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Oral history interview with Jack Lenor Larsen, 2004 February 6-8

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Jack Lenor Larsen on February 6-8, 2004. The interview took place in East Hampton, New York, and was conducted by Arline M. Fisch 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.

Jack Lenor Larsen and Arline M. Fisch 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

ARLINE FISCH: This is Arline Fisch interviewing Jack Lenor Larsen at LongHouse in East Hampton, Long Island, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, on Friday, February 6, 2004. This is disk number one.

Jack, let's talk about your childhood in Seattle. Were you born there?

JACK LENOR LARSEN: I was born there in the Norwegian Hospital. My parents had come from Alberta, Canada, a few years before and married in Seattle, and I lived on the outskirts of the University District of Seattle.

MS. FISCH: Was it a great place to grow up?

MR. LARSEN: Yes. We were always sort of on the outskirts, maybe because land was cheaper, and there was always water around – fresh water or salt water bays – woods, places to explore, lots of space.

MS. FISCH: So is that what you liked best about living there? The kind of landscape and space, or were there other things –

MR. LARSEN: Yes, I never – until I was in high school – I was not in a built-up area in which you couldn't get into the woods within a block or so, and, for me, that was my life. I loved it.

MS. FISCH: So you were very affected by the landscape, by the sea and the mountains?

MR. LARSEN: Well, the mountains – you had to *go* to the mountains, and we did, including Mount Rainier and such, but on clear days you could see them. Puget Sound has five volcanic peaks that are always snowcapped.

MS. FISCH: What did you like to do with your time when you were a boy? I know you told me you were a cub scout and a boy scout, but what kinds of things did you like to do?

MR. LARSEN: Building shelters – places -- was my most consistent occupation. That and adventures – going places alone or in a group – [inaudible] – and usually leading a small group when I did.

MS. FISCH: What kind of adventures?

MR. LARSEN: The excitement of going some unknown place through the woods. For both what we were building and where we were going, I would think this out inside or in class or – and dream up an activity for – usually for the weekend, and lead those who would follow, either to create some sort of structure or to go someplace. And particularly when we got lost in swamps and thornbushes and nettles and so forth, there was always the threat of mutiny. [Laughs.]

MS. FISCH: So you were the leader – the ringleader of all of this?

MR. LARSEN: I was, not because I was a so strong, but because my followers were so easily coerced.

MS. FISCH: Or you had all the good ideas about where to go.

MR. LARSEN: Well, I had ideas. And I realized recently that this hasn't changed. I'm still doing it. I do it with LongHouse Foundation and anyone else who will follow. And I dream up projects and try to get somebody to go along with it.

MS. FISCH: Well, tell me about the things you built: the tree houses and stuff.

[Cross talk.]

MR. LARSEN: My father was a building contractor – mostly houses – and I don't know whether I was imitating

him. He was very successful and persuasive and magnetic, and maybe that's why I was doing it, but it started simply – you make a tent out of a blanket, when I was four, and became more ambitious. And any material – and usually they were on the ground and not in trees, but sometimes underground. I also built boats and tents, but – and circuses -- but the making was the thing.

MS. FISCH: That was what interested you?

MR. LARSEN: The circus never went on. And the boats I usually sold, and not –

MS. FISCH: Were these small boats, or boats you get into?

MR. LARSEN: No. They were boats to get into. And I didn't make them to sell them, but I didn't really make them to go boating either. I was lucky on one. It was a dugout made out of madrona wood and it virtually sank, and I think maybe that's why the mother bought it, because her little boy who wanted it wouldn't go floating off anyways. [Laughs.] It was destined to remain at the water's edge. But I somehow got out of this predicament and was paid for my folly.

MS. FISCH: Was your father involved in all of this?

MR. LARSEN: Not at all.

MS. FISCH: Was he teaching you?

MR. LARSEN: Not at all. No. He even – he very seldom came to see what I'd done – boats, yes. He also built a very successful fishing boat, but no, he sort of kept an eye on the boats – some of them, the kayaks and so on -- but the camps not. And Mother would check it out usually, and friends, but sometimes we slept overnight – George and I or someone else – some other weekend guest at one of these tents or camps, but usually it was just making it.

MS. FISCH: It was just the building that was most interesting to you.

MR. LARSEN: Mm-hmm.

MS. FISCH: What were the strongest parental influences on your character? From your father or your mother, or both?

MR. LARSEN: Both. Hers was the most constant, but his voice was stronger. Maybe because it wouldn't come so often. But being an only child and in the Depression I was usually taken along – babysitters only happened on New Year's Eve and rare occasions. Being parked with friends' kids was more frequent, and I was totally agreeable to that, because that way I had constant companions and that was the only time I did. But as I was the only child, I was also the youngest grandchild on one side and the oldest on the other, so I had some grandparental focus.

MS. FISCH: And did they live in Seattle as well?

MR. LARSEN: No, but they came to visit on occasion. They were still in Canada. And we went to Alberta every once in a while, and later I had relatives in British Columbia.

Mother was remarkably well organized and I learned that from her.

MS. FISCH: Well, that's a very positive influence then.

MR. LARSEN: Some of it I resisted when I was home, but it immediately took over when I went off to college. Having a tidy room and so forth, which I think I resisted just to be more independent, but once I was away, I became – then I immediately took over these things that I'd been taught, and I used – I got in the habit as a young undergraduate of trying to leave my digs like I'd like to enter them.

MS. FISCH: Well, that was certainly a very positive characteristic to develop.

MR. LARSEN: And my dad was an achiever. He was successful. He was also very popular. Everyone liked him – all ages and all genders -- and he was the darling of all their adult friends. The men wanted to be with him, and so did the women. He was attractive, which my mother – I didn't think she was at all.

MS. FISCH: Was he a storyteller?

MR. LARSEN: Sort of, yes. Yeah. He had – he flirted with women, and my – even my girlfriends -- and he was charming, and he had – he always had something amusing to say, even if it was the same things.

MS. FISCH: Was he a sportsman?

MR. LARSEN: Yes. He – when I was a little boy, they played golf a lot and I would follow them along. And later he became a fisherman and he never stopped that, and they would go all the way out to the – to the ocean to fish, and to Canada to fish. He was a very good fisherman and –

MS. FISCH: Did that interest you at all?

MR. LARSEN: No. Salmon fishing is boring.

MS. FISCH: All fishing is boring.

MR. LARSEN: No, stream fishing, which I did with my uncle, you keep constantly moving and doing things. There's skill and prowess and so forth. But getting up at 3:00 in the morning and sitting in a cold boat for hours and hours and hours and trolling was – and even reeling in a fish I never really thought was so wonderful (which is why you do it).

Mother went along and did fairly well, and they got salmon up to 60 pounds. Once they came back with 1,000 pounds and gave it – most of it -- away. They also went fishing – the king salmon ran on my birthday week, so they were gone for 10 days. And when I was 15 I cooked a 15-course dinner for my favorite girlfriend, and then we went dancing afterwards, and they came home early and found every pot and pan and wineglasses needing cleaning. But my analyst said *that* was not a mistake. [Laughs.]

MS. FISCH: You did that on purpose.

MR. LARSEN: I was telling them something – I was telling them something, and then it somehow didn't happen again.

MS. FISCH: Now, you had some interesting adults in your childhood who were not family members – I was reading that – but who had a positive influence on your development, and I wondered if you'd like to talk a little bit about those –

MR. LARSEN: Well, fortunately, the same analyst said they saved my life. The first one were people who lived across the alleyway who were older, a little more affluent, partly because the woman also worked, and they were childless and thought I was wonderful.

MS. FISCH: Were these the Murphys?

MR. LARSEN: Yes. And they had a Airedale who was my buddy. You know, they – both of them were in total agreement that I was the best little boy in the world, and my own parents didn't seem to act that way, but –

MS. FISCH: Well, parents have to be disciplinarians, and people across the street can always be nice.

MR. LARSEN: Right. Yeah, they were more like grandparents in that way, and I spent – the five of us spent a lot of time together because –

MS. FISCH: Oh, so your parents were involved with them?

MR. LARSEN: Because – the golfing and so forth was the five of us, and my fourth birthday there was only the five of us and – and then we moved across the bay and they often would spend weekends with us and I liked that.

And I would go to work with this Irishman and he –

MS. FISCH: What did he do?

MR. LARSEN: He was in the shipping business and he drove a big truck with stuff, but he was – plumbing parts and things, which – where he worked, which was sort of an interesting place to explore. I would have a – would draw when he was tied up and so on and he would buy me my favorite sandwiches and so on. No, we had – and he was very physical, which neither of my parents were at all, but he just thought there was nothing better than to ride on his shoulder, sit in his lap, or whatever. And I liked that, too.

And eventually he became an alcoholic and we didn't see them as much, and we were – when we moved across the bay to Bremerton, we often spent weekends there with the – because it was more like home and I had playmates there and so on. But because of his alcoholism that we were doing less, and eventually they adopted a nephew, so they had their own little boy and I was getting older and this glorious redhead stopped working, let her hair turn grey, and –

MS. FISCH: So all the glamour was gone for you.

MR. LARSEN: It wasn't quite the same. But in the meantime we had – there were the Meyers in Bremerton, and one of dad's first jobs was building for them and then building a summer house for them, and I started school with George.

MS. FISCH: And George was their son?

MR. LARSEN: Yeah, another only boy, and his parents thought he was the best thing that had ever happened. They were also a little older, a little more affluent. And me, George's friend, must be pretty good too, so I spent a lot of time with the Meyers, and they sort of took over that role. And I thought that she was very stylish and he was the – George's father was also very easy, very approachable and supportive, and he was the man in the Lion's Club that did things with children like Easter egg hunts and supporting the Boy Scouts and all of that. So that sort of took the place.

And he was the – both Meyers were happy to take George anyplace, so I went to Sunday school with them and to whatever the meetings were, whatever. They picked him up and dropped him off and me too, which I –

MS. FISCH: George was then your best friend?

MR. LARSEN: Mm-hmm. The only problem was he was everybody's best friend.

MS. FISCH: So you had a lot of competition?

MR. LARSEN: I did. I wasn't his only friend. The Huckleberry Finn/Tom Sawyer thing wasn't quite – wasn't quite that close. They also moved. They finally stayed in their summer house, which was five miles away and was a different school, but then finally I had a bicycle and I could go there. Then that made it better.

MS. FISCH: When it was time to go to university, you enrolled at the University of Washington [Seattle] in architecture.

MR. LARSEN: It wasn't my plan. The plan all those years was that mother's father had money and he thought I should go to McGill [McGill University, Montreal, Quebec, Canada], which was –

MS. FISCH: The best school.

MR. LARSEN: – the Harvard of Canada. Then it turned out their architecture school wasn't the best, and in those days candidates for college in Canada had 13 years to matriculate instead of 12, and they had five years of French and five years of Latin and three years of Greek and a classical education.

MS. FISCH: And you didn't have any of that.

MR. LARSEN: Well, I had some Latin. Anyway, it would have taken me forever just to get into McGill with that, and I was thinking to get through college quickly. It seemed like I'd spent all my life in school.

MS. FISCH: So what year did you then enter the University of Washington?

MR. LARSEN: In '45.

MS. FISCH: In '45.

MR. LARSEN: And my next thought was Harvard [Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts]. I mean, partly because it was far away. And the advisor explained that Harvard's school of architecture wasn't so great, either.

MS. FISCH: Well, it was a graduate school, or it is now.

MR. LARSEN: Yeah. Yeah. Well, then it wasn't – didn't rank very high. And at that point University of Washington was one of the top six in architecture, so it was decided that I would start there, so I did. And –

MS. FISCH: Was architecture the field that you thought you wanted to study?

MR. LARSEN: I thought so and I was – I didn't know too much about interior architecture, but that occurred to me that wasn't so uninteresting. The house we moved into when I went to high school had had an interior designer and was more polished than my dad left to his own devices, and so I knew about that and thought that was rather nice. But landscape architecture also seemed like an option, because I'd always been involved with gardening.

MS. FISCH: And was your mother a gardener? Is that how you got involved in gardening?

MR. LARSEN: My father, before he learned to become a builder, had done some landscaping and he, sort of, decided where our small gardens – how it would be laid out and such, and knew something about shrubs and trees and so forth. Mother had beds of flowers for making bouquets mostly.

But anyway, that was a possibility, so getting away from home was very attractive, and going back to Seattle from this suburban town – that was attractive. And once in school – and my dad suggested that I not pledge a fraternity for the first – at least for the first semester, and maybe better for the first year not to. Just couldn't decide which group I wanted to be in for – well, after I learned about Bohemia, I wasn't going to go to one of those conformist fraternities anymore. And I also met people that were older and there were quite a few because of –

MS. FISCH: Because of architecture?

MR. LARSEN: And because of –

MS. FISCH: The GIs –

MR. LARSEN: – the war, that a lot of the kids – the young men entering college were in their 20s, and so the younger teachers and so forth. And I found older people were more interesting. They had more experiences, they had traveled, they were more sophisticated, so I spent my time with older people mostly and –

MS. FISCH: Well, you were also interested in furniture.

MR. LARSEN: Well, that – in the second year I did sophomore and junior interiors in one year after doing freshman architecture the first year. I was also – being – having a man on campus, which was relatively new in '45. I could bully my way with my advisor into taking almost only major courses instead of academics. I had to take English and PE, but everything else was professionally oriented. So at the end of two years, I'd finished three years of professional work, and the good part about that is when I did take the academics, it was because I wanted to. I decided that –

MS. FISCH: Well, you could also choose a little bit more wisely –

MR. LARSEN: Yes, and get more advanced classes, and anthropology, and even botany. Yeah, I had – I was in a botany seminar with doctoral candidates and also with anthropology, and so on. Because I was an upperclassman and I was curious about it. So that was – had been good.

MS. FISCH: Who were the teachers in your undergraduate years that were useful to you or important to you? Were there some?

MR. LARSEN: They were pretty good teachers, and I generally liked teachers all the way through. There would be some that I – geography and the subjects I liked. But even literature and such. There was a lecturer in architecture named Professor Herman that was spectacular, and he could – it was a very large, popular lecture, and then we broke into segments for the studio work, but he lectured to a great many and he was amusing. He'd been doing it a long time and he would make fun of poor design. He also said, "I'm happy to welcome 400 of you freshman. I'll see 100 of you as sophomores, and I'll graduate 25 of you." [Laughs.] And (fortunately) I decided to move to interior architecture. I didn't wash out. I moved out.

MS. FISCH: Why was that? Did you just find it more interesting to be involved in –

MR. LARSEN: I'm not sure –

MS. FISCH: – interior spaces, or –

MR. LARSEN: – why. I took freshman art classes, so I was in the art department where interiors was taught. Maybe it just seemed more approachable or more personal.

MS. FISCH: Well, certainly when one looks at some schools of architecture, the studies are so specific and directed there's not as much room for individuality as there might have been in interior –

MR. LARSEN: That's true.

MS. FISCH: – design department.

MR. LARSEN: And I guess the best friends I had that first year were interior majors, including someone who is still a best friend, and she was so good and – a wonderful draftsman and drew like an angel, had great style. They offered her a four-year scholarship if she'd stay in architecture instead of interiors, and she didn't. So I think that was an influence, that I, sort of, went along with people I knew. And then in the equivalent of junior

design, we had to take a textile course.

MS. FISCH: I was going to ask you, when did you first become involved with textiles?

MR. LARSEN: It was just spring semester of the second year, when I was part of junior design. And this girl named Pat had an aunt at Stinson Beach, and she knew San Francisco and she knew about Dorothy Liebes and how exciting the new weaving could be, and all those materials and colors and so forth. She went – when we – as part of the textiles, we had to spend a little time weaving to understand about woven cloth, and she did that with great relish, so I did, too. And what I was doing wasn't very creative, but – and I was also very clumsy. I broke more warp yarns than anyone I've ever seen. It just didn't come at all easy, but I liked it, and the women teaching it – a man who was so interested; they were supportive, so I spent more and more time in the weaving studio.

MS. FISCH: Do you think the attraction was the color and texture of the fibers, or was it the structure that interested you?

MR. LARSEN: It was working with my *hands*. I'd done crafts in Boy Scout camp and braided and worked with all those materials – *made* things, and this was creative play. I fell – I was – I just fell into it, and the more I thought about it, I wasn't a great drawer or renderer or any of those things you did in architecture and even interiors. In interiors I tried to build models instead of doing renderings and –

MS. FISCH: Then what?

MR. LARSEN: [Laughs.] And my – I had a great teacher and she said, "Well now that the model's finished, I want you to render it." So – and working with a pencil worse yet than drawing in ink. I wasn't building anything and I was used to building with materials and making things. And even the small weavings were structures and *real*, and student architecture is very abstract. You're not really working with any of the real materials and what you're – even what you're drawing about isn't going to be built.

MS. FISCH: It's a very abstract thing.

MR. LARSEN: Yeah, so –

MS. FISCH: Well, in the weavings – in this initial weaving class, you actually wove things, but did you have to draft them and then weave them, or you simply got to experiment?

MR. LARSEN: No, I was more into texture and color and yarns and materials, and there were lots of yarns there, even some pretty interesting ones. The – and so I began to think, and I spent more and more – any spare time I had, I spent in the weave studio and –

MS. FISCH: And it was in the art department? Because usually weaving was in some other department.

MR. LARSEN: Actually, it was – it was in the home economics department, and the good part about that was that the textiles – the home economics textiles, which was geared to *using* textiles, not chemistry and physics in textile -- school textiles, in home-economics textiles – identifying fibers and yarns and cloths and finishes and so forth -- was sort of real. And some very good teachers. And I got on with them very well.

MS. FISCH: Were you the star pupil?

MR. LARSEN: No, I was just at it the most. Not the best, but the most. And I wasn't trying to do things like the home ec students were: making blankets and things. I – that wasn't what I was up to. But by, sort of, the end of school I was thinking, well, maybe – and in Seattle there was a Dorothy Liebes type who was doing custom weaving that had some glamour and success, and in those postwar years there weren't modern fabrics to buy, and certainly not in Seattle. If you wanted one, you had to find a weaver.

MS. FISCH: So there was a role model that –

MR. LARSEN: Right.

MS. FISCH: You observed.

MR. LARSEN: And closer than Dorothy Liebes.

MS. FISCH: And what was her name?

MR. LARSEN: Oh, I don't remember her name, but she had some success. And then there was another one from Europe, Hella Skowronski, who was – became sort of known even in crafts circles. Hella, H-E-L-L-A S-K-O-W-R-O-

N-S-K-I. East Europe probably. And she was creative.

MS. FISCH: And she had a weaving practice?

MR. LARSEN: Yes, somewhat. Yeah, that came I think a little later, but anyway, that year –

MS. FISCH: Now this is still your junior year?

MR. LARSEN: Yeah, well it was my second year, but I considered myself a junior.

MS. FISCH: Right.

MR. LARSEN: I'd finished three years of professional work. The first year I worked in landscaping – gardening, I should say – during the summer, but the next year I taught underprivileged children in Bremerton, because I could live at home and make some money, and that was very interesting. And they weren't even particularly poor; they were people who'd come in for war work, but their parents were not middle class. They were – everyone at – everyone in Seattle was middle class, but these newcomers weren't there yet. And the big difference, their – they were in housing developments, which was all right, and their parents were making good money. Sometimes the mother was working too, but they didn't spend time with children. They didn't do things on weekends. They didn't take them out to do anything. So I took to that very happily, and I went to night baseball with them at night. I went to several churches with them on weekends.

MS. FISCH: Did you do art projects with them?

MR. LARSEN: We did that – both. While I was sorting out the art materials, a redheaded, freckled little boy came in called Billy, and I said, "Billy, would you go out and organize the bats and everything for us?" And he became my Friday and helped me with the – all the older boys and our sports and things. It turned out the year before he had – he personally had broken – he was on the outside and had broken 410 windows.

MS. FISCH: What a record.

MR. LARSEN: But he was going to be foremost whatever – inside or outside. Well, he became foremost inside. And I was dedicated to – well, again, I had willing, younger followers.

MS. FISCH: Followers [laughs].

MR. LARSEN: And more than usual.

MS. FISCH: Well, I was fascinated to learn that sometime in your schooling you worked on a project in Pre-Columbian textiles with Grace Denny.

MR. LARSEN: Yes, I did.

MS. FISCH: And how did you become involved? Was it a translation project?

MR. LARSEN: We're getting to that.

The – well, after doing that and working till – I think we were out early – that was finished up in early August, and I still had four weeks or five weeks or something before college started again. I went off to California for the first time, alone. I'm not sure how I got there – maybe on the bus, train, or something – and then when I got to San Francisco, which I just loved – it was much more interesting than Seattle – and everything about it. But I had some cracked ribs from swimming with the boys, and a doctor at a clinic taped me up and said that I should not be active for a while. And he could give me more – he could spend some money with a splint or something or other, or for about the same money I could probably just go and lie on a beach, and so I checked out some architecture books and went off to Carmel.

MS. FISCH: To recuperate.

MR. LARSEN: And in the meantime I had visited the Dorothy Liebes studio and that was very interesting.

MS. FISCH: Her studio was in San Francisco?

MR. LARSEN: Mm-hmm. Five forty-five Sutter Street, right near Union Square, and if you went downstairs – and there was a garden below grade and the big studio, I suppose inexpensive for the location, was on garden level with a wall of glass facing this garden, and it was glamorous and all the women and girls were in blue smocks and doing interesting things.

Anyway, I went off to Carmel and took a room in a Victorian – in what had been a Victorian mansion with three stories and turrets, and it seemed very interesting. And people were coming to Carmel looking for artists, and as I was hitchhiking through 17-Mile Drive and so forth, they thought, well, maybe that he is one of them. They would pick me up and give me lunch.

I met some interesting people hitchhiking, which I had never done when I was younger, including some rather glamorous girls with a huge Buick convertible, and they were potters, so – you know, they were potters. They had been students of Glen Lukens and were doing very colorful stuff.

MS. FISCH: Sounds like a movie.

MR. LARSEN: Yeah, the Blair girls, who had oil money from Oklahoma, and mother had brought them to California to find a husband. Which they weren't about to do, and through them I met someone who – Mary Blinks. Did you ever hear of Mary Blinks?

