

A TEI Project

Interview of William Fyfe

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1. Transcript

1.1. TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE ONE (OCTOBER 22, 1993)

VALENTINE

I'd like to start off with where you were born.

FYFE

I was born in Oak Park, Illinois, in 1910.

VALENTINE

How did your family come to Oak Park?

FYFE

Well, my mother [Hannah Christabel Beye Fyfe]'s family moved out to Oak Park from Chicago, seeking a suburban, almost rural atmosphere, I suppose-- because I never saw it, but I was told that they even kept a cow in their backyard. My father [James Lincoln Fyfe] came from Portage, Wisconsin. His

father [James Fyfe] brought the family to Oak Park, and I really don't know the reason why. My father and mother met in Oak Park; they married in 1907. My dad was born in 1869. And my mother was born ten years later, 1879.

VALENTINE

How did they meet?

FYFE

I don't know, but it was a small community, and very possibly at the H. W. Austin barn, where they used to have dances and Christmas parties. My brother was born in 1908.

VALENTINE

What's his name?

FYFE

James. Jim.

VALENTINE

Like your father?

FYFE

Yes. My father was named James Lincoln Fyfe because his father was a great admirer of Abraham Lincoln. My brother was named James Beye Fyfe, and his son is named James Arthur Fyfe after Arthur Morgan, the former president of Antioch College. Arthur Morgan went on to be the first president of TVA [Tennessee Valley Authority] under [Franklin D.] Roosevelt.

VALENTINE

How important were politics in your family?

FYFE

Well, politics, in the context in which it's used today, really weren't important to our family, but both my father and my mother had a great sense of responsibility to the community. Before my dad volunteered to go into the army during World War I, he'd been on the village board; he ran for and was elected president of the board just prior to going into the army. He had served

as president of the trustees of Unity Temple. My mother came from a family that was much involved with the school system. Her father had been treasurer of the school board. In a village where they had nine schools named after nineteenth-century authors--Irving, Holmes, Emerson, etc.--they named a school the [William Beye] School after grandfather. That's kind of an unusual accolade. My mother was active in the PTA [Parent-Teacher Association]. She was one of the instigators of the League of Women Voters in Oak Park, and a curious thing happened. At one time she was called for jury duty, and then when she appeared and they found she was of the female persuasion they decided that it wouldn't be appropriate, so she was turned away. Later on, not too much later on, they made a case out of it and went to court and won, so she was responsible for women being on juries in the state of Illinois.

VALENTINE

Well, good for her.

FYFE

Yes.

VALENTINE

You must be proud of her.

FYFE

We are in many ways. Mother and Dad were active in the village, in the community, but there wasn't politicking in the sense that the word is most often understood today.

VALENTINE

Were they strong Democrats or Republicans, or did you talk about those kinds of issues?

FYFE

Everybody in Oak Park was a Republican in those days, [laughter] but I think my parents switched when Roosevelt was elected.

VALENTINE

I want to know more about your mother because she has quite an interesting background.

FYFE

Well, I might just wind up with my dad here.

VALENTINE

Okay.

FYFE

He went to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology [MIT], and graduated in 1897 at the age of twenty-eight. He must have been some kind of a workaholic. In those days, they had only a course in architecture, no structural engineering, so they improvised special courses in engineering for him. I don't know whether that was for two years after he graduated, just how long, but those courses eventually became the structural engineering courses at MIT. My mother attended the Art Institute [of Chicago]. She specialized in making jewelry, and when she came out of school she opened a shop on Michigan Avenue in Chicago. I don't know what it was called in those days, but-- When my brother and I came along she sold the shop--it became the Kalo Shop, well known for its silver work for many, many years in Chicago.

VALENTINE

How did she keep up her interest in the arts after that?

FYFE

She did some drawing at home. She made lots of bookplates for friends, and eventually I inherited two dozen or more. One of the sorrows of my life is that she made a beautiful bookplate for my brother but got only about halfway finished with mine. Never did finish mine.

VALENTINE

Maybe she meant for you to finish it.

FYFE

That would be a happy circumstance, but I can't find it.

VALENTINE

Oh, no.

FYFE

I really would like to see it again. I haven't thought of finishing it myself, but it would have been fun. Then, as her family responsibilities were no longer taking most of her time, she used to do lots of pencil sketching, mostly outdoors, but in later years she made a studio in the back of her house in Oak Park and did watercolors and some pencil sketches there. She illustrated a book called Little Old Oak Park written by May Estelle Cook, and they're interesting illustrations. They don't look very professional, but the Oak Parkers love them. It was a marvelous book. May Estelle Cook was quite an institution in Oak Park. She was an English teacher in Austin High School in Chicago and was very active in the library in Scoville Institute in Oak Park. She was much respected by the whole community.

VALENTINE

So you have a strong tradition for art in your family. A creative side.

FYFE

Yes, I think so. Dad, a great admirer of Mr. [Frank Lloyd] Wright, was a good architect and an excellent structural engineer. In fact, he did the structural work for the Imperial Palace in [Tokyo] Japan, which was just a couple of blocks away from Mr. Wright's Imperial Hotel. It survived the same earthquake.

VALENTINE

All right, because the hotel is famous for that. When did he do the palace? When was that?

FYFE

I can't give you a date.

VALENTINE

Was that before or after or the same time as the hotel?

FYFE

Oh, I think it must have been a little before the hotel. Mr. Wright's system, of course, was unique. After he got to Japan, the story is that he changed the foundation drawings that he went over with and devised that system of many short piles. I'm sure my father's engineering was more conservative and standard for the period. I worked with my father a little, and I've seen him even in small problems apply a unique approach to solving the engineering problems. When he was operating in Chicago, he would go over to the building department and they would just take his drawings without any question.

VALENTINE

So he had a reputation.

FYFE

Yes. He worked for an architect by the name of David Adler. No relationship to Dankmar Adler, but David Adler was the top residential architect in Chicago for many years. He was getting 15 percent commissions when the very next architects--there were maybe two, maybe three--were getting 10 percent. That's indicative of the kind of work he was doing--all big homes along the lake-shore all the way up to Lake Forest and Lake Bluff. Dad did most of David Adler's structural engineering. And it was through that connection, of course, that I began my career in architecture. While still in high school, I worked in David Adler's office as a gofer.

VALENTINE

While your dad was there?

FYFE

Well, no. Dad had his own office; he wasn't working in Adler's office. David Adler had an office over the Chicago Symphony in Chicago, on the top floor. I guess there were about ten draftsmen. Eventually I got to do some tracing, but for the most part, I kept the conference room dusted and ran errands.

VALENTINE

That's the real business of architecture. [laughter]

FYFE

It was a wonderful experience because David Adler's office turned out incredible drawings--full-size details--lots of them. I remember one time he had a full-size drawing of a dormer for the William McCormick Blair House in Lake Bluff. He wasn't satisfied with it so it was up on the wall all the summer I was there. When David Adler came into the drafting room, you could just hear him [knocks on table] and he'd stop and he'd look at that detail. The building got built, the dormer is on it--I've seen pictures of it--but he never took the drawing down while I was there. [laughter] And, well, that's enough I guess about that office. That's where I first met Paul Schweikher. My career sort of paralleled Paul's for a while after that.

VALENTINE

Right. Well, I want to come back to that later, but let's do more with your family background. When your father was at MIT, did he know any of the other so-called Prairie School architects that went to school there?

FYFE

I don't know. But that was the school in those days. Most of the well-known architects came out of it. It was a pretty traditional education.

VALENTINE

[École de] Beaux-Arts-inspired education?

FYFE

Yes.

VALENTINE

Did he do any designing or was it all structural engineering?

FYFE

Oh, yes, he was a registered architect as well as structural engineer. He was responsible for several homes in Oak Park. He did the Nineteenth Century [Woman's] Club, which was a large building; Hepzibah Children's Home, another large building; a hospital in Maryland; and some commercial work. I really don't know how to answer that question very precisely. Very often, he associated himself with other architects who were strong in design, and I suppose maybe that's why he was a partner with [Herman] von Holst. That

partnership dissolved when Dad went off to the war [World War I]. He was commissioned a major in the quartermaster division and built a camp in Puerto Rico, I believe, and a very large Camp Pike in Little Rock, Arkansas. He did his own designing for residential work.

VALENTINE

What kind of designs did your dad do? How would you classify them by style?

FYFE

Well, again, it's hard to peg it, but he was very much interested in what came to be known as the Prairie style. His residence work was not clearly in that style, but some of the smaller homes were definitely influenced by it. Some of his larger homes, I don't think-- I can't see that you could call it a "J. L. Fyfe style" or any style in particular. There were great variations in it. Invariably they were excellent plans, and--

VALENTINE

And good engineering?

FYFE

Oh yes; yes indeed.

VALENTINE

What was his philosophy of architecture?

FYFE

I do not know. I worked with him a little bit in his later years when he did some work for the Dearborn Chemical Company. He'd let me arrange the windows, if you call that designing. He was very meticulous, very demanding of his draftsmen, I was told. I can't really answer your question about style.

VALENTINE

Okay. How big was his office?

FYFE

Very small, at least when I knew it, I guess shortly after the war. Maybe half a dozen. By the time I really got to work with him, we were into the Depression,

and there might be one draftsman. Incidentally, in the same building at 228 North Michigan Avenue, Perkins and Will had an office on another floor, and they had exactly one draftsman. As you perhaps know, it's a huge firm now with hundreds, in several different cities. I watched it grow.

VALENTINE

But they both kept alive during the Depression. That was something when most offices were closing. Back to the partnership with von Holst: When did that begin?

FYFE

My suspicion is that it wasn't very long before it was dissolved, but I do not know. There's somebody in Chicago that could tell us. I just haven't taken the time to check that.

VALENTINE

Well, there's an interesting link there with Frank Lloyd Wright because that was the firm that--

FYFE

Oh yes, yes. It should be in the record that when Mr. Wright decamped for Europe, he turned his practice over, as the story goes, in just a day or two, to von Holst. One time my father told me-- Of course at the time that occurred I was maybe eight years old. At some subsequent time, and I can't put a date to it, I remember my father saying that he and Herman von Holst had gone to see Mr. [Henry] Ford. When Wright left, the Ford account was apparently a possible project. My father's report on it was that nothing came of their visit with Mr. Ford. I've seen a notation about that in the book Walter Burley Griffin: Selected Designs, and it shows a design which is attributed to Griffin. The rendering is probably by his wife, Marion Mahony [Griffin]. And there it says-- Shall I read it?

VALENTINE

Yes. Who's the author of this book? [David T.] Van Zanten?

FYFE

Yes. Edited by David T. Van Zanten and published by the Prairie School Press in 1970. It's a very nice drawing, which I'm sure Marion must have done. And it says, in parentheses, "Marion Mahony Griffin, project for Henry Ford House, Dearborn, Michigan. Elevation dated 1912, inscribed von Holst and Fyfe architects, Marion M. Griffin associate. Later altered to von Holst and Fyfe associate architects, Marion M. Griffin designing architect. Ink on drawing cloth, courtesy of Northwestern University." And then it says, "Construction never got beyond the foundations," which is news to me.

VALENTINE

I always heard it never got that far.

FYFE

I did a house in Mexico City that never got beyond the foundations. [laughter] I think architectural historians would like to know more about the von Holst/Fyfe partnership, but I've never taken time to check it out. When I finally went to Taliesin, this was not clear to me. I never thought about it, and Mr. Wright certainly never mentioned it.

VALENTINE

Did any of these people who were associated with that firm--?

FYFE

No. But I know where I could find reference to a man who would have information about all that period of Chicago architects. I'd have to do some research to find that, and then that would just lead off to something else. Jack [John O.] Holzhueter, it would be the kind of thing he'd love to do.

VALENTINE

Oh, he would love it. Yes, yes. I wonder if those people ever came to the house, if you had any contact with them as a child, with Marion Mahony or--

FYFE

No. My mother was a very good friend of Maginel Wright [Barney], Mr. Wright's sister, and was in and out of Madame [Anna Lloyd Jones] Wright's house, which was a little gothic cottage alongside of Wright's studio [Frank Lloyd Wright Home and Studio]. She had a daughter, Elizabeth [Barney]

Enright [Gillham], about the same age as my brother, Jim. Apparently, Maginel and my mother thought that those two ought to get together, but that was almost one strike against the whole idea if the parents wanted to foster-- I knew Franklin Porter, who was the son of Jane Wright Porter. We were about the same age, but we didn't play together very much. We did some. I remember the time they were living in the [Arthur and Grace] Heurtley House, a wonderful house to play hide-and-seek in. Any of the Wright houses, mostly-

VALENTINE

Oh, yes. It's a hide-and-seek with a front door.

FYFE

Jane Porter-- There must be a gene in the Wright family. She was always instigating picnics and trips out to the tennis club, and we joined her in this several times. Oak Park was, early on, a very wealthy suburb of Chicago, about 1910. For the next ten or fifteen years, it was still growing. I can remember when the northern part was just prairie. And when my folks first lived in our house on 316 South Euclid Avenue, they said they could look east and just see prairies out to the east. Shall I get into my education?

VALENTINE

In just a little bit. I want to finish talking about Oak Park and your family. The relationship between your mother and Maginel--was that a childhood relationship or did that continue into their adulthood?

FYFE

It was into their adulthood, and I don't know how far back it went. They must have been close to the same age.

VALENTINE

Did you know her?

FYFE

No, I never did. In my childhood bedroom there were some of her drawings on the wall. That's the closest I ever got to Maginel.

VALENTINE

All these connections that we don't know are there, right, when you're growing up.

FYFE

I know. Most of my life is missed connections.

VALENTINE

Well, I think they're operating anyway. Tell me about Oak Park when you were a child. What was that community like?

FYFE

As I knew it, it was a pretty cohesive community. They had lectures, and the Scoville Institute was something that May Estelle Cook was responsible for getting started. They had intellectual lectures there, and by the time I came along, they were always held in the high school--a series every year. My folks belonged to a historical group that would meet once a month and discuss a book or something of that sort. Very literate, intelligent community, tree lined, beautiful elm trees along most of the streets. I could earlier remember when some of the streets were just brick and Chicago Avenue was just cobblestones. But very soon the village became-- The streets all became well paved, and they even paved the alleys. An excellent reputation for their schools-- The high school was joined in a district with River Forest. River Forest was quite similar to Oak Park, possibly a little bit more wealthy community, smaller. The two communities joined certainly in the high school and a lot of other activities.

VALENTINE

What social class was your family in?

FYFE

Well, we were never considered wealthy, but Mother and Dad were among the group of people who were kind of getting things done in the village. Does that answer your question?

VALENTINE

Yes. It always surprises me to see [old] photographs of Oak Park, with those Frank Lloyd Wright houses that are so modern. We think of them in the context of today, yet the photos show horses and buggies pulling up in front of them, and the streets are unpaved. It's such an anomaly to me.

FYFE

I have an old picture of one of my father's houses that he did in the northern part of the village, and there's a buggy alongside of that one. It's just amazing to see it, dating it that way.

VALENTINE

It reminds you how modern those houses were of Wright's. What do you think there was about Oak Park that would commission so many Wrightian houses that were so futuristic?

FYFE

I don't really have any personal insight into that. Of course, I've read the book-books I guess--that have attempted to delineate the kind of people who would retain Mr. Wright. They seemed to be self-made persons who have done well financially and have inquisitive minds, inventive minds, and did not have the same social status as the very wealthy people who were on the North Shore in Chicago. That's what I've read.

VALENTINE

Do you think that's accurate?

FYFE

I have no way of knowing.

VALENTINE

[laughter] I just wondered what you knew, and what talk was around the town about those strange houses. Or was that accepted?

FYFE

We had good friends like Caroline and Edward McCready, who could afford a large house. They admired Mr. Wright's work, but they hired another architect, Robert Spencer, to do their house in 1907. A banker, Hal [Harold H.]

Rockwell, has a house that is Prairie style, and he, too, admired Mr. Wright's work, but he had Tallmadge and Watson do his house.

VALENTINE

Now, were these houses period houses or Prairie houses?

FYFE

They're second cousins to the Prairie design, yes. Mr. Rockwell had an island [Sapper Island] up north in the Saint Joseph River near Desbarats, Canada. Mr. Wright did a couple of cottages up there for members of the Pitkin family. So he knew Mr. Wright's work up there as well as in Oak Park. But he was a conservative banker and in 1910 he had Tallmadge and Watson do his house.

VALENTINE

And Wright still had a reputation in Oak Park from a few years before then? He wasn't quite forgiven?

FYFE

Yes.

1.2. TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE TWO (OCTOBER 22, 1993)

VALENTINE

[Prairie style houses] are probably in one of those guides to Oak Park architecture.

FYFE

Pardon?

VALENTINE

They're probably in one of those guides to Prairie School architecture in Oak Park.

FYFE

Oh, I'm sure they are.

VALENTINE

What was the feeling towards Wright among the upstanding citizens of Oak Park?

FYFE

Well, incidentally, I have five or six copies of the Saturday Evening Post-- Is it Finis Farr?

VALENTINE

Yes.

FYFE

In 1961 he wrote "Frank Lloyd Wright: The Triumphs and Scandals of a Genius" that ran for five issues. They go pretty much into details of Mr. Wright's life. But in my family, that would be gossip; it just never was discussed. I never heard anything from any of my family other than praise for the designs and the architecture. Both Mother and Dad admired Mr. Wright's work very much.

VALENTINE

Good.

FYFE

But as to any of his other activities, we just never talked about it. I can't answer your question really.

VALENTINE

Was there gossip at school or at the tennis club?

FYFE

No.

VALENTINE

Because you read so much about that, I just wondered if you had any firsthand experience.

FYFE

I just don't know. We used to go to the [River Forest] Tennis Club frequently. That was a marvelous building. I admired that building tremendously.

VALENTINE

There's another connection there: the tennis club.

FYFE

And I grew up in the Unity Temple.

VALENTINE

Right. I want you to tell me about that--what you remember about Unity Temple.

FYFE

Well, it goes back to when I was maybe five years old. It must have been shortly after it was built. I used to go to kindergarten class there. I really can remember playing "Drop the Handkerchief," and what's the one about--? "London Bridge." By the time I was in older classes we met around little tables under the balconies, and there was never really good provision for separation between classes. We'd meet in the main two-story space for opening sessions, and they'd try to get us to sing songs there. Then we'd move into the little classes. By the time I was in high school, we had classes up in what used to be--it was designed for the women's sewing group. We had a little more privacy up there. The thing that I remember best of all in Unity House [the parish house portion of Unity Temple] was the absolutely superb arrangement for serving dinners. They used to have frequent church dinners, and high school kids would often do the serving. The way that it was planned--they made a place for dishes to be kept and brought to the table and brought to be cleaned and washed and then put back to where they belonged. And the separation from the food preparation and the serving was absolutely marvelous. It worked. In the temple-- I always had trouble with that word because Mr. Wright called it Unity Temple, but we all thought of it as Unity Church. Much has been written about how the temple was designed to bring you in through a preparatory garden and then into a lobby, and then you were turned and had to find your way back into the church proper. The acoustics in there were marvelous, and the arrangement of seats on three sides brought everyone in close contact with anyone speaking from the pulpit. The thing that I liked best about it was at the end of the service. As a child coming out of Sunday school, I remember watching the janitor; when he heard the last hymn going, he'd

open two doors that led from the church proper down some steps to the entrance foyer or lobby. There were two doors on each side of the pulpit. So that meant that when the service was over, not only could the minister pop down there and catch anybody coming out, but people rose and moved forward toward the front of the church.

VALENTINE

That's nice.

FYFE

So that worked very well, and always there were lots of people standing and talking before they left for home.

VALENTINE

How did the skylights work?

FYFE

Beautiful. Absolutely stunning. Going back to the church house--when we were high school kids we discovered a switch that would turn the lights on over that skylight. That was nice at nighttime, but in the daytime there was so much dirt on the skylight that very little light came through. Early on, the [Unity Temple] Restoration Foundation got those skylights cleaned off, and that was a great revelation.

VALENTINE

I'll bet it was.

FYFE

Beautiful.

VALENTINE

As good as you remembered it?

FYFE

Oh, I never remembered it in daylight before. It was much better. It was a totally new experience; everybody appreciated it. In the church proper there has always been reference to the skylights there producing a sort of a

sunshiny glow--lots of yellow-gold in those skylights. The restoration foundation recently spent a good deal of time and money getting those put back in top shape and protecting them overhead with a protecting skylight. Well, while we're talking about the temple--one often hears about the art glass just under the eaves at the back of the galleries and over the organ. They're stunning leaded glass windows. Absolutely beautiful. You may get a glare when you're looking toward the pastor: you're looking south, and there's no escaping the fact that there's a troublesome glare produced by them. At one time curtains were hung there but they got dirty and dusty and looked awful, so that's gone. The plan of that building has been studied all over the world.

VALENTINE

It's one of the great spaces. It's just wonderful.

FYFE

It surely is.

