

A TEI Project

Interview of Ruth Waddy

Contents

1. Transcript

- 1.1. TAPE NUMBER: I, Side One (July 26, 1991)
- 1.2. TAPE NUMBER: I, Side Two (July 26, 1991)
- 1.3. TAPE NUMBER: II, Side One (July 27, 1991)
- 1.4. TAPE NUMBER: II, Side Two (July 27, 1991)
- 1.5. TAPE NUMBER: III, Side One (July 27, 1991)
- 1.6. TAPE NUMBER: III, Side Two (July 27, 1991)
- 1.7. TAPE NUMBER: IV, Side One (July 28, 1991)
- 1.8. TAPE NUMBER: IV, Side Two (July 28, 1991)

1. Transcript

1.1. TAPE NUMBER: I, Side One (July 26, 1991)

MASON:

Today is July 26, and I'm talking with Ruth Waddy, in San Francisco. Ms. Waddy, could you tell us when and where you were born and also give us your full name?

WADDY:

I was born in Lincoln, Nebraska, January 7, 1909, and my full name is really Willanna Ruth Gilliam. Willanna was my first name because my mother-- I was the oldest, the first child. My mother's first name is Willie [Goran Gilliam], and her second name was Anna. But when I went to school, the children called me "Banana!" So I asked her if I could go by my second name, Ruth. She said yes. From then on I was Ruth Gilliam. Now, when I got married I didn't want to drop the maiden name, so I go by Ruth G. Waddy.

MASON:

I see. And what's your father's name?

WADDY:

John Moses Gilliam.

MASON:

Do you know when they came to Nebraska, approximately? Had they been--?

WADDY:

They had been married four or five years prior to my mother becoming pregnant with me, and they were in Butte, Montana, at the time, near the time of my-- And she became pregnant with me. But my father was very suspicious of staying there because there were no African-Americans in Butte, Montana, at that time. So he decided to move to Lincoln. And another thing, my father always liked to buy wherever he lived. He liked to buy his house and some land around it because he was a strong believer in gardening for, you know, tomatoes and peppers and things like that. He liked to have vegetables.

MASON:

Is that what he did for a living?

WADDY:

No. He was a waiter. That's how he happened to know the Northwest of the country so well, because he did what many African-American men did in those times--run on the road. But he was not a porter, he was a waiter.

MASON:

This was on a train?

WADDY:

Yes. On trains.

MASON:

Did your mother work also?

WADDY:

No. My mother never worked. In fact, when I was a baby until-- Well, when I was born, I had two younger sisters, Margaret [Gilliam Harrison] and Gladys [Gilliam Little] . Margaret is about a year and three months younger than I, and Gladys is almost three years younger than I am. Gladys was born in 1912. Margaret was born in 1910. She was a middle sister; Margaret was the middle sister. And Mama hired — It was during the period of a lot of immigrants coming to the United States- -when the immigrants came to the States, I mean, a lot of them from Europe. My mother knew how to speak German, so she hired-- They had a German help, you know, to help my mother do the--

MASON:

How did she happen to know how to speak German? Do you know?

WADDY:

Well, my mother seemed to be very well educated, although she was an only child. Her mother died in childbirth. She was raised by her grandparents.

MASON:

Was she educated abroad, do you know?

WADDY:

No. She was born in Fort Scott, Kansas.

MASON:

Same place as Gordon Parks.

WADDY:

But she was raised and she talks about Leavenworth, [Kansas]. I guess that's where she met my father. I don't know. Maybe so, because I know the Gilliams had property in Leavenworth. I never asked her, and when I thought about asking her she was gone. But she must have come from a sort of upper-class family because she put-- In those days, young women had hope chests. A hope chest meant that you put away things in preparation for your wedding, your future home .

MASON:

Like linens and china and things like that.

WADDY:

Yes, yes. She put quite a store by sterling silver and linen tablecloths and very fine things. We always had a dining room and a linen tablecloth, and each of us had our own napkin and napkin ring with our names on it.

MASON:

Oh. Did she play the piano?

WADDY:

Yes, she did, and she sang. She had a beautiful singing voice, but none of us inherited that. But we did inherit a love for grand opera. She sang grand opera.

MASON:

Where did she sing? Just locally?

WADDY:

I know that she sang in Leavenworth, Kansas, because my uncle-- My father, on the other hand, there were eight in his family, girls and boys. Uncle Elijah [Gilliam] often remarked that it was strange that none of us had the voice my mother had. So it must have been in Leavenworth, Kansas. And where else, I don't know. She never did say. When I thought about asking her about those things, she wasn't here--she had died.

MASON:

What year did your mother die?

WADDY:

I don't remember. I don't remember dates of-- I remember when my father died, because I was graduating from the eighth grade. I was thirteen years old. I remember that . But I don ' t remember my age .

MASON:

So he died before your mother?

WADDY:

Yes, many years before.

MASON:

Did you know much about your father's family background?

WADDY:

Yes. Uncle Elijah wrote a sort of mini- autobiography for his daughter [Anne Gilliam Hare] , and I have a copy of it someplace. Uncle Elijah was the youngest of the eight children. My father was next to the oldest- - of the boys, anyway. I remember Aunt Jane [Gilliam] , my mother saying that she was sort of a disciplinarian. She never had any children, though. Uncle Henry [Gilliam] did. Uncle Henry was the oldest boy, and he had some children, but I don't remember how many. My father, since he ran on the road and he liked the Northwest, when my mother and he were married, that's where they lived. In those days, there weren't very many African-Americans in that part of the country. That's why it was a German immigrant who hadn't learned how to speak English yet. That's why my mother hired her, I think.

MASON:

I see. So what kind of education did your parents try to give their children? Did they try to give you music lessons?

WADDY:

Yes, yes, my mother did, because, of course, being in music, she thought it was important. I remember we had a cardboard-- We didn't have a piano at first. The keys were cardboard, and we had to practice on these cardboard keys. And it was numbered, you know. The keys were numbered E, F, G, A, B, C. Let me see. I think there were six of them. The C starts, C, D, E, F, G, A, B, C. A, B, C are the higher one's up. And then after a while we got a piano. I liked the piano. Some woman heard me play once, and she offered my mother-- This was after my father had died. She said that she would see that I became a concert pianist if my mother would let her take me. But Mama said no, because she had heard stories about white people taking children, and they were actually enslaving them to work for them, you know, for years and years and years. So she said no. But I played for the church, and I played the pipe organ for the church. I liked the pipe organ because the pipes are for the keys where you do your footwork.

MASON:

How long did you continue to play the piano? All your life or did you stop at some point?

WADDY:

Oh, I can't play the piano now.

MASON:

So it was mostly classical music then, or was it--

WADDY:

Yes.

MASON:

No jazz, right?

WADDY:

But my youngest sister played jazz.

MASON:

What did your mother think of that?

WADDY:

She didn't think anything. It was quite acceptable then. Not as acceptable as it is now, but it wasn't, you know, forbidden.

MASON:

Did you have any other incidents in your childhood that you can think of that were important or people you met who seemed to have influenced you?

WADDY:

Nobody influenced us except certain precepts that our parents gave us. Nothing else. Nobody, unless they had the same ones, the same precepts. Our life was-- As children we had-- It was very regimented. We got up early and everybody got dressed and had breakfast at the same time. And you either played or went to school. My mother sewed. She made a lot of our clothes. And when we were able, we were taught how to sew. I remember one thing: Of course, we always, Margaret, my middle sister, and I, would lose the needles, but not the long ones. Sewing needles, you know. But the little short ones, they were about two inches long, an inch and three quarters or two inches long. We would put them down or forget where they were, just drop them. So we were always asking Mama for a new needle. She would give us longer ones and longer ones. Well, longer needles were fine as long as we didn't lose them. But, on the other hand, you can't do very fine sewing with a coarse needle, taking big stitches. You have to take small stitches to do fine sewing, small holes in the material. So one day, before we asked Mama for them, because Margaret and I asked her, we said-- We just had a darning needle. One was taught how to darn, too, which is quite--

MASON:

Useful.

WADDY:

Yes, it is. Very useful. And it looks good, too, if it's done properly. We said, "We'll give Gladys the darning needle." But Gladys was very sharp, my youngest sister. We told her she could take more cloth on the darning needle, take more stitches on the needle, because it's longer. She said to us, "Well, if it's so good, how is it that you're giving it to me?" She was very good at that.

MASON:

What church did your family belong to?

WADDY:

Methodist .

MASON:

Did you remain a Methodist?

WADDY:

I don't go to any church at all. I don't-- If I-- When I went to church, I went to Methodist churches.

MASON:

One usually thinks of the church being kind of a central part of black life, and if you're not in church, then you're sort of disconnected from a lot of activities, social, political things. But you didn't find that that was--

WADDY:

Well, I stopped going to church after I was grown. I was grown up and not living in Minneapolis then. I remember particular things about Minneapolis. First of all, when I was growing up, there weren't very many African-Americans there. There are now and have been for some years. But we had white neighbors, and intermarriages were common. And the church was an important community-- when I was growing up--for African-Americans. They didn't call them African-Americans at that time. They were called "colored people."

MASON:

That was before "Negro."

WADDY:

Yes, then Negro, and then "Afro," which doesn't mean anything, because, as Gladys says, there's no such thing as an Afro. What's that? That's just as bad as saying a colored person. But African-American comes a little closer to what Africans are here in the United States. But the thing that I remember is that it gets dark early in the summer and in the winter. We had to be in bed by eight o'clock. Now, I mean in the winter it gets dark by eight o'clock. In the summer, it's around nine o'clock or so. But we had to go to bed at eight o'clock while it was still light. And we would play. We lived in houses that had an upstairs and a downstairs. The bedrooms were upstairs. And the downstairs was the-- See, they didn't call it a living room. It was called a front room. And then a dining room. And then a kitchen. Maybe there might have been an extra room, but if it was I don't remember the name of it.

MASON:

Parlor or sitting room.

WADDY:

A parlor maybe, but not a sitting room. And then we always had a basement. The houses where it snows always had cellars or basements--a foundation-- because it's required because of the weather, of the freezing. The freezing of the ground. So when we would go to bed in the summer, I would tell stories. I had a very active imagination. I would tell stories, fairy tales, mostly, to my younger sisters. If I couldn't think of an ending, you know, a proper ending, I'd just say it's "continued until tomorrow night." My mother would be downstairs,

and she could hear me talking or all of us talking or laughing. She'd say, "Children!" She'd call upstairs, "Be quiet! Go to sleep," almost every night. When my father came home from being on the road-- He ran to Washington when we lived in Minneapolis. Washington, the state of Washington and the state of-- What 's that other state that 's below the state of Washington?

MASON:

Oregon.

WADDY:

Oregon. It would be eight days, from time to time. He'd be out eight days and be in three days, you know, in Minneapolis, three days. One time my mother said to him-- we could hear them-- "See Jack, that's the way they do every time I send them to bed." My father never whipped us, not one time, because he said he was too strong and he would hit his girls too hard. But Mama wanted him to do that. So one night he called us downstairs, and he said to me, "I'm going to give you three licks because you're the oldest." So he gave me, and he counted them out, "one, two, three," out loud like that. And Margaret he gave two, "one, two." Of course, we didn't cry because he just barely touched us. So we went upstairs, and we heard Mama say, "I don't hear the children crying." And Papa said, "You don't hear them talking either, do you?" My father was-- My sister Gladys was like him. She always had an answer that you couldn't answer back. My daughter [Maryom Ana Al-Wadi] does that, too. She can always give you an answer that you can't answer back. You have to be quiet because she's hit the nail on the head.

MASON:

Yeah, well, it sounds like you had a really happy childhood.

WADDY:

It was, very, very much so. So much so that when I was working in Los Angeles, or it was in Chicago? No, it was in Los Angeles, at the [Los Angeles] County Hospital. One worker said to me, "Oh, Ruth, everybody knows you had a happy childhood. We can tell by the way you act." [laughter] It really was, it was a very happy childhood. All of us. And then my father died, and my mother went to work. That's the first time that she had ever gone to work outside of the home. Of course, she worked like a dog, I realized after I grew up. After I got grown, I realized how hard my mother worked at home, because she did her own canning. In those days they canned. She did her own laundry, and she took care of her children. If anything happened in school, she was always up to the school to talk to the teachers. She was an ardent church worker. She worked hard. I didn't realize that. And she loved to entertain. Of course, she was a very good cook, too, and cooking also is hard work.

MASON:

Back then especially, with no dishwashers.

WADDY:

Washing, and taking care of children, three girls, and maintaining a certain kind of standard, that's hard work.

MASON:

Did your family belong to any organizations like the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People]?

WADDY:

They never mentioned it. My father didn't think much of any kind of organization of any color or any size or nothing. He just thought a lot about doing things yourself. My father was a better businessman, businesswise, than my mother, but, of course, he was outside the home all the time.

MASON:

So how did you decide to go to college, go to the University of Minnesota? What led you--?

WADDY:

Well, first of all it was cheaper. I thought I wanted to teach school . They had normal schools at that time. They were schools that taught people how to become teachers. They were called normal schools. But it cost \$30 a year. First they had semesters, and then they changed to quarters at the university. It was \$30 a quarter then.

MASON:

This was 1927-28. I'm just trying to get an idea of how much \$30 was. Was that a lot?

WADDY:

Well, I worked while I was going to school. Because my mother, when she worked, she made \$25 a week.

MASON:

I see. That gives me an idea.

WADDY:

So I guess \$30 was quite a bit of money then. Not as much as \$1,500 and \$5,500 now.

MASON:

Yeah, it's ridiculous now.

WADDY:

I know. It's much higher now to go than it was then. Let's see. [searching] I thought I had that out. I had an old University of Minnesota bill to show you.

MASON:

Oh, okay. Well, you might find that later. So in the normal school to become a teacher you would probably take a lot of different subjects. Instead of focusing on one area, would you take courses in--?

WADDY:

You have to decide what you're going to take before you-- If you want to teach English, well, I guess that's what you'd concentrate on. Or they had one called arithmetic and then mathematics. Mathematics was not all- inclusive. Mathematics started with algebra at that time. I think it starts with trigonometry now.

MASON:

Is that what you studied?

WADDY:

No, I went through solid geometry, but not trig. I didn't go that far.

MASON:

No, but I mean, did you want to become an English teacher or what subject did you specialize in?

WADDY:

Yes, English.

MASON:

I can see by all your books that you love to read.

WADDY:

Yeah, I love to read. Oh, yes. I read like mad.

MASON:

What kinds of things did you read? Do you remember?

WADDY:

Philosophy. I liked nonfiction. I didn't like romance and love stories much. It didn't make sense to me. I mean, it seemed kind of silly.

MASON:

Do you remember some of the philosophers that you liked in particular? Maybe American or German or--

WADDY:

No, I don't remember that. The only thing I remember is that they never resolved anything. That kind of put me off, too. I like things coming to a resolution, coming to some kind of conclusion, coming to some kind of end. I like the hands-on approach. I was always that kind of a person. My mother called me a bull in a china shop. I was, first of all, large for my age. And I was strong physically, very strong, which may account for my present condition, because I was that way all of my life, all of my life. I may have just done too much, just done too much.

MASON:

So you were interested in athletics and things like that?

WADDY:

No, I liked to swim. I liked the water, let's say, but I never learned how to swim well. And I liked playing tennis, and I prefer to play with men. Women didn't play very much. They didn't play hard enough.

MASON:

They were too busy being dainty.

WADDY:

Yes. There was a great difference made between men and women when I was growing up, more so than now, a different kind. It wasn't as interchangeable as sometimes it is now. I think it's more true now than it was then.

MASON:

You mean that back then women were trained to stay in the home?

WADDY:

Yes, exactly. Women who liked sports or were too athletic were called tomboys. That wouldn't wash today. I think that today it's more true. It comes closer to the truth than before.

MASON:

You mean in terms of--

WADDY:

Differentiating between the sexes.

MASON:

Oh, you think things are more separate now?

WADDY:

No, they were more separate then. And that wasn't true. They are really more alike than they are different.

MASON:

So were you called a tomboy back then?

WADDY:

No. Because I was not athletic.

MASON:

You were just strong.

WADDY:

I was just strong. I was just physically strong.

MASON:

Was that something that you were thinking about a lot back then, the differences between the sexes?

WADDY:

No .

MASON:

Okay, and then while you were in school the Depression broke out. The crash happened in 1929, and it seems like you left school after that happened, because on your resume it says you were in school from '27 to '28, then '30 to '31. So did that affect your finances immediately?

WADDY:

No, because I worked while I was going to school. I worked as a domestic and stayed on the place.

MASON:

You didn't lose your job?

WADDY:

What they called a live- in, which means that you took care of the children. You stayed-- You know, instead of having a babysitter, the maid took care of the children so that the master and the mistress could go out to a show or to somebody 's house or whatever . But they had a caretaker for the children in the house. That was part of your duties, as well as cleaning and cooking and whatever else. But I did it after I went to school. Like I would get up maybe and fix breakfast and go to school. Fix breakfast for the household and then go to school. Then, when I came back, I would go to the store or start fixing dinner or do some cleaning- -whatever day it was, whichever was the more important.

MASON:

When did you find time to study?

WADDY:

After dinner, after the dinner dishes were done.

MASON:

You must have been tired at the end of the day.

WADDY:

No, not particularly, because I had study periods during the time. Like, for instance, an English class would be between eight thirty and ten o'clock or eight thirty and nine thirty. From nine thirty until eleven o'clock was free time. That was time for me to study before an eleven o'clock class. There was time during the day. And, of course, at night too.

MASON:

So when did you — ?

WADDY:

Well, my mother was cook at like a restaurant. It was really a candy store that served meals. Ragland's Candy Store was the name of it.

MASON:

Like a Woolworth's, something like that.

WADDY:

Yeah. Ragland's Candy Store was like a See's Candy Store with very fine candy. And she decided to open up-- Mrs. Ragland was married, but she was the one who made nearly all the decisions. Mr. Ragland just went along.

MASON:

I'm sorry? Oh, he went along. He raked in the money .

WADDY:

Yeah. So my mother started it, and it was successful. But they needed a dishwasher at one time, and I said that I would do it so I could get out of staying in the house as a live-in domestic. But when I saw how hard my mother worked doing the cooking, I decided that she worked that way because I was in school and, you know, I had two younger sisters. She was only making \$25 a week. I decided that I didn't need to stay in school, I needed to get a job and help her. So I told her that, and she thought it would be more important for me to get a degree. But, you know, I was in my twenties, or close to, and felt just as grown as anybody else. So I quit school and went to Chicago, because I knew that they had jobs for live-in maids in Chicago. So if worst came to worst, I could always do that, because I knew how to do it.

MASON:

What did you want to do in Chicago? What did you think — ?

WADDY:

I thought that I would work and save a little bit of money so that I could go back to school, because my mother was very unhappy about that. She was unhappy and proud, too, you know, both of them. I told her she didn't have to work that hard for me, because I was strong and able. She was proud about that, but she wasn't happy about my quitting school. When I went to Chicago, I saw so many black people, more than I had ever seen in my life. I fell in love with it just as soon as I got off the train. I mean, I saw people just walking up and down. I said, "This must be heaven!" I said, "I'll never, ever leave Chicago, as long as I live." I just fell in love with it. They had more black people in Chicago in one block than there were in the whole city of Minneapolis. They had five thousand-- Of course, they were living in kitchenettes, two, three living on top of each other along with the cockroaches .