MS. FISCH: I have heard of her, but I don't know what she did.

MR. LARSEN: Well, I trekked up the top of Jack's Peak, because she had the biggest [Richard] Neutra house in that part of California, and no one was at home, so I peeked in all the windows and did what I could, and then I told my new friends about this, and they said, we know a Mary Blinks.

MS. FISCH: Is that B-L-I-S – B-L-I-N –

MR. LARSEN: B-L-I-N-K-S. She was a colonel's wife, but she'd hired the architect and was running a turkey farm on the side up there. So I was invited up to dinner, and Mary explained everything was wrong with the house, but they'd never move anyplace else, and that was nice. The Blairs had a glamorous life, and we went down to Big Sur. People that owned miles of that beach and people with wonderful music rooms and so on. And then – [audio break, tape change.]

Oh, in the meantime I'd just started to work at Gump's Carmel and my ribs were better, and not because I really needed a job so much or that I could stay very long, but Gump's Carmel was quite wonderful then with modern crystal sculpture from Czechoslovakia and all kinds of things I'd never seen before – a rather noncommercial store. And then they hired me.

I'd just heard of that when I met these two chaps that had come up from Los Angeles, and after Labor Day weekend they said, "Well, why don't you come back with us? You can have a free ride." And in Carmel I decided the Southern Californians were much more interesting than Northern Californians. They were much freer and more – they seemed much livelier, so I said, "Well, I'll go see that."

Well, they showed me Sunset Boulevard and Bel-Air and Beverly Hills and the beach, and everything was wonderful. I never saw the flat, smoggy part of Los Angeles.

MS. FISCH: Well, it wasn't so smoggy, probably, at that time.

MR. LARSEN: That's true too. And I met some of these modern designers and architects, and, boy, that seemed very interesting. And they even introduced me to a weaver named Dorothea Hulse, who had a school in a studio called Handcraft House, and Dorthea said, "You should come work with us and you could help my – our -- people with your knowledge of color and texture and modernity and so forth that they don't know, and we could teach you more about weaving." So I went home to announce that I was going to move to Los Angeles and drop out of school, at least for the moment.

MS. FISCH: It didn't go over very well I expect.

MR. LARSEN: I stuck it out. My dad was really up in arms. First of all, I might be – and I probably announced that I'm going to try to be a weaver instead of an architect, or that – so Dad says "You're going to be poor and Los Angeles is the garbage can of the nation and please know that you won't expect any allowances or help financially."

And I – my grandfather had given me a big house I was renting. Mother and I each had a big house in Vancouver and we had some income, but I wasn't getting that directly, as I was underage, so I didn't have that either, but I had – maybe I had some savings or some bonds. I had bought –

MS. FISCH: War bonds?

MR. LARSEN: I had some bonds. Maybe I started cashing those in. I had worked during high school, because this navy town I was in was so crowded that we could only go to school four hours and we were supposed to work the other half time, and so we were living at home, we were affluent, and I was – I did save money and bought some

bonds. Maybe I had something, but not much. I was – I started weaving at Handcraft House with Dorothea.

MS. FISCH: So you went back to Los Angeles.

MR. LARSEN: I did go back to Los Angeles. I didn't go back to school, and I did drop out and met all kinds of interesting people, including a girl who worked for Victor Gruen as an architect and who had a Model A roadster and I met [Bronislava] Nijinska, who was teaching ballet in Los Angeles, and one of these chaps was dancing with her, and all kinds of interesting people. And we could decide at dinner to go – whether we wanted to go to the Metropolitan Opera downtown or not. It was a free and easy life.

MS. FISCH: And you were working for Dorothea?

MR. LARSEN: Yeah. And then in November – and I was living near Bullocks Wilshire, in that area, Lafayette Park. I got a job at Bullocks Wilshire for six or eight weeks before Christmas and that was the best store in the world at that time. It was extraordinary. Everything about it was – all of the floor walkers were Yalies the same size – wear the same size clothes – and all of the janitors were Japanese men of the same size and age, and so on all the way though. They could have anyone they wanted, and they had giants who lifted little old ladies out of their limousines and movie stars and – and my job to begin with was wrapping packages – gift wrap. But I was doing that for about half a day and they came and got me and sent me over to work in Futures across the street, and that was putting away bicycles or whatever anybody bought to be delivered at any hour wanted. It was most of the Christmas gifts mostly, and they wanted them delivered at this or that time and file them away and make sure that happened.

And Dorothea was two blocks away, and as soon as I finished my job, I could go weave. So that was rather perfect. I was being paid to go work for Dorothea. And in addition to some amusing commissions, nothing – well, she did *The Robe* [1953] and all those things for Hollywood.

MS. FISCH: All the costumes, or the fabric for the costumes?

MR. LARSEN: Yeah, not so many costumes, but ceremonial fabrics that had to be, sort of, authentic, and they would try – you had the Eastern Mediterranean wool and you dyed it in the right stuff, and there was research and there was money to pay for it. So that was one thing she did, and she wasn't a great designer. And Maria Kipp was very successful in doing fabrics for architects out in Pasadena, but she wasn't that. But she had interesting students, and a lot of them had Hollywood connections. They were directors' wives, and one of them was Joan Crawford between husbands. The – and she wanted to weave suitings for her little children. (I think that she'd been neglecting them.)

MS. FISCH: Right.

MR. LARSEN: Including the one who wrote *Mommy Dearest*. And –

MS. FISCH: It must have been a very brief phase for her.

MR. LARSEN: It was sort of brief, but I taught her how to warp. Yeah. And then we had a director's wife who was affluent. She wore the most expensive clothes I'd ever seen and the most expensive cigarettes, and her husband and son had both died in a plane crash in Brazil at the same – *together* -- so she was psychologically stretched out and vulnerable, and her psychologist had told her that handcraft would be useful.

MS. FISCH: So how many students were there altogether?

MR. LARSEN: They were sort of private. They would seldom – occasionally I'd have two or three people I was teaching to warp at one time, but usually it was –

MS. FISCH: Mostly it was one-on-one.

MR. LARSEN: – one-on-one. Well, this director's wife had one remaining son, and she was going to do a very – the most luxurious sport jacket for him she could do. The best yarns, and she was pretty good. And she took it home to be finished, and the housekeeper put it in the laundry machine and it came back as thick as a rug and about this wide. [Laughs.] And she lived through it and then realized she was going to survive. But I liked her. And I had another one that I – would bring enough lunch for the two of us. And she lived at Laguna, or had a house at Laguna, and that's how I got there.

Well, then – oh, then and somehow in my research – and I had some friends; one was a teacher and one was a student with a little house out near SC [University of Southern California, Los Angeles], and somehow they said I could use the library at SC, and I went out there and there were people that could do that full time. And I said the students were very privileged to – that they didn't have to work and learn full time. So I went home for Christmas and said that I would like to resume architecture – at least I would enroll in the architectural

department at SC -- and my dad said, "Well, I'll pay your tuition, but as long as you're down there, you don't get anything else."

MS. FISCH: Oh, tuition was sizable.

MR. LARSEN: Yeah, I took French at Los Angeles City College, but I took the other classes at SC and moved out there and did get a bicycle to get to school on and land was very flat. And bicycling around Los Angeles, even on the flat with all those exotic trees that I didn't know, with big seed pods and interesting textures and bits of palm bark, and as I was learning textiles, I became so sensitive to all these exotic textures. And Southern California does have about more kinds of plant material growing than any place in the world.

MS. FISCH: Much of it imported, but –

MR. LARSEN: Yes, exotic. And you get up into Beverly Hills and the texture-play is just incredible. So I was – and I was trying to weave everything I could lay my hands on, you know. At one point I was doing wonderfully with some sea grass. It was glorious, a wonderful, dark olive and glossy, and it dried out, of course, and became brittle, but I tried it.

MS. FISCH: Were you weaving still at Dorothea's?

MR. LARSEN: Yes, I continued to do that. Then Mary Martin came out to play *Annie Get Your Gun*; this was at – still in the '40s,'48, and she and her rich husband came in and commissioned Dorothea to do some silly breakfast linens, and on them they wanted "Daddy loves Annie" and "Baby loves Annie" and "Madie loves Annie" and everybody loves Annie. And as this was such a silly, trite project, it was given to me and I had to weave in this funny lettering.

MS. FISCH: Good practice.

MR. LARSEN: Yeah, it took discipline and it had to be very tidy, and I did that and various things.

MS. FISCH: So you stayed at SC, then, for that spring semester?

MR. LARSEN: And summer semester.

And I had some wonderful classes and they weren't – oh, with – what was really interesting to me was philosophy. I took ethics and values and metaphysics, and that was what was really real, and the discipline of logic and everything about that I really like, but I also took a class in modern painting. Wonderful collections down there. Edward G. Robinson owned the best Gauguins in the world, and that funny Price man and so on.

MS. FISCH: Vincent Price, you mean?

MR. LARSEN: Vincent Price. The – Oh, and I did take an architecture –

MS. FISCH: Did you take architecture at all?

MR. LARSEN: I took some not studio classes, but lecture classes, and one of the things we did was a field trip out to see the Bel-Air Hotel going up. And we were told that this is the way it's going to be: from now on all hotels will be like this. [Laughs.] Which turned out not to be true, but I know I – in addition to philosophy I had some interesting classes and classmates, including one of them was a son of a radio king, in fact I think it was called King Radio or something like that, and he had 41 cars and took a different one to school every day.

And then I would take the streetcar down to Los Angeles City College for French.

MS. FISCH: That was in the days when streetcars were still there.

MR. LARSEN: On Vermont Avenue, yes. And that teacher was not uninteresting, but that was practically free as opposed to the –

MS. FISCH: Actually it probably was free.

MR. LARSEN: And they had very good teachers because they paid a lot. SC didn't – had prestige, so they didn't pay so much.

[Audio break.]

MS. FISCH: This is Arline Fisch interviewing Jack Lenor Larsen at LongHouse in East Hampton, Long Island, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, on Friday, February 6, 2004. This is disk number two.

MR. LARSEN: About the time that summer semester was over, my parents showed up.

MS. FISCH: Oh, they came to visit you?

MR. LARSEN: Mm-hmm. And I didn't realize it, but they were – had a bribe up their sleeve. If I'd just leave Southern California, they would release my grandfather's money and I could be financially independent.

MS. FISCH: That was a big incentive.

MR. LARSEN: And they would buy me a loom and so on. And I fell for it.

MS. FISCH: Were you ready to leave Los Angeles?

MR. LARSEN: Maybe I was. But my intention was to go ahead and get my degree and – but I wanted to do it in textiles, so I went back to the University of Washington.

MS. FISCH: They didn't have a textile program at USC did they?

MR. LARSEN: No, not at all. Glen Lukens was there in ceramics, and that was about all they had in craft. And he was starting to work in glass – slumped glass, that was sort of what he was interested in then.

So I had a very kindly advisor, a very senior man, who said, well, what you'll have to do is transfer to General Studies at the University of Washington, and that Professor Grace Denny is translating a big, important book from French into English and maybe you could work with her and earn credits.

MS. FISCH: That sounds nice.

MR. LARSEN: I knew Denny from being in her department with learning to weave. And that sounded okay and she was well along on that, but she was also starting to work on her classification of textiles. She had had a book in about its 20th printing called *Fabrics* [Grace Denny. 7th ed. Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1953]; a home ec book – a small one – a handbook. And that she kept revising frequently. She was also working on that, but – and maybe I even helped her on that some, but this new classification of fabrics was very interesting and scholarly. But my job on D'Harcourt was not translating from French to English, but working on structures, diagrams and reconstructions of these five-layered fabrics and all the strange things that are in that book to help – and most of them weren't even published, but they helped the writers describe what was going on when they could see diagrams. And there were a few others –

MS. FISCH: Now, did you work from actual textiles, or you worked from the D'Harcourt book?

MR. LARSEN: Yes, I worked from the D'Harcourt book. Irene Emery was doing all her reconstructions with white cotton cord –

MS. FISCH: And was she at the University of Washington?

MR. LARSEN: No, but she and [Adele Coulin] Weibel, who was at DIA [Detroit Institute of Art, Michigan], were top textile gurus – scholarly types – and Weibel was also interested in Pre-Columbian fabrics. I later met her when I was at Cranbrook [Cranbrook Academy of Art, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan] and sold her some things. Well, as it turned out my best friend in Seattle at that time was this princely Chinese from Lima named Chan Khan, and his father had built the parks in Miraflores and – that series of parks -- and he was ambassador from China to the west coast countries of –

MS. FISCH: Of Latin America?

MR. LARSEN: Of South America. I think Ecuador, Chile, and Peru, and his headquarters was Peru – Lima. And doing all kinds of things. He was underwriting studies in doing colored – growing colored cotton and –

MS. FISCH: This was the father?

MR. LARSEN: Yes, and very wealthy. He was the last descendant of Kubla Khan.

MS. FISCH: With all that that implies.

MR. LARSEN: And been trained in England. He had been attached to the English embassy in Vienna after the First World War, bought a lot of the Hapsburg jewels, and they realized that they were inbred, and he – they started marrying as far outside as possible. His wife was the last Hawaiian princess and their house became the presidential mansion. It was fabulous. Two Duesenbergs, 32 servants, and my young friend had never dressed himself till he came to Seattle, and he arrived with great trunks of white alligator made in Argentina. He had silk

sheets, linen sheets, fur blankets, Chinese blankets – unbelievable.

MS. FISCH: And how did you meet him?

MR. LARSEN: He was in architecture. Sort of the key person in Northwest architecture in Seattle was Roland Terry. And Roland had won a scholarship when he graduated for a year in South America and spent a lot of time being hosted by the Khans in Lima. And so this young boy – the son – when he went away to architecture school, it was to Seattle, and his idea was to stay in school forever. He was there as an undergraduate for, like, 17 years, but because his father had died young and he'd been brought up by servants and his mother spent a lot of time in Paris and so on, but because his father had been so good to the Peruvians, he – Chan had the right to sign out antiquities, and Pennsylvania or the Smithsonian or whatever could dig down there, they needed Chan's signature to get them out.

And the architect Roland Terry decided, well, that might be useful, and his aged mother was living with him was sort of aristocratic, but a widow. And they started importing the best Pre-Columbian fabrics to come into America. The collections in Boston, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania, Chicago, Brooklyn -- all came through Seattle.

MS. FISCH: Oh, I didn't know that.

MR. LARSEN: In the '40s. It was known as the Terry Collection.

MS. FISCH: He imported them and then sold them?

MR. LARSEN: Yeah, to the right people, and the most famous thing was a Paracas mantle about the size of this room. I remember reading about – well, it had come to Seattle. Anyway, so I became more and more fascinated with fabrics, and finally I was being even sort of paid. I think it was just to earn some credits for working on them and learning more about weaving. I had these things in my hands.

MS. FISCH: What an incredible experience.

MR. LARSEN: The most incredible fabrics I've ever seen. Ones made out of human hair, and some of them I've never seen the likes since. I don't even know where they went, but –

MS. FISCH: But this was your first encounter with ethnographic stuff.

MR. LARSEN: Yeah. Yeah.

MS. FISCH: Wow.

MR. LARSEN: I was starting at the top. They also had some metal and some pots, but mostly textiles. And also knowing someone of such a different background was sort of an eye-opener.

MS. FISCH: Now, was he involved in textiles, or he was, sort of, the means by which they came?

MR. LARSEN: No, he wasn't. No, he wasn't. And after – when he was about to graduate and he finished with school and lost his visa in architecture, he switched to interior architecture and started over.

MS. FISCH: Another degree.

MR. LARSEN: He was sort of charming. We had a very well-known teacher named Hope Foote, and when – before he switched to her school, which was in the art department, she was down in architecture, and he met her and he said, "And what are you taking here?" She was about 50. And so he did well with her for a long time with that kind of charm, but –

MS. FISCH: So what did you learn from this, being able to handle these textiles? Were you looking at the structure, or you were –

MR. LARSEN: Yeah, that's what it was.

MS. FISCH: You were analyzing it.

MR. LARSEN: Yeah. How were they woven? And some of those dimensional things in five layers, I think no one still knows. They were probing how might they have been done, but I think no one quite knew. The ladies in the East tried – couldn't get that far, but D'Harcourt really covered the gamut.

Also Bennett and Bird had come out with a book then.

MS. FISCH: Bennett and?

MR. LARSEN: It was Junius Bird.

MS. FISCH: Oh yeah.

MR. LARSEN: Who I came to know. And the older one was Bennett. On the earliest Peruvian fabrics before the – from getting from fishnets and things to the –

MS. FISCH: This was before it got to the –

MR. LARSEN: To the art stage, and so that was sort of interesting too, and they were also – they looked more like my cord structures, some of these things –the earliest things they were finding. They were a lot of them very utilitarian.

MS. FISCH: Who owned the textiles that you were examining? Was it the University which owned them?

MR. LARSEN: Chan.

MS. FISCH: Chan.

MR. LARSEN: Yes, eventually when Roland's mother died -- she wasn't helping with the mounting and cleaning and so forth, and they became more Chan's and less Terry's. Roland was also very busy with architecture. Roland Terry in the meantime became my first client, and I was doing commissions. It was all in the family. So that was very interesting, and as a result I started taking anthro classes at the University of Washington and their specialty was – sort of reasonably – Northwest Coast, but we had a famous head of that department, Erna Gunther, who had done her field work in Southwest and knew something about weaving too. And in the Northwest we had basketry and a fabulous collection. It had originally been made for the Seattle World's Fair. It was in one of those old buildings, but probably the best collection of Northwest –

MS. FISCH: No one wanted to send them back afterwards.

MR. LARSEN: No, they somehow became permanent and –

MS. FISCH: Now that's the collection that Ed Rossbach worked on extensively.

MR. LARSEN: Yes. And they're now in the ugliest building on campus. It's just awful. I was there recently, and one of the people in my class is still – became head of Northwest Coast Studies at that school. He's still around.

MS. FISCH: How did you hook up with Ed Rossbach, who I didn't realize taught at the University of Washington [1947-50].

MR. LARSEN: Yes, well, that's the other part of the story, that Ed had come from Cranbrook with Cranbrook looms. He'd been – he took a master's in art education at Columbia [Columbia University, New York, NY; M.A. in art education, 1941], and he was a painter and I think he went to Cranbrook as a potter. But he took another master's from Cranbrook and became a weaver [MFA in weaving and ceramics, 1947], and with him around it was decided that there'd be a new class in creative weaving that he would teach in home ec – for the art department but in the home ec school. And Jack would be his graduate assistant.

MS. FISCH: Oh, the stars were in alignment there.

MR. LARSEN: Yeah. And the only problem – everything was glorious except I'd never had an 8:00 class in my whole life. I was a night person. I usually worked till 4:00 in the morning. And I finally had a student – I'd moved close to the campus, right on the edge of the campus, and I had a student who came and got me to those 8:00 classes. It would be so embarrassing to come in late, because Ed was so vulnerable; he'd accept it, which made it worse.

They were, sort of, long studio classes. They lasted some three hours I think.

MS. FISCH: So he taught – he actually taught weaving?

MR. LARSEN: Yeah, and I translated for him. He was very abstract and he wouldn't explain what it was all about. He would just say, "Here is the yarn, this is what I want," and I'd explain to the students what to do next. Yeah, and it was very interesting. We had a very masculine woman whose – I think her major was physical education. She'd been a major in the Women's Army Corps and wasn't so young, but knowing nothing about art or color or anything, she was sort of a primitive. What she did was totally original. No one had ever seen colors like that or patterns like that before. That was sort of interesting to me, that you could approach it from a different angle.

And then spring semester, my third quarter system, our third time around we had a special class for the painters, and that was the wildest –

MS. FISCH: And there were painters who wanted to study weaving?

MR. LARSEN: Yeah.

MS. FISCH: That's surprising.

MR. LARSEN: They needed, I guess, an elective. And their whole idea was if you're giving us rules, they're to be broken. And what messes they got into! That – trying – you know, breaking all the rules, but that was also interesting to see.

MS. FISCH: But you were sort of the technical assistant?

MR. LARSEN: I was the glue, yes.

MS. FISCH: Right, and so you'd have to rescue their effort.

MR. LARSEN: Try to. There was one girl – they were sharing a loom, most of these students. Two of them would decide on a warp and they'd each weave on it – set it up and weave on it. And this one girl somehow hadn't left space for the other one. Some conflict, but she had, I guess, advanced the warp and woven on her half of it and –

MS. FISCH: And then think the warp would go back.

MR. LARSEN: Misconceptions like that. But anyway, I became friends with Ed, and at the same time he was courting Katherine [Westphal].

MS. FISCH: Oh, I was going to ask you if he'd already married Katherine or was in the process.

MR. LARSEN: No, they were courting. She was the wildest woman I'd ever met. I talked to her yesterday.

MS. FISCH: Oh, you did?

MR. LARSEN: We are good friends because she mellowed and became relatively conventional – relatively. Anyway, she'd been teaching at the University of Wyoming. She came with – she wore red cowboy boots, and when she was painting – she did murals and things – she would take her wig off and she had no hair at all. And her language was a little rough and she was totally unconventional, and very short and round, and Ed was very long, and to see the two of them walking through the campus hand in hand was hilarious. Rather touching.

MS. FISCH: Was she an artist?

MR. LARSEN: Yeah, she was a painter.

MS. FISCH: Painter.

MR. LARSEN: And a muralist. She made large strokes. And originally from California.

MS. FISCH: How long did Ed teach that class?

MR. LARSEN: Not so long.

MS. FISCH: Before he went to Berkeley [University of California, Berkeley]. He went from Washington to Berkeley, I assume. [Rossbach began teaching at Berkeley in 1950.]

MR. LARSEN: Yes. And meantime he got me a scholarship to Cranbrook and – and, well –

MS. FISCH: It was his idea that you should go to Cranbrook?