VALENTINE

It's hard for me to picture Universalists [Unitarian Universalist Church] in a temple. [laughter]

FYFE

It doesn't seem to ring true. No. [laughter] We used to go frequently to the [River Forest] Tennis Club, which in my view is another great building--another building that just worked beautifully. There was a fire, I guess you know, and very quickly Mr. Wright, Mr. [Charles E.] White [Jr.], and Mr. [Vernon Spencer] Watson, I think, got together and planned this building. But I'm sure it's pure Wright. The roof structure's exposed wood trusses, and they have some painted squares on them that are beautiful. There are three big fireplaces. It's on a long north-south axis: a long narrow building, fireplace at each end of the main room, and out in front of each fireplace, built-in seats facing each other--a large version of the kind of fireplaces he did in several of his early houses, especially the [William H.] Winslow House and his own house in Oak Park. At the north end there is the men's locker room--pretty good size; at the south end there is a kitchen, and beyond that, the women's locker room; and on the

east side, a long porch where you could sit and watch the tennis being played out on the courts. Right now, it's been added to so many times you can't even see the original building, but it was a stunning building. It was sort of a community center--well, not a community center because you had to be members of the club, but Saturday nights tabletops would be put on wooden horses and white paper rolled out for tablecloths, and there might be parties of six or sixteen, or even sometimes much larger parties. Women would bring their casseroles to the kitchen and do their cooking there and bring the food to the table. The chairs were folding chairs, and that always was a big deal after dinner to get all those things put away. Then they usually had dancing. The big events of the season were the men's show and the women's show. The year that I graduated from high school, Jeannie Roberts wrote a musical for the high school group. Many of us were members of the club, but we had some ringers in there. I can still remember some of the songs. Both Unity [Temple] and the tennis club just worked so well; it was beautiful to experience them in terms of planning.

VALENTINE

Did your father comment about the space or the structure or anything in your presence, going there all those times together?

FYFE

No. He appreciated them, I'm sure.

VALENTINE

Did you know they were special places then, or were you just so surrounded by Wright buildings that you took them for granted?

FYFE

I think the latter. I was delivering newspapers all over Oak Park and River Forest and delivering ice cream, too, on my bicycle, and I would see houses that I liked. They turned out to be by Frank Lloyd Wright. They were all unusual except some of his very first ones. I remember when I was maybe a senior in high school, I hired a friend of mine to take pictures of them for me. He was in the camera club, and he had a wide-angle lens. This was about 1927 or '28. He took pictures of a half a dozen houses for me. Actually, this says

something about me, I guess: when I finally got to Taliesin, it was just another Wright house for me. [laughter] I wasn't bowled over so much, as most people are immediately. In retrospect I recognize how being in and utilizing Taliesin was absorbed by osmosis.

VALENTINE

What was your own family house like?

FYFE

Small, but lots of space inside--typical suburban house with a great big window in front and cut glass and colored glass over the big window. Not a distinguished house in any way.

VALENTINE

Did your father design it?

FYFE

Oh, no. One thing he did do-- Oak Park had what they called Yaryan heat; it was a by-product of generating electricity. They piped this through part of the community, and it came down our alley and into our house. And I guess when my father bought the house-- Because I know it had a furnace at one time, but by the time I came along it had all radiators, and they were all huge radiators, so we never suffered for not having enough heat. In the wintertime we could see where it came into the house from the alley because it would melt the snow over the pipe. Those pipes were made of wood.

VALENTINE

My goodness.

FYFE

So eventually it rotted out and the whole system was abandoned.

VALENTINE

Didn't think that through.

FYFE

Well, I don't know when it started but it must have been about the turn of the century. Certainly didn't have plastic.

VALENTINE

No, but wooden pipes don't make sense.

FYFE

I never saw one so maybe I'm mistaken about that.

VALENTINE

High school.

FYFE

Graduated in 1928. I did fairly well academically. I won a scholarship when I graduated.

VALENTINE

What classes did you like?

FYFE

I took art and drawing classes, of course. I liked English best, I think. There was an excellent club system. Even a book was written about the clubs at Oak Park [and River Forest Township] High [School]. Freshmen mostly joined the science club, and I joined Brooks Club, which was a religious education club. By the time I was a junior, the big club to belong to was either Burke or Lincoln Club. They were both public-speaking clubs. The drama club was another prestigious club. There was a fine newspaper--weekly--with four editors that rotated in turn. I was editor of the Tabula magazine, which came out three times a year and then published an annual at the end of the year.

VALENTINE

You did very well academically in a school that was known for its very high standards.

FYFE

I guess that's a fair statement. I took algebra twice and took French over once. I had trouble with languages. Even when I got to college I persuaded them not

to insist on my going on with French; I said most of the architectural magazines were in German. I had just as much trouble with German.
[laughter]

VALENTINE

Where did you go to college?

FYFE

I went to Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio, because my father had read an article in Harper's magazine about the college. Arthur Morgan was the newly appointed president. He was a civil engineer. He created a program where you went to school part-time and then spent time out in the world in a job somewhere. The co-op work was not just to earn money; it was to get away from the ivory tower aspect of schooling.

VALENTINE

It was for your education.

FYFE

It was great. I think Arthur Morgan was a tremendous person. He influenced my life more than anybody else outside of my family.

VALENTINE

Really? How?

FYFE

Just by being the person that he was. By reading things he wrote. I didn't have too much personal contact with him, but I had some. His engineering specialty was large-scale drainage and flood control. He didn't just devise a means for controlling water; he worked for and with the whole community, even into the educational system around the community. He had a holistic attitude about everything and devised the college experience-- I can't think of the word, the word escapes me--symmetry, developing the symmetrical person. At Antioch we had days when we all turned out and worked to clean up the campus. The first year my off-campus job was in the city of Dayton, Ohio, working as a common laborer on an office building seven stories high. In those days, that was a skyscraper. I remember working right alongside day laborers, mostly

black, who were supporting a family on the same salary that I was getting. I was getting the same salary as they were, and I could hardly make ends meet for myself. It was a pretty illuminating experience. The second year, I had a job in an architect's office in Chicago.

VALENTINE

What firm was that?

FYFE

Well, David Adler and Robert Work had a partnership-- Eventually David Adler withdrew, and Robert Work started an office with another architect whose name I can't remember, but they were still doing large homes.

VALENTINE

Russell Walcott?

FYFE

Yes. Right. Russell Walcott. There were two Walcott brothers, but this was Russell. I went to work there.

VALENTINE

Back up for a second. You had worked in David Adler's office between high school and college as a gofer, is that right? I'm a little confused about the sequence.

FYFE

That was when I was still in high school before Antioch. I got an off-campus job when I was at Antioch with Russell Walcott and Robert Work.

VALENTINE

Okay.

FYFE

While I was there Paul Schweikher came back. He'd gone to Yale [University] and won a scholarship to travel in Italy, and came back to Chicago. He came into that office. Paul wanted to do more modern work, so pretty soon he got a position as designer for Paul Maher. Paul Maher was the son of George

Maher. George Maher was operating at the same time Mr. Wright was. Paul Maher--that doesn't sound quite right.

VALENTINE

Phillip [B.] Maher.

FYFE

Phillip Maher. Sure. Phillip Maher did many buildings along the near North Michigan Avenue in Chicago. There were about a dozen buildings. They were always, like David Adler's, well proportioned and beautifully designed. Very gracious buildings. But this time he wanted to do a "modern" apartment building just off of Michigan Avenue on the Near North side, and he wanted Paul Schweikher to do the design for it. Paul asked me to come over there and work in that office. They had about eight draftsmen, so I spent some time over there.

VALENTINE

How old was Paul Schweikher then? Wasn't he pretty young to be chief designer?

FYFE

He must have been in his late twenties. Paul was an interesting guy. He came from Denver [Colorado] without a penny to his name, and he had a wonderful wife, Dorothy Schweikher. She was a medical technician, and she kept them afloat while he was getting his start. I remember he used to walk to the office and have an orange and a glass of milk for breakfast. He was a self-made man. He achieved a great deal. He went on to be head of the architecture department at Yale University. I don't think that was a happy experience for either of them. He ended up at Carnegie [Institute of Technology].

VALENTINE

So you were working as a draftsman in that office?

FYFE

Yes. Well, then I went to work in Phillip Maher's office.

VALENTINE

As a draftsman?

FYFE

Oh, yes.

VALENTINE

Well, you're moving up from gofer to draftsman.

FYFE

Yes. [laughter]

VALENTINE

Did you know you wanted to be an architect at that point?

FYFE

Sure.

VALENTINE

When did you make that decision?

FYFE

Well, when I was at Antioch, the first job that they assigned-- I didn't know if I wanted to go into very fine printing or be an architect, and they sent me over to be interviewed at a little firm that did beautifully printed books. They handed me a book at the interview and asked me to look at it. I started from back to front, and they knew right away I didn't know anything about books. So for the next co-op job they sent me over to Dayton, Ohio, to be working with McCall's magazine. I started there one day when coming back from Europe was the Antioch student--their former co-op student--who'd been with McCall's for several years. So they wanted him instead of me. That ended my printing career, and I went to be a day laborer in building construction. Special courses were created for me at Antioch--very conservative: I made some beautiful drawings of the Greek and Roman orders, and you know that trip. At the end of two years, I got permission to go to the graduate school at Yale University. They accepted two of us that were not graduate students.

1.3. TAPE NUMBER: II, SIDE ONE (OCTOBER 22, 1993)

VALENTINE

You went from Antioch [College] straight into graduate school at Yale University without a degree from Antioch.

FYFE

Yes, and how did that happen? Well, my adviser at Antioch was a graduate of Yale University and he knew the campus minister there. He wrote him a letter, and I just made application, and I guess my record was enough. I was told later that they were sort of interested to see what somebody coming out of Antioch would be like. Anyway, I got in. And because of my experience drafting in an architect's office, I was able to make pretty good drawings right away.

VALENTINE

What made you choose Yale?

FYFE

At that time, it was still a [École de] Beaux-Arts system, and they were tops in this country. They won more prizes than any of the other schools. I think that probably was partially it, and of course I knew Paul Schweikher had gone there. At the end of my sophomore year I saw a notice on the board that Mr. [Frank Lloyd] Wright was starting his school at Taliesin, so at summertime, Max Mason, who was in my class at Yale, and I drove up to see Mr. Wright, and that's how I got introduced to the Taliesin Fellowship.

VALENTINE

Who was Max Mason?

FYFE

He was the son of the former president of the University of Chicago, Max Mason. At the time, his father was the head of the Rockefeller Foundation in New York. Maybe this isn't the tale you wanted in the story here, but Max and I came back from Spring Green [Wisconsin], and he called his father to say that he wanted to go there. The first question his father asked him was, "What kind of degree will you get?" [laughter] So you can understand that he went back to Yale and, later, I went to Spring Green.

VALENTINE

So you decided not to finish at Yale?

FYFE

Yes.

VALENTINE

You didn't get a degree there either?

FYFE

Oh, no. I never had a degree--not sorry about it.

VALENTINE

What was your first impression when you went up to Taliesin? Did you meet the Wrights?

FYFE

Yes, I think that comes in our next interview. Maybe I should go back to Oak Park [Illinois] and the houses that I knew there.

VALENTINE

Okay.

FYFE

I very much-- I've got them in chronological order here. Mr. Wright's own house and studio [Frank Lloyd Wright Home and Studio] I knew, of course, very well. One time the Art Institute [of Chicago] held classes in Wright's studio. It was standing empty and they rented it, and I took art classes in that studio. I knew the [William H.] Winslow House very well out in River Forest, and the [Chauncey L.] Williams House in River Forest is the one that has some stone around the front entrance. One time Mr. Wright was looking through some pictures and saw that and said, "I tried it, but I'd never do it again." The [Nathan G.] Moore House--I knew it before the fire in 1922, and I just loved it after the fire when Mr. Wright came back and had an opportunity to redo it. I think it's an absolutely stunning display.

VALENTINE

Had you been inside his houses?

FYFE

Well, I'd been inside the Moore House just visiting or going on an errand, so I remember being received in the study, where there was this high, narrow window kind of reminiscent of the ones in Unity Temple with the art glass in them. Another house that I'd been inside was the [Frank W.] Thomas House, which he did back in 1901. And there I missed the front entrance; I went up some stairs, not the front entrance. Again, I was just going on an errand. The [George W.] Smith House, I told you a little while ago, is the house on Home Avenue in Oak Park, a very early house of Mr. Wright's. As a youngster I just knew that it was different, but I didn't know anything about Mr. Wright.

VALENTINE

That was the one near your grandparents' house?

FYFE

Right across the street from my grandparents' house, where I frequently visited. The [Edward R.] Hills House was for Moore's daughter [Mary Moore Hills], and that house was an attractive one. It recently burned down. The Moore House burned and was redone; the Hills House more recently burned and was redone meticulously to its previous state. It's in beautiful condition right now. Then the two Martin houses [the William E. Martin House and the William G. Fricke House, sometimes referred to as the Emma Martin House] I knew very well from the newspaper days. The [Arthur and Grace] Heurtley House eventually Jane Porter purchased. The Porters [Jane Wright and Andrew T.] purchased that, so I was in and out of that a good bit. A very good friend of mine, years later-- It was made into two apartments, and the [Marshal] Jackson family lived there, and I visited them a lot. Unity Temple, we talked about. The [Mrs. Thomas H.] Gale House on Elizabeth Court--I just loved that little house.

VALENTINE

That's a nice one.

FYFE

Yes. It's badly in need of repair, but I think somebody's taking it over now.

VALENTINE

That's what I'd heard.

FYFE

Yes. The [Edwin H.] Cheney House is, I think, one of the nicest houses that Mr. Wright did all on one story. There's a house that's called the [Harry C.] Goodrich House that's two doors north of the Cheney House. The time I knew it, a member of the Unity [Temple] church, Judge Holden, lived there. More than once I've seen Mr. Wright talking to people about the Cheney House in photographs, and you could see the Goodrich House in the background. He never mentions that he also did this two-story house.

VALENTINE

Why?

FYFE

He's very proud of the Cheney House, which is all on one floor, you know, and the whole character design there is so much different. The difference is the Cheney House was seven years after the Goodrich House, and Goodrich is more typical of the community. I love the [Peter A.] Beachy House, which also caught fire recently and is being nicely redone. It's a more heavy-handed design. I've read that [Walter Burley] Griffin is probably responsible for that, but I'll bet you [Marion] Mahony [Griffin] was more responsible than he. She also was supposed to be responsible for the [Frank Wright] Thomas House, which has all the living quarters up high, almost second-floor level for most of the houses around there.

VALENTINE

What do you mean by responsible?

FYFE

Well, I don't remember where I picked up, but somewhere I did, that she was working on the project and made the suggestion. It's the first-- Yes. It was a year ahead of the Heurtley House. The Heurtley House has all of the living quarters on the upper level, but it also has a lot of living spaces on the first floor, the ground floor. The Thomas House is almost entirely up on one level. The [Frederick C.] Robie House I knew in Chicago, and I've been inside of that several times. It just narrowly missed being torn down. They were going to put

a women's dormitory there; a friend of mine was to design the women's dormitory, but they finally did save it, and thank goodness for that.

VALENTINE

That's a wonderful house.

FYFE

The [Avery] Coonley [House, Riverside, Illinois] I just loved. Especially I was taken so much by--because I've never been inside--those tile and incisions that are in plaster. I can't think of the word I want. The Isabel Roberts House [River Forest, Illinois] I knew very well.

VALENTINE

Did you know Isabel Roberts?

FYFE

No, I didn't; just knew the house.

VALENTINE

She worked in Wright's office, in his studio in Oak Park.

FYFE

Yes, she did. I could easily believe that Mr. Wright was trying to outdo himself to design that house. He liked it so well he repeated it two or three times afterwards. Then he did one for [Oscar B.] Balch, Grace Pebbles's husband. [He] was an interior decorator, and Mr. Wright did that shop for him on Lake Street. I never liked the house. And finally, the [Harry S.] Adams House, which was right at the end of Euclid Avenue. I used to live on Euclid Avenue. Euclid Avenue bumped into the Adams House and then jogged around it. That was the last one he did in Oak Park--1913. It was sort of a rerun of all the things he had done before. In total, there were twenty-seven houses in Oak Park and River Forest that I came to know, and the Robie House in Chicago, and the Coonley House in Riverside. So by the time I got to Taliesin I was pretty familiar with Frank Lloyd Wright houses.

VALENTINE

It was just another house to you. [laughter] I love that.

FYFE

When we have our next conference I'll show you a picture of my room there right next to the bell, so when it rang in the morning--

VALENTINE

You were awake for breakfast. Well, why don't we stop there for now, and we'll pick up on your arrival at Taliesin next time.

FYFE

I think I'd like to tell you just a little bit more about the Unity Temple restoration.

VALENTINE

Good.

FYFE

There was a young man in Perkins and Will's office by the name of John Michaels. He came lately to his interest in Frank Lloyd Wright; it began with Lake Street at Scoville Park. There was a fountain there that the sculptor [Richard] Bock had designed and brought to Mr. Wright for his criticism. Mr. Wright poked a pencil through the drawing and said, "There should be a hole there." Now there is a hole there. Mr. Wright has taken credit for designing the fountain [Scoville Park Fountain, Oak Park]. It is an interesting fountain, with curious sculptures around it. Human beings had bubblers up above, and then the water drained down into little pockets for dogs, and from there it went to bigger pockets for the horses. It was done at the time when there were a lot of horses that went by on that street. It was falling into disrepair and was going to be abandoned when John Michaels took an interest in it. He very carefully took--I forget what you call it--but of all the sculptures and formed--

VALENTINE

Impressions?

FYFE

Yes, impressions of them. And eventually it was moved a half a block down to the corner of Oak Park Avenue and Lake Street. He used to bring it into my office and we'd kind of talk together about how to work a little park there. So he literally, single-handedly, saved a bit of Oak Park Wrightiana. In my view, it really was a Bock. That got him interested in Mr. Wright. John and his wife began going to Unity [Temple] church, and that got him interested in Unity Temple, and single-handedly, against great, great pressures, he got people moving towards the restoration of the temple, for it was falling apart. For many, many years, he was the guiding force in getting the [Unity Temple Restoration] Foundation started and organized and the work to go ahead. He died sort of midstream of it, but I doubt-- The [temple] would have been in great disrepair if he hadn't got things started.

VALENTINE

He got the congregation to undertake that?

FYFE

Oh, yes. He had to get the congregation moving on it, and funds. It's terribly expensive. One of the first things he did was to take all of those front doors, which are oak with art glass panels, and have them remade.

VALENTINE

They organized a foundation to do that, but where did the money come from? Did the congregation organize it, or did it come from Wright supporters outside?

FYFE

The foundation is raising funds separate from the church, and about five years ago there was quite a schism developing when the church thought that they weren't-- And you could see there was a delicate situation there. When the foundation would do something, were they doing it for the church or were they doing it for the preservation of the building? They finally worked their differences through and now they have a very good working relationship. One of the things that I hope they'll get around to doing is air-conditioning the building. Now, is that for preservation or is that for the church? And it would be very costly. The heating system initially was designed for hot air, and it just

didn't work. So immediately they switched over to steam, which bangs around the place in a terrible way. And those radiators just are an eyesore. So I hope eventually they'll be able to air-condition.

VALENTINE

Preservation is always a tricky thing with an ongoing institution like Taliesin itself. People are still living there, and you can't freeze it in time. What point do you take it back to? Or do you let it grow organically, or what do you do?

FYFE

In the case of Unity Temple, fortunately, it's always been a church. But in the case of Wright's house and studio [Frank Lloyd Wright Home and Studio], they had a terrible time deciding what they'd take it back to.

VALENTINE

Because he was always changing it.

FYFE

Sure he was. Yes indeed he was. And maybe you've seen this magazine called Fine Homebuilding, I think it is. They had an essay showing how they had to redo the foundations on the studio. And the Herbert Jacobs House in Madison [Wisconsin]--incredible work to restore that.

VALENTINE

In Madison?

FYFE

Yes.

VALENTINE

Yes, yes, they did an incredible amount of work on that.

FYFE

Right. So just amplifying what you said, restoration work is very, very costly.

VALENTINE

Yes.

FYFE

We recently went through a period of fear that the overhangs on Unity Temple were falling down. And supposedly the best engineers in Chicago for this kind of work recommended that they all be torn off and replaced. So we finally got some peer reviews from WASA [Wank Adams Slavin Associates] in New York that did Fallingwater [Liliane S. and Edgar J. Kaufmann House, Mill Run, Pennsylvania]. And they were the first people that came on and said, "That's probably too excessive," and suggested other avenues. And in the course of the next two, three years we did more research but with different engineers. They don't have to be taken off; they're in good condition.

VALENTINE

What is your role in the foundation?

FYFE

Well, I-- What was I called from the beginning? "Consultant." The foundation is basically now more organized and recognized as responsible for expending all funds that come in for restoring the building, which includes taking paint samples. They do now have it back to painted the colors it was originally. And they repaired-- One of the most difficult things is to keep-- Well, I'm going all over the board here. The kind of pebble aggregate on the outside on the cement is unique. It was something Mr. Wright dreamed up and had done. At one point it was all plastered over, and the plaster had to be taken off and the finish restored with Gunitite--close to what was there originally. Incidentally, when I was a kid the building was covered with vines. And they had to be taken off. I heard Mr. Wright more than once say, "Doctors can bury their mistakes but all architects can do is cover their buildings with vines."
[laughter] I never had the courage to ask him if he meant Unity Temple.
[laughter]

VALENTINE

I think he'd be very proud of that one.

