

## A TEI Project

# Interview of John Lautner

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## 1. Transcript

### 1.1. TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE ONE (APRIL 16, 1994)

VALENTINE

This is kind of a follow-up to the oral history you already did with UCLA ["Responsibility, Infinity, Nature," 1986; interviewed by Marlene L. Laskey, 1982], so we're not going to talk about your background or your own personal career, but just the years at Taliesin from 1933 to 1939. Anyone who wants further information should consult the previous oral history. I want to talk about what attracted you first to go to Taliesin in 1933.

LAUTNER

What attracted me?

VALENTINE

Uh-huh.

LAUTNER

Well, that was the year I graduated from college, and while I was in college, and school in general, I kept analyzing and trying to figure out the best kind of life work. And it seemed to me at that time that most of the work that people got into became ruts and repetitive, boring things where by the time they were forty years old, they were either bored to death or dead. My father [John E. Lautner Sr.] was a professor and my mother [Vida Cathleen Gallagher Lautner] was a painter, so I was brought up in a philosophical, everything

good, beauty in nature in northern Michigan environment. Everything was aimed at ideal everything. So my mother ran across the Frank Lloyd Wright autobiography [An Autobiography: Frank Lloyd Wright] right at that time and discovered that he had just started the Taliesin apprentice training. And I knew right then that that's where I wanted to go, because I helped my father build a house and a log cabin and I had studied some architecture in school. I'd taken some drafting in high school, but I hated drafting because I couldn't keep a neat pencil and a neat everything. I knew that in the academic world, if I went to a typical architectural school, I'd just be graded for neat. [laughter] I was concerned about ideas and real architecture, which Frank Lloyd Wright was concerned with. That's a whole new world in architecture, and they still put it down and don't understand it. Academia goes merrily along with the styles and the fads and the superficiality, unfortunately. So it's very irritating to see what goes on, but I've existed in spite of the commercial, superficial profession.

VALENTINE

Not just existed but thrived.

LAUTNER

Yeah.

VALENTINE

Artistically. What did you know about Wright's architecture before you went there?

LAUTNER

Nothing, nothing. Who else--? Nobody knew anything. It's just the autobiography was enough to inspire anybody.

VALENTINE

Had you seen any of his Prairie School houses?

LAUTNER

I hadn't seen anything; just went there to study architecture, to be an apprentice.

VALENTINE

What did you expect when you got there?

LAUTNER

Well, I expected a genius and he was a genius. And I was shy and scared and it was hard for me to talk with him, for me to say anything, because I felt I might say something too dumb for him to even listen to. So it was a little difficult for me that way. But he was so warm and friendly that even if you were young and ignorant it was an ideal, beautiful situation all the time.

VALENTINE

How many other apprentices were there when you arrived?

LAUTNER

About twenty. There were never more than thirty the whole six, seven years that I was there. I was there at an ideal time, and he was with us all the time. We had the benefit of Mr. Wright personally being with us practically all day long, every day.

VALENTINE

And where were you assigned to live when you first got there?

LAUTNER

Planning to live?

VALENTINE

Where were you assigned? What room were you given? Who made those decisions?

LAUTNER

Well, Mr. Wright made all decisions. I was married. I got married at the same time.

VALENTINE

Did you get married before you went there or after you got there?

LAUTNER

Before, I think. Just before. So we got a room down below Wright's quarters in the main house.

VALENTINE

How did you convince your wife [Marybud Faustina Roberts Lautner] to go to Taliesin?

LAUTNER

Well, she was very much interested too. So I didn't have to convince her; she loved the idea anyway.

VALENTINE

Was she going to be an architect also?

LAUTNER

Well, not necessarily, but she was interested in the arts and interested in everything. She could play the violin and the piano and-- Well, she was interested in everything. She still is.

VALENTINE

What can you say about your impressions when you first got there? The other people there, the life-style, the beautiful surroundings. Do you remember?

LAUTNER

Oh, sure, I remember. Well, I just-- Amazing, beautiful place. The first time I'd really experienced real architecture, except that I was born in a house in Marquette [Michigan] where my mother arranged for an architect from Maine to do a Salem house--a 1620 Salem house--which is a good piece of architecture traditionally. But Frank Lloyd Wright was nontradition, so it was very interesting to see and hear him describe the real meaning and potentials of architecture.

VALENTINE

What was Marybud--? What was her background like? Your wife.

