Tempe [Arizona State University, Tempe, Arizona].

MR. COOKE: Arizona State?

MR. KEYSER: Arizona State, where she currently is, I think. I'm pretty sure she's still there. But she was one of the early women in the late '70s, early '80s. She was there, and I know she was – I'd say she graduated, probably, from our program somewhere around '78-'79 and then spent another two years in industrial design before she went on. Wendy Maruyama and Gail Fredell –

MR. COOKE: And Gail Fredell were there as master's students.

MR. KEYSER: Yeah, simultaneously. I'm trying to think of other women who have gone out and stuck with it. I can't think of any others at the time, but there was never a large percentage of women. I mean, the woodshop was always a predominantly male environment.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. KEYSER: But the percentages did increase somewhat.

MR. COOKE: Yeah, it seemed like there was more entrance opportunities, in essence, for women at that point.

MR. KEYSER: Yeah, yeah. And I think all of the women had an impact on the environment of the – you know, on the program – a very positive impact. They always brought something to it that was not there before, which – you know, a sensitivity, in many cases a work ethic that some of the males didn't have.

MR. COOKE: Who then followed, fell in the line.

MR. KEYSER: Yeah, right. The graduate program was a two-year program at that point. I don't recall exactly when it made the transition from a one-year program to a two-year program. I think that was probably in the early '70s. We had moved out to the new campus. Brennan had retired, it seems to me, around '72, '73, somewhere around in there, and Bob Johnston had come on board, and I think there was a general consensus overall that the graduate program should be upgraded. And so it went from a one-year to a two-year program.

In the woodshop we used the first year as kind of a leveling year, I guess I would call it, a time to fill in the low spots in one's background. We got very few people who had an undergraduate degree in wood or in furniture.

We got some with undergraduate degrees in fine arts. A few of our own undergraduate students stayed on. We tried to discourage that, but a few of them stayed on, Joe Tracy, for example. I'm trying to think of a couple of others.

MR. COOKE: So you had other programs to sort of sprinkle people to? I mean, as opposed to your experience where there was limited opportunities, you now had RISD and BU and various others that would provide other areas and other experiences for some of your students.

MR. KEYSER: Sure. Exactly. But a large percentage of our graduate applicants came from architecture or industrial design, some from fine arts, interiors – interior design. More recently we've had a large influx of Asian students, Korean especially, who had done either industrial design or art programs on the undergraduate level. A significant number of the Asian students were women, too. But we used the first year as kind of a fill-in period, a time whenever they could, sort of, update their experience, either technique-wise or object-wise: item of furniture, you know, if they had never done a chair, that was the time they should do a chair. And many of them we plugged in with undergraduate classes who were doing similar projects, a chest of drawers or a chair problem, that sort of thing. And that worked out well, because the graduate program was by far the minority in terms of enrollment. The graduate program was smaller than the four-year undergraduate –

MR. COOKE: What were the relative numbers of each?

MR. KEYSER: I'm guessing maybe three-fourths undergraduate and one-fourth graduate.

MR. COOKE: But total numbers?

MR. KEYSER: Oh, total number?

MR. COOKE: In a year.

MR. KEYSER: We ended up having a maximum of 36 total in the shop, with two faculty members. And so there were usually maybe –

MR. COOKE: Six or seven grad students?

MR. KEYSER: Six or seven grad students is what we like to keep it at. Beyond that it became unwieldy in terms of thesis guidance and that sort of thing. It wasn't so much the first year, where most of them were plugged into one or the other groups of undergraduates that were working on the same problem, but it got to be more hectic in the second year. The second year, then, was the thesis year. It was the time for them to make a proposal and to – we started out actually planting the seed for that the last quarter of their first year.

And we had them actually draw up three potential thesis topics that they thought they might be interested in pursuing. And we discussed those before they left in June. And then the idea was that over the summer they would do some, perhaps, sketching, some library research, some more thinking about it, and come back in September ready to finalize their thesis proposal and select a committee and proceed with the thesis. So the whole second year was pretty much a thesis year.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. KEYSER: So that pretty much describes the nuts and bolts of the curriculum. I think we've got a cadre of students out there who responded to the program, who have stuck with it, have stuck with their career in the – you know, without boring you with a lot of names, but in terms of the independent craftsmen, some of the notable ones are a fellow by the name of Steve Crump, who is now active in the Furniture Society. He's down in Memphis. Brad and Sandy Smith, who are in Pennsylvania. He's the one who started out doing the production of kitchen utensils –

MR. COOKE: Oh right.

MR. KEYSER: – and he was a very ingenious young man. He could do just about anything. And now he's evolved into now doing more furniture-size items on a production basis, and I think he's now doing some one-of-a-kind things as well [Bradford Woodworking]. Jeff Behnke, one of his classmates – one of Brad's classmates who has a company called Altura Studios. He was in New York City, and now he's out on the West Coast, I believe in Washington or Oregon. And he actually has a line of furniture that he produces and sells through designers and architects.

Lorna Secrest in Pennsylvania, Pittsburgh, owns a company called Works of Wood. Rick Wrigley, Gatehouse Furniture up in Massachusetts. A number around Rochester, who have stayed around Rochester: John Dodd, Richard Newman, Lou Casartelli, Steve Oubre, Arnold Van Denburgh. These are all people who have – you know, own and operate their own business. These are just ones that come to mind.

In industry we have a fellow by the name of Kevin Stark, who got his graduate degree. He'd done his undergraduate at Oswego [State University of New York, Oswego], and he did his graduate degree with us, specifically in designing for industry. He's now vice president in charge of design at Hickory Business Furniture. He has one of our other graduates working with him, Jamie Schwartz. Lamar White graduated in the – I'd say the late '70s, early '80s. He's been with Knoll International – well, he worked for Hunter Kariher for a couple of years once he graduated, and then he got a job with Knoll International. A fellow by the name of Dan Miller, who works for Bernhardt. Rachel Dacks, who worked for Davis Furniture. I'm not sure what – I think she owns her own company, her own design firm [now teaches at Savannah College of Art and Design, Savannah, Georgia].

Teaching: some of the early ones that were there with Wendell and I were Alan Lazarus, who teaches at William Paterson University [Wayne, New Jersey]; Alan Friedman, who taught at the University of Indiana, Terre Haute, I think. A fellow that teaches at Indiana University in Pennsylvania and I can't recall his name [Christopher Weiland]; I tried recalling it last night. Age has a way of – [laughs]. I've mentioned Lauren McDermott. Bob Leverich, who graduated more recently, he teaches at Evergreen College out at Olympia, Washington. Of course, Gail Fredell and Wendy Maruyama, who were at CCAC [California College of Arts and Crafts, San Francisco] together, and then Gail was at Anderson Ranch [Snowmass Village, Colorado]; she's now on her own, and Wendy went on to San Diego State. A couple of students who went – three different students who went up to Canada and have taught there [William Vine and John Kitamura at Ryerson University; Timothy Stanley at Humber College] – they may even be retired now, taught in various colleges up in Canada, Ryerson [Ryerson University, Toronto, Ontario] being one of them. I can't recall the name of the other one.

MR. COOKE: It's not Sheridan?

MR. KEYSER: No, it wasn't Sheridan. Is there a Humberg or a Humbert, something like that [Humber College, Toronto, Ontario]?

MR. COOKE: I think there is something like that.

MR. KEYSER: I think one of them taught there. Richard Prisco, who teaches –

MR. COOKE: Savannah.

MR. KEYSER: Savannah College of Art. I could not remember the name of that. So those are the ones that come to mind in terms of the graduates. So I think it's – to me, it's been rewarding knowing that students have gone out and are making a living in one form or another.

MR. COOKE: Along each of the three different areas that you were –

MR. KEYSER: Yeah, that we sort of – and I think there's probably a lot of them that are doing, sort of, peripheral application of what they learned; maybe refinishing businesses or custom carpentry. I know one fellow, Steve White, was doing yachts; he was working for a boatyard that built custom yachts, and he was doing all the wood outfitting of the –

MR. COOKE: Interiors.

MR. KEYSER: – the interiors, yeah. In fact, I think he did his thesis on yacht furniture, things that were on pivots, like the table, so it would always stay level as the –

MR. COOKE: Right, gimbals.

MR. KEYSER: Gimbals, yeah, that's what it is. So I think there's a number of them that are probably in peripheral applications. And there's a lot you never hear about, you know. They kind of lose contact; they don't keep in touch. We always encouraged them to keep in touch, and I have a personal sort of alumni directory that I kept over the years with their addresses and what they were doing. But some you just never hear about. But I would say – you know, I came from an engineering background, and of the people that studied engineering, probably – you know, there was a small percentage of us that actually ended up staying with engineering.

MR. COOKE: Right, exactly.

MR. KEYSER: You know, you kind of deviate onto other things. So in terms of percentages, I think we're probably pretty good.

MR. COOKE: With people staying with it?

MR. KEYSER: Yeah, people staying with it.

It was a rigorous program. The studios were not open 24 hours; they were open usually, as I remember,

something – 10:00 or something at night, maybe midnight. On special occasions towards the end of a grading period when deadlines were looming, they could get extra special permission for extended hours and things like that. But it was a rigorous program. I mean, in a lot of cases maybe we had allowed the pendulum to swing a little bit too far the other way. Maybe the demands for professionality and – professionalism and – we may have been a little bit too intense. It was certainly an intense – I mean, people were – at the end of a school year people were burned.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. KEYSER: But by and large I think they appreciated it. I mean, I think they got a lot out of the program.

MR. COOKE: When did – I mean, you talked about it sort of being a two-headed program in that it changed in the '80s when Rich Tannen came in?

MR. KEYSER: Right. It seems to me that Rich came – I had another sabbatical the ’85-'86 school year, and Rich was my replacement. I had been on his thesis committee at BU a couple of years before that.

MR. COOKE: Yep.

MR. KEYSER: And I remembered his work, as well as the work of, I believe, Bruce Beeken, and I believe Tom Hucker graduated that same year perhaps.

MR. COOKE: Yeah, Tom was a certificate of mastery student, which was a different – actually Bruce was, and Rich might have been as well. I think all three of them were –

MR. KEYSER: Yeah, certificate –

MR. COOKE: – because they had three different levels. They had the BA, the MFA, and then also the certificate of mastery program –

MR. KEYSER: Oh, I didn’t –

MR. COOKE: – which was sort of a nondegree program.

MR. KEYSER: Okay. I think all of them were in the certificate of mastery program.

MR. COOKE: Makes sense.

MR. KEYSER: And I had been on their thesis review – they always brought one external person in, and Jere and Neil Hoffman had invited me to come up to be on their review committee. So I was familiar with their works, and when I found out that I had been awarded the sabbatical, I got in contact with – I guess, Jere and Alphonse [Mattia] at the time.

MR. COOKE: Yep, that would make sense.

MR. KEYSER: And I know I called Bruce and I called Rich Tannen. Rich was interested, so he ended up coming down and spending a year there. He met a woman there who was a graduate student who he ended up marrying, and then he left for a year after I returned – at least a year. He was back in his own shop in the Cambridge area, I believe. So it must have been around ’87-'88, something like that.