MR. LARSEN: Yes. Well, no. What came first was I was wanting to get through school so quickly, being I changed majors and dropped out for a bit and so on, I was in school longer than I intended and became an insider once I was a graduate assistant and so forth, and got to like it. And I thought, well, maybe I'll just *stay* on campus. And I was still very involved with philosophy, and I decided my approach, then, would be I will teach – I will get a master's, and I will teach weaving until I can teach philosophy. And that was going to be my profession.

MS. FISCH: That was your goal.

MR. LARSEN: And it turned out the only two places where I could easily get a master's in weaving was Berkeley with a thesis and such, and it was still under – sort of under the thumb of the anthropology department.

MS. FISCH: And Ed wasn't teaching there.

MR. LARSEN: No. No.

MS. FISCH: Who was? Was there someone there?

MR. LARSEN: A good weaver, well-known, and I got to know her. And the weaving was set up at Berkeley as a handmaiden to the anthropology department to make reconstructions for –

MS. FISCH: So it was sort of a research program.

MR. LARSEN: It was very much tied in with anthro, and I did a thesis on some modern implications of Pre-Columbian weaving, and somehow I had to do research in Berkeley because they had some – because of their emphasis on weaving was Pre-Columbian – so I got to know both anthropology people and this nice older teacher, and in the meantime the decorative arts department was growing with the GIs and such, and Ed was offered a job there, and I think in the meantime he'd married Katherine and she was from Berkeley. She'd gone to school there. And so they went there and she began to teach at Davis [University of California, Davis].

MS. FISCH: It was so early. I didn't think she taught at Davis until much later.

MR. LARSEN: Well, I'm not sure about that, but eventually she went to Davis.

MS. FISCH: Eventually she started.

MR. LARSEN: In the meantime I went from Cranbrook to the East, and I wouldn't see them so much.

MS. FISCH: Well, let's talk a little bit about Cranbrook. What year was it that you went to Cranbrook?

MR. LARSEN: In '50.

MS. FISCH: 1950?

MR. LARSEN: Mm-hmm.

MS. FISCH: And how long did you stay? Did you do two years?

MR. LARSEN: I did two years' work in one year.

MS. FISCH: So you only stayed one year.

MR. LARSEN: And that was sort of spectacular. It was – in the meantime, [Eliel] Saarinen had died in April or May, and Cranbrook had been set up as an ivory tower, so the idea was that life and art is going to be very hard and you should be fortified with a few years of grace before you're thrown into this maelstrom.

MS. FISCH: Now, who taught weaving?

MR. LARSEN: Marianne Strengell, and Loja Saarinen was still there, and there was a famous teacher at Kingswood as well – another Swede, and a man who taught power loom weaving, so I set off for the *East*. That's what Seattle people thought of Michigan – it was back East.

MS. FISCH: That was back East, right.

MR. LARSEN: And on the train finally I'd switched in Chicago onto Grand Trunk Railroad, which went up to Canada, got off it with my trunks and things at Cranbrook, and went by taxi, way up to this remarkable school.

MS. FISCH: Did you enjoy being there?

MR. LARSEN: I loved it. Well, it was spectacular. The only rule then was that you couldn't be in the studio after 11:30 p.m. or before 7:00 in the morning. And we read that backwards – that we were there from 7:00 in the morning till 11:30 at night and would then take work home and mend our fabrics or whatever after that. And they fed us and –

MS. FISCH: You lived on campus?

MR. LARSEN: Yeah. The – very interesting and –

MS. FISCH: What kinds of things did you do there?

MR. LARSEN: I wove some rugs, which was new to me, and we made exhibition lengths and –

MS. FISCH: Is that sort of three yards?

MR. LARSEN: Yeah, exactly – full width and – first of all you made the samples, but then from those you made exhibition lengths. There were lots of places to buy exotic yarns in Detroit then. Plus, because of Cranbrook it was more of a crafts center and there were people buying and commissioning all of this stuff.

MS. FISCH: But I mean, I don't think of Detroit as being a textile center.

MR. LARSEN: No, no. It was a crafts center, but people bought handwoven fabrics and certainly handwoven rugs, and Marianne was very busy doing this. She had a lot of weavers on the outside weaving for her.

MS. FISCH: Who were some of your fellow students? Were there interesting fellow students?

MR. LARSEN: Niels Diffrient was there in architecture; he did industrial design – head of several important industrial design firms.

MS. FISCH: What's his last name again?

MR. LARSEN: Diffrient. D-I-F-F-R-I-E-N-T. That's his Freedom Chair over there – in fact he's quite successful with industrials. He also did the Lincoln Chair and this chair. And he married Helena Hernmarck.

MS. FISCH: Oh.

MR. LARSEN: Her third husband; and I knew them both before they knew each other, so they're good friends. And my particular class wasn't so illustrious, I don't think, but there were some artists and painters and –

MS. FISCH: But there wasn't anybody else in the textile area that –

MR. LARSEN: That succeeded?

MS. FISCH: That went on.

MR. LARSEN: Well, it was mostly a school for teachers.

MS. FISCH: Oh, I didn't know that.

MR. LARSEN: Yeah. That's what you did. You got a master's and then –

MS. FISCH: And then you got a job.

MR. LARSEN: Cranbrook people – this was in the – when all the art departments were booming after the war and they all wanted Cranbrook graduates. And that's why I was there.

MS. FISCH: But once you got there, did you realize that teaching wasn't what you wanted?

MR. LARSEN: Slowly. First of all, we saw Marianne. Her studio was beyond ours, so she had to walk by our windows to get to her studio, and she also went to work at 7:00 in the morning and worked hard, but she also left and she was doing projects here and there with Saarinen, and she was working for [Florence "Shu"] Knoll, and she was doing this and going to Finland and – it seemed rather a glamorous life. Hardworking, so she was a success and fairly well-known in different – in architectural ways as opposed to –

And finally – I mean, by spring I was thinking, well, maybe before I become a professor, I should profess my profession. And we had spring break in May and people in the design disciplines tended to go off to New York and go as a gang sharing expenses to drive there, so I went along and I took a portfolio. And that seemed to be the thing to do. I hadn't thought of it seriously, but I wanted to do it with vigor, and I called up everybody in the phonebook – everybody I'd ever heard of in the fabric business -- and was saying I'm from Cranbrook, which was magical in those days. The whole Knoll gang were Cranbrook – [Charles and Ray] Eames, Saarinen, Shu Knoll, [Harry] Bertoia – all those people who had sensed we were a lot of geniuses, and they would see me and then they would send me off to see somebody else. I had about 15 appointments or so, and I wasn't particularly job hunting, I was just getting some reaction.

Well, I was saying that I had this interview with the team of Herbert Rothschild –important furniture people. Anyway, they said they didn't think what I was doing could be manufactured, but they didn't know that business, but what they were involved with was selling fabric as part of their furniture, and they knew that what I was

doing couldn't be sold. So this is my big introduction. And Herbert Rothschild much later wrote to me saying he'd made a lot of mistakes in his life – he'd never been that far wrong, and that he was glad that it was a mistake because he's enjoyed living with my fabrics.

MS. FISCH: So you went back to Cranbrook.

MR. LARSEN: I did. But while I was in these many interviews I had, and people I met, was Knoll, who had Cranbrook associations of all kinds, including my teacher, and the head of fabrics there had taken my portfolio in to show Mrs. Knoll, and I learned later that Mrs. Knoll said, "He looks too individual to conform to our setting," and so – and if I – Knoll was so good in those days that if they'd offered me a job, I would have taken it. They didn't.

But I did meet Arundel Clarke, who had come over from England in the '30s. Arundel.

MS. FISCH: Arundel Clarke.

MR. LARSEN: That's an English town. A-R-U-N-D-E-L, Clarke with an E, who came to start a modern store at Rockefeller Center, and later he founded Knoll Textiles and now was supplying architects with special-order fabrics, and he sort of liked what I was trying to do and later wrote that if I would come to New York that he would like to work with me. And I met the gang at Thaibok, which was some people who had been together in the war who started selling Jim Thompson's Thai silks in America – went under the name of T-H-A-I-B-O-K. Thaibok.

And they were very open, informal, and maybe we could get together. And they later wrote saying they'd back me to design a collection for them if I came to New York. New York City was the first place I have ever felt at home. I met a chap – a friend of a friend -- who had been to Black Mountain [Black Mountain College, Black Mountain, North Carolina], and he'd also woven with Dorothy Liebes and studied – he was a – he was doing fabric designs – print designs, and he'd also studied with Anni Albers at Black Mountain, so we had something in common. And he introduced me to New York City and we went up to Harlem to visit a famous – Richard Lippold was up there, and did all – it was just the first place – it was so European in those days as opposed to any place, even compared to Chicago or Detroit or the West Coast cities that I knew. And that's what I liked about it, and it was nothing new about it. Everything had been sooted over and there were no new buildings which were all right, and it felt to me like it was where Bermuda is, halfway to Europe, and I loved it. I felt at home there.

So I went – I finished up at Cranbrook, had a degree show, and a friend from the West Coast came and fetched me, and we drove with his grandmother across the country and – dreadful experience.

MS. FISCH: You mean across back to Seattle?

MR. LARSEN: Back to San Francisco. To drive all day long, and this was 1951, and stay in some awful place. We also didn't have much money. The food was deplorable; it was so boring, you couldn't get a drink in most places – even a beer in most of those places in the Midwest in those days. Five or six days, and we weren't such good friends after that. And I stayed with him for a while in Mill Valley under eucalyptus trees and they dripped from the fog all the time and it was sunless. And I almost took a studio in San Francisco in the old Flatiron building, which was $65 for several rooms. But anyway, I decided I wasn't getting on very well with this person, I would go back to Seattle for the rest of the summer.

And I in the meantime Win Anderson, who became my associate, had stayed on in Seattle to finish up my commissions when I went to Cranbrook. And then she said she would like to join me at Cranbrook, and she came on at mid-year and was there a year and a half or so. But she was back in Seattle. Her folks had a big old house and I stayed with her for a while, and then I stayed over near Chan Khan for a while, and I started weaving pillows and selling them. I had lots of yarns and I was told that there was a good agent in San Francisco who would probably like to sell my pillows; and they did. And then I – oh, in the meantime I had offers that summer from University Champlain-Urbana.

MS. FISCH: University of Illinois.

MR. LARSEN: University of Illinois, to teach there, and someplace in Iowa that had a Saarinen building – some small town. Cedar Rapids. It had a Saarinen art school or something like that. And I could teach there and have a wonderful studio and be free four or five days a week. It was a little tempting.

MS. FISCH: Except that it was Iowa.

MR. LARSEN: Except that it was Iowa. [Laughs.] And I really wanted to go to New York. And I finally figured that if I could pack up all those looms and 39 boxes of loom – of yarns -- and so forth and move to the Midwest, I could also move to New York, and so I did. And I sent all this stuff slow rail freight. It took about a month – COD.

MS. FISCH: So you'd be there when it got there.

MR. LARSEN: Mm-hmm. And I went by way of San Francisco, partly to see my new agent, and they treated me like a superstar. This was Dorothy and Harry Lawenda, Kneedler –Fauchère, who are still the biggest agents in California, and they were then just starting out. They later started Jackson Square in San Francisco. And they sort of adopted me and suggested I had to stay on, and Harry Lawenda had designed a sofa that was going to be on the cover of *House and Garden*. There was a big Pacifica show; it was going to be the biggest thing in America, and wouldn't I show my fabrics with Marguerite Wildenhain, the Bauhaus potter who was at Pond Farm [Guerneville, California].

MS. FISCH: Mm-hmm.

MR. LARSEN: So they arranged a two-man show in Pacifica, and I wove on Mary Walker Phillips's looms fabric for the cover of this *House and Garden* story. And in the mean – while I was weaving, they were showing me the life. Dorothy had convinced Trader Vic to start a restaurant. They'd all been out in Asia, she and Trader Vic, and some of these people were old China hands. She had been in a Japanese prison, and her then-husband had been on that Death March out of Corregidor and died. Three children in a Japanese prison camp, all during the war – an interesting lady. And anyway, they were showing me a new, glamorous life. I think they had a lot of money – big house and servants -- and I was having a fine time.

MS. FISCH: And you were dazzled, huh?

MR. LARSEN: And one of the people they knew was Barbara Dorn, who was designing a special modern house for the crown prince of Egypt over in Orinda, and Barbara started a designer show. She introduced Eames chairs and things to the West Coast, was into modernity. She started a showroom in Miami and wouldn't I – couldn't she represent me? And she did.

So anyway, with the loitering in San Francisco so long, I had to cash in my rail ticket and buy a bus ticket, which was a lot cheaper, and I bought a bag of English muffins to eat on the trip east. And off I went. I got out of the bus to see the modern capitol in Lincoln, Nebraska, and the bus went on without me with everything on it. When I got to New York, Arundel Clarke said he'd bought a new building for his new textile business and it was at 73rd between Fifth and Madison, and he couldn't really hire me, but if I wanted to fix up the top floor, which was four rooms, I could have it rent free for six months and then I'd have to pay him some rent. So – it was good –

MS. FISCH: What a deal. Right.

MR. LARSEN: Yes, it's what I could afford, and I sanded floors and fixed it up. And hired Ginger Martindale – you know Martindale's bookstore in Los Angeles? It used to be *the* bookstore in Los Angeles. She'd gone to Beverly Hills High School with Liz Taylor and was sort of a debutante, but she didn't want to go to college. She was an independent girl. Her sister was at Julliard in music, and she wanted to weave, so she was my affordable assistant. A good weaver, and I was happy to see her come at 9:00 in the morning and happy to see her leave at 5:00 in the evening. I could work by myself after that, and –

MS. FISCH: And you were continuing to produce pillows, or were you –

MR. LARSEN: No, I was doing some work for Arundel, and he was, sort of, taking me to mills and showing me the ropes of textiles. For a long time I was the only one in this empty building, while he was building out of his showrooms and a warehouse in the basement, and so on – and I had all kinds of adventures. I would lose the key and I'd have to either drop into the coal cellar about 20 feet in the dark to get in, or climb the wall until I could find an open window, and I'm scared to death of height. And once it was the fourth floor before – I was most scared of going down the opposite – I kept climbing this building. There was some adventures there.

And I was furnishing with – on Thursday night people could throw things out of their apartment and somebody would come along and pick them up, and I would find things: tabletops or things that I could furnish this place with. This local Gristedes, and they opened an account for me. He asked me how much I made, and I said, "Well, I don't have any income." He says, "Well then, I'll give you an account. It's the rich people that never pay me." So at Gristedes I met Ruth, and I asked her what she did and she said, "I cleans." So, I got a housekeeper two days a week to look after us and she was a good sport. She was – we sat – we had a table this high to eat on and she would have her lunch sitting on the floor too. You get into those kinds of things –

Finally, Barbara Dorn brought Jens Risom along, who had designed furniture for Knoll. He had started his own business. It was going great guns, sort of handcrafted office furniture out of wood. He said, "Come down to the showroom and then you can have any furniture you want. I just can't see you living in these empty – bleak, empty rooms," and I decided, well, I'd rather have the empty space than his furniture. So I had a chair, but with my fabric on it that had been in an exhibit. And Arundel loaned me a famous bed he used in a model room. Heavy as lead; it was sort of this way. He'd done a room for prayer and the bed was part of it, and they had to

borrow that bed for photo sessions every once in a while and carry it up and down the stairs. It weighed a ton. I had a bed, but –

MS. FISCH: And how many rooms did you have?

MR. LARSEN: I had four. In the meantime, my other account was Thaibok. As they were afraid that Thailand would fall to the Reds and they wouldn't have anything to sell, and they sort of liked their lifestyle, and so wouldn't I design an American collection (and they had the money) and then they could sell that?

MS. FISCH: So the American collection would be purchased by you?

MR. LARSEN: In America. And they were an unusual, very uncommercial group. One of them had a design degree and the girl from Parsons [Parsons School of Design, New York, NY], one of them was a Burden, was a socialite, and worked in the showroom. And so when I said, "I really can't go any further without meeting with your mill people," they said, "We don't have mill people. Don't you know any?" So I found one. And I had somebody helping me with commissions knew an Italian who had gone bankrupt out in Patterson [New Jersey]; a super weaver, just wasn't a businessperson. This was Richard Bolan, whose family were weavers from Southern Italy.

MS. FISCH: What was his last name?

MR. LARSEN: B-O-L-A-N. And we rented one loom.

MS. FISCH: One power loom?

MR. LARSEN: One power loom in a place he found out there, and somehow I bought Canadian linen and the yarns and got them dyed, and we did these fabrics for – they called it the American Random Collection. And they did have a hotshot public relations man: Alfred Auerbach, who had connected Eames to Herman Miller and knew the ropes. And Alfred saw that we – with press, came in to see these things and so forth, and Frank Lloyd Wright came and bought 200 yards of one for Taliesin East.

MS. FISCH: Wow.

MR. LARSEN: So that was pretty nice. And so it was something of a success, and I learned about producing with someone else's money. They paid me as fast as the money was going out. Then I worked for another modern company that didn't work so successfully, and I had several agents that Barbara had helped me with who were selling modern furniture and sort of took on my line. None of them really worked and we had one that worked better.

Oh, and my second employee was a social register divorceé named Marion Miller, and she had two boys and she found an apartment for them, but Ginger was jealous of this older woman who knew more and was so connected. So Marion took over the office, and she could type and she did the billing. I'd been typing invoices and stuff. I never was a typist, but I had done all that till then on my college portable. But anyway, Marion took over that and she – at one point, Jock Whitney sent his people down to help us with business.

MS. FISCH: Because of her?

MR. LARSEN: Yes. Yes. She had those kinds of connections. Well, it turned out I was smart enough to know that they know a lot more – they know about business, but they don't know about our business with what they were trying to advise us. It had nothing to do with where we were.

We should continue another time.

[Audio break.]

MS. FISCH: This is Arline Fisch interviewing Jack Lenor Larsen.

Okay, you were saying that you did a lot of lecturing around the country?

MR. LARSEN: Usually in museums, and I did some jurying as well, but with that travel money I would visit our showrooms, which were nationalizing. And I'd be gone for a week or two – even if it was in the United States. So Win would help to keep things moving along while I was gone. She was also single, as opposed to Marion and other employees, and so when I worked nights and weekends, she would work with me, so she was also a companion and certainly a colleague. Eventually, when we traveled (she went with me on the African trip and the Indian trip), and I don't know how both of us could be gone for six weeks on end, but we were.

MS. FISCH: And things managed to stay together until you got back?

MR. LARSEN: Mm-hmm. Things weren't quite as frantic in mid-century as they became later.

MS. FISCH: Well, I was going to ask you, how was business in the '50s? What were the challenges?

MR. LARSEN: It wasn't as fast-paced as it became later. The deadline constraints weren't quite so critical. A year after Win arrived, I hired Bob Carr, who traveled across country with a new baby for a $50-a-week job, and he became production manager. He's the chap I mentioned who had been at Claremont and taken a master's, I think in ceramics, but he was a weaver. And he'd come in and bought yarns from me when I was at Dorothea Hulse.

MS. FISCH: So you knew him for a long time before you hired him.

MR. LARSEN: Well, I didn't really know him, but I interviewed him in Los Angeles when I was out there, and about that time I realized I've seen him before. And I had. But quite amazing that for so little money he moved across country. And so from then on, Win was assisting me in design and he was doing production.

MS. FISCH: Now, when you say he was doing production, were you actually weaving materials?

MR. LARSEN: We were handweaving, but production also meant ordering all the yarns for our expanding powerweaving business, and these were really powerwoven handlooms.

MS. FISCH: Well, now, tell me a little bit about that. That's such an interesting concept: handcraft on power looms.

MR. LARSEN: Well, the Cranbrook style that I learned from Marianne was mixing a number of yarns, usually in the warp – of different characters, different texture. And when we did power-loom weaving at Cranbrook, that's what we did, so usually it was one, two, three, four. I mixed mine all up, and then did a random repeat, sort of like grasses or bark or whatever, and that became a Larsen style and we did quite a bit of that. And normal weavers couldn't do it, but my battalions were willing to do anything, and so we imitated handweaves on the power loom on relatively short warps and sometimes piece dyed.

MS. FISCH: So if you were doing a production order, how much would that mean?

MR. LARSEN: I think we never wove – warped on power looms -- less than 100 yards, but I think sometimes – I think eventually we had enough looms that we could leave a loom idle if we didn't weave it all off, and usually we could weave more than one color way on a warp, or we dyed it different colors and we – for piece dyes we did keep some stock of natural goods. But real mill people thought we were still handweaving, because it wasn't fast.

MS. FISCH: Because of the quantity and the style.

MR. LARSEN: The small quantity and it was slow, and quality was more important than speed. But it meant supervising all this from New York City and ordering all those yarns and keeping track of inventories of fabrics and inventories of yarns and all that.

MS. FISCH: It was just a massive administrative task.

MR. LARSEN: Yeah, so the production department had a lot to do, and it grew. Bob soon had assistants.

MS. FISCH: And you were still in the building on 73rd?

MR. LARSEN: No.

MS. FISCH: Or you had moved?

MR. LARSEN: At the end of that year I was outgrowing the space, and I was offered a handloom factory for five cents on the dollar. In fact, it was $1,500 and it was a lot of big, heavy production looms – dobby looms; fly shuttle looms – and weavers to weave on them – black girls.

MS. FISCH: And where was this?

MR. LARSEN: On East 22nd Street.

MS. FISCH: Oh, nice.

MR. LARSEN: Between Park and Broadway on the south side of the street, and it was the parlor floor of what had once been a brownstone probably, and it was a fairly large space and it had automatic spinning and winding

equipment, big warping reels, and some yarns.

MS. FISCH: So this was a business that was defunct and had come on the market.

MR. LARSEN: Yeah. And I asked my dad for a loan, and he said it was time I learned to be independent, and so Eleanor – my patron Eleanor Lloyd Richards -- said she would put up the money and I could pay her back monthly.

MS. FISCH: Was she in New York?

MR. LARSEN: She had a townhouse in Upper East Side and a house in Rye. A few other houses – an aristocratic lady. Her family were Dutch New Amsterdam. They used to own the Upper East Side. Interestingly, she was the patron of weavers.

MS. FISCH: Why was that? I mean, she just had an interest in that?