FYFE

It's getting to be in a condition that now he might be more proud of it. The last thing I heard before I resigned was that they're finding some of these Gunitite

exterior parts are delaminating around the base. If that's true, again we're into tremendous costs. I really didn't carry my weight on the restoration work because I live so far away. It was very difficult for me to attend meetings, but I tried to keep track of what was happening, and if something came up that seemed to me particularly important then I'd try to get in to Oak Park or Chicago for the meetings. When they thought they were going to tear off all of those overhangs, I attended regularly.

VALENTINE

Well, I'm sure you carry a great deal of weight with your name attached to that cause.

FYFE

Oh, no.

VALENTINE

It gives it credibility.

FYFE

About the one sterling thing I did was when some of the members of the foundation thought that-- Between the lobby and [Unity] House [the parish house portion of Unity Temple] there's this great big piece of plate glass. You could look in. And they thought that had been a later addition, and I said, "Well, it was probably there in 1915." They decided that that was part of the original building.

VALENTINE

Yes.

FYFE

We used to play hide-and-go-seek in the church. I don't know how familiar you are with the plan, but you could be in the gallery and squeak and the person that was "it" would try to catch you. There were about twenty different ways you could get out of there, go down different stairways. It's a marvelous building.

VALENTINE

It is. How much more is there to do on the restoration?

FYFE

It will go on forever. But cosmetically, right now it's in pretty good condition, and by that I mean very close to its original condition. They've instituted some night lighting, so that helps for public relations. They've never been able to get funds from foundations like they could for the [Frank Lloyd Wright] Home and Studio. The greatest impediment to that is that foundations don't like to give money to a church.

VALENTINE

Right.

FYFE

One of the great things about Unity Temple is that it functions so well for a church.

1.4. TAPE NUMBER: III, SIDE ONE (OCTOBER 23, 1993)

VALENTINE

I want to take you back to Yale University and the notice on the bulletin board about the opening at Frank Lloyd Wright's school at Taliesin.

FYFE

Well, it was the first I learned of it. At this time I ought to get into the record that this is sixty years ago--that's more than a half a century. And one of the things that bothers me about this interview is that I can remember just little vignettes and incidents without corroborating experience to put them in the right time and place. I just know that there was a notice on the bulletin board, and it's one of these things issued from Taliesin in that rose-colored type of reproduction that they had. I forget what it's called. And it struck an interested chord in me, and also Max Mason, who was a student in our class at Yale.

VALENTINE

Do you remember what the notice said that intrigued you so much?

FYFE

No. I didn't do as much research as I should for this. Probably I could find it, maybe in the Oak Park Library. I think I had a copy and gave it to the Oak Park Library.

VALENTINE

We can find it.

FYFE

I don't remember what it said. Anyway, we had an interview with Mr. Wright, and I cannot remember where it was or what really took place, except fixed in my memory [is that] as we walked across what he called the hilltop garden he waved his cane in one direction, "And that's where the golf course is going to be," and waved it in a little different direction, "And that's where the tennis courts are going to be." So that leaves the impression in my mind of the kind of schooling that was in his mind at the time. This must have been in June 1932, about. And since then I've learned that in 1931 he began writing to H. Th. Wijdeveld, in Germany I believe, and he was calling it the Chicago Allied Arts and Industries School. He thought that maybe Wijdeveld could be the director, and Mr. Wright would be the chairman. That was on April 6, 1931. By the thirteenth, he was writing another letter, two pages long, and he was calling it the School of Architecture, the Taliesin Fellowship. But he still wanted Mr. Wijdeveld to be the director. By September 5, a one-page letter invites him to come and see the fellowship in Spring Green [Wisconsin]. A few days later he sent a telegram to come after October 10. An undated letter follows that, telling him that the school was being formed: he would still like him to come as director, but the national economy in the United States was very poor, and things were kind of rough. That was followed by a telegram on January 1, 1932, just sending him New Year's greetings. But in February of '32 he sent another two-page letter kind of backing out of asking him to come as a director, and he gave his reasons for that; it basically had to do with the economy--not being able to afford it.

VALENTINE

Who was Wijdeveld?

FYFE

I believe he was a publisher in Germany. I don't know the answer to your question.

VALENTINE

I just wondered who Wright considered qualified to head his school.

FYFE

Maybe he was an architect. It shows to me how Mr. Wright began his thinking about a school there. And of course he knew about the [Arts and] Crafts movement and the idea of designing and then selling their designs to industry for production, and saw that as a possible income source.

VALENTINE

Well, there was a strong movement about that in Germany at that time.

FYFE

Yes, there was. The name escapes me that was the famous one.

VALENTINE

Well, there was the Bauhaus at Weimar [Germany].

FYFE

Oh, exactly.

VALENTINE

The Wiener Werkstaette before that.

FYFE

And Mr. Wright would never admit that that was in the back of his mind, but I'm sure he was acquainted with it. Well, anyway, we went back to Oak Park [Illinois], and I told my folks that I'd like to go there. They were entirely agreeable to it. Max called his father [Max Mason] on the telephone in New York, and the first question his father asked him [was] "What degree will you get?" So you can deduce from that that Max went back to Yale and never came up to the fellowship.

VALENTINE

Did he become an architect?

FYFE

Yes, I think he did, out in California. I kind of lost touch with him. I still have a watercolor that he made while we were on our trip to Spring Green of some barns and the hills of Wisconsin. So I then contacted Mr. Wright to see if I couldn't come up and help get the school ready for opening in October.

VALENTINE

Did you apply as a student, also, and then offer to come early to help prepare the school?

FYFE

Yes. So I landed there soon after Edgar Tafel had arrived. [William] Wesley Peters was there and Yen Liang was there. At mealtime it was like an old medieval board, with the king and queen at one end of the table, and then in descending order, the people who had been there the longest-- Being the last one in, I was at the very tail end.

VALENTINE

Not for long.

FYFE

Not for very long. Right next to Edgar Tafel, I got all kinds of amusing things as asides, and I'm the only one that would hear them.

VALENTINE

Oh, I'm sure. Now, who else was there when you got there besides Wes Peters and Edgar Tafel?

FYFE

Oh, Sam [Samuel] Ratensky, Rudolf Mock, and Jimmy [James] Drought were there. Bob [Robert] Goodall, Karl Jensen, Henry and Else Klumb, Yen Liang, of course Svetlana [Wright] and Iovanna [Wright], and I think that's it. I was at the far end of the table and behind me was a screen, and on the other side of

the screen, the workers. At that time Mr. Wright still had workers working for him. They were getting fed in the next room. We didn't throw our food off to the dogs behind us, but it had very much a medieval aspect about it. Where was I?

VALENTINE

About the hierarchy of sitting at the table.

FYFE

Yes. At first I was put up in the Taliesin house in the guest room for a week or ten days, I guess, which was a beautiful room--beautiful outlook. And I remember a lovely hide: I don't know if it was cowhide or horse--horsehide, probably--which was draped over the foot of the bed. After that I had a room for a while downstairs in the lower level of Taliesin, I guess, until some of the dormitory rooms became available. Eventually, there was an influx of-- There was never all of a sudden several people arriving at one time. They just sort of filtered in. Next I had a room in the tower that surrounded the water tower. That was at the top of the hill between the kitchen and dining room overlooking the inner courtyard. It was a beautiful room with windows on three sides right next to the bell, so when it rang at six or six thirty or whenever it rang, it just about knocked me out of bed. I stayed there for, I suppose, a year or so. Eventually I moved over to Hillside [Home School] before Hillside [Taliesin Fellowship Complex] was prepared, but we fixed up a room in some of the old classrooms on the wing that goes from the assembly room out to the theater [Hillside Playhouse]. And I lived there for a while, even during the winter. We had no heat; we had just a little metal space heater.

VALENTINE

It gets cold there.

FYFE

It did. It does get cold there. We learned eventually how to stoke a fire at night with oak. We had a lot of oak available and slabs left over from getting oak to build with. We learned to build a fire that would still have coals in the

morning so we could get it started up easily. No running water: I remember we'd get a big cup of hot water from the kitchens and use that for shaving.

VALENTINE

How were the rooms assigned?

FYFE

That's a good question, but I don't know the answer.

VALENTINE

Who told you that would be your room?

FYFE

I have a suspicion it was just kind of squatter's rights. Yen Liang had a room in the tower; so did Bill [William Adare] Bernoudy. There were three rooms in the tower. They were the nicest rooms around. I don't remember the answer to your question. It's a good question. There's evidence of the lack of structure: there were never any classes or prescribed work to be done. I found myself doing things that I probably would have been doing if I were back at Yale. I made charcoal drawings of both Jack [John H.] Howe and Wes Peters. I did watercolors. The oak tree in the middle of the council circle turned a beautiful, beautiful red-orange color, and I tried to capture that in watercolors.

VALENTINE

You just did this on your own?

FYFE

Just did it on my own. I tried to study a textbook on the strength of materials. That didn't get very far.

VALENTINE

Were other people doing their own thing too to further their education, or was there any kind of structure at all?

FYFE

Very, very little structure. I can't tell you really too much about what other people were doing. I made a list of the kind of activities that did go on.

VALENTINE

Is this what you expected it to be, or did you expect to have classes?

FYFE

I tried to illustrate what I brought to the situation from my past. Nobody else did watercolors; nobody else did charcoal drawings; nobody else studied textbooks.

VALENTINE

Did you end up teaching anyone else to do it?

FYFE

No.

VALENTINE

Did anyone teach you while you were there?

FYFE

No. Mr. Wright eventually would try to give a talk-- I guess we won't call it a lecture--maybe once a week. His heart wasn't in it. [laughter] And pretty soon it just became a rehash of what we'd heard before. The way to learn anything from Mr. Wright was just to happen to be around when the creative spirit was going in him. I did tell you that quite by accident I happened to be in the studio when he came out and sat down at somebody else's drawing board. On a topographical map, he did the new [Malcolm E. and Nancy] Willey [House] in [Minneapolis] Minnesota. Before he put pencil to paper Mr. Wright had the building clearly in his mind. The whole house. And he couldn't get it out in pencil. He couldn't get it out fast enough. The rest of us would design--we'd make a plan, we'd make some sections, we'd make elevations, and then we tried to get them all to fit together. The only other person I know who had this ability to see in three dimensions before he started drawing was Eero Saarinen. He was at Yale when I was there, and when we were doing a project, he inevitably started with either a perspective or an isometric and then worked out from that. Mr. Wright was doing this on a plan--topographical

plan--but up in the edges he'd put a little detail here or a sketch there. When he got all through, my best guess is that it might have taken the better part of the hour, maybe more. He used that phrase--you've seen it in print lots of times--that he just shakes it out of his sleeves. But he was pleased with what he'd done.

VALENTINE

Did he make any changes after that, or was that pretty much it?

FYFE

That was very much it. I can't tell you how the drawings got made or who was assigned to do them, but it did eventually--

VALENTINE

Did you work on any of the drawings?

FYFE

Not on that house, no. My own drafting-- I did some for Alden Dow. He brought three or four houses in to do for Midland, Michigan. I helped draft on those.

VALENTINE

How long would Wright spend thinking about an idea before he was able to draw it--shake it out of his sleeve?

FYFE

I have no real knowledge, but it's common knowledge, I think, that these things would germinate in his mind until he had it all clear. Have you seen his initial sketch for Fallingwater [Liliane S. and Edgar J. Kaufmann House, Mill Run, Pennsylvania]? It's a very small and simple sketch.

VALENTINE

But it's all there.

FYFE

Exactly. Yes, indeed. Something I can't reconcile with a little bit of the literature that I've seen-- When Florida [Southern College, Lakeland, Florida]

came, I thought it came to Mr. Wright while I was still there--that Mr. Wright just put it on a back burner in his mind, just started thinking about it. But nothing I've ever read indicated that it came in 1934. See, I left in 1934, but I still have the belief that he had started thinking about it then.

VALENTINE

Let me ask you before we leave the subject about having Saarinen at Yale, what the differences were between working with Eero Saarinen and working with Frank Lloyd Wright.

FYFE

Well, you understand that Saarinen was a student. We were in the last vestiges of the--oh, I can't think of the name of it--kind of training based on the system in France [École de Beaux-Arts]. So there are a lot of French words. You go en loge for a day: you're handed a program, and you have to devise a solution for it in one day. Depending upon the complexity of the program, you might have that "project" to work out in maybe three weeks or three months, depending on how complex it was. Where we saw Eero operating, because he skipped freshman year and just popped right into the sophomore class, was en loge. As I said before--and I still have to do it--I have to work from a plan and sections. Of course, they imply elevations, but it's still a grinding out of all these details. I forget what the question was, but did I answer it? [laughter]

VALENTINE

Yes, I think so. I think we're starting to digress a little bit. Getting back to when you first arrived at Taliesin and how Wright prepared for the school, what were your goals? What did you want to accomplish in the time that you spent there?

FYFE

I arrived without finding any sense of a formalized school, as I tried to indicate, and rather quickly fell into just extemporizing daily on my own. Or sometimes we'd be sent out to do other things. I started to run down a list of activities that were included. Gardening was one--that came more or less later; gathering wood, and I can remember going out with a team and wagon. Mr. Wright had purchased oak forests to be sawn up into wood for building. The

large logs would be brought to Hillside, where they had a big sawmill. It developed a huge dune of sawdust. But when we went out for wood, it was for the smaller limbs for burning. Taliesin itself had thirteen or fourteen fireplaces and three or four boilers, and they were all being stoked with wood-oak, which was very good firewood. And the quarrying stone you've surely read about. There were two quarries. One was limestone, the other was sandstone: sandstone for Hillside and limestone for Taliesin.

VALENTINE

How did you learn to do that? Who showed you?

FYFE

You just were given chisels and hand sledges. You didn't have to be taught that. You just did it. Some of the limestone was burned in a huge kiln in the side of a hill--I guess it was six to eight feet high--stoked with oak branches. We burned the limestone so that it could be slaked for plaster and stucco. We got sand from the Wisconsin River. There was a certain amount of carpentry going on by the apprentices, and that was difficult because the wood wasn't really cured. I remember I was trying to make a built-in table one time at Hillside, and Mr. Wright came by and indicated he didn't think I was going to be a very good carpenter. But with that kind of wood it was very difficult. I was an apprentice to a plumber for a while. Again, I can visualize this very distinctly, but I can't remember where we were doing it. I can visualize the plumber himself. I learned how to cut threads in pipe and make the connections, but I don't know if it was Hillside or the basement of Taliesin. This bothers me not to be able to give very complete details. We did masonry, of course, working with the stone. I was one of the first persons to do the projections of movies every Saturday and Sunday. We had movies to show in the theater; eventually two of us did that. There was a certain amount of drafting going on. Bob Goodall was doing a beautiful set of drawings for changing the old Queen Anne house that Mr. Wright had early on done for his two aunts [Jane and Nell Lloyd Jones] for their Hillside Home School. Mary Ellen Chase wrote a book called *A Goodly Fellowship*, which has a beautiful story about the school ["The Hillside Home School"]. She eventually taught at Smith College, I believe, and she came out to teach in the sisters' school. She describes her two or three years--

VALENTINE

Oh yes, I remember.

FYFE

Anyway, Bob was making a wonderful set of drawings, and I just loved the way it was shaping up. Building had already begun on the remodeling. And I think after I left, Mr. Wright had it torn down, much to my anguish because I was liking-- I think, as I told you, it recalled the kind of architecture I had grown up with and known in Oak Park. I think I resonated to that. Mr. Wright would take pleasure in messing up Bob's drawings.

VALENTINE

Pleasure?

FYFE

Well, yes. He would sort of systematically do it. So finally Bob had two sets of drawings: when Mr. Wright came around he pulled out a particular set, and when he wasn't around he worked on the ones he really wanted to keep neat and fine. I think what Mr. Wright was trying to demonstrate was that architecture was something more than just a drawing. It's the only thing-- I think that's the best light I can put on it. Also, Bob, on his drafting table, had an old cardboard box of English Oval cigarettes. Now, they were really fancy cigarettes. Mr. Wright would come and, oh, he's going to have one of those, and he'd open it up. All Bob did was keep his cigarette ashes in it. It took Mr. Wright two or three times before he stopped biting on nothing. [laughter] There was kitchen duty. I never got involved in that, but lots of kitchen duty showed up eventually. And farming-- I at one time had to do shearing the sheep. And another time-- I know I worked with the horses because there are photographs of me sitting up on an old carriage in a Prince Albert coat and a top hat. How I got a Prince Albert coat and a top hat up in Spring Green, I don't know. Possibly I brought them from Oak Park. Anyway, I was driving the horses. When we went out to the woods for cutting up wood, I drove a team of horses out for that. I can remember coming back once driving into the wind, and we were just frozen. This was winter work. It was cold. A very strong wind made it terrible. I can't remember where the horses were stalled. I can't remember taking care of them. I just know that I did a lot of work with the

horses. One time I was returning from Hillside to Taliesin and there on the side of the hill, halfway up before Tanyderi [Andrew T. Porter House], there was a dead horse. It was there a couple of days, and nobody's doing anything about it. So I just undertook to dig a hole and bury it. So much for farming.

VALENTINE

Who made these assignments for farming or horse care or kitchen duty?

FYFE

*[Assignments were regularly made to individuals to present a formal introduction of the Sunday afternoon public showing of the movie of the week, and from time to time apprentices were asked to write for "At Taliesin," a column appearing in the local newspapers.] There were sporadic attempts to have a person in charge who would make some of the assignments.

VALENTINE

Is that the "boss system"? The "supervisor of the fortnight"?

FYFE

Pardon me?

VALENTINE

The boss system that's been described?

FYFE

Well, somebody would be responsible for sending us out to different jobs, depending on what was needing to be done or what the current emergency was. We were very often just leaping from emergency to emergency--pushing the truck and stuff like that. After I left, I understand that that system was more regularized and operated much better. I think the person, the leader--I don't know what they were called--would be appointed for a two-week stint. Probably it even included taking care of the services at the chapel on Sunday, things of that sort, as well as duties and work around the house. I'm just about to the bottom of my list here. At one point Mr. Wright called me: I was called into the house. I forget whether Mrs. [Olgivanna Milanoff] Wright was there or not, but Mr. Wright brought out a book called The Book of Tea by [Kakuzo Okakura]. Do you know that little book? Beautiful book.

VALENTINE

Uh-huh.

FYFE

There's a chapter on making tea. So he used that as a springboard to suggest that I-- And maybe there was somebody else involved, because I think immediately two of us were responsible for making tea and serving it in the council ring.

VALENTINE

So that was the beginning of the tea.

FYFE

That was the beginning of the tea, yes.

VALENTINE

They still have teatime at Taliesin.

FYFE

They still have--

VALENTINE

Yes, they do. It's very important.

FYFE

Yes, it comes at maybe four o'clock. It comes at the close of a really hard workday, and it's an interval of contemplation--anyway, a change of pace. It was a great idea. But The Book of Tea told about watching how the bubbles come, so for a few days we were trying to make it according to The Book of Tea prescription. That didn't last very long.

VALENTINE

Well, it makes an architectural experience.

FYFE

Yes. And it introduced us to the book. I have given at least a dozen books to friends who loved it. So that's a rundown on the kind of activities I can remember.

VALENTINE

What was a typical day like? How regulated was it?

FYFE

Well, the most regular thing was the morning bell.

VALENTINE

Which you heard first.

FYFE

I don't know whether it was six o'clock or six thirty, and then breakfast would be served for a while. That largely was half a dozen different cold cereals that you could choose from and dried fruit--apricots, peaches, and prunes--and the milk was from our own dairy herd, although I never got involved with the dairy herd. After that, people kind of filtered back to the [Hillside Drafting] Studio. If it was a cold day, there'd be somebody to build a fire there, and we'd stand around warming up to that. In the studio-- Behind the drafting studio was a workshop where Manuel Sandoval had started a model of San Marcos in the Desert. Beautiful model, just extremely beautiful, and very detailed. Lots of work went into that--people helping him making parts that could go into that model. I don't have a very clear picture of a typical day. I know that a group of us responded when the weather was right--it would be after the winter, of course--to gardening. I think many of the people who came to Taliesin came because of Mr. Wright and Mr. Wright's architecture. They would invariably want to be associated with the studio and the work in the studio and looked down on some of us who were working out in the gardens. But this is a little bit off the track of what we've been talking about. Finis Farr, in his story about Mr. Wright, pointed out--and I think it's true--Mr. Wright was eager to have the apprentices-- Before they could do, they had to be somebody. So Mr. Wright was anxious that we were whole persons, and good, whole persons would produce good, whole architecture. You probably read about it: we used to sing frequently, to the tune of "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring," "Joy in work is

man's desiring." We could sing it well. I don't think many of the apprentices really took it to heart because implicit in that is that any work is fine and is a good thing. Those of us who were sort of the mainstay in the garden crew felt that this was work that needed to be done for the community and were willing to take it on and do it. At least I know I did. A thing happened to me that might-- While I was there my favorite aunt [Elizabeth Beye] died, and the only surcease that was open to me was to go out into the garden. I remember crawling on my hands and knees in the friable dirt, and I was going under squash plants: plants that produce great big leaves. The stems came out of the ground about an inch in diameter, and then they tapered up into a very small piece and spread out in huge leaves. On my hands and knees I saw a whole new world--a vegetative world I think somewhat indicative of how I was pleased to be working in the ground in the farming end of it. Garnering wood took an awful lot of labor in wintertime just to keep the fires going. Bill [William] Deknatel's father had some kind of manufacturing business, and he was trying to design-- What do you call these little things you put a cup of coffee--?