MR. COOKE: That sounds right.

MR. KEYSER: Wendell Castle had had a school of his own, and I guess it was up for sale and RIT ended up buying it, which basically was a few pieces of machinery, some workbenches, a degree which had been approved by the state, which was the AOS degree. We had an associate's degree, a two-year degree; it was called the AAS. Maybe it was OA – no, it was the AAS. I guess it was the associate in applied science. And his was the AOS, associate in occupational studies, I believe. So we got a – basically we got a degree –

MR. COOKE: A new degree stream and then probably a third –

MR. KEYSER: A third faculty position, yeah. And that’s when we interviewed a number of people and ended up going with Rich Tannen. So at that point, then, it was a three-person department. Rich was primarily responsible for the AOS – for the two-year AOS program. It was a two-year program, no liberal arts component. They did have a drawing and design – drawing in 2-D and, I think, 3-D component to it that was similar to the BFA undergraduate program. Other than that it was all studio work.

So he kind of took responsibility for that. But again, all of us sat in on, certainly, the final crits of all of the

students. And in many cases when time was available, we sat in on the sketch critiques or the design critiques earlier in the quarter. In some cases we overlapped. For instance, if I was giving a chair problem, and there were second-year AOS people that were ready to tackle a chair, we sometimes folded them into the same group.

And in terms of the day-to-day contact with the student at their benches, all three of us were fair game for –

MR. COOKE: Roaming through the bench rooms, yeah.

MR. KEYSER: – yeah – for any of the students. I think it was a – it brought a – having the third faculty member brought another viewpoint. Rich had his own business, but he was also actively exhibiting and working through galleries, which I had had little experience. Doug had actually owned a gallery, but after that point hadn't done a lot of gallery sales, I don't think.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. KEYSER: So that brought a little different component into the program.

MR. COOKE: Did you find that the students were testing the limits in terms of bringing in other materials: metal, plastics, paint, you know? What was – I mean, people always talk about Wendell's project in terms of the scribbles and things like that. Is that something you see also taking place in the late '70s and the '80s? This sort of external influence of Memphis and New Design and things like that.

[END TAPE 3 SIDE A.]

MR. KEYSER: Yes, and some of it was a result of the overall curriculum, the overall School for American Crafts curriculum. When I was a student, and up until – it seems to me it was when Neil Hoffman was there. He was the associate dean and one of his interests was curriculum development, and they decided that there should be an elective component to the craft school curriculum – actually to the whole fine and applied arts, as it was called at that point, curriculum, in that each quarter from the – I believe it was the junior year on – the student had to take – in addition to their major had to take one class in an elective each quarter.

They could do it all in one area during the six quarters of their junior and senior year, or they could dabble in – divide it up any way they wanted. And I have to admit, I was one of the faculty members that was dead against it. I thought, here goes the craft school professionalism right down the – because it's cutting into that precious studio time.

MR. COOKE: The studio time, yeah.

MR. KEYSER: Yeah. And I'll be the first to admit it had completely the opposite effect. It had an invigorating kind of stimulation, bringing in other materials. You know, students were taking metals and then applying – you know, making their own hardware and legs and supporting structures and things for their furniture. Glass, the same way – you know, going into glass and incorporating that. Few of them that I can recollect ended up taking electives in painting. Some in drawing, very few in painting, I believe.

MR. COOKE: And it didn't dilute the experience of a quote, woodshop, at all?

MR. KEYSER: It didn't. It didn't. It didn't dilute that at all; it enhanced it. So that, I think, accounted for some of it. Things like the whole Italian scene and Memphis had an influence, I think. So people in that – for instance, in that sheet goods problem that we gave, you know, they started painting, using laminates – plastic laminates, things like that. It was a wonderful influence. Nobody actually, that I can recollect right now, ended up doing, like, all metal furniture. Probably Richard Prisco came the closest, and he was – he graduated in, seems to me, the early '90s, maybe mid-'90s, and he did an awful lot of machining.

MR. COOKE: Yeah. A lot of machine milling, yeah.

MR. KEYSER: An awful lot of machining. We had acquired a Bridgeport mill.

MR. COOKE: I was going to ask whether there was a Bridgeport milling machine, because it looks –

MR. KEYSER: Right. And we had always had a metal lathe, I guess, or from quite a bit back we had had a metal lathe. But we acquired a Bridgeport, and Richard kind of – he had come from an industrial design background and he took to that machine very nicely. And he ended up doing predominantly metal furniture for his thesis. But they began introducing other materials in more than just a decorative, or a kind of a – I don't know how to phrase it, but in a substantial way, you know, as a significant component into their designs.

MR. COOKE: Right. Yeah, an integral part.

MR. KEYSER: Yeah, an integral part of –

MR. COOKE: This might be a time to also talk about your whole notion of teaching, sort of, your decision in the '90s to shift away from teaching, in some respects, sort of the end of the teaching road, as it were.

MR. KEYSER: I definitely had the feeling that it was time to start another chapter. At that point I had been at – this was in the spring of ’97. I had been thinking of discontinuing teaching, and it just seemed like it was a good time. I had been there for 34 years. I mean, it’s amazing when I say that, because it didn’t seem like it was that long, and then I had taught at Ohio University one year prior to that. So I’d had 35 years of teaching, being committed to it. I think the – I had mentioned earlier the, sort of, awesome responsibility that I felt in terms of the student’s career, and that certainly was accentuated in the '80s, '90s, when the cost of tuition rose so dramatically and the interest, the focus of the student, was definitely on being able to make a living when they got out.

In the mid-‘90s – Dean Johnston had retired – the college went through a transition period. They took the College of Fine and Applied Arts, of which the School for American Crafts was a component, and the College of Graphic Arts and Photography, and another unit called the Center of Imaging Science, and they decided to amalgamate these three different components into one grand college, one megacollege. And a new dean was hired, as well as directors of – certainly the fine and applied arts component had a new director.

MR. COOKE: Yep.

MR. KEYSER: And with this new blood there seemed to be a directive to reexamine curriculum and to try to handle more students with less time, with little or no change in goals, educational goals. And while at one point I was very interested in curriculum development – in fact, at one point I think I was probably more interested in the curriculum development than I was in the teaching. But in the mid-'90s I had been through curriculum development a number of times. I said to myself, you know, how many ways can there be to teach furniture design?

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. KEYSER: I looked at myself and the length of the time I had been there, and I felt there was a need for some fresh ideas, some fresh viewpoints. I felt myself somewhat resistant to the change that was taking place. The morale seemed to be with curriculum review and program review and things being discontinued, and our entire textile department was in danger of being eliminated, which it subsequently has been. At one point there was a proposal that came down from the dean to eliminate the graduate program in wood, and it just seemed utterly ridiculous to me to cut off one’s nose to spite one’s own face. It was a thriving program; it essentially didn’t cost RIT any more to have six or seven graduate –

MR. COOKE: It brought distinction, yeah.

MR. KEYSER: And it gave it a distinction and a visibility in the field that I felt was important. And so all of these things sort of came together, and I got the feeling that in terms of my own work, in terms of my own creative life, that I wanted to get on to something else, that I felt there was something as important – not more important, but as important to do that I hadn’t done. And I just felt it was time to depart.

MR. COOKE: It’s knowing when to go out on top in some ways.

MR. KEYSER: Well, that’s exactly what I said at the time. I said I – you know, I had experienced throughout my career people who had lingered on and on, and on and sort of outlived their usefulness, and I felt I was at the top of my game, or near the top of my game, and I felt it was time to move on. I remember one morning one of RIT's presidents, his name was Paul Miller – he was president for about seven or eight years, I guess, in the mid-‘70s to early ‘80s [1969-1979]– and I served under, I guess, a total of four presidents, and –

MR. COOKE: Two or three deans, and –

MR. KEYSER: And three deans, yeah. And I had a great respect for Paul Miller. He was just a wonderful administrator. He was a sensitive individual. And I was walking – and he had resigned the presidency and gone back into the faculty status on a part-time basis. He taught maybe one quarter a year or something, and then he worked on the Kellogg Foundation and a bunch of other things. And I was walking in from the parking lot with him one morning and I said, “President Miller, I really respect your stepping down as president and going into the – you know, picking up the faculty ranks and doing what you’re doing.” He said, “Well, Bill,” he said, “I’ve lived my life according to a plan. I’ve found over the years that I can achieve maximum impact by going into a position for six or seven years, giving it my all, and at the end of that point maybe having achieved 80 percent of what was possible, and then pulling out and doing something else. I might achieve another three or four percent by staying on for a couple of more years, but,” he said, “the odds were also that I could decrease; I could

backslide five or 10 percent.”

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. KEYSER: And he said, “I’ve always felt that my plan was to get in, do what I wanted to do and then get out.” And I stayed well beyond the six or seven years of Paul Miller, but at that point I decided that it was time to discontinue, to turn another chapter. I don’t use the word retirement because – I don’t use the “R” word. To me, socially and economically and everything, it has a demoralizing and a degrading –

MR. COOKE: You’ve shifted gears.

MR. KEYSER: I’ve shifted gears.

MR. COOKE: It really does bring up the point that we haven’t addressed in terms of your own work, sort of thinking about, in addition to this very strong commitment to teaching and to curriculum at RIT, sort of, what was going on over this same time period when you were in school at RIT and then subsequently teaching there, of the nature of your own work in terms of the types – you know, you’re somebody who has not necessarily pursued the gallery scene. It’s been primarily commission work, and you consider religious commission work, ecclesiastical work. You’ve done some speculative work. But it might be instructive to think back and follow – have that parallel path of what we’ve talked about in terms of what was going on in your teaching and think about your own work and how it was interconnected with some of your teaching or, you know, sort of, bodies of work, of how that might have changed, and some of the concerns, techniques, interests that you’ve had over your career.

MR. KEYSER: Well, I think a big overview influence was the fact that we were expected, as faculty members – as productive faculty members -- to remain professionally active. Our schedule was designed to accommodate that. Basically, each faculty member, from the time that I can remember, was always three consecutive days. For instance, the week was divided up Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday. One member of the faculty, of the shop, would be in, and Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday the other faculty member would be in, so that you coincided on Wednesdays.

And that made for a good transition between the first part of the week and the second part of the week and communication between the instructors and that sort of thing. The four consecutive days, which included the weekend, was a nice body of work – nice body of time that you could use to do your own work, and that was encouraged. Along the way annual reviews came in. They were nonexistent early in my teaching career. And one of the primary evaluation criteria was teaching effectiveness. The secondmost was professional activities. So that was always encouraged.

I think I did a pretty good job of keeping up with that end of my responsibilities. I started out in the early '60s, when I first came to RIT, doing speculative work, because I didn’t have commissions, and I had ideas and I felt it important to work and do things. So I started off doing speculative things. And these could be things that I – usually they were triggered by an idea that I had, but also triggered by an upcoming exhibition or a competition or something.

At that point they had a series of Young Americans shows, which I think I only qualified for maybe that year before I came to RIT [1962].

MR. COOKE: Young once. [Laughs.]

MR. KEYSER: You’re only young once, right. But then they had, like, “Craftsman of the Eastern States” and –

MR. COOKE: Yeah, they had those regional shows –

MR. KEYSER: – sort of regional shows.