MASON:

And the rats. Outrageous rents, as well.

WADDY:

Well, the kitchenettes weren't so bad, except there were too many. Five thousand in one block. There were hardly five thousand in the whole state of Minnesota, and that was just one block of Chicago. I loved it! I absolutely loved it. But when the war came-- And I stayed there, too. I got pregnant. I got married. I got a divorce. When World War II came, I decided that I was going to keep my daughter and work in the daytime when she was going to school. I applied for a job as a blueprint reader and solderer for radios at Lockheed [Aircraft Corporation] .

MASON:

That doesn't sound like a job that many women would--

WADDY:

I took it. I went to DuSable High School at night so that I could learn it. What I didn't realize until later, there was a young man who was teaching the class that was probably an engineer and couldn't get a job either, which was why he was teaching there. Well, anyway, I made an application, and I never will forget it. A young man interviewed me, and I told him that I knew how to solder and read radio blueprints. He said, "Let me see you solder." So he handed me a soldering iron. I showed him spot soldering. That's a different kind. So I showed him. Well, he had some bosses, so he went to his bosses and said that I knew how. But they told him no, that he couldn't hire me because I was an African- American, I was black. He said-- I heard him, because he was so provoked or, you know, excited about telling me yes, thinking that he was hiring somebody. And his boss was telling him no, he couldn't hire me. The young man said, "But she already knows how! And we're hiring them by the hundreds who can't tell a soldering iron from a pressing iron!" But they insisted. They said no, and that's how I came to Los Angeles.

**1.2. TAPE NUMBER: I, Side Two
(July 26, 1991)**

MASON:

That was during the height of the Depression that you were in Chicago. How did that affect the way you were living? Did you always seem to manage to find a job?

WADDY:

Oh, yes, because I was always a good cook. I am an excellent cook. Yet I haven't cooked anything for quite a long time.

MASON:

What kind of things did you like to cook?

WADDY:

Everything. I cooked anything well. I like to eat, for one thing.

MASON:

Oh, good. [laughter]

WADDY:

And so I know good food. I mean, I know many kinds of food. I know how to read recipes. For instance, a lady went to a dinner party and the hostess served a cranberry ring that had oranges and orange rind and walnuts in it. She got the recipe from the hostess, a raw cranberry ring. She was entertaining. It was Irving Stone. They were the Irving Stones, that family. She [Jean Stone] was entertaining another author and wanted to impress him, so she asked me what did I think would be an impressive dinner. I said goose, for one thing. Goose is a fowl, you know, for the meat. And she said, "And we'll use a cranberry ring."

The cranberry ring didn't have any-- She just gave me that with no gelatin in it. She watched me make it up, and she watched me put the gelatin in it. She said, "That's not in the recipe." I said, "You said it was a ring, did you not?" She said, "Yes." I said, "Well, what's holding the things together? Something has to hold it together." So it turned out right, of course. She got a lot of praise for that ring. It's served with sourcream-- mayonnaise mixed with sourcream sauce.

MASON:

Oh, so it's more like a salad and not really --

WADDY:

Yeah, and it's very, very good if it's made properly.

MASON:

Sounds wonderful.

WADDY:

It's grated orange peel, a certain amount of fresh orange juice, you know, peel, grated in with the cranberries and chopped walnuts. It's very good. It's kind of expensive too. Well, she said to me afterwards, "That's exactly-- It turned out just exactly right." She said, "How did you know that?" I mean, that's because I'm a cook. She said, "I wonder why she didn't put that in the recipe?" I said, "She probably forgot."

MASON:

It was so obvious.

WADDY:

"She was being the hostess, you know." She looked at me like she didn't forget it, she just left it out on purpose. I said, "She probably forgot. You were pressing her hard." But anyway, that's what I mean when I say I was a good cook. I can read a recipe and tell you how it's going to look and how it's going to taste before I cook it.

MASON:

What memories do you have of Chicago? Because it was an exciting city, as you were saying, in the 1930s.

WADDY:

It wasn't exciting. It wasn't exciting to me. Minneapolis was more exciting. We didn't do anything. The thing that impressed me was that there were so many blacks there and they got together on political things.

MASON:

Yeah, that's what I was going to ask you about, because Richard Wright was there in the thirties and Charles White.

WADDY:

Yes, I saw him.

MASON:

Oh, did you? Where did you meet him?

WADDY:

Charles White?

MASON:

No, Richard Wright. You met him?

WADDY:

Yeah, Richard Wright.

MASON:

You met him?

WADDY:

Yes .

MASON:

How did you?

WADDY:

On a WPA [Works Progress Administration] project.

MASON:

Oh, the [Federal] Writers Project.

WADDY:

Yes. He was telling me about the first book that he did--what the plot was. It didn't have a plot. He was talking about the young man and what he thought. I was trying to learn how to write, but I thought you had to have a plot. And we argued about that. But he was quite correct; you don't have to have a plot. He was just telling me about-- I've forgotten the name of the book.

MASON:

Well, that was *Native Son* .

WADDY:

Native Son , that's it. That's it. He was saying what that young man thought and how he thought and yet was unable to do it. He was living in a country, in a situation, where he was unable to do and be what he really was. That's what he was trying to explain to me. But I never-- Having come from Minneapolis, why, you could do anything you want to in Minneapolis, because there weren't very many blacks there. You know, they didn't have any-- Racial prejudice wasn't practiced there at that time. But now it's quite different, because I remember reading once after I got to Los Angeles that there was a race riot in Minneapolis. That meant that there were a lot of blacks up there .

MASON:

Yeah, they had come north to find jobs.

WADDY:

But when I was there, there weren't many blacks there, so you could go and do anything that you wanted to do.

MASON:

Yeah, I guess it was too far away. Everybody went to New York or Chicago or Philadelphia. So was this-- Now, I know Richard Wright formed a writers group, Southside Writers Group. So you just met him sort of on a personal, sort of on a social --

WADDY:

No, it was because we were working for the same WPA project.

MASON:

Oh, what did you do on the WPA project?

WADDY:

We were supposed to write something, but I don't remember my doing anything in particular except talking, meeting people. I don't remember doing anything.

MASON:

I know a lot of things that he wrote for the Writers Project were things about living in Chicago, in the city.

WADDY:

Yes.

MASON:

Let's see, did you meet Margaret [Taylor Goss] Burroughs then? Did you know anybody in the Southside Community Arts Center?

WADDY:

Oh, yes, yes.

MASON:

Oh, did you?

WADDY:

Yeah. I thought I had some stuff in here about Margaret Burroughs.

MASON:

Well, she's mentioned when you go to the Soviet Union, but not before that, no.

WADDY:

Not before that. Yes, I did.

MASON:

Well, that's what I mean about exciting. You're telling me all these things and you're saying it wasn't exciting, but it sounds it.

WADDY:

Yes, I met Margaret Burroughs, and it is exciting in -that sense, because Minneapolis didn't have that.

MASON:

Did you--? I'm sorry, go ahead.

WADDY:

Now I forgot what I was going to say. What were you going to ask me?

MASON:

I'm sorry. Well, I was just going to ask if you met Charles White?

WADDY:

No, Charles White was in Los Angeles.

MASON:

Well, he came out in the fifties, but he was there in the thirties. He was in Chicago.

WADDY:

Oh, I don't remember meeting him there. I knew him when I was in--

MASON:

Los Angeles. So were you involved in the political activities in Chicago? Were you interested in them?

WADDY:

Yes. You know, I would listen, but I wasn't a worker, as many of the blacks were. They worked. That's why they could accomplish something--because they worked at it. You know, they would have meetings. I did that. I'd go to the meetings. I met Carter G. Woodson, because I went to a meeting and talked to him. You know, I went early and talked to him.

MASON:

This was the John Reed Club?

WADDY:

I had just gone to a meeting for Carter G. Woodson. He was the main speaker.

MASON:

Oh, I see.

WADDY:

No club or anything. I don't remember who sponsored the event .

MASON:

How did you get chosen to be on the Writers Project? Did you have to submit--?

WADDY:

Oh, yes, we had to — Maybe that's how I did It. I don ' t remember .

MASON:

So you must have been writing things.

WADDY:

Maybe Margaret Burroughs told me about It. She may have been the one who told me about It. Somebody-- It must have been through one of those meetings or that group she had there, the Southside club, that Southside art club that she had. And the museum that she had was In her house.

MASON:

Right, in the beginning.

WADDY:

Yes. That's right. It was in her house.

MASON:

She had a collection that included African art.

WADDY:

But I didn't know about art. I didn't become particularly interested in art right then. The thing that interested me was the different things that blacks did, they actually did, and the fact that they were black and doing. In Minneapolis, you could join the same groups. I could join art groups there, but they mostly were white nearly always, very few blacks. Most of the time I'd be the only one. But this time I wasn't.

MASON:

Did that make you feel uncomfortable then when you were the only one?

WADDY:

No, because I didn't know anything else. I had never known anything else. See, when I was born in-- I didn't go to school in Lincoln, Nebraska. I started school in Minneapolis, Minnesota. I was the only black in the class. It was ordinary to me. I didn't know anything else. That's why I liked Chicago. I didn't know that there were so many people like me doing the same thing. There was a different feeling, but it was a plus feeling that I would have missed had I stayed in Minneapolis. I probably was missing something, but I didn't know what it was in Minneapolis. One was accepted in Minneapolis because I wasn't any threat. I was not any threat to anything or anybody. I remember once that Mama went up to school to talk to my teacher because she said I read so well that I was going around to read to classes. My mother objected to that. I was a very good reader because, as I said, I had an active imagination, and I would take the part of the characters, you know, that were in the story and read it that way. Mama said that-- I remember her saying that she didn't send me to school to go and read to classes, she sent me to school to learn how to learn myself, for me to learn. So I didn't do that anymore. I read to my sisters and would tell them stories.

MASON:

So in Chicago, in other words, there were a lot of creative groups that you could get involved in.

WADDY:

Yes.

MASON:

And you were mostly interested in writing and not really in art.

WADDY:

Yes. Not in art. I don't remember trying anything.

MASON:

Do you remember ever getting anything--? Did you ever get anything published that you wrote?

WADDY:

Not that I know of.

MASON:

Were there other writers that you met? There was Arna [W.] Bontemps there, and, let's see--

WADDY:

They were probably there, but I don't remember meeting them. I don't remember any contact with them.

MASON:

And what about music? Because I understand there were a lot of jazz musicians that came up from New Orleans. Was that a big part of your life there?

WADDY:

No .

MASON:

Okay. So you were working?

WADDY:

Yes, I was working. On my days off, that's when I would go over to Margaret Burroughs ' s house.

MASON:

You say you did know Elizabeth Catlett, because they were sort of friends.

WADDY:

I met Elizabeth through Samella Lewis.

MASON:

So you were saying that you decided to come to Los Angeles.

WADDY:

Yes, because I couldn't get a job in Chicago, a daytime job. I could get a domestic job, but I didn't want [to be] a domestic. I wanted a job where I would be away from home while Marianna [Maryom Ana Al-Wadi] was in school and [then be] home with her. My sister Margaret is a registered nurse, and she was working here in Los Angeles. Her husband [James Haynes]-- She got married in Minneapolis and moved to Los Angeles. He lived in Saint Paul. There were more blacks in Saint Paul than in Minneapolis. Minneapolis and Saint Paul are called the Twin Cities. It's just across the Mississippi [River]. You took a street car across the Mississippi, I mean across the bridge. It's just, you know, right together. And she met-- I can see him, but I can't remember his name. He was her first husband. My sister got married twice.

MASON:

Well, we can add it.

WADDY:

[Sinclair] Harrison? No, not Harrison, that's the second husband. Well, anyway, she got married to him. She married him. She married in Minneapolis, or did she get married in Saint Paul? She didn't have any children. But, anyway, he

was working for Douglas [Aircraft Corporation] . He was working in aircraft, I think. I don't remember. Here's my daughter.

MASON:

Let's pause for a second. [tape recorder off] Okay, I turned it back on. His name is Jim-- James.

WADDY:

She wrote to me that I could get a job if I came here. So I packed up and took my baby- -of course, she wasn't a baby then--and came to Los Angeles and got a job the next day. At Douglas.

MASON:

Doing what?

WADDY:

Riveter. "Rosie the Riveter."

MASON:

Yeah, classic. Classic. Where did you live when you first came here?

WADDY:

I lived with my sister when I first came here. Then I lived in the project over on Rose Hill. That's not the name of the street, but that was the name of the project.

MASON:

I don't know where that is. What area is that? Is that around Watts or--?

WADDY 'S DAUGHTER:

It's El Sereno. Near El Sereno. We lived on Florizel Street.

WADDY:

Florizel Street, that's it.

WADDY 'S DAUGHTER:

In the Rose Hill prewar housing project, 1942.

MASON:

So what did you think of Los Angeles? Did it live up to your expectations? What were your first impressions?

WADDY:

I was at the-- I came around Christmastime, and my daughter wanted some roller skates for Christmas, so she got them. I mean, that was one of her Christmas presents-- That was one of her Christmas presents. And she roller skated on Christmas day. I couldn't get over it because it snows- -

MASON:

[laughter] Yeah, in the Windy City it would have been unbearable.

WADDY:

Yes. Whoever heard of, you know, sunshiny and a sidewalk? I said, "No wonder the houses in Los Angeles don't have any foundations. They don't need any!"

MASON:

Yeah, but then you found out about the earthquakes probably soon after that.

WADDY:

Earthquakes didn't bother me. But I just couldn't-- I liked Los Angeles. My sister was surprised when we got a place to live right away, because, as I say, I like, you know-- That was one of my objections to philosophers. They didn't resolve anything. They didn't go ahead and finish it. They just talked and talked and talked. I mean, wrote and wrote and wrote. They didn't have any evidence. You know, I like evidence and proof. But anyway, we weren't here very long until we moved into a place on Rose Hill, on Florizel Street. When I was riveting, I liked to work with men better than women. It's because men have a sense of tools, and their timing is different. You can tell by a certain sound whether or not a thing is going down right. But women didn't have that sense at that time. It may have changed now since they drive so much.

MASON:

Yeah, because the men were out working on the cars. And the women--

WADDY:

Yes, yes. I was a great do-it-yourselfer, you know. Because I never had very much money. I had what my mother called "champagne taste with a beer income." So I learned to do many, many things myself, and I would make things myself.

MASON:

You mean sew things and--

WADDY:

No, I mean like put that table together and--

MASON:

I see.

WADDY 'S DAUGHTER:

The one you're sitting in front of. She made that table.

MASON:

Oh, this one.

WADDY:

Yeah, and this one too. I sent for it and then finished that one.

MASON:

You assembled it.

WADDY:

And well, anything like that. If I wanted some leather handbag, tooled handbag, of course I couldn't buy it, so I learned how to work with leather. I made a pair of sandals for my daughter that she liked so much. I couldn't make another, second pair because she didn't need them, you know, as badly as she did that first pair. At least, I thought so. I used to make all of her clothes. I sewed, too.

In fact, one of her teachers at a parent- teachers meeting told me that I made her clothes. That was the very thing I was trying not to show- -that they were homemade. I said, "Yes, I did. How do you know?" She said, "You couldn't afford to buy them. Not clothes like that, you couldn't afford it." Anyway, my question was answered, which is, "Did they look store-bought?" And the answer was yes. That's all I wanted to know. I didn't really think about, "How do you know I couldn't afford it?" I didn't think about that. [laughter]

MASON:

A backhanded compliment.

WADDY:

But the thing I wanted to see about — James Haynes, that was his name. What he said about Los Angeles, which I think is true — And the same thing is true of California. It's not just Los Angeles. He said — You see, during the war a lot of blacks came to Los Angeles. Someone said something about California being south. And whoever he was talking to said, "Well, California's not south." He said, "No? I never saw any palm trees in Saint Paul!" [laughter] I like that, answers like that. My father used to give answers like that, too. I used to like Hershey almond [chocolate] bars when I was a child. He would buy them and put them up on the shelf. I asked for one, and he thought that I'd had enough. Then I would say to him, "But they'll get stale up there." He said, "What's the difference between it getting stale up there or in the store?"

MASON:

But you weren't getting any.

WADDY:

There wasn't any difference.

1.3. TAPE NUMBER: II, Side One (July 27, 1991)

MASON:

Yesterday we left off with you finding employment with the Douglas [Aircraft] Corporation on their assembly line doing riveting. You were just telling a story about how you were actually training people and were one of the few to be chosen to go to Pasadena.

WADDY:

No, Burbank.

MASON:

I'm sorry, Burbank.

WADDY:

Pasadena didn't have any big industries during the war. Pasadena was considered then sort of a fine residential area only for people. They didn't rent

their homes, they owned them. They were homeowners. Anyway, I told him no. But a friend of mine who worked there went there. The pay was more, and she liked it.

MASON:

So it would have been doing the same thing- - riveting?

WADDY:

Yes, riveting. In riveting, the rivets had to be absolutely flat to match against the skin of the wing or part of the wing because of the wind. Men were easier to work with than women because, I think, they had handled tools and they listened. There were certain sounds that certain tools make, and they were aware of them. A riveting gun and a bucking [bar]-- I've forgotten what the square was we used. It was a long wire that you put 35 against the long piece of steel, and it had a flexible steel oblong between two and three inches long and one inch wide. And it had to be pushed against the rivet a certain way so that the rivet would be flat, you know, flatten out. The men could tell from the sound whether or not they had it in the right position. The women didn't pay any attention, and so, of course, we had to dig the rivet out, which made a big hole and it made it worse. That's why I preferred to work with men. But I never will forget two incidents. Once a white guy, very, very tall and slender from Georgia, which made me think at that time of — I don't remember if it was a saying or a song--"as tall as a Georgia pine." Well, when he found that I was his partner, he looked at me and kind of curled his lip a little bit. I did the same thing. The manager or instructor, the head boss, explained to him what was the operation, so he said okay, you know, because he wanted a job. So he went along bucking properly. Both of us, when we started, looked at each other with —

MASON:

Suspicion or disdain?

WADDY:

Distaste. Distaste is how we looked at each other. But at the end we smiled, because he knew how to buck the rivet, and, of course, I knew how to use the gun. I knew how to use a bucking bar. We just changed sides. We'd work one side — I would be using the gun, and to do the other side I'd be using the bucking bar and he the gun. We smiled at each other. Another time, I think this man was an islander, but I don't know what island. But he was half my size. He wasn't as tall as I, and he was very much smaller. And again, both of us looked at each other with distaste, great distaste. At the end, we both smiled, because he knew how to use the tool, and I did, too. We had a good part[nership] . You know, we didn't have to correct it, dig the rivet out or anything like that. It was perfect.

MASON:

Work is work.

WADDY:

Yes, work is work. It makes no difference. If you know what, period. I've never forgotten that. And I haven't forgotten what that young man said about the soldering iron, "She already knows how, when we're hiring them by the hundreds who don't know the difference between a soldering iron and a pressing iron." He was a white guy, too. He wasn't--

MASON:

So when the end of the war came and all the soldiers came back, then a lot of people, a lot of women usually, lost their jobs in the factories.