MR. LARSEN: Mm-hmm. I'd heard about her at Cranbrook. She'd written saying that particularly the girls who were weaving at Cranbrook should know how to spin. She'd like to come and teach them. And they said, okay. And she arrived with a flock of sheep and a car too big for the garage and a chauffeur. This was before my time, but she was a legend. And she'd written to me, and the letter caught up and got to me about when I arrived in New York, saying if I ever came to New York, please call.

MS. FISCH: Wonderful opportunity.

MR. LARSEN: And I did, and I had lunch probably the next day with she – maybe she and the chauffeur. And she sent me a check for $500, which was enough to bail out my COD shipment. [Laughs.] And we did things together. Through her, I met [George] Nakashima, a lot of people she was friendly with. We made trips and I visited her house in Rye and she often invited my friends up on Sunday. She was a Japanophile, and when I finally had some parties, she said, "Well, you can't send people home without dinner," and she would send over dinner for my friends.

MS. FISCH: What a very nice friend. So this was the start of your real production business –

MR. LARSEN: Right.

MS. FISCH: – in New York.

MR. LARSEN: Yes, we had space and I bought bigger and bigger looms. A 12-foot-wide loom, a nine-foot-wide rug loom, a seven-and-a-half-foot loom, in addition to these upholstery looms.

MS. FISCH: This really enabled you to expand your business enormously.

MR. LARSEN: Yeah, it was a – yeah, I recognized it to be a major jump forward. That's why I felt so lucky to get it, and the price was within reach even then, and there was even room enough there to keep some stock for the incoming powerweaves.

MS. FISCH: Now did you only do the weaving there? You didn't have your design studio there?

MR. LARSEN: Well, yes, we were doing that as well, and there was a room, smaller than this, was sort of the office and showroom. And I eventually had an opening at that first year in this production space, which we cleaned up as well as we could and had a bar and so on. And I worked all night – two nights in a row, I think, all night, and some of the press came, and Dorothy Liebes came and wove on the big loom with me and so on. And then Mrs. Richards came and said, "Jack, you're dead tired. Let me take you home." And I'd had a few drinks and I was dead tired, and I eventually came back and the party of course was over, and I had missed the last part of it.

MS. FISCH: Now at some point you did a project in Haiti. Was that at this same time period?

MR. LARSEN: Yes. 1952 – exactly. This is Barbara Dorn, who was aristocratic also. It was interesting. She hated silver jewelry. She thought that was for peasants. Her class didn't wear silver. But she was a woman of means and very secure, and sort of an artist-type husband, and the husband was a supporter of John Cage, and that's how I met John. She was in town every month, and she'd take me to dinner and take me to Broadway and to John's, and John would play for us.

And she'd been to Haiti. She was headquartered in Miami and was trying to sell for us. And she found a French painter who had noticed that the local ladies were rolling a magnolia fiber on their thigh to make wicks for little tin-can oil lamps, and the painter said, hey, you're making yarn, and if you make yarn, you can weave. So he

brought over a loom and taught them how to weave on it, and that's very beautiful – a plain woven of stubby Haitian cotton, and it wasn't really cotton. It was this magnolia fiber, which was silkier and waxier and stronger than cotton – more soil resisting. And Barbara suggested that they needed somebody to distribute these beautiful cloths and somebody to help them with color and design, and I should go down and help them.

MS. FISCH: Were they mostly weaving in white before you went?

MR. LARSEN: No, they had some color. Tended to be citrus colors: yellows and oranges, pale colors on a white warp. And so I went down, and there was a Creole family who was doing this – father and son – and they were sort of related to a man who had the most interesting hotel there that had once been the presidential palace, built in the 19th century. Mahogany gingerbread – the Olafson [Hotel] which is – it only had about a dozen rooms, but everyone who went through Port-au-Prince stayed there. And rather good food, a tiny pool, and the manager of it was friendly. and it was Big Doc time, which is now thought of as golden age. It was relatively peaceful and very beautiful and lots of gingerbread. Colorful – I had to buy a camera there was so much to photograph.

But because there was strife even then, there was very few tourists, and the few inns and hotels were the social centers of the whole country, but only one of them served dinner and orchestra and dancing every night, so we went to wherever that was each night.

MS. FISCH: An itinerate feast.

MR. LARSEN: And I learned that if you have a great handspun yarn like that, to give it variety, but it was dyed in a kettle in the backyard and that made it more interesting. You needed only one yarn and a simple weave to be wonderful. And I got DuPont down to help with the dyeing and introduced colored warps, which meant I could do more colors, and I did stripes and rugs – small rugs. And people loved it.

MS. FISCH: Now was this a production business for you?

MR. LARSEN: Yes.

MS. FISCH: You were importing it and marking it up?

MR. LARSEN: Yeah, we were importing it and selling it quite well.

MS. FISCH: How long did that project go on?

MR. LARSEN: For 25 years or so.

MS. FISCH: Oh, that's a long time.

MR. LARSEN: Yes, and Bob Carr started going down as production manager overseeing it, and he bought a house in Haiti, so Haiti became his territory. I didn't ever go back again.

MS. FISCH: But then you did go to some other countries and did similar things.

MR. LARSEN: Yeah. Well, that was the beginning of our handspun imports, and then I met a Hungarian woman who had lived in Morocco during the war. It turned out she was a Hungarian Jew, and it was good to be outside of Europe during the war. And Margit, M-A-R-G-I-T, Pinter, P-I-N-T-E-R. And she had figured out that the Berber weaving they made for burnooses and stuff out of, also, handspun and ungraded – very ungraded -- wool would make a terrific upholstery, and it did. And we started distributing it – these Moroccan fabrics. And she also knew, from Hungary, Marcel Breuer, and Breuer thought these handspun wools were the only upholstery that was like what he knew in Europe, and it was very durable and very soil resistant, and in addition to that it didn't compete with art, and that became very important, because whether it was an executive office or a collector's house, the one thing you didn't want was pattern or color that would compete with the paintings.

And Marcel was also the lead domino. What he did, Skidmore and other major architects thought was the right way to go.

MS. FISCH: So this was actually an inroad into the upholstery field.

MR. LARSEN: And into the executive office field, just as corporate headquarters buildings were beginning to boom.

MS. FISCH: Were you able to maintain the standard of quality from such a distance? I mean, I'm sure you had to –

MR. LARSEN: Well, Margit went back and forth there, and, yeah, it was pretty – the rule was it needed to be consistently inconsistent. When we could teach people that and then keep homogenizing it not to be different from one end to the other. We could have variety, and streaks they learned to like, as long as they were consistently so.

And then it was a problem that they had to be dyed pretty much like the sample. That was the other problem. You could have a sample that was years old, and they'd expect what was coming in to look like it. We – once we did a special with a strange, exotic European designer in New York, in which he had been lugging around a drapery sample of ours for so long that it was dirty, and we had to spray the production –

MS. FISCH: To look like it.

MR. LARSEN: – to look like a dirty sample. [Laughs.]

MS. FISCH: That's funny.

MR. LARSEN: Another job, it was a – people that used their New York apartment about once a year for a week a year or something, and we had some linen vertical blinds so we wove narrow by hand that would smell from the oil of the spinning or something and we'd have to spray the apartment before they arrived, and they didn't want us to have to take them back or reweave them. And I met the people later – years later -- and they laughed about this, but we did a lot of spraying in those days.

MS. FISCH: You also had a number of commissions early in your career, and I wonder what you think of them –

MR. LARSEN: A lot of them, and not just the famous ones, but at least half of our work was custom.

MS. FISCH: When you say custom, you mean a client that might be a designer – I mean decorator.

MR. LARSEN: Well, they were designers and architects, and it could as likely be a bank or something as a house. And if it was too big, we'd powerweave it, and otherwise we'd handweave it, and if we powerwove it, we usually had some left over, and we'd cut it into samples, and that's how the line grew.

MS. FISCH: So those commissions were actually adding to your repertoire?

MR. LARSEN: Right. And the thing is, in those days there weren't a lot of modern fabrics sitting around waiting to be bought. Knoll had half a dozen and a few other people had a few, but you needed a weaver. Then custom was so easy that when we introduced a fabric, we cut at least 100 yards for samples of each color swatch, and it costs money to do that and put a label on it and ship it out to showrooms, but if it's custom, you don't do that.

MS. FISCH: You just design –

MR. LARSEN: They give you 50 percent down, which we buy the yarns with, and some of our clients would pay us when it was delivered.

MS. FISCH: Oh, so you knew how much you had to produce?

MR. LARSEN: Yeah, so without much knowledge of the market we sold it before we made it. There was no risk there, and with an advance it was an easy way to grow. Someone starting out today would have a much harder time.

MS. FISCH: You did also do some big, major commissions – public commissions.

MR. LARSEN: Well, the Lever House [New York City], we had a lot of pluses starting when we did. First of all, Lever House was the first corporate tower in America and it had a lot of publicity.

MS. FISCH: I remember.

MR. LARSEN: And our drapery was the only fabric you could see, because the street floor was mostly open space. It was up on pillars. And that helped us, and the Good Design Shows were on at MoMA [Museum of Modern Art, New York, New York], and I think I had more – there were five years of them – I had more fabrics than any other person in those shows. There was at least one every year. Well, I think what happened, it opened in the Chicago market in January, and then it would come to the Museum of Modern Art later on, so –

MS. FISCH: So it had two audiences.

MR. LARSEN: Two audiences every year. Enormous press. There was more press for design and architecture immediately after the war than there was for fine arts. Exhibits all over, competitions all over, big stories in

every newspaper.

MS. FISCH: That's because no building had happened till after the war –

MR. LARSEN: Right, people were hungry to build and for design news and for change and for New Wave and for modernity.

MS. FISCH: So it was a really rich time for you to be producing?

[Cross talk.]

MR. LARSEN: Extraordinary. It was a *crest* of a wave, and not much competition, and Dorothy Liebes got more press than we did. And she had glamour and color and look – and all that, but mine were more appealing to – certainly for corporate headquarters, and the architects, they trusted me more. So it was –

MS. FISCH: So that was a really wonderful field for you.

MR. LARSEN: Fantastic. And if I wasn't in the studio working at night, I was out with my clients. There were all these design activities and openings, some of them mine. Things going on; and to me, that wasn't selling, it was great fun, and most of it didn't cost money. It wasn't benefit time yet.

MS. FISCH: You were a guest instead of a payer.

MR. LARSEN: Yes. Yes. And I enjoyed what I was doing and met people that were very influential – my mentors, and Edgar Kaufman, and they were also a generation older and more traveled, more experienced, more interesting. I had a wonderful time learning from them and they didn't mind a young protégé, and so we got along very well.

MS. FISCH: Well, for a very brief time you did some work in the fashion field, too, and I remember that you had a wonderful clothing store called –

MR. LARSEN: J. L. Arbiter.

MS. FISCH: Right, and I didn't know where the name came from.

MR. LARSEN: Well, there were several phases to it. I tried some apparel fabrics even at Cranbrook, not many, but a few, and there was a famous suit-maker in New York – expensive suit-maker -- and somehow I met her at the Museum of Modern Art, and she said come and show me your things, and I did. And she showed me her fabulous Scottish fabrics that cost about $4 a yard, 54 inches wide, and said, "Jack, you better stick to furnishings," that "we're not as nice as those people are and we don't pay nearly so much." So that was good advice.

But then, to keep Ginger and my colored girls busy when we didn't have orders, I started doing one-of-a-kind suitings out of precious fibers, and these were odd lots of camel hair and all kinds – mink – spun mink, all kinds of silks, and all kinds of exotic yarns, and it was sort of one-of-a-kind. And even if I made a longer warp, I would change the weft so they were all unusual. And somehow along the way I found the right tailor for these, and he was also showing them to some of his clients, including the Duke and Duchess, who ordered suits out of them and then didn't pay him.

MS. FISCH: Of course. They're famous for that.

MR. LARSEN: And so they thought that I shouldn't be paid either. I said, "Well that isn't my problem." But then a young Jewish boy and his mother – I think at 73rd Street – came to see me, and he was just out of Parsons. He was from Atlanta, and he was just out of Parsons, and he couldn't decide on the summer one or the winter one, and his mother said, "Well, Joe, as you're just starting out, get both. You can't afford not to." And I thought, how different than my life. [Laughs.] Plus paying tailors for both. He was a rich young man in my book, but we did some of that as well, but not too much.

MS. FISCH: But didn't you have shops?

MR. LARSEN: At Thaibok the head man, I guess even president of this little operation, was a unusual man named Manning Field, and he was sort of – he was unusual in every way. He'd been part of the American Field Service, and which was mostly very rich young men that went off to ambulance corps in the beginning of the war. He wasn't rich, but he had gone to a very special, progressive school and sort of fit in with those people, and he had unusual ideas. And after about the third year I entertained merging with Thaibok, and that seemed like a good idea, but they were rich. They had a lot of money. They were buying the heaviest weight silk – this one – for $4 and selling it for $16, and rather quickly. And so they had money and I didn't, so we couldn't figure out how we –

who would own what with their bank accounts. And so we didn't, but all of them came to work for me – Manning and everyone else. The shipping clerks – they all came to work for me. That solved that problem.

And Manning had unusual ideas, and one of them, by the end of the '50s, was "Well, what are you going to do next, Jack?" and "Why don't you do clothes?" And so we – I did some out of our fabric. My idea for women was to do classic clothes that would be becoming, and you'd just – if you found a cut that you liked, you'd just change the fabric. And I even found a few classics. One of them was an A-line coatdress that most women look terrific in, even if they weren't beautifully proportioned. It was tight through the bodice and sleeves, and then flared, and they didn't have to wear a lot of undergarments and they were comfortable and the fabrics – my prints and other fabrics – lent themselves pretty well. And I did some jackets out of the Haitian fabric, and so on. It was nonsensical in that one night I'd dream up a ball gown and the next one would be men's beach togs.

MS. FISCH: It wasn't exactly a consistent collection.

MR. LARSEN: But both Magnin's and Neiman Marcus sampled it – about 100 garments each – and came back with real orders eventually, and as we didn't raise – we sold some stock, but not as much as we thought, so we couldn't really afford a store, so it was a corner of the showroom, but some interesting people came in, including Joan Baez, who I did a lot of clothes for. And when I stopped, she wanted to know if I wouldn't go on doing them just for her, which I couldn't afford to do. But a lot of interesting people.

And then at the end of that period, Jacks of California started buying rather heavily our fabrics and not the clothes. They made their own clothes out of them, and they were not Seventh Avenue types either, and Rudi Gernrich. So that's what happened.

MS. FISCH: So you kind of eased out of the fashion business almost the same way you went in.

MR. LARSEN: Yeah, oh, in the meantime and before that, when Marion came, we started selling some to designers on Seventh Avenue. B. H. Wragge quite a bit, and Pauline Trigère and so on. And that turned out to be a terrible business, mostly because their morality was that they ended the season with no inventory. Anything they didn't sell they sent back, and as I made it just for them, I had no way to sell it. And – disaster. So I stopped. Finally we would only sell Seventh Avenue things in our lines so that if they sent them back, we could sell them to somebody else. So we sort of got out of that, but the – first of all, I learned if one wanted to cope with apparel, you didn't do it with your left hand. And even the people who had been the most supportive thought that these classic clothes were the idea of the decade, but six weeks back they were for the next season saying, "Now what's new? Now that we've done classic clothes, then what's new?"

MS. FISCH: Right.

MR. LARSEN: So I realized that nothing was very durable over there.

MS. FISCH: Well, you also had done design work in other areas of home décor over many years under various kinds of licensing agreements.

MR. LARSEN: Right, we did –

MS. FISCH: Did you like that better? I mean, is that a better approach than trying to do it all yourself?

MR. LARSEN: Yes and no. Well, first of all I never intended to produce. I was just doing that until I could just design. I won't bother with production anymore. And eventually the first big client we had design-wise was United States Rubber, who had a new upholstery division with a high-shrink yarn that would create dimension. Something called Tri-Lok: T-R-I hyphen L-O-K. And they interviewed 16 designers in furnishings field. The most famous of them. And most of them were furniture designers and not in fabric, and we won out and they paid us well.

United States Rubber then was one of the largest companies in the country. In addition to tires, they owned Naugahyde and Krylon and upholstery foam. They were big with automotives. They were the largest shareholders in General Motors and DuPont. And I was in Detroit a lot because Detroit was going to be one of our big markets for this. They spent $100,000 every time they'd do something new for Detroit. They took hundreds of yards for sampling, testing, but I never really got orders. And going south in those mill towns and all that, and the segregation between colors in the mills! I remember one night Win and I arrived and they said we were so lucky, we had the best night of the month. It was going to be a watermelon bust, but we were home in bed by 9:00!

MS. FISCH: This was a mill that was going to produce the things that you designed?

MR. LARSEN: They did.

MS. FISCH: And they could produce.

MR. LARSEN: Yeah, South Carolina. Yeah, but that whole – that person – anyway, that was in still already in the '50s, and I decided, well, I'm spoiled. I make my own mistakes and they just make bigger ones. Doing my own production had some advantages over being a captive designer!

MS. FISCH: So that was your first experience and it wasn't to your liking?

MR. LARSEN: They couldn't protect their patent. Tri-Lok finally went out of business and their corporate profits were higher than they'd ever been, and that kept happening to us.

MS. FISCH: But you did do some successful licensing things. You did towels –

MR. LARSEN: In '62 we were – I guess the next big one was our first go around with JP Stevens. Who were big in sheets. They bought Utica, and they were one of the largest factories in sheets. Not as large as Cannon, but they were more deluxe than Cannon. And they weren't really in the towel business, and so at that time we also – at the same time another company came to us -- Springs -- and there were three different towel manufacturers, actually, who were talking to us at the same time, and Springs decided they were really going to be more volume oriented than we would want to be and they hired Pucci. Pucci didn't take them that direction at *all*. He did very expensive, very difficult towels. Anyway, we went with Stevens and –

MS. FISCH: And was that a successful venture?

MR. LARSEN: It was fabulous. It was a huge success. I calculated that being new – that we better be bold to get noticed, and they wanted me to look at their colors that had sold; they had a few colored towels that were nothing. And I said, no, I'll look at what the top line was – their sales figures -- which was Fieldcrest, and I'd actually worked with the designer for Fieldcrest. He was an interior designer, but I worked with him when he gave him Dorothy Liebes colors, and the most remarkable sales promotion – most creative I've ever seen, like he introduced colors like chutney, which was a pretty nasty shade of bronze, but they sent jars of chutney to every saleswoman at home telling her about the romance of the spice trade and how exotic this was, and you've never tasted it before, but isn't it wonderful?

MS. FISCH: And it was quite a color.

MR. LARSEN: And also shocking pinks and all this stuff, and it made this successful. And even in the Midwest and places where they'd never seen colors like that. So I said, let's look and see how they're doing, and it turns out that in towels you can't be too high style because you can hide the – if it was a mistake, you can hide it.

MS. FISCH: And it's not a big investment for people. They can be daring.

MR. LARSEN: Right, if you make a mistake on a sofa or living room carpet, your mother-in-law is going to say, "I knew you didn't have taste," but with a towel if nothing works, you can hide it or give it or something. So that you could be outrageous in towels, and we were. And I was friends with Gerald Pierce, who was starting in fashion, and we got his model and sample maker to make all sorts of clothes and put on shows and videos of pretty girls wearing this stuff, and very quickly they were the best-selling towels on the market: jacquard, patterns, color. And what I learned was that no weaver had designed jacquard towels. Graphic designers didn't know weaving.

MS. FISCH: And they didn't know how to weave them. They only knew –

MR. LARSEN: That you could be one color and – we could be plain on the back and pattern on the front, striped on one side and plain on the other. All these things – you could mix it all up. We had a field day doing things that had not been done before.

MS. FISCH: And how many years did that program continue?

MR. LARSEN: Well, first of all, we said, of course, we'll copyright them. And they said, we have 17 lawyers on staff. *We* will copyright them. And they forgot to. And the Japanese had copies pretty quickly. Good copies for less money.

MS. FISCH: That's amazing that they would be so foolish.

MR. LARSEN: Yeah, well, big corporations *are* foolish. We learned that. Then pretty soon they had a large towel department. And our competition at Stevens, they had a man and a woman, rather well paid, full-time designers who did about 100 warps competing with us, while we did all ours on one warp, and of course ours all coordinated. And they spent $100,000 on samples of things they didn't put in the line, and ours – well, we had no interference, so no one saying you can't do that. No sales manager saying, "That will never sell." And pretty

soon they had a towel department second guessing, and we were on time, and they'd think, well, we have time to do more samples then. And it became worse and worse and worse. And how stupid – they were all men, but women buy towels, and they were guessing what the consumer was going to want, because -- in those days, at least – what the buyers bought didn't determine anything. It's what the consumers took home.

MS. FISCH: So in a sense you were competing with the design department of –

MR. LARSEN: No, then they fired the design department. We were the designers. We had all of these executives saying that they weren't so sure, and they were such nice guys that it was pretty awful having to finally – finally we quit. Well, next thing they did after our first success, they said, "Now we want something even more special for Saks and Nieman Marcus and Magnin's," and so we did something even more fabulous, and Sears walked in and bought it and fell flat on their face, naturally. And they were really willing, if we put up with them, to sort of give pensions, because we had put them in the towel business and they could afford to. We said, "We don't want to go there anymore."

MS. FISCH: So you left that field?

MR. LARSEN: We stopped and decided – first of all, we were doing some other licensing for downtown houses, and usually what happened, they would try knocking us off and printing a weave or something of the sort and then decided maybe they should just hire us. It might work better. And so we went to work for Charles Bloom for store fabrics, and that was also a little difficult because they had sales managers quite willing to veto what we were doing. Finally, Macy's/May came along and said, we will buy whatever Larsen designs for us.

MS. FISCH: This was Macy's/May Company, or –

MR. LARSEN: Macy's/May Company were a buying combine. And I had a friend there, who was in their modern furniture department, which was selling some Larsen fabrics, and they placed an order for a lot of Bloom fabric, up front, for anything we would do. The sales managers all disappeared. They *had* the order. And that was – it was simpler. It was bold and colorful, and it all went very well until they had a huge opening in New York. To all the employees on two floors they made an apology saying, "You've never seen color or pattern like this, and don't worry, you won't have to sell it. We have another line for you to sell, but Larsen's is going to make wonderful press and the windows look great and will bring people into the store and" –

MS. FISCH: You'll have something else to sell them.