MR. COOKE: – in ’63 and ’64, somewhere in there.

MR. KEYSER: Yeah, and then there was “Objects: USA” [1969] that came along early on.

MR. COOKE: Finger Lakes Exhibitions [Memorial Art Gallery, University of Rochester, Rochester, New York]?

MR. KEYSER: Finger Lakes Exhibitions were – I pretty religiously entered those, submitted to those. And so that was another trigger for doing speculative work. I got awfully tired of refinishing pieces, you know, which would come back from an exhibition or come back damaged, and then you’d have to repair it and, you know, refinish it. I sold very little through those exhibitions.

Gradually some commissions started coming my way. Ironically, one of the first ones was a liturgical

commission. A priest wanted to donate a set of altar candlesticks for the high altar at a local seminary. And, coincidentally, he taught church art history and sat in on the diocesan building committee, so that any church renovations or new churches that were being built, sort of, passed through his committee. And I guess he was happy with what I did on that initial commission, and so from then on he tended to put my name in or recommend me for future liturgical commissions.

But I also did work through architects, some commercial work: large conference tables, things like that, reception desks. I worked through one interior designer, in particular, in Rochester.

MR. COOKE: Was there a particular type – approach that you had? I mean, Frid was always – you know, it seems to me from talking with other former students of his that he was always trying to get people to develop a niche, a particular specialty or something like that within the larger marketplace.

MR. KEYSER: I never tried to do that.

MR. COOKE: So you dealt in a variety of different modes.

MR. KEYSER: Yes, yes. Well, a variety of different applications I would say. When I first started doing commissions, I guess I must admit that I – my heart was perhaps not in them completely. I looked at the – what I referred to at the time were limitations of commissions: the site, the function, the desires of the client or the building committee or whatever, the budget, sometimes the time frame. And I specifically, in my mind – they were, quote, limitations on my creativity. Over a period of time I came to a 180-degree view of those and I started calling them "parameters." And over the course of the years, those parameters led me in directions that I would never have gone had it not been for the existence of those parameters. And I think that was a significant influence in my work.

It also resulted in the fact that I – it was influential in the fact that I think I don't have a recognizable style; I don't have a body of formally consistent work.

MR. COOKE: Signature work.

MR. KEYSER: Signature work. And that doesn't bother me. I'm not worried about that; I never was. As I was teaching and concurrently doing what evolved into predominantly commission work, I thought the two complemented one another very well. I think the commission nature of my work served as a very real role model for the students who had plenty of opportunity, plenty of examples, even around Rochester with Wendell and some of the other woodworkers, or nationally even, who were doing predominately gallery work. I think it served as an example of – as an alternative.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. KEYSER: I never pushed that, but I always felt it had a presence and a place for me to be doing that while teaching.

MR. COOKE: A viable path.

MR. KEYSER: A viable path, yeah. I took a lot of opportunities to bring in what I was doing on the outside to the classroom, either through slides or drawings. Many times during vacations I would have current students working for me in my studio helping with projects. And of course they would come back and, I'm sure, report to other students what they had, you know, been working on. So I tried to keep students aware of what I was doing on the outside.

I concurrently tried to do speculative work as well, but the percentages were much less. The bulk of my work ended up, certainly at the end, being commission work. And I approached the two different works, the two different ways of – the two different applications completely different in the way I worked. The commission work was completely premeditated. The really creative part was up front during the design phase. I tried to approach each commission with as open a mind as I could muster. I tried to approach, you know, for instance, a coffee table like I had never seen a coffee table before, and what should a coffee table be and how should it fit the particular site and seating arrangement and things like that? What structure can I use to hold this surface 16 or 18 inches off the floor?

I always went through an extensive sketch stage. It was the blood, sweat, and tears part of the project, was the design stage, coming up with the design. I was motivated in those days a lot by – in the early days by technical things that I was interested in, the vacuum forming being one of them.

MR. COOKE: I was going to say, when did you develop your – I mean, there are some techniques that you're really associated with in terms of hollow-core veneer and the vacuum work or some of your bending.

MR. KEYSER: Steam bending is something that I got into and introduced into the curriculum then.

So on one hand there was the technical things that I was interested in at the particular time, trying to apply those to the commission at hand or even the speculative piece at hand, the formal kind of possibilities that I was interested in – I guess I've always been interested in or influenced as much by architecture and sculpture as I've been by furniture. In fact, I've come to the point where I don't look at much furniture at all, you know, even studio furniture. I've kind of looked at enough to kind of know what's going on.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. KEYSER: But in terms of examining it beyond that, I'm really not interested in it. I look a lot more at sculptors' work, and less now architecture, but at some point I was looking at a lot of architecture.

Function was certainly, in the commission work, was very important. Another reason, I guess, why I zeroed in on commission work is I really enjoyed the feedback from the client, the direct contact with the client without a middleman. I found selling through a gallery – and I could probably count on the fingers of two hands the number of pieces that I've sold through galleries over the years. And many of them I never knew who it went to, never got any feedback from the client that ended up buying it. And I found I missed that. I'd come to enjoy more and more the – just meeting someone socially for the first time and exchanging those "well-what-do-you-do?" kinds of questions. And when they find out what I do, they – invariably someone will say, "Oh, did you do the furnishings down at St. Mary's?" And I'll say. "Yes." "Oh, we really enjoy going there every Sunday and experiencing those pieces and having them become part of the worship."

MR. COOKE: That's great.

MR. KEYSER: And I found that that was missing in the gallery work. You know, I tried to communicate that to the students, and whether that was important to them or not I don't know. But it certainly has been important to me, the – and knowing – revisiting and seeing how the pieces have aged, and in some cases have been much disappointed by the care that's been given them – [laughs] particularly in the commercial – in a corporate sphere. I mean –

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. KEYSER: You know, you go into some places and the janitors are the worst enemies of custom-made furniture.

MR. COOKE: The vacuum cleaner marks and –

MR. KEYSER: Right, right. So – but to me that's all part of the life of the piece and has been one of the motivations for the commissions.

The speculative things I felt important to keep up because I felt they kind of fed the input into the commission work. They provided the, quote, research – form research. And those I approached much, much looser. The entire project seemed to be sprinkled with the creative aspect rather than the creative part taking place upfront and –

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. KEYSER: With the commissions, you know, you worked until the piece looked like the drawing that you gave the client or the model that you presented, and I always felt obligated to do that. I always felt obligated to follow through on the presentation, unless there was some really good reason for changing it. But –

[Audio break.]

MR. COOKE: This is Ned Cooke interviewing Bill Keyser at his daughter's home in Sudbury, Massachusetts, on Friday, May 2, 2003, for the Archives of American Art. This is disk number five. And continuing up where we had left off, you were talking about the role of speculative work as a way of, sort of, freeing up and exploring ideas which then went into your commission work.

MR. KEYSER: Right. It was sort of like a cyclical – or a circular kind of involvement. As I was working on commissions, concentrating on evolving the piece to the point where it looked like the drawing and then was, quote, finished, I found myself looking over in the corner and seeing the scraps lying about the band saw, or one of the machines, and seeing things in those that seemed a lot more interesting to me than the object that I had just been working on for four or eight weeks, or whatever. And so I began using these leftover parts, sometimes the debris, from a project as beginnings for a speculative piece.

At one point I was doing a lot of steam bending, and I found to get enough usable parts on a given commission

involving steam bending, I would bend 20 percent more than I needed just to account for breakage and over-bending or under-bending or spring-back or whatever. And so these became the raw material, then, to put into other pieces. The similar was true of veneered formations that I had – at one point I was doing, like, jellyroll-type laminations of different species, doing a wide billet – a thick billet in a curved form, using different species to achieve, sort of, a curvilinear striped effect, and then using – then re-sawing these on the band saw, a la jellyroll fashion, to get thinner veneer that I could then veneer onto a surface to get a visual – a surface – a visual surface effect. And so these became then – and I had slices left over from these, and these became beginning points for wall pieces, wooden paintings, if you will, things like the coffee table that you're familiar with, with the discs.

MR. COOKE: That's the coffee table from the "New Handmade Furniture" in 1979 [Museum of Contemporary Crafts, New York].

MR. KEYSER: Right. And so the commissions provided much of the raw material, if you will, for some of the speculative pieces. They also – I think much of this debris served as a starting point for sculpture, where I was even freer from the constraints of function. It didn't have to have a flat top or a horizontal surface if that wasn't necessary visually. And so I became interested in periodically doing sculpture. Again, some of this was in response to an upcoming exhibition, a faculty show or something where I needed a piece, and I would often start with something that existed in the shop and proceed from there and decide, you know, what it wanted to become, what it could become, how I might manipulate it.

MR. COOKE: It's almost as if you had a different set of parameters. You talked about the parameters of a commission giving you some structure that you could work within. All of a sudden you had material parameters that you said those became your guidelines that you could then go in a different direction and circle back.

MR. KEYSER: Exactly, yes. They were very much a set of parameters that I could work within. And it provided me opportunity to push my formal ideas beyond what commissions would allow. I was influenced at various stages during my career by various art movements – well, by furniture movements as well. I mean, the early Italian stuff – not so much the Memphis stuff, but the early Italian stuff where – I think it was a revelation to me that the Italians would use a six- or a 12-inch diameter leg where a two-inch diameter would suffice strength-wise. And I had done my thesis on structure – you know, sort of minimal, just what is necessary for the support of a piece.

And so, I began to think about the other reasons for using scaled-up members in furniture. The minimalist era in fine arts, I think, was a great influence on my work: the work of Donald Judd, who, I guess, also did some furniture, I found out later. I didn't know it at the time.

MR. COOKE: His plywood and steel furniture.

MR. KEYSER: Yeah.

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. KEYSER: And a number of those other primary structure sculptors that were working in – when was that? The early – mid-'60s, wasn't it?

MR. COOKE: Actually, Judd – a lot of his work is late '70s and '80s, early '80s, and that's when Scott Burton is doing similar work as well.

MR. KEYSER: Right, right.

So those kinds of things, the speculative work, the commission work, feeding that back into the teaching, and the effect of my students on my work, I think probably had an impact, maybe not formally but in terms of initiative, motivation. I mean, man, I'd better get going to keep ahead of these guys. [Laughs.]

MR. COOKE: That's what a lot of teachers, you know –

MR. KEYSER: Right.

MR. COOKE: It does affect your own work. I mean –

MR. KEYSER: Right.

MR. COOKE: – you're constantly rethinking things.

MR. KEYSER: Yeah. Well, Frid always said, you know, "It's the teacher that learns the most," and I've come to believe that. The other factor in all of this, in my life, has been my family. Joan has been very, very supportive. I think being married to a woodworker is probably not the easiest life, especially one who has two jobs, you know,

teaching and trying to –

MR. COOKE: And making –

MR. KEYSER: – and making. There's an awful lot of weekends spent in a studio. There's an awful lot of, kind of, aborted or cut short vacation periods because a commission is due or something. I've come to sort of hate all Christian holidays because there's always an altar or a baptismal due on Easter or Christmas, you know. [Laughs.]