WADDY:

Women and men. Because he just picked out the best ones. When he said to me that I could work in Burbank, he said, "You're late all the time," he said, "but you do very, very good work." I was late because I overslept. It was a graveyard—I worked on graveyard shift, which was from twelve at night until seven in the morning. And as we were speaking about the red cars earlier, when I'd come home to Florizel Street, I'd go to sleep on the red car and the conductor would come and say "This is Florizel Street." He'd wake me up if I went to sleep on the car because I had another job. I was, you know-- It wasn't enough money for what I wanted to do with my daughter in school. I was trying to save a little money and give her as many advantages -- I was trying to save money to buy a car, a secondhand car. I have never owned a new car in my life. I have driven for many years, but they were all used cars. I remember that I drove to San Francisco in a Model T coupe, a Ford Model T. I hadn't been driving very long then, but I figured if I could drive to San Francisco in that car then I would really know how to drive. And I did.

MASON:

It wasn't one of those where you have to crank it up or anything like that, was it?

WADDY:

No. It wasn't-- I didn't have to crank it, but it wasn't an automatic shift. What's that other shift called?

MASON:

Standard.

WADDY:

Yeah, standard shift. It was a standard shift. It was many years before I graduated to automatic shift. I meant to buy a car, so I had another job. That's why I was so tired. But I was able to do both of them.

MASON:

What was your other job?

WADDY:

I was a domestic, as a day worker. Not one family but several families.

MASON:

So instead of taking the job in Burbank, what did you do instead? I understand at some point you opened up your own business.

WADDY:

Yes. Actually, I tried to become self-employed several times, but I never had the right attitude. For instance, when I first learned ceramics I was smoking. As I say, I started smoking when I first started working at Douglas. And doing cleaning, you know, that kind of work didn't bother me. I wasn't-- It didn't bother me to do that kind of work. One day, I don't really remember how, I heard of a ceramics class, and I went to it. Tony Hill was the instructor. I never will forget that as I was learning I didn't pick up a cigarette. I remarked to the other students, the other ladies around me--they were mostly ladies--I said, "I haven't smoked one cigarette all this time!" "Well, that's wonderful!"

MASON:

Because ceramics was so relaxing.

WADDY:

And I was so interested in it, and I liked it so much. Tony Hill had a brother [Evans Hill], and he cleaned offices at night. I met him and somehow or other we hooked up. We worked together, and I thought of how one cart 39 could carry all of our cleaning things. I told him about it. Tony's brother was a carpenter, a very good one. So he made the cart for me from the idea. I worked with him, too. I was working with him. Some company in Los Angeles had several offices, you know. I don't remember the name of the company, but it may have been Atlas at that time. They had several offices. Well, anyway, I talked to the president about this cart, and he said that if I brought him a model, he would see about using it. I told Tony's brother-- I can't remember his name. Well, anyway, he wouldn't make me a cart because I wouldn't marry him.

MASON:

Oh! So you had known him before you met Tony Hill.

WADDY:

No. I met him after I knew Tony.

MASON:

Is that why you took the ceramics course?

WADDY:

No, I read about it in one of the African- American papers or heard about it somehow like that, that they were offering classes, that Tony was offering classes. Where was this place?

MASON:

Was it an art school or just a high school or some community art center?

WADDY:

It seemed like it was his own place, Tony Hill's own place, because he had his own kiln.

MASON:

And what kind? Was it hand-building or wheel?

WADDY:

It was both. We started hand-building, and then we went to the wheel. But I didn't-- I don't remember that I was very good at the wheel. I don't remember my being that. I remember doing pretty good things by hand, but not the wheel

MASON:

Do you have any of those things now?

WADDY:

It was a long time ago. It was during the war, around that time. It was during the war, because I had started smoking.

MASON:

So that was really the first time you had practiced art.

WADDY:

Yeah, it was the first time I knew about it. It was the first time I had ever done it and the first time that I knew how to go to classes where they were offered. I knew I had to do something after the war was over. But I had decided that I was going to try and get something that I liked to do. It was part of my search. I don't remember all the particulars.

MASON:

Did you meet other artists through Tony Hill?

WADDY:

No, but I learned an appreciation for ceramics, though. It enlightened —

MASON:

What did he teach you about ceramics?

WADDY:

He taught about glazes, and I learned about that southerner who was the inventor that made glazes out of some kind of seed, I think. Who was it?
[George Washington Carver]

MASON:

I don't know.

WADDY:

It was too long ago for me to remember now.

MASON:

Yeah, so this was an experimental --a new glaze?

WADDY:

No, he's famous for glazes. He's an African- American, a southerner. And he's from-- He did other things, but he's certainly known for making glazes. And

colored pencils, known for it. If I call his name, you'd recognize it. He's well-known as one of America's black inventors. [tape recorder off]

MASON:

Well, when did you meet Danny [Daniel LaRue] Johnson? And when did you start to meet — ?

WADDY:

I met him through my sister, Gladys [Gilliam Little], my youngest sister. She met him someplace after he had just won a Guggenheim [Foundation] award. So when I talked to her about getting the blacks in L.A. together-- I said, you know, "If we could get them to a social affair someplace that they would attend, then I could maybe form a small group." That was after I had been fired from the county job. Because after I left Douglas, I think the next job I had was working for Los Angeles County Hospital as an admissions worker. An admissions worker was really--

MASON:

They would probably screen people as they come in.

WADDY:

Yes, to see whether or not they are eligible for county care. Yes, that's what they did. There was an amusing incident when I got that job. I didn't know anything about medicine. In fact, I didn't think very much of it. And I didn't know anything about doctors. So I said, "Well, since I have this kind of a job, I'd better find out something." The best way to find out things, sometimes, is when people are sitting down to a meal. You introduce the subject, and everybody joins in and says what he has to say about it. We had a cafeteria in the dining room, and I pulled two or three tables together. Each table seated four people, one on each side. So I pulled them together, and when the workers came in we'd sit together. And sometimes the interns would sit down. Once in a while a resident would sit down, a nurse would sit down. Then I would introduce the subject, something about medicine, and they'd tell us, add what they-- Well, one time when I had the tables together, an intern was arguing with a resident that it only took six years to go through school in medicine. He said, "Really, that's all it takes. Not eight." At that time it took eight, as I remember it. And finally the resident admitted that it took six years, you know, the lesser time. The other time was spent in learning a certain routine or procedure to be sure that they acted a certain way. They had to be trained that way. I was always doing something on every job that I had that was not protocol.

MASON:

What else did you do there that — ?

WADDY:

Well, the supervisor, the manager of the cafeteria. complained about the tables being together, the people sitting down. But of course the thing was that the conversation was always very interesting and spirited. And I learned quite a bit.

MASON:

But they objected because that's not the way--

WADDY:

Yes, it wasn't proper. My supervisor called a meeting to have it stopped. She called all the social workers together when she just needed me--just to tell me--because I was the one who was doing it, nobody else but me. The other people sat down, because they liked the conversation. So I thought that was very silly. You know, why not go directly to the person who's responsible? Well, anyway-

MASON:

Did you stop doing it? Or did you tell her she didn't know what she was talking about?

WADDY:

No, I just told her that all the rest of the workers there that she was talking to-- Why call all the rest of the workers together when they hadn't done anything? But they didn't think anything of it because they were already trained. They were already indoctrinated, so they didn't think anything of it. Just wait for the next thing I was going to do. [laughter]

MASON:

Did you make a lot of friends there at the hospital?

WADDY:

Oh, yeah, many.

MASON:

How long did you work there?

WADDY:

That's when I got my first used car. I don't remember how long it was. I think I quit. I wasn't fired, though. Then I started trying to do things, becoming self-employed. I tried making a chili dog [stand], but it didn't make enough money for me to live on.

MASON:

So you had a little stand?

WADDY:

Yes, I had a hot dog stand. I used a chili sauce, and they were called chili dogs.

MASON:

I was reading that it was while you were working in the hospital that you were diagnosed with epilepsy.

WADDY:

No. My self -employment didn't give me a steady income, so I decided to get another job. By this time, you know, I'm getting older and older and older. So I applied to work for Los Angeles County as a temporary clerk, and I took a test for that. With temporary clerks, it was a very easy test for me. I scored one hundred. They didn't have one to ten. The highest score was one hundred, the next ninety, next down eighty, next seventy, down. That's the way they scored. A hundred was the highest score. So I got a hundred on the test. But I forgot that the county has three screens. You have to pass three screenings. You had to pass three things in order to get in. You had to pass a written test, a verbal test when you're interviewed, and then a physical test. Well, when I got a hundred on the-- They changed-- A hundred on the written test. The county decided they wanted permanent clerks, and they took them out of their temporary clerk pool. That meant the highest ones, you know, had to have a verbal test. So I decided that I would fail on the verbal test because I didn't want a permanent job, I just wanted a temporary job. I wanted just enough time for me to try and find a job that was self-employed. So the first supervisor, I gave her some wrong answers— the first interviewer. [With] the second interviewer, I tried the same thing, but she said, "I'm going to take you anyway." And I was hired. Because the answer I gave her didn't add up with the written test. And then I had a physical. When she said she'd hire me anyway, then I started to work, and then I had a physical. Well, there wasn't anything I could do about the physical, when the results from the physical came, the doctor said, "Let her go because she's the kind that drops down anyplace, anytime." He didn't say it was epilepsy, because I don't think it can be diagnosed.

MASON:

He didn't recommend any treatment or anything?

WADDY:

No, he just said, "Let her go." He said, "She can't work at all." So I said to the supervisor, "Well, how am I going to live if I can't work?" She said, "Well, I guess you'll have to receive state aid." Because I was in my fifties, fifty, fifty-one, or fifty-two, or something like that. But I wasn't old enough to get Social Security yet. She said, "I guess you'll have to have state aid," So since I was fired, I got state aid. I didn't have to make any application because it was from county to county, you know, from one government agent to another government agent. So it was no problem at all. They just sent me the check. But I was very, very angry.

MASON:

Why?

WADDY:

Because I wanted to work. I was in the habit of working .

MASON:

You had never experienced any kind of physical symptoms before?

WADDY:

No-- Oh, yes, I had some symptoms, but I didn't have any accidents, as I did later on. As I grew older, I actually had attacks. Very much so. I remember I had one here in San Francisco, twice. I used to come up to San Francisco more often than I did later on. I was in the hospital. I dropped down just as the doctor said. I think I was on the street or something, and I had to go to the hospital. But I didn't stay very long. They gave me Dilantin. That was the first time that I had ever taken Dilantin. And whenever I didn't take it, then I would have an attack eventually, you know, after a while. So that's when my daughter [Maryom Ana Al-Wadi], I remember my daughter said to me, "Well, Mother, you should have been dead long ago. You just won't lay down." [laughter] She said, "You just won't lay down."

MASON:

So you had more time to spend with your daughter, if you weren't working.

WADDY:

Oh, she was grown. She was grown up. She was living here in San Francisco.

MASON:

No, I mean when you started to receive the checks from the--

WADDY:

No, I didn't-- I was angry because I didn't-- That 's when I started thinking about getting the blacks together, the blacks in L.A. together, because I didn't have anything to do, you know, except the regular housework and going to the store and fixing the meals. But I was very strong then, and I had a lot of energy.

MASON:

And the civil rights movement.

WADDY:

And that's why Gladys introduced me to Danny Johnson. Because unless I was actually in the bed from something, I wasn't sick other than that. One day I said to myself, "You've always said that if you had plenty of money--" No, not plenty of money, "if you had a place to stay and enough to eat, why you would do this, that, and the other, " you know, different plans that I had for starting social groups. I'm more interested in the condition of man than I am in anything else--to improve his condition. But I think that he has to do it himself. It has to come from him. Somebody else can introduce the idea, and they can even, having made the introduction, the person to whom it was introduced might improve on it, but it has to start with the person. It has to start with the man himself. All I wanted to do was get it started. That would take time and energy, and I had promised myself-- I had said to myself once, "If I had the time, a place to stay, and something to eat, why, that's what I would do."

MASON:

What did you think needed improving most? Was it economic or social or political?

WADDY:

I thought that first we ought to get together and talk about common problems, something that was common to everybody and how to resolve it and work on it. But the main thing was to get them together first. That was the hardest thing, the first thing to be done. They had to be brought together. I was thinking about African- Americans.

MASON:

Yeah. By this time, the civil rights movement was gaining momentum. Wasn't that bringing people together in Los Angeles somewhat?

WADDY:

No .

MASON:

Not really?

WADDY:

Not like in Chicago. They talk about it loosely, but the people who needed to work with it were not really involved in civil rights. The people who were involved in civil rights weren't what one would call a solid citizen. A solid citizen was a person at that time who has a permanent home and a job or a business and a family. The people who were interested in civil rights then didn't qualify, didn't meet those qualifications.

MASON:

They were younger people?

WADDY:

Some of them were young. Most of them were younger people. Some of the them were older, but the majority of them I think were younger. I thought all people should be involved, but I wasn't thinking about civil rights in particular. I was thinking that they had to be involved in working among themselves and fostering certain ideas among themselves, certain trends among themselves, so that they could forward whatever cause that was outside of themselves to their advantage.

MASON:

Did you find inspiration in, say, Martin Luther King [Jr.]?

WADDY:

No, I was-- No.

MASON:

It was just something that you had been thinking about on your own from what you had observed?

WADDY:

Yeah, for many years. Many, many years. Ever since I was, you know, like in my twenties.

MASON:

Well, you were saying that Chicago —

WADDY:

Yeah.

MASON:

So that's the kind of thing you were talking about when you were with Margaret [Taylor Goss] Burroughs.

WADDY:

No, I was listening mostly to what different people said, because I didn't feel that I had all the answers. I felt that the answers would come from everybody. Everybody would put what he had to say in it and then an answer could be made or had. But every person had [to make] a contribution for it to be a common thing.

MASON:

So Daniel --

WADDY:

My sister met Danny, Daniel LaRue Johnson.

MASON:

Did he have a lot of information?

WADDY:

Not at all. She was impressed by his having won this--

MASON:

Oh, Guggenheim.

WADDY:

Guggenheim. And she said he was interesting in himself, you know, the man himself was interesting, and for me to meet him. But when I decided to try and make a group of African-Americans in Los Angeles, I said I'd do it through art, because I felt that if they knew that my intent was social or civic that they wouldn't come. But if they were attending an art affair, that they were so socially important, that they would do it. So I asked Danny if he knew-- I told him that I'd like to have names of some artists. I'd like to have a juried art show at the Los Angeles County Museum [of Art] of black artists. There had never been any. He said that there weren't that many black artists at museum quality. I said, "Well, who do you think is the — ?" I asked him if he thought he was. He said, "Well, of course." I said, "Well, who do you think is as good as you are?" He said, well, Mel Edwards was as good as he was. So I said, "Okay, what's his telephone number?" He gave it to me. I called Mel and told him the same thing, that I wanted a juried art show at the L.A. County Museum. Who did he think was as good as he was? He gave me the name of George Clack.

Clack, his name is. So it went until I had quite a few names, you know, like thirty or so. At that time, there was a black bank called Safety Savings and Loan Company in L.A. They had a community room in the back of the bank which they rented out to various organizations. Marjorie Green was in charge of it. I told her I'd like to use it for a meeting of these artists. She said okay. So we didn't have to pay any fee, and we met there. I told them about it, and they liked the idea so much that they decided-- They liked the idea, but then I didn't know anything about art. I knew I liked it all right, and I knew that it had an important social value, but I wasn't an artist. I just liked the work.

MASON:

How would you define the social value of art? I mean, what do you mean?

WADDY:

Well, art to me has a social value the same as, say, religion has a social value, in the same sense, as a spiritual thing. And it does the same thing — some of the things, anyway (I'm not very religious) --that religion is supposed to do. It inspires one. It lends you courage. It makes a pleasant atmosphere, so that you have pleasant thoughts. And it makes you think. A lot of people don't think. They react all right, and they have a thinking apparatus, but they don't use it very much. That's what I meant by a social value. The first one is obvious--that it makes a pleasant surroundings. Everybody enjoys that. When one enjoys anything, that means that one is happy and is apt to bring out the best in themselves when they're happy. That's good. That makes a good world. That's what I mean by art being spiritual or being of social value. It's also gives you-- It's another way of expressing yourself, because many people are artists and not aware of it. I'm one of them, [laughter] The artists thought I was an artist, because they couldn't conceive of a person, just a lay person, being that interested. Of course, I didn't tell them that my ultimate aim was civic and social. I didn't mention that to them.

1.4. TAPE NUMBER: II, Side Two (July 27, 1991)

MASON:

So you would say that to you successful art or important art is art that has those three or four virtues, that it inspires people and as well as being pleasant to look at.

WADDY:

It doesn't necessarily have to inspire anything, but if a person-- I don't think that it necessarily, you know, has to-- It depends on the viewer whether or not that art gives them inspiration. Different people bring different things to art. Art, to me, it makes you feel good. That's what it does. It might make you feel good

because it makes you think. It might make you feel good because it inspires you. It might make you feel good because it brings another viewpoint to something that you've already thought about or know. It does something to you. As I say, it can be as little as just being pleasant.

MASON:

Is there any art that you don't like--that doesn't appeal to you or that doesn't make you feel good? Or do you enjoy most of it because whatever it does it still makes you think maybe about why--? Or are there some kinds of art--? I don't know, pop art is one that usually people dislike a lot.

WADDY:

That's because they don't understand what the artist is trying to say, I think. If the artist-- Or they don't know, whatever the subject is, enough about each subject that's being portrayed. But I think that pop art is-- People don't understand what the artist is trying to say or saying. Because some of them go past trying to say, they say it. Or they may not agree with what the artist is saying. I like all kinds of art, if I understand it. The understanding adds to your enjoyment. If you don't understand it, then you just have to depend on how it looks. And when you know how it looks and understand it too, then it's of great value to you.

MASON:

And so when you had this show at the Safety Savings and Loan--

WADDY:

No, we didn't have the show. Because they were good artists and it was going to be a juried show, it would have to be at the L . A . County . So I ' d have to ask the curator of the county. He was [Richard] Brown. I think it was Brown at the time. I can't remember his first name.

MASON:

Well, Rick Brown was the director around 19-- I think he started there in 1965. So you went to the director or — ?

WADDY:

Yeah, director, whoever it is who sets up shows. I'm not — Well, anyway, I decided that I'd ask Mr. Houston, Norman [O.] Houston at the Golden State [Mutual Life Insurance Company] . I told him. And I would invite Charles White, because he was an artist and I wasn't an artist. So the three of us went there. I'll use the name Brown, although I'm not certain. He said we could have a show if we could find him a [Henry O.] Tanner. And years later — Oh, dear, who's that man that we were talking about earlier today who has a collection?

MASON:

Cecil Fergerson.

WADDY:

Cecil Fergerson. He was working there at the county, and years later Cecil told me that there was a Tanner already there down in the basement in the storage. But he didn't know it, I guess.

MASON:

Or maybe he wanted one for his own personal —

WADDY:

No, I think he wanted one for the museum. But he didn't know it was there. The museum did have a Tanner. Because having a Tanner would be quite a feather in his cap, you know, because Tanner is a good artist and what we call in books "a collector's item," you know. It's why they're having this Tanner show going around the country now.

MASON:

I wonder why he said that. I mean, he knew it was impossible to get, so he wouldn't have to have the show?