MR. LARSEN: Yes, and so we realized we'd again been sort of duped, but much to everyone's surprise it was the best-selling collection they'd had since before the war. And in San Francisco it was even better. So then I called up the man in charge of the Midwest who had Field's – Marshall Field's and Hudson's, Dayton's. And I said, "How are you doing?" He said, "Oh, I didn't show it to them. I didn't think they'd like it." So even with a success it wasn't what it should have been, and we weren't getting royalties.

MS. FISCH: Oh, you did all this for a design fee?

MR. LARSEN: Yes, it was – we sometimes got royalties, but I don't think we did there, but anyway, that wasn't even – but the thing was we realized that those monies, even the DuPont monies, which was consultation and they paid an enormous amount of money per day, was gone at the end of the year, and what we did for Larsen was building. So we decided we were going to cut our design staff way down and not do all those outside accounts, just do what we want to do. And we found that cutting revenue was a lot easier than cutting expenses, but at least – and the other fault of having such a big studio is that myself and Paul Gedeohn and the other top designers became bosses. We were running several other people instead of designing. Well, anyway, we went back to –

MS. FISCH: So you made a corporate decision to downsize.

MR. LARSEN: We did. It was – but I always had a certain notion – this bad idea – of starting our own Chevrolet. We could see all the mistakes they were doing and how they didn't work with the press as they should and so on, and we did this collection called Winn Anderson fabrics for stores, and in those days stores had a lot of fabrics for furnishings and home sewers. And sure enough, it started off with a bang. Bloomingdale's gave us all the Lexington Avenue windows, so they called – they thought, well, Larsen was a better name for them than Win Anderson, so they called them Larsen fabrics. And at the time it was window dressing. They weren't really in the business to sell those fabrics, but it was to get you in the store and you might buy some sheets or a dress or something. And when we were just sort of getting started, their Larsen promotion was *over*. In Chicago we had Carson – Carson Pirie Scott -- with 15-foot high windows – they were all this collection. Then there was the question, "Will that kill our business with interior designers?" Well, Richard Himmel saw one of the fabrics at Carson's and ordered 7,000 yards for a hotel, so obviously – and even with the Macy's thing, other designers could send their aunt in to get her something decent for a price she could afford, and so on. They didn't mind at

all. We did learn that. But we eventually stopped that for a while.

MS. FISCH: I think we'll stop right now.

MR. LARSEN: All right.

[Audio break.]

MS. FISCH: This is Arline Fisch interviewing Jack Lenor Larsen at LongHouse in East Hampton, Long Island, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, on Saturday, February 7, 2004. This is disk number four.

I wonder if you could point out what are some of the highlights of your career over the past five decades. What do you think have been the most successful projects for you? The things that you either enjoyed the most or sounds the most exciting or are the most proud of, maybe. What did you enjoy doing the most? I mean, we've talked about these licensing things and how they came and went, but what are the things that were most significant to you?

MR. LARSEN: Well, one of them, for sure, was my project with Russell Wright to work in Asia. He had a contract for Southeast Asia with the State Department, and their idea, with these countries over there that were not giving in to communist takeover, was that we would give them 80 percent in cash and 20 percent in aid. As they weren't industrialized, developing handcrafted exports was one of the ways they could create jobs at home (their people would have income and therefore resistant to communism) but also create export, which would help the economy and the balance of payments and so on. Sounded awfully good. And this was late '50s and there had been quite a bit of such development going on already. Marianne Strengell and several of the Cranbrook people had worked in the Philippines with varying degrees of success. Marianne's project had not worked. That for one reason or another, and I was aware that that was a bad idea. Such a project would win the support of leaders, and then when it didn't work, they would be –

MS. FISCH: Not looked upon favorably.

MR. LARSEN: Yeah, they would be disaffected, and the looms were rusting from the climate and that wasn't good. On the other hand, John Risley, and his wife [Mary], was a potter from Cranbrook – a friend of mine – went off to the Philippines, and everything they did seemed wonderful. Do you remember capa shell? Those lamps?

MS. FISCH: Oh, yes.

MR. LARSEN: That they made lamps and everything out of?

MS. FISCH: Mm-hmm.

MR. LARSEN: Well, that was John's. He carved wood bowls that were all over the place, and the first basket chair, and I saw a show in New York – he had a big show at Georg Jensen. Everything he did seemed to be wonderful, and they were in Maine and I'd go to Haystack [Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, Deer Isle, Maine], and I'd see them up there, and that was successful, but many weren't. I saw some in my Peruvian trips which were failing.

But I had a three-year contract for Taiwan and Vietnam, and Russell would bring back materials and possibilities, and we started working on samples, and eventually I was to go over, and I took a protégé, Ruben Eshkanian, who was an Armenian in jewelry at Cranbrook – whom I convinced to try weaving -- and he was in our studio and he went earlier than I did and stayed for a couple years over there. And so eventually I was to go over for the winter of '59 and '60, and I had golden introductions everyplace because of Russell. And it was a tight little world so long ago, particularly of Americans there, so – in Japan I spent some time, and my friends, the Kellers, were already in Japan. I was with them and I had –given interpreters and first class everything. Frank Lloyd Wright's hotel and so on, and it was jolly. And in Hong Kong I met Charlotte Horseman and all the right people there.

One small trouble was my vaccination had been done on shipboard and they didn't know what country – in the middle of the Atlantic -- they didn't know what country to put down, so they'd sent me to a tent over a gutter on the street, and they scratched both arms a lot with what looked like a rusty nail and smeared this toxin on, and I virtually was dying by the time I got to Taiwan with smallpox, almost, but Taipei was awful.

MS. FISCH: Did you go by a ship all the way, or you flew to Japan?

MR. LARSEN: Oh, no. It was 36 hours from Honolulu to Tokyo on a propeller plane, and we put down on four islands for gas. It was before jets, but then I also flew to Taiwan. So I was in Taipei for a bit, and then went down to TaiChung, T-A-I-C-H-U-N-G, the old capital, which was so sunny that the movie industry was there. Taipei is smoggy and terribly polluted and has very little sun, but TaiChung was beautiful and the mountains and everything looked like Chinese scrolls. I was amazed how – those unlikely looking landscapes really do exist. It

was also – TaiChung was where the mines were where the treasures that had been taken out of Beijing were. (They'd been in Tacoma in warehouses all during the war.)

MS. FISCH: And nobody knew?

MR. LARSEN: Well, I didn't know. The people in Puget Sound didn't know that. Anyway, it came from there to TaiChung, and they would take some of them up for display, which tended to be the worst Ching Dynasty things that they liked and that I wasn't crazy about, but –

MS. FISCH: And what were you working on in the way of designing?

MR. LARSEN: Weaving. We'd taken over a Japanese-built compound, which was living quarters and also our shop, where we were working with local weavers on samples. My interpreter had pretty good French, but no English, and my French wasn't good enough, but he had – the Japanese had been very good to colonials, and one of the things they'd done was taken Taiwanese to Japan for education. And he'd even been sent on to Paris to complete his, which is why he had French. And he and his wife were friendly, but it was problematic with the communications. And the Chinese thought decimal points were ornaments, and that got us in trouble on pricing and such.

The – it had turned out they also thought – they carved music notes decoratively.

MS. FISCH: Had nothing to do with the sound?

MR. LARSEN: [Laughs.] Decimals were a problem. And materials were a problem. We didn't have much to work with, and so I was always scouting for materials, and two problems: one, a lot of the things that looked pretty good in the hank were noodles. All kinds of transparent, fine noodles that looked like yarns till I touched them. But the other was I would be followed, and if I found something that was a yarn, it would be reported and it would become a government monopoly, and if it was three cents a pound –

MS. FISCH: Suddenly it was a lot more.

MR. LARSEN: Thirty cents a pound, because we had to buy it from the government. Then it was called the Chinese Squeeze. And in reality the government was trying to convert that 20 percent into cash too, and they were also putting – if we ever did get anything to sell – they were putting an export tax on it, which would raise the price.

MS. FISCH: So did anything positive develop out of this?

MR. LARSEN: Not much ever, and I think particularly in weaving I don't think much did. And lots of meetings, which were so formalistic. You made an appointment to make an appointment and that kind of slowing things down. The Taiwanese were just beginning to realize that they were captives rather than liberated. They'd been better off under the Japanese. The idea of these overseas Chinese was like New Yorkers in South Dakota. "We might as well make some money while we're stuck out here." And it was 100 percent interest a year. Usury was their usual way of making money. Up to 10 percent a day, and Chinese pay their debts! They borrow more money to pay them, so they couldn't lose. And why should they industrialize and perhaps get 25 percent when they were making 100? But somehow they did learn in spite of –

MS. FISCH: Because they're very industrialized now.

MR. LARSEN: Yes. So individually what we were doing was of no use, but that next generation, I think, sort of, did learn something.

MS. FISCH: But you felt that was a significant project you needed to be involved with?

MR. LARSEN: Well, the whole experience –

MS. FISCH: Well, it introduced you to Asia.

MR. LARSEN: Yes, and then I moved from there in January. I was also back in Hong Kong some while I was there. That was pretty interesting – more interesting. And unfortunately Taiwan was 10 percent the labor cost of Hong Kong. Hong Kong was cheap. So that was in our favor, but the problems of working with two governments – we still weren't doing wonderfully well and Russell was impatient; he didn't understand our problems.

Then I went to Saigon. And I'd read *The Ugly American* [Eugene Burdick and William J. Lederer. New York: Norton, 1958], and various things about Indochina, and the Americans there were not ugly; they were very helpful. And the women were all volunteering and teaching and working in hospitals, and they were all trying to help and they were *good* Americans, but they didn't socialize with the Vietnamese as the French had done. They

didn't invite them to parties. They weren't so popular. And the Vietnamese were nouveau riche – part of the ruling clique (in first class – you'd only see these Vietnamese). And that regime was more rotten than Chang Kai Shek, more opportunistic, more stepping on little guys.

MS. FISCH: But you were again involved in trying to develop some weaving?

MR. LARSEN: Mm-hmm, and it was difficult. The artists in lacquer and the few traditional crafts in the South weren't very useful for export, and the few craftsmen that we had to work with were refugees from the North. In the North there had been some production and some export, and they understood that. The people in the South didn't. And the Chinese merchants were sort of entrepreneurial, but really didn't either.

MS. FISCH: But there was skill there. I mean, you were going to work with people who knew how to weave, or you were going to teach people to weave?

MR. LARSEN: No, they knew how to weave certain things. I was mostly working – my most successful refugee group were working in sea grass, a flat weaving like tatami, and one of the things I was doing was colorful, striped small rugs or beach mats.

MS. FISCH: Mats?

MR. LARSEN: Mats or whatever. But where we worked, there wasn't much water – it was on a hillside – and rinsing, they didn't understand about. Imagine getting up sweaty and striped! [Laughs.] I had a few problems like that, and then I also – we twisted sea grass into cordage and wove tapestry rugs, and you made the loom on the ground on pegs and sat on the woven part while you went on weaving, and it made a pretty good rug. It never became terribly successful, and the people also generally sort of resented making something that was going to disappear. That's their feeling about exports.

MS. FISCH: They had always made things for the local markets.

MR. LARSEN: So, yeah. And we eventually took over an old store, and the idea was our rejects or whatever could be sold locally, but the whole idea that their work was going to be on Main Street – they liked that a lot better. And I became very friendly with a couple of these refugee groups. One of the women, Madam du Kim, D-U-K-I – capital K-I-M, was called the Eleanor Roosevelt of Vietnam, and she was grand and tiny and handsome for an older woman, but the upper class had lacquered black teeth –

MS. FISCH: How exotic.

MR. LARSEN: – to protect themselves from beetle nut.

And that was classy, but took some getting used to, and she was so effective. All but one of her sons and her husband had been killed on the raft that they came down the coast on, and so she'd become head of this whole band of several hundred refugees. Difficult for a small woman. Her son helped her, but she was head of the whole group.

When I finally left, they – all these villagers came out to see me go, and the plane didn't leave. I had to sneak back – sort of disappear. Accept their gifts and disappear and come back –

MS. FISCH: Stay in hiding –

MR. LARSEN: Was incognito until I could get out.

In the meantime, I was sent up to central Vietnam to where they had woven honan, which is handwoven silk out of tussah, and it has a lot of body and the French fashion market was desperate for it. Nothing coming out of China. And that was exciting in that we went through war-torn territory and had to go around blazing trucks on the road. We had to go through the jungle, where there were tigers -- my open jeep. And there were bridges out. We had to cross on rafts and –

MS. FISCH: Well, you were part of a team at this point, or were you on your own?

MR. LARSEN: I had to – there was a little team, and there was a nisei. [Ken Emurya] and his Japanese wife were residents there, but that was it. And we had some Vietnamese girls in the office, but that was the team.

MS. FISCH: And did this project result in – again in some exportable things?

MR. LARSEN: Barely. Barely. A little better, but not very successful. In Hue, in central Vietnam, on my silk project, for instance, when I finally got to the villages where I was supposed to go after all these broken bridges, there was a torchlight parade of triumph. Here comes messiah. And they – all the town elders showing me their

looms hidden away, and they had great drums for making patterns; sort of pre-jacquard, but like player piano music. And then the negotiations – well, what they wanted to weave was military cloth for their army for their new country, which was like sugar-sacking, sleazy cotton, 10 cents a yard from Japan.

MS. FISCH: They knew they would get paid for that. That's probably why –

MR. LARSEN: No, they would be contributing to their country.

MS. FISCH: I see. So it was a patriotic gesture.

MR. LARSEN: So I thought I was so smart; I said, "Well, if you'll weave honan for me, I'll give -- every meter you weave, I'll give you 40 meters of military cloth." That will solve that. And – oh, no. They'd be wasting their time for something that would disappear. And then I said, "Well, but you'd be getting money for your country." "Oh, we don't need money, it comes from foreign aid." [Laughs.] So I was not a great success, but in the meantime I was weekending with Jim Thompson. Without any subsidies or whatever this entrepreneur was doing quite well, because he stayed there and worked – and the government couldn't do much to stimulate businesses, so I decided –

MS. FISCH: It's too bad the State Department – the U.S. State Department -- never noticed that that was a more successful way of doing things than their pattern of just sending people in part-time. But it had for you a good result, in that it introduced you to a part of the world that you might not have come to otherwise.

MR. LARSEN: I became an old China hand fairly quickly. Jim's notion – I also – he gave me books about Buddhism and so forth, and I learned. There was a lot of time to read. He'd been to Burma, and Burma had every kind of weaving of India and Europe, and as the fashions never changed, the weavers were the couturiers. It was the most wonderful place for living fabric tradition I've ever been. It was just a living museum. Every technique and hosts of silk. And anyway, he'd been up there. Some of his weavers rebelled and walked out when he was there. He couldn't really handle Burma. So he said, why don't you go be the Jim Thompson of Burma? So I went up and I went all over to see the weaving, and I talked to the minister of industry and they didn't want experts, but if I was a worker, he thought maybe I could stay. They'd thrown out the Ford Foundation and Rockefellers and all those experts – didn't like those. So I cabled back to New York saying, I'm coming home to settle up, then I'm going to move to Burma. And it took me a long time to settle up, and Burma became communist and I couldn't go, unfortunately, so I –

MS. FISCH: But you did seriously consider doing that?

MR. LARSEN: Yeah. Again, to be a leader of little people was very appealing. [Laughs.]

MS. FISCH: But did your relationship with Jim Thompson at that time – did that contribute to your becoming involved later with Thaibok?

MR. LARSEN: Well, Jim, when he saw me in New York in 1952, he thought I was competing with him. He didn't like it, but by the time we were friends, I could understand everything he was trying to do.

In the meantime, his – the Thaibok firm had many bloodless revolutions. Ten people owned it, so it was easy for them to keep changing regimes; and they tried copying us, which wasn't the way to go, and what they were doing didn't change. So later on one of the larger shareholders in Thai Silk Company in Bangkok came to me after Jim disappeared.

MS. FISCH: Well, I thought there had been some connection there.

MR. LARSEN: I said I would, if we could buy what was left of the American franchise, so that we would be selling what I designed in Thailand, and we were given that. In fact, we had to buy Thaibok over 20 years on a percentage of sales, which were our sales. We paid – overpaid 1,000 times what we should have. It wasn't the right deal.

MS. FISCH: But you then designed for Thai Silk.

MR. LARSEN: Mm-hmm. And eventually it was good. And it was wonderful because Jim was an architect and a great colorist, but he didn't know anything about weaving, and the Thais didn't know much compared to the Burmese, and they'd forgotten what they – it was – everything was plain woven. And up-country they'd done some ikat, but he'd never tried that. The thrill was – two harnesses was all they had. So it was an industrial revolution to have four harnesses. It was so easy to be creative in Thailand.

MS. FISCH: You've done that over many years. Do you still continue to work with Thai Silk?

MR. LARSEN: Mm-hmm. In the meantime, they got smarter – the Thai Silk Company, which is run by an American

from Puget Soun, Bill Booth, who's one of Larsen's best suppliers and largest suppliers, is also a major competitor. Much later – maybe 15 years after Jim Thompson died -- they decided, well, that was a pretty good name. And as anybody could say that they were selling Thai Silk, Thai Silk Company was not a good name, so they became – they marketed it under the Jim Thompson brand.

Then they broke our exclusive (that we were still paying for) and started selling in America under the Jim Thompson label, so pretty soon they were competing with us and *also* a good supplier.

MS. FISCH: An ironic situation.

MR. LARSEN: Yeah.

MS. FISCH: Well, I'm interested that you function mostly as a designer, but you've been so active in the crafts world, and I wonder, how do you feel – do you feel you're a part of two different worlds: the design world and the crafts world?

MR. LARSEN: But they're both *my* world. [Laughs.]

MS. FISCH: But they're both yours. I see. Well, I was interested in what you wrote recently about the relevance of craft in the design world in the 21st century. If that's how you feel, then you are indeed a part of both worlds.

MR. LARSEN: Well, first of all, to me, craft isn't just handcraft. The postindustrial craft is the most interesting thing going on today.

MS. FISCH: So you might call new technology postindustrial craft?

MR. LARSEN: Craft quality, I think, is what they have in common, that is, a perceivable sense of materials and process, which is more precious today than ever, because it's so rare. In the Early American period or any archaic period, you could tell exactly what things were made of and how they were made, and people – it was so commonplace that it wasn't particularly popular. That things were polished and more refined and manmade-looking was what people hoped for. Homespun was easy. But today, these drywall boxes we live in, where you don't know what the material is or how it was put together, a sense of recognition of something that you know the materials and can perceive how it was constructed is *precious*. It's reassuring, not just aesthetically, but emotionally, and that's how I see craft quality. And achieving it doesn't have to be done by hand.

MS. FISCH: So you think that the craft world doesn't necessarily have to be an isolated world off here by itself, but that it's part of the bigger picture.

MR. LARSEN: It certainly should be, yes.

MS. FISCH: Well, in your memoirs you say that planting ideas and suggesting connections makes for the best form of gardening, and indeed you've been a really generous enabler to many designers and artists and craftspeople, because you make connections and you clearly like to do that.

MR. LARSEN: Well, it's my favorite sport!

MS. FISCH: Well, what is it that motivates you and inspires you to do that? I mean, is it just your perception that it's possible, or is there something else that makes you want to do that?

MR. LARSEN: In my mind, there are these Cs that occasionally you find, and to close it – to put – to finish the circle.

MS. FISCH: Finish the circle?

MR. LARSEN: – the connection is – I guess that's what bees are doing, but it's my favorite occupation to put ideas or people or anything together. And that was sort of what my Thai experience was. It was all there just waiting to be harvested. And that in the third world, where I work so happily, that tends to be so easy, and in those American corporations it was so *difficult*.

Well, one of the problems – well, in Vietnam – my frustration there; the logic didn't work. That time and money didn't exist in the sense of their being important, but the corporate world, there's often no logic either. And in communist China, there was no incentive to get it done, because they didn't have incentives. You couldn't get ahead. But cause and effect, that's what I learned in weaving; that every time something went well or badly, there was a reason: that the warp had broken or the ratchet wasn't working or – or that there was a reason why it worked or why it didn't, and I liked that about the way it works.

MS. FISCH: Well, another way that you've made connections, both for yourself and for other people, is through

organizations, and you have been very actively involved with some of them. I was thinking particularly about the American Craft Council and Haystack and the World Crafts Council, and I wondered if you want to talk a little bit about why those were important and what you think – how they were significant to you personally.

MR. LARSEN: Well, I was mentioning, when I wasn't in the studio at night, I was out with my clients who were architects and designers, and they had organizations that were quite well established: chapters and – as Boy Scouts had been. They also had this network that worked. All your dues went to national, and a part stayed regional, and some were local. And that was pretty much the same thing with AIA [American Institute of Architects] and ASID [American Society of Interior Designers]. And they also had conferences, as we were having, and I went to them, and they also collected Fellows, either because they were wonderfully good at what they did or they helped the organization, and they gave gold medals. So I wasn't inventing anything; I was just transposing it.

MS. FISCH: But you felt obviously deeply connected to the American Craft Council to want to make it like a network. Do you think ACC has succeeded at being that kind of network?

MR. LARSEN: At times. I think about 1960 it seemed more like it was jelling – it was coming together -- but there's been a lot of competition. In both design-world and craft-world marketing, and being market driven rather than design driven, they thought it was good. I never thought so. Even if I learned something about marketing, I didn't think – even though I had to practice something about marketing, I didn't think that was a *reason* for doing anything. It was an aid to doing something, but of course the end effect was just to make a sale or some money. I refused to think that. So that's hurt both fields. This "me too-ism" and getting ahead and being a success, and the reason for recognizing the Toshikos [Toshiko Takaezu] of the world is – or in both fields – is trying to get young people to emulate their careers.