MR. COOKE: You're frantically trying to put the finish on so it's dry.

MR. KEYSER: Right, right. And I can remember, you know, coming – particularly in some of the early years, coming in from the studio for dinner, sitting down at the table and for the first half hour not saying anything and Joan saying, "Your mind is still out there at that –"

MR. COOKE: Right. Transitions were hard.

MR. KEYSER: Right. And so, you know, that's one part of it that I think I've been very fortunate with Joan, and the children. I mean, they probably were deprived some in their upbringing by my preoccupation with some of these other things. But on the other hand, one of my clients is a tax lawyer, and at one point he said, "Bill, do you know how lucky you are to be able to sit down at dinner with your children and talk about what you're working on?" He said, "What possible interest could my kids have in me saying, well, I prepared a legal document today for Mrs. So-and-So on her investments?" He said, "At least you can talk about, well, I got a really nice curve out of this lamination today."

MR. COOKE: Something tangible.

MR. KEYSER: Right.

MR. COOKE: Understandable.

MR. KEYSER: Right. And as it's worked out, my daughter has not followed the arts real closely. I mean, she's interested in the arts, but early on she did some really neat sculpture, you know, using scraps out of the shop and things, and at one point took a sculpture class or a design class – in fact, I guess she took one at MIT when she was doing graduate work, a product design class or something. My son couldn't care less about art, but he does enjoy using his hands, and he's quite skilled in terms of making things. But he would just as soon follow some plans or just, sort of, wing it rather than sitting down and designing.

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. KEYSER: So, you know, it's had an impact there. I guess the other thing that's had an impact on my career, I guess, has been my faith. I am a practicing Catholic, have always been. I was born and raised a Catholic, and I've always –

[Audio break.]

MR. COOKE: We had stopped just as you were going to start addressing the role of your faith in terms of your work, so maybe if we could pick up there again.

MR. KEYSER: Okay. Yeah, I guess I've always – I've been a practicing Catholic, but, you know, I'm not overt about it. But I've always believed in the presence of a – I guess I refer to it as kind of a supreme craftsman. And I've come to believe that whatever I've been able to achieve has really been – that I'm – it's been His work more than mine, that I'm just a vehicle.

And I think it's expressed itself during the design phases. I mean, I can be beating my head up against the wall in the sketch stage, going through different schemes and sort of frustrated and maybe doing a little praying along the way, and all of a sudden something – a switch turns and something happens and, kind of, there it is, you know? And that aspect – and also my whole career I felt very lucky about, sort of, being at the right place at the right time in so many cases that I can't help but feel that there's some kind of a plan in place. [Laughs.] And so, beyond that, I sort of got into – in the commission end of things, suddenly realizing that I was doing an awful lot of ecclesiastical work.

MR. COOKE: You're really one of the people who I think has done probably, you know, a significant portion of your work – I can't think of anybody else who's done the amount of liturgical work as you have.

MR. KEYSER: Right. It's – I don't know of anyone else. It wasn't by design. I think it just sort of evolved that way. I got working with a number of architects that sort of specialized – or one of their specialties was church work,

and so once I, sort of, proved myself to them, they were perfectly willing to allow me to respond to their scheme and design the furniture.

MR. COOKE: To me it still seems so rare because, I mean, if you think about in the early 20th century with the arts and crafts movement, there was a lot of liturgical work and coordination of it. But as I look around at a lot of contemporary churches, it seems to me like there's less and less. They're buying it sort of prepackaged, manufactured.

MR. KEYSER: Catalogue stuff, yeah.

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. KEYSER: And it's a shame, because so many of the architectural settings are inspirational.

MR. COOKE: They should be. [Laughs.]

MR. KEYSER: Exactly. But it's – in my own work, liking – trying to forget preconceived ideas about, for instance, what an altar should be or what a baptismal should be and – I should say trying to forget about examples, specific examples that I have seen. It's been an advantage in the liturgical stuff in that I haven't seen an awful lot of – other than the catalogue stuff -- and so I'm more able to approach it objectively rather than being encumbered by all kinds of – you know, when you do a coffee table, the first thing that flits through your mind is every coffee table you've ever seen.

MR. COOKE: Right, exactly. Rolodex flips through. [They laugh.]

MR. KEYSER: Exactly. And so it's – liturgical work is different in that respect for me.

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. KEYSER: It's also a chance to do multiple pieces, ensembles that many private commissions, at least, don't afford. You know, you do a dining table or a reception desk or something, but seldom do you get to do a complete roomful of furniture. A liturgical setting and an ecclesiastical setting, you know, there are these elements that have to –

MR. COOKE: So you'd be doing multiple pieces? You wouldn't just be doing –

MR. KEYSER: Oh, yeah.

MR. COOKE: – a lectern or a baptismal font, but –

MR. KEYSER: No.

MR. COOKE: – sort of outfitting the entire –

MR. KEYSER: Frequently it was the complete thing, other than pews, right?

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. KEYSER: Everybody asks, do you do pews? No. [Laughs.]

MR. COOKE: No.

MR. KEYSER: I stop short of that.

MR. COOKE: Get the mill shop to do that.

MR. KEYSER: Right.

But it's a nice way of getting a concept – an overall concept and then, sort of, applying it to the various items. You know, and the challenge is to have a continuity yet not a repetitiveness or – you know, where boredom might set in, but rather, sort of, having each piece relate back to the basic concept of the – that you had for the overall –

MR. COOKE: Through the whole thing.

MR. KEYSER: Yeah. And so I found that part of it very challenging. And the architects that I worked with – like I say, once I, sort of, proved myself – were willing to, kind of, give me pretty free reign. And I made it clear in making presentations to building committees and so forth that one of the things I respond to, one of the

parameters that I respond to, is the architectural setting.

So if it's a new church or a renovated church, I try to talk with the architect and figure – and discern what he or she is trying to do with the space, and do something that complements that. And I guess my intention is to do something rather simple, not – something that's not self-conscious or calls a lot of attention to the item of furniture but yet is still inspirational. And I view these works as – these pieces as sort of stage-set pieces whose main function is to be supportive of and facilitate the liturgy that's going to be choreographed around them.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. KEYSER: And in that respect, you know, it's not so much making a personal statement with the piece but rather trying to come up with some sort of a – something that speaks of truth, I guess, and speaks of directness.

[END TAPE 3 SIDE B.]

MR. COOKE: It still has to have that captivating – sort of, that –

MR. KEYSER: Yeah.

MR. COOKE: – quality of bringing – I mean, I always think of objects I look at when I'm in a setting of worship.

MR. KEYSER: Right.

MR. COOKE: I need to lose myself looking at things.

MR. KEYSER: Yeah, exactly, something which people can notice if they – it doesn't have to jump out at them –

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. KEYSER: – but is something that they can notice and respond to. And, you know, concurrently it, sort of, has to satisfy my own form interests.

MR. COOKE: Yes.

MR. KEYSER: You know, I go back to the fact that I, sort of, view myself as a form-maker, first and foremost.

MR. COOKE: Well, I can see that real modernist strain of form-giver in a lot of your work and the use of the steam bending and the vacuum forming. I mean, it's all about form, mass.

MR. KEYSER: Right.

MR. COOKE: Good. What I might do is ask a few specific questions, you know, sort of more the discrete – some of the discrete questions are things that might give you an opportunity to reflect on some smaller segments, things we might have touched briefly on but to allow you to expand a little bit more.

MR. KEYSER: Okay.

MR. COOKE: One would be to contrast – you're somebody who's been in the academic side of things for most of your career, and, sort of, what you see as someone who's been an educator and a maker, the difference between the university-trained woodworker and someone who's learned it outside of academia, through an apprenticeship, through –

MR. KEYSER: Self-taught.

MR. COOKE: Self-taught or summer workshop programs or things like that. What do you say to those, sort of, contrasts? Is there something that's discernible?

MR. KEYSER: I think there is. I think one of the hallmarks would be the word "exposure," that the university-trained person, assuming that they're in a comprehensive-type program, they're just exposed to a lot of different aesthetic possibilities, technical possibilities, I guess ideologies, that the person who is operating outside the university, outside of academia, might find hard to duplicate. If they're going through the apprenticeship-type thing, they might learn much, much better a particular design direction, a particular aesthetic direction that the master is pursuing. They might learn much more in depth his or her particular technologies and how they go about their work.

But I think it's rare whenever such a program would afford a chance for the apprentice to do anything more than, perhaps, scratch the surface in terms of his or her own work and the development of that work. I think it would be very rare. I don't know of any apprenticeships that are offered that afford the apprentice the chance to

really blossom on his or her own, you know. It seems to me they're pretty much there at the service of the person that's offering the apprenticeship, and they get very used to the way that person works and the type of work he or she does, but –

MR. COOKE: Would it be different – I mean, there's one apprenticeship model in which people take on somebody younger just to simply increase production and, sort of, get another set of hands who can follow exactly what the master wants. But then there's another sort of apprenticeship, say the way Art Carpenter runs apprenticeships, that are different, it seems to me, in some ways.

MR. KEYSER: Okay. I don't know much about the way he works, but it's certainly possible that such a thing could exist.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. KEYSER: Still, you know, you're dealing with one person. And one of the things about the university, particularly in a multi-person program, or even where it's a one-person studio but you're exposed to others – you know, to sculptors and painters and graphic artists and so forth who are working nearby –

MR. COOKE: Let alone other students.

MR. KEYSER: – let alone other students that – you know, there's just an awful lot of exposure.

MR. COOKE: Yeah, I think that really sums it up well.

MR. KEYSER: But I think it gives it a depth and, I don't know, a breadth to the experience that is lacking in just about any other setting that I can imagine.

MR. COOKE: Yeah, I think you're right. Have you ever had any involvement with some of the summer programs that have grown up, particularly thinking within woodworking, that you've got Penland [Penland School of Crafts, Penland, North Carolina] and Haystack [Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, Deer Isle, Maine] doing more wood than they have done in the past, or Arrowmont [Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts, Gatlinburg, Tennessee], Anderson Ranch [Snowmass Village, Colorado]?

MR. KEYSER: I taught two different summer sessions down at Penland. Doug Sigler was pretty intimately connected with Penland. His home is actually down there. He ended up building a home down there and actually commuting to RIT to teach.

So I taught down there two summer sessions. One was, I believe, a two-week and one was a three-week session. The first time I taught, it was quite a revelation to me, quite a change in my thoughts about teaching particularly. Bill Brown was the director at that point, and he was just the ideal administrator. He, kind of, put in place mechanisms and systems to allow things to happen, and then, kind of cut you loose and allowed you to do whatever you wanted –

MR. COOKE: Hands off, right?

MR. KEYSER: Hands off, yeah. He was there if you needed him, but otherwise you seldom saw him. And his philosophy, I guess, was, come in and teach what you want to teach and what you feel strongly about.

That first time I taught, two of the people that I had – one was Wendy Maruyama before she came to RIT for her graduate work, and the other was Tom [Thomas] Hucker. And so they were two students that I remember. The other ones I've not heard an awful lot about. And I completely enjoyed the freedom that that environment offered. It was a very intense – and yet a lot of social kinds of things: the common dining – you know, taking the three meals a day together, playing volleyball after dinner at night until it got dark and then going back to the studio and working for another couple of hours. And the, sort of, informality of the whole thing allowing, first of all, a smaller number of students, maybe six –

MR. COOKE: In the shop?