WADDY:

If I had known as much about art as I know now, I could have gotten a Tanner. You know, I could have borrowed it for a while to get the show done. Because in the art world they have the same kind of shenanigans going on as they do in business. You know, it's a business, and you do the same kind of tricks. [laughter] But I didn't know that then. So we never had the show. I came back and told the artists the condition of having the show, and none of them knew where to get a Tanner. So we didn't have the show. That was the end of it. But the artists were so happy to be sitting so close together. There were about fifteen or twenty, we'll say. Maybe there were more. There weren't any less than that, but maybe there were more than that. They were so happy to be together, they said, "No, we'll form a group." Not "We'll form a group," but "We want to stay together." So it was all right with me. Then we decided on a name and made up the rules of membership. That's how Art West Associated was born, just because they wanted to stay together. They wanted to be in touch with each other, and we took in new members .

MASON:

You were the president?

WADDY:

They made me the president because I had gotten the artists together, not because of my knowledge or any other reason, just simply because I had initiated it. That's all.

MASON:

Did they allow you any say in what was going on after that?

WADDY:

Yeah, but not much. Yes, they did. They allowed me — We elected a secretary and a treasurer and decided what the dues were going to be and just had a

regular club. That's how it started. We had regular meetings at each artist's home. That's where they were. And when the United States started that humanities and history department, humanities, arts. National —

MASON:

Endowment for the Arts.

WADDY:

Yes, National Endowment for the Arts. Then I thought that we should try and get a permanent place for ourselves. One of the artists there, Helen Green, I think her name was Helen Green, her father owned his home in Watts. He had a lot near there, next-door or near his house. When he heard that we were trying to work on a permanent place, he said that he would give us the lot, give Art West the lot, if we would put in a foundation. But the men in the club didn't like the location.

MASON:

What was wrong with it?

WADDY:

Well, it was in Watts. That's what was wrong with it. And they didn't-- Now, had I had my wits about me, I would have gone out there with some stakes and strong cord and, you know, squared off enough feet to lay the twenty by twenty or sixteen by sixteen and started shoveling, digging a ditch, because I was certainly strong enough to do it. But I just wasn't thinking. And then the men would have helped me. They would have helped me dig the ditch. I always regretted that I didn't do that.

MASON:

So there wasn't enough status in Watts, or what was wrong with the Watts community? I mean, this was a few years before the riots. The riots were in '65, and you started Art West in '62. So did he offer to give you the plot before the riots?

WADDY:

Before , uh- huh .

MASON:

Things were deteriorating, but it still wasn't-- It hadn't been burned pretty much to the ground.

WADDY:

No, it hadn't been burned, but they were deteriorating. You know, in the black community. Watts didn't have that good of a name. That's why they didn't want it there. I've always regretted not having done that, because that's all I had to do, because the men would have come to my aid. Well, that's one of the regrets of Art West.

MASON:

What kinds of — ?

WADDY:

But it got to be known throughout the country. When artists from out of the country came, they came to our meetings and became members.

MASON:

Who were some of the people that you remember who aren't from the area who came and joined?

WADDY:

I'd have to look it up. I don't remember just offhand.

MASON:

So did it change--? When I was asking whether the artists let you have your say, I was asking whether the meetings fulfilled the social purposes that you'd envisioned.

WADDY:

No. I didn't introduce that.

MASON:

So it just became a group so that the artists could meet and talk and probably plan exhibits.

WADDY:

We would plan, yes. We planned exhibits. When we had it in city hall, the first one at L.A. city hall, that was a juried show. We had several of them. I'm sorry I don't have the minutes. Several juried shows. The reason I thought about the National Endowment is because I wrote a proposal and we got funded \$5,000 for that. I wanted the artists to stay busy, either having a show-- And they complained about not being able to sell their work. So, let's see, where is that paper?

MASON:

Maybe I'll pause here. [tape recorder off] I'm looking at an advertisement. You say it's from Essence magazine, an ad for Art West Associated to buy an original print. The subscriber ship-- Oh, and you put out brochures. You published brochures for the-- That's interesting. So that was well--

WADDY:

That was one thing that we did.

MASON:

That was funded by the National Endowment. So this was after-- When did you go around the country to collect prints by black artists? Was that before?

WADDY:

I don't remember [whether] before or after. I don't remember hardly anything about it at all, to tell you the truth. You see, I have to look it up.

MASON:

Because, let's see, the book called *Prints by American Negro Artists*, that's--

WADDY:

Oh, yes. That's another thing. That was another one. I wanted to show you something about that book. [tape recorder off] Up north here, called Art-West Associated North, that's *New Perspectives in Black Art* .

MASON:

So she [Evengeline J. "Vangie" Montgomery] came to Los Angeles--

WADDY:

She lived, yeah, I knew her in Chicago. I'd known her a long time.

MASON:

Oh. Was she a native of Chicago?

WADDY:

No, she was a native of Boston. Negro History Week. That's why we were in city hall. And *Prints by American Negro Artists* , see, I started that because, well, Martin Luther King [Jr.]'s coming here. At USC [University of Southern California]-- Let me get the--

MASON:

Well, there's a guy [Theodore V.] Roelof-Lanner who edited the book. [tape recorder off] He heard him. He and his wife went to hear Martin Luther King. He had done prints for USC. He'd been doing —

WADDY:

A master artist with the master printers, something like that. He decided after hearing Martin Luther King that he would put some black artists in there. He went to the printmaker's society, and Betye Saar was the only member there. She said he asked her if there were any other black printmakers. And she said, "Oh, yes. You go over to Ruth Waddy's house. She knows a whole lot of them." I hardly knew about printing at all, period, at that time. But Margaret Burroughs had sent me a little booklet of printmakers from the Southside art group.

MASON:

Yes, Southside Community Arts Center. She was also making prints herself.

WADDY:

Yes. She sent me that. I knew that Van Slater was a printmaker and Bill [William E.] Smith. Let's see, who else? Betye Saar was making prints, too, at that time. Because I have one of Betye Saar's prints.

MASON:

Yeah, the one reproduced in the book is called *Samsara* .

WADDY:

Yes, that's it.

MASON:

That's the one you have?

WADDY:

No, I don't have that one. I have another one. If you look in there in that book--
[tape recorder off]

MASON:

I was looking at one of your copies of *Prints by American Negro Artists*. You have a postcard in the front sent to you by James Parker who says that he found [a copy of] this book in a bookstore in Chicago and it was [for sale for] \$400.

WADDY:

No, in New York, because he was in New York when he wrote that.

MASON:

Oh, you mentioned it to him while you were in--

WADDY:

At the National Conference of Artists in Atlanta that Margaret Burroughs founded some years ago, many, many years ago.

MASON:

There were two editions published. The second edition has an essay in it by James Porter.

WADDY:

That's right.

MASON:

Who got Porter to write the--?

WADDY:

I guess Roelof-Lanner. I guess, because, you see, I don't think he was very much impressed by [the introduction that I wrote for] the book at first. I wrote something for Roelof-Lanner. I wrote an introduction. It's in there in the second edition someplace. But it wasn't what he wanted. What he wanted was what James Porter wrote. But I didn't know anything. I didn't know that much about art, you see. I just liked it. When I got involved with the artists, then I learned something about it. But I had never gone to art school or done anything in art.

MASON:

Well, James Porter probably at that time--

WADDY:

Yeah, he was teaching art at Howard University.

MASON:

Yes, Howard University. So nobody knew as much about African-American art probably as he did. On the other hand, I bet he didn't know much about California artists. I wonder.

WADDY:

No, I guess not. I don't know.

MASON:

Because, you know. New York was everything then. And all the prints-- How did you gather together all the prints that are going to be printed?

WADDY:

Well, Roelof-Lanner said that he wanted to put in some black printmakers. I said yes, and he looked it over. There were enough so that after a while he said, "I don't want you to do that book at all for USC. I want to do a book about just black artists, black printmakers," because he was a printer. He said, "Would you help me?" I said, "Well, of course." So I wrote-- I don't know whether it was a postcard or a letter — it was probably a letter, although a short letter--to all of the schools or to the print artists in different towns, asking them to send some prints to me for the book. Of course, none of them sent any. Not a one. Roelof-Lanner said, "Well, what are we going to do?" I said, "I guess we'll have to do the same thing we did with the ones in L.A. — go and get them." That's how I got them in L.A. [laughter] They didn't come to me, I went and got them. He said, "Well, I don't have that kind of money. I don't have any money for the fare." I said, "Do you have \$100?" He said yes. Well, at that time Greyhound bus had an advertising promotion program going on. You could ride for \$100 round- trip anyplace that the bus stopped. Or anyplace that it stopped, that would take care of all of it. But by the time I got the money, the promotion was over. So I went on another bus. I don't remember the name of it. Anyway, there are two bus companies in L.A., and I went on the other one. I didn't get the Greyhound. That was \$100, and they went to nearly all of the places. So I mapped out the places that the bus went. I asked the artists for the names and addresses of a relative who lived in that town or a friend who would put me up overnight and give me one meal. And I told them why I wanted to do that, you know, that we were trying to publish a book. I waited until I got an answer, whether they would say yes or no, because I didn't have any money either. I'm a state aid recipient. [laughter] So after I got my answers back, I took my round- trip ticket. A friend of mine in Glendale, she's a little, short, fat, white woman. She was a librarian. I think she was a librarian. Well, anyway, she had bought a cashmere coat that was too small for her. It was on sale and it was too small. She gave me that coat because it was in the winter.

MASON:

Yeah. Well, that was nice.

WADDY:

I had heard how warm cashmere was and lightweight. And it is exactly, because it did just-- It did a perfect job for me.

MASON:

It helped you in the Chicago wind?

WADDY:

Yes, yes. It's very warm. So I waited until I got an answer. Nearly all of them said yes. Of course, all of them said yes. And I went on my way.

MASON:

Where did you stop first?

WADDY:
I don't remember that.

MASON:
Did you go all the way out to the Midwest and stop? Did you stop maybe first in Chicago or did you go all the way to New York and then stop back?

WADDY:
No, I stopped along the way. I probably-- I don't know . I don ' t remember .

MASON:
But you made it all the way--

WADDY:
I went north. I went to the Midwest first, because I think I remember Detroit, and Detroit's not that far away from Chicago. Yeah, I went up and then down the coast and around and back. I probably went that way. I remember incidents of the trip.

MASON:
Judging from the artists represented in the book, it seems like you hit all the forty-eight states. You didn't go to Alaska and Hawaii, but--

WADDY:
No, I didn't.

MASON:
But you made it all the way to--

WADDY:
I made quite a few. I didn't get to all the states. I didn't get to Washington or Oregon.

MASON:
Yeah. No, I was just kidding. But it is a wide range of artists. So what kinds of--? Did you have an idea of what kinds of prints you wanted or would you just get the artist to bring out some things?

WADDY:
I didn't go by anything except what I liked. I remember writing Vangie Montgomery like that. She said, "Well, Ruth--" When I got to Boston-- Now, Vangie knows about art. She's an artist, but she works in jewelry. But she knows about it. She's had training, and she knew that I hadn' t had any . She said, "How do you select the prints?" She said that to me. I said, "Well, I look at everything they have. And what I like best, well, that's what I take." She said, "What? What! Ruth, that's no way to pick out prints. " I said, "Well, I didn't know." She gave me a booklet. I'll have to find it. She gave me something to tell me how to pick out prints.

MASON:
Yeah, it's really a complicated process.

WADDY:

So when I got through reading the booklet, I said, "Well, it says the same thing I said. You pick out what you want." It did. I'll find it. It's around here someplace. God knows where, but I still have it.

MASON:

Because there are so many printing processes and papers .

WADDY:

Yeah, but that has nothing to do with what you like. The process has nothing to do with what you like. The different kinds of process, that's what I wrote for the book. And they printed it. It's in there, along with Wood's, I mean James --

MASON:

Porter's.

WADDY:

Porter's. But this is what I said to her. I said, "I read it. It says the same thing I do. It says that after you get through, what you like, you pick that."

MASON:

And the artists, did they persuade you either way or--?

WADDY:

They were so pleased to see me. They were pleased to-- Oh, I've had a tremendous amount of artwork that I've had to sell when I came up here because I couldn't afford to bring it up here and there was no place to keep it because I've got stuff behind-- I don't have a bed board. That's not a bed board, that's paintings that I can't hang. And behind the desk and under the bed it's a whole lot of work there. They'd give me-- just say-- "Would you like that? Would you like that?" Well, of course I'd like it. You know, they were beautiful things. Beautiful things, but I just couldn't afford it. I didn't have anyplace to put it. I put up as much as I could at first. In that apartment, I had more freedom than I have here to hang. And it was bigger, too. The neighborhood was kind of-- Union Street, Union Avenue in L.A., is not as bad as Watts--the reputation that Watts had. It's not one of the choicest parts of Los Angeles, but the building itself was superior to this building. It's much, much larger and storage space was much bigger. Of course, it was on a bigger piece of land, too. Well, anyway, she didn't say anything when I said the book says the same thing that I do, that you pick out what you like. So that's how I got around. But when I got to Detroit, I took the telephone numbers of everybody that I was going to stay with. [Donald] Stinson. I can't think of Stinson 's first name.

MASON:

Donald?

WADDY:

He enamels copper. Have you seen that copper ashtray that I have on the desk in the bedroom?

MASON:

No , I haven ' t seen that .

WADDY:

Well, he's as good as that man. He's an L.A. man that did that.

MASON:

Well, Curtis Tann —

WADDY:

Yes, Curtis Tann. Yes. Yes, he can-- That's his piece that I was going to show you. One of his pieces. Well, Stinson is another one who can enamel as well as Tann. He had given me his sister's name — she was married — and telephone number. I had written to her. But when I got there, she hadn't received the letter. I had written in time, but she just hadn't gotten it. It was a funny thing . So when I called her up, I said, "This is Ruth Waddy . " And she said, "Yes?" like, "Well, what about it? Who are you? Yes, so your name's Ruth Waddy." I said, "Well, I wrote you and asked if I could — " She said, "Well, I never received any--" It was around eleven thirty at night. Anyway, she said, "No, I never received any letter." I said, "Well, I couldn't have had your telephone number [unless] your brother Donald — " Donald Stinson his name is. She didn't answer that. So she turned to her husband, and she said, "Well, I'll send my husband down to the bus station. We'll see." You know, like I'll send my husband down and he'll look you over and see if you look safe enough. Well, I told her about the letter I had written and the date that I had put on, you know, when it was dated. Do you know, the next morning that letter came. It was held up in the post office some way, and had the same date.

MASON:

Well, you must have met his approval in your cashmere coat, anyway.

WADDY:

Yeah. So I stayed there in Detroit. I never will forget. And that's how Romare Bearden-- I met him too that way. Not that way, but I met on the tour when I went to New York. One of the things he said was, "Would you like me to take you to lunch?" Well, I'm not much on eating out because- -

MASON:

Well, if you were low on cash--

WADDY:

Yeah, first of all, I couldn't afford the places that I would like to eat if I were going to eat out. And at that time--see, this is a long time ago--I was very particular about my food. I mean, I was particular about what I ate. Of course, I'm particular now, but I'm not quite as rude as I used to be. [laughter] Because he said, "You want to go to lunch?" I said, "No, thank you." He said, "Well, I can afford it." I said, you know, "I don't doubt it." I didn't think about his finances. But I have a book on him now.

MASON:

Yeah, [Myron] Schwartzman's [*Romare Bearden: His Life and Art*] .

WADDY:

Thinking back to when I did talk to him, I know he could afford it, but I just don't eat out. Very rarely. It's been a long time since I-- Well, anyway. She said they were so glad the letter came. A few years later she came to L.A. for Donald's birthday or they had a little girl or something. I can't remember. Anyway, she was in L.A., and Donald was introducing her and her husband around. When he got to me, she said, "Oh, no, you're the kind who calls up in the middle of the night and you want to stay over!" And I said, "Detroit!" She laughed, and her husband laughed too, because that's exactly how it happened. I can't think of Detroit without thinking of that incident. I was making myself, you know, preparing myself mentally to stay there in the bus station till the morning. I said, "It's a good thing I have this coat, because it would make a nice, warm cover." Stay here in the bus station, you know, on the bench. Because the way she said over the phone, "I didn't get any letter from you. I didn't get any letter from you." That's how I did it. The artists-- They would show me their work, all of it, not just the prints but whatever else they had done. When I'd say about a piece, "It's very good" or this is thus and so, they thought so too. They agreed. Then they'd ask me something that an artist could answer, you know, a practicing artist or just even a lay person. I mean, a lay person who looked at art a lot but was not an artist. They said, "Well, how is it that you--?" I told them that I wouldn't know. But they'd say, "Ruth, do you think I should have more blue in this?" or "Do you think that--?" You know, something like that. I'd say, "Well, I don't know." They said, "Well, how did you get into art if you don't know anything about it?" Oh, what they'd do is look at me like "You're an artist." I said, "The thing is that I have worked all my life, and I know that anybody who is good, they worked. I don't care even if you have talent. You still have to work. Art is work. " Well, they couldn't answer that. And besides, they were so young, you know. I said, "My daughter's your age. I have a daughter older"-- Sometimes they were older, sometimes she was older. I'd say, "I have a daughter older than you. Now, I know a lot. I've been working, you know. I've been taking care of my daughter for a long time." My husband [William H. Waddy] and I got divorced when Marianna [Maryom Ana Al- Wadi] was three. He was so jealous. I can't stand jealousy. I mean, especially the kind that makes up things.

MASON:

Your husband was jealous?

WADDY:

Yes. I mean, he didn't want me to go on the street outside unless he was with me. And he couldn't be with me all the time because he had a Job.

MASON:

Because he didn't think nice women were out alone on the street?

WADDY:

But I had to walk the baby. He would just make things up.

MASON:

About your friends?

WADDY:

What?

MASON:

Was he jealous of your friends, that kind of thing?

WADDY:

If they were male, yes. He said, "You don't look at me that way." That didn't bother me so much as making things up, just out-and-out lying. I had never run across anybody that was jealous. It wasn't in my family, you know, in any way. My father never acted that way.

MASON:

Most women would be flattered that a man--

WADDY:

Well, I didn't have anything for him — You know, I wasn't especially-- I wouldn't scare you to death, but I wasn't any beauty. There wasn't anything remarkable about my appearance. It was very mediocre.

MASON:

To him you were--

WADDY:

Oh, I guess he thought I was worth it, I guess. I loved him though, just the same. But that particular thing--

1.5. TAPE NUMBER: III, Side One (July 27, 1991)

MASON:

When we left off, we were talking about your trip around the country to collect prints for the book *Prints By American Negro Artists* . I'd like to hear more about the trip, but we have so much to cover. I was just hoping that I could ask you just one or two more questions and then we can go on. Did you see Bob [Robert] Blackburn?

WADDY:

Yes, indeed. He's another very, very good printmaker. I went to his studio.

MASON:

As I understand it, his Printmaking Workshop is the oldest in the country. Could you talk about that a little bit?

WADDY:

I don't remember anything about any of the artists, unless there was something special. I know that he is an excellent artist and printmaker, but I didn't know how good he was at the time. His name was given to me or I picked his name from some book or magazine. I collected the names of artists and asked artists for other names. I knew that he taught school, but I don't remember any particular thing about him except that he let me look at some prints. I think I selected one.

MASON:

I see you said you met Romare Bearden.

WADDY:

Some of the artists were more outgoing than others. He wasn't particularly so.

MASON:

Romare Bearden wasn't?

WADDY:

No, Blackburn.

MASON:

Blackburn wasn't. I see.

WADDY:

Romare Bearden, I think, recognized the fact that I wasn't an artist myself and I didn't know too much about it. But what I was doing was all right with him, and he wanted to be in the book. But Romare Bearden wasn't, you know, overimpressed, as some of the artists were. Some of the artists, for instance, said — Well, they were very much elated to have someone collect their prints to be published.