LAUTNER

Well, she had everything. She went to Smith College. She had everything that anybody ever wanted, that's all. Wealthy family: her grandfather [John M. Longyear] owned half of northern Michigan. They had a house in Maine and a house in Marquette and entertained the governors and the presidents, so she's seen a lot. Very brilliant mother [Abby Beecher Roberts] and brilliant grandfather.

VALENTINE

Interested in architecture also.

LAUTNER

Yeah, yeah.

VALENTINE

Who do you remember when you first got there?

LAUTNER

What do I remember?

VALENTINE

Of the other apprentices. No, who? What impressions did you have of the people who were already there?

LAUTNER

Well, my main memory is of Mr. Wright, who was the most fantastic all-around man I ever met in my life. It was just so exciting being with him and hearing his ideas about everything in the universe. That was the whole life and the whole excitement. The other apprentices--some of them to me were kind of strange kids that I didn't particularly know or particularly like. I mean, they were all different kinds. So I was good friends with two or three and I knew them all, but most of them were just more distant friends.

VALENTINE

Do you think they all had the same kinds of experience there? The same kinds of goals?

LAUTNER

What?

VALENTINE

That they came for the same kinds of reasons and had the same experience?  
Or was yours unique?

LAUTNER

Well, I can't say that. I mean, that's their story.

VALENTINE

Yeah. I just wondered if you ever talked about it with them?

LAUTNER

No, no, I never asked them why they came. I mean, why should I? [laughter]  
That's an academic question. [laughter]

VALENTINE

Sorry about that.

LAUTNER

That's a filler-in. The kind I don't like.

VALENTINE

[laughter] Okay, fine. What was a typical day like there?

LAUTNER

Oh, it was great. You've interviewed other apprentices, I guess, haven't you?

VALENTINE

Uh-huh.

LAUTNER

Anyway, one of the best things was that there was only one rule that Mr. Wright maintained, and that was you had to get up for breakfast. So if you were late, you didn't get any breakfast. If you were working hard on the farm or carpentry or stonework or what have you all morning long and you didn't have any breakfast, you'd get pretty faint. So you figured out pretty quickly

that you had to show up for breakfast. Otherwise, you're a free, independent apprentice to do the best you can with your own initiative and your own ability, and you're on your own. As Mr. Wright said, you're exposed to the environment and either it takes or it doesn't take. There were guys there from graduate school at Harvard [University] and they didn't know what to do because they didn't have any classes. So they sat in their room and played cards and they finally left. It was a total mystery to them because they didn't have organized classes like they have in the university. So Mr. Wright figured out that the best apprentices were high school. College students had too much to unlearn. They couldn't learn anything because they were already prejudiced by academia.

VALENTINE

Did you spend most of your time in the studio?

LAUTNER

No. Oh, no. I spent most of my time as a steamfitter. I liked it. And I didn't like drafting much. As I say, I couldn't do it neat. But I liked to do it enough to build something, and that's what I learned. I could get down enough work on paper to-- Well, I couldn't then, but I learned later, you know. I took the regular-- It was real apprentice training. I did carpentry and not much stonework, but plumbing and steam fitting and some drafting and some work on the farm.

VALENTINE

How did you learn those skills?

LAUTNER

By doing them there.

VALENTINE

Did people show you or did you learn by hard luck?

LAUTNER

You learn by doing it. That's the premise of the whole apprentice training. And of course, I knew carpentry when I came there because I learned that from my father helping him build. So I could do carpentry work when I came.

VALENTINE

When you were in the studio, did you have the opportunity to watch Wright work on designs?

LAUTNER

Oh, sure. All the time. Anybody could. You could stand right there and watch him and talk to him. I was right there when he designed the [Liliane S. and Edgar J.] Kaufmann House [Fallingwater] on Bear Run [Mill Run, Pennsylvania]. I was standing right there. He did the whole thing in about twenty minutes. He could design something and carry on a conversation with two or three people at the same time. He was absolutely amazing.

VALENTINE

Now, had he worked out that design in his head?

LAUTNER

Sure.

VALENTINE

And just put it down on paper when you saw it?

LAUTNER

That's the way he did everything. And he accented that in his talking with us: that you don't make sketches, you have to have an idea, and when you have the idea you can put it down. So that's the way I worked all my life.

VALENTINE

Would he describe what he was doing and why he was doing it as he talked to you?

LAUTNER

No, he didn't get that-- Occasionally. But it was mostly philosophical, not specific details of drafting or anything like that.

VALENTINE

I mean, sight location or the prevailing winds or--?

LAUTNER

Sure, he'd point out the specifics of what happened with a particular job. [Fallingwater] I remember very vividly. People don't understand it even now. A lot of people don't know about it. He used on a lot of houses and buildings a unit system, which was convenient for dimensioning and consequently for building and so forth. Like later on in some of the typical houses he used a four-foot module--sometimes hexagonal, sometimes a triangle. But in the Bear Run house over the waterfall, there were rocks down below where he decided would be the foundation. Those rocks were 13 feet 6 [inches] on center, so he put stone pillars 13 feet 6 [inches] on center, under. That was the horizontal unit system. The typical academic--you know, all they know is four feet or two feet; they don't know anything else. They couldn't imagine inventing a different idea because they don't know what the meaning is.

VALENTINE

Exactly.

LAUTNER

It's all superficial and artificial. So that's real.

VALENTINE

Did he describe that as he was drawing it, or did you discover that later?

LAUTNER

Well, he-- No, he did point that out as the foundation so that everybody knew the horizontal unit system for that particular house. Anybody working on it knew what was happening.

VALENTINE

Did he redo it much after that first drawing?

LAUTNER

No. He had the whole thing in his head and he put it down. Never changed. It was all there.

VALENTINE

How much time passed between when he got that commission and when he drew that drawing, do you know? How much time did he spend ruminating on it and working it out in his head? Do you have any idea?

LAUTNER

I don't think it would be more than two or three weeks because he went down there to look at it, and as I remember he came back on a train. There was practically no airplane travel at that time. He had it all in his head when he came back on the train, and he came into the studio the next morning and there it was. Boom.

VALENTINE

What did you think when you first saw that drawing?

LAUTNER

What did I think? Well, I think "I'm in an office of a genius."

VALENTINE

That is such a beautiful house.

LAUTNER

Yeah.

VALENTINE

Everything about it is so wonderful.

LAUTNER

Well, they all are. They're all based on ideas.

VALENTINE

Particularly that one, though, it's so breathtaking with the landscape and the waterfall and the trees.

LAUTNER

Well, I don't know. I think that a lot of other ones I prefer. This one's been--

VALENTINE

Really?

LAUTNER

This one's been advertised. I think that I have an opinion of my own that he was so disgusted with the International style that he partly did this tongue in cheek, to knock out the International style, which it did. It was similar and it beat all of them at that. But with those flat ceilings, you don't get the kind of beautiful, flowing spaces that you get in the rest of his work. So to me, I'd rather live in almost any other job than that. I don't want to live in that one because it's a flat ceiling and it's not that interesting an interior space. The big things are the interior, the disappearing interior--flowing spaces. But nobody knows because they judge-- Everybody copies everybody else. Everybody says the same thing. Everybody repeats the same photograph. Blah, blah, blah. Media-made junk. So that's what we're up against.

VALENTINE

Which house would you prefer to live in of his?

LAUTNER

Oh, my God. I don't know. I mean, I would have loved to live in the [Avery] Coonley House [Riverside, Illinois] or the-- I remember we visited the ex-governor [Henry J.] Allen House in Wichita [Kansas] on one of the trips from Wisconsin to Arizona, and that was the first time I saw-- It just hit me: joy and repose all at the same time. It's a fantastic, magic quality that nobody in the world except Mr. Wright got. And it was just unbelievable. That's the kind of environment I like.

VALENTINE

After he finished the drawings for a project, let's say Fallingwater, what would be the next step? Would he turn those drawings over to someone else to work out the details? Who would it be?

LAUTNER

Well, they'd have to finish the working drawings, yeah.

VALENTINE

Who would do that?

LAUTNER

Generally, there were about four or five guys who were excellent draftsmen. Of course, one in particular, Jack [John H.] Howe, did most of the working drawings or most of the preliminary drawings. He did most of the drawing, period, he was so fast. But [Robert K.] Mosher and [Edgar] Tafel and Wes [William Wesley Peters]--they did the structural working drawings from the preliminary design.

VALENTINE

And then what would the next step be in the process? I want you to take me through--

LAUTNER

Well, whoever worked on it the most would become the superintendent and--

VALENTINE

Is that how it was done?

LAUTNER

--go to the job for the construction. So that was a perfect experience. Like I worked on my deceased mother-in-law's house [Abby Beecher Roberts House, "Deertrack," Marquette, Michigan], which is the first job I worked on. I made the drawings and I superintended the construction. So that's the ideal experience. That's the total apprentice training.

VALENTINE

So you did the working drawings for that?

LAUTNER

Yeah. Well, most of them.

VALENTINE

Did you bring her in as a client?

LAUTNER

Well, she came by herself because her daughter and I were there. Nobody could bring her anywhere; she decided everything herself.

VALENTINE

How much did she know about what she wanted out of a house? How much did Wright help elucidate what she wanted?

LAUTNER

Well, that was one of the tough ones. He said he had something like four or five women in the whole history of his career that he couldn't work with and she was one of them. [laughter] I mean, she was. It was a bad job altogether.

VALENTINE

Really?

LAUTNER

Yeah, because she-- We did Broadacre City at the time and she saw some of the models and she picked one out that she wanted, so it wasn't necessarily designed for the woods or for her to begin with. Because she liked the look of it, she dictated, "I want that one." And he'd never had that happen before at all. It was always a specific solution to suit. And then she said, I'm just-- She's divorced and the kids are grown up so she says, "I want a one-woman house." So then when he does it, the dining room is just part of the living room and only takes about six people. And she'd blow up and say, "Do you realize I have fifteen, twenty people for Thanksgiving dinner?" Rah, rah, rah. It was that kind of stuff with that kind of a woman. So I don't want to go into all that.

VALENTINE

It seems to me that house is site-specific with a view of those woods.

LAUTNER

It's beautiful in the woods.

VALENTINE

Yeah.

LAUTNER

And open to the woods. It's fantastic to be in that living room. But it's no good for the snow. There's a lot of flat roof and not enough pitched roof, so they had a hell of a time with it leaking and everything.

VALENTINE

I just wondered if she got the house in Broadacre City that she thought she wanted or got something better that you snuck in on her.

LAUTNER

No, just what she asked for.

VALENTINE

How was your experience working with her, since you supervised the building?

LAUTNER

Well, it was-- I didn't know enough-- I didn't get into changing anything. I just did it according to Mr. Wright's plans. And I didn't-- I hadn't enough experience to improve details, or I wouldn't do it anyway. Nobody did anything without Mr. Wright's approval. He did everything. Except like in this one, if I'd had more experience I would have done a better electrical system, and I would have done several other things, I guess. But that was the beginning.

VALENTINE

Your daughter [Karol Lautner Peterson] is living there now, right?

LAUTNER

Yeah.

VALENTINE

Does the house still hold up?

LAUTNER

Her husband [Bruce Peterson] is a carpenter, so he put a new roof--a pitched roof--over the main part of it that had been too flat. He just did that in the last few years, and it's now improved so that they can finally gradually rehabilitate stuff inside.

VALENTINE

You said that nobody would dare change Wright's ideas and drawings, but I've heard that William Wesley Peters used to put more steel in the structures. Does that count for changing?

LAUTNER

No, I don't think so. It was just-- It was protecting Mr. Wright, really, because he loved to have a long cantilever, you know, and he loved to stick-- If it was wood, it would be all wood. If it was steel, it would be all steel. If it was concrete, it would be all concrete. And he kept ideal everything, you know. So from an engineering standpoint, sometimes those wood members wouldn't be big enough, and Wes as an engineer knew that they were going to sag. Rather than have a sagging roof, he'd stick some extra steel in there so that twenty years from now they wouldn't be yelling at Mr. Wright for poor construction. So it was a protection.

VALENTINE

What was Wright's attitude about that?

LAUTNER

Well, he didn't like-- He'd argue. He was very stubborn about some of those things. It was because he liked to keep pure everything. Everything pure. So it's all right.

VALENTINE

The next job you supervised was Wingspread [Herbert F. Johnson House, Wind Point, Wisconsin], the house for "Hib" Johnson.

LAUTNER

Yeah.

VALENTINE

And you did the working drawings and supervised that one?

LAUTNER

Well, I did some of the working drawings but the boys in the office did most of the working drawings. I full-size detailed the windows and doors, those big high ones, and so I got a kick out of that--to see how I could do it. And then it was a real pleasure, because we had a cabinet shop in Milwaukee, the same one that did the Waldorf-Astoria [Hotel, New York] and the [United States] Supreme Court building. They would full-size detail the whole house, all the woodwork. I'd go down to Milwaukee and check. There'd be five-foot-wide drawings thirty feet long on these big tables. Everything in the house full size. And the house just went together like a cabinet because the contractor and the cabinet outfit were so good that it was just a dream. Nothing like that happens now. I mean, when I came out here, they didn't even know what a shop drawing was. It's just coming to a land of butchers compared to civilized.

VALENTINE

Why is that? Why does the West Coast lag behind?

LAUTNER

Because all they care about is money. Speculation. Dirty, cheating bastards, that's what they are.

VALENTINE

But not in Wisconsin?

LAUTNER

No. They're different in the North, in the Middle West. They're more honorable; there's no doubt about it. The crooks get kicked out of town. Here the crooks live.

VALENTINE

[laughter] There may be some truth in that.

LAUTNER

Yeah.

VALENTINE

You probably learned a lot about supervision by the time you got to Wingspread from your first job.

LAUTNER

Well, you just keep learning forever.

VALENTINE

And what was Johnson like to work with as a client?

LAUTNER

Oh, he was fine. Mr. Wright practically saved his life. He was about forty-five and he had everything in the world. He had houses all over the world; he had airplanes, boats, yachts; and I think he was essentially bored to death. Mr. Wright rejuvenated his life, taught him about how to live and the beauties of nature and music and architecture. He turned him around. So that was a fantastic thing.

VALENTINE

Yeah. You once said that you can't do anything better to improve your life than living in great architecture.

LAUTNER

No. So I was lucky. I saw him one time not too many years after it was finished. I met him at his office and went to his house for lunch. I had the full experience of living in a whole new world, which is what Mr. Wright gave Johnson. He gave him a whole new world. But you know, the media and all the rest of them--they don't understand any of that. None of that stuff comes out. It's just the roof leaks or they have trouble with the glass tubing and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. Picayune crap.

VALENTINE

Or what it looks like rather than what it feels like.

LAUTNER

Well, just picayune stuff, that's all. It's sickening. I tell people they shouldn't read anything that anybody else writes. They should just read what Mr. Wright wrote. All the rest of it is crap.

VALENTINE

Well, he's the one who really knows his work the best.

LAUTNER

Yeah. But it keeps going on and on.

VALENTINE

Yeah. How did the clients tend to treat the apprentices?

LAUTNER

The clients? Well, they were very good. If Mr. Wright assigned a certain apprentice to a certain job, they were happy. They accepted the young man as part of the building process.

VALENTINE

What was your experience like on the [George D.] Sturges House [Brentwood Heights, California]?

LAUTNER

Well, it was difficult to get through the building department because it didn't have any typical walls or typical anything. The code here, for instance, requires two-by-fours at 16 inches on center. That's a minimum wall in a one story. But fortunately, the head of the department was an old-timer, something like the man that Mr. Wright had when he was building here. There were like forty or fifty points that were against the code, which doesn't mean that there's anything bad; it's just against the code. So I finally, luckily, met with the head of the department and he crossed off the forty-five points that the checkers were quibbling about--technicalities--and we got it built.

VALENTINE

How were you able to convince him to do that?

LAUTNER

I don't know. I have a certain amount of brains and a certain amount of ability which I'd use, that's all.

VALENTINE

Did Wright's reputation enter into that?

LAUTNER

I don't know. I don't know. I think this guy was a more independent, reasonable kind of a guy anyway. Most of them are strictly routine.

VALENTINE

What were the Sturgeses like as clients to work with?

LAUTNER

Well, they were kind of strange. They loved the house, and yet they did and they didn't. I never saw them after they sold it. So I don't really know what their feeling was, themselves. But we were good friends and we used to go out there to visit or have dinner every once in a while.

VALENTINE

When the house was done? Or while you were building it?

LAUTNER

After it was done.

VALENTINE

You had started a family by that time, right?

LAUTNER

When I came here, yeah. Nineteen thirty-nine, I had my first child. So that's when I came here to superintend the Sturges House and build my own house.

VALENTINE

At the same time?

LAUTNER

Yeah.

VALENTINE

Did Wright allow that?

LAUTNER

Well, yeah. He okayed my superintending the Sturges House, so I was here.

## 1.2. TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE TWO (APRIL 16, 1994)

LAUTNER

I have people do it and then it's not working.

VALENTINE

Oh, it's working.

LAUTNER

And then they want to do it over again, and I tell them to go to hell.

VALENTINE

I don't blame you. I just wondered how you felt about doing jobs on your own at the same time you were working for the [Taliesin] Fellowship--if that ever became a problem.

LAUTNER

Well, sure. He didn't like anybody doing work. He did all the work. He did everything. And so anybody would be silly to try to do anything outside. But it was a smoother transition than some for me because Mr. Wright did a house for Bell and a house for Maurer, and neither one of the clients could afford his plans, which he knew. So he okayed my doing the work for those clients, and that was fine.

VALENTINE

Why didn't you have Wright design your house?

LAUTNER

Well, I wanted to be on my own. I knew I had to sometime. I would have preferred to stay at Taliesin because it's such a beautiful life, but I had to get started on my own sometime. And when I came here and drove down Santa Monica Boulevard, it was so goddamn ugly I was physically sick for about a year, because I'd been used to the beauties of everything--everything beautiful. And here everything's ugly. It's just exactly the opposite. I couldn't imagine doing anything as ugly as Los Angeles.

VALENTINE

But in your own work, you went such a different direction. You've got the principles of organic architecture, but made such different kinds of buildings.

LAUTNER

Well, that's what Mr. Wright wanted. The infinite variety of nature. So everyone's an individual thing. And that's what I did.

VALENTINE

What's "California" about your work?

LAUTNER

What's California? Nothing. It's just-- Well, it suits the sites and it suits the climate, but it has nothing to do with California fads, fashions, and merchandise.

VALENTINE

It goes deeper than that.

LAUTNER

Yeah.

VALENTINE

Did you ever find Wright to be anti-Semitic? Did that ever cause a problem?

LAUTNER

No, no. He had a lot of Jewish clients. Kaufmann is Jewish, [Solomon R.] Guggenheim--in fact, most of my clients are Jewish because they're the only ones with guts enough to do anything. Guts and brains. The typical white American Republican is the most backward, status-quo individual in the world. They won't do anything. Nothing.

VALENTINE

When you started your own office, did you run it pretty much the way Wright had run his studio?

LAUTNER

Well, sure. Informal, and letting people do what they could do to help. So it all worked out kind of naturally. I didn't organize like the typical office and say, "You do foundations, you do stair details, you do this, blah, blah, blah." You know, I never did any of that stuff.

VALENTINE

How did you find employees? What did you look for in an employee?

LAUTNER

Oh, I didn't look. They just came. [laughter]

VALENTINE

You had to make choices on who to hire. What qualities were you looking for?

LAUTNER

Well, I was too easy. I was lucky that most of the people who came wanted to work with me because they discovered I was doing original, real stuff, not just styles. And so if I could afford to and if I had enough work, I'd have them work for me. But some of the time I'd think they were going to be all right, and then they weren't much good and I'd keep them too long because I was too softhearted to fire them. [laughter]

VALENTINE

I just wondered what you learned from Wright and from being at Taliesin on how to organize a studio practice?

LAUTNER

Nothing. It wasn't organized. [laughter] It was completely informal. The ideal office was Mr. Wright's. It's all voluntary. Completely unorganized, voluntary: total cooperation to get the job done. And as long as there's no money involved, you could do that. But as soon as there's money involved, then you've got problems. The office I would love to have would be like Duke Ellington's band: you just do it all together perfectly. Everybody's conscious of everything and it just goes. Well, that's the way Mr. Wright did it. There was no organized office at all.

VALENTINE

But I assume your staff was interested in money. Or were they cooperative like--?

LAUTNER

Well, not as much as they are now. [laughter] All I'm saying is that you couldn't get total voluntary action like Mr. Wright's office when they're being paid so much an hour and they start picking, you know, who's going to get this and who's going to get that. Then it all goes to hell.

VALENTINE

Uh-huh. How long were you married to Marybud Roberts?

LAUTNER

Gee, I don't know exactly.

VALENTINE

The whole time you were at Taliesin?

LAUTNER

Oh, sure. More than that. For several years after we built the house here.

VALENTINE

Okay. I thought she had left earlier, that she had left Taliesin. But you were together the whole time. Okay. Why do you suppose the Taliesin experience "took" with you and it didn't with some others?

LAUTNER

Well, because I had the natural background and intuitive-- I was born with an intuitive sense and I was brought up in a philosophical nature environment. Everything contributed to my being totally sympathetic. Well, if you're from Los Angeles, you don't even know what that means. [laughter] I mean, they come to see me now and they look at the work I'm doing and they just go, "Huh? What's that?" No understanding at all. Because they have no background. They're uncivilized. They're money oriented.

VALENTINE

How involved were the clients with the apprentices? When Wright was interviewing clients at the beginning of a job, were apprentices ever involved with that?

LAUTNER

Not the first real interview, no. It's a strictly personal, private interview.

VALENTINE

When would apprentices be brought into that?

LAUTNER

Well, as I say, there are no rules. Just get up for breakfast. If there were some clients who liked to come and visit while the work was going on, then they mixed with the apprentices.

VALENTINE

Were they welcome?

LAUTNER

Sure. Other clients never came, and some came often. It's the variety of nature.

VALENTINE

Which were the better clients? Those who were there and visited or those who left you alone?

LAUTNER

I don't know. That's another crazy question. [laughter]

VALENTINE

Sorry about that. [laughter] I just wondered if it made a difference in how the project came out.

LAUTNER

No. I think there were some beautiful projects where we never saw the client.

VALENTINE

Uh-huh. The years that you were at Taliesin, they were working mostly on Usonian houses. But the projects you were involved in were the more expensive ones, not the Usonians. Is that right?

LAUTNER

Well, they were just the work that Mr. Wright had at the time, which was really minimal, you know. Because the Depression-- He didn't have anything when I went there. The first house was the [Malcolm E. and Nancy] Willey House in Minneapolis. Little tiny house. And that was the whole project for Taliesin. Gradually he got several other commissions. Some small, some big. And that's the way it went.

VALENTINE

Did you work on Usonian houses?

LAUTNER

Well, no. I remember him starting the [Herbert and Katherine] Jacobs House [Madison, Wisconsin]. And I saw the working drawings; in fact, I saw the house when it was being built, but I didn't work on it. That was the first one. I think I left right after that.

VALENTINE

That was '36, I think.

LAUTNER

Yeah. Well, I left in '39, but I didn't work on any Usonian.

VALENTINE

Was the experience at Taliesin what you expected it to be?

LAUTNER

Well, I had no expectation. I mean, it was better because all I knew was that Mr. Wright was not a typical, picayune academic, [laughter] that he was a free genius. And he was. It was so exciting because of his brilliance that there were twenty of us young guys and it was more exciting being at Taliesin than it was to go to Chicago for fun. We stayed there all the time. Voluntarily. Because he was more interesting than the whole city of Chicago. Now, you can't beat that.

VALENTINE

That's pretty good. [laughter] How could you leave? That must have been hard.

LAUTNER

Well, I hated to leave.

VALENTINE

Yeah. Especially to come here. [laughter]

LAUTNER

I would have loved to have stayed, because it was an ideal life: brilliant conversation, everything. Everything beautiful, everything changing, everything fresh, everything new. So I've tried to do that all by myself here, which I have. But I've been all by myself. I have no friends, nobody to talk to, nothing. I'm just completely alone.

VALENTINE

Do you keep in touch with anybody from Taliesin?

LAUTNER

No. I visited whenever I could, which wasn't very often. But I was glad to get over there for Easter a couple of years ago, and I was over there another time when Betty Jane Cohen made this film on me, you know. So we had some good visits there. Wes was my best friend there. The rest of them who were friends weren't there at the time. But I write to Tafel once in a while, and I saw Mosher in Spain before he died, so I was glad to see that. Otherwise I talk to Aaron Green once in a while in San Francisco, and, well, that's about it.

VALENTINE

And you kept in touch with Wright, I assume.

LAUTNER

With Mr. Wright? You mean--?

VALENTINE

By writing or by phone or when he came out here, did you see him?

LAUTNER

Oh, yeah. When he came over here, I would drive him around. Whatever he wanted to do. I'd pick him up at the railroad station and drive him, so I had some great experiences that way. One time he came over to break the booking system for films. You know, he always had the theater at Taliesin, Wisconsin, and [Taliesin West] Arizona. But Hollywood required-- We had all the best foreign films, but we never had any Hollywood films till Mr. Wright did this. They required-- If you bought a first-rate Hollywood film you'd have to take a second-rate one at the same time. Extra money, money, money, dealing, dealing, dealing, [laughter] dirty, dirty, dirty--typical Los Angeles, you know. So he came over to bust that system. He didn't make any appointments with any of these big guys--we'd just walk into the head offices of all the big studios, distribution, everything. And I remember him saying when we'd get to the head office, "Well, I guess you don't know who I am, but I'm Frank Lloyd Wright and I'm here to do such and such." And they'd stop him right away and they'd say, "Of course we know who you are. You've been famous for fifty years. And Hollywood people are only good for about four or five years." [laughter] So they look at it from that standpoint. But we went to maybe four or five offices and didn't have any luck in changing the system or getting the movies-- just the ones that he wanted to get--till finally we went to the head guy of-- I'm not sure if it was Paramount [Pictures] or what it was. But this guy--we walked in and he knew Mr. Wright right away, knew all about him. Mr. Wright told him what he wanted to do and he said, "Of course. Anything you want." [laughter] The reason for it is that this guy made a hobby of keeping track of the lives of people who were on a boat to Yokohama when Mr. Wright was doing the Imperial Hotel [Tokyo], and Mr. Wright was one of the passengers. And this guy has a whole life record of Mr. Wright and all the passengers on that boat.