MR. KEYSER: – in the shop at one time. So you could pretty much gear it individually to – you know, to the individual and what they wanted. You're no longer working with a sophomore class or a junior class, you know –

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. KEYSER: – assigned problems.

MR. COOKE: With a specific curriculum in place.

MR. KEYSER: Right. I did pose – I think both times I posed, sort of, a theoretical focus that I encouraged the students to think about as they decided what they were going to do. I can't even remember now –

MR. COOKE: So you're not just opening up the shop and saying, make whatever you want, I'll help you out, and that was it.

MR. KEYSER: Exactly. I wanted to create some sort of a sense of focus, and yet I didn't want to assign a problem.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. KEYSER: So I, sort of, posed a theme, I guess, if you will, that I encouraged them to respond to in whatever item of furniture that they wanted to try to undertake. That seemed to work well. With a small group you could do that, you know; you can allow it to be more open-ended.

And so it was – I came back, kind of refreshed, if you will, almost like a retreat, a teaching retreat where, you know, I came back with a lot of – not a lot of ideas but some ideas that changed the way I approached the teaching back at RIT.

MR. COOKE: So do you see them – they are related, then, in essence in terms of your summer experiences and your regular school year experiences in some ways?

MR. KEYSER: Yes, they are, particularly at Penland, Doug being so tightly tied in down there. We encouraged some of our majors to spend a summer or two down there. If there was a particular instructor that was offering a particular expertise that seemed valuable, we encouraged a student to go down there. And a number of them took advantage of that, and I think benefited greatly. And they could do it, I think, relatively inexpensively. They could apply for an assistantship, and as a result of being in a major program, a number of them got assistantships, you know, summer studio assistant kind of positions, which, I think, financially helped out quite a bit.

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. KEYSER: And it was a good time to get another exposure, to be exposed to another way of thinking somewhat other than your normal two or three instructors in the wood program at RIT.

MR. COOKE: Yeah, okay.

MR. KEYSER: So I think it was very beneficial. I've not been to – I've been to Haystack just visiting; I've not taught there, and I've not been to Anderson Ranch, but I suspect they have similar benefits.

MR. COOKE: Right. So the idea of interaction with other people but this real, sort of, level of intensity or commitment in terms of shop life for those two or three weeks.

MR. KEYSER: Exactly. Exactly. And I think it's an ideal supplement to an academic – a full-blown academic program.

MR. COOKE: What kind of experiences were there between people who were students in academia versus people who were amateurs or people who were just there for the experience? Was that an interesting sort of dialogue?

MR. KEYSER: Well, it was. It was interesting from the point of view that I think the – it was obvious that the student who was involved in academia at one point or another had more in-depth vision, I guess, or an awareness, as a result of the exposure he or she had in academia, whereas the person coming in from the outside, whatever it might be, I guess was just less aware of what was going – less aware of the possibilities, probably more reluctant to experiment, to push off in a new direction, more inclined to go with the first idea that surfaced.

MR. COOKE: So were they resistant to interaction?

MR. KEYSER: More resistant, yeah – yeah. You know, it never got to a tug-of-war sort of situation, or open hostility, thank goodness.

MR. COOKE: Good thing in a shop.

MR. KEYSER: Right. But there was obviously a difference of approach, and I would try – in creating this focus or theme, I guess my intention was try to push some of those people off dead-center to get them thinking in other ways, as well as a person coming from academia. I mean, you know, one more point of view, one more challenge, is always worth it.

MR. COOKE: Can be helpful.

MR. KEYSER: Sure.

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. KEYSER: But it was particularly aimed, I guess, at someone coming from the outside who may not have thought about the particular theme that I was trying to establish and trying to get them to think about.

MR. COOKE: You had mentioned during lunch this whole notion of, at one point, traveling along – you know, from Mystic up to Maine, going to boatbuilders and things. Has travel been an important part of your renewal, your interest in exploring different techniques or looking at artwork, to travel either nationally, internationally?

MR. KEYSER: Well, it has been. That particular trip I was working on an NEA fellowship to study boatbuilding techniques and try to apply them to my furniture. My intention was not to build boats but rather to gain some insight into the techniques used and apply them to the furniture. I had always been interested in this idea of doing the most with the least: lightweight structures used both in boatbuilding and early aircraft construction, World War II plywood fuselages and wing structure and things like that, and gliders, and the old Piper Cub kind of construction, which is basically a framework with a taut skin stretched over it. And so I was interested in the boatbuilding, and I traveled up there.

Earlier I had – we had taken a European jaunt at the end of one of my sabbaticals, and we had gone to Scandinavia, starting out in Denmark and visiting some of the small shops there. And that was inspirational, not so much from the work that they were doing, but the way that they were doing it, with the small shops being able to essentially produce a line of furniture, usually designed by an architect who was affiliated with a particular workshop but not an employee of it. He was an independent –

MR. COOKE: Designer.

MR. KEYSER: – designer. Hans Wegner comes to mind, Finn Juhl and some of those people. But the way they were able to produce furniture on a production basis was very informative to me. In Sweden – then we did visit with Jim Krenov then, now that I remember. That was before he came to RIT. I guess I visited him over there.

MR. COOKE: And maybe Craig McArt –

MR. KEYSER: Craig McArt had said, “Well, if you’re going over there, you ought to look this guy up.” And I did; I visited at his home -- he had a shop in the basement of his home -- and spent one afternoon with him. And then we went on to Oslo –

MR. COOKE: The opposite of production work. [Laughs.]

MR. KEYSER: The opposite of production work, right. And he actually took us to a couple of – as I remember it, a gallery and perhaps a small museum over there that had some of his work in it.

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. KEYSER: So I was able to see finished products other than what he had in his home. And, you know, it was very impressive.

In Oslo – outside of Oslo there’s the Viking Museum, which houses resurrected Viking ships. It was – I mean, that was a religious experience. Here – it was, kind of, the opposite to the way I approach commissions, where I try to respond to the site and design an object within that that complements and is in the spirit of the structure. Here they designed the museum buildings – are you familiar with the Viking Museum there?

MR. COOKE: No.

MR. KEYSER: There is this – I think, two different buildings basically erected to enclose a resurrected Viking ship, and –

MR. COOKE: I remember seeing pictures of one from a *National Geographic*.

MR. KEYSER: Exactly.

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. KEYSER: But there’s these, you know, very elegant craft – lapstrake hulls, you know, that culminate in these beautiful finials at either end. And while they showed the deterioration that time had on them, they were still

elegant things. And then an architect had designed this, sort of, hyperbolic paraboloid shells that enclosed them, so the artifact and the architecture, sort of, became one. It was just – they were just beautiful. I mean, it's one of the things from the travel – from my travels that have really stuck in my mind.

And then in Scandinavia in general, we visited a number of folk villages, sort of old-time villages, farm villages, farm buildings that had been dismantled, relocated into one location and then reconstructed. And there seemed to be a real – one sensed a kind of a oneness of design and utility and craftsmanship intimately tied into their life, their everyday life, and that really impressed me. You know, in reading about the Scandinavian culture and things like – that led me to, sort of, discover that as well.

Those travels and visiting places like the Adirondack Museum in Blue Mountain Lake [New York] and the Small Boat Museum [Antique Boat Museum] in Clayton, New York, have been very inspirational and, sort of, motivating in my own work. Beyond that I guess the – my interest in sculpture and now more recently in painting and things, I really do enjoy museum visitations. And my daughter just moved here to New England from San Jose, California, so a few times when she was out there, in the couple of years that she lived out there, I would always take the opportunity to take the train up to San Francisco and visit the Museum of Contemporary Art there in San Francisco. And the structure and the collection are, you know, very inspirational.

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. KEYSER: There was a one-person retrospective of Richard – of, yeah, Richard Diebenkorn that was out there. Richard or Robert? Diebenkorn, at any rate.

MR. COOKE: Richard.

MR. KEYSER: Painting retrospective of his, which was phenomenal.

MR. COOKE: But this would be the type of thing – before, you didn't go to museums as often?

MR. KEYSER: I guess I've always been a museum person and a gallery person in terms of going to see what's going on.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. KEYSER: But I seem to be doing more of it as I get older. [Laughs.]

MR. COOKE: That's okay. Do you – you know, given your experience going to Denmark and Sweden, do you think of yourself as a furniture maker who's part of a larger international tradition, or is this something that is more specifically American, sort of the idea of studio furniture maker?

MR. KEYSER: I guess I think of myself as part of an international phenomenon, if you will, or trend, growing more so, I think. Maybe I'm just becoming more aware of it as I have had more experience, you know, over the years with the teaching thing. Being involved in the field, maybe I've just become more aware of it, but I think it's also growing. I think – without sounding prejudiced, I guess I feel that the American movement is kind of leading the way. But it's definitely an international thing, and the influence on my work has certainly been international, I think, you know, with some of the early Italian stuff and –

MR. COOKE: The Scandinavian.

MR. KEYSER: – Scandinavian, you know with Tage Frid. And I feel that I've kind of shed the specific influence of the Scandinavian way of doing things, but some of the backup philosophical stuff I think I still respond to.

MR. COOKE: Well, it's interesting in terms of there's a hierarchical sort of design structure in Italy and in Scandinavia, where there are architects or designers who are sort of outside the shops, who are turning to these small shops to execute the work –

MR. KEYSER: Yes.

MR. COOKE: – whereas in the States it seems like there's always this greater interest in terms of the designer-maker, someone who's doing their own design, doing their own making, which RIT certainly was fundamental in terms of laying out that kind of agenda in the '50s.

MR. KEYSER: That's a good distinction. I didn't think about it in that way. And one of the reasons I evolved away from engineering into what I'm doing is to get that control from conception to execution to finished product: the total picture. I would never have been satisfied with coming up with, you know, a paper design, and then having it mass-produced by a manufacturer.

MR. COOKE: Right, or given a paper design to then put into production?

MR. KEYSER: Right, right. And some of those designers work various ways – in differing ways in terms of evolving their designs. What I've read about Hans Wegner, for instance, and the kinds of very elaborate prototypes and things that he made, sometimes not in wood, sometimes in cardboard and foam core and things like that, but still you could tell that he understood what the wood would be doing and the way it would be put together, you know, by looking at some of his mock-ups and maquettes and things. And I guess the industrial designers that I respect are the ones who approach it from that point of view, the hands-on kind of things, even if they don't do all of the actual work –

MR. COOKE: Full knowledge, yeah.

MR. KEYSER: Yeah. One of our former graduates works for – or one of our graduates, rather, works for Knoll International, not as a designer but more as a – like a product manager or an evolver, taking a – and he worked with the architect that did the peach basket chairs.

MR. COOKE: Venturi? Robert Venturi?

MR. KEYSER: No – well, he worked on Venturi stuff, but –

MR. COOKE: Oh, Frank Gehry –

MR. KEYSER: Frank Gehry's, yeah.

MR. COOKE: – chairs, yeah.