MASON:

By that time, he had pretty much made his career.

WADDY:

Yes, and he was a little bit older, too. He was older than the rest of the artists. The other artists were mostly in their twenties and early thirties — not older than thirty-two, at most. Most of them were in their twenties, between twenty and twenty-five, twenty-six. But the older the artist was, the less impressed he was, because they knew more. That's natural.

MASON:

Were you able to come to any conclusions about, say, trends in African-American print artists during that time?

WADDY:

No. There weren't any particular ones.

MASON:

Yeah, so it was just according to the people's interest.

WADDY:

According to each artist's. They did their own thing. Romare Bearden was more abstract than most other artists. Some of the artists were very much aware of the civil rights movement, and that was depicted in their work and their conversation sometimes. The older artists were, as I said, matter-of-fact, just took things very matter-of-factly. They weren't unduly excited about it, while the younger artists were. They didn't talk about any trends, and they didn't exhibit any particular trend. They did what they liked.

MASON:

In this same book, they included one of your own prints. It's called *A Matter of Opinion*. By that time you had taken the [Famous Artists] Home Study Course, and had you been to Otis [Art Institute] by-- Well, you were in Otis in '65, so did you--?

WADDY:

The book came out in '67. I think maybe I had been to Otis.

MASON:

Could you talk about that, your own--?

WADDY:

A Matter of Opinion is an abstract. There are columns of different sizes and heights. I had come to the conclusion that people very often had opinions based on misinformation or no information or prejudice. It wasn't fact at all. They expressed very strong opinions about things based on those three things. So an opinion didn't mean anything. It meant that if you wanted to know the facts, you had to go and get them yourself. You couldn't take anybody's word for it, because they couldn't give you a factual source.

MASON:

So did the different size poles — ?

WADDY:

Yes, represented individual opinions. It's just a matter of opinion.

MASON:

Was that the kind of work you were doing at that time-- more abstract?

WADDY:

I don't think it was — I didn't have any particular-- I didn't know of any other way to express that thought. That's why I used abstract.

MASON:

When you took the home-study course, what was that?

WADDY:

It was the Famous Artists Home Study Course. Years and years ago there were famous artists, you know. Some company had induced different artists to make up a book, contribute to a course, a study course, a home-study course. Some of the artists talked about color a lot. Some of them talked about graphics.

Some of them talked about placing things on the page. That's all I learned, those kinds of things.

MASON:

Then when you went to Otis, what did you study? Did you study with Charles White there?

WADDY:

No, his classes were advanced classes. Charles White was good in graphics and drawing, very good, and I was not. I never have been. Since he was very good at that, he taught that, but that was an advanced class. I only went one quarter to Otis. I think it was just one quarter. The school year was divided into quarters at that time, not only in the art school but at all the higher educational institutions. I think they were divided into quarters instead of semesters. When I started school, it was semesters .

MASON:

Yeah, maybe it's just the West Coast. They seem to prefer quarters.

WADDY:

No, I don't think so. I think that it was national when the change was made to quarters. I don't remember the reason that was given, I mean for changing from semesters to quarters. I don't remember.

MASON:

Why did you only go one quarter? You hadn't formally enrolled? You just wanted to take a course? Is that what happened? Or you wanted to continue but you —

WADDY:

I didn't have any intention of graduating or anything like that. I just wanted to take a course.

MASON:

Which course did you take?

WADDY:

I don't remember. Probably I just started in a beginners course. You know, learning value and color and how to place what you were drawing--what colors, you know, placement . I don ' t remember .

MASON:

So when did you start to — ? Is that when you started to produce more and more work? How much--?

WADDY:

Yes, I did more work after that because I knew a little bit more about what I was doing. But the thing is, the artists helped me more than anybody else, more than anything. Artists would show me how to print and they showed me what value meant in colors and they showed me about graphics. For instance, the ear is placed between the eye and the nose, not wherever I had it. [laughter] And

they showed me, you know — They taught me how to be an artist. The artists themselves did it. The artists when I first — In my first close contact — For instance, when I was collecting the prints, some of the artists would ask me, well, did I think they should change a blue to another kind of blue that was lighter or would add more value to the top of the painting or whatever they were doing? I told them I didn't know, and they'd look at me as though, "You know, all right, you just aren't going to say." I got tired of that. That's really why I went back to school, so that I could answer questions like that. Because I did not know. Like the majority of people say, "I know what I like." I liked it or I didn't like it. I couldn't say specifically why I didn't like it, and I couldn't say specifically why I did. I went to school really to learn why, so that I could answer them. Because, as I say, they were young people but they were respectful because I was so much their senior. I was as old as their mother. I could be their mother to many of them. So they wouldn't just come out and call me a liar, as they would their peer probably. But they gave me that look. They let me know that they didn't believe me. Why would a layman go around collecting artists' work if that person wasn't an artist?

MASON:

Yeah. So did you get what you wanted out of school? Were you able after that to articulate what you liked and didn't like?

WADDY:

I didn't initiate any art conversations, but I did know enough if somebody asked me a question to give a sensible answer. I didn't elaborate or anything like that. I never did learn enough to do that, because, as I said, I only went one quarter. I started with oil painting. But it was to me the fact that I wasn't a good graphic artist (and still am not, as a matter of fact) — it interfered with what I wanted to say with oil.

MASON:

Well, you were talking about this painting that you have here called *The Shroud* .

WADDY:

Yes, I used very big canvases because I made myself an easel--a beautiful easel, too, strong and sturdy, and it could roll around. But they cost too much to frame. Prints were less expensive. The ones that I was doing were very small ones.

MASON:

When did you start exhibiting or did you exhibit with the other artists from Art West [Associated]?

WADDY:

Yes, if my work was chosen. We juried — Someone would jury all the shows. I remember once Art West had a show at the Oakland Museum or something.

MASON:

Well, there was Art-West Associated North who had the show. I think it was "New Perspectives in Black Art."

WADDY:

Art West too was in that show. Samella Lewis and William Pajaud were the jurors for us, because Art West-- I was so proud of it, that Art West paid them their fare round-trip from Los Angeles to San Francisco. We had the work sent to the Marcus Bookstore, and they came and juried it upstairs. All the work was juried, because I didn't feel that there was anybody in Art West who knew enough to jury shows, so we had an outside juror. There also wouldn't be any politics, you know, or favorites, that sort of thing. Although the artists in Art West became very well known.

MASON:

When did the organization break up, approximately? Was it in the seventies?

WADDY:

I don't remember dates at all.

MASON:

Okay. In '65 some of your work went to Leipzig, East Germany, or was it-- There was a print show in East Germany.

WADDY:

You know, whatever I have written down there, that's what happened. I don't remember things like that.

MASON:

Let me pause here for a second. [tape recorder off] So in 1965 you got the opportunity to go to the Soviet Union. Could you talk about your experiences there and about how the show came about?

WADDY:

Well, actually, Margaret [Taylor Goss] Burroughs got the invitation. She wrote me a postal card and asked me if I wanted to go to the Soviet [Union]. I told her, yes, when were they leaving? The next time she wrote me a letter, she told me when it was and sent me a copy of the formal invitation from the Soviet art establishment. Charles White had been there before, and he was the one who suggested my name. That's how I got there. Charles White did it. He said he'd already been there. I think the Soviet [Union] was inviting artists of different nations to come. Or maybe Charles Burroughs, Margaret's husband, had been raised in the Soviet [Union], you know.

MASON:

Oh, no, I didn't know that.

WADDY:

That's where he was born. He spoke Russian very fluently, of course, because that's where he grew up. The invitation for Margaret and Charles Burroughs

had been as a couple. Margaret, being an artist herself, probably made some kind of contact with the artists in the Soviet [Union] the first time, you know, a few years prior to this trip that I was on. Because I think this was about the third or fourth time that Margaret had been over there. So when she was invited-- So when the Soviet Friendship Houses invited Margaret to bring another artist, I think she took Charles White. He didn't want to go again, and he suggested my going, taking his place. He said, "I've already been there . "

MASON:

He'd already had the experience.

WADDY:

Yes, he thought he'd had the experience, and he didn't want to go again. He suggested that I go, and that's how I got the invitation from Margaret. That's why she wrote it on a card, because on a postal card — She said when she got back to the States she had asked other artists in Chicago to go, but they were afraid to go because of politics.

MASON:

Well, it was a little while after the McCarthy era, but still during the Cold War. But that didn't bother you.

WADDY:

Not at all. I didn't think anything about the-- I didn't agree with the McCarthy era. As far as the United States being critical of the Soviet Union, you know, let whoever is without sin cast the first stone. The United States was not without sin herself, in my opinion. So it wouldn't have bothered me, I don't think, because, as I say, you have to be clean yourself before you cast the stone. And the blacks were having a bad time in the States at that time. You know, it was worse than it is now, anyway, and it's bad enough now. For instance, when they talk about drugs, the first thing they talk about are gangs of blacks in the streets in urban areas. But it's the whites, though, who use the drugs. They're the ones who bring it in, use it, and have enough money to get cleaned out, and enough money to buy it in the first place. It doesn't make any difference who they are. I mean, from medical doctors to someone receiving state aid or county aid, some kind of public assistance rather. All of them are white that use it. To me, you know, you have to clean yourself, clean out your own house first, before you can talk about the other guy's house.

MASON:

Yeah, I just wondered if that was the reason why, since the show was jointly sponsored by the Soviet government and the American government- -

WADDY:

It wasn't sponsored by the American government. The American government didn't have anything to do with it.

MASON:

Oh, I see. I thought I read someplace that it was. Maybe it was in the article.
WADDY:

No, the American government had nothing to do with it, not in any way.

MASON:

Well, that makes more sense, in a lot of ways. So what expectations did you have? Did you have any expectations of the trip at all?

WADDY:

No. Because, as I said, I had already done *A Matter of Opinion*. Very few people had the facts, so I had to go and see for myself. I didn't have any opinion of it or any expectations. The only thing, it was exciting to get a passport, because I had never gotten a passport in my life. That's the first time in my life I ever got a passport, because I hadn't gone overseas.

MASON:

So did you make some work especially for the trip?

WADDY:

No. As I say, I collect work. I was more interested in getting as many artists to give me work to take with me over there for the exhibitions in the Friendship Houses. The Friendship Houses in the Soviet Union are like the community houses here in the States. It's like a community house — like galleries. They would set up a gallery, you know, some rooms for an art exhibit. But a friendship house itself, the building itself, is like a community house. They're all over the Soviet [Union]. That's where they entertain many kinds of arts and professions, people from other countries.

MASON:

So what happened when you got to the Soviet Union?

WADDY:

We were assigned to interpreters, because Charles [Burroughs] said that he was not going to use anything but English. He said to our group that he wasn't going to use anything but English, although he spoke and understood Russian fluently. He was fluent in it.

MASON:

Why did he say that? Because he was forgetting things?

WADDY:

No, because he didn't want it to appear that he was interpreting — Because it was safer. Not safer, but in the sense that it was more polite.

MASON:

Did they have receptions set up for you to meet people?

WADDY:

They took us to travel around. I have a written--

MASON:

Yeah, I saw that. Did you write this when you — ?

WADDY:

When I came back.

MASON:

Do you want to look at this to refresh your--?

WADDY:

Oh, I could tell you this. The thing about the Soviet [Union] that impressed me personally was the fact that everywhere they took us they acted just the same as the United States does when they're trying to impress foreigners. They take them to their best places, the prettiest, and give them the best food. They acted just as we do. I mean, they were just the same. [laughter] You know, when you want to impress somebody, you put your best foot forward, as they say. Well, that's what they did.

MASON:

Did you have a chance to break away from the sort of guided program?

WADDY:

No, no, because they had evidently-- Our time was filled up with entertainment, you know, doing what they asked us to do. We first went to Moscow, and the Red Square was very popular then. It was very impressive, too. The buildings were very impressive. They were well built, big and well kept. It was just like if a foreigner comes to the United States. They take him to the best places in Washington, D.C., I guess. And they take him then to New York at night and take them to the best musicals. Well, they did the same thing. So, of course, it was very entertaining and very pleasant, only it was Russian instead of American. That was the only difference. I noticed that their airplanes, at least the airplanes that we were on, weren't as smooth and they didn't operate as smoothly. They were kind of noisy. But instead of having paper napkins, they had linen--not cotton, but linen, a very fine linen. And the food was delicious. The hotel where we stayed, the rooms were huge. The bathroom was as big as this room.

MASON:

Wow, that's unusual because, you know, you hear stories about a family of five living in one room.

WADDY:

Yes, well, that was true, too. I saw it. It wasn't shown to me. It's just because if you keep your eyes open you can see it. But it wasn't shown to you. What was shown to us, the same thing, as I say, I repeat, was just the best, just as we do when foreigners come over here. We show them the best. We don't take them to the ghetto and show the worst parts of the United States. Well, that's exactly what they did to us when we went to the Soviet [Union] . They showed us the best always, which was very pleasant. Just like the best here in the States is very pleasant.

MASON:

Did they try to introduce other artists to you?

WADDY:

No.

MASON:

I mean Soviet artists.

WADDY:

No.

MASON:

No? Okay.

WADDY:

But once, you know, in one of those cities-- I'd have to see my notes to remember my name of it. It's like Hollywood. That's where they make their movies.

MASON:

Well, you said you went to Moscow, Leningrad, Alma-Ata, and Baku?

WADDY:

Yeah, Alma-Ata. That's the place that's like Hollywood here. That's where they make their movies. It's on a river. Anyway, it's in the notes. We had to take a boat to get-- It's an island. Is it an island? There's an island in a river. It's someplace where they mine coal, too. Well, anyway, on this boat was a mess boy, I guess you would call him, a waiter, a young fellow. He started talking to me. One of the things I noticed, too, when I was in the Soviet [Union] was that the children spoke more than one language. They could speak English as well as Russian. They probably could speak another foreign language, too, which made me think of their education being superior to that of the United States, because the United States doesn't teach its children more than one language. That's an elective here in the States.

MASON:

Yeah. Well, because the whole world has to learn English. So, I mean, that's how, you know, in the States, why should they go out of their way to try to communicate with any other peoples?

WADDY:

But it's easier when you can speak the language of a country. It's easier and more pleasant for you. And just because they speak a different language doesn't mean that they're any different people. They're just like you. Hot is hot and cold is cold. And they bleed red blood just as you bleed red blood. I mean, the blood is red, period.

MASON:

Did you meet any black emigres, any blacks that had emigrated to the Soviet Union?

WADDY:

No. But this boat that we were on, we were going to some oil, that's what it is. They had coal there. Anyway, this young fellow said that he wanted to draw me. I asked him if he was in art school, and he said no, because his mother was a widow, and he had younger brothers and sisters, and he had to work in order to help support them. Well, at one of these dinners-- That's exactly contrary to what we had been told, you know, at one dinner: they always take care of their people, especially the children. So he drew a likeness of me, and it was very good. He had one or two of them, I don't remember which. Anyway, I asked him for one, and I asked him to sign it and put down his name and his address. He did. The next time we had a meeting with the officials who had planned this whole thing--the main officials--I told them about it. Now, they knew that I only spoke English. But when I gave them the name and address of this young fellow and showed them his work, they were a little surprised. I was so glad. I knew that they would be surprised, because, as I said, all the artists were younger than I. So they would put me in that same class. They didn't recognize the fact that I was older and I would know a little more, you know, about people. And I didn't think that they were any different from Americans. Because all people are more or less the same when you put them in the same situation. They usually react about the same. The difference is negligible. I knew that they would think, "Well, she could talk about how good he was and what a wonderful artist he was and how he should have been kept in school and thus and so, but she doesn't know who he is." And I wouldn't. I couldn't pronounce his name. That's why I asked him to write it down. But that comes from being older. Because a young person would think of that, too, if they'd had that experience. But that kind of experience comes from being older. You have to live it in order to have it. And they were surprised. Margaret Burroughs said that they put him back in school, and he has become an artist.

MASON:

Really? That's terrific.

WADDY:

A very good one. So I said, "Well, that time I tricked them." [laughter] They didn't think that I could, because I don't think they had that high opinion of-- You know, "She's a nice person and all like that, but she's not very bright." I mean, they didn't think I was stupid, but I didn't know their ways and I couldn't-- Everybody's way is the same. That just comes from being here. You know, certain things one learns just because you're here long enough. That's all. Well, I never will forget that incident. Also, as I say, the hotel. The fixtures in the bathroom were marble. The towels in the bathroom were linen. Now, you know linen is very absorbent, and it is as absorbent as terry cloth if it's linen not mixed with cotton. Of course, some cotton is absorbent, too, but not as a towel .

Linen and terry are the most absorbent that I know of. But when it comes to running hot water and machines running, the United States was superior on machines--the way that they run smoothly. They're just better on machines. But the quality of the life-- It's nicer to use linen napkins than it is to use paper napkins. The quality of what we were shown was better in the Soviet [Union] . However, the story about a large number of them living very poorly is true, because one of the places we went was to some very-- He must have been a very wealthy man. In the back there were some little kind of hovels, and people lived there. They may have been his servants. But it was still, even for them-- The way their servants are treated, [compared to how] domestic servants are treated here in the States, was very, very poor. You know, more like slaves than-- But the food that they had was fabulous.

MASON:

Probably caviar and salmon.

WADDY:

Yes. Lots of caviar, lots of caviar, and it was delicious. Because the caviar was like anything else there-- quality. And they drank a lot!

MASON:

Yeah, they have that reputation.

WADDY:

Gosh!

MASON:

Well, it keeps you warm, I guess. [laughter]

WADDY:

Well, they had furs there. What's that other fur? It's a short hair, like mink? I can't think of it now. [sable]

MASON:

Beaver?

WADDY:

No, it's like mink.

MASON:

Seal?

WADDY:

If I call the name you would-- People who don't know the difference between mink and this particular fur call it mink. But it's another fur from a small animal like a mink. Gee, I can't think of the name of it.

MASON:

Well, that's okay.

WADDY:

No, but we were treated very well. We went to see the movies, and we went to Leningrad. And the old stories about Russia with the horses going up into the

palaces-- The way the steps are made you can easily imagine horses going into palaces. You know, the stage being driven into the palace. Leningrad is a beautiful city, and they had beautiful art museums. Oh, the museums are just fabulous in Leningrad. Of course, the Soviet [Union] is very much larger than the United States, about four times the size of the States.

MASON:

Was there any art you were particularly impressed with? Was it the icons that--?

WADDY:

What I was impressed with was the galleries in Leningrad. That museum has a name, but I can't remember that name either.

MASON:

It's probably here in your notes.

WADDY:

Maybe. I don't remember a lot of things about the trip except a few incidents that stood out. I know once when we went to see a movie, one of the guards, one of the interpreters, he wept so. He made an apology for it, but so many people had died there in the Second World War. That was the first time I knew the reason why the Germans-- The United States were saved by the Russians coming in and fighting the Germans. That's what saved the United States from being wiped out--the Russians did. But they lost forty million young people.

1.6. TAPE NUMBER: III, Side Two (July 27, 1991)

MASON:

Are there any other incidents that stand out?

WADDY:

There was an African in the hotel, a young man from some country in Africa.

MASON:

Was he a student or just — ?

WADDY:

He was a student, and he was raving about the racial prejudice that was being displayed in his particular case.

MASON:

In the Soviet Union?