VALENTINE

So it was sheer luck.

LAUTNER

Yeah. So he opened the whole system and just gave Mr. Wright anything he wanted. So that was a very interesting trip. Then I drove him over to [Walt] Disney [Productions] when he was trying to make Disney do something beautiful instead of ugly. He was going to do the first movie-- You know, that-- I forget the name of it. But anyway, his first cartoons were those ugly cows with-- We had beautiful Russian cartoons that made Disney look sick. And Mr. Wright tried to persuade him to do something beautiful instead of ugly, but he got nowhere, absolutely nowhere. Disney had no understanding of anything beautiful. So that was a failure but he tried. And then I'd drive him when he'd come to see [John] Lloyd [Wright], his son. I'd drive him to Lloyd's house. And he came to my house and approved my design.

VALENTINE

I was going to ask what he thought of your work. What did he say about it?

LAUTNER

He didn't say anything; he approved it. He came with Henry Russell Hitchcock at the same time. And Hitchcock said that mine was the best house in the United States by an architect under thirty. And that was published in House Beautiful, and I never got any work at all out of it. [laughter] Nothing. I mean, here, it's all selling. You've got to have salesmen and media people, and you've got to be a faker and salesman and a bullshitter in order to get along. If you do something good, it doesn't mean anything.

VALENTINE

But Wright said you couldn't know anything until you were forty.

LAUTNER

Yeah. Well, I was twenty-eight, but he approved it anyway. I agree with that, that you can't really be a good architect.

VALENTINE

You don't know enough about life yet.

LAUTNER

No.

VALENTINE

Did he see your other work?

LAUTNER

No. That was the only one he actually saw. I think he would have liked all of my latest work.

VALENTINE

I think so, too.

LAUTNER

Yeah.

VALENTINE

How could you summarize the value of that experience? I mean, you mentioned beauty and being surrounded by great things and great ideas and the importance of the idea in work. Is there anything else you got out of those years spent there that shaped your life or your work?

LAUTNER

Well, I don't know, I was born and brought up more or less like that. So it was just more beautiful and more exciting and more interesting than-- The way I look at it, Mr. Wright was not only a man of the world, when he talked you could sense that he had a sense of the whole universe. And so that experience with a real genius is indescribable, and there's nothing I can say. It's just fantastic.

VALENTINE

Yeah. You once described Taliesin as "the end of my journey: the place where life is lived, where life is loved, and where life is not abused."

LAUTNER

What's that from?

VALENTINE

That's how you described Taliesin: the end of your journey.

LAUTNER

When?

VALENTINE

Oh, about 1986, I think.

LAUTNER

Where did I say that?

VALENTINE

In the interview you did with Marlene [L.] Laskey for UCLA.

LAUTNER

Really? What did I say?

VALENTINE

"It's the end of my journey: the place where life is lived, where life is loved, and where life is not abused."

LAUTNER

That's funny. Well, I think that's right, but it's not necessarily the end of my journey.

VALENTINE

You want to change that?

LAUTNER

Yeah. I didn't know I said that.

VALENTINE

I think I quoted you correctly.

LAUTNER

I don't know. [laughter] Did you read that?

VALENTINE

Uh-huh.

LAUTNER

Well, I got tired of those interviews, [laughter] and I might have said-- You know, she came it seems like maybe ten or fifteen times, and I didn't like-- She was very good, much better than most.

VALENTINE

Yeah, she was. Well, maybe it was the beginning of your journey.

LAUTNER

Well, yeah. Sure. Well, not exactly. The continuation.

VALENTINE

Well, I want to thank you very much. I know you're not crazy about the crazy questions--

LAUTNER

Yeah.

VALENTINE

--and doing these interviews, but I appreciate your taking the time to do it.

LAUTNER

Yeah, okay.

VALENTINE

I hope it will be valuable. Thank you.

LAUTNER

Good, yeah.

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