MR. KEYSER: Chairs. And taking our students down there to see what he was doing, what this Lamar White, the graduate, what kind of a position he had there. He went through some of the steps, the elaborate variations-on-a-theme kind of thing that he would actually do the work, and Gehry would come in every – periodically -- and kind of check and say, well, now, change this curve a little bit, or, let's add this extra member in here, or, try to research an adhesive on here that we could use to put this stuff together with, you know.

It was interesting to see how somebody like Gehry works with a lot of models and mock-ups. He may not actually execute them himself, but he uses them as tools to evolve a design. You know, I find that fascinating.

MR. COOKE: Yeah. I mean, I always think of, sort of, the American – it's part of a larger entity, but yet it's also different than some of the European models in terms of this emphasis on, sort of, small shop, not even production but, sort of, one-of-a-kind work and this – almost the individuality is so stressed, and its connection to education and self-education.

MR. KEYSER: It's almost – I don't know what you would call it, but financially self-defeating –

MR. COOKE: Right. That's true.

MR. KEYSER: – when you think of –

MR. COOKE: Unreal expectations, maybe, yeah.

MR. KEYSER: – when you think of someone spending so much time and energy doing a one-off design that in many, many cases works – you know, it's amazing that it works with the first shot when you think of industry doing, you know, multiple maquettes and mock-ups and things, and trial chairs, for instance, until they get one that actually works. To expect a craftsman to do it, you know, with a one-shot deal –

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. KEYSER: And in many cases not amortise it over any more of a product run than that one chair or one group of chairs. Economically it doesn't make a lot of sense, but yet it seems to be that that's one of the real values in the studio art movement, that people are able to take the time and have the interest in doing one-off work. And I guess that there's a market that will afford it.

MR. COOKE: That desires it, yeah.

MR. KEYSER: Yeah, that desires it.

MR. COOKE: How has the market for furniture changed over your career? I mean, you again, sort of – you talked a little bit about Shop One being this incredible experience for you to see, which was basically a cooperative place for the RIT faculty to show their work, or some of the students.

MR. KEYSER: Exactly.

MR. COOKE: What do you see as some of the changes? And then you had talked a little bit about the Baltimore ACE Fair; what do you see are some of the major shifts and changes that have occurred?

MR. KEYSER: Well, I think the individual craftsperson has become a lot more sophisticated and businesslike and professional. I mean, Shop One certainly set the stage for me and for a lot of people, I think, in terms of the possibilities, but you go to an ACE show and, you know, craftsmen are wearing three-piece suits, and they have all of the literature there and they have websites and they have portfolios there and order forms, and deposits are required and – you know, all sorts of things that – the professional level of the whole movement, I think, has increased dramatically over the years. The market, I think, is – I think the prices have probably escalated. I don't have too much exposure to the gallery situation, but –

MR. COOKE: Do you find many of your students, that's what they want to get into right away upon graduation, is to be placed right in galleries, in museums, or, sort of, what –

MR. KEYSER: I get the impression that the majority aim towards the gallery route, but I think there is a segment that's interested in commission work. And I think in my own case the valuation probably has not increased in the same magnitude as it would have had I gone a gallery route, I think –

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. KEYSER: – just the exposure. I'm very much a regional craftsmen. I would say 80 – somewhere between 80 and 85 percent of my work is located within 40 miles of my home.

MR. COOKE: That's remarkable.

MR. KEYSER: You know, I've done some work through an interior designer down in New Jersey. I've done a commission – one commission through the Snyderman Gallery in Philadelphia. I've sold some things through Pritam and Eames [East Hampton, New York]. I sold a couple of pieces through Richard Kagan. I don't know if that name is familiar to you.

MR. COOKE: Oh, yeah, Philadelphia, yeah.

MR. KEYSER: In Philadelphia. But other than that, most of my work has been right around the Rochester area. And so I don't think my prices have, probably, kept pace with what would have been possible had I gone – been more geographically diverse –

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. KEYSER: – and gone through a gallery situation.

MR. COOKE: Are there any other ways you think the market has changed? I mean, one of the other things that I have been struck by is – I think about the role that process used to play so much. In the Rhinebeck craft fairs, where they had tents and people were demonstrating parts of their work, the whole idea of the role of the demonstration as a way of bringing a client in, yet the ACE fairs, you know, the maker is there in a three-piece suit. There's been, sort of, a strange disconnect sometimes from process.

MR. KEYSER: I guess I never thought about it in that way.

MR. COOKE: I mean, that just might have been a marketing tool of the '60s and the '70s, sort of, this whole notion about demonstrations and process, hooks – the personal hook into that work.

MR. KEYSER: Yeah. I guess I don't have any real informed feeling about that.

MR. COOKE: Do you think the galleries are ever – could fully support this field – I mean, you know, you or somebody who has been able to do a lot of commission work but some speculative work as well? You know, I've oftentimes wondered whether there will ever be sort of a collectors of furniture group through the gallery system that helps really support the field, or is that a part of the field that actually is limited?

MR. KEYSER: Well, I would – from my perspective it's limited. You might have a better perspective on that, but it seems to me that the number of informed people with the affluence necessary to purchase works through galleries or commission through galleries is a finite number. And just in terms of cash flow – while I think most of our graduates would like to be in that realm of marketing through galleries, gaining a reputation that way, I think just from a cash flow basis, it seems to me there are going to be some pretty lean times until things sell. And something furniture size is – you know, you not only have the material expense, the material investment in the piece, but then the time is a lot more exorbitant than, say, jewelry in most cases.

MR. COOKE: Or ceramics.

MR. KEYSER: Or ceramics or smaller –

MR. COOKE: Or even glass.

MR. KEYSER: – smaller items, where the process is more spontaneous, the materials are perhaps cheaper. So from a cash flow point of view, unless you have a good day job or something or, you know, have inherited – some means of support, it seems to me it's going to be pretty tough sledding. And I think these are some of the realities that we try to point out, try to make people aware of, you know, in our curriculum, that there are other ways of making a reputation and gaining a foothold in the marketplace.

MR. COOKE: Right, in building up visibility.

MR. KEYSER: Right. The galleries definitely, I think, have a very important role to play. I mean, I think much of the work there in galleries is cutting-edge stuff that, sort of, is the pace-setting rabbit that a lot of the rest of the field is, sort of, following. Does that seem – does that make sense?

MR. COOKE: Yes, it does. I mean, I actually think that a lot of these things work together, in some respects, and one can't really place a greater emphasis on one than on the other.

MR. KEYSER: Yeah, one's not more important than the other, I don't think. It's the sum total that make for a movement or a trend.

MR. COOKE: One of the things I find striking that's missing more recently has been the idea of the regional show; some of the smaller regional museums not putting on, you know, a "Finger Lakes Exhibition" or something like that, that sometimes would give you yet another vehicle for visibility, that it's – you know, it's through the ACE Fair or a gallery representation, sort of a limited opportunity for people to see some of these objects. I mean, the numbers that are being produced are small anyway, and then if you limit the number of venues, then it gets really hard.

MR. KEYSER: So you, from a – on a national scale, you think things like the "Finger Lake" show are the exception rather than the rule?

MR. COOKE: Yeah, I think they've declined. You know, they were prominent in the '60s and '70s, and then I think they've subsided in terms of numbers or impact.

MR. KEYSER: And even there the Memorial Art Gallery has, sort of, de-emphasized a bit, in that they only do it every other year now. It used to be an annual affair and they now do it every other year. The prize money has decreased. Originally the, sort of, grand prize, or best of show, was a – the winner was offered a one-person show at the museum. Now they don't do that any more; they give some cash awards. But I don't think the number and amounts of them are what it used to be. So it seems they're perhaps trying to compete with museums on a national scale rather than fulfilling any local kind of nurturing.

MR. COOKE: Which you almost feel like you want to – I mean, as you point out, what's your clientele? It's 40 miles around.

MR. KEYSER: [Laughs.] Yeah.

MR. COOKE: A community that's been important to your development is probably RIT then? I mean, that's –

MR. KEYSER: Very much so, yeah.

MR. COOKE: And you alluded to the people in the other media and the students that you had, faculty you've taught with. I mean, it seems like all those have been –

MR. KEYSER: That's been my community pretty much. I had some notes on that.

I think some of the early people that I was exposed to there, Tage Frid for one, who was just – you know, I always have admired just his – the mastery of technique that he – that that person had. Frans Wildenhain, who taught ceramics, he was a product of the Bauhaus, and he was, like, the artist's artist. He was, like, the complete, almost, Renaissance man, in that he worked in watercolor, he worked in oils, he worked in ceramics, everything from functional vessels to huge wall murals to freestanding ceramic sculpture. He just, sort of – to me he, sort of, pointed out the possibilities of being, sort of, a total artist, without a given single niche.

Peter Voulkos, I guess I've – I'm getting a little bit off of the idea of the community question, but –

MR. COOKE: You can talk about influences too.

MR. KEYSER: Influences, yeah. Peter Voulkos, although I – you know, I never met the man. I've read a little bit about him and have seen some isolated examples of his work, but what I've been impressed with there is just the extreme experimentation that he was able to go – to achieve in his lifetime.

Some of the sculptors that have been important to me, David Smith and Anthony Caro, who, I think, really, to me, revolutionized sculpture and what it could be. And people like Martin Puryear and Richard Deacon, who have used the material, wood, in a very expressive way -- Puryear just in terms of his level of appropriate craftsmanship, what I call appropriate craftsmanship, making things as well as it needs to be made. Some of his wooden sculpture, by furniture-maker standards, is probably considered somewhat crude, but it has an integrity and a cohesiveness about it that – any more polished and it would be over worked.

MR. COOKE: Yeah. I think your definition of appropriateness is – makes a lot of sense.

MR. KEYSER: Yeah. So those are the people, I guess, that I, you know, have thought a lot about and thankful for having known a little bit about their work.

MR. COOKE: How's your work been received over time? Do you feel like people have gotten it right from the start? Do you feel as if it's been a tough sell sometimes? Have you been in sync with the times?

MR. KEYSER: It's –

MR. COOKE: A hard question, right?

MR. KEYSER: Yeah. In retrospect it seems like it was amazingly easy. I mean, I can't – I find it hard to believe that people have that leap of faith to commission a piece of furniture, you know, that's – that they're willing to lay out thousands of dollars for, based on a sketch.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. KEYSER: That, to me, seems – it seems to me that would be extremely difficult. But yet, I've been able to do it and other furniture makers are able to do it, and I think it goes back possibly to a question of integrity and honesty that's – and quality -- that's not available elsewhere in the marketplace in mass-produced goods. And there are those people who still seek that kind of – that level of involvement. And I think on one hand, whereas I get a lot of satisfaction and put a lot of importance on that interaction between myself and the client, I think there's probably clients who put an awful lot of importance on that personal involvement with the maker.

MR. COOKE: Yeah, I think that's true.

MR. KEYSER: And so I've had little difficulty selling work over the years.

MR. COOKE: Of course, given that a lot of the stuff is commissioned then, you know, it's self-selecting success in some ways.