VALENTINE

Coaster?

FYFE

Yes, coaster--a design that could be manufactured in great quantities for sale. It was sort of a Mondrian type of design, and I don't think it ever went anywhere, but he was active in that for some time. Fred [Frederick] Langhorst got himself into sculpturing in stone, and he spent a lot of time on that. Gerry [Geraldine E.] Deknatel was working on the model. Again, I can't give you a very clear image of what a day at Taliesin involved.

VALENTINE

Did people more or less self-select to do these things they were interested in, or were they encouraged or assigned?

FYFE

I think there was a modicum of encouragement--very little assigning, and that sort of left people to devise their own way of doing things.

VALENTINE

Did they rotate the gardening and the household work or was it always the same group?

FYFE

Well, different people got assigned to the gardening. There were four or five of us that were regulars in the garden. Another thing that seems to me to have been part of the Wrights' plan as the years went by is this sense of community. As I indicated a moment ago, most of the people were there with a very individualistic attitude, wanting to know how to design buildings and to learn this from Mr. Wright. This didn't foster any real sense of interaction between people for developing community. I've often wondered how much as the years went by, with the aid and help of Mrs. Wright--who had been to [Georges] Gurdjieff's school [Institute for the Harmonic Development of Man, Fontainebleau, France] or whatever it was in Paris--he moved away from his initial sense of a school to just apprenticeship: if he saw this as an object lesson for his Broadacre City, the sense of community. Two of his books came out, I think, during 1932 while I was still there: *The Disappearing City* and his first autobiography [*An Autobiography: Frank Lloyd Wright*]. Then *The Disappearing City* was revised and enlarged, I think, later on. I don't have any way of knowing but I rather suspect that he was beginning to see the fellowship of people as a kind of a prototype or experimental unit for his Broadacre City. Anyway, it became apparent to me that the school I envisioned when I first came there--and obviously, as I tried to indicate before, was in the back of Mr. Wright's mind when I first started--was not going to eventuate.

VALENTINE

When did you come to that realization? Or when did Wright come to that realization?

FYFE

Well, I don't think either of us could say yesterday we didn't and today we did.

VALENTINE

Early on?

FYFE

You've heard about the Sunday evening sessions in that wonderful living room; it's an absolutely marvelous room. Sophie [Breslau] was a singer and a friend of Mrs. Wright's. She sang to us in that room, and you just absorbed it through your pores. The music was all around you. In later life, when I got into designing auditoriums, I had that very much in my mind, and I tried to make the rooms where music was to be created rooms where the hearer could have the sense of being immersed in the sound. The professors would call it "presence." To me it just is-- I can't think of the word I want.

VALENTINE

When did those Sunday evening concerts begin?

FYFE

They weren't always concerts. The music developed mostly after I left. They had Svetlana playing the violin, and some of the others. They imported some good musicians. But I tried while I was there to write a song and get a mock music theme going just playing on tin pans and stuff like that. There wasn't a heck of a lot of music, but this one singer who came to visit Olgivanna was an exception. Often it was a dialogue between Mr. Wright and a couple of professors who would come out from the University of Chicago. Again, the names escape me. It was very interesting just to listen in on them. I'm sure that we bothered Mrs. Wright terribly; the costumes that we did or didn't wear around the place, particularly in the summer. But Sunday evening we were supposed to dress up, and I understand lately that they still have formal wear on Sunday. Seems incongruous for the champion of freedom, but--

VALENTINE

I was going to ask you about that.

FYFE

I guess Mr. Wright had his share of inconsistencies.

VALENTINE

We all do. But there's a lot of irony there with the common man and the regulation of behavior--the freedom and independence that's being fostered at the same time there's a lot of control.

FYFE

Arbitrary control as it came from Mrs. Wright--it probably was justified, I think, most of the time.

VALENTINE

What kinds of regulations did she impose?

FYFE

I don't know, and while I was there it was never direct from her. It would only be as she influenced Mr. Wright. I had very little contact with Mrs. Wright. I can remember the incident where some of us drove into Madison [Wisconsin] to beat up on Mr. [C. R.] Sechrest.

VALENTINE

I want to talk about that.

FYFE

Okay.

1.5. TAPE NUMBER: III, SIDE TWO (OCTOBER 23, 1993)

VALENTINE

We should begin by explaining the background to that incident--how Mr. Sechrest had irritated you.

FYFE

I'd better get my notes out for that one. In November of 1932--or it would be late October--Mr. Wright was in Madison, where he was attacked by a man by the name of Sechrest who had been a carpenter working for Mr. Wright previously. Sechrest wanted to collect money that Mr. Wright owed him; I don't think it was very much. They had an altercation that turned into fisticuffs apparently right out in the street in Madison. Mr. Wright wrote about that quite luridly in his autobiography. He appeared back at Taliesin with a big

bandage on his nose--claimed to have had his nose broken. So some of the senior associates, men that had been there longer--I came upon them in the dormitory--were planning to go into Madison to take care of Mr. Sechrest. Karl Jensen, Rudolph Mock, and Sam Ratensky were involved, and I apparently volunteered to go with them.

VALENTINE

Wes Peters was in on this too, wasn't he?

FYFE

Oh, yes. Wes Peters, sure. I'm not very big, and I certainly wasn't one of the old-timers there, but they apparently let me go. My memory of my intention was to be the pacific one and calm them down a little. It was kind of a rainy day, and we got to Madison eventually, about forty miles away--certainly time enough to change our minds, but nobody was willing to admit to a change of heart. The site was an apartment house where we had to go up narrow stairs and maybe a switchback or two. I think the Sechrests lived on the second floor. The door was open, ajar a little bit, and words were exchanged, but no loud voices. So we're about to retreat when I thought, "What the heck," and I led out a punch towards Mr. Sechrest. I don't think it landed but--

VALENTINE

You instigated it? The punching?

FYFE

Yes. I'm the great pacifist but, well, I just can't imagine something not coming to some sort of a conclusion, I suppose. Anyway, we retreated, and a few days later I was working at one of the stone quarries when one of the apprentices rushed up and said that a deputy sheriff was at Taliesin looking for me. So I went over, and yes, the sheriff had sent out a deputy to pick up the five of us. We were taken into the Dane County Jail. There we stayed for four or five days at least. What I can remember well is that I attended a religious service on Wednesday night and again on Sunday, so it was at least that span of time. The five of us were separated in the jail so we had no communication. It was a beautiful jail. Clean and sunny on sunny days. I've since heard people describe that jail today as a quagmire of dirt and filth. But in those days it was a very

respectable place to be. We went to court, and the first session wasn't conclusive. A young attorney in Madison was pleading our case for us. The case was rested for a while until they got an experienced attorney--someone who knew the ropes in Madison. When we came back into court, our case was just a mild one with a few fines made.

VALENTINE

What was the damage to Sechrest?

FYFE

None.

VALENTINE

What about the black snake whip that was allegedly involved?

FYFE

Karl Jensen did carry a whip, but I think the black snake was a bit of journalism, and it was never used. He just had it, held it, but nobody did anything to Mr. Sechrest at all. It got in the New York Times, apparently, either from Sechrest or a figment of the imagination of the reporter. I know what happened because I was there. It doesn't coincide with what the Times had, and it certainly doesn't coincide with Mr. Wright's report in his autobiography. It was dumb.

VALENTINE

Youth.

FYFE

Yes.

VALENTINE

What about when it went to trial? You said your father [James Lincoln Fyfe] was in the back of the courtroom.

FYFE

When we were moved from the jail to the courtroom, at the end of the corridor I could see my father just hovering. I don't know how he got word of

it; I can't imagine. I never talked to him about it. I guess he just was going to be sure that nothing drastic happened. When nothing drastic did happen, why, he just must have gone back to Chicago.

VALENTINE

And you never spoke about it?

FYFE

No. That's typical Fyfeism.

VALENTINE

He's always there to support you, but you didn't talk about it.

FYFE

Exactly. What else shall we talk about?

VALENTINE

You mentioned earlier the senior apprentices and the junior apprentices. How did that division work? How did you move from one group to another?

FYFE

It wasn't an assignment. "Senior" was just for those who were in attendance before the influx of new apprentices for the fellowship. It did include the names that I read to you before. I think there's some question whether Yen Liang was the first apprentice or Bill Peters, and then Edgar [Tafel] and myself, and after that--I forget the date that it was supposed to officially open--several other people came.

VALENTINE

So you weren't a junior very long. You were a senior.

FYFE

No, I was a senior at Perkins and Will. I don't know. [laughter]

VALENTINE

You weren't a senior apprentice?

FYFE

No.

VALENTINE

But you're one of the charter members of the fellowship.

FYFE

Oh yes, but so were twenty other people.

VALENTINE

Was there any kind of animosity or resentment from one group to another?

FYFE

Not that I was aware of. There may have been. There was no one-on-one access to Mr. Wright, and of course, that's why most of the people were there. One occasion that I had with Mr. Wright, I came out onto the hilltop court, and we were sitting at the edge of the terrace around the council ring looking off towards the east as the sun was setting behind us. He unburdened himself to me, and I never knew why. But he was kind of lonesome, I think. The burden of what he was saying was that he just wondered why his peers didn't accept him. He felt very sad for himself on that score. Another time I met him on the side of the Taliesin hill. The snow was melting, and we both stood in running water for a while. I have to give a little background to this. Svetlana, Olgivanna's daughter, was up in the dormitory--it was largely the men's dormitory--one evening, and the telephone on the corridor wall rang and she was unceremoniously told to get the heck back down to home base. That seemed to me kind of an infringement on her freedom. She was just being friendly, talking with a whole bunch of us. I said as much to Mr. Wright while we were standing there, the water trickling down the side of the hill. The water was coming from the septic tank, actually. [laughter] Neither of us changed each other's mind, but it was one of the few occasions that I had a one-on-one discussion. In retrospect, I think I can see why he was worried--well, concerned. But I would hazard a guess that Olgivanna put him up to it. Maybe Olgivanna called her; I don't really know.

VALENTINE

Did he accept criticism from the apprentices? Or did he ask what you thought about things?

FYFE

No, I don't think he did very much. I've read letters that Bob [Robert F.] Bishop wrote to his bride or bride-to-be in which Bob seemed to have several one-on-one conversations with Mr. Wright. I didn't know of anybody else having any. Of course his secretary did, and eventually Gene [Eugene] Masselink. Masselink was very close to him. Bob had come on, I think, before the apprenticeship had started. I can't be sure when he came, but he was especially taken on to work his way through without paying tuition. He felt very responsible about that, and he was a very good worker--excellent worker. He worked a lot over at Hillside so we didn't have too much contact--mostly at mealtime. Bob was one of the few people I respected. I had a great deal of respect for him. Jack [John H.] Howe also was taken on in a similar fashion without paying full tuition. He was younger than most of us; I think he was just out of high school. He worked around the home, keeping it clean and building the fires. Every morning he built the fire in the master bedroom--things like that. Long after I left, I learned he became sort of chief draftsman in the drafting room. When I was still there, he was not involved in any of the drafting or any of the-- He just didn't enter into the work of any group, if there was a group.

VALENTINE

How much tuition were you paying?

FYFE

I don't remember if it was \$125 or \$165 for a term. I think we paid for the first two terms and then stopped paying.

VALENTINE

You paid for two terms and then stopped paying?

FYFE

Mr. Wright said it would be all right to stay on.

VALENTINE

At what point did you start getting paid?

FYFE

I never got paid.

VALENTINE

Did you get an allowance or were you in any way compensated?

FYFE

Room and board. I was looking--very anxiously looking--to develop a community aspect. So my disappointment arose from the fact that it was neither the school I had expected it to be--and then I was perfectly willing to accept the apprenticeship format--but I wasn't seeing a community developing where there was a focus for community. It always was sort of an individual, one-on-one. Very definitely some people were anti-communal. I remember-- I wouldn't give you the name if I remembered it, but I remember one fellow who just wouldn't take his share in keeping the communal bathroom clean. And so I finally told him if he didn't, why, I'd punch him in the nose. [laughter]

VALENTINE

You're a real pacifist. How were problems like that dealt with--people who weren't pulling their weight or not contributing enough?

FYFE

Talking about the development of the Hillside buildings, I told you how delighted I was with the way the old Queen Anne house [Hillside Home School] was shaping up. But the drafting room had just been built with green oak. At the end of the first year, a very long eave that extended all the way around that building had waves like that. Let the record show that my hands are going up and down like a wave. Mr. Wright must have an arrangement with somebody up above: wherever that eave was low, he had it propped up, and lo and behold, before I left a year later, the eave was nice and straight. Day lighting for the drafting room comes from a sawtooth roof with glazing on the north side. There had to be a little ridge at the middle of each one of those valleys, a crocket to deflect rainwater to the sides. Mr. Wright had the idea, I guess to save materials, that we would just mix mud, carry it up there, and

shape those valleys so that the water would run off. That was a big operation. I used to have a photograph of Louise Dees-Porch and Svetlana--they were about the same size and did a lot of things together--carrying mud. Mud had to be made in a big trough--where we slaked lime--and carried in buckets onto the roof. It seemed like a dumb idea then. I don't know how it worked out; maybe it worked out all right. It certainly added a big weight load on those trusses. Maybe Mr. Wright was testing his trusses. That's a beautiful room with those beautiful trusses. I'll speak a little bit about the fireplace that was at the far north end of the room. Do you remember my describing the fireplaces in the River Forest Tennis Club yesterday? This was planned as a larger version of those fireplaces. On either side were benches facing each other. I happened to be around when Mr. Wright was at the drafting table and he redesigned the fireplace at an angle, making the seating come out at an angle. He got up with an expression of elation, something like "Wasn't that great." I believe this was an example of his moving away from ordinary symmetry and rectilinear plans, and a beginning of thinking and planning more freely in what he called "occult symmetry." Let me read to you what he wrote in his second autobiography [An Autobiography] on page 333. Obvious symmetry would claim too much. I find the too obvious wearies the eye too soon, stultifies imagination. Obvious symmetry usually closes the episode before it begins. There would be nothing but the occult symmetry in the new San Marcos desert. That's where he was getting onto the idea. I had to look up the word "occult" to understand his use of it, but it means-- I can't remember exactly what the dictionary says, but it includes "mysterious." It seems to me that one of the great aspects of Mr. Wright's architecture is the mystery that exists therein. Another example of angularity, it seems to me, is the terrace outside of the Willey House. The Willey House itself is all rectilinear, but the terrace in front goes off at an angle. Thereafter, you find the angle interposed in so much of his work--rearranging seating in the little theater, for example. Another opportunity when I happened to be around as Mr. Wright was doing a creative thing: we'd come down from the theater, and he was sitting at a drafting table--Bob [Robert K.] Mosher's--and he had asked Bob to design a lamp for the theater. He sat down and didn't say to Bob that his design wasn't good--it wasn't that good, I could tell that--he just began designing. Basically it was a cube--a sort of box open at top and bottom--around the light source itself. Above it and below it were plywood shelves that would be painted light

blue to reflect the light. There was a series of half a dozen of these boxes, one above the other, on a hanging support. I thought they were the most beautiful things in that theater. It was a revelation to see how it was apparently all in his mind when he sat down at the drawing board.

VALENTINE

Was it in any way related to the design Bob had come up with?

FYFE

No. Totally new.

VALENTINE

You have a picture of that somewhere that you were showing me earlier.

FYFE

Well, it shows up in some of the photographs--

VALENTINE

I just wanted to give a reference on the tape in case someone wanted to look at it.

FYFE

--of the theater in that first Architectural Forum presentation [Architectural Forum, January 1938]. Thereafter, Mr. Wright thought he improved on the lamps. There were two, one at each end of the room, and they became much larger, more elaborate. To my way of seeing, these initial ones, in their simplicity, made a tremendous statement with the least effort. I just loved them. I tried to make a companion lamp based on those hanging lights. There was a stairway leading from the upper level to the lower level to get into the theater, and it's a place where we needed to have a lamp. Failed miserably. I was going to have a box hiding the lamp and light reflected by a plane above. The problem of holding that sheet above and making it so that you could replace the bulb when it burned out was beyond me. I never really got it. Another instance of creativity that happened while I was there, but I was not party to it at all-- I think Mrs. Wright was responsible for the curtains that were used in the first theater. They were beautiful. As Mr. Wright revised the theater, it became more and more complex. The curtains themselves

eventually had to be increased in height. That was accomplished by a series of strings that held them in place. It worked out all right because you still saw those beautiful curtains. *[I recall a comment of Mr. Wright's that speaks to his creativity and possibly to client relations. I suspect in Mrs. Richard Lloyd Jones Mr. Wright may have met his match, for his comment indicated that the original concept for the [Richard Lloyd] Jones House in [Tulsa] Oklahoma was not for the square piers as built, but for the block piers to be diamond shaped by turning the piers 45 degrees off the grid lines. Together with the alternating glazed panels, the piers formed more of a screen than a wall. Mr. Wright's comment sounded regretful, and there's no doubt in my mind the effect of the early plans would have been wonderful, but Mrs. Jones had her way, with the piers squared to the lines of the plan.]* Fyfe added the following bracketed section during his review of the transcript.

VALENTINE

Did the gift box idea--was that in existence while you were there?

FYFE

No, not even anything like it.

VALENTINE

Was there any kind of marking of Christmas or Wright's birthday?

FYFE

He loved parties. The very first Halloween, we had a grand party. Each of us was to come in costume. I don't remember what most people did; maybe most people had to extemporize anyway to make some sort of a costume. There was one person in a clown's costume that was sitting in a chair and could blink the eyes, apparently underneath, by pulling strings. Mr. Wright couldn't guess who it was. That really irritated him. He kept coming to ask, "Who are you?" It turned out to be John Lloyd Wright, his son. The Wrights just all loved parties and picnics and that sort of thing. We'd go-- It's well documented how many picnics we'd go out on in good weather. They were a chore to get the food and everything ready and to carry great big cans of milk. Mr. Wright would always find someplace where we had to climb a hill. Once you got there it was worth the effort. It was just great. We did get into a little

bit of regularity by going to the chapel on Sundays, and usually we'd have speakers. Sometimes, very rarely, an apprentice would speak, but I think later on it became a routine thing for the apprentices to take charge. Edgar Tafel was always there playing on the harmonium-- Is that what you call these organs where you have to pump with your feet? If you listened carefully, every once in a while he'd be playing a popular song, but playing it with the rhythm of a hymn. It sounded very much like Sunday school or church music, but it would be--

VALENTINE

That's perfect Edgar Tafel.

FYFE

Exactly.

VALENTINE

What was his costume at the Halloween party, do you remember?

FYFE

No, I don't remember. I do recall--it was either that Halloween or the next-- there was a competition among the apprentices to make a pumpkin. So most of us went out to the field where we'd planted them and brought in nice, big round ones or elongated ones. A few--two or three of the creative people-- went out and found ones that were squashed or had crazy shapes. And they proved to be the best ones, of course. Again, going back to the point I made earlier, my sense as I arrived at the school was when Christmas holiday came, you just went home for the holidays. So I went home for the holidays. I think the Wrights were not happy with that. They felt that we were their chickabiddies and we ought to stay around Taliesin.

VALENTINE

You were home.

FYFE

I guess they had a very nice Christmas at Taliesin. Another thing happened when my mother [Hannah Christabel Beye Fyfe] had written something to Mrs. Wright--I don't recall the occasion for it--and she did not put a salutation

on it: "Dear Mrs. Wright." Both Mr. and Mrs. Wright charged out--I guess I was in the studio--and wanted to know how did my mother write letters. Didn't she use a salutation or something like that? I interpreted that Mrs. Wright thought she had been affronted, and I said my mother was unique; she did things differently and very easily could write a letter without a salutation.

VALENTINE

So the form was more important than the content.

FYFE

Sure. You know this isn't too long after much of the world had turned on the Wrights.

VALENTINE

Particularly Oak Park.

FYFE

Although I was never aware of it in Oak Park. Let me see-- And I was away after 1928; I was away at college. I have five issues of the Saturday Evening Post. Is it Finis Farr--was writing about Mr. Wright. It's very interesting, because to read it in the Saturday Evening Post, to see what was current at the same time-- If Jack [John O. Holzhueter] would like to have them, he may.

VALENTINE

I'm sure he'll grab them.