WADDY:

Yes, in the hotel that night. He was, again, way ahead of the Americans. You see, they didn't treat our delegation that way at all. Whatever they were doing to him, they didn't treat us that way at all.

MASON:

What was his complaint?

WADDY:

I don't remember, but he was making a whole lot of noise about it. He wasn't talking to us. He was talking to the offenders. That again gives you another slant, viewing the Western civilization. Western countries, including Europe, especially [the] English.

MASON:

I'm not sure what you mean.

WADDY:

By the Western civilization?

MASON:

No, just in terms of —

WADDY:

Racial prejudice?

MASON:

Yeah. The point you were making about the differences in treatment.

WADDY:

The other countries are European countries- - Western culture, that's what I should have said. Because that Western culture includes Europe. And the Soviet [Union] is in the continent of Europe, the European continent. The continent. It's not a European country as we-- Just like the United States is in the continent of North America. It's not just North America, because Canada is here too.

MASON:

Mexico, don't forget that.

WADDY:

Yes. So that gave me another view of the sameness of attitudes of different peoples, how they treat each other. It was very enlightening. That trip was enlightening in that sense. The actual-- Oh, we went to a musical that I enjoyed very much. It was a takeoff on an American musical. *Singing in the Rain* I think was the name of that. The reason why I remember that is because the rain was plastic strings. And the light, the stage lights, played on the strings a certain way to make it look as though it were raining. But it was nothing but strings. That's what it was. But aside from that, you know, I learned about people and attitudes from the trip. And some of my opinions were confirmed.

MASON:

Like what?

WADDY:

Like the sameness of people. They had rich and poor just like they have in the States, rich and poor. Even though it was the Soviet [Union], it still had rich and poor. Well, aside from that, you know--

MASON:

There were no political discussions and arguments?

WADDY:

Oh, no.

MASON:

That's probably hard to do through a translator.

WADDY:

Especially if the politics were different than that of the guest. Underneath the bottom layer of both, the politics were the same. You know, it had different names, but it was still the same old thing. Because, again and again, it is let he who is without sin cast the first stone. On both sides. It's the same old thing.

MASON:

You were telling me off tape that you never saw the show hung in the Soviet Union.

WADDY:

No .

MASON:

So you didn't get a chance to see what the reaction of the Soviets was to the work.

WADDY:

No, I don't know. I think that it probably was more a political gesture than anything else. It may have been. I don't know that, but I just suspect that. I was glad to have gone to the Soviet [Union] . But when the time came to go home, everybody in the party that I was in, the delegation that I was in, was employed, and so they had to go. The Soviets paid our round-trip ticket to the States and back. We flew from where we lived. I was living in L.A., so my plane went over the North Pole into the Soviet [Union] --went up north first and then over into the Soviet [Union]. But I wasn't employed, so I didn't have to go home. So I went to Europe, I mean the other part, the western part of Europe. But I didn't go to England. I didn't go anyplace except Paris. The reason why I went there was because a Parisian couple had come here. I had a friend who knew somebody there, and they had an apartment. They came to the States and let me live in their apartment. That's why I went to Paris.

MASON:

How long did you--?

WADDY:

I also went to-- Where is the place in Italy that has the grand opera?

MASON:

Milan?

WADDY:

Florence. A friend of mine was studying singing- - opera--in Florence. I went there too, and I stayed with her and then went to Paris. And then from Paris I came home.

MASON:

About how long was the trip altogether, including the Soviet Union? Was it longer than a month?

WADDY:

It was about a month. I remember about a month. The whole trip, you know, including the Soviet Union.

MASON:

Did you try to look at the arts in Italy and Paris? I mean, Florence and Paris? Or was it more--?

WADDY:

Milan. I didn't go to any other place. She had a friend who lived in Venice, because he tried to persuade me to come to Venice. That's where the canals are. I told him that I couldn't go because I didn't have any money. I had my fare back home, but I didn't have any spending money to travel around like that. He said, "Well, you don't have to have any money. You're going to stay in my house with my grandfather." You know, with his family. But going back-- Mama [Willie Coran Gilliam] always said, you don't go anyplace unless you have your fare back home. So that's why I didn't go to Venice, because I didn't have any fare back to Milan.

MASON:

What were your impressions of Milan?

WADDY:

Oh, it's just an ordinary city. It was just mostly to see my friend Helen Bowman. It was just ordinary.

MASON:

In your later prints, did you ever incorporate any of the things that you saw or experienced?

WADDY:

In Milan?

MASON:

Either in Milan or Paris or in the Soviet Union, in any of your work?

WADDY:

No. It seems to me I did something about Red Square. No, I didn't either. I don't remember doing anything in particular.

MASON:

So your work didn't really change, then, that much when you came back.

WADDY:

No .

MASON:

Let me pause a minute here. [tape recorder off] Okay, we wanted to talk about some of your prints that you have produced, and you brought out a number of slides that you have. You have a number of notebooks of slides, but you just--

WADDY:

You don't have to move the [projector] wheel. It will move by itself. That's a portrait of my mother that I copied from another portrait, another picture I had of her. But, no, it's this one.

MASON:

Yes, this photograph here.

WADDY:

I was trying to get the detail of the dress, but I didn't do it very well. The dress shows a lot of detail.

MASON:

This is what kind of print?

WADDY:

It's lino. Yeah, it's lino. All of my prints are linoleum prints. I think that's May Day . You know, up north May Day is very important because it's after snow. Winters up north, the northern part of the hemisphere, they may not be as severe as they used to be. But spring was quite a day, and May Day was quite a holiday. Now it was summer.

MASON:

So here you used--

WADDY:

The Norwegians and Swedish people and people from those countries celebrated May Day. It was quite a celebration. And Minnesota is populated--it was when I was growing up — with Swedes and Norwegians. Scandinavians, you call them. They're from the peninsula of Scandinavia.

MASON:

In some places. May Day is almost like a pagan holiday.

WADDY:

Yes.

MASON:

It's a celebration of fertility.

WADDY:

Yes .

MASON:

Here you've used color. Did you hand-color that or is that printed color?

WADDY:

It's printed color. They have inks in color, too, that you can use for color. It was printed color.

MASON:

Did you prefer color?

WADDY:

I didn't have a preference. It depends on what I want to do. This [slide] was in the islands, in Tobago. Again, it's *Lyming and Listening* .

MASON:

You explained to me off tape what lyming means.

WADDY:

Lyming means rapping, gossiping. The children are listening because there weren't very many telephones in this particular town in Tobago in the West Indies. So news was done firsthand. You tell it to somebody, and then somebody else would tell it to another person. That's how news got around. And children would report, too, what they heard. That's why the children are standing around--the teenagers. They aren't grown, because the grown people wouldn't — If they didn't want anything to be known, they wouldn't let the children in.

MASON:

Yeah. You used children a lot.

WADDY:

I like children very, very much. I like children. I think children are very-- I think they're the hope of mankind. Because man might not always be on this planet. The planet probably existed without man, and it could do so again. But if we have children and take care of them, then he'll be here for a long, long time. And then another thing about children, they're fresh. They don't have preconceived ideas and ideals. They see things clearly and plainly and state so. They talk that way, too, if they're permitted to do so. That [slide] is an abstract. I don't have any name for it at all.

MASON:

This appeared in [Samella Lewis and Ruth Waddy] *Black Artists on Art* as untitled. This was done about 1969, it says in the book. So you were just saying you went back and forth from abstract to representational work.

WADDY:

Yes.

MASON:

It just depended on what you wanted to express. Then, when you were working, did you have in mind a particular market that you were trying to reach? Who did you feel your audience was, when you were producing your prints?

WADDY:

I didn't think of an audience, because all of the artists that I knew didn't sell very much. That's one of the reasons why they were enthusiastic about being published, that it might induce sales. That's the reason why I put that ad in the

paper--in the magazine, rather--to induce sales, to encourage the artists. That's why I like to have exhibits. We had quite a few exhibits of different kinds. You know, Negro History Week, or somebody's birthday. We'd do it at city hall or at a community room. And in colleges we had quite a few shows. It was to encourage sales. But ordinarily the sales were unusual at that time. They weren't as common as they are now. Now artists have sales.

MASON:

When did you sell your first print? Do you remember?

WADDY:

I don't remember.

MASON:

Do you remember some of the earlier sales maybe from--? Because I noticed there were some exhibitions like at the [Westside] Jewish Community Center, Do they buy work from the show? Do you remember?

WADDY:

No. They didn't buy any work. The fact that black artists were exhibiting was news all by itself.

MASON:

I don't want your slide to burn up.

WADDY:

The Fisherman.

MASON:

This looks like another one from the islands.

WADDY:

Yes. Because fish was very important to people who live on islands or near water — not urban people. Fish is very important to them because it's one of their staples for food. You know, the fish is very good, too, the way they prepare it. They prepare it in many ways. They usually go out early in the morning. These are *The Exhorters*. This is during the civil rights days. Everybody was telling everybody else they should do this and they should do that. Blacks should do this and blacks should do that. They should be thus and so. And everyone-- Each one had a different concept of what should be done. That's why I call them *The Exhorters*.

MASON:

Would you say this is critical? Were you being critical of any of these exhorters? Or were you just stating the way it was?

WADDY:

No, I was just stating the way each one has their own concept of what should be done in the civil rights period. This [slide] is a self-portrait. I used to wear my hair very short, and I would now, too, except that I don't want to pay the barber \$8 to cut my hair off.

MASON:

What were you trying to express about yourself here in the self-portrait?

WADDY:

Not any particular thing. I put the squares on the blouse to give it, you know, a foundation.

MASON:

Yeah, it makes a nice balance and it really draws the eye into the image. Is this the only self-portrait that you've done, or have you done a separate--?

WADDY:

Only one.

MASON:

That's the only one. When did you do this one, approximately? The early sixties? I mean, the late sixties?

WADDY:

When I was doing prints, so it must have been in the sixties, I guess. I don't know. It's been a long time. Whenever I worked in prints. It's a [slide of a] little boy, but I don't remember the title. I'd have to see the--

MASON:

Yeah, it looks like it's written on the--

WADDY:

The children again, playing in the water with the black and white.

MASON:

So as your work went on, did you experiment with different ways of cutting the linoleum block?

WADDY:

Yes. I tried that, because you have different kinds of knives, you know, that fit in the handle. And the knives could determine the outcome of the picture. If you wanted a wavy outline, then you might use a knife that has a blade that fits into a-- I'll show you what the-- Do you know what working tools look like?

MASON:

Yeah, I've seen a few kinds.

WADDY:

Well, you know how it fits, it screws into the handle. I might want to use a wavy knife. But I didn't experiment too much, because linoleum when I started was too hard to get. They were beginning to use synthetics instead of rubber. Linoleum was originally made of rubber. Then they started with the synthetics coming in, you know, make it up with a different kind of composition, which didn't cut as well, as easily. It printed all right, but it didn't work as well. Linoleum, rubber linoleum, the printing linoleum, was hard to get. I think it's hard to get now. I have a few pieces uncut that I'm saving for the time that I'll start doing it again maybe someday. I keep on telling myself that lie.

MASON:

Are you making sketches now, or are you just--?

WADDY:

Oh, I have a lot of things that I want to do. The sketches, that's the easiest part.
[laughter] No problem at all on that. But getting down and cutting that linoleum, that's the thing.

MASON:

Let me pause here. [tape recorder off] Is that how you usually proceed when you make your prints? You make a sketch, and then you cut out the linoleum?

WADDY:

Yes, I make a sketch and use carbon paper to put it on the linoleum and cut it, trace the sketch onto the linoleum and cut it. Because, you see, the linoleum prints opposite, so the sketch has to be opposite, too.

MASON:

Yeah, the reverse.

WADDY:

"Reverse," that's the word.

MASON:

I can't focus that [slide] any better. Can you see It?

WADDY:

Yes, I can. It seems to me it was made in the islands. I'd have to see the title to remember the — It's about children, at least. The reason I say it was in the islands is because of the color, because the islands are very, very colorful.

MASON:

This [slide] is a black girl in a pink dress. Does she have on a red hat? Is that —
? She looks like she's —

WADDY:

Looks like she's walking down the road, but I'm not sure. Let's see the title.
There's *The Key* again.

MASON:

This was also reproduced in *Black Artists on Art* . You were telling me off tape what *The Key* was about. It contains--

WADDY:

The key to freedom of the countries in Africa is fighting. That's the key.

MASON:

So it's specifically about Africa and not about African-Americans .

WADDY:

Yes, it's about Africa and each of the countries becoming free. It's about a little girl who had some kind of message to phone, but they don't have a private phone in the house. And she's very little, because she has to turn a garbage can upside down in order to reach the public phone. It's to illustrate the children.

They know how to manipulate mechanical things like a touch-tone telephone or to even know to telephone, to make a call. They're inventive, creative, ingenious. She's too short to reach the phone, so she arranges, you know, turns the garbage can upside down or something that makes her tall enough to be able to reach the phone. Because she feels that what she has to say is an emergency. So she's capable of taking care of it. Black children are often able to do that. They're very creative if they have come across a situation that requires some ingenuity or creativity. We aren't that way. That [slide] is a bouquet.

MASON:

It has a lot of different colors in it. Was that a difficult print to make because of all the different colors?

WADDY:

And because it's flowers. I was just treating a bouquet of flowers in an abstract way, sort of. I like flowers very much. I was just thinking of treating it as an abstract.

MASON:

Do you feel it was a successful print? I mean, to me, I think it's very pretty the way the flowers kind of explode out of, I guess, the paper at the bottom.

WADDY:

Yes, it is. The green paper. The bottom part is one of my fingers, holding it. Someone gave me some flowers, and that's what's at the bottom — my fingers holding the paper of the bouquet.

MASON:

Okay. [That slide is] sideways.

WADDY:

That's all right. *Fetish* is the name of that one. I know what it is because there was a period when- -I don't know whether it was after civil rights or not--they were saying anything that was African to the African- Americans was quite all right. They were taking fetishes and all kinds of small objects, which I thought was very silly. So that's another abstract. It's just a fetish. I made it red because red is in the old saying, you know, about fifty or sixty years ago-- "Red is the color that brought you over here." Red is the color that brought Africans over on the slave ships, they said. It was an old saying.

MASON:

I don't understand what that means.

WADDY:

It doesn't mean anything. They didn't know what-- They didn't know how they- - The people who said it evidently didn't know how Africans were taken as slaves. But it was a saying while I was a child. I haven't heard this now for twenty- five years, I think fifty, seventy years ago. They'd say, "Red is the color

that brought you over here." When the colored people-- They called them colored then. When colored people liked the red dress they'd said, "You don't want red, because red is what brought you over here." Put you on the boat-- They gave you some red cloth. We don't want red. But red is a good color, and it's very good on blacks. It's very becoming to them.

MASON:

Yeah, and what were you saying about African- Americans using African objects?

WADDY:

Yeah .

MASON:

Were you talking about artists or just the whole trend in the sixties?

WADDY:

The general public. Just a trend of the sixties.

MASON:

So you felt that they didn't really understand what African culture was about. I'm not sure I understand.

WADDY:

Oh, they were making a lot of noise about practically nothing. Except if they were so African or pro-African, well, why didn't they put their money where their mouth was, such as join some societies that would free some African countries or take in some African students or something like that? Something for real. That ' s what I meant when I said that .

MASON:

It was just, you know, for a lot of people it was just —

WADDY:

Just like a fad.

MASON:

Yeah. But for some people it was a really serious thing, you know, since African history isn't really taught in schools. So it was a period of self - discovery and kind of a discovery of one's origins.

WADDY:

Yes .

MASON:

So do you think that was a positive thing?

WADDY:

It's okay as long as you keep it in the has been, used-to-be' s. As long as you keep it there, in the period where it belongs. Don't make used-to-be's be's, because used-to-be 's can't be made into be's. Used-to-be's don't release one from the responsibility of taking care of the be's. Used-to-be's can't fly; only bees can fly.

MASON:

Is this [slide] also children? I can't tell.

WADDY:

I can't tell. It looks like it. I'd have to see it. *Almost* is the name of that one. I know that was an island in Tobago, because that little boy was trying to catch a butterfly. They have the imperial butterflies on the island. They're called the imperials. They're very big and very colorful and very beautiful butterflies. They don't grow everywhere. There are places that have butterflies but never imperials. They only grow certain places in the world. He almost caught it, but he didn't get it quite. He was a little boy. And that diaper was coming off too. Sometimes they don't wear any pants at all.

MASON:

Yeah, you show that in *Lyming* , where the boys don't have any pants.

WADDY:

That's *Mother and Child* . That's a black [ink] and white [paper] mother and child.

MASON:

Do you remember what led you to do this particular [slide]?

WADDY:

It's *The Littlest Clown*, I think. And that [slide] is my grandson when my daughter [Maryom Ana Al-Wadi] brought him one time down to L.A. He had on a bib. I didn't like it at all. It fit him all right and all like that, but I just didn't like the bib. So I just did a print of him and said *The Littlest Clown* .

MASON:

I see. The perspective, it looks-- Did you do this from a photograph?

WADDY:

No, he was-- I had a photograph of him.

MASON:

Just the whole perspective from which this is done looks like a photograph to me. That [slide] is completely upside down.

WADDY:

That's *The White Hat* . It was around Easter, and again that was on Tobago. She was going home and had this white hat on. She was very, very proud of it. It was way too big for her, but she was very careful of it. She was a little girl. That's *Intermission* . That's upside down too. But the round figures coming out are people. *Intermission* is like when one goes to a theater. I was likening life on earth to a theater. It seemed as though at the time that I did the print that people were in the middle. They were confused and didn't know which way to go. Society in general, I'm saying, the country even. They didn't know which way to go, so they were in the middle. And the middle was like a tomb, like a sort of death, and it was at intermission, between acts. Like between using a lot

of synthetics and using natural things. They were between the two. It [next slide] is a day worker sitting in the hot day.

MASON:

I think this one is called *The Red Umbrella* .

WADDY:

The Red Umbrella.

MASON:

You can see a big red umbrella.

WADDY:

And that's just off the boat. *The Giraffes* .

MASON:

The Giraffes . What does that mean?

WADDY:

It meant that we were going to talk about immigration again, and the immigrants were trying to, you know, settle. There's another animal in there besides giraffes. There are two giraffes, and what's that third animal? I don't even remember what it is. And it implied, I was hoping that it implied, that there were Americans who were just off the boat, too--native Americans, black Americans, yellow Americans, Chicanos. They were just like the others, just off the boat. That [slide] 's an abstract. It's upside down, too. I tracked different countries of Africa, and the countries are different. One should call an African a Nigerian or a Ghana --

MASON:

Ghanian.

WADDY:

Ghanian?

MASON:

I say "Ghanian."

WADDY:

Yeah, Ghanian is right. The way you're saying it is correct.

MASON:

Can we pause here for one second?

WADDY:

Sure. [tape recorder off]

MASON:

You were telling me about Africa.

WADDY:

Yes. I think Africans should be called by the country, as you do the rest of the continents. That's why I made the different designs for each country, to designate that they aren't just Africans. The same thing is being done with

Africans as is being done with African-Americans here in the States. All of them lumped together.

MASON:

But you see a lot of regional differences between southerners and northerners.

WADDY:

Yes. They aren't just Africans. The only thing that makes them just Africans is the colonialism, and it's still being practiced even in the so-called "free" countries.