MR. KEYSER: Oh yeah, but I mean, even selling a commission, from, like, initial inquiry – and I go through some steps to, sort of, ensure that we're on the same wavelength. You know, I'll go through an initial meeting of showing slides or a portfolio, talking to them about the project, possibly giving them some idea of, if they don't have a budget in mind, at least some idea of what we're talking about budget-wise. But the main thing is to make sure we're on the same wavelength in terms of form and aesthetic direction. You know, if they're interested in – primarily in the direction that another craftsman is going as opposed to the direction that I'm involved in, then it's a waste of time to get beyond that first meeting. You know, it's better that they pursue the other – something with the other craftsman.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. KEYSER: So, I try to do – I don't try to do a sell; I try to do an information thing early on, and then through drawings and maquettes – and/or maquettes, depending on the application -- I try to give them as clear a picture as I can of what to expect, and then I try not to deviate from that in the execution.

MR. COOKE: So you've been consistent.

MR. KEYSER: Yeah.

MR. COOKE: Have you felt that you've benefited from some of the publications in the field, whether they be periodicals like *American Craft* or *Fine Woodworking* or *Woodwork* magazine or exhibition catalogues like *Woodenworks* [Renwick Gallery, Smithsonian American Art Museum, and the Minnesota Museum of Art, St. Paul,

Minnesota, 1972] or *New Handmade Furniture* [American Craft Museum. New York: American Craft Museum, 1979]? I mean, what's your take in terms of the state of the periodical and publication part of the furniture field?

MR. KEYSER: Early on – initially it was *Craft Horizons*. I guess – I benefited a lot from that, I think, although the actual articles on wood were pretty few and far between. I mean, you could have a year's subscription and maybe have one or two articles, or even an isolated picture of something –

MR. COOKE: Picture, right.

MR. KEYSER: – you know, that a furniture maker, or a woodworker did. [END TAPE 4 SIDE A.] They were still kind of inspirational. The early *Fine Woodworking* was kind of similar. You know, it – there was – when I say similar, that's the wrong phraseology. They were valuable. Some of the early *Fine Woodworking* publications were valuable, particularly in terms of technique, but also just exposure, just what was going on, their –

MR. COOKE: Sense of excitement.

MR. KEYSER: Yeah, and their early design books, I think, helped supplement the technical stuff that their monthly publication put forth. And so I think they were very informative and effective. More recently I don't – I still subscribe to both of them. I've been tempted to drop my subscription to *Fine Woodworking*, but I have the whole series – [Laughs.]

MR. COOKE: Right, you got to keep going.

MR. KEYSER: – and I've got to keep going. They were instrumental in my teaching years, just in terms of supplementing lectures and things like that with articles from *Fine Woodworking*. *Craft Horizons*, I feel that they're – at least in terms of my commission work -- they're going a different direction generally than what I'm going in right now, or have been going up to this point.

MR. COOKE: For a while.

MR. KEYSER: They're more into art without quite getting there, I feel. A lot of the stuff presented there, I think, aspires to be sculpture but ends up being kind of second-rate. I don't – I feel dilettante – I mean, I'm not an authority, but that's just my first impression.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. KEYSER: I do a lot more looking and reading in art periodicals. When *Fine Woodworking* comes in, I sort of page through it, see what the table of contents holds, and maybe pick out an article or two to glance at, and then it goes on the shelf. *American Craft*, pretty much the same. Maybe I'll spend a little more time with that. *ArtNews*, *Art in American*, *Artforum* come in and I pretty much try to read those. I mean, I end up pretty much reading them cover to cover.

MR. COOKE: Is that just a recent phenomenon as you've stopped teaching and are exploring painting and sculpture more?

MR. KEYSER: I think it started before I stopped teaching. Certainly in my library investigations and stuff I would be more prone to take out a book on a sculptor or on a painter than I would on a furniture maker. I enjoy the critical writing in some of the art periodicals very much, particularly the reviews of one-person shows, and that seems to be missing in *American Craft*. I mean, the articles in *American Craft* are generally career surveys or surveys of a body of work by one person, but there's, you know, maybe four to six articles like that in a given issue, whereas reviews of one-person shows in *ArtNews*, you know, there may be 30 of them an issue.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. KEYSER: And the writings are usually by – are frequently by artists who are also writers, so I find a lot of thought-provoking commentary.

MR. COOKE: So you feel like furniture is lacking in terms of a critical discourse?

MR. KEYSER: I think so. I don't know what your feeling is about it.

MR. COOKE: I think that's obviously a sign that the Furniture Society is trying to correct in terms of initiating conversations and writings and paying attention to the idea of thinking about what we're doing.

MR. KEYSER: Right. I think the catalogues of things like the new furniture show and some others have been valuable in that, and I've enjoyed those. I'm thinking of the one book of Jonathan Fairbanks. He ends up – it's more of a survey kind of thing.

MR. COOKE: Oh, the *American Furniture 1600 to the Present* [Jonathan Fairbanks and Elizabeth Bidwell Bates. New York: Robert Marek, 1981]?

MR. KEYSER: Yeah. I don't think he gets into a lot of critical stuff, but as, kind of, a survey I think it's very good. I've read a little bit of David Pye's work, and it seems to me that his – he's kind of a – he's a real theoretician, and what little I've read has been very thought provoking: *The Nature of Craftsmanship* [*The Nature and Art of Workmanship*, David Pye. London: Cambridge University Press, 1968] and the *Nature of Design* [*The Nature of Aesthetics and Design*. David Pye. New York: Van Nostrand and Reinhold, 1978].

MR. COOKE: *The Nature and Art of Craftsmanship*?

Where do you get your ideas for your work?

MR. KEYSER: Boy.

MR. COOKE: And have your sources of inspiration changed?

MR. KEYSER: Well, I think they – yeah, they have changed. I think early on – in some of the earlier years I got, perhaps, more inspiration from the techniques involved, particularly the steam bending and the vacuum forming, and how I could exploit those techniques to achieve a given form. More recently, I guess I think more in terms of the form that I want and then figure out a way to make it. And often that figuring out is not a complex – I mean, it almost takes place simultaneously with the designing of it, which is probably not a real good way of doing things. Maybe it's better to, kind of, forget the techniques and come up with the form, and then really figure out a way to make it.

MR. COOKE: And then go "now what?". [Laughs.]

MR. KEYSER: But that hasn't been the way it's worked in my case. It's usually a simultaneous sort of thing of technique and design. But the technique – the specific technique like the steam bending -- early on as I started playing with it and exploring it, it was much more an influence on the final design of the piece than it is now. And maybe it's just that I feel more comfortable with a greater variety of techniques, and so that I'm able to pick and choose, and, you know, one of them doesn't stand out as a real interest for me anymore.

Where do the ideas come from? Boy, that's a tough one to say. I mean, I –

MR. COOKE: Seems that you get them from all sorts of places. I mean, talking about a lapstrake Viking ship, or talking about a process, talking about liturgical space. I mean, it seems like you are really open in a variety of different ways.

MR. KEYSER: Yeah, there's a lot of exposure that's necessary, I think, generally to various forms, whether they be in nature or – and I think you, sort of, build up, kind of, a form memory or a form vocabulary that you're more able to pick and choose from as time goes on, because it's a continually expanding thing. I never throw any sketches away or drawings away. You know, I have reams of stuff at home that Joan keeps saying, "Why don't you get rid of that stuff?" [Laughs.]

MR. COOKE: As long as you can retrieve it, it's okay.

MR. KEYSER: Right. But I don't work on the computer in terms of designing, and so everything has a paper trail. And I find it enlightening to go back and look at old drawings, look at old sketches, and see things in them, things that I didn't – hadn't seen before as a result of the interim experience. And I think it's a matter of – you know, in the interim between when I did that and when I look back at it, there are a series of experiences, visual experiences that built up an ability to see, I think, that – when going back on some of these old sketches, I say to myself, gee, you know, that's a pretty interesting design; you should execute that some time, or at least play with it, pursue it.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. KEYSER: Boy, it's really hard to say exactly where they come from. I do a lot of sketching – not as much as I should. I do sketching in response to a particular project. You know, I've made resolutions to myself that I was going to spend X number of – half an hour a day doing nothing but drawing, doing nothing but sketching –

MR. COOKE: That lasted two days or –

MR. KEYSER: Yeah, right, then it sort of went by the wayside. So, you know, my drawing activity is very sporadic. But when I'm doing it – when I'm working on a project, I do a lot of sketching, and the ideas somehow come from that. And, like I said before, somehow there's a switch that flips somewhere along the way that says, that seems like it has possibilities. Beyond that I can't –

[Audio break.]

MR. COOKE: This is Ned Cooke interviewing Bill Keyser at his daughter's home in Sudbury, Massachusetts, on Friday, May 2, 2003, for the Archives of American Art, the Smithsonian Institution, and this is disk number six.

I wanted to, coming from ideas, perhaps throw you a question. Maybe this is showing an interest in exhibitions or history, but if you had to represent your career, your ideas, your contributions to the field, can you think of, say, three objects that you would say, you know, this is Bill Keyser and his contribution to the field of American furniture? Are there three objects, or, you know, is there one object that, sort of, summarizes it all? I'm just curious to have you talk about that.

MR. KEYSER: I think it's a very valid question. I think it's – I've been aware, at least in my own work, that there are a few pieces that my mind retrospectively goes back to that I feel are successful. I think a lot of work comes and goes, or has come and gone, and at the time I was happy with it; I was – you know, felt it was successful, but once out of sight it, sort of, became – they, sort of, become out of mind. But there are a few that, sort of, come back and you think about more and more.

A very early piece – well, it was done, I guess, mid-'60s – was a very international style carcass piece. It was a small chest of drawers. It was a speculative piece. It was basically a rectilinear volume set on a very geometric pedestal base. The front and back of the carcass – that is, the drawer fronts and the back of the carcass were ornamented, if you will, with aluminum tubing, which was essentially extruded into the fronts of the drawers. These were, like, inch-and-a-half diameter aluminum tubing, the centers of which were filled with end-grain teak, and that was then recessed into the horizontal grain of the drawer front. And the same motif was repeated on the back of the chest.

It never sold. We still own it. My wife keeps her sewing supplies in it. But it was, sort of, my response, I guess, to the trend towards minimalism at the time, as a result perhaps of my industrial design teaching out at Ohio University, sort of a culmination in a piece that has been around and has been on my mind and I keep going back to it. There was a series of, I think, maybe seven of – no, it was an even number, probably six or eight of these circles embedded into the drawer fronts, which were about – oh, this cubical volume was maybe 15 inches wide and 30 inches high and 15 inches deep. And the center two were recessed – the end-grain teak was recessed a bit, and that provided the drawer pull to grasp the drawer and pull it out. That piece stands – sticks out in my memory.

MR. COOKE: That certainly is a connection from your introduction into the field and awareness of – you know, one can see the awareness also of Italian design at that point –

MR. KEYSER: Yep.

MR. COOKE: – and there are a lot of different things that – could see coming together in that –

MR. KEYSER: Yeah. It wasn't a technical tour de force, by any means, but I think it was real design or aesthetic pinpoint for me at that time.