MS. FISCH: Providing role models that are genuine.

MR. LARSEN: Yeah. But not try to make a Toshiko look-alike, but try to *be* a Toshiko is much more to my point.

MS. FISCH: Now, you were president of the American Craft Council for quite a long time – of the board I mean.

MR. LARSEN: But not controlling. I was – that was [Robert] Peterson's doing.

MS. FISCH: I see.

MR. LARSEN: When he was chairman.

MS. FISCH: He made you president, huh?

MR. LARSEN: Yes, he did. I was out of the room. But I was his Merlin, as I was in some ways to Mrs. [Aileen Osborn] Webb – I influenced her somewhat – and everybody else. And Barbara was easy to guide.

MS. FISCH: Barbara Rockefeller?

MR. LARSEN: Mm-hmm, as the second chairman. [Charles] Peebler needed a lot of help. He didn't know our world at all, never did really learn it, but –

MS. FISCH: Did you feel a kind of obligation to the American Craft Council to make sure it went in the right direction, or that you were –

MR. LARSEN: Not an obligation, but it was – I couldn't change AIA or ASID, but here was an organization that could be channeled and influenced.

MS. FISCH: So you saw a, kind of, leadership opportunity?

MR. LARSEN: Yes, I think so, but that fit and that's sort of my style.

MS. FISCH: Well, certainly that's the role you played at Haystack school, that you've been very much in the leadership as well as a mentor.

MR. LARSEN: Boy, that was sort of wonderful! When I went on the board, and from the time I got involved in '51, Fran [Francis Merritt] had vision and he was a saint, but he was open to suggestion and easy to influence. When Priscilla [Merritt] and I tried to make him into a more organized man, we failed. I eventually learned to respect his sense of hidden organization – whatever happened he – you couldn't see his organization, but it was working and I let him alone. But in the beginning with a great director and Mimi [Mary Bishop] making up the small deficit, the board was hardly necessary. My chief role was changing the complexion of the faculty.

MS. FISCH: And a very important role that was.

MR. LARSEN: And that was great fun. And I was still in my 20s when I got Anni Albers and Toshiko and Karen, all those people, there. And the school had been started as a grassroots operation, and Fran was brought in and he wanted to change it, and I was more willing than he to change it to being – he'd been at Cranbrook. He –

MS. FISCH: Right. He came from Flint, didn't he?

MR. LARSEN: Yes. He taught at the Kingswood Girls School there, but he'd been around that, so he knew what an international complexion could be, and I was more in touch with it than they were. And I was in New York and soon all over the country.

MS. FISCH: And had you met Fran at Cranbrook?

MR. LARSEN: No, I hadn't. They were – by the time I was at Cranbrook, I think he was pretty much into working at Flint. Later, because of Mary Bishop, I lectured at Flint, but Fran was already gone.

MS. FISCH: So that was the connection for you: Mary Bishop, right?

MR. LARSEN: Mary brought them – everybody -- into New York. As an affluent Midwesterner, she was used to coming into New York and seeing shows, buying clothes and gifts for a few weeks every winter, and so she brought everybody involved with Cranbrook in to do that. And they all came up the stairs in my 73rd Street studio and sat on the floor and had lunch – a lot of them, a dozen guests, which was – I wasn't quite used to -- and they were also adults. And – but they told me what they were up to and would I help? I said, of course.

So then I joined them and met in Worcester, Massachusetts. It was a big crafts show and we all met there and I tried to get to "Wooster." In fact, they were staying in Leicester, which spells "Licaster" but sounds like "Lester."

MS. FISCH: Right.

MR. LARSEN: And so first getting to "Worchester," then getting to "Warchester," but it was really spelled Worcester. It was a problem on the train, because once I got to Worcester, getting to Leicester when I was looking for "Lester" was also a problem, but I met up with them. And I was more and more realizing that California didn't have a monopoly on craftsmanship, as we used to think in California. The New England metals really impressed me, so –

And then in March I went up for mud season in Maine for the first time and stayed with the Merritts and got involved. But the point was, in the beginning a board member wasn't really necessary (all those board meetings I went to), but when Mary was fading out as founder for solving the money problem and Fran was going to need replacement and building the new campus – well, that was my first job.

MS. FISCH: Building the new campus, I think, was a major achievement. Certainly people give you praise for that.

MR. LARSEN: Well, that was fun! We interviewed three architects, and I was so impressed with Enrico Peresutti of the top architectural firm in Italy, who had done a village for miners that was not so unlike what Haystack became. And every house was faced in a different direction so they'd look more different, and there was a place for their little garden, and it was a model of what he was thinking of for Haystack, was a factory-style building where everybody would work and live in this big building on the cliff.

[Audio break, tape change.]

MS. FISCH: That was an impossible situation.

MR. LARSEN: Fran and I were both turned off by that. And in the meantime – oh, how I got to [Edward] Barnes. In "Interiors to Come" [monthly *Interiors* magazine design competition] there was a cabin he had done that looked like a Haystack cabin with a 45-degree roof, and this was his vision of what a life in the wild might be. And he'd also done the Fresh Air Camp, which Mary Martin was chairman of.

MS. FISCH: Oh, I didn't know about that.

MR. LARSEN: It's someplace in New York. I never saw it. But he had experience with a camp. Well, that was to his credit and his charm. Also, he tapped me to help him with 707s for Pan Am.

MS. FISCH: Oh, was that through Ed Barnes?

MR. LARSEN: Mm-hmm.

MS. FISCH: Oh, well that's interesting.

MR. LARSEN: He thought I was a poet, and he needed that for this very industrial project, and so I worked with him and Charles Forburg on that project, and pretty soon Ed was working on Haystack, and he did our Fifth Avenue showroom at about the same time. And Forburg worked on that and we were all hand in glove.

MS. FISCH: But your relationship with the World Crafts Council was maybe a little different because it was only, kind of, periodic that things happened, but I know you were very involved with that.

MR. LARSEN: Well, I was head of the American delegation, which met a lot in New York, and not always happily. We had some – I guess it was some of the heads of the world business that meddled in my concepts of what we should be doing, but I almost left that several times, because I didn't think it was going in the right direction.

MS. FISCH: Well, it was a very problematic organization, but it had such wonderful benefits, especially, I thought, for Americans to make connections abroad. I still see people that I met through the World Crafts Council, and I think that people who have come after me have not had that opportunity to live in the global craft world, and I hope that sometime in the future it will be possible again to do that in a different way.

MR. LARSEN: Yeah, well, it was a good idea, but typically America, whereas other governments were involved, ours never was. And maybe that was – would have been worse if they were. The –

MS. FISCH: Well, the financial situation was always precarious, and I think part of that caused dissension in the American Craft Council, because the money was being diverted to –

MR. LARSEN: Not much.

MS. FISCH: – international things, but it certainly wasn't a lot of money.

MR. LARSEN: Not much. Well, I argued that about every year. "Don't think it's your money you're giving them. Mrs. Webb did that a long time ago. She's giving it forever and she's endowed that money and we're simply passing it on. It's not ours." But the newer people didn't know what the older people did. It was – there wasn't continuity.

MS. FISCH: No.

MR. LARSEN: That was their great weakness, and with the time of the schism, so much – eventually there were people warring that didn't know what it was about.

MS. FISCH: What the war was about. I know, it was so unfortunate.

MR. LARSEN: All they knew was that they were the enemy, and *not* true!

MS. FISCH: But as a global person, you brought a certain kind of perspective to that organization, which it needed, I think. And certainly Mrs. Webb had a very global perspective when she conceived of the organization, and that's the part that I think is so sadly missing now for a lot of people.

MR. LARSEN: Well, that's the next thing for the Council.

MS. FISCH: The American Craft Council.

MR. LARSEN: Is to think globally, and they don't have to change their name, but they have to change their attitude. Fortunately, the museum has warmed up to that pretty much so. It – and so has SOFA [International Exposition of Sculpture Objects and Functional Art] and so are more and more of the galleries, and certainly people like Garth Clark that think – and Helen [Drutt English] – in terms of artists worldwide.

MS. FISCH: Right, I think that's something we all need to think a little bit more about. And certainly you've always been an avid and an adventurous traveler, and I wonder what motivates you to visit – to travel to a particular place. Is it always some idea that there's a potential connection for you in the design concept, or does that come later?

MR. LARSEN: No, it's – I don't go looking for it.

MS. FISCH: I mean, do you travel out of curiosity or adventure, or maybe both?

MR. LARSEN: Well, it seems to me like it's opportunity – it's fulfillment. I don't know when I decided I was a world citizen, but very early. I wasn't very successful as an American. [Laughs.] But I had a teacher in high school who – I was also Canadian. I had dual citizenship and that, I think, I thought was an asset, but I had a teacher who

knew history and geography very well, and she could only take us to Canada during the war because that was the only option, but I went with her a lot to British Columbia – to Victoria, but that was one's destiny, was to travel and to get outside of where one was. And I thought you can't do too much of it, but I did as much as I could.

I didn't go to Europe particularly early, because I didn't want to go on a little trip. I wanted – I had hoped I could go open-endedly and I eventually decided, well, I'm too tied down to do that. I better start going only occasionally, but I did one every year. Fortunately, I wandered around Europe for quite a bit before I started working there, because *those* trips were very focused.

MS. FISCH: But you do sometimes travel just as a traveler?

MR. LARSEN: Rarely.

MS. FISCH: I remember once you went to Afghanistan.

MR. LARSEN: Oh, that was – Central Asia is – it seems like a magical place to me. You know, we *all* came out of Central Asia at one time, it seems like. The Dorians and the Celts and everybody. We each came out of Central Asia and that's a place of energy. And Pupil Jayacar also felt very strongly that it all started there. That is the center, and so Afghanistan was more available than Uzbekistan, so I went a couple of times, and I've not done as much as I would like to. But fortunately, it was the right moment.

MS. FISCH: Well, I think it was in '71 that –

MR. LARSEN: '70. Was the Turkish conference in '71?

MS. FISCH: '71.

MR. LARSEN: Because I went on from there with –

MS. FISCH: Or '72. No, I think it was '71.

MR. LARSEN: Yeah, I went once to get the trip organized, and then I took Sam [Maloof] and Ramona [Solberg]. What they told me was I would need two cars to go where I wanted to go, so if one broke down, the other could go for help. So then – who will come along?

MS. FISCH: Who can I convince to go with me?

MR. LARSEN: Yeah. So that's how we got to be a group.

MS. FISCH: Well, are there places that you haven't been that you'd like to go?

MR. LARSEN: I'd still like to go to remoter areas in Central Asia, and I would still like to take the trip that Mrs. Webb and I were going to, and that was to take a Land Rover or something from Dakar to Chad across the Sudan. I think it's still fairly tribal. I've been in the Sudan at the top of Nigeria, and that interested me.

The Sahara is sort of like a sea; all those caravans crossed it and brought ideas and also merchandise. Hard to know where all these things come from: styles, religions, all kinds of things. But that interested me.

MS. FISCH: Have you traveled a lot in Africa? I know you were talking about South Africa for a while.

MR. LARSEN: No. When I was a little boy in Alberta, at nine I think, I saw an early documentary of Elizabeth – Princess Elizabeth visiting the colonies of West Africa, primarily Nigeria, I think. And all I could see were those wonderful structures behind her: mud and clay and bamboo and all kinds of stuff. And I said, I'll go look at those, and that's what I went for. And then I met Arthur Goldreich, and so we also dropped down to South Africa, and I didn't know there were such wonderful fabrics in West Africa then. Few people did, but marvelous.

MS. FISCH: Are there places in Africa where – you said you'd like to go across from Dakar across the Sudan, but have you been to Egypt? Have you spent any time there?

MR. LARSEN: Yes, eventually. I haven't – I stopped briefly in Cairo. No, I haven't done that, but I did get to the Coptic Museum and such. But I was in Morocco a few times and particularly south of the savannah in Africa; Morocco's so rich. Travel for 100 miles in Nigeria to see something. Every mile in Morocco has marvelous traditions – marvelous.

MS. FISCH: Well, I read somewhere that Japan is your favorite country.

MR. LARSEN: Mm-hmm.

MS. FISCH: Is that still true?

MR. LARSEN: Yes.

MS. FISCH: Why?

MR. LARSEN: Well, now it's the new Japan, and I find it just as bewildering as traditional Japan. I don't understand – after 32 trips I still don't understand it very well, but I certainly respect it. And it's not perfect. Some of their ideas are not right, but mostly it seems right.

MS. FISCH: You've also done production there in Japan.

MR. LARSEN: I didn't early on, and I was awfully glad we didn't, because they were the first – it was the first currency that I was so aware of how it was changing. It went up about 10 times in the 45 years I've known it, and – but somehow where we work, it's affordable.

MS. FISCH: So you are working now in Japan?

MR. LARSEN: A lot. Both in fabrics and these new wall coverings.

MS. FISCH: Well, and sometime in the past didn't you do some ceramic design in Japan?

MR. LARSEN: Oh, I did – twice.

MS. FISCH: I thought I remembered something about that.

MR. LARSEN: Both the Dansk group and – all the things I did for Mikasa were both in Nogoya, which is the porcelain capital. And with Dansk it was because of the currency change. It was becoming a problem – that dinnerware I did this – was so successful saleswise. It was only producing at about 30 percent first quality. They were having trouble with the casting and so forth, and they kept wanting me to do patterns on it to cover up some of the flaws, and that didn't work really. But then they got robot assist.

MS. FISCH: And it works better.

MR. LARSEN: A hundred percent first quality.

MS. FISCH: That's wonderful.

MR. LARSEN: And actually the potter assists the robot.

MS. FISCH: That's very funny.

MR. LARSEN: And so once they had that in automation, it was so much better priced than European porcelain that they've done very well with it.

MS. FISCH: Oh, well that's good. But you aren't designing that right now?

MR. LARSEN: No, it's –

MS. FISCH: And now you're doing textile things.

MR. LARSEN: And the Mikasa things were short-lived, but I did a great many. And they sent potters to work in our warehouse to make the models for me as fast as they could make them, and I had a good Japanese designer on my team to – as a go-between. I did a great many of those, but – and they're still in business.

MS. FISCH: So Japan's on the cutting edge of textile innovation?

MR. LARSEN: Has been for 20 years, largely because of Jun'ichi Arai. He was the founding genius.

MS. FISCH: And so there must be lots of interest there. I mean, they're doing stainless steel fiber and all kinds of things that are pretty interesting.

MR. LARSEN: Yeah.

MS. FISCH: So I know you also have a close relationship with Issey Miyake, because recently you did a small exhibition there –

MR. LARSEN: Well, we're good friends. I originally found his clothes in Paris in his first little store 30 years ago and – do you know Dextra Frankl?

MS. FISCH: Mm-hmm.

MR. LARSEN: Well, through Dextra -- her son married Kasuko Koike, and through Dextra I met Kasuko, who is Issey's best friend. And that's how I met Issey 30 years ago. Kasuko Koike is a very powerful woman involved in fashion and costume design and history and so forth, but as she's married to an American, she doesn't have to be a Japanese wife. She is a powerful career woman, and therefore she and Issey saw eye to eye. And she was his closest friend, and as he didn't have a family, they were even closer, and so I was introduced at the right level. And interestingly enough, it was Kasuko who came to write the lead article on this approach that you were reading. She brought Dextra with her.

MS. FISCH: Oh, did she?

MR. LARSEN: For the summer.

MS. FISCH: Well, how did the exhibition that you just did, the "Small Works" [2002], how did that collaboration come about? Was it a collaboration or was it something you wanted to do?

MR. LARSEN: I had juried – oh, the origins of that whole idea of small textile works was Paul Smith's.

MS. FISCH: Oh, was it really?

MR. LARSEN: When he had that tiny little balcony on the stairs of the first museum in the early 60s. And he did a show called – maybe, "Woven Forms."

MS. FISCH: I don't know. I remember the show called "Miniature Textiles," but that was a British show that was done after that.

MR. LARSEN: Well, yeah. Well, I think it might have been "Woven Forms." Anyway, it was miniatures and tiny -- and all those people – and the first Sheila Hicks – all cottoned to this idea, and it was perfect for that tiny little space about 10 by 10 or smaller. And there – as a reaction to the Lausanne Biennale [International Biennale of Tapestry in Lausanne, Switzerland], where Lurcat and the founders of that – we had to keep out any pretenders, and the original – I think the first one, they wanted 20 square meters, but it was then 10 square meters. Finally it was five, but for a long time it was 10. And so individual producers were discouraged. It was good for Aubusson and such places – Gobelin and such.

But probably Ann Sutton started up the miniature textile competition in London, and I was involved in all – there were three of them, and I was involved with those as chief juror or whatever. And Hungary had one to get ready for – a national one to prepare for the –

MS. FISCH: The international.

MR. LARSEN: – international one. They had 100 participants. It caught on like wildfire. And for new countries, Eastern Europe was deep into this, because you don't need patrons.

MS. FISCH: Well, it's affordable and people can send their things.

MR. LARSEN: And – or equipment or materials, clients, anything. So it – I don't know how I got the idea, let's do one. Let's revive that here.

MS. FISCH: Well, I thought it was very interesting that your concept of it was three-dimensional and the others had not been. Although many of the objects were three-dimensional, that wasn't the brief for the competition. It was the eight-by-eight-by-eight size flat against the wall. And yours was, you know, here's the eight- by-eight-by-eight cube. What can you make to put in it? So I thought that the dimensionality of it was different.

MR. LARSEN: I might have even been influenced by the things from my birthday – those 65 objects, which I had nothing to do with. I don't know who grabbed that up. But they were dimensional and all the media and international and –

MS. FISCH: So you thought of the exhibition, and then did you propose to Issey that it could go to Japan?

MR. LARSEN: Well, as we were getting such marvelous response to it, I guess I – I think first I decided – oh, SOFA wanted me to do another exhibition. The first one – this is Mark Lyman – was things we would like to have in the LongHouse collection. It was the first exhibit we did, and he wanted another one. And it might have even been that that was the start of –

MS. FISCH: That was the impetus?

MR. LARSEN: – the one that came here, because it was going to go to SOFA, but as the Japanese, who came into dimensional fabrics later than Europe, still think it's – and the Koreans still later – were so avid, the idea of sending it to Japan seemed reasonable, and we were also beginning about that time to – oh, we took a tour to Cuba and somebody said, "Well, why are you taking people to Cuba, where you haven't even been, when you know – when we'd like to go with you to Japan?" So maybe that was also part of it.

And Issey wasn't the first thing in my mind. I was looking for a place in Japan. I wrote to Seiko Jima, and she looked at some places, and Reiko Sudo says, "Well, the best gallery in Tokyo is Issey's." I didn't even know it existed. Do you know the space?

MS. FISCH: No, I don't.

MR. LARSEN: Let me show you a picture, because she was right.

MS. FISCH: Well, I'm going to stop the tape because I think we're almost at the end of it.

MR. LARSEN: Good.

MS. FISCH: And you can show me a picture. So we'll continue later.

[Audio break.]

This is Arline Fisch interviewing Jack Lenor Larsen at LongHouse in East Hampton, Long Island, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, on Sunday, February 8, 2004. This is disk number five.

You've written a number of books on various aspects of the fiber world, from surveys of specific techniques to contemporary works from around the world. What motivated you to take the time to do that? That certainly is time-consuming.

They made important contributions to the textile world and certainly have inspired research and documentation. Was that your primary intention?

MR. LARSEN: I was sophomoric as a young person, having learned so much in a hurry. I was aware of what I knew, and after Cranbrook I was going to write a book on, sort of, advanced fabric design, and that was delayed. But when I proposed doing it, the publisher who – I'd also worked on a book when I was still an undergraduate called *Adventures in Weaving* [Gertrude Greer. Peoria, IL; C. A. Bennett Co., 1951], with a Seattle woman. And Grace Denny was writing books and I was working with her. So I thought I knew something about that. And the publisher said, well, they didn't have an elementary book on weaving. Wouldn't I *first* do that? So I did that one and –

MS. FISCH: Did you do that one alone?

MR. LARSEN: No, that's the one I did with Azalea Thorpe [*Elements of Weaving*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1957]. We described the problems of that. And it was okay. It was in print quite a long time, but without being a beautiful or just very special book. Then *Fabrics for Interiors* [with Jeanne Weeks. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Co., 1975], which was a text I wrote because there needed to be such a book, and when I was teaching at Philadelphia College of Art, I was aware that that kind of information didn't exist. I had a hard time finding someone to teach such a course and tell people what I've learned. And my fellow graduates at Cranbrook – in an art school you didn't learn it, and even interior and architecture majors didn't know much about fabrics and how to describe them – identify them. So I set about working on that, and it's still in print even though it's obsolescent; it is a text for most people studying interiors.

Mildred Constantine invited me to do a show called *Wall Hangings* [1969] at the Museum of Modern Art in the 60s, and what was emerging at that time, both in America and in Europe, a new art form that weren't traditional flat tapestries, nor were they necessarily sculptural and dimensional, but they were new and bold. And so I worked on that show, and I went for the museum to Poland and Switzerland and Holland and France, talking to the makers of these pieces. And after doing a small catalogue for the museum and the show being a great success -- we were on the ground floor of the Museum of Modern Art, and the press didn't pay as much attention as they should have, but others did -- we decided to do a book called *Beyond Craft: The Art Fabric* [with Mildred Constantine. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Co., 1973], and that caused a considerable stir and led to a second show. The show opened at the San Francisco Museum of Art and a second book called *The Art Fabric: Mainstream* [with Mildred Constantine. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Co., 1981], and both large 14-inch-format, rather deluxe books. Lots of illustrations.

And then someone suggested I write a book on batik, and I said I wouldn't do it on batik, but ikat is much more

interesting and even plangi – the various tie-dye techniques are more diversified around the world, and through history and are more important than batik. Curiously enough, I had collected a great many ikats and plangi pieces, and even batiks, without particularly identifying them as being any particular technique. But they were rich in red-blooded expression from tribal people in many parts of the world.

And in going off to Indonesia to gather more information and more fabrics I had stopped to see Bronwen and Garrett – two Rs, two Ts – Solyom in Hawaii – scholars of textiles and particularly of Indonesian fabrics in Hawaii. And they were enthusiastic and knowledgeable in areas which I was certainly not, and had vast files of research. And I said, well, why don't we do it together?