FYFE

Okay. And then I've seen references to other picnics and parties that they've had at Taliesin. And I mentioned to you that Mrs. [Jane Wright] Porter's sister [Maginel Wright Barney] was often eager to have that same kind of interaction. Incidentally, going back to drafting, that was one of the jobs that Jane Porter asked me to do--some remodeling to the lower level of Tanyderi. It was a very simple thing to do: just opened it with French doors so the lower level came out into a terrace. Didn't have to move much earth to do it, just put a little framework over the-- I forget what you call it--trellis. I had drawn a perspective to show Mrs. Porter, and I showed it to Mr. Wright. His only comment was--there was a shadow that came across the foreground that led

up to the building--"That's a nice shadow." I think he was incensed that his sister didn't have him do it. Early on--this was an assignment--we were all to do an abstraction in colored pencils. I have a habit when I'm drafting of sharpening a pencil and getting a very fine point on it by scratching it on a piece of scrap paper. So with all the different colors I was doing that on the side. Mr. Wright came by and said he thought the side scratches looked better than the abstraction. Generally speaking, I came to the conclusion you could sum Mr. Wright up as a benevolent authoritarian, to use Grant Manson's phrase. With one exception, I'd never seen him really tie into any of us: that exception came when--again, I can't recall his name so it's just as well, I guess-

VALENTINE

Doesn't matter who.

FYFE

--had designed a built-in seat for the apprentices' dining room alongside the fireplace. It would have been something that might have come out of one of Mies van der Rohe's classes. Very straightforward, very simple, structurally sound--just a piece of plywood on some cantilevered supports. Mr. Wright was piqued because it was so out of keeping with anything else around Taliesin. It was a totally different grammar of design. That's the only time I saw him take out after any of the apprentices, and heaven knows we gave him cause.

VALENTINE

Did you?

FYFE

Yes. I remember one time the farming group had a harvest of onions. In our innocence we knew that they had to be dried, so we took them around to this one roof over the hog pen, a roof that came close to the grade--huge roof--and we just laid the onions out there in the sunshine. When we finally got back they were all cooked. So there went the onion harvest. [laughter]

VALENTINE

And what was the reaction? [laughter]

FYFE

None. We were never taken to task for it. I have three things in my notes here. Another time we were making a display--some of the draftsmen in the studio--to be shown in Madison. I am one of the world's worst spellers, and on every drawing where we had an entrance, I spelled entrance as "enterence." Nobody discovered it until the display was hung. Mr. Wright never said a word about it. Another time we burned out a row of sumac Mr. Wright was trying to get established--no harsh recrimination.

VALENTINE

How did people respond to criticism from him-- like that one instance with the chair, or someone looking at a drawing?

FYFE

You mean the bench?

VALENTINE

Right. Or his criticism of your drawing or the idea behind it or the lamp?

FYFE

I agreed with him. It didn't bother me. I just don't remember his ever taking out or abusing anyone or making anyone feel put down.

VALENTINE

Did he make you feel good? Did he hand out a lot of praise?

FYFE

No, I don't think so.

VALENTINE

How were discipline problems taken care of?

FYFE

I think there were very few occasions when they were needed. When we came back from Madison and being in jail, as a reward we were taken into the living room, and Mrs. Wright let us taste her first wines. She was good at

making wines from dandelions and grapes and all kinds of things like that, so it was a great privilege to be able to taste her new wines. I cannot recall an instance of someone being asked to leave Taliesin. Of course we were all on notice that we were there at their pleasure. I think if there were occasions that needed some action taken, it was done without any general attention.

VALENTINE

Would he dismiss you or would she?

FYFE

I've never been party to it; I don't know.

VALENTINE

How much gossip was there going on among the apprentices--or factionalism or groups or jealousies--?

FYFE

Again, I tend to be kind of innocent in that respect. I'm not aware of any. As I alluded to earlier, those of us that went out gardening and farming were looked down upon. Speaking for myself and for some of the others who were in that more intimate group who got to know each other very well, I think I was closer to the essence of what the fellowship was all about than those who were just trying to get in on the drafting.

VALENTINE

Who were just trying to learn something.

FYFE

Yes. Mr. Wright wanted us to be somebody before we tried to do something. Of course to be somebody is-- There's the irony of the individualistic: he's all for everybody being his own individual, and yet-- Which reminds me, lots of times Mr. Wright used the word "organic." I often tried to puzzle out in my own mind just what he did mean by that. The nearest I came to it was a matter of growth. It seemed to me that every house I knew that he did, and practically every building, therefore, was an individual thing of its own. Within that individual characteristic there was a growth. It exemplified a growth throughout in some buildings, where he was able to do it in the rugs and the

furniture and the fixtures and everything else. I saw a sense of an idea growing to fruition in each one. I think I absorbed that by osmosis and was able to articulate it in my own mind later on. But he also used the word "principle" a lot. Design for a principle. I had great difficulty with that. I remember just writing it on a piece of paper, and for years the paper lay in the upper layer of my tool box and I would just see it every once in a while--"principle." Now, in retrospect I can see growth from within as opposed to adding onto a building something from the outside--you design on the principle of organic growth. Everything came to fruition out of the principle of organic growth. And it means a holistic approach to whatever that particular project was--which could be a single building, it could be a little doghouse, it could be a total campus. He also used the word "faith" a great deal. And that did bother me because faith in what? And I still wonder what he was talking about. He never elaborated on his faith in what.

VALENTINE

Did you ever ask him?

FYFE

No, I guess I didn't. Was it a faith in Taliesin? Was it a faith in Mr. Wright? Was it a faith in organic architecture? And I suspect it might have been all three of those things at different times. Then there was another use of the word "details." It hasn't come back to me. He said that something is in the details. My own definition is that "Definition is in the details." That makes sense to me, but that is not the word he used, I know: it was "Resolution is in the details," or "Completion is in the details," or the finish or the heart or something is in the details. He said it often, and it may come back to me some other time. Do you want any vignettes of things that happened?

VALENTINE

Sure.

FYFE

Every night, particularly in the winter when the evenings came early, along about seven o'clock the lights would get dimmer and dimmer, and that meant that the water had run out of the dam that operated the generator. Now, we

talked about Edgar earlier--Edgar played Bach beautifully. There were pianos all over the place. One time, we were poorer than the proverbial church mice, but Mr. Wright came back from New York and he'd purchased a huge [Karl] Bechstein grand piano.

VALENTINE

How did he do that?

FYFE

Who knows? I don't know. But he did. There were pianos all over the place, and Edgar would get away from a lot of chore work--what he would consider chore work, and what I would consider community establishment--by going off to practice. Mr. Wright loved it and I did too, particularly to hear him play Bach. One time half a dozen or maybe more typewriters appeared in the studio. They were sans serif type; they were beautiful. I remember I typed up some of Mr. Wright's early magazine articles, and the typewriters were used generally. But he never paid for them, so all of a sudden they all disappeared. They were repossessed. And I told you how much we appreciated the Wrights' living room. That room was just as nice for two people as for twenty people.

1.6. TAPE NUMBER: IV, SIDE ONE (OCTOBER 23, 1993)

VALENTINE

You were talking about the chairs delivered to the [Taliesin] living room.

FYFE

They were a pair of chairs with very nice down cushions on the back and on the arms. The first thing Frank Lloyd Wright had done to them was he had somebody come in with a saw and saw off the legs so that they'd be closer to the floor and fit his own size and shape. You've heard him admit as far as his own furniture is concerned that he's been black and blue all his life from sitting in his own chairs.

VALENTINE

Did you find them comfortable?

FYFE

No, never. I think his furniture's horrible. On a Sunday afternoon very shortly after I'd arrived, I remember there was not much going on, and I was sitting on the grass in the upper courtyard. Svetlana [Wright] came out of the dining room just below where my room eventually was--anyway, the private dining room--and she saw me and rolled an apple across the grass to me. It was an endearing and caring thing for her to have done. Again, these are just vignettes; maybe if there are enough of them, somebody can piece together an impression of life at Taliesin.

VALENTINE

Like a nice quilt.

FYFE

[William] Wes [Wesley] Peters loved tapioca, and tapioca was often served as dessert because it was good and it was inexpensive. But most people just wouldn't eat it, so he'd gather up everybody else's and he'd have a whole stack of saucers at his place. You could turn the saucers upside down and tapioca wouldn't drop off--glued to it. Mr. Hill was a big person, physically, and was in charge of the gardening to begin with. Mrs. Hill was the cook who did all the cooking at first. One time it was somebody's birthday so she made a birthday cake. Pretty soon people were having birthdays all over the place.

VALENTINE

Several times a month.

FYFE

Yes. She caught on.

VALENTINE

How egalitarian was the [Taliesin] Fellowship? Did people really feel like it was a communal experience, or did they feel like there was a hierarchy and a caste system--some were more equal than others?

FYFE

It's a yes and no answer to that. The people that had been there for a long time felt a superiority. Henry Klumb deserved it. He had been there longest and knew best what to do. He didn't throw his weight around at all, but

[Rudolph] Mock and [Samuel] Ratensky and who was the fellow from Denmark--?

VALENTINE

[Karl] Jensen?

FYFE

Yes. He was Mr. Wright's secretary and he certainly was impressed with his position. Among those who came later, it never stratified into any kind of hierarchy that I was aware of--just whatever the person was able to be or do. That was accepted and that was that. Vada Dow, Alden Dow's wife, found it very difficult to fit in. She used to come out gardening with white gloves on and a big floppy hat. She was a good sport about it, but she just didn't enjoy doing it, and it didn't last very long.

VALENTINE

How many women were there when you were there?

FYFE

There were a fair number, I would say--I guess about three to four. Betty Barnsdall was the daughter of [Aline] Barnsdall, for whom Mr. Wright did the Hollyhock House in Los Angeles. She was there for a while. Betty [Elizabeth] Bauer [Kassler] went on to become curator at the Museum of Modern Art, taught, and published. I had great respect for her. George and Helen Beal, so there was Helen Beal; Bill [William Adare] Bernoudy; Bob [Robert F.] Bishop; Ernest Brooks; Willets Burnham; Louise Dees-Porch-- She was a workaholic, and she really should have had more credit for what she did than she would assume. Gerry [Geraldine E.] Deknatel, Abe [Abrom] Dombar, Vada Dow, Jimmy [James] Drought, Bitsie [Elizabeth Barney Enright] Gillham was there. Mendel Glickman, Bob [Robert] Goodall, Phil [Philip] Holliday, Jack [John H.] Howe, Karl Jensen, Henry and Else Klumb, Fred [Frederick] Langhorst, Gene [Eugene] Masselink, Rudolph Mock, Chandler Montgomery-- Chandler Montgomery was kind of a tutor to little lovanna [Wright] and so was Phil Holliday. Mabel Morgan ended up in the kitchen, and she was a very hard worker. Bob [Robert K.] Mosher, Bill Peters, Sam Ratensky, Marybud [Faustina] Roberts [Lautner], Manuel Sandoval, Hank [Henry A.] Schubart, Bud

[Irwin] Shaw, Lewis Stevens, Edgar Tafel, Betty [Elizabeth] Weber-- She had been with Charles Morgan in Chicago, who was somehow related to Mr. Wright's work. Did you know about that?

VALENTINE

No.

FYFE

She was part of the gardening group--great big brown eyes. In the Morgan studio in Chicago they used to do exercises on bars--Yvonne Wood and daughter Mimme and of course Svetlana. So maybe it isn't quite three to four, more like two to four. *[It was never clear to me whether Ernest Brooks was an apprentice or supposed to be a leader in music. Unfortunately his predilection for Ravel and Debussy did not fit well with Mr. Wright's concept of musical building blocks more clearly evident in Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms. Mendel Glickman, structural engineer, was in residence from time to time, but with little direct contact with apprentices.]* Fyfe added the following bracketed section during his review of the transcript.

VALENTINE

Was there any difference in the way the women were treated versus the men--or the assignments they were given or they chose for themselves?

FYFE

I wasn't aware of it.

VALENTINE

How was the issue of homosexuality dealt with?

FYFE

It never reared its head, at least not to my knowledge.

VALENTINE

How about heterosexuality?

FYFE

It wasn't an issue. And certainly morals-- In the light of Mr. Wright's and Olgivanna [Milanoff Wright]'s background, you might have thought it would become some kind of an issue, but it never was--never openly discussed, and as far as I know, even thought about.

VALENTINE

Were there relationships going on that weren't talked about, or was it expected?

FYFE

The only two I'm aware of were Betty Bauer and Rudolph Mock and Marybud and what's his name--

VALENTINE

John Lautner.

FYFE

They were friends before they came and were married while they were there. I don't think there was any pairing off other than those two. I did do some more drafting on the [Jean] Schuette residence for Maple Bluff [Madison, Wisconsin], for the Blue Parrot Celebrity Room for Mrs. [Grace] Pebbles in Oak Park, and some alterations to Tanyderi [Andrew T. Porter House] for Jennie [Jane Wright] Porter.

VALENTINE

Right. I want to talk about those projects in more detail.

FYFE

I can't imagine, looking back-- I just dug up drawings for the Schuette residence downstairs in the files.

VALENTINE

This was your cousin, right?

FYFE

She was my first cousin, and she wanted a colonial house. How I drew those drawings at the Frank Wright fellowship is beyond my ken.

VALENTINE

Yes. How did they let these pages out? I don't know. The paper wouldn't even accept it.

FYFE

One drawing indicates that I had crits [jury criticism] from some of the other apprentices. Finally, I simplified the building so it lost many of its colonial characteristics. The final result: I just told her that I couldn't do it. Partly a little bit of my own growth represents--

VALENTINE

Why couldn't you do it?

FYFE

I didn't think it was-- Well, that's quite a question, isn't it?

VALENTINE

Yes, it is.

FYFE

I didn't think I should be responsible for another colonial building. These drawings-- Do any of them show a plan?

VALENTINE

Some beautiful drawings.

FYFE

I think looking at them right now that you spread them out before me, the plans are not bad. I suppose that Mr. Wright would pretty much say that they're in the box mode. They do fit into the slope that exists on the property that I knew very well--Maple Bluff. I'd grown up on Maple Bluff. I knew the area well. I think the final design--I wouldn't have been ashamed to have it built.

VALENTINE

And yet you withdrew from the project?

FYFE

Well, I see there are no shutters on it, and I can't imagine how they would have been acceptable to Jean's desire for a colonial building. I think she finally got one built--a colonial building, that is.

VALENTINE

It probably wasn't as good as this.

FYFE

I'm sure it wasn't.

VALENTINE

So you were responsible, indirectly, for another bad colonial. [laughter]

FYFE

All right, all right.

VALENTINE

Now, there's some correspondence about that with your father [James Lincoln Fyfe] in which you and he share your philosophy about architecture and what a house should be. Could you speak a little bit to that?

FYFE

Maybe you could speak better than I because I don't remember. I remember there was correspondence, but I don't remember what it was. Okay, this drawing shows a crit from others, and then this is my father's--which would be really bad architecture.

VALENTINE

Why is that bad?

FYFE

This little porch is just tacked onto the building. It isn't integral to it. And I think even this bay window isn't integral to it. The one that I ended up with wasn't much better, but it was integrated into the architecture better. What more did my father say?

VALENTINE

Well I don't have his letters, but I have your responses.

FYFE

This certainly doesn't demonstrate any open planning: I'm sure if we were doing it today we'd take that partition out and we'd be able to move all the way around like that. Given the time and the place and the climate, I guess it wasn't a bad job. It blows my mind that I was able to do it at Taliesin. I don't know where or how it was done.

VALENTINE

Did Wright ever see it?

FYFE

No, I'm sure he didn't.

VALENTINE

It says, "A major dilemma for me is whether to do something colonial, which would, if not exactly, compromise my principles of architecture only because those principles are not yet formed definitively, which would, I say, at least be inconsistent for my trend for the sake of experience involved." You needed experience out of it, but it really wasn't the direction you wanted to go.

FYFE

Sounds candid to me.

VALENTINE

These are swell letters. [laughter] The word "swell"--

FYFE

I can remember where I picked it up. I was working in Robert Work and Russell Walcott's office, and they had an interior decorator who said that some things were "swell." I thought that was a swell term circa 1928. She had some antiques sent up from New Orleans. They were able to poke into the holes and find the end of them and decided that they were not worm holes--that they

were just holes that had been put there with a drill. So they returned the furniture, but did keep some andirons.

VALENTINE

How did Wright feel about you taking on jobs like this that were your personal work and not fellowship work?

FYFE

I think it's part of the transition that went forward. He permitted Alden Dow to have drawings going out, without Mr. Wright's name of course. I think that plus the experience with the Pebbles Celebrity Room solidified in his mind that there would not be any more of that kind of work brought into-- Anything that would come into the fellowship and go out of the fellowship would be through Mr. Wright, and he would have a part in it.

VALENTINE

What was the Pebbles job?

FYFE

Mrs. Pebbles was a longtime friend of Mr. Wright. She was also a friend of the Fyfes and I knew her very well. I cannot recall how this got started, but I suspect that she contacted Mr. Wright with the proposition of doing a room that would be called the Celebrity Room. It was an adjunct to a larger room-- the Blue Parrot Restaurant, which she had recently opened in Oak Park [Illinois]. She had, along Michigan Avenue in Chicago, one of the finest and most stylish restaurants in the Italian Court, and then she had a couple of little ones up the block, scaled down a little, smaller and less expensive. Apparently, she wanted to open this one in Oak Park and have this room. I'm sure my contribution to it was these silhouettes of buildings--Wright buildings in Oak Park and River Forest [Illinois] that I knew very well. I had previously made a Christmas card from Hillside [Taliesin Fellowship Complex] that showed the buildings and trees in silhouette, and then in the corner, the Taliesin logo. Up one side it had my name, and at the bottom was "Greetings from Hillside." It was a black linoleum block print on lovely Japanese gray paper with added white snow on the roofs and a couple of other places. When Mr. Wright saw it, for once he approved very much. But he was distressed that it was a

personalized card and that it was from Hillside. He apparently thought that I should have designed a card that would be for the entire Taliesin Fellowship.

VALENTINE

What if you had designed a card on your own, without consulting him, and he didn't like it? What would the response have been?

FYFE

My guess is there would be none, or he would say, "Well, you did that logo well." [laughter] To kind of repeat myself for the third time, I've never seen him abuse anybody, with that one noted exception. He had a very benevolent, kindly presence. Anyway, I very quickly did another silhouette of Taliesin on a larger card but using the same format, for a Christmas card just for Mr. and Mrs. Wright. The first one was made with linoleum block, and I still have the block downstairs. The other one was just done with India ink on the same kind of paper. I apparently made two of them because one was for Mr. and Mrs. Wright, and I mailed one to Oak Park. I have that one downstairs.

VALENTINE

This is also the drawing that became the masthead for the Taliesin columns ["At Taliesin"].

FYFE

When they used the Hillside card as masthead for the Taliesin columns, it was cropped a little bit, which did improve it actually. I thought it was very good.

VALENTINE

I like it.

FYFE

Well, that started the silhouette business and led to the silhouettes in the Celebrity Room, which I enjoyed doing because I just loved those buildings in Oak Park.

VALENTINE

These were all houses that you had known as a child?

FYFE

Yes. It did include Unity Temple. I don't know why, but Saint Mark's [Church] in the Bowery was in there also.

VALENTINE

East Oak Park. [laughter]

FYFE

Just very small in the distance. And then the sort of clouds and trees and then the foreground abstraction of sidewalks and streets. In one of the drawings there are some squiggles--I think Mr. Wright was suggesting that there ought to be some kind of vegetation or weeds. I don't think they got incorporated into the final drawings. I transferred the drawings to the walls, and then professional painters started painting them. Pretty soon costs began to add up, with painters' time--it took so much time--plus other things. They wanted a little bar in there and two waitress stations around posts. And other things began to be added: noise came from one room into the other, so they wanted doors to shut it out. In the end, I took over the painting just to reduce the cost. I must have been gone from Taliesin well over a month.

VALENTINE

You were living at home in Oak Park?

FYFE

I was living at home in Oak Park and working my tail off on this room, thinking I was doing the right thing. But in Mr. Wright's eyes, it was very much the wrong thing. I was feeling increasingly estranged the longer I stayed away. I do not remember that there was any payment in return for doing this work, although I'd put out for some materials and Mrs. Pebbles had reimbursed me for that. There was no payment for labor. Gee, I don't know if I got free meals or not, but I did get free meals at the Italian Court Restaurant in Chicago sometimes. So it was a friendly kind of thing that I was trying to do. Eventually-- I can't remember the fellow's name who wrote "At Taliesin": [Newspaper Columns by Frank Lloyd Wright and the Taliesin Fellowship, 1934-1937].

VALENTINE

Randolph Henning?

FYFE

Yes. He dug up correspondence that related to this. The correspondence showed that Mrs. Pebbles did pay Mr. Wright, and at the end Mr. Wright had appealed for some more money, and she contributed some more money. Henning thought it was another Frank Lloyd Wright project that just hadn't gotten into the books yet, but [Bruce] Brooks Pfeiffer thought it was an apprentice project. I think probably Pfeiffer was correct. Anyway, that's the way it's gone into history now.