Another piece which sticks in my mind was a commission for an ark for the University of Rochester's Interfaith Chapel [1970], and it was – I'd been doing some steam bending, and at that point it was my most extensive steam bending project. I had done other arks, which were basically cabinet forms. An ark is a structure to store the Torahs for the Jewish faith, and they had been – the prior ones had been cabinet forms, basic cabinet forms. This one I decided I wanted to deviate from that, and the design that I arrived at was a large compoundly bent shell, wooden shell. The grain was vertical, so I steam bent two-inch oak – two-inch teak, rather. The total height on this was maybe eight feet – between eight and nine feet high, and the breadth of it was probably around six feet. And then there were clips that held three different Torahs, and then the doors that closed upon those Torahs were smaller shells that were sort of nestled within this larger shell.

The larger shell was held up by two tabs, basically planes of wood that protruded out the back of the shell and held it at the appropriate orientation. It wasn't completely upright; it was somewhat reclined, so that the Torahs would rest back against it so that gravity wasn't a factor of them falling out. Now, that was a tour de force, so to speak, technically.

MR. COOKE: Because that was really a big awakening of sort of your interest in technique – in trying different techniques –

MR. KEYSER: Right.

MR. COOKE: – to achieve – stepping outside of a usual box or carcass, or something like that.

MR. KEYSER: Exactly, where technique became a parameter within the total picture. And I thought that was pretty successful in most respects. The one respect that it fell short in – it's a portable piece of furniture and it has not worn gracefully, because it has to be taken up and down from a raised marble sanctuary platform, and so – and the people that move it are not terribly careful with it. So in that respect it somewhat fell short, but as a form and as a solution to the problem it was instrumental in my development.

Another couple of pieces that fall into that same category as being sort of terminal points in the technique being a significant input into the final solution would be a lawyer's office [J. Kevin Mahoney, 1974-76] that I did using the lapstrake boatbuilding technique, where individual boards are bent – in this case they were steam bent – and then they're beveled and adhered together, one lapping over the other to form a sort of stepped, compoundly bent shell, if you will. I ended up doing a desk and a large credenza, a large double bookcase with file drawers beneath and compoundly bent doors above, and then a series of, I believe, a total of six chairs, the shells of which were lapstraked, a continuous shell from top of the back down through the lumbar region and then into the seat. The inside was upholstered; the outside showed the lapstrake format within a somewhat conventional chair frame format. I thought that total job, particularly the large bookcase, was particularly successful and was a piece that I go back and think about a lot, and think about maybe applying that technique again to something. It was kind of a one-shot application of that boatbuilding technique.

And probably the fourth, as I think about it on the spur of the moment, was an ecclesiastical commission for a small church, which is now about 10 miles from our home, a Lutheran church [Risen Christ Lutheran, Perinton, New York, 1977]. It was a new church, and the sanctuary, in plan view, was kind of the shape of a football in profile, kind of a lamella [plate jointing] wafer shape, a pointed oval, one radius of which was smaller than the other, so it sort of bulged more in one direction than the other. And I had the commission – the design contract to do the job, and I came up with a rather traditional means of – a rather traditional altar for it. It was to be an altar, lectern, and a cross, were the three components.

The rear wall of this sanctuary area, which was a circular wall with a semi-circular window, sort of, directly behind the altar – the night before I was to present the designs I got thinking about it and somehow decided, hey, there ought to be a more adventuresome solution to this for such a unique kind of setting. So I came up with a – I, sort of, in my mind said, well, Bill, you've held table surfaces and altar surfaces up with volumes, you've held them up with linear members, with legs, what about curved planes? And I guess I immediately thought about some of Alexander Calder's stabiles and those kinds of forms. And I came up with a small illustration-board maquette – I mean, very crude – in one evening in a couple of hours.

And I went in the next evening to present my designs, and I presented the rather safe solution. And I finished my presentation saying, "Oh, by the way, I also thought of this other design. You know, you may or may not be interested in it, but here it is," and they responded very favorably to it. And I then figured out how I was going to make it. And I ended up using torsion box kind of construction, using commercial quarter-inch plywood as the skins and building up tapered frameworks in between, so that these planes not only were curved in profile, but they also tapered from top to bottom. And then I had to figure out how I was going to mount them into the top.

I mean, I can't adequately verbally describe the design, but it was one where, you know, when it was all said and done – oh, and the lectern was kind of a variation on that same theme. It set to one side. And the curvilinear wall behind the altar, with this large window, didn't seem to provide a space that would accept a cross, and so I ended up supporting the cross off the end of this altar. The top of the altar repeated, in plan view, the shape of the dais that the whole unit – that the ensemble set on. And the curvilinear flow of the base, sort of – of the altar, kind of, led up to the cross, which was to the right – on the right end of the – and the lectern was further to the right, and those curves complemented. So the movement – the whole movement of the ensemble was, like, from the floor up toward this cross. And I thought it – I thought it was an extremely simple – not simple to make, but simple statement -- that formed a unity with the architecture.

So those are – I would say those are four pieces that I would pick out. Now, none of those – well, the one – the first one was speculative, but it was pretty well – it was pretty well predetermined in the design stages; that is, the small chest piece with the extruded aluminum tubing set into the front – recessed into the front.

The most successful piece of the speculative work -- which I followed the other way of working, which was, sort of, start with something and then add something and – would be the piece that was chosen for the "New Handmade Furniture" show, the coffee table. I call it *Coffee Table with Discs* [1978].

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. KEYSER: There I had some leftover serpentine veneered stripes, if you will, leftover from another project, and I had a slab of an elm log that – from my student days. Frid had taken us out to a sawmill, and we were going to do green turning – green bowl turning, so he had the sawmill – they had a huge elm log there, and they custom sliced it for us into, like, 10-inch-thick chunks of wood that we then hauled back to the studio and cut

blanks from and turned them green on the lathe and stacked them for a year or two and then – with the idea of going back. At any rate, this slab was what was left from one of these logs.

MR. COOKE: From one of the first cuts.

MR. KEYSER: One of the first cuts. So it had the cambium layer convolutions on the one side and then the more or less flat – but it had warped over the years. So that was from my student days and I had kept it and, you know, it had to be 10 or 15 years later – I had this serpentine veneered shape and this slab that I had hauled around for years, and I thought, I'm going to do something with them.

MR. COOKE: That prefigures your notion about some of your sculpture, just sort of looking around the studio –

MR. KEYSER: Exactly.

MR. COOKE: – and finding some of these parts and putting them together.

MR. KEYSER: Exactly. And, you know, it evolved. I basically constructed the base, this serpentine-shaped base, and supported the top on some wooden sticks on a scaffolding thing, and then said, now, how are you going to connect the two? And I went through, you know, a number of different possibilities in cardboard and other materials to kind of mockup what might connect the two. And I was going to connect them with cones, with solid cones, to fill in, sort of, a tapering space between the two. And before starting the cones I decided to make a couple of discs the largest diameter of the cone and sort of placed them in there, and suddenly it hit me, why not use these discs to form the juncture?

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. KEYSER: And so then I went ahead and executed some discs and drilled through them. Well, actually, I think I constructed the discs around a central cavity that I could have some all-thread rods go up through to connect the two and – but it was like a revelation – revelation that hit me, you know, as I was evolving this design. I mean, it could have been a complete disaster. The base could have been useless. You know, the slab top might have ended up as firewood.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. KEYSER: But as it was, I thought it was an interesting juxtaposition of the natural form, the machine – the sort of sculpted S-curve form and the very mechanical discs. And somehow I've always felt that it, sort of, belonged. And so I guess those would be the – those would be the highlights of my production, you know, as – on the spur of the moment, sort of, they come to mind.

MR. COOKE: Yeah, quickly.

MR. KEYSER: Yeah.

MR. COOKE: Maybe just one final question, and that is – you know, you're somebody who has shifted out from the furniture field into sculpture and painting. Now that you're not totally within it, you're sort of – you've got a little bit of objectivity, a little bit of distance from outside, where do you – do you see this as an exciting period within the field? You made some, sort of, references to some of the work in galleries and things like that. Where is it heading? Is it headed – is it an exciting time? Is it a time of retrenchment? I'm just sort of curious.

MR. KEYSER: I think of it as a very exciting time, where anything is possible. I'm currently – I don't feel that I'm outside the field, as you described.

MR. COOKE: Well, I didn't mean totally outside.

MR. KEYSER: Right.

MR. COOKE: I mean, in some ways you have a little bit more critical distance than when you're teaching.

MR. KEYSER: Yeah. Oh, for sure, yeah. I've had more time to think about my own work and my own directions. And again, it's something that I sensed when I decided to stop teaching, that there was something important that I should be doing. I didn't know what, but I think I have a clearer idea now. I don't know where it's going. I'm currently – I've taken, sort of, a break from my painting activities to execute some commissions, furniture commissions, but I think about the painting every day. I think about the sculpture every day. I think about how the three activities might come together, or maybe they'll stay completely separate. I don't –

MR. COOKE: Is that a statement on the whole field – not just yourself but on the whole field of American studio furniture?

MR. KEYSER: Exactly – exactly. I don't see myself ever dropping furniture. I still enjoy the challenges of furniture. I think it – I'm probably going to try to work more of the spontaneity and the looseness and the freeness that I find in the sculpture and in the painting. I'll try to find those ways of working within the furniture – I think that's probably a given at this point. I don't intend to automatically do painted furniture –

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. KEYSER: – or furniture using sculpture as the main objective, or sculpture using furniture as a motif, or – I don't see myself doing that. But more specifically I can't say at this point, but I find it a very exciting time. I find it a time when I can't wait to get up in the morning to get into the studio to work. And it's a time when I haven't had assistance in the studio. When I stopped teaching, I sort of decided that I didn't want to teach any longer; I wanted to, sort of, cut that chapter clean. And when I've had people in the studio before, it's always been, you know, part teaching, part employee-employer kind of relationship, and I guess I'm not interested in that anymore. I'm not interested in doing workshops any longer.

MR. COOKE: How many people would you have working in your shop?

MR. KEYSER: The most I've had – one summer I had – it was either two or three. I think three over the course of the summer, but at one time, I think, only two worked with me. My shop is –

MR. COOKE: They were RIT students or –

MR. KEYSER: Yes. Yeah.

MR. COOKE: – that you were – just additional sort of experience for them, and then you get an extra set of hands to –

MR. KEYSER: Exactly.

MR. COOKE: – move boards around and that sort of thing.

MR. KEYSER: But they were advanced students at that point. One was a graduate student. One was a – in fact, I think maybe he had graduated from the undergraduate program. Both of those students I could pretty well give a project to and turn them loose on with just, you know, daily monitoring kind of thing. And my shop was not large. It was at my former residence, and it was only, like, the equivalent of about a three- or a four-car garage, so it was not a large studio.

But it's an extremely exciting time. I just don't know exactly where it's leading at this point –

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. KEYSER: – which is part of the excitement.

MR. COOKE: Yeah. Even for the field as a whole – not just even your own work but the field as a whole?

MR. KEYSER: It seems to be in an incubation stage right now, where you don't quite know where it's going to go.

MR. COOKE: Yeah. Great. Thank you very much.

MR. KEYSER: You're welcome, Ned, and thank you for doing this interview.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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