And so as we delved into it, the "pope" of all resists was a Swiss, still alive, working in Basil at the Ethnographic Museum, which turned out to be the Vatican of resist study. And what these three umbrellas for resist techniques were, what they had in common was, they all resist. And that simple people – preliterate peoples -- had a great need for identity and symbol. Who were they? Who were their family? Their succession? Rank? And so forth. And first it was in body paint, and then it needed to be on garments and weapons and such, and the only – there were no dyes that could be directly painted permanently on fabric. All those juices and things were extremely fugitive. The only way to be permanent was through immersion and often with boiling and often repeatedly. So once you had that, to get a symbol on it you needed to make a resist, and it could be liquid, as in batik; or it could be a pressure, as in plangi, which we often call *Shibori* today; or you could compress yarns before they were woven for ikat. And except for the extreme Arctic and some Pacific islands, every peoples in the world used these resists. And later when they learned pattern weaving, as in classic Chinese and Europeans, they stopped using resists so frequently, but everyone had.

MS. FISCH: So that was a major research effort.

MR. LARSEN: It was – but it was also fabulously interesting. It was so beautiful, and amazingly enough, resists were at that time extremely available and affordable, both in Indonesia and in Central Asia and Southeast Asia. A little less so in Japan, but Africa – West Africa was very rich in all three kinds of resist. And some of the – interestingly enough, West African and Japanese blue resist had some similarities in being on cotton and rather architectonic. There were some similarities there, but it was – of all the fields I've studied, it was the most interesting and rewarding, and I kept meeting people who were – had a lot of first-hand information.

There was a man in Greenwich Village whose father had been the photographer in Indonesia in 1900 and photographed all the royal families with their resists, and he had a big collection – one of the best – and was still buying. And Alfred Büler – the pope of all of this, who had written many books, and his antecedents in Switzerland had been the earliest researchers – was a very responsive collaborator.

MS. FISCH: Who published the book on resists?

MR. LARSEN: That was also Reinhold. And the man who published it was a Dane living in America, and when he took it to Frankfurt and showed it to his sales crew, they said that that was a dead issue, and it turned out to be certainly my bestseller and very, very successful. There was also a show that traveled for a very long time.

MS. FISCH: What was the exact title of the book?

MR. LARSEN: *The Dyer's Art* [with Dr. Alfred Bühler and Bronwen and Garrett Solyom. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Co., 1971]. And eventually they took the very graphic dust jacket of an Uzbeki ikat and cast it in bronze and gave it to him for his courage. The trouble was it was the only book printed in Korea, where prices and exchange were going up even faster than Japan, and eventually they couldn't, without starting over, reprint it again. But it was sold very well – and it's quite valuable today for resale.

And then rather parallel to that, I did *Interlacing* [with Betty Freudenheim. New York: Kodansha Int'l., 1987], which is a survey of all of the kinds of weavelike structures. We say that only textiles are woven, but mats and basketry and all those other structures that go over, under, over, under – are interlaced, and braids are interlaced and there are a great many of those, and mats and about half of all baskets. And that, too, was fascinating. One learned from the Leakey family and others that basketry and nets for fishing and such – fish traps – were probably man's oldest tool and proto-man was very small at the beginning and we didn't kill big animals. We dug for roots and berries and small fish and shellfish and things. And if we collected them into a basket or trap, we could gather to eat instead of eating on the bush like animals do, and we needed language. And the sequence of interlacing led to mathematics, and that women, which were the chief gatherers, were more important than we earlier thought.

So the whole idea of being the first and most important tool, interlacing was also spectacular, and with it I worked on my classification of interlacing and –

MS. FISCH: So that's what got you started on your idea of a classification system?

MR. LARSEN: I'm not sure whether the classification led to interlacing or whether the book project and exhibition -- but they worked hand in glove, and I was being logical and appalled by the fact, even in our own collection, which had grown to several thousand pieces, there was no rhyme nor reason to its numbering out. Date of acquisition. And that every other craft collection in every museum worldwide was pretty much done that way, which made no sense within an institution, and no ability to communicate from one institution to another in a numerical sense. It was like not having written music. And that there was a place for everything. It was like geography, that there are really – everything belongs on that globe. There is a place – was quite an eye-opener, and where *did* it belong? I'd earlier learned that every color could be also charted as to its relative value and hue and intensity, so this was also an interesting project, and it was also a collaborative exhibition that traveled.

MS. FISCH: Well, I know you brought together good people – museum people and crafts people to talk about this classification.

MR. LARSEN: That was later.

MS. FISCH: Was that later?

MR. LARSEN: When I realized it's not just fabrics, but all craft media are sort of in that same boat and the – what a remarkable thing it could be to make this happen – to have the equivalent of the Dewey Decimal system.

When I was 20, I taught a class at the Seattle Art Museum on design and color for handweavers, and one of my young adult students was a woman named Virginia Harvey, and she, it turned out, was a textile authority, handled both the University of Washington's fabric collection, which was pretty good, and the Seattle Art Museum's. And she learned how to store fabrics, but they had been -- and when I was a student -- in every place, in drawers, in paper, and the teacher or curator spent the next day after showing a few putting them back. In the meantime, there was the wear and tear on fabric. She realized they should be rolled. The rolls should be suspended, not sitting on a shelf, in acid-free paper, and research should be in photographs and descriptions of them, and you only touched those that you absolutely had to. And I found out that all over Europe, including the Kremlin Museum [Moscow, Russia], they were using the Harvey system – and rather soon; within a couple of decades. It just caught on like wildfire, so when there was a better method, it would be adopted, so that was encouraging.

ARLINE FISCH: Now, this is the same Virginia Harvey who wrote books on macramé and all of that.

MR. LARSEN: And I think split-ply twining, and so she was an inquisitive mind and only recently died. You know, she became a life-long friend and colleague. And I could ask her questions, and she'd think about it and get back to me.

MS. FISCH: So did you discuss the classification system with her?

MR. LARSEN: I did a lot, yeah. And what to do about – what do you do about laces, for instance? That used all of the interlacing systems and methods.

MS. FISCH: All at once.

MR. LARSEN: That's something apart. It's not a structure; it's another kind of umbrella. So, no, I enjoyed that. The other thing is I've never understood *leisure*. That – so when I wasn't working on my main thrust of designing, I worked on something else, and gardening was also something else, so –

MS. FISCH: But it seems that your interest in collecting has also sparked your research. I mean, is that – do you do the research as you collect, or do you collect and then think about wanting to know more about what you found?

MR. LARSEN: It's – first, it's impulsive. I collect first, and then curiosity about all this leads to doing something with it.

MS. FISCH: Were you a collector as a child?

MR. LARSEN: Yes, I was. I collected always – and nature things. I could collect bees in my hand without being stung at three, and plantlets I would grow – collect baby trees and plant them, and they would grow quickly and become problems. And when we went for Sunday drives, I would get out of the car and collect wild plant material and such. And then all the usuals of matchbooks and pennants and things, and I always collected.

MS. FISCH: And you've collected textiles because of your ongoing involvement.

MR. LARSEN: I didn't mean to. I was going to avoid that, but by the time we got to West Africa, where there were all of these incredible things that no one here had ever seen, and they were also affordable. They'd just had an

independence, so native dress and going back to their roots were where the Nigerians were, and they – all those resist fabrics were in vogue, and there was more going on there than had been or perhaps since. It was a good time and it was irresistible to collect things – a couple hundred pieces. Then the collection became more serious.

MS. FISCH: And you do collect other things as well. You collect art, for example. Is that a very deliberate kind of thing, or is that, again, a response to things that excite you visually?

MR. LARSEN: One impetus was the same teacher, Hope Foote, who was very important – she tried to teach, and succeeded in her own way, of teaching taste. But we were at her house one day as a group, and she'd been to Asia many times before the war and had all these beautiful pieces of furniture and serving props and some Mark Tobeys and scrolls. And it was a treasure house and we were all dazzled, and she said, "Well, if you buy one beautiful thing every year, you'll soon have some nice things to live with." I thought, well, if you do it every month or every week, it would go faster.

And I started collecting Northwest Indian baskets, which one could in those days, if one was persistent, find in thrift shops. And on Saturdays I'd make the rounds of the four thrift shops in Seattle and had a pretty good collection, which I sold to buy yarns when I was at Cranbrook, but I'd been through that process. All the anthropologists that I met usually had a Navajo rug and some baskets and pots and a few choice things.

Hope's assistant had worked with Wright and Breuer and all those great architects, and she finished a house at that time and it was all the things that one dreamt about in terms of the best designs, stainless and dinnerware, and all the right things. And I asked, "Are you rich?" And she said, "No, I'm not at all rich. I don't have the normal things. I don't have Spode, I don't have sterling, I don't have Baccarat. What every bride has to have, I don't have. I just have what I want and it costs even less." So this idea of subsidizing the alternatives – if I went without a lunch, I could have that – was what enabled me to buy.

MS. FISCH: What got you started on collecting furniture, because I know that you have a big collection of important Eshericks that you're very proud of. That's a sort of major commitment when you collect furniture.

MR. LARSEN: Well, when I was first in New York and needed so much in the way of equipment and looms and yarns and everything, I did buy a pair of Nakashima chairs and maybe I bought them on time. It was probably that I'd had a windfall – a lecture or something that gave me some extra money, so I – oh, when I was in Los Angeles and poor and disowned and rather religious, I one time gave away everything except what I was wearing. And I wasn't going to have anything that was material. Then I had another teacher who you know. I met Ruth Pennington –

MS. FISCH: Oh, yes.

MR. LARSEN: – who was a jeweler for –

MS. FISCH: A silversmith –

MR. LARSEN: She also taught silk-screen.

MS. FISCH: Oh, I didn't know that.

MR. LARSEN: And one spring she was getting a suntan from her country house and new dresses, and she wasn't a beautiful woman, but she looked so healthy and friendly, and it was just a treat to see what she was going to come in looking like.

And I decided that clothes didn't necessarily matter; they were also a gift to others if they were art – and if it was art, I could have it, so if furniture was an art form, like the Nakashimas, then it was all right. It wasn't just a possession. And that was my justification. That – and sort of like the table appointments that were design expressions rather than possessions.

MS. FISCH: Well, I know you're going to have an exhibition soon at the Museum of Art and Design [New York, NY]. Tell me again what the title is.

MR. LARSEN: "Jack Lenor Larsen: Creator and Collector." The working title that Connie gave it was "The Hand and the Eye," and she was disappointed when they didn't keep it. They thought she was vague. But [Wharton] Esherick, for instance, I knew him. I mentioned Bertha Schaefer; she was his dealer and she was also an interior designer and she used Esherick furniture. And her idea of art was all forms, so she dealt in craft as well as design and painting.

So when I had some loose money, finally, from this DuPont commission – and told that maybe I should buy some art rather than paying it all in taxes, I thought about, well, what art? And I decided, well, the art I would like would be Esherick, and so that's how that started. And then when Bertha died, I ran up to the studio to see what

Esherick furniture was there, and Wharton had been there first. A lot of it she was using was on consignment!

MS. FISCH: He took it back.

MR. LARSEN: But I did get a chair and a table that she owned for a price about at least a decade earlier. It was very affordable.

MS. FISCH: And are those things going to be in the exhibition?

MR. LARSEN: Those aren't, but his great arch from the Curtis Bok house, which was his best house with the library arch, is going to be. And the World's Fair table and two of its chairs will be, and the red bench, which is about his only piece in soft wood and painted, which was affordable because it wasn't typical, and then once I bought it and it was published, it was considered rare and "I'd stolen it." [Laughs.]

MS. FISCH: Jack, let's talk about your gardening. Why do you love gardening so much?

MR. LARSEN: It was one of my first successes. When I was three, I was given some radish seeds and shown how to plant them and then to cover with cheesecloth to keep out flies, and six weeks later I was a great success. I had a crop. [Laughs.]

MS. FISCH: What kind of gardening do you like best now?

MR. LARSEN: Japanese gardening, or probably informal gardens, asymmetrical ones. Even English gardens also have that character. It's interesting that all of Europe, including Russia, who had formal parterres, all symmetrical and hedges and so forth, and all over Europe, these were ripped out and English gardens were put in.

MS. FISCH: The English gardens are less symmetrical?

MR. LARSEN: Yeah, they're informal, woodland, sort of naturalistic from Capability Brown. You know, also it reduced maintenance, which probably even in the 18th century after the serfs were freed was sort of in keeping with the times.

MS. FISCH: Well, gardening does involve a lot of physical work. Do you do a lot of the work yourself?

MR. LARSEN: Mm-hmm. I don't get down on my knees as much as I used to. I sit and weed or whatever, and I'm not out as many days of the year or as many hours a day as I used to be.

MS. FISCH: Did you actually like the physical part?

MR. LARSEN: A lot, and being up on top of the pine trees – we had a lot of pine trees at Roundhouse in the winter and they're blowing in the wind, and when there was snow on the ground is when I did that pruning. I – well, and I trusted trees. I'm scared of heights, and ladders are not trustworthy, but trees I trusted. You know, it's awfully good exercise and older gardeners are better; at least they know more. You don't become a better tennis player at a great age, but you do become a more knowledgeable gardener. And what I like best is the destructive aspects of making a clearing or a brush pile or – where you can tell what you've done. That is – and so much of what most of us do is not measurable at the end of a day, but in gardening it usually is. And to be physically tired and sleep so well from the fresh air and all of that is rewarding.

MS. FISCH: How do you manage to find the hours and days in your otherwise really busy schedule? Or you just make it part of your schedule?

MR. LARSEN: Well, no I don't. Getting up very early and finishing my desk work so I can get into the garden. I used to try to be ready when Bonifacio came at 9:00, but now I have Matko coming. [Laughs.] And that's one of my frustrations, because often it's well after lunch before I get into the garden, but then if left to my own devices, I work until dark – until I can't see anymore. And that I like. *That* being my only deadline.

MS. FISCH: I know that you have a variety of gardens here at LongHouse. Did you start out with that plan, or do gardens evolve? I'm not a gardener so I'll ask these questions.

MR. LARSEN: It definitely has evolved. No master plan I had – my approach was impulsive. Either there's a gift of trees or there's 20,000 new bulbs or an idea. And always in the dental chair I try to think about gardening.

MS. FISCH: Well, I'm fascinated that you have colored gardens. Where did that idea come from?

MR. LARSEN: It's quite English: white gardens, blue gardens, and so on. But it's certainly one of the easiest ways to differentiate.

MS. FISCH: But you must have to know a lot about plants, or have learned a lot about plants, in order to choose those which are going to give you those colors.

MR. LARSEN: Not so much. To do an April garden, for instance, would require more knowledge. That's what was going to bloom here in April dependably. That's another English idea. That's harder. You know, color is relatively easy and it's also easier to do all one color than mixing colors harmoniously, and it takes more skill, but more and more now I'm less involved with flowers and flower colors. I'm trying for year-round color, and every trip to Japan I try harder, because their gardens really are absolutely as good in winter as they are in summer. Flowers aren't very important generally speaking.

MS. FISCH: No, the trees are much more important.

MR. LARSEN: And they're sort of jewelry in the garden. Their azaleas, they prune almost all the flowers off of them, and that maple leaves are more important than cherry blossoms even. But here in a deciduous forest you have to create a winter garden of evergreens and such. I'm still busy working on it, but flowers are ephemeral. They bloom most of them for a very short time, and most of the time you're looking at the rest of the plant, so I focus on the shapes and the forms and the textures and the colors of the leaves, and that's what I focus on more now.

MS. FISCH: I remember once you had a striped garden for a while. Do you still have that?

MR. LARSEN: No, that was at Roundhouse, and you have to keep constantly working it – any aspect of it – to keep the stripes there. It was effective briefly, but I couldn't garden professionally, because that takes more risks than I could sell professionally. I make a lot of mistakes.

Fortunately now, with tree spades, which make a conical hole and then make a conical lift of a tree into that hole, the tree hardly notices it's been moved.

MS. FISCH: So do you move things around?

MR. LARSEN: A lot. And they come up to 12 feet wide, these cones. The bigger they are, the more you pay and the more damage they do. But I had a fairly large one here recently. I made a new garden. We didn't see it today; it's about a third of a mile walk through the woods – a stroll garden. And I moved over 100 large trees and large shrubs and growing trees that were in the wrong place into that garden, at some expense and quite a bit of torn up lawns. But it's possible to correct mistakes, fortunately. But I couldn't do that for a client.

The trouble is being a designer composing things sort of in scale, and you do that with baby trees; everything else you might do as still life of. It *stays* there. Gardening material does *not*.

MS. FISCH: It keeps getting bigger.

MR. LARSEN: Or it dies, or goes out of season or whatever, but mostly it grows. And if I compose things so they look right to begin with, they are destined – and even if I realize, well, we can't do that, so I double a space, but they should be 10 times further apart!

MS. FISCH: So then you have to wait 10 years for them to get where you wanted them.

MR. LARSEN: Well, an old saw was for street trees, for instance – every other one is fast growing and you cut those out when the real ones grow up. And I do that now with ornamental grasses, sort of substitutes for the in-between period, and it helps, but it's still hard to visualize. I also nursery some material until it's a little bigger and then put it out.

MS. FISCH: I notice you also have lots of sculpture in the garden, but was that a later thought? In your plan of gardening?

MR. LARSEN: It wasn't later. It's – it costs more and it's not as easy to acquire sculpture as it is a plant. We have 100 nurseries out here plus all the mail-order firms. So I was eager to have sculpture as I could get it. Also, the average visitor is less impressed with just more trees and bushes with the walk all the way out there unless there's a sculpture or something very specific to see.

MS. FISCH: So it's a motivator for touring gardens.

MR. LARSEN: It's remarkable. It's easy to talk about – to explain why the something or other is so special garden-wise is a little difficult, but to say that this something is something harder. This – I'm awfully conscious of that.

MS. FISCH: Does the gardening have any impact on your design work with textiles?

MR. LARSEN: Yes. First of all, I normally think best when my hands are busy, and weaving or weeding or pruning or whatever is provocative. Even better is sitting in a symphony, which is more abstract than an opera, a ballet, or play; then I'm sitting on my hands and my mind wanders, or the dental chair when I'm trying to make it wander. That's even better than the pruning, but weeding – I think – I often think out solutions. Sometimes I just get the same idea over and over again, but other times I do come out with a "what would happen if." Or I actually learn something. Years ago, I was looking up through a red leaf maple and realized, well, half of it's green but it's exactly the same value and intensity as the red. They're merging together.

MS. FISCH: So there is some visual connection for you.

MR. LARSEN: And could I do that in weaving? And I did it both in flat woven cloths – silks and such – and I did it in carpet. Well, here's red and green. Not quite the same value, but – there.

MS. FISCH: Right. This is the catalogue from your exhibition at the Louvre.

MR. LARSEN: Yeah.

MS. FISCH: And this is a carpet called *Fantasy*.

MR. LARSEN: And the color way I called *Macedoine*, for a compote of fruits, but red and green about the same value and intensity, made a very rich coloring, but it also made everyone think of the Renaissance.

MS. FISCH: Because those fabrics had that kind of quality in them.

MR. LARSEN: Right, and very not modern. Not using modern painting really, or in most textiles, but it did lead me into doing something I hadn't done before. And then from that the whole plate of complements. Another favorite scheme of mine are low-intensity blues – very pale blues – and high value yellows – ochres that are about the same value to blend together wonderfully and you think of Klimt: that's his favorite color combination. It's very rich – opulent. It's like shadows on gold. Van Gogh – his fields and so on. It's a wonderful, rich kind of color, and then oranges and lavenders – great oranges and lavenders together using complements in that way grew out of the red and green. But before that I'd use colors close to each other on the wheel, which is much easier, it's simple.

MS. FISCH: More predictable.

MR. LARSEN: Yes, and so I also – also why is almost nothing in nature ugly or vulgar? Why? That's also a secret of mine in my own work and also in teaching, is – "I like that" doesn't mean anything. But *why* do you like it? You get to the essence, the cause or reason, and then that same reason you can use for something else that will be likeable.

MS. FISCH: So the gardening has – or your observation of nature has kind of produced some of –

MR. LARSEN: I often – when something works, I try to figure out, why is that so good? And that I learned from – and if it's not a textile, it's more generally useful than if it's more specific.

MS. FISCH: LongHouse is, I quote, "the last of the rather long line of personal living spaces that you've designed over the years." And it was preceded here in East Hampton by Roundhouse, and people are always curious about Roundhouse. And I wondered if you could talk a little bit about your inspiration for that.

MR. LARSEN: It was double. On the more general level, the organic seemed to me awfully right when I was in my first mature period in my '30s. More important than it being modern or new was organically right. And of course my mentor, Edgar Kaufman, Jr., had gone from Frank Lloyd Wright's – being a Frank Lloyd Wright scholar and building *Fallingwater*, to feeling that organic was the solution and that nature is organic, and that rather than being classical or romantic, let's just be organic.

And about the same time there was a book that came out called *The Personal House,* and it was done by a man better known as a potter: Henry Varnum Poor, who was an older generation, but had some influence on the early Craft Council. I'm not sure exactly. Maybe he'd shown at America House [New York, NY]. But he had built personal houses around New City in Rockland County, and I knew some of those intellectuals who were involved with that and were among the first people looking for alternate styles and maybe still arts and crafts mentality. His book, *The Personal House*; it was very impressive to me, and at the same time I was in Switzerland a lot and running all over looking for mills, and all over saw glorius generic architecture with barns even better than the houses, and how they related to the hills and the material that was grown nearby and the rocks and the wood and the shingles, and I was – I wanted woodpiles and windmills and so forth at Roundhouse. That was in my mind.

But then going to Africa to look at architecture and even more than the way they used the materials, whatever it

was at hand, thick earth walls in the Sudan for protection from heat and cold, and other materials. But a young man and his wife worked very hard to buy a second wife to help her, and then a third. And each wife had a house, and adolescent boys had a little house. So you had a cluster of buildings. It was very sculptural and there the spaces between were also part of the house, and whether it's in the sun or in the shade became important. And much, much more interesting than little American houses, which are very un – are very poor. Yesterday I was thinking Europeans in row houses and apartments really do better than we do with our idea of our own little houses. And so that intrigued me.