1.7. TAPE NUMBER: IV, Side One (July 28, 1991)

MASON:

Yesterday we were looking at slides of your work. I was wondering if you could talk about your approach to printmaking. I mean, your style is very direct, and it also contains a lot of-- Well, we talked about children being a favorite subject. Why would you say that you deliberately pick a very direct, sort of highly readable style?

WADDY:

I don't know how to do any other. [laughter] As I had said earlier, the artists thought I was one [of them], and I had to learn very quickly how to do something in art. I hadn't had any formal art training, to speak of. And I think that I'm inclined to be direct in other fields, I mean in speech and so forth. So I approached art that way because that's the way I am.

MASON:

So you never really significantly changed your style.

WADDY:

No .

MASON:

Even the things that you're doing-- You mentioned that you're making sketches. They're pretty much in the same style.

WADDY:

Yes, the same style. I see-- Many of my sketches are not original. Something that I see in a magazine or a newspaper makes me think of something. But I wouldn't say that the idea was original. It's prompted by something that I've seen. The idea is prompted by something that I've seen .

MASON:

What about subject matter? How would you say that--?

WADDY:

I like social issues mostly, rather than just beautiful things such as beautiful landscapes or a beautiful scene. I like to look at them, but I've never felt the

urge to paint or make a print of any. Although I have seen many things that I liked, a lot of scenery, natural beauty that I liked, and many beautiful flowers. But I wouldn't attempt to make a print of beautiful flowers, because I don't feel that I am that-- I'm not skillful enough to do it.

MASON:

Well, the print you showed me yesterday of the bouquet of flowers, that was very beautiful. With your hand holding it and--

WADDY:

Yes, but, again, it was-- You know, I went to an abstract style because I couldn't paint--draw--the bouquet as it actually looked. Because I'm not skillful enough to do that.

MASON:

Today, how often do you take out your sketchbook?

WADDY:

Very seldom. I haven't done it for years. I keep the sketches because I keep promising myself that I'm going to, but I never actually do it. That is, I keep the — When I say sketches, I mean the pictures or what gives me an idea to do the sketch. That's what I keep.

MASON:

Like you make a scrapbook of images. I see.

WADDY:

Yes. I have a scrapbook of pictures that I've taken out of magazines or newspapers that give me ideas, but I haven't gone any farther than that. I haven't worked on it--done any printing--for many years now.

MASON:

Is that how you always worked? I know the print of your mother [Willie Coran Gilliam] you were saying is done from this photograph.

WADDY:

Yes.

MASON:

But, for example, the things that you did in Trinidad, the island pictures, they were from life, more or less.

WADDY:

Yes, they were. Yes, they were from life. The children playing in the water was from life, too. I don't make many sketches from life, but there are a few I can't escape. But there are very few. I saw that little boy trying to catch the butterfly. That was from life. But the fisherman was something that I didn't see then, but I knew that that's what they were going to do. They would say to me, "We're going fishing," and they were dressed to go fishing. That's what inspired that print.

MASON:

So what would you say was the period in your life when you were doing the most art? Was that, say, after Art West [Associated] broke up? I know it's sometimes hard for people to--

WADDY:

No, it was during the period that I was with Art West.

MASON:

I see. Let's pause. [tape recorder off] You were saying the period while you were with Art West was the most productive .

WADDY:

Yes, when I was associating with artists. That's when I did the most work, because they were on hand for me to ask questions when I didn't know how to do something. For instance. Van Slater tried to show me how to register color. You know, after you print it, then there are certain marks that you make on the plate. Not the plate, but on the linoleum. You know, on the block, so that you know where to put the colors and where to place them on the paper. I never did learn how to do it as well as he does, or did, rather. He was killed in an automobile accident when he was a young man.

MASON:

And you were telling me off tape why Art West broke up, finally. There were disagreements within the group.

WADDY:

Yes, they didn't like the address and where the-- They found a place that they liked on Buckingham Road. At that time, the rents were very high, and they couldn't get a lease, as I had had for the one on Jefferson [Boulevard], and so eventually they ran out of money. That was while I was out of the country.

MASON:

When you came back, did you become involved in any of the other art groups that had started up, like the Black Art Council?

WADDY:

No, none.

MASON:

Well, not necessarily join, but did you--?

WADDY:

I didn't associate with any particular group. Not any.

MASON:

Were you involved in any of the protests at the Los Angeles County Museum [of Art]?

WADDY:

Yes, I was once or twice.

MASON:

What were the circumstances around that? Because one protest was-- I'm sorry, go ahead.

WADDY:

The only one was to exhibit black artists, and there was just a march. Other than that I wasn't involved in any other group.

MASON:

Did you go to the--? There was a show in the late sixties of African art that I understand a lot of people in the black community were involved in. It was the Tishman Collection. They had a lecture series also around that, with people like Samella Lewis and Charles White. Suzanne Jackson, I think, also spoke at the museum. Did you go to that?

WADDY:

No. No, I didn't go to any event. Although I know those people-- Suzanne Jackson. Remember, I had a sale of artwork, and some of my work was included at Suzanne Jackson's house. She was living in L.A., but it's been so long. It's been so long. It's a long time ago.

MASON:

That was the first time you had to-- You wanted to sell off some of the work that you'd collected over the years.

WADDY:

Yes.

MASON:

That wasn't in her gallery, right? Because she had a gallery for a while. Gallery 32.

WADDY:

No, it wasn't.

MASON:

It was in her house. I see.

WADDY:

It was at her house.

MASON:

Did you ever go to her gallery or, say, Alonzo Davis's gallery, the Brockman Gallery?

WADDY:

Alonzo Davis's, that's the Brockman Gallery. Yes, I liked the way that he ran his gallery very much. It was very professional. The way he conducted his art business was that way. His brother Dale [Davis] worked with him, too, but Alonzo was the leader. I admired the way that Alonzo, as I said, conducted the gallery. He had special shows. I remember he had a series of motion pictures once. I've forgotten now what it was, but I went to each one of them.

MASON:

They were films by black artists that he had. When did you meet Samella Lewis?

WADDY:

I don't remember when, but I remember--

MASON:

Or how or whatever.

WADDY:

I was thinking about that this morning, because it was in Los Angeles or San Francisco. It must have been in San Francisco because Evengeline [J.

"Vangie"] Montgomery introduced us .

MASON:

Oh, wait a minute. It looks like there's a-- [tape recorder off]

WADDY:

Because when I met Samella, the first thing she said to me was, "I should have been in that book." She was talking about [Theodore V. Roelof-Lanner] *Prints by American Negro Artists*. I said to her, "Well, I sent you a card." She said, well, she didn't know anybody by the name of Roelof-Lanner. Actually, she said, "I don't know any nigger by the name of Roelof-Lanner." [laughter] I told her that he was the one who was paying for the cards. That's the reason why I signed his name. So we started arguing, and Evengeline said, "Ruth, you know all the artists, and Samella has all the scholarship," because Evengeline knew me before I was an artist. She knew that I hadn't had any art training. But I knew that the artists — She said, "Now I think that you and Samella should do a book together." So both of us cooled down and said okay, and that's how it came about.

MASON:

This is [Samella Lewis and Ruth Waddy] *Black Artists on Art* .

WADDY:

Yes. The first volume was so successful, we did a second. It sold so well.

MASON:

So there was a kind of a sort of a market for black art then.

WADDY:

Yes, there was. Samella was teaching at Scripps College in Claremont. After the book, then she decided to do the journal of black international art [*International Review of African- American Art*] . A magazine.

MASON:

Yeah, it changed names. I think it was called *Black Art Quarterly* for a few issues.

WADDY:

Yes, she did. *Quarterly*.

MASON:

How did you pick the artists for *Black Artists on Art*? Did you just send postcards to everybody?

WADDY:

No, I knew them by that time.

MASON:

But, I mean, did you just pick everybody you knew, or did you make a specific selection of people? Because it includes quite a number of artists.

WADDY:

I picked the ones who I thought were good and asked them for other artists. Although, at that time, I knew many, many artists. But as I've said many times, I wasn't an artist and I wasn't really qualified and I knew it. So I always asked people who I thought were qualified. Alonzo Davis was qualified. He was teaching school, as well as running the Brockman Gallery. Then teaching used so much time, he stopped. I remember him telling me one time his mother and his aunt said they were tired of supporting him after he quit school to work at the Brockman Gallery. [laughter] It wasn't called Brockman in the very beginning. It was called something else, but I can't remember. Brockman is his mother's or aunt's maiden name.

MASON:

Yeah, because the Brockman Gallery had a sort of core group of artists that Alonzo represented. The Black Artists Association or something like that.

WADDY:

Yes, they did, and all of them were professional artists.

MASON:

And some of those members overlapped with Art West as well.

WADDY:

Art West had professional members in it, nearly all of them were. I was the only one who wasn't.

MASON:

Oh. And how did you and Samella Lewis work together?

WADDY:

Fine.

MASON:

Putting together the book. I mean, did you pool all your artists together and then go through them together, or did she put in some and then you put in some?

WADDY:

No. I put-- Because she was working, you know, teaching school at Scripps College. She was teaching art there at Scripps College. So she left the artists up to me. She, being a professional artist, would view my selections and say yes

and no that they were good enough. But I don't remember her selecting any artists to go in.

MASON:

Oh, I see. So she would only select some specific pieces to go in.

WADDY:

That's what she would do. But not too much of that, either, because she wouldn't even have the time. She had just this-- As Vangie said, she had the scholarship, she knew how to put it together.

MASON:

When you read the introduction not only to *Black Artists on Art* but also her survey of black art, *Art: African-American* --

WADDY:

She did another book by herself. She's done two now.

MASON:

Yeah. It's gone to a second edition now. That's used as a textbook in a lot of, well, in the few places that teach African-American art, anyway. I was going to say that she seemed to have really strong opinions about art that she felt was important. That really comes through, it seems, in the selection of some of the pieces. They seem to be more, well, a lot of social commentary. I don't know if I should say the word "militant" or whatever.

WADDY:

Yes, I was that way, very much so, but so was she when I first met her. Because Scripps College is not a place where a militant would be.

MASON:

I can't imagine.

WADDY:

But I was, because I wasn't working, so, of course, I could afford to be. I mean, if I were a professional, as many of the people whom I knew were, well, maybe I would have been that way, too. But since I was on the other end, you know, one of the have-nots, I was in the have-not group of people. Art Seidenbaum said I was in that group, but I didn't associate — I associated with people who had more than I did and had better jobs and a better education, better everything. I just seemed to gravitate towards those people and that kind of people. But I didn't lose my anger and militancy, though, because I did. I tried to make them that way too or tell them why I was that way, point things out, you know, situations out to them to illustrate it. I've been that way all my life, I guess.

MASON:

In what other ways do you express that kind of militancy? You talked about being involved in the march against the Los Angeles County Museum. Were there any other marches or protests that you were involved in?

WADDY:

Of marches and protests, I have been involved in very few, maybe two at most. That kind of militancy doesn't appeal to me because it doesn't resolve anything. It just says, "I don't like it," but it doesn't resolve it. Now, if it were the kind of militancy that we aren't going to trade there or they aren't going to get our business, now that kind I'm interested in. But just to march around, that leaves me cold. I want some results. That's why I liked Chicago, because in Chicago the blacks would get together and they got results. They did something that resolved it. And that's what I was hoping.

MASON:

Did that ever happen in Los Angeles?

WADDY:

Not to my knowledge.

MASON:

Well, we finally got the California Afro-American Museum established.

WADDY:

Yes, and it's state-funded. It receives some of its funds from the state, that's true. That's one. That's a result. I agree with you on that. That's the kind of result that I'm talking about. There were others, too, in Los Angeles. Art West had a show in city hall, downtown in L.A., and it was written up in the *Los Angeles Times* . *The Los Angeles Tribune* . *The Times* or the *Tribune* , which is their leading paper?

MASON:

Well, the *Times* now, but maybe then it was the *Tribune* .

WADDY:

It was the same paper. I think the *Times* . Because it was the first time that there had been an exhibit. It was either Martin Luther King [Jr.]'s birthday or during Negro History Week, because there was one painting that was causing controversy because of its militant stance.

MASON:

What painting?

WADDY:

And Johnny Otis used to be a--

MASON:

Oh, really?

WADDY:

Yes .

MASON:

He used to be —

WADDY:

A member of Art West.

MASON:

Oh, really? [laughter] That's right, I think I heard him say on the radio once that-- He'd sort of denigrate-- I've never seen any of his work, but he said, "Yeah, I try to paint or draw sometimes."

WADDY:

Yes .

MASON:

Oh, I see. Whose painting was it that caused--?

WADDY:

I don't remember. But that's why it got in the *Times* . That ' s how it got in the *Times* .

MASON:

So this must have been in the early- -

WADDY:

I wish I had the minutes of Art West, because it would have had something in there about the date and the artists who participated.

MASON:

Does anybody have the minutes or have they just disappeared?

WADDY:

I don't know who has them.

MASON:

But you think somebody might have them? There's always somebody who collects those things.

WADDY:

I was trying to think of the members, which one would be the secretary.

MASON:

Let's see, was Raymond Lark?

WADDY:

Yes, Raymond Lark was. Lark's a good artist. And he heard about-- Art West was known not only in San Francisco but other cities, too. Because some artists from other cities said that they'd heard of Art West. Or I think that the advertisement-- I don't know how they heard of it, though.

MASON:

And you were also saying yesterday that-- I wanted to ask you about artists like P'lla Mills and Alice Gafford and Beulah Woodard, who were actually active in Los Angeles in the 1950s. You were saying that Alice Gafford was a part of--

WADDY:

Art West. She was a member also.

MASON:

So it seems like there was a large range of--

WADDY:

In ages and talent, especially talent, because I was in there! [laughter]

MASON:

And you said that Miriam Matthews was also a supporter of Art West.

WADDY:

Oh, yes, she was a supporter of art.

MASON:

Did their — ?

WADDY:

Art West was definitely an influence on public recognition of black artists. Two or three people became collectors during that period when we had shows. And, of course, we always invited this particular-- I can't remember who they are. But I know that two of them were doctors. Miriam Matthews was a supporter. She bought art, too.

MASON:

Yeah, well, Leon Banks is usually a name--

WADDY:

Banks, that's the man. Yeah. That's one of them. Isn't he a doctor?

MASON:

Yeah.

WADDY:

Yes. I think that black art- -artwork by black artists- -has become stronger as the years have gone by.

MASON:

How do you mean "stronger"?

WADDY:

That people buy it.

MASON:

I see. That the market has opened up.

WADDY:

Yes, yes. Because the resale of their work is very, very high.

MASON:

But not compared with white artists, though.

WADDY:

Not, no, but almost. For instance, it's not quite as high but almost. It is not in the millions yet, but it's in the hundreds of thousands. Some artists get that much. For instance, Romare Bearden did.

MASON:

Yeah, but, I mean, his work isn't as costly as, say, Jasper Johns's.

WADDY:

It's almost so.

MASON:

Do you think that that's a good thing- -to have a larger market for black art? Or do you think that because there may be a large market for a certain kind of art, then that would maybe adversely influence the kind of art being produced, because people might be more inclined to work with the mind that, "Well, I have to take the edge off my art because I want it to sell, I have to make it less militant"?

WADDY:

No, not any more than the artists did before there was a market. Some people are just very sensitive to the market, and some people are not. The market comes to them, rather than them going to the market.

MASON:

Yeah. David Hammons is probably an example of--

WADDY:

Now, hold on. I don't call \$250,000 a poor example.

MASON:

No, no, I was just saying he seems to be somebody who has always followed his own instincts.

WADDY:

And he will, because there were some members in Art West who were teachers, for instance, like Alonzo Davis. He was one of the early members. When he started the Brockman Gallery, then he resigned from Art West and started his own group. But people like that who are teaching school or who had some kind of employment and did artwork, too, David Hammons at one time didn't think very much of them. He liked Roland Welton, for instance, very much better, because Roland Welton was an artist and that's all he did.

MASON:

I see. So if you can't make a living from your art-- I see, he has very high standards.

WADDY:

Yes. I remember him expressing that years and years and years ago, and I don't think he's changed that much. His art is salable, but it's because the public has become enlightened. He hasn't bowed to the public. And I don't think now it's likely to change at all, because you've got to plead your own-- Very, very few people learn that.

MASON:

Did you see a show at the museum, I think it was in the seventies, with Charles White and Timothy Washington? You didn't?

WADDY:

Timothy Washington is another good artist.

MASON:

How did you or when did you or what were the circumstances around your friendship with Noah Purifoy?

WADDY:

He was a coworker first. That's how I got to know him.

MASON:

You were both-- That was the job that you had screening patients.

WADDY:

Yeah, we were working in the same-- All of the admissions workers were in one huge room. Each one had a desk, and the client would come to the desk. That's how I became acquainted with him.

MASON:

Both of you being interested in philosophy, you must have had a lot to talk about.

WADDY:

He was a do-it-yourselfer. He fixed his house on La Brea [Avenue] when he lived on La Brea. I think it was a garage or it was some little house in the back that he got for very cheap rent. He fixed it up and made it very attractive. And there was another young man by the name of John Wilson who lived with him. John Wilson is an architect or he's in the art — He was in the art field but not the same, not fine art. He and Noah worked together, and they introduced music when they had an exhibit at the Home Show in Los Angeles. It was the first time that music had been used, the very first time. It was written up in the *Times*, too.

MASON:

You mean it was used as part of the exhibition? How was music--?

WADDY:

It was used-- You know how when they are-- It wasn't an art exhibition, it was an exhibition of what they had to offer. You know, like it was business. It was a business. The Home Show is a business show. Once a year or twice a year L.A. used to have the Home Show downtown in that civic building. Have you heard of the Home Show?

MASON:

No .

WADDY:

They used to have one where you could buy home appliances and there were decorative gardens. It was like a convention, but it was called the Home Show. It went on for a few days in the civic center. The reason why it was written up in the *Times* is because the music attracted crowds to their booth.

MASON:

Was it jazz? What kind of music?

WADDY:

I don't remember. I don't know. I had the newspaper article for a long time. I saved it, but I don't have it now. I don't know what I did with it. That was the first time that it had been used at booths at conventions, and after that it was used a lot. But they were the first ones: John Wilson and Noah Purifoy. John Wilson lived on Windsor Boulevard in L.A. It was between Wilshire [Boulevard], close to Wilshire, between Wilshire and Olympic [Boulevard]. He died. I can't understand all these young people dying.

MASON:

Do you own any of Noah Purifoy 's work? Because we were talking yesterday about the piece by--

WADDY:

I have a poster of *Sir Watts* . I think I still have it. I think it's under the bed with all this stuff. *Sir Watts* was a wonderful piece. It's a beautiful piece. It was from the riots, after the riots. He had found a mesh lady's bag, evening bag, and that was one thing that was on the-- It was the statue of a man from the waist up. It was quite a masterpiece made of junk material, and he made some posters of it. I got two of them. I framed one. This [indicates] is something else. This other, this large one with the most wood, it's the farthest to the right.

MASON:

Those are two pieces of melted neon from "66 Signs of Neon."

WADDY:

Well, the one with the biggest, most wood? That's Noah's. And this one is Judson Powell's.

MASON:

How long have you had those two? I mean, did you get them right after they had toured?

WADDY:

After I started going to Noah's house often. I went to Noah's house lots of times, and he'd come to mine. Noah did this table. I got the wood, but Noah made the frame. I wanted it made out of two-by-four, and he did that when I was in L.A. He did that for me. I said, "How much will it be?" He said, "I'll let you know later on," or something like that. I said, "I'd rather pay now."