VALENTINE

So it's your project, not Taliesin's. Did Wright make any contribution?

FYFE

No. Only just that one squiggle that I spoke to you about. I don't recall his being involved in the design of it. I apparently went to Oak Park initially to measure up the room. Whether I made the drawings in Oak Park or whether I made them back at Taliesin, I cannot remember. The only thing that's clear to me is that the idiom of the silhouettes stemmed from the Christmas cards.

VALENTINE

It must have been beautiful.

FYFE

Well, I think it had some merit. At one point--slight digression--Mr. Wright had gotten Aero shades made. They were designed by somebody over in Waukesha [Wisconsin] or on the coast near Milwaukee somewhere. They were little narrow slats of wood, parallelogram shaped. They were shades that would roll up and down, and they were a natural light tan color for Taliesin. They were beautiful. They also deflected light rays up to the ceiling. Light just hit the edge of the parallelogram. Later they did all of Hillside with the Frank Lloyd Wright red color. They weren't as successful there, I thought, because they were painted instead of natural wood. Finally some were made for the Celebrity Room, and they were bright yellow with black cording. I've never liked those; I thought they were awful in that room.

VALENTINE

Well, the murals were yellow and black, weren't they?

FYFE

Yes, the sky was a soft yellow, but the shades came through in kind of a hard, bright yellow. I think that that was the beginning of the end for me. I must have gone back to Taliesin that summer and worked through until about September and finally decided to leave.

VALENTINE

Why did you decide to leave?

FYFE

I wasn't sensing any community there, and I wasn't aware of any sense of focus there--either from the top down or generated from the apprentices themselves. There were few people among the apprentices that I really respected highly. I don't think that I had any fear of being intimidated by Mr. Wright; that's not the right word. I guess I thought the fellowship wasn't going to go anywhere. That could be taken philosophically or literally because there was talk of taking the fellowship to Russia. There was talk of taking the fellowship to Arizona, which of course did eventuate in a few years. I don't think they ever went to Russia. But obviously it had taken on a whole new dimension and character from what I had anticipated in the beginning. When Mr. Wright first was selling the idea to us, [Alexander] Meiklejohn was supposed to come as a philosopher, Buckminster Fuller was going to be in charge of the shops, Georgia O'Keeffe was going to be there in charge of painting, etc. Those are the only three names I remember offhand. Initially, there was supposed to be painting and sculpture and other arts and crafts. There were six of these leaders plus Mr. Wright to make seven leaders and seventy apprentices. There would be shops that we could work in. There was the hope that we would design things that would have a marketable aspect to them.

VALENTINE

There was somewhat of a Bauhaus structure.

FYFE

Yes. That calls to my mind-- One time I had a glass about the size of that one, which is about three inches high and two inches in diameter. I picked it up I think in a five-and-dime store. It had a nice curve to it and a very heavy bottom. That's the one time I heard Mr. Wright approve of somebody else's design. He said he would have been proud to have designed that. [laughter]

VALENTINE

That's a high compliment indeed.

FYFE

Yes. Oh, and one time when I came back from being in Chicago or Oak Park, I had found a white goatskin. You can imagine how big a skin from a goat might be. In the studio there were benches, and many of the benches had skins on them for a loose covering. So I brought that goatskin to Mr. Wright for his bench and he loved it. He wanted to know all about where did I get it and how much did it cost. In my Victorian background, you gave a gift to somebody and you didn't tell them how much it cost. So I never told him. It really pleased him very much to have it.

VALENTINE

So in the middle of the Depression you decide to leave security, Taliesin, and go out and make your own fortune?

FYFE

Yes.

VALENTINE

And there were no architectural jobs to speak of in this country?

FYFE

Well, I had one apparently, and I can't-- This is what bothers me so much-- definitive details I just cannot bring back up. But almost immediately after I left, I went to Berlin, Connecticut, and designed and helped build an addition to an eighteenth-century farmhouse.

VALENTINE

And how did you get that job?

FYFE

When I was at Yale [University], I came under the-- This favorite aunt [Elizabeth Beye] that I told you about who died was in charge of the Red Cross, helping people, and she helped the Shephards. Mrs. [Katrina] Shephard had married Mr. [William] Shephard, who was a graduate forester from Yale but not making very much money. They were in deep trouble, and apparently Mrs. Shephard's family had written them off. Eventually, things brightened. So my connection was through my aunt to these people. When they knew I was in New Haven they looked me up, and by then their situation had changed drastically. Bill grew up on sailboats. His father had been in the coast guard when they had sailboats. Bill had a forty-five-foot ketch, and he would take college students on as crew. They had horses, and I used to ride out on their farm. Anyway, that's how they knew me, and they asked if I would put this addition onto their farmhouse. So I got immediately into designing and building this addition. When I finished that, I came back to Chicago and found that I could go into Paul Schweikher's office. At one time during the Depression, his was the busiest office in Chicago. Contractors who used to do huge homes for David Adler and Robert Work would come to him to see if he had any work he could give them. He had one very big house, a large house; a forty-eight-page brochure for the Arkansas Soft Pine with twelve house designs; a dozen small houses for a development in Saint Joseph, Michigan; and then the Third Unitarian Church in Chicago.

VALENTINE

I'm jumping ahead of myself a little bit, because I want to talk about your post-Taliesin career the next time. But I just wanted to comment on the Depression and what impact that had on architecture and how difficult it was to get work.

FYFE

Yes. Even after the Depression it was difficult. There was many a time where I literally never knew where my next job would come from. It would come from all crazy different ways, over the telephone--or an insurance salesman dropped in on me once, and he told someone else about me. Crazy.

VALENTINE

Money was always a problem at Taliesin.

FYFE

Oh yes. Not only because of the Depression, but inherent in Mr. Wright's lifestyle. When we were getting food from this nice little old lady in Dodgeville [Wisconsin] who had a small store--sort of an A&P-type store--Mr. Wright would go over in his big touring car in good weather and just load that thing up to the gills with food on credit. She carried us into thousands of dollars. And then he'd go down and buy the [Karl] Bechstein grand piano. [laughter]

VALENTINE

Who paid for this? Where did the money come from?

FYFE

Well, some money came from the apprentices. And Mr. Wright was writing books. He was lecturing. I went to three or four lectures with him. At the invitation of Baker Brownell he was at Northwestern University once. In the afternoon he talked to a women's club--told them their hats were dreadful--and to a group of students. In the evening, it was the downtown campus. I remember we came out from that and it was dark. For once, he admired the city and the night lights in the city. He had to admit it was beautiful. Another time he was lecturing in Rockford [Illinois] at the Congregational church. He really liked that auditorium because it was kind of an Akron plan where people were circled around the pulpit and the speaker. You just felt very comfortable. For once, he complimented them on where he was. He usually goes to a meeting and tells them how terrible everything is. He was getting money for lectures. I tried to get him on the lecture series in Oak Park but wasn't successful in that. I don't think he had very many magazine articles at that time, but I guess some money from his books.

VALENTINE

There was very little architectural work going on in the period you were there. Just the [Malcolm E. and Nancy] Willey House, I guess.

FYFE

That's it, yes.

VALENTINE

I wonder if you could take us through that process of how it went from design inception--that full-blown drawing that he drew, how that project went through the studio.

FYFE

I don't remember who got assigned to that. It must have happened very shortly before I left because I have no memory of it being out on the drawing boards and assigned to persons to carry it on.

VALENTINE

It was going on the whole time you were there because the first commission came through in 1932.

FYFE

The first one was in '32?

VALENTINE

Yes. And then they couldn't afford to build it as he had designed it.

FYFE

That's right. But I thought it was designed before I was there. It may have been earlier in '32.

VALENTINE

It may have been. And then they redid the whole thing, so the design you're talking about is the second version?

FYFE

Yes.

VALENTINE

And that was in '33 or '34.

FYFE

That's part of the transition that I saw in those two years. The first one harks back to some of the things he'd done at [Lake] Tahoe and other places. The one that got built, it seems to me, is the beginning of the Usonian period.

VALENTINE

Very much.

FYFE

For the [Herbert and Katherine] Jacobs House [Madison], which came a few years after that, he was really into his Usonian period. I think that his occult symmetry started on the great big fireplace in the drafting room [Hillside Drafting Studio], and you can trace that into all kinds of changes away from the rectilinear.

VALENTINE

How much attention or acknowledgment or discussion of world events went on while you were there?

FYFE

Not a great deal. I remember a discussion of how the Russian experiment had devolved into a power struggle, but certainly not a great deal among the apprentices. Bill [William] Deknatel was an admirer of Picasso, and he took a lot of ribbing on that. On Sunday evening, occasionally we would have a professor, usually a sociologist, from the University of Chicago. That discussion never spread out into very many students.

VALENTINE

Did you discuss politics?

FYFE

No.

VALENTINE

Did Wright discuss politics? Roosevelt? The New Deal?

FYFE

I remember--this isn't politics exactly--when they were first trying to solve the housing for the poor in Chicago. They built these dreadful high-rise apartments [Taylor Homes and Cabrini-Green]; he said, "They're institutionalizing poverty."

VALENTINE

He was absolutely right, wasn't he?

FYFE

Absolutely right. As usual, he was about forty years ahead of his time. I think we were pretty well isolated up there. Insulated, maybe.

VALENTINE

Did you feel insulated when you were there, or only looking back on it?

FYFE

Looking back.

VALENTINE

So the world had little impact on what happened to you there--what went on.

FYFE

Quite so. As you've probably read, as I have, he had to let go when-- At least his version of it is--and I guess it's true in this case--that when WPA [Works Progress Administration] came in, a lot of the men who were working for him on scrip and very little money just jumped onto the WPA programs and got hard cash. Two things happened while I was there--this is trivia-- Wisconsin issued coins in cardboard and we had paper scrip during the bank holiday, and the other thing is the dust storms came through while I was up there. I can remember days where here the sun was more like the moon, a full moon in the sky, because of the dust. This would be sometime-- Again, some more trivia: we were sitting with Mr. Wright on a hill that faced south toward the end of the day, just resting there--a few of us gardeners. Mr. Wright joined us there surrounded by a great field of watermelons. He instigated it, we all followed suit--taking a watermelon, breaking it open, just eating the heart. That's where the sweetest part is. There were so many watermelons, we weren't ever going to use them all, so we just had our fill then. And then we

were walking back to Taliesin past Midway [Barns] and in a field on our right-hand side--a corn field--was a great big oak tree right in the middle of the field. Mr. Wright turned and queried us, should he cut that oak tree out? I think none of us was courageous enough to offer an opinion. I've seen recent pictures with the tree still there. He was genuinely wondering what to do with it.

VALENTINE

It's a good thing he left it.

FYFE

Yes. It's a magnificent tree. But it's not what most farmers would do. He often used to talk about little men sitting at the base of a tree. He used to say, "Why so hot and bothered, little man?" I guess we got that story while we were looking at that old oak tree--trying to ask us not to be so uptight about workaholism.

1.7. TAPE NUMBER: IV, SIDE TWO (OCTOBER 23, 1993)

VALENTINE

I want to ask you what skills you developed from your experience at Taliesin. Or attitudes.

FYFE

At Taliesin I wasn't the greatest farmer. But in 1935, I met my brother [James Beye Fyfe] back in Oak Park. He was a graduate structural engineer and had been working for United States Steel [Corporation] in Pennsylvania drawing rivets all day long. He was sick and tired of that. So we agreed we'd like to take a try at farming together. We looked for farmlands in Michigan, came around the bottom of Lake Michigan, and started up this side. Just outside of Woodstock [Illinois] was the first time we found a farm that was good soil that was within our ability to buy it. And that's how we landed where we are, here on this side of Woodstock. We took short courses at the University of Wisconsin, that summer my brother worked for Mr. [Earl] Hughes on his farm, and the next March we moved onto our farm. My interest in this venture was directly related to my experiences at Taliesin. I had a faint hope that

eventually if we got this thing going right, we might have visitors come to stay with us. And I had hopes that we might even have a school for small children. But none of that ever eventuated. We did have an excellent herd of holstein-friesians. Over the years, my brother turned out to be a remarkable herdsman, no question about it. He married and had a family, and eventually I married and started a family, and 160 acres wasn't going to support two families. So I went back into architecture and kept the ten acres you see here. The far end of this house was built during the war. I was in Mobile [Alabama]. Well, that's part of the next lecture.

VALENTINE

Before we finish today, though, I'd like you to list some adjectives that describe your experience at Taliesin.

FYFE

I don't know; I'll give them to you at the beginning of the next lecture. I'll give you a list of adjectives to describe Mr. Wright.

VALENTINE

All right. Rewrite the questions then.

FYFE

I wonder where they are. Somewhere I have a list of adjectives that describe Japanese prints, and it seemed to me they quite accurately described Mr. Wright.

VALENTINE

It would be nice if you could find that. Why don't we start the next session with those two lists?

FYFE

Will do.

1.8. TAPE NUMBER: V, SIDE ONE (OCTOBER 23, 1993)

VALENTINE

We're in the home stretch now.

FYFE

I think when we parted I was to come back with a list of adjectives describing Taliesin, and I volunteered to bring a list of expressions that applied to Mr. [Frank Lloyd] Wright's work. At the time that I arranged an exhibit of Mr. Wright's work for our local library, I wrote this part of the explanation: "Expressions applied to the Japanese prints were 'inventive,' 'unexpected view,' 'oblique angle,' 'asymmetry,' 'dynamic tension,' 'vertical poised against sweeping curves,' 'simple quietude'--and the Japanese expression for that is wabe, 'elegant simplicity'--and the Japanese for that is sabe, 'modest beauty,' 'close to nature,' and 'sensing the eternal core of things.'" It seemed to me that these expressions applied to Japanese prints are equally properly applied to the architecture of Mr. Wright.

VALENTINE

That's perfect.

FYFE

Now for adjectives describing Taliesin. I had a very difficult time with that. I came up with four words.

VALENTINE

Okay.

FYFE

Heterogeneous, nucleus--being Mr. Wright--beautiful, and frustrating.

VALENTINE

Explain. [laughter] I'm a schoolteacher, what can I say?

FYFE

Well, heterogeneous explains itself, doesn't it? It's a mix of-- It certainly was not homogeneous. And certainly Mr. Wright was the nucleus of the place. That it was beautiful--not only the natural setting with the hills and that part of Wisconsin are just beautiful, but of course Taliesin itself is a beautiful building, well accommodated to its situation. Frustrating--that's the one you wanted explained apparently. That the actuality was so remote from initial

expectations I think was part of the frustration for me. The lack of money available for promoting and carrying on the Taliesin Fellowship--very many evidences of that were frustrating to the apprentices, but it must have been extremely frustrating to Mr. Wright. It seems a miracle to me that the fellowship finally came through and carried on. My own reactions to my experience there were embraced in "challenging," "profitable," and "developmental." Those ought to explain themselves, I hope.

VALENTINE

That's a very good description. It covers a lot of bases. I came across this letter from Phil [Philip] Holliday to a student who was doing a survey about participants in Taliesin. In the bottom of this letter, he says, "One more recollection. A working companion"--which he identifies as you--"and I were dismissed for twelve hours to pack and depart because Mr. Wright came back after we had finished an assigned task and, not seeing us working, assumed we were derelict in the duty. He was quick to judge, and in this case, misjudge. We kept receiving messages to appear at local events for the next few hours, and did so to be ignored until the next morning, a Sunday, when things were straightened out and we were asked to stay." Is that typical or unique?

FYFE

I don't think it's typical, and it isn't exactly according to my own memory of it. I remember the incident well. On Saturday, Phil and I were sweeping out and cleaning up the theater building [Hillside Playhouse] over at Hillside [Taliesin Fellowship Complex], while all the rest of the fellowship had gone to the river to go swimming. I don't think we were assigned that task; we just assumed it because we both lived there, probably. I think as the day wore on, we were a bit miffed that everybody was having fun swimming down at the river while we were carrying forth on, as I remember it, a duty that had been self-assigned. I do recall distinctly leaving a little pile of dirt right in the middle of the corridor and abandoning it there. I don't know if we finally went to the river or not, but that's what Mr. Wright saw. We felt put upon that we had been alone and cleaning up and getting ready for Sunday and then were abused for it. The other recollection that he gives us there--I don't doubt that it's true but it escapes my memory. I remember us just being very unjustly accused.

VALENTINE

You don't remember being asked to pack your bags and leave?

FYFE

No, but it could have been.

VALENTINE

Edgar Tafel claims to have received the most firings. He was ordered to leave many times over, and then he'd be forgiven.

FYFE

He was "Peck's Bad Boy."

VALENTINE

I think he lived it to the hilt. He enjoyed that reputation.

FYFE

Sure enough.

VALENTINE

I want to talk about your life as Bill again. When you were at Taliesin you were called Beye.

FYFE

When I arrived there was Bill [William Wesley] Peters; there were a couple of other Bills already on the place. Mr. Wright just decided to call me Beye. He knew the family name, family associations, and knew them much better than I did. When I arrived, this background material-- I could recollect it, but it wasn't part of my baggage when I arrived.

VALENTINE

Does anybody still call you Beye or is it Bill?

FYFE

Anybody that was at Taliesin still calls me Beye. We have a son, now, named Beye. Sometimes a telephone call will come in for "Beye Fyfe, please," so we get a little mixed up in sorting it out.

VALENTINE

So after you left Taliesin in 1934, then you bought a farm with your brother [James Beye Fyfe] and became a dairy farmer.

FYFE

Not right away; about a year later. I went immediately out to Connecticut and had a job to design a two-car garage and living quarters over it and attach it to an eighteenth-century farmhouse. Not only did I design it, but I helped build it and worked there through the winter.

VALENTINE

I take it it was not colonial. [laughter]

FYFE

It was spartan colonial, yes. It was an intriguing challenge to work out the levels of the addition to the levels of the house on a single stairway that served them both. It was a lovely occasion for me. I enjoyed doing the work. A lot of the time I just lived there, bached it, did my own cooking. That's where I picked up a cocker spaniel dog that came home with me. By 1935, I was home with my brother and found that we were both interested in farming, and that's when we began looking for a farm. In Woodstock we found about three different farms that we looked at seriously and considered quite seriously. The one that we bought was, to coin a cliché, dirt cheap. It had previously been a quarter section, but one corner had been sold off, which we bought later. The original purchase price was \$75 an acre with buildings, the twenty-five acres that we bought later with no buildings cost \$125 an acre.

VALENTINE

How much later was that?

FYFE

Not much. A year maybe.

VALENTINE

You were too successful.

FYFE

It was a good farm, good soil. We began assembling a herd of pedigree cows-- had a good dairy farm going. Eventually, Jim married--we were bachelors when we came out. We started on March 1; that's when all farmers move because that's when they have the least inventory to carry over to a new farm. My first job was to disinfect the barn. The previous summer I-- My really first job was to put in more windows because the Chicago health commissioner had edicted that anybody sending milk to Chicago had to have a certain amount of windows in the dairy barn. My third job was to build an outhouse. There was no-- I don't think we even had electricity to begin with; Saturday nights I had to pump water for baths by hand. It was pretty primitive. Eventually Jim had his family, and I married and had a family. This farm wasn't going to support two families, so I went back into architecture. During [World War II], I was in Mobile [Alabama] working for the U.S. War Department doing camouflage work along the Gulf of Mexico. A letter came from my brother saying that he was going to have to sell the herd. I wrote, "Don't sell the herd," because I knew it was a very good one. I got permission to come home and work on the farm. At that time the fear of attack from South America had evaporated because that German [General Erwin Rommel] who was sweeping across North Africa in tanks was finally stopped. The fear was that he would get all the way to Egypt and then cross the ocean to Brazil and attack this country from the south. At that time we had no protection along the Gulf. The War Department said, "You can go work on a farm, that's okay, but if we ever need you, you have to come back."

VALENTINE

Where had your brother learned farming?

FYFE

He had worked on a farm in Maine one summer. All he did was make hay. He got good and tired of that.

VALENTINE

Rivets and hay.

FYFE

Did I tell you about the rivets?

VALENTINE

Yes.

FYFE

Oh, I'm sorry. I'm retelling you a lot of this.

VALENTINE

No, you're not.

FYFE

We were able, during the war, to start this house that we're in. The thirty-six west feet of it was considered a tenant house on a farm. We bought all the lumber we could find in different lumberyards. There are eleven different kinds of wood in that small part of the house. It's what is now known as a passive solar collector, of course. We did not have permission to get plumbing materials, but I already had those stashed away. We had to reapply to get a heating unit because that, too, had metal in it. The design of the concrete floor took care of all the ducts so there wasn't very much metal used. Anyway, we finally got it built. I dug out the entire basement with a spade because we couldn't find any excavating equipment. We had an old--I forget what you call it--scoop, I guess. In the olden days a dump scoop behind a horse was used to excavate. You'd scoop something up and carry it over to another place and dump it. We found one, but it was so rusty it broke. So much for the first section of the house.

VALENTINE

Where did you meet your wife, Peggy [Margaret Veuve Reeder Fyfe]?