And then we got to the Transvaal – to the Endobelli, which are monogamous and the wife and children lived in a rectangle at the back of these row houses built side by side, little lots and walls between. And the man's house was a round house with a horseshoe of small rooms around it for storage and such. But the idea you could have a round house without pie-shaped rooms, which moderns here were doing so badly. They are not good for people and for beds and refrigerators. It didn't work. But the idea you could have a round house and put it – this hemisphere of rooms around it and still half of the house could have windows and access to the out of doors, and it was perfect! So I started making craft paper models when we were in Zululand. After dark there wasn't really anything to do, so by torchlight I was making these models of what would such a round house be like here. And of course it could use all those materials and so forth, so organically and so personally.

And when I came back – everyone was interested. No one had ever been to Africa; even travelers. So what was it all about? And I was interviewed by a smart lady, top design writer, and she made it sound as if this house really existed and only she had seen it. And my – our publicist, who was spectacular at that moment, said "Unless you do an African fabric collection, I'm quitting." So I did. And I had calls from *Life* magazine and *House and Garden* – everybody wanted to publish this round African house. And I thought, well, if they're so eager, maybe I can get some industry support to build it.

MS. FISCH: Did you already have the land?

MR. LARSEN: Well, I went out that summer all over – I already had a chauffeur's quarters out here for the summer, and I spent the summer looking for land. And I lived down by the multis and near the beach. It was so beautiful, and that things weren't going to change was attractive. But land down there was very costly and I couldn't have much.

MS. FISCH: Now, where was this again? On the shore?

MR. LARSEN: This was down near the beach that I was living in the chauffeur's apartment above the garage.

MS. FISCH: But it was on Long Island?

MR. LARSEN: Yeah, it was East Hampton.

And I had learned when – first in New York City I thought to go away just for a weekend wasn't worthwhile. I worked on weekends and I would go to Europe or to Haystack, but – for weeks on end, but not just for a few days. Then I became sort of religious about weekends. And I had a roof garden in town and I would gather stones and plants and such and take them to town. And curiously enough, I had a realtor that took me to that golf course we saw last year, which doesn't look very interesting to me. The nice ones couldn't be near, but he had a lot near a golf course for very little money – three acres. So we went to look at it. Well, I didn't want *that*. But I saw a lot of cedar trees that grew up in abandoned fields and said, "Well, those I like." He said, "Well, you like those, I have the place for you," and it was the Roundhouse property. It was a farm that had been abandoned in the early 20th century. It was rolling; it had 100-foot-high hedgerow around it; it was a kingdom. It was absolutely beautiful – the grasses and the wildflowers and pine trees and these fields. It was heaven.

MS. FISCH: And how many acres?

MR. LARSEN: It was about a dozen acres. It was affordable, and actually the mayor of East Hampton had bought it. He had six children. He was going to build there and he was – he was crossing after lunch in Amagansett and a speeding car killed him. That's how I happened to get it. And it was perfect, and there had been a straw stack where I built the house. It was a black compost several feet thick, but it didn't have grass. It was bare. It was so rich in the soil. And with a round house, you can make a compass out of a piece of string, and Win and I said, "Well, here's the main house; here's the guest house; there's the studio and tool garden." Rounds and rounds and rounds – obsessively round. I'm not quite sure of that, but I was in analysis five days a week and I was also curious, and so was she, as to why I was doing this at this private place that was also a showplace. And I finally figured out I'm trying to tell myself that I'm not a corporation; that I am also a person. It's not just incorporated.

MS. FISCH: But the house was always going to be yours and not the corporation's?

MR. LARSEN: Yeah, but it was – that's exactly it: that I had an identity that wasn't my firm and my profession. I

also felt that it was so perfect – the different grasses – that I wasn't going to garden beyond the garden walls, but you couldn't see the pond from the terrace because of the high grass, so we scythed down the grass, and then I started invading the landscape with more plantings.

MS. FISCH: How long did it take you to build the house? Was that done all at once?

MR. LARSEN: Yes, it was. As a matter of fact, it took forever. The man I chose to work with – first of all, several architects were willing to subordinate their egos to build my house, to my surprise, and the one who did help gave me some good advice – made me do things a little bigger than I was going to. He guided me well. But this builder I chose was a – even though I wanted a masonry house – he was a carpenter, so his idea was we would build forms out of wood and pour the walls, not do them with block or something. And we built forms all winter long – six men – and nothing was going up, and then it turned out with poured concrete we had to put steel in it like a 20-story building, so they spent the spring putting the steel in the forms. And it was also very expensive and I decided, well, we can't build the studio. I just don't have that much money. I can't raise that much money. He said, but we could pour it out of the forms. So we did. So all we really had to pay for was the roof. And we used the guest house forms to build the round pool, so eventually it got a little better, but –

MS. FISCH: Did you get some corporate funding for it, or in the end you paid for it yourself?

MR. LARSEN: The cedar people helped me with the big shakes, and U.S. Ply gave it hundreds of sheets of plywood for the ceilings and such.

MS. FISCH: But it was a costly venture.

MR. LARSEN: Yeah, and I learned what real estate meant. I had – being single and working all the time and not spending money, I had tailors on three continents; I had Mark Cross leather luggage. Nothing was too good because I never had any time to spend money. But real estate is different from all those other things.

MS. FISCH: It's a black hole into which money gets poured.

MR. LARSEN: It was – and I kept – one of my older students had loaned money to my company, and I finally said, "Well, the company doesn't really need it anymore, but I do." Could you take it out of there and loan it to me? And she did. And other innocent friends helped and gave me loans for – and I had some shares before I had real estate that were doing very well. Those went.

MS. FISCH: They all got converted to real estate?

MR. LARSEN: Mm-hmm.

MS. FISCH: So how long did it take you, actually, before you were able to move into that house?

MR. LARSEN: About two years. For a while we were camping in the guest house, which had a little kitchenette, and on Thanksgiving I had friends out, and we were camping in the main house but not really living there.

MS. FISCH: Was it as wonderful when you finally were able to live there as you had dreamt about?

MR. LARSEN: Yeah. Round rooms are very interesting, because you define space by corners and a round room is halfway to infinity. It does have a floor and ceiling, but it was special. It was also finite. Also, I was antagonistic against glass walls. There were many glass houses, but this didn't have enough windows, so I added a conservatory so when I had to be indoors, I could see out better than this house had allowed. It was sheltering, but with the conservatory, I had both.

MS. FISCH: And how long did you actually live there before you decided to sell it?

MR. LARSEN: A long time. Well, I moved in in '64 and I was there until '92.

MS. FISCH: Oh, almost 30 years.

MR. LARSEN: And I kept adding to it.

MS. FISCH: And what made you decide to sell it?

MR. LARSEN: Well, it was sort of finished and the garden –

MS. FISCH: It wasn't an adventure anymore.

MR. LARSEN: – the gardens were sort of finished, and I was at Stanley Marcus's adobe once more out in Santa

Fe, his second house in my tenure, and it was not the largest house there ever was, but it had a lot of rooms with no function except to hold art. Waste space. And I'd never – I'd always designed tightly, and I would get up early in the morning there and my – the Larsen room was the last room on one end, the kitchen on the other, and wander through all these spaces in the semidark to make coffee. And so I sort of knew the house well as an individual.

And I came back thinking, well, if I started over, I could build a house with waste space. And I owned this property – 12 acres of it – and when I got back, Ed Barnes had claimed that he'd never borrowed the book on Ise Shrine, which is the most beautiful building in the world: a seventh-century wooden structure in Japan. I-S-E Shrine. And it was sort of pre-Japanese because it was pre-Buddhist – a Shinto shrine. It's rebuilt every 20 years so the craftsmen don't lose the skills of all these secret joints. The emperor is coronated there. That's why they can afford to do all that – as The Sun of Heaven. And it was back on my desk with a sheepish note saying, "I found it." And that seemed fortuitous; that maybe that would be the inspiration for the new house.

And I had cleared trails. Where the dunes are was a new meadow here and – oh, on this side there was another lawn, but this was a real jungle of broken trees and monster vines. A terribly – totally neglected.

MS. FISCH: But it backed up to the property of where Roundhouse was?

MR. LARSEN: Next door, yeah.

MS. FISCH: It's right next door?

MR. LARSEN: I complained to a landscape architect, a very good one, that I never saw the part I wasn't working on. I spent the whole weekend someplace and I didn't see the rest of it. He said, well, we'll build a long, English drive around it so at least coming in and going out you'll see the rest of it. And it was next to the property edge. And I thought, well, if anyone ever built next door, I'd certainly be vulnerable, so I bought this at the right time.

[Audio break.]

MS. FISCH: This is Arline Fisch interviewing Jack Lenor Larsen at LongHouse in East Hampton, Long Island, on Sunday –

MR. LARSEN: The eighth.

MS. FISCH: February eighth, so this is disk number six.

We were talking about developing property for LongHouse.

MR. LARSEN: Well, two things: there was a Japanese teahouse builder out here who had actually apprenticed building Ise Shrine and was using similar construction for a large house for his assistant – American assistant. And he had a model of that house about five feet long that I bought and gave to the craft museum [Museum of Arts and Design, New York, NY, formerly the American Craft Museum]. And very impressive to see that – these great logs and things. Quite amazing. And so I also had – I was taking out thousands of oak trees here and I thought, well, we'll build this new house out of the trees I'm taking out and use this Japanese to help us.

Well, he said oak trees expand and all, and I remembered that's true. You can't do that, so that didn't work. And the only trees in North America were Alaska cedar, and John Hauberg of Weyerhauser said, well, we would own some of those, so –

MS. FISCH: How fortuitous.

MR. LARSEN: – I took hope for a moment, but then I had my regular architect was going to help with the plumbing and heating and other things, and then he wanted nine roofers from Japan for two years for the roof, and that was sort of the last straw. I realized it would take more time and more money than I had, and so we – Charles Forburg and I -- would go on alone. And Charles went quite the other way; we would do it out of masonry. But then I learned about this Monier roof – M-O-N-I-E-R – made out of gunite, which is a California invention. And I had to replace the cedar roof at Roundhouse, and each shake there had to be handmade into a triangle to make this conical roof, so the expense of that and the danger of it – those dry cedar shakes burning –

MS. FISCH: They're a horrible fire hazard.

MR. LARSEN: This idea of a 200-year roof that was fireproof was very appealing, and so that's how that came about, but required a great deal of structure to hold it, but then the beams to do that were attractive, so –

MS. FISCH: But this Japanese pavilion inspired the design –

MR. LARSEN: Right, it did. And Peter Olsen and I laid out the site of the house. First of all going up on stilts like Ise was attractive for me because there are no hills on Long Island and if you want a vista, you have to go up, and going up on stilts seemed very reasonable. I'd seen early plantations in Louisiana that did that for flooding, and of course in Thailand and Southeast Asia they do it for the rainy season.

MS. FISCH: The rain.

MR. LARSEN: And I explained to Charles that the space underneath would be free, and he said, well, not quite, but it will cost less, and so we went up. And we got on high stepladders to see what it would be like. It was wonderful. And I laid out the gables for siting out of bamboo. Well, we set up these gables – these bamboo poles, for the gable ends to site the building, and on all of these collaborations with architect Charles Forburg, I tend the do the floor plans and he does the structure, and we do the finishes, particularly on my houses. And so he said we would fast track it, and that meant we didn't make every decision before we started building, and that was a good idea. Working as a craftsman, my idea of working that way – organically, the idea that when you get to the top of the first hill, you can see better where you are going and then decide where you go from there, and I worked that way always. And architects tend not to.

MS. FISCH: Well partly because they have to get building permits.

MR. LARSEN: Well that's probably – but even, their nature is to decide on the last door knob before they dig the hole, and that's incomprehensible to me. But on this one we really worked that way, and after we got into the house, I decided I wanted a window or that's where I would like a window in, to work there, and that view not this way and so on, so that's the way we'd do it, and it took forever and had several builders in succession. It took longer, more time, and more money than anticipated, but it also got a little bigger and much better in the process.

MS. FISCH: And you're very happy with it? Did you always intend that it would not remain only your personal space?

MR. LARSEN: Yes. This one – at Roundhouse people would come and realize that I was coming out to work in the garden, and "when are the owners coming to just come out and enjoy it?" And I thought about that and thought, well, maybe if I made it a public garden, it would more justify the fact that I was spending all of my time and money on it. So when I built this one, and it was going to be even bigger, a 16-acre garden, that it would be a case study to share with others, a demonstration house, on alternate lifestyle. And I talked to a lawyer about setting up a foundation for it and she said, "Let's set it up now and it'll be easier; get some friends together for your board and then you can decide what you want to do about it." So we did. And we're still working on that. I didn't think of having performing arts here, but once it existed, they said "Well, we want to read poetry or dance here or bring music." That was added, but the idea would be shared, that it would be a case study, I always had with this one.

MS. FISCH: Was it also in your mind that it would be a kind of repository for your collection?

MR. LARSEN: Less so, and the collection was smaller when I started, because when I had big things and I moved a lot, I gave them to museums. And I did quite a bit of that. And I learned, like recorded music, you don't have to listen forever. You don't have to own it forever. I grew in the process of having listened, or lived with, that I didn't have to own things unnecessarily. But once I had a place, I sort of kept things here, even larger things, rather than giving them away so quickly.

MS. FISCH: So the foundation is now going to enable you to, or maybe force you to build an addition to house some of the activities of the foundations?

MR. LARSEN: Yes, originally I thought that the public part of it would be after my lifetime or after I moved out of the house, but that's certainly not the case. And now that we're rather successful and have many activities, and staff, and volunteers, and deliveries, and all of it being at the top of the house, and everyone having to move through the house, and it being hot up there, particularly last summer –

MS. FISCH: The building is not air conditioned, is it?

MR. LARSEN: No. It doesn't really need to be except for the fourth level. Having a place aside for them would be reasonable, more reasonable than my trying to move out, so we're working on that.

MS. FISCH: And when do you anticipate that will be?

MR. LARSEN: Hopefully, by the 2005 season the staff will be out of this house.

MS. FISCH: Do you think that when that's done, you will feel that the project is complete – you'll be happy to just

enjoy it?

MR. LARSEN: Of course, but probably not. New projects, for anyone who creates, are what life is made of, and I often notice with artists it's the newest work that they love – six months old it's not very important, but what they're working on now is the new child, and I expect I'll have more ideas.

MS. FISCH: But you're happy with the way it evolved, and the performing art coming has been very satisfactory for you?

MR. LARSEN: Yes, and what I realized, it's what I've always done, and which makes me happy. I find a group who will go along with my ideas and my interests – therefore I'm comfortable in that group and I belong to it. I'm important to it and I don't have to tag along with someone else's group, which was more problematic. And I did it as a child, I did it with my own projects, my own companies, all my life, and I'm comfortable with that situation.

MS. FISCH: Well, you've certainly not retired in the normal sense of the word, but you did sell your business several years ago, and was that a difficult decision, or were you ready to do that?

MR. LARSEN: I was quite ready.

[Audio break.]

MS. FISCH: This is Arline Fisch interviewing Jack Lenor Larsen at LongHouse in East Hampton, Long Island, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, on Sunday, February 8, 2004. This is disk number seven.

So we were talking about your so-called retirement.

MR. LARSEN: I'd had some problems with presidents and I didn't – I was happy to have somebody else run that operation, just do the designing. And having been responsible to about 200 people working for us and all the producers and shareholders for a very long time, I was ready to stop doing that. And we had an opportunity to merge with an English company that would take that off my hands and I could focus on other things and still work on design. That was agreeable enough.

MS. FISCH: And how do you function in the current situation?

MR. LARSEN: As a design consultant I work on – I no longer control the Larsen line, but only those things that I'm working on, which is fine. It took some adjusting and continues to, but I'm fine with it. I was -- fairly recently, I was at an opera and Placido Domingo was conducting.

MS. FISCH: Mm-hmm. He's moved from being on the stage to being in front of the stage.

MR. LARSEN: Yes, and then he's also very involved with the Los Angeles Music Center. Well, that should teach me something. I don't have to do the same things. And that's perfectly consistent with my own feelings. But what I enjoy doing most is what I don't know how to do yet. Sales mangers and so forth always wanted last year's best seller, and I'd been in a position of saying, I won't do that. I've learned some things by the fact I did it last year, so I'm not going to repeat myself and I haven't had to, and so going on to new challenges, it's very interesting.

MS. FISCH: And what kinds of new challenges are you looking at?

MR. LARSEN: Not quite sure, but I'm open. I'm at another phase now where I'll not even be working in my own studio at the beginning of this summer of 2004 and –

MS. FISCH: You mean the studio in New York?

MR. LARSEN: Yes. And so I'm not exactly sure what my next challenge will be.

MS. FISCH: Do you have any other books in mind?

MR. LARSEN: These archives, even, have made me think I might try compiling my assorted writings and lectures and essays and so on. I've done a great deal of writing that is not in books, and I've always thought that would be worthwhile. And now maybe I will do that, but I will also do some things with people as well.

MS. FISCH: So you're quite looking forward to those new things that are on the horizon.

MR. LARSEN: Mm-hmm. I am.

MS. FISCH: What was it like writing your memoir [*A Weaver's Memoir*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1998]? Was that a good experience, difficult experience?

MR. LARSEN: It was extremely difficult. I'd never written in first person before, ever, even in an essay. And I had tried, when asked in lectures to tell about yourself, to get out of that situation to tell about something else in third person. And using "I" all the time, I found embarrassing. How could I rephrase it to leave out the first person? And Paul Gottlieb, who'd commissioned the book, said, "I want you to tell about your work, and your gardens, and your travels, and your collections," and such, and he didn't say about your friends and your personal life and so forth. So I left that out. So it wasn't that personal, but it was still very difficult.

MS. FISCH: Did it take you a long time?

MR. LARSEN: A long time. And I had an editor who didn't push very hard. I hired my own that I would have to meet with every week. She and others would try to help, and then they weren't writing as I remembered it and in my words, and I'd have to rewrite everything. It was very difficult.

The good news was that I came home one night and there was the book bound, and I sat down at 1:00 in the morning and read it, and it read easily, like conversation, and after being so hard to write, the fifth draft, that was good news. And in doing the recent book for the museum with many writers and rewriting everything –

MS. FISCH: This is the catalogue for your exhibition –

[Cross talk.]

MR. LARSEN: Right, which is really a book. But when I had to do some checking on the memoir on that – the final edit on that -- I realized how good the memoir is by comparison and relatively easy than someone else telling my story.

MS. FISCH: I was very admiring of the memoir. I really enjoyed reading it and I thought – I just wondered how difficult it was to do that.

MR. LARSEN: It was very difficult, but I recently wrote to the woman who helped me, and she encouraged me to make it more personal and to tell about *that* – that's interesting! And I thought it was not worth telling, but she said, "Oh, no. That's what we want." And I thanked her again for helping me to open up more. And of course, what we like about people is their being vulnerable and I was a little more vulnerable, in the memoirs than I had ever been before.

MS. FISCH: Well, that was the other thing I wondered about, is whether that was hard to do because you do, sort of, lay yourself out to the public.

MR. LARSEN: Yeah, well, and now I – that was sort of – I appreciate that more now than I did then.

MS. FISCH: And you were telling me that it's just now been reprinted in softcover because it sold out.

MR. LARSEN: Well, yeah, and the reason I wanted it to be reprinted is I didn't want to have to do it again. [Laughs.]

MS. FISCH: Well, also you get all these frantic requests from people and you think: I can't do that.

MR. LARSEN: Right.

MS. FISCH: So it's wonderful when it's reprinted.

Well, is there anything else you'd like to talk about that we haven't covered?

Tell me about the bench exhibition that you're going to do this summer. That's pretty interesting.

MR. LARSEN: Oh, well, the garden committee was – oh, the way that started, I'd been trying to say that I'd like the garden here to be more important as a thing and not just events that we do in the garden, but let people come *for* the garden. The garden becomes better, more mature, more diversified, and it's also relatively easier, and will be after I'm not here, to maintain the garden than to keep inventing. Also, the professional – the public gardens in America have their publications and their own literature, and they're trying to get people to focus on the gardens, and not that we have fireworks and you're coming for something else, but you're coming *because* of the garden. And more and more I've been agreeing that that's what I would like and that it would be the way to go.

And if you're going to be in the garden – in the art of the garden, not art in the garden -- it'd be easier to sit. It's

so hard to find benches that fit in and aren't sore thumbs and they're white and they distract. Let's work on the right benches. And thinking, well, there could be architects and artists and people creating benches and could be an exhibition and maybe some of them will be on permanent exhibit. And the art committee said, "Well, we'll help," and so it was going to be part of last year and it – that would be our big event this year the whole season.

MS. FISCH: And how many benches will there be?

MR. LARSEN: Somewhere between 50 and 100. The responses, now that it's really going to open in a few months, are beginning to come in faster. We have, sort of, winter garden benches that will be on a porch or a closed space, but it's a little harder to get benches that are going to be out year-round and are durable.

But all kinds of materials, different parts of the world, and some of them will be site-specific and sort of built in and we'll only have photo murals of them. Memorial benches, et cetera.

MS. FISCH: Do you anticipate doing a catalogue?

MR. LARSEN: I'd –

MS. FISCH: You'd probably like to.

MR. LARSEN: Yeah. We're getting some important essays from periodicals, but how we will make the documentation printed, in videos and webs and all of that, is relatively easy and inexpensive these days, and wide audiences, but printed page we're working on.

MS. FISCH: It would be nice to have a printed document if you could get someone to underwrite its publication.

MR. LARSEN: Yes.

MS. FISCH: And that's certainly something that could be available here –

MR. LARSEN: As garden literature, it's competing with cookbooks for popularity, as is gardening. It's not so impossible. I could – might be even a commercial press.

MS. FISCH: Right. Well, that's exciting. So that's your very next project.

MR. LARSEN: Yeah. Very good.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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