MASON:

Yeah, before inflation. [laughter]

WADDY:

Yes. But it was some kind of favor of his. He didn't charge me for it. This was my printing table. That's when I was printing then.

MASON:

Yeah, it's nice and big and sturdy.

WADDY:

Yeah, it's heavy. That's that weight-- I used that piece for a weight for printing. You know, the one that holds the door open?

MASON:

Yeah.

WADDY:

That's what that iron is, too, that I have down here. Because it has to keep-- If you register or lift it from the print, the print has to stay on the block in the same spot or else it will ruin the prints. So it has to be heavy.

MASON:

Did you ever try assemblage yourself? Did you ever experiment with assemblage? It seems that just because, you know, you're around it with Noah Purifoy, I was just wondering if it ever attracted you.

WADDY:

Assemblage?

MASON:

Yeah, like *Sir Watts* , using junk, junk sculpture.

WADDY:

No, no, no. I was a do-it-yourselfer, but it had to be something that I wanted to use and I couldn't afford to buy. That's the kind of do-it-yourselfer I was. But Noah was an artistic — He was an artist. He fixed the yard, and he made a table out of little pieces of hard wood. When I say little pieces-- A table top.

1.8. TAPE NUMBER: IV, Side Two (July 28, 1991)

WADDY:

When I say little pieces, I mean about two inches, two or three inches long, and about one inch wide. He fitted them together to make a table top. He did things like that. Well, see, I never did anything like that.

MASON:

When did you begin to--? Did you buy many works that weren't prints or start to collect art outside of prints at any time?

WADDY:

Oh, yes. But I actually didn't buy hardly any art at all. When I got the prints for American Negro Artists , the artists gave me pieces. I would just keep them until I could frame them and hang them. But I don't have them now because I couldn't hang them, you know, where I live [in senior citizen housing] . Except on Western Avenue, I think I could hang anything I wanted to there. And also, I didn't want to put them in storage, because I was afraid I might lose them. Because many years ago, when I was about in my, oh, I'd say between fifty and sixty years ago, probably longer than that--oh, I guess it's about that long--I lost

some things in storage, because I didn't pay the storage bill. I mean, when I lost it, it was because the storage bill wasn't paid. I didn't have enough money .

MASON:

Do you think that the art groups that we've been talking about helped to or tried to formulate what might be called a black aesthetics, which is kind of a nebulous term, but some people might define it as a particular approach to art that might be recognizable as African- American? Do you think that anything like that could exist or did exist or should exist?

WADDY:

No, I don't think it did, because African-Americans are just like other Americans, generally speaking. Or, specifically speaking, each person has a different approach to everything. You know, each person is distinctive, we'll say-- I'll say. And, no, I don't think there should be, because I don't think there is a specific need for it. I think that gradually black American artists will be accepted as black Americans are accepted in other fields.

MASON:

And that's just because people will know more about the artists the more exposure they get?

WADDY:

Yes, and their art is shown in black American homes. Black American homes don't show-- I mean, white American artists.

MASON:

You say black homes don't show white artists?

WADDY:

No. But black artists appeal to those people. Otherwise Alitash Kabede couldn't sell. She's an art dealer in Los Angeles. You couldn't sell if they didn't want to buy black American artists' work. And she makes a living at it, which means they buy quite a bit. They pay whatever the going price is--the market price.

MASON:

Yeah. Well, some whites will buy so-called "blue chip" artists like Romare Bearden or Charles White. So, you know, the market might be more mixed.

WADDY:

Oh, yes, the market is very much mixed, because she sells more than Bearden and White.

MASON:

When scholars talk about a black aesthetics, sometimes they use-- It seems that they are trying to refine it lately to talk about a kind of blues aesthetics and trying to make a parallel really between blues music, which is a distinctive kind of music, and sort of saying, well, if we look at black visual arts, then there must be some kind of parallel that might have some roots in southern folk culture and things like that. But you don't see anything like that?

WADDY:

No. Now, artists' work to me is just as varied as any other aspect of American art. What scholars are saying that? Are they artists?

MASON:

The blues aesthetics? Or the black aesthetics?

WADDY:

Either one. Are any artists saying that?

MASON:

Well, David [C] Driskell talks about a black aesthetics, and he's a scholar, or I should say he's a scholar/artist. But usually it's really intuitive.

WADDY:

David Driskell is an artist?

MASON:

Yeah.

WADDY:

I have never seen any of his work. I know he's considered a scholar.

MASON:

Well, yeah. He does oil painting, but usually it's really harder to define in the visual arts. There's a professor now. Rick [Richard J.] Powell. He's a young professor, graduated from Yale [University] . He talks about a blues aesthetics in art, and he's also a printmaker.

WADDY:

He came from the wrong school.

MASON:

Oh, what's wrong with Yale? [laughter]

WADDY:

It's Caucasian. That's what's wrong with it. So he's been trained rather than thinks. Those are training schools, Yale and Harvard [University], but they aren't thinking schools. Some schools specialize in training people. Of course, they don't call it training, but that's actually what it does. It trains you and programs your mind a certain way. It doesn't let you think.

MASON:

Well, there's another, a literary scholar who came also out of Yale, whose work has been really influential, named Houston [A.] Baker. He talks about a blues aesthetics in literature. He seems to find a certain commonality between certain works, different themes, like repetition, and, I can't think of some of the other things, but, you know, things that are found in blues music. His work has been really influential, and it seems to be convincing.

WADDY:

It's influential among what group?

MASON:

Well, among black scholars as well as white scholars.

WADDY:

Black scholars.

MASON:

But, well, artists. You know, they probably just do what they want to do without, you know, trying to--

WADDY:

Well — [laughter]

MASON:

Why are you laughing?

WADDY:

It makes me think of what I told my daughter [Maryom Ana Al-Wadi] when she finished her bachelor's [degree]. I wanted her to go on. No, I don't know-- She didn't have it. She was going to [Los Angeles] City [College] to get a degree. I don't know whether it was-- She hadn't gotten a bachelor's yet. She said, "It's nothing but a piece of paper." I said, "I agree, that's all it is. But that piece of paper opens the door . " And she said, "Yes." That's what I was laughing about. Some of the people, some of the graduates, don't let the degree go any further than just being a piece of paper. Of course, one has to be trained, but too often I think that schools train you not to think. Because people who think are usually upsetting the status quo or ask questions that might upset the status quo, even their own. And thinking is not particularly easy, either.

MASON:

It takes a lot of time and effort.

WADDY:

Yes, it does. And honesty. And honesty is not particularly trained in any school. I mean, that's not one of the things that they train one in. But everybody to his own notion. As I said, it's "a matter of opinion."

MASON:

So through your involvement in the arts and your own work you have been receiving honors and awards since 1963, approximately. Let's see, in 1963 you got an award from the National Association of College Women. What was that for? Do you remember?

WADDY:

I think it was just because Art West was going and had been started or something like that. Although it wasn't the first time artists had gotten together, maybe it was the first time it was more inclusive, for some reason. I don't know. Because it certainly wasn't the first time there was a black artists' group in Los Angeles, I know that.

MASON:

Do you know how they found out about your work or why they were interested in art? It seems like kind of a general- -

WADDY:

Yes, it was more to arouse African- Americans ' interest in the work of black artists. That was really the purpose of Art West. To tell the public that they had among them artists whose work was worthy of being bought. that would give pleasure to them — pleasure to the buyers, I mean, enhance their life.

MASON:

And then in '86 — [tape recorder off]

WADDY:

Maybe the fact that we got so much publicity was because I wasn't so much of an artist but I could get artists together. Maybe so, because everybody, every one of them, was better than I was.

MASON:

You got an award in '64 from the Los Angeles YWCA [Young Womens Christian Association] . You got one from the National Conference of Artists.

WADDY:

Oh, the National Conference of Artists, that was interesting. I think that was because it was the first art group in L.A. I don't know why. Art West may have gotten a lot of publicity from the members. As I said, in the beginning it may be because there was somebody who could get artists together who wasn't really, truly an artist. At least, they were very much better than I.

MASON:

Did you attend a lot of the National Conference of Artists' meetings?

WADDY:

Yes, because I wanted to be associated with artists. I liked them. I like artists. And Margaret [Taylor Goss] Burroughs was the head then, and I knew Margaret Burroughs from Chicago.

MASON:

Do you remember any particular meeting that was exciting to you? Because they met in different parts of the country.

WADDY:

Yes, they did.

MASON:

Sometimes in Florida, I think, and Chicago, I know.

WADDY:

And then Georgia, Atlanta. West Virginia is one place I remember. I remember that because — [tape recorder off]

MASON:

So you were saying that —

WADDY:

Bill [William H.] Waddy came from West Virginia, but I don't remember the town in West Virginia. I don't remember the name of it.

MASON:

I see you got an award from Compton College in 1972.

WADDY:

We probably had a show there.

MASON:

And one from Art West in 1972.

WADDY:

Yeah, I'm sure we had a show in Compton. The one from Art West they couldn't decide what to do, so I got a plaque with a bronze-- Here it is. They said in Art West-- I remember one of the members, and I can't remember who it was, he said, "We couldn't decide what to do about you, Ruth. We would have planned that each member would say what you had done for each member individually." But I don't remember all that stuff, because, firstly, that's not the way I do things. I mean, I do it just because I can do it. It was needed, and I can do it. That's all.

MASON:

But still, it takes a lot of energy and dedication and interest.

WADDY:

I mean, the person needs it. You see, if everybody's doing well, then that means I'm doing well. So I'm very much interested in everybody doing well. Because that helps me. That's what makes it good for me. That's why I think it's so silly for people-- Why can't they see that? It's how you elevate yourself — you keep everybody else up. Since you're just like them, that helps you. I mean, that's to your benefit. That doesn't mean — I remember one artist, I forgot her name. She had some children. She said to me, "Don't you remember when you did that?" Well, I didn't do that for them. She had some children, and they needed something, a thermos bottle. I had two thermos bottles, thermos jars or one of those things.

MASON:

Yeah, like for lunch boxes.

WADDY:

Yes, lunch, that's right. She had some children, and she wanted them to take something warm. And she asked me, "Don't you remember when you gave me the thermos?" I had two of them, and I can't use but one. So that helps me.

MASON:

Many more people have the opposite attitude--the more they step on other people, the higher they go.

WADDY:

That's just a contrary. They're working against themselves. The old saying is charity begins at home. You take care of yourself first and then you spread it abroad. Well, that's how you take care of yourself. That's exactly how you take care of yourself. Treating other people as you would like to be treated doesn't have anything to do with ethics--that ' s good business. That's just plain, good common sense. It hasn't anything to do with being right or ethical or any of that. It's just plain good business. See that everybody else is up and you're up, because you're just like everybody else. Well, anyway, I don't know what they-- I got up there and said, "Thank you, " you know.

MASON:

Oh, I see. We'll pause here. [tape recorder off] So here's your plaque from Art West.

WADDY:

Yeah, that's it.

MASON:

It says, "This commemorative plaque is presented to Ruth Waddy, 1972, for outstanding national and local community service to art, artists, and mankind. Art West Associated, Incorporated. Los Angeles, California." That's very nice. Well, if you hung up all your plaques, you wouldn't have any room for your art, so it seems like you've made the choice to hang your art in your apartment.

WADDY:

Yeah, because at least I know why I did it. At least I can say that there's some reason for all of the honors. I think they kind of ran out of people.

MASON:

Oh, come on. Well, what was your award from the Los Angeles City Council, 1979? Do you remember? And there was the League of Allied Artists in 1981. And also an award from the California Afro-American Museum in 1983. In 1986, you got the Vesta Award from the Women's Building. Had you been involved in the Women's Building?

WADDY:

Oh, yes, yes. I can remember that because it was so kind of far out.

MASON:

How so?

WADDY:

I mean, in my mind it was. Mary Jane Hewitt had received one, and she told me something about Vesta and what it stood for. At least I didn't feel too strange accepting it, because I knew that one black American had received one. Mary Jane Hewitt is an African- American.

MASON:

But you hadn't been involved in the Women's Building before, though?

WADDY:

I think that they just tried to get someone from each ethnic group in Los Angeles. I think that might have been it.

MASON:

So it was more of a public relations ploy than anything else.

WADDY:

Yes, yes. And, of course, the Women's Building would have liked it if more black women would be involved in it.

MASON:

Well, wasn't Samella Lewis involved?

WADDY:

In it?

MASON:

To some degree.

WADDY:

Maybe so.

MASON:

Because I know she was involved-- Well, I read that she was involved in that group of artists that organized to protest that art and technology show at the Los Angeles County Museum [of Art] , called something like the Los Angeles Women's Art Council or something like that. And I think Betye Saar had a show there. But yeah, I guess maybe between black women and white women there were too many conflicts to resolve.

WADDY:

Yes, there are.

MASON:

Their outlook was too different.

WADDY:

Yeah, Betye Saar had a show. I can remember that.

MASON:

And then you got in '87 an honorary doctorate of fine arts from Otis Art Institute of Parsons School of Design of the New School for Social Research in New York City. Can I read the inscription?

WADDY:

Sure. [tape recorder off]

MASON:

This is the citation from the Otis Art Institute. It says, "Ruth Waddy, painter, printmaker, advocate of artistic opportunity--"

WADDY:

That's the main thing that I wanted. That's the main thing.

MASON:

Okay, well, that's first. "Your strong graphic images strike us with aesthetic, emotional, and social power, and your dedication to seeking out the distinctive experience of black artists in America has widened that power. You have been a prophet exclaiming the news of black artists and calling upon the world to embrace them. If not for your efforts, artists now prominent would have remained obscure, thus denying us the vision and insight of their work. As art reveals the freedom of the human spirit, you have expanded freedom's boundaries for artists themselves and for us all. Otis Parsons of the New School for Social Research is honored to confer upon its former student the degree of Doctor of Fine Arts, honoris causa. May 14, 1987."

WADDY:

It's amazing. I want to-- People are, you know, they're wonderful animals. They're wonderful. Wonderful. But they don't let themselves be that way.

MASON:

How so?

WADDY:

They let other people train them, which is all right, after they think, after they think. The training is essential, you know, for the performance of a job or a profession or whatever. It's essential. I recognize that, or at least I think I recognize that. I know it's important. If people would just be people, you know, just be themselves, they'd be really wonderful. They're good, too. You know, like war — You don't like that. They really don't like it. But they let themselves be led by the nose this way and that way. It's stupid. They're dumb! [laughter] That's why they're trained, so they won't be themselves. Because they'd upset a whole lot of customs and governments and taboos. If man stays on earth, he will eventually be that way, because that's the only way left, you know, the only way left.

MASON:

You mean, to be unconventional and to go against the--

WADDY:

Yes, to be themselves — good. To be their natural selves.

MASON:

Well, some people would say in the sixties there was some of that.

WADDY:

Yes .

MASON:

Do you think that will reemerge eventually?

WADDY:

Oh, it wasn't resolved in the sixties. We just had hints of it. It wasn't resolved. Nothing was resolved, because the majority of the people were trained. I think man is essentially a good animal.

MASON:

So what — ? You said you had a problem with this question, but I'll ask it anyway. Looking back on your life and your career and your involvement with the arts, what makes you the most proud today?

WADDY:

I have as much embarrassment as pride. In having started Art West and knowing so many artists, I am both proud and embarrassed, because I feel so lacking in a lot of ways. I'm the same kind of animal as I say about man-- you know, dumb too. [laughter] I'm dumb too. I could have done better. If i had just had my eyes open and thought. Well, hindsight being better than foresight, I'm not particularly— I can't think of a particular thing. That's all.

MASON:

Okay. I just have one final question. What kinds of things have you done to preserve the record of your activities over the years? We were looking through some of your notebooks here in your apartment of the slides, and some of your papers you've given to the Amistad Research Center in Louisiana. Have you gathered together scrapbooks and things like that? Not really, no.

WADDY:

But I think that this talking to you makes me think that I should do it.

MASON:

Yeah. [laughter] Art historians would really appreciate that.

WADDY:

Maybe I will. If I get two or three days in a succession that I feel good, maybe on the fourth day I might start it. Usually if I start something, I'll finish it, usually. Although I can think of my failings better than I can of my successes. For instance, when I started Waddy Shower Cap [Company] , I was trying to prove that you can become wealthy without charging a whole lot of money. But I didn't charge enough. I charged a little bit over the wholesale cost to me, a very little. But when I took it to the retailers, they raised it a whole lot.

MASON:

Yeah, they usually double it on principle.

WADDY:

Oh, four or five times, at the best stores, like Saks Fifth Avenue and Robinson's and I. Magnin. They bought the cap maybe at \$12 a dozen and sold it at \$60. They charged a whole lot for each cap.

MASON:

How did you come up with the idea for that?

WADDY:

Oh, because my sister Gladys [Gilliam Little] and I had accepted a whole lot of social invitations, you know, to very nice places, and we hadn't returned them. We had been trained. Mama, as I told you, loved to entertain but thought that

when you're entertained or when someone entertains you, you return that invitation by inviting them. Gladys and I hadn't done that. So I said to Gladys, "We'll have a big party and have a caterer and door-to- door--" What is it when you go up to the door and somebody takes your car and brings it back for you?

MASON:

Oh, valet parking.

WADDY:

Valet parking. And she said, "Well, where are we going to get the money?" I said, "Well, I'll make something, and we'll sell it, and we'll get the money that way." She said, "Okay." And so I made the shower cap. Gladys is a very good judge of things that she sees. Finally, I got one that she said, "Oh, that's a good cap." So she said, "I'll do the selling," because she is better at selling than I. But she doesn't like hot weather; she can't stand heat very much. So the first store she went to was Robinson's, and the buyer ordered a gross. The buyer said, "I'll try it out, and I'll take a gross." Well, I didn't even know what a gross was. [laughter] I found out it's twelve dozen. And I said to Gladys-- I was making it at home, you know. I have an example of a cap. I'll show it to you after a while. So I got the gross out. The next week the buyer asked for two gross--the very next week! I said, "What on earth! I can't afford that." I realized I finally had to get a place where we didn't make anything else but caps. I did that by going to city hall and getting a zoning variance so that I could work across the street. It was a vacant place on Venice Boulevard. I rented some machines and got enough supplies. Then I found that I really had to charge more than I was for the wholesale price, because at that time buyers went in retail stores and then got the name of the wholesaler and contacted the wholesaler. So it got to go around the country and I couldn't fill the orders. So I had to hire some seamstresses. That meant that I had to have more money. [laughter] But they were making such good profit, they wouldn't accept the higher price. I wrote a letter trying to explain it, but that went out the window. Those are the kinds of mistakes I'm talking about. Like that one about that Mr. Green giving Art West the land. Now, if I had-- That's all I had to do. Just stake it out and make everything exactly at a right angle, every corner a true right angle. I already knew that, but I wasn't thinking. Those are the things that I'm talking about when I say I can think of my mistakes better than I can anything else. Those are the first things that come to mind when you mention something to me, not pride, but that you didn't do this or you did that. That's what comes to mind. You don't have anything to be proud of. You remember you should have done that. Maybe you should have done the other. Those are the kind of things that come to my mind.

MASON:

We have a few more minutes left on the tape. Is there anything you would like to add?

WADDY:

Well, I think it's a great honor to have an oral history.

MASON:

It's a great honor for us to have you participate.

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