FYFE

I was teaching at Northwestern University, and she was one of my students.

VALENTINE

What were you teaching?

FYFE

Interior design. I was lecturing in the downtown campus, and she was taking that course. We got to talking, and it eventually led to marriage.

VALENTINE

When was that?

FYFE

Nineteen thirty-nine. I think we were married forty-eight years when she died of cancer. She had three different cancers and finally a multiple myeloma, which is incurable. That's the one that begins in the bone marrow. Once it's discovered, it's already progressed. The prognosis at the Mayo Clinic was three years or maybe thirty years. She lived for another three years.

VALENTINE

Did you consider yourself a farmer or an architect during that early period?

FYFE

I was very much of a farmer. It was hard work and we had a cash flow problem, of course. Every once in a while I'd go back to the city and do some drafting in an architect's office. So here's a problem: When I was milking the cows--we milked by machine but you have to strip the cows afterwards--my fingers would get toughened up to doing that task. Then I'd get back into town and I'd have to take a pencil and try to do some very delicate things with my fingers. So they weren't congenial activities exactly.

VALENTINE

No, I hadn't thought of that.

FYFE

It was real farming. As I told it on tape, Jim turned out to be a marvelous herdsman. When he died a tragic death on the farm, that year he'd been selected Dairy Farmer of the Year by the state. His wife [Hildegard Haataja Fyfe] had to accept the plaque posthumously. I enjoyed farming. When I came back from Mobile, we took another farm of 160 acres across the highway. So

we had two herds going. We had a nisei, a Japanese student from a college in California, to help. His family had been put into a camp in Arkansas. Through the Quakers, we got Koske [Ijichi] to come to work with us. After he'd been with us--he was just a great guy--he asked if he could bring his mother and his sister and his uncle. They came up and lived-- I forget whether they lived in our house across the way or they lived on this farm. Anyway, the uncle had worked with a famous agriculturist in California. I'm not going to come up with his name. He arrived in September, put in a garden, and had vegetables to eat out of the garden that fall. He knew just where to plant--on the sunny side of the barn--and he used some mature manure that was available. It was a very interesting family. Amy [Ijichi], the sister, graduated from Woodstock High School. I'm getting pretty far afield here.

VALENTINE

No, it's very interesting.

FYFE

When the war was over and they wanted to go back to California, nobody would sell Koske automobile insurance. And I said, "Oh, okay, I can get it for you from the Chicago Motor Company." They also wouldn't sell it to a nisei. I couldn't get it from the local [American] Farm Bureau [Federation]. Isn't that crazy?

VALENTINE

Yes.

FYFE

Before Koske came, we had to make sure that it would be agreeable to the neighbors. And the farmer who had been on our farm before we bought it-- name of [William] Fermin; that's a German name-- During World War I his father had been hounded around the square in Woodstock. He was the only neighbor that objected to a nisei coming to live with us.

VALENTINE

You'd think he would understand.

FYFE

You'd think he would understand. Before they left, after the war, the Ijichis were admired and loved by all the neighbors.

VALENTINE

So the sister had no problem in high school.

FYFE

No. Oh, no, she was very much appreciated, and she liked it. No problem.

VALENTINE

I picture you like Thomas Jefferson, sitting on your farm, dabbling in architecture, making these award-winning houses.

FYFE

Just the other day I was showing George [A.] Talbot III some drawings I'd made for a house in Mexico City. They were made downstairs here. I can't believe how I had time and energy to make that set of drawings. I think there were fourteen architectural and four mechanical sheets, and they're almost as big as from here to the end of that table: huge drawings, beautifully made. I don't know how I combined that with farming. But I did.

VALENTINE

How many people were working on the farm?

FYFE

Well, just a moment back-- I think Koske was helping me across the highway. I guess that left Jim alone on this farm. But when we did anything big, like haying or threshing, we worked together on both farms. The farm across the highway had woods out in back, and I remember picking up calves that were born out there and carrying them back to the barn on my shoulders. That farm was spread out more than this farm. This farm was a square section. Across the road we introduced contour farming.

VALENTINE

Where was the barn from here?

FYFE

On this farm?

VALENTINE

Yes.

FYFE

Directly east. It burned. One time I got off the train coming back from Chicago, and the sheriff met me to tell me that the barn was burning. A metal barn has been put up on the old foundations. When we took over this farm, we put new foundations under the old barn. So they were in good shape. The barn and the house and all the sheds are gone from the farm across the highway. There's just the silo left there; you can see that. But we didn't have any farm experience behind us. Maybe I told you--we took a short course at the University of Wisconsin, Jim had had a summer in Maine, and I'd had some experience at Taliesin.

VALENTINE

Served you well.

FYFE

It all worked out.

VALENTINE

You said you got in touch with Koske through the Quakers. Were you a Quaker back then?

FYFE

No. I became a Quaker when I married Mary [Pollock Endres Fyfe].

VALENTINE

That's what I thought, but you mentioned that, so--

FYFE

They do some good work.

VALENTINE

They do great work, yes. What was your involvement with Hull House about that time?

FYFE

I came back from Taliesin, and Bill [William] Deknatel had known me at Taliesin. Bill was on the board of trustees for Hull House.

VALENTINE

Oh, I didn't realize that.

FYFE

They had a director of the art department, Emily Edwards, who was an excellent director and a fine person. But they were getting a strong infusion of WPA [Works Progress Administration] workers from the artists in Chicago. They wanted somebody to supervise that. I think I was supervisor of maybe thirty-five people. We had more than a dozen studios.

VALENTINE

This is in your spare time from the farm?

FYFE

No, I was in Chicago by this time. One of the nicest studios was every Thursday night. A WPA plasterer would come in in the morning and make four-foot-by-four-foot plaster sections for each student. By evening class they could each do a fresco in the wet plaster. A serigraphy studio had a dozen or so of the best artists in Chicago at that time and a carpenter shop. There were marvelous classes for the young kids that would come in after school. We'd put a man's shirt on backwards for a smock, and they had an easel, and each person had a big can of white paint, blue, red, and yellow--just let them go, with wonderful results. We put on an exhibit one time. Of course I'm being very objective about this.

VALENTINE

Of course.

FYFE

It was a terrific show. A few weeks later the Art Institute [of Chicago] put on their show. Theirs were stilted and stiff and ours were freewheeling and wild and wonderful.

VALENTINE

So how were you as a teacher?

FYFE

Well, if I tried to teach I was lousy. If I let things go, I was okay. One of the best meetings I had with the staff, I came completely unprepared, I got one of the staff to go to the blackboard, and I just began to get people to volunteer ideas. We were going to work up a program for Christmastime. It turned out to be the best meeting ever. I was a lousy lecturer. I struggled hard with that. I remember one time at Northwestern University where I was on the ground floor. I had a roadster parked just out in back where I could see it. I could hardly make myself stand there and talk on a wonderful spring day.

VALENTINE

You have as much trouble as they do.

1.9. TAPE NUMBER: V, SIDE TWO (OCTOBER 23, 1993)

VALENTINE

Well, when you were in Chicago, while you were teaching at Northwestern and working at Hull House, who was working on the farm?

FYFE

By that time, I think I had sold my share to Jim, my brother, and he was working it alone.

VALENTINE

That's a lot of work.

FYFE

By then, the farm that we rented during World War II was no longer part of the project. He was just working on his own farm. Then I went to work for myself in Chicago and in Oak Park [Illinois]. Oh, I remember why I went into

Chicago: I felt isolated out here, and I felt I needed more contacts with architectural things. After five years on my own, I went to Bertrand Goldberg. Does that ring any bell?

VALENTINE

Yes.

FYFE

They call it Bertrand Goldberg Associates. I was the associate. Then, in 1956 my brother died. He had climbed to the top of a silo, and apparently the silage gives off a toxic gas. We can only believe he either had a stroke or a heart attack, because he knew that that was a hazard. He was very tired. He'd been up to northern Michigan and bought a farm there because he and his youngest son, Bob [Robert William Fyfe], suffered from asthma. When he returned to his farm he climbed the silo to see how much silage he had to sell. His oldest son, Jim [James Arthur Fyfe], was playing basketball at the base of the silo, and finally realized his father hadn't come down. Six months later, his widow died. So their four children [Ellen Fyfe Thompson, Mary Fyfe Engelbrecht, Jim, and Bob] decided to stay together and to live with us. At that time, I felt I had to have an assured income so I went to work at Perkins and Will.

VALENTINE

You had three children [Beye Fyfe, Edward Allen Fyfe, and John Corwin Fyfe] of your own also.

FYFE

Yes.

VALENTINE

So you had seven children now.

FYFE

In this house we put two people in each room. I stayed with Perkins and Will for eighteen years, retiring in 1975--a recession year. They asked me to take an early retirement, which I did. I started to work with the [McHenry County] Planning Commission in Woodstock.

VALENTINE

So you didn't retire; you just moved.

FYFE

Yes.

VALENTINE

I want to talk about some of the projects you did both on your own and with Perkins and Will. The Lewis House--

FYFE

I was working in Paul Schweikher's office at that time. I did not have a license. Herb [Herbert] Lewis was an artist, and I knew Catherine [Lewis], his wife, very well. They wanted me to design a house for them, which I did. It was built in Park Ridge [Illinois]. Paul was listed as the architect because he had a license. It was a very interesting experience for me, and the Lewises loved it. There was one wing labeled on the plan as "studio." I remember going before the village planning commission, where some of the people of Park Ridge were afraid if they had a studio there would be naked women running around. [laughter] But we reassured them and there was no problem. There were not very many houses around it at that time. A mistake that I made was not to set the house a little bit higher. By the time the other houses were built around it, it was a little low relative to the others.

VALENTINE

It was very much like a Usonian house, I thought.

FYFE

I had no notion of what Mr. Wright was doing at that time.

VALENTINE

You didn't keep up with him?

FYFE

No.

VALENTINE

Follow his work in the press?

FYFE

No.

VALENTINE

That's interesting.

FYFE

How did I finally come to this solution? There was an earlier solution which I think I have down in the file somewhere. This one worked out very economically and fit their needs well. The Lewises finally had to sell it, as they were moving to Arizona. Much later I went back and found that over the kitchen windows somebody had put scallops, so I never returned. I remember in House and Garden the house was published twice. One time mention was made that the rafters were a little bit busy or fussy. I just loved them: they were scissor trusses, and I just loved having them exposed as they were.

VALENTINE

Did you keep in touch with anyone from Taliesin?

FYFE

Not really. One summer Phil Holliday was working for a former roommate of his at the University of Wisconsin--had a farm by Spring Grove, Illinois, which is not too far down [Highway] 47 from here. I came out that summer and worked with him, gardening. I met Edgar Tafel a few times when he briefly lived in Chicago.

VALENTINE

What was Perkins and Will like during the period in which you worked there?

FYFE

Growing. I think I probably told you that when they were at 228 North Michigan [Avenue] in the same building my father had his office, they had one draftsman, Joe Salerno, a friend of mine. Then they moved over to the Merchandise Mart and they got a little bit larger, growing all the time, because they were specializing in schools. This was a time when a great many

schools had to be built. If you follow their work very closely, first they did a lot of elementary schools, then they did a lot of high schools, and finally they got into doing a lot of colleges. By the time I went there, they were beginning to do colleges. I was darn lucky: I'm not exactly sure why the assignments came to me. The first were libraries because I had done some libraries. Then there were jobs that involved campuses. There was a large one in Kansas City [Missouri] for the Beth Shalom congregation. Eventually they would do a temple there but this was just a school to begin with. Beautiful site--trees and hills and dales. I was new in the office. George Hutchinson was a partner in charge or the senior in charge. We had an associate in Kansas City to do the working drawings. Bids came in, and I knew that they were going to be high. Nobody could go down from Perkins and Will at that time, so I had to go. The bids were way, way high. It was a terrifying experience for me, but Perkins and Will eventually redid a whole new set of buildings. Very conventional, I would say. That's the kindest word I could use. I had made a series of preliminary drawings, including the temple, using a hyperbolic parabola roof on the temple; then the high school, leading down the hill to three units; elementary; and then kindergarten. One time I asked Mr. [Lawrence B.] Perkins if he wanted to see the prelims. He took them home, and later I learned that if he hadn't seen those drawings they'd have fired me. It was a good set of drawings. Then I was assigned to Rockford College--a beautiful three-hundred acre site, incredibly beautiful and large--and Calvin College almost simultaneously, each of them to do a master plan for a new campus in the countryside.

VALENTINE

Why were you selected to do the master plans?

FYFE

I can only guess. Maybe because I'd been at Frank Lloyd Wright's. Probably. That's the only thing I can imagine.

VALENTINE

It turned out to be a marvelous selection.

FYFE

It fascinated me. I remember walking all over the Rockford campus, and right in the middle--about where we wanted to build--was a huge willow tree. So I would walk up and down and around on the hills, and I could orient myself by that tree in the early springtime because it was bright yellow. I concluded that we would put the campus itself on the sort of ridge where you were aware of the city: there wasn't much city around then, but the world outside. You could hear and see it. The dormitories would be down below where sounds would be dissipated. There were some beautiful woods. There was a maple forest there. That's how that campus got going. The one in Grand Rapids [Michigan] for Calvin College, again, I just one summer walked all over the site and got a feel for the woods, meadows, stream, hedgerows--I had a topographical map there, a very good one, while Rockford had had an aerial topograph that was sort of all right. Just walking all around the [Calvin College] site I got a sense of a proposal. That fall, I proposed it to the college, and they accepted. At Rockford we had a continuing contract. In Grand Rapids, we had a new contract for every job.

VALENTINE

And there were a lot of buildings, a lot of contracts. That job lasted a good long time.

FYFE

Yes. At one time the chief draftsman went by my desk and said, "You going to make a career out of this?"

VALENTINE

You just about did. [laughter]

FYFE

Yes, I did. It also involved our interior department and landscape department. We had a lot of separate contracts.

VALENTINE

Even after you left Perkins and Will, you were still working for Calvin College.

FYFE

Perkins and Will asked me to take an early retirement in 1975. There was a hiatus of about five years until building began again at Calvin. So then they came back to me and I worked out of my studio here. I don't remember how many buildings after that there were. I think they were mostly additions to existing buildings that I had designed.

VALENTINE

What are the principles for planning a new campus?

FYFE

Here you're going to get my short course in architecture.

VALENTINE

Why not?

FYFE

It seems to me that whether it's a building or a room or a campus, your first ingredient is the client's program. That's one reason that I had difficulty at Perkins and Will: because I wanted to work with the client. As Perkins and Will increased in size, it became more and more horizontally oriented. You were either a job captain, draftsman, or designer, or you handled the client. And I wanted to do all of those things, even to working out some of the details if I thought I had some special idea for them. How did I get off on that?

VALENTINE

The principles of planning a campus.

FYFE

Right. I would make it a cardinal principle that anytime I went to the board or to ask anybody to make a decision, I would have all the data available for that person or those persons to reach their decisions. That meant that part of the program was getting the client to make a written program. The architect can help but should not do it for them. Thus it becomes kind of--I can't think of the word--an introspective experience: they have to look into themselves to understand what goals they have. Every building is the result of perceived needs; I insist that they be written out--by the client. I remember in the case of Calvin College one time, they had assembled an ad hoc committee of some

of the best minds on campus. I was a little late in arriving. When I did, the committee was deep in a discussion of what type of material to use on the windowsills. I'm not known for being very--I don't know the expression--politic? Anyway, by the time we left, the president [Dr. William Spoelhof] was well aware that he had to do something about it. So he set the committee to writing their program. I think it took months before it came back from them, and it was a thick document. But it was excellent. They approached what the college was there for, what they were trying to do, and what the library should do in that whole scheme--what were the requirements and what were the needs of a library? It took me a long time to digest it, and to help myself I made a table of contents and then an index. When I sent it back to the college, the head librarian was quite apologetic that they had not made a table of contents and that they had not made an index. But they were quite necessary for me because sometimes things would turn up in two or three different locations in the program. It was about that thick. Anyway, the written program is terribly important.

VALENTINE

You frequently have to educate clients to do that, though--what needs to be in a program and how to approach it.

FYFE

Yes. After the library, good programs always came through for each building.

VALENTINE

See, you're a good teacher.

FYFE

Well, Dr. Spoelhof was an exceptional president. And the libraries-- I early on learned that that was one of his great interests. They had a remarkable library for a school their size.

VALENTINE

How big a school was it?

FYFE

When we started, it was about 2,500 students and we finally got to planning for 5,000. It never reached 5,000. It leveled off to a little over 4,000--about where it is now.

VALENTINE

It's a religious school, right?

FYFE

Yes. The Christian Reformed Church. They came to this country for just the opposite reason that the pilgrims came: their church in Holland was getting too liberal so they came here to keep their beliefs intact.

VALENTINE

Well, I thought you had a very interesting solution: to build the triad of buildings that was the center of the--

FYFE

Well, that was a response to the feeling of the administration, I think primarily Dr. Spoelhof. The science building and the chapel and the library were the three dominant buildings. The chapel didn't get built till very nearly the very last thing because that's part of their religion too: the chapel is no more a religious place than the classroom. They believe that every hour of every day they're working for God. Their symbol is, in Latin, "Gladly I offer my hand and my heart to thee, God," something like that. And they mean it. Wonderful people to work with. They wouldn't back away from a problem; they'll sit down and solve it, which a lot of clients won't do.

VALENTINE

Yes.

FYFE

So I guess in terms of the campus plan, I tried to learn of their religious beliefs and needs, and they gave me lots of material to read. This all happened at their hundredth celebration, so they had a book about the church that was very helpful to me, coming to them as a Unitarian. That's about as opposite as one could possibly be, but we had no problems. They believe in doing good things, and Unitarians try to do good things, too.

VALENTINE

The fundamental belief is the same.

FYFE

Just don't get involved in theology. [laughter]

VALENTINE

Well, that's a good principle anyway.

FYFE

Yes.

VALENTINE

They're very pleased with that campus, from everything I've read.

FYFE

Yes, they are, and they should be. It's a good campus. It has enough irregularity to-- Well, okay, that's number one in Fyfe's short course in architecture. The second item is that architecture should accommodate to the site; it should not abuse the site in any way. This can apply to things in the city as well as out in the country. These two campuses, of course, were in the country. It should improve the site, if possible. At Calvin, again, there were hills and dales and woods and hedgerows and a stream, Whiskey Creek--which was a big joke--coming through the property. We never leveled a site for a building--leveled it for the tennis courts a little bit.

VALENTINE

So you go in the library on the third level because that's where the hill was or something?

FYFE

Well, many of the buildings-- I guess, to be more accurate, none of them have really a front entrance except the administration building. I realized that there would be parents and students coming for the first time. You just come in under a low ceiling, so there is kind of a main entrance to that building. But all the other buildings just have entrances as they respond to internal and

external circulation patterns. Almost every building, therefore, has entrances at different levels. The library was the-- The seminary, a graduate school, was the first building on the new campus. It was to be separate from the college, but not too separate, as it would share space in the library when it would be built later. Whiskey Creek, some trees, and a slight elevation clearly indicated an area in one corner of the property for the seminary. And where did I start off from on this?

VALENTINE

On the site?

FYFE

Oh yes. So the next buildings that were built were dormitories for the freshmen and the first phase of a library with three classrooms in it. It was a two-story building. Later, for a very big addition to the library we continued the two existing levels and added another level below grade. I attended a seminar on libraries at the University of Colorado. There the university has a lot of sub-basements in their library, and I thought, "Well, why couldn't we gain inexpensive space by having a sub-basement in this library?" So now we have another level down below grade, and that's how the front entrance is at the third floor. It's designed-- Every library needs to be designed for expansion because every library expands.

VALENTINE

That's right.

FYFE

So this library is designed to carry a fifth floor, eventually, and when I got around to doing a design for a fifth floor I fell in love with it. It's going to be cantilevered on three sides, and all those windows around the top will be great. If you have a study table next to a window, or if that space is devoted to offices--they might do that--it would be a wonderful place to be. That's number two. Number three in my short course is what the architect can bring to the project in terms of insights, experience, inventiveness, or knowledge. *[There you have it: program, site, expertise. Mr. Wright, I think, was able to perceive needs that clients themselves had not realized; thus he was able to

program buildings in unique ways. His adaptation to site is legendary. And his expertise--well, we'd be here a long time trying to cover that.]* Fyfe added the following bracketed section during his review of the transcript.

VALENTINE

Well, those are three biggies.

FYFE

Yes.

VALENTINE

To get all those things in balance means good architecture.

1.10. TAPE NUMBER: VI, SIDE ONE (OCTOBER 23, 1993)

VALENTINE

If that's what makes a good architect, what makes a good client?

FYFE

Well, again, that's a very penetrating question because an architect can't make great architecture without a good client. It's some kind of a chemistry that develops between the two, and respect for each other is an important ingredient, I think. What makes a good client?

VALENTINE

Is it just luck that you had so many good clients and that [Frank Lloyd] Wright had so many good clients?

FYFE

I think I worked hard, particularly at Calvin [College], in developing interactions and communication. In every instance--both Rockford [College] and Calvin, and in Kansas City [Missouri] as well--I worked with associate architects. There were four at Rockford, and in the case of Calvin, there were three different architects, all members of the Christian Reformed Church: [J. T.] Daverman and [James K.] Haveman in Grand Rapids [Michigan] and Stapert in Kalamazoo [Michigan]. Intentionally or unintentionally, an associate's office could ruin whatever we were trying to accomplish. So I made it a point to keep

lines of communication open with the associates and the client. With Calvin College, from the very beginning we decided that everything from the college to the architect would go through Henry DeWitt, and that turned out to be a very, very good choice.

VALENTINE

Who's he?

FYFE

He was the vice president for administration and finance. My first introduction to him was when we went to apply for the job, meeting the board of trustees: there was this young man that left the meeting to get some information from his office, and I thought, "Well, there's a lightweight boy." He just turned out-- Everybody respected him so much; by the end of his career he was tremendously effective. He was a hard worker. He would take the attitude that they're building not for next year, they're building for fifty years at least, so let's spend a little bit more and do it right. Afterwards he told me-- Every once in a while I'd make a suggestion. And after a while I became a little bit concerned, I guess is the right word, that if I said something, they just accepted it without question. That was more responsibility than I wanted. It turned out, I learned later, that sometimes I made some suggestions that Henry or the college thought were questionable. But I had a good track record, so they just accepted the suggestions, and they almost always worked out well. Everything went through Henry DeWitt, and that meant that we wouldn't get instructions from anybody else on the campus. It was centralized that way. Another reason that they were a good client at Calvin is that they-- All the departments were interested in the welfare of the total college. They weren't trying to make separate fiefdoms. When we came to doing the science building, there was a new man on campus as head of the department. He was the first one I encountered who was just pushing for his own department. He lasted about one and a half years. So there was a wonderful feeling on campus for the total college project.

VALENTINE

You know what I like about your architecture and why I think it's good? It's because it's so people oriented. Everything is aimed at how it will be used and how to make people comfortable in that space.

FYFE

That's right. It was a cardinal principle with me that the needs are spelled out and you have to meet those needs. But you try to make it so that--in the case of a college--that the teacher can do his job well, so the student can do his job well, and so that they'd be happy there. Of course this comes directly out of Frank Lloyd Wright. There was a quote that was in a little brochure that came from the [S. C.] Johnson Wax project [Johnson Wax Building, Racine, Wisconsin]. Is it there?

VALENTINE

I don't know. Is this it? "The Most Important Factor in Designing"?

FYFE

Sure.

VALENTINE

Read it.

FYFE

I clipped this out and put it with Scotch tape on a card along with a couple of other quotes, and I had it up in my office at Perkins and Will for many years.

VALENTINE

Read them all then.

FYFE

"The most important factor in designing," said Frank Lloyd Wright, "is the human value involved. If you make men and women proud of their environment and happy to be where they are and give them some dignity and pride in their environment, it all comes out to the good." These are quotes that in March 1990 I sent to a student at Calvin who was going to go into architecture. This one is by Lawrence B. Perkins: "Architecture is not a question of brick and mortar; it's a response to a problem, an idea. It's

planning for an intended result." And then I had a quote from Eero Saarinen: "We must have an emotional reason as well as a logical end for everything we do. Architecture is not just to fulfill men's need for shelter but also to fulfill men's belief in the nobility of his existence on earth." That's pretty high-flung, isn't it?

VALENTINE

Yes it is.

FYFE

But from his father [Eliel Saarinen], a noted Finnish architect, Eero learned always to design a thing by considering it in its next larger context--for instance, a chair in a room, a room in its building, a building in its environment, and an environment in a city, which I thought was pretty-- This was kind of high-level information that a student probably wouldn't get in a classroom. I got a nice letter back from the student.

VALENTINE

I didn't see the letter that you got back, but those are things you probably picked up by osmosis being on that campus.

FYFE

But making people happy to be where they are is important. I recall that when we started at Calvin the professors were keeping their private libraries at home, and as soon as their classes were done they were scooting home to do their work. So the college agreed to improve their office space in an effort to keep them on campus, and it worked. We started out with very nice offices in the seminary, the first building on campus. Always there was a place for their library. They had one easy chair for a constituent to sit in. They had, in those days, a place for a typewriter--of course, now they're all on computers--and a closet for their coats. It did work. The professors began staying on campus, and for the most part, were pleased. As the campus developed, each department seeing the last ones built wanted offices just a little bit bigger. Finally they demanded windows they could open. It got pretty fussy. I remember offices for the staff in the physical education department where one instructor wanted his windowsill lower so he could sit in his chair and look

out the window. If there were complaints, they never reached me, except sometimes through the student newspaper.

VALENTINE

What kind of complaints did they come up with besides that they needed lower windows so they could sit in their chairs?

FYFE

Well, on the addition to the student commons, on the east side I put some very small windows. Finally I insisted in every classroom-- I've sort of shifted gears here. A lot of the professors, I asked them what kind of classrooms they liked. Some of them used slides a lot so they didn't want windows. But I insisted that every classroom have one window at least.

VALENTINE

Good.

FYFE

But the ones that the students objected to I made very small on the east because of the morning sun coming in. Things like that. There was one other, but I can't remember what it was.

VALENTINE

Well, that's a pretty good track record for that many years.

FYFE

Yes. When we were designing for the-- I think it's interesting so I'll tell you about designing for the seminary. They listed their needs, and they had so many classrooms and so many seminar rooms. Every time, you're trying to meet a budget and make things more economical if possible. It turned out that the seminars were all in the afternoon, and the classes were in the morning. So we designed three classrooms at two levels. In the morning they would have the full complement of students at both levels for a classroom, and in the afternoon, they would have half as many students sitting around a table at the lower level for seminars. The upper level, roughly a horseshoe shape, produced a sort of well below for the table. That well was lined with a nice wood, walnut or cherry, so it was something like being in a study. Another

thing that happened out of that arrangement: there was great interaction between the professor and the students at the table and with all the people at the upper level, and there was great interaction student to student across the table and across the room. Most of the seminary professors loved it, and we introduced similar rooms every once in a while in the college. The chemistry people and the scientific people wanted their classrooms in three levels, which was traditional. It worked out well with lots of blackboards. For a time this was the type of classroom that seemed to be most acceptable. Later there were professors who wanted rooms on one level with no fixed chairs so that they could bring people into a circle or do anything--very flexible. So there's now a mix of many kinds of classrooms on the campus. Scale is terribly important. It's one of the hardest things to teach, this matter of scale, but that speaks to the humanness of the situation. We were very fortunate in the brick selection when we did the first building. Samples of about twenty different bricks were built just to make a selection. The nicest one was a brick that Eero Saarinen used frequently. I forget what it's called--buckskin, I think. But it was too expensive. The one we finally selected was close to it, and it turned out to be a very good selection. It works; it has a sand finish. I thought-- At one time when the library was under construction, somebody drew something on a brick interior wall with a felt pen, and oh my gosh, how are we going to get this out of the middle of a great big brick wall? Well, it just rubbed off because of the sand finish. It's a warm, rose kind of color. The photographs don't tell you that because the color photographs change the colors a lot. So it worked out very well. I have a brick in the studio if you want to see it.

VALENTINE

I'd like to see it. The things that you learned about architecture and that you just know about architecture--how much of that goes back to your experience at Taliesin or at Yale [University] or from your father [James Lincoln Fyfe] or from Paul Schweikher or from yourself? Or is it really a combination of all those things?

FYFE

Mostly Taliesin. Yes. Just in retrospect I can realize it. I think I told you that in one of my interviews with the students I said that I just got a lot out of it by osmosis. Really I meant that just by being at Taliesin, I was picking up on it

without making it an issue and not really paying very much attention at the time. Mr. Wright's buildings, if you try to analyze them, are very mysterious. Some people even call it a spiritual quality. But nothing is ever exposed just immediately on first view. Something always brings you around a corner or up or down changes in levels: ceilings change, views develop. I never felt enjoined by the college to frugality, but this campus in Grand Rapids in particular was incredibly economical. When most college science buildings were being built, for instance, at about \$50 a square foot, this one was built for \$26 a square foot. It was a plan that concentrated all the expensive utilities in a core, including the elevator. Then you could feed out to laboratories and classrooms and other places easily. And all the partitions could be moved easily, as the walls were nonstructural. We finally discovered the least expensive partition was a heavyweight concrete block. And they're expendable. You want to use heavyweight blocks for sound attenuation. If sound attenuation was very important, why, then we filled the blocks with sand.

VALENTINE

So it's like the [Malcolm E. and Nancy] Willey House, where budgetary constrictions made the design much more exciting.

FYFE

Surely. And I think Mr. Wright was growing--

VALENTINE

What would you have done differently if you had had the budget? Where would you have spent it?

FYFE

I don't know. I can't think offhand of anything we would-- But every time we did something we knew was spending a little extra money, it was done with discretion and full of knowledge that we were doing it. One great disappointment I had--this does not have anything to do with architecture, this has to do with college campuses. Initially, I proposed a program similar to universities in England and somewhat like the separate colleges at Yale. There were to be five colleges called "guilds." They were to be self-sustaining units with a kitchen and dining and living rooms and some classrooms, and the

several colleges would use the same gyms and libraries--some of the central features. The president was all for it, but he couldn't sell it to his faculty. I was greatly disappointed about that. Every once in a while those drawings emerge and I look at them again and wish they had been built. I truly believe they would have fit Calvin's program well.

VALENTINE

Yes.

FYFE

It would have been fascinating. It would have helped them in their growth because they could just do one guild at a time. And when they had that many more students, do another guild. But the faculty didn't come on board and that program never went ahead.

VALENTINE

It's been sixty years since you were at Taliesin. What do you realize now about that experience that you didn't know then?

FYFE

Oh golly. I don't know. I think even when I left I had some concern that it was too much oriented toward one person--Mr. Wright. And I think I was right. All I can judge by is the printed material that continues. I have yet to see anything that I get excited about done by other apprentices. I know I don't see very much. This is heresy. I don't know if this should go on the tape or not.

VALENTINE

Put it on. You have nothing to lose. [laughter]

FYFE

I don't resonate to a lot of the later things that Mr. Wright did. I'm thinking of the [Grady Gammage Memorial] Auditorium [Tempe, Arizona] and I'm thinking of the [Marin] County [Civic Center, San Rafael, California] building. The county building is ringed with balls that make one think of a pawnshop.

VALENTINE

Yes.

FYFE

And I don't know, but I suspect [William] Wes [Wesley] Peters was responsible for those. But I must quickly add that when we went up to a seminar at Taliesin in Spring Green [Wisconsin] one time there was an in-depth slide show of the palace that he did in Iran. Beautiful, incredible--if you can accept the fact that a palace should be built. That was Wes's design, I believe.

VALENTINE

One of the criticisms of Taliesin has always been that the people who go there, and especially the people who stay there, don't really develop a style of their own. It's largely imitative. And yet people like [E.] Fay Jones and John Lautner and these great talents have come out of there. What's the difference between who gets it and takes it and runs with it, develops it, and who doesn't?

FYFE

That's interesting. Now, Fay Jones is my notion of an excellent architect. Incredibly great. And he was only there for a very short time.

VALENTINE

A few months, yes.

FYFE

John Lautner was there for about six years, but I don't know any of John Lautner's work.

VALENTINE

Well, it's very original.

FYFE

Is it?

VALENTINE

Yes. Very strong. And takes the principle and the philosophy of what Taliesin was about and develops his own idiom with it, I think.

FYFE

Well, gee, I hope to be able to see some of it sometime.

VALENTINE

Oh, I'll send you some pictures of it.

FYFE

Oh, you have some? I'd love to see them. Yes, xerox them. One time Calvin wanted to put a fax machine in here. [laughter] I just didn't want to be that close to-- You can't fax them, but I'd love to see them. Did you indicate to me that his health isn't the best right now?

VALENTINE

Yes, I understand he's been very sick the last few months.

FYFE

What kind of sickness?

VALENTINE

He has some kind of muscle problem or weakness.

FYFE

Is most of his work in California?

VALENTINE

Southern California, Los Angeles area. And some in Mexico and the Southwest.

FYFE

A variety of types of buildings?

VALENTINE

Mostly houses. But do you see a difference in people who stayed there for a long time versus people who were there a short time? Or is there a difference in the people who went there and their own innate personality or talent--that they were able to get it and go somewhere with it?

FYFE

I'm not that well acquainted. You would know much better than I. Is it Christine Brierly?

VALENTINE

Cornelia Brierly?

FYFE

Cornelia Brierly. I've heard her talk and I read a couple of things she's written, and I suspect that she was and is a valuable part of Taliesin. I don't know the others--

VALENTINE

Well, how did you break away from just imitating what Wright was doing to developing your own understanding of those principles?

FYFE

Well, again, by osmosis. I told you that I get very much wrapped up in the beginning of any project. Even if it's a house. I've lost clients-- One time, Mary [Pollock] Endres [Fyfe] was married to Ronald Endres and they wanted me to design a house for them, so I went to interview them and began asking questions. Have you heard this before?

VALENTINE

No.

FYFE

It led to a divorce.

VALENTINE

[laughter] I had no idea.

FYFE

So I never got around to designing that house. I get very involved in trying to know what a client wants to do. In Seattle, Washington, I went to live with Dr. [John] Ingle, his wife, Joyce, and two children for about a week to find out what their needs really were. I expend a great deal of energy and time

wrestling through whatever a project is, its uniqueness, and what is really involved.

VALENTINE

But you finally did design a house for Mary [Dr. Mary P. Endres House, West Lafayette, Indiana].

FYFE

Oh yes.

VALENTINE

A wonderful house.

FYFE

Yes. I'm very proud of that one. Because it works--

VALENTINE

It's a beautiful house. I don't know how she could give it up.

FYFE

She gave it up when she went to Governors State [University]. The house had a lot of flow spaces, but Mary could have privacy by just going up the stairs to a landing where there is a bathroom, laundry, and clothes closets, and then she could go up a few more steps to her bedroom, study, and worktable. Then at a lower level there were two bedrooms, bath, and kitchenette. So it adapted itself, I would say, easily to thirty guests or just to be alone.

VALENTINE

Yes. She says the house worked wonderfully well for her life-style of being alone part of the time and taking people in and giving them shelter.

FYFE

We did plan a deck, which would have been fun. It was planned to go around a tree with the tree going through the deck, but that didn't get built.

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FYFE

I've had difficulties with other clients. I started a house for a couple, Bill [William] and Dorothy Weers here in Woodstock [Illinois], and the two just wouldn't resolve any problem. They had a great many problems between them and they wouldn't solve them. It wasn't too far into the preliminary drawings when I had Bill come here, and I had a check ready to give him back all the fees so far. I just wanted out. The plan had a good principle involved. It was built for their elderly years with all main rooms on one floor. Upstairs was a space under a big roof for Dorothy, who's very intelligent and has files on everything. And downstairs, space opened out to a garden. Bill was a nurseryman and chemist. So the basement was Bill's and the attic was Dorothy's and they lived happily ever.

VALENTINE

It probably helped. Tell me about your life now. How is your retirement?

FYFE

We're both showing our age dramatically in the last two years. Losing memory. [Mary Fyfe enters room and joins conversation] Did you hear that question? MARY

FYFE

No.

FYFE

Repeat the question.

VALENTINE

I said, how's your retirement? Tell me about your life now. How did you meet Mary?

FYFE

Oh, that's interesting. When Mary was county superintendent of schools, as you know, Peggy and I had our first son, Beye [Fyfe]. So that's 1943. I'd come from Oak Park [Illinois], where we had a wonderful school system. Out here these were all one-room schoolhouses in the country and no kindergartens, so

I took it upon myself to see the county superintendent of schools to talk about getting a kindergarten going. And the county superintendent of schools, flabbergasted by a layperson coming in to talk about schools, invited me out for coffee and Danish. And so that's how we first met. MARY

FYFE

And in just a few weeks I was invited for supper or lunch or something or other, [laughter] and that's when I first met Peg [Margaret Veuve Reeder Fyfe]. And we've known each other ever since. When Maggie asks you a question, I think you should answer. [laughter]

FYFE

Why, I did.

VALENTINE

[laughter] And then when Peggy died, you married Mary. And that was when?

FYFE

1984. July 3, 6--? MARY

FYFE

Eighth. [laughter]

FYFE

And Mary was a Quaker, so we had a Quaker ceremony, which you may know--or maybe you don't know. Nobody performs it. We just stood up in the middle of our meeting--we call a church service a meeting--and said our vows to each other and then we signed the marriage license. It's legal in Illinois.

VALENTINE

That's nice.

FYFE

And all the twenty people present signed a certificate of marriage. MARY

FYFE

And then we had a reception in a good friend's backyard, where they had arranged--wasn't just potluck--a wonderful meal. Then we moved here, a hundred miles away.

VALENTINE

What role does architecture play in your life today?

FYFE

Oh. I guess if we have a favorite son, it might be John [Corwin Fyfe]. He is a veterinarian living in Maryland. He and his wife Linda [Mansfield] bought a wonderful piece of property back in some woods. It's a place where they can keep their horses and any other livestock that they want to have. And it will always stay that way. But the house on it is dreadful. [laughter] So they asked me to-- Anyway, I thought the assignment was just to take that house and do some things to help it out. So that is one project. And for our yearly meeting, Quaker meeting, near McNabb, Illinois, we worked out a couple of designs for their meeting house. It's on the [National] Register [of Historic Places] now. Additions were happening to it that didn't respect the initial building. I think they have come around to seeing the necessity of preserving the original design. And I gave them some drawings. One of Mary's favorite places, the Fine Line, is a great big barn for art-- MARY

FYFE

Creative arts--mainly weaving but lots of other things, too: jewelry, dyeing, ceramics, paper making--

FYFE

But it is a real barn. They sandblasted all exposed structures inside to a beautiful golden brown. And it's very much respected, the barn, but they did need more space. So I proposed a shed to be attached at one point, and if the shed is extended it will cover an addition that had been poorly conceived when Denise [Kavanagh], the leading light of Fine Line, was in the hospital. So what else have I done architecturally? MARY

FYFE

Well, I suppose you talked about how long you stayed with Calvin--over thirty years?

VALENTINE

You still read about it an awful lot too, don't you?

FYFE

They have about six projects that they would like me to do, and I would like to do them--additions to buildings that are there already. And at one time, before my eyes gave out, the plan was that I would do them and the drawings would be "put on the shelf" for when they might be needed. The student population ceased its upward spiral, and income has leveled off. I don't think they've done any building of substance since I left. But I'd dearly love to have finished those projects. I don't think I'll ever get to do them now. I had a cataract operation recently that didn't work out. I can still make good drawings, but it's tedious. Sometimes I even have to use a magnifying glass to be sure the lines meet. MARY

FYFE

Working with Bill Nelson.

FYFE

Oh yes. Maybe I told you about our trade-off? Bill Nelson is in our meeting and he's an interesting guy. He's an inventor with a delightful wife and two of the nicest children you could possibly imagine; they've grown up in our meeting. Little Andrew [Nelson] was-- Eight weeks old? MARY

FYFE

Eight days old when he first came to meeting.

FYFE

Now they have purchased rural property out west fifty miles down Rock River. They're in a beautiful area-- have a stream going through their property. They've made a pond and planted thousands of trees. Now Bill wants to design his own house and build it himself. He makes drawings on his computer, and I have the problem of deciphering those into an eighth-inch scale. And so I'm working with Bill and he's doing carpentry here on our home in exchange. I enjoy it because of the way his mind works; it's lots of fun.

VALENTINE

And you still read about Frank Lloyd Wright. You've come full circle from your Oak Park days.

FYFE

Oh yes. Over the years, if I got a clipping--and a lot of people send me clippings--I'd throw them into a pile and sort those out for George [A. Talbot III] to look at. I don't think he paid much attention to them.

VALENTINE

Oh, I think he did.

FYFE

So I don't know what-- They really aren't important unless someone is trying to build up a Frank Lloyd Wright file. Anyway, they're available here if they want them. MARY

FYFE

You can have copies. He will have copies of all of this?

VALENTINE

Yes. MARY

FYFE

So there's something you can put in the file. That's pretty comprehensive.

FYFE

Well, I get to make some corrections and additions, don't I?

VALENTINE

You'll get to edit it.

FYFE

The word I couldn't come up with--the system of teaching architecture at Yale when I was there--was the [École de] Beaux-Arts system.

VALENTINE

Yes. The parti system. Well, I want to thank you for taking the time and sharing your life with us and providing a valuable resource for research about Frank Lloyd Wright and the experience at Taliesin.

FYFE

*[Maggie, it seems to me as I recall our discussions of the last few days--which I've much enjoyed-- that these two years, '32 and '34, were years of transition for Mr. Wright. Surely the fellowship shift from school to apprenticeship is one marked transition. And it seems to me that Mr. Wright's turn to his Usonian phase was exemplified in the two Malcolm [E.] Willey designs. And it seems to me the change of the fireplace at the end of the Hillside Drafting [Studio] marked a return to Mr. Wright's sense of "occult" design.]

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