

## **A TEI Project**

# **Interview of Fred and Barbara Meiers**

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## **1. Transcript**

### **1.1. TAPE NUMBER: I, Side One (September 3, 1986)**

SMITH:

We normally start out by asking you when and where you were born.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Dates and that type of thing?

SMITH:

Dates, yes, your family background and so forth. Do you want to start off, Barbara?

BARBARA MEIERS:

I thought maybe I'd let him start since my voice—

FRED MEIERS:

I would let her voice warm up.

BARBARA MEIERS:

I have a little trouble with roughness.

FRED MEIERS:

Let's see, I was born in El Paso, Texas, on September 18, 1916.

SMITH:

What were your parents doing?

FRED MEIERS:

My father, when I was born, was working in real estate. He was about twenty-two. My mother was about—let's see, I think my mother was eighteen when they were married. She married because she would be able to stay out late.  
[laughter]

SMITH:

That's what she told you?

FRED MEIERS:

Without parental supervision. Yes.

SMITH:

What were your parents' names?

FRED MEIERS:

My mother's name was Irene Conner. My father's name was Frank Meiers.

SMITH:

And how did they get to be in El Paso? Were they natives of the area?

FRED MEIERS:

My mother was born in El Paso. My father was born either in Texas or Indiana.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Texas, someone said.

FRED MEIERS:

But I have a hunch that he was born in Indiana. His mother and part of a group of three sisters came from Ireland. They had a brother who was living in Jeffersonville, Indiana, or Louisville—no, living in Louisville, Kentucky. That's right. So I think they probably went there, and then I know that the three were in Jeffersonville, Indiana. I don't know for how long, and I don't know the sequence or times or dates or anything in connection with their arriving in El Paso, but my grandmother on my father's side had lived in El Paso a long time, too.

SMITH:

And your father was a real estate developer or real estate salesman?

FRED MEIERS:

Real estate salesman.

SMITH:

Was El Paso growing fast at that time?

FRED MEIERS:

I have never thought of El Paso growing fast at any time. It'd be too bad if it did. It's an extremely ugly place. We drove through there recently, and it hasn't gained anything in beauty in the past ten years since we had been there.

SMITH:

How long did you stay there?

FRED MEIERS:

Off and on, say, seven years, something like that.

SMITH:

So you were pretty young when your family left El Paso.

FRED MEIERS:

Well, my parents were separated when I was about seven, and before that we had spent the summers in California. I mean, my mother and I and my grandmother [Mayde Dennis Conner] had spent the summers out here for weather reasons. So I'm virtually a native Californian.

SMITH:

So when you were seven you moved to California?

FRED MEIERS:

Permanently, yes. I don't know whether I was seven or eight, but in that period we were back and forth between Texas and California. I went to school in San Diego. I know I started school in San Diego. I didn't go to kindergarten. I probably went to the second half of the first grade in El Paso and then after that went to California and to San Diego schools.

BARBARA MEIERS:

But some of his early interest in Mexico comes from that early Texas period.

FRED MEIERS:

Yes, I was very interested in Mexico, very young.

SMITH:

How young? What are we talking about there?

FRED MEIERS:

We were talking about this a few minutes ago.

BARBARA MEIERS:

You used to go to El Paso frequently.

FRED MEIERS:

To Juárez.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Right.

FRED MEIERS:

Mexico is right across a little bridge, with a footbridge, and one walked across it or went in a streetcar or in a car. Usually we went in a car. We frequently, much to my delight, went to dinner—or supper as we called it—in Juárez. There's a very nice market there, and we went to the market. I was interested in the people that worked for us and [I] learned Spanish to be able to talk to those people.

SMITH:

They taught you Spanish?

FRED MEIERS:

Yes.

SMITH:

The housekeeper?

FRED MEIERS:

Yes, right. I can remember having little things. I didn't always pick them out—I was just thinking—I didn't pick out these little things, but they were very important to me. There was an apricot seed in the form of a little animal that was curled up. It might have been a monkey, or something that could curl up and use the form of the apricot seed to advantage, that I was very fond of. And there was a walnut that opened in three sections rather than two. It was filled with a scene, a landscape.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Tiny, tiny things? Tiny, tiny figures?

FRED MEIERS:

Well, it was a walnut. And contained tiny little Amozóc-type figures that were about so big.

BARBARA MEIERS:

They still do those little walnut things.

FRED MEIERS:

Trees, people, and I had other little things of this kind. I was interested in all the things that I saw in Juárez. I can remember sitting or being at a bar. I might have been on top of it.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Sitting on the top.

FRED MEIERS:

A big walnut bar in a saloon where people were having some refreshments. In another memory, I recall a place called the Blue Fox where we seemed to go to eat that had entertainment, which I got a big kick out of.

SMITH:

What kind of entertainment? Mariachi?

FRED MEIERS:

No, a lady dancing. A lady with feathers dancing and a man in a devil mask.

SMITH:

When you started going back to Mexico looking for folk art did you look for things like the walnuts with little scenes in them? Did you find anything?

FRED MEIERS:

We found them. We found the people, the village that is especially known for this kind of thing, yes.

SMITH:

What village is that?

FRED MEIERS:

It's in Puebla and it's called Amozóc.

SMITH:

Amozóc. Had the style changed?

FRED MEIERS:

Not really, not really. It's very closely related. This tradition is passed down with practically no change. It's amazing how some things in Mexico practically never change. This is the way it's done, and it's just passed down through generations. Let's hope it does continue.

BARBARA MEIERS:

We did go to Juárez too.

FRED MEIERS:

Oh, that's right, in our early—

BARBARA MEIERS:

We did. In our early trips we went to Juárez—

FRED MEIERS:

Barbara's first trip to Mexico—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Which was still one of the best markets, a wonderful market—

FRED MEIERS:

—we went to Juárez.

BARBARA MEIERS:

—with wonderful folk art. We found some of our old pieces there.

FRED MEIERS:

Juárez is very different, or was very different from Tijuana. It's not a typical border city; it must be a more conservative city. It's a big city. It was a big city then, substantial, well developed.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Not like a border town. It was really more like—

FRED MEIERS:

Not that kind of atmosphere.

BARBARA MEIERS:

—real Mexico farther down.

FRED MEIERS:

Not that there isn't something of everything, but it seemed a prettier—I think it's a prettier place than most border towns.

SMITH:

When you moved to San Diego did you continue having an interest in Mexico? Did you go down to Tijuana?

FRED MEIERS:

It wasn't as accessible. I did, of course, go to Tijuana, but it was really ugly. Years ago—you know, this was a long time ago, sixty years ago—Tijuana was mainly dirt roads and dust—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Really little.

FRED MEIERS:

—and little.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Small and nothing much there.

FRED MEIERS:

But we went there. I went there and I found things. We usually, when we went to Mexico when I was very small, we would be going to Rosarito [Baja California], family picnics on the beach, this kind of thing.

SMITH:

So you came to San Diego and grew up there. Your mother was separated from your father at the time?

FRED MEIERS:



Yes. I think they separated, must have separated when I was about seven. My mother remarried within, I think, about a year and a half, something like that.

SMITH:

What did your stepfather do?

FRED MEIERS:

My stepfather laid hardwood floors. Very nice person.

SMITH:

A contractor?

FRED MEIERS:

No, no. He was a floor layer. I guess later he contracted.

SMITH:

What was his name?

FRED MEIERS:

His name was Oliver [E.] Hubbell.

SMITH:

Did either of your parents or your stepfather have any interest in Mexico themselves?

FRED MEIERS:

No, not—it was my interest.

SMITH:

How about your grandmother? Was she—?

BARBARA MEIERS:

His grandmother was a big influence on his life.

FRED MEIERS:

My grandmother had early influences. Her father was interested in Mexico and had some interest in mines someplace in Mexico. Her mother died when

she was a child, and she lived with somebody called Mother Robinson when her father was away in Mexico. It sounds like a nursery rhyme.

SMITH:

What was your grandmother's name?

FRED MEIERS:

Her name was—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Mayde Dennis [Conner].

FRED MEIERS:

—Mayde Dennis.

SMITH:

This was your mother's mother?

FRED MEIERS:

Yes, and I was very close to her. My mother sometimes seemed my sister, in a way, before I had a stepfather, and my grandmother was sort of my mother in my thinking. Not really. But because my mother was so young, and she liked to be young.

BARBARA MEIERS:

[laughter] She'd rather not have been a mother early.

FRED MEIERS:

My grandmother liked to be young, too. But my grandmother was interested in Mexico, and they did go to Mexico. They went to balnearios [bathing resorts] for what ailed them. [laughter] I always loved to hear about their being met by the horse and carriage and all that jazz, and go-ing to this place, and, oh, just hearing about life in Mexico.

SMITH:

Did you yourself ever go down to the capital?

FRED MEIERS:

Not till I was about—not till I was nineteen. Yes, right.

SMITH:

When did you start developing an interest in art?

FRED MEIERS:

I was very young. Very early, too. I can remember being very interested from, say, fourth grade, I think, probably. I can remember thinking I was really interested and very good. I was good at most anything in school, but I was really interested in anything connected to art,

SMITH:

In high school did you have particular interests?

FRED MEIERS:

Sort of general interests. I had a major in art. I was very much interested in languages and had a couple of years of French and Spanish. I was interested in theater. I was active in this kind of stuff. I had an opportunity to design lots of productions and costumes and this kind of stuff.

SMITH:

For the high school productions?

FRED MEIERS:

Yes, for high school productions.

SMITH:

What high school did you go to?

FRED MEIERS:

Point Loma.

BARBARA MEIERS:

And he had a teacher there that was a very big influence on him.

FRED MEIERS:

Yes, a drama teacher who was very—

SMITH:

Who was that?

FRED MEIERS:

His name was Emery Shepherd. He sort of recognized ability and the direction that I was interested in, and encouraged it.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Well, his whole way of teaching was to bring out creativity in the students. He was a very creative thinking person.

FRED MEIERS:

Right.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Very interesting person.

FRED MEIERS:

Quite interesting to be interested in—well, it was a progressive viewpoint, and it was early for this kind of thing, you know.

SMITH:

Did you keep in touch with him?

FRED MEIERS:

Yes, yes, until we—I don't know—until—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Oh, yes, through the years.

FRED MEIERS:

Yes.

BARBARA MEIERS:

We used to go down and visit him.

FRED MEIERS:

We haven't been in touch with him for quite a while now, but we were in touch for a long time.

SMITH:

And he was a drama teacher?

FRED MEIERS:

Yes. Well, he was an English teacher—drama, right.

BARBARA MEIERS:

He was very much in touch with all of the creative things going on in San Diego, too.

FRED MEIERS:

Right.

BARBARA MEIERS:

The visiting artists.

FRED MEIERS:

Yes, he entertained people. The Boehms, Adolph Boehm, head of the San Francisco Ballet, and his wife were close friends. He liked to entertain—Stravinsky was a friend of his. He entertained many of the important artists that came to town.

SMITH:

You were at these dinners?

FRED MEIERS:

Yes, yes. I met lots of interesting people through him. Later while I was in college, he made it possible through an impresario who brought all kinds of theater and musical events, to San Diego, for me to get a little job ushering. So I saw almost everything that came to San Diego. Usually there were two or three events—well, at least one event a week, you know, concerts, dance, theater. It was a real opportunity.

SMITH:

What college did you go to?

FRED MEIERS:

I went to San Diego State [College, now San Diego State University].

SMITH:

What were your aspirations?

FRED MEIERS:

I don't know—I don't think that I—

BARBARA MEIERS:

You majored in French.

FRED MEIERS:

I majored in French in college.

BARBARA MEIERS:

He had a real aptitude for languages.

SMITH:

Was it because you were especially interested in France and the art and the culture?

FRED MEIERS:

No, no, it wasn't. I liked the teacher.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Was that it?

FRED MEIERS:

No, it had to be more than that. On Shep's suggestion, instead of starting with my art studies as a freshman, he recommended that I get all my academic stuff out of the way. Which isn't a bad idea except that it's pretty important to do the thing you are especially interested in. But anyway, I followed this

advice at least for the first two years. I don't remember whether it was after I had been in college a year or whether the fair arrived as I came—

BARBARA MEIERS:

The exposition.

FRED MEIERS:

Yes, I think it must have been after my first year of college. There was an exposition in San Diego, and I got a summer job with the [Old] Globe Theatre as an usher. You know the same Globe Theatre that's very well known now.

SMITH:

Right.

FRED MEIERS:

As things went on I learned how to folk-dance; did some of that. I learned how to play a recorder, and I played the recorder as part of a trio for musical interludes in some of the plays.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Some of the Shakespeare plays?

FRED MEIERS:

Yes, in Hamlet, and Midsummer Night's Dream.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Then they had the English dancing on the green, too, that you were part of.

FRED MEIERS:

Well, I said I learned how to do that. I don't think that I danced.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Performed with the group.

FRED MEIERS:

No, I don't think I did.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Just with your friends for fun.

FRED MEIERS:

Yes. Later we had folk dancing at one of the private schools. We folk-danced once a week just for the hell of it.

SMITH:

Balkan type of folk dancing?

FRED MEIERS:

English.

SMITH:

English. Morris dancing?

FRED MEIERS:

Morris dancing, English country folk dancing. It's easy and it's fun.

BARBARA MEIERS:

It was because of your work with the Globe Theatre that you interrupted your college, wasn't it, and went to New York?

FRED MEIERS:

Let's see. I was working at the Globe Theatre and I was taking classes. I was going to college full-time. The Globe Theatre Company was going to Dallas.

BARBARA MEIERS:

The exposition.

FRED MEIERS:

The exposition. No, the Globe Theatre was going to Dallas. Another company, a second company, was taking over in San Diego. After two years of college I felt a need for playing and staying out of school. So I went to Dallas with the Globe Theatre and was there, oh, for six months or something like that. My father was living in Dallas. He, by that time and had been for quite some years, was working with Seiberling Rubber. He was in charge of the Dallas office for Seiberling Rubber, sales office. I went there especially because of my



friendship with the folk dancers. Then after this, when the fair closed, I went to Fairhope, Alabama, for Christmas and stayed with my special friends there.

SMITH:

Who were—?

FRED MEIERS:

Who were Parker Totten and Claire Totten. Their father and mother were quite progressive people. They had settled in this community. It was a single—tax colony, and they were attracted to it partly by that and partly because there was a progressive school there. They were interested in this for their children. This school had as part of its curriculum English country folk dancing. So all the children in the school grew up knowing how to do these dances. These dancers all came from this place.

BARBARA MEIERS:

That were with the Globe?

FRED MEIERS:

Yes, yes.

BARBARA MEIERS:

I didn't realize that.

FRED MEIERS:

The school, being part of the community, had a weekly dance evening for the community. The community enjoyed this exercise as well.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Did you go on to New York from there?

FRED MEIERS:

There was a group of us—I don't know whether it was just the three of us or whether there were others, but we were talking about going to England—this was in the middle of the winter—and folk dancing to make our livelihood. But some older friends suggested very strongly that this wasn't a very good idea at all. So, in lieu of that, we went to Mexico, the three of us.

SMITH:

This was when you were nineteen?

FRED MEIERS:

Yes. We went to Mexico. We were there a while, then we thought, well, we'd better look around and get something to do. We thought of going to school, but then we inquired and the university was having a little vacation right then. Then we thought, well, maybe we'll work. We looked around and found the obvious answers, that we didn't have working papers and there was no way we could work. We were there a couple of weeks or so, then we headed north. We were coming close to the border, and Claire wanted to go to New York, Parker wanted to go to California, and I didn't especially care. So—we really did this—we flipped to see which coast we would go to from Laredo. We went to New York.

BARBARA MEIERS:

You got jobs in New York.

FRED MEIERS:

We got jobs in New York.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Or had to get jobs in New York.

SMITH:

What kind of work were you doing there?

FRED MEIERS:

I worked in an advertising agency.

SMITH:

Doing what?

FRED MEIERS:

A flunkee.

SMITH:

The gofer.

FRED MEIERS:

Yes.

BARBARA MEIERS:

What was the name of it? It was a fairly well known—

FRED MEIERS:

It was E. W. Helwig. It had accounts—Mazola it was called—Corn Products. They [handled] Mazola, Linit Laundry Starch, Dextrose, Karo syrup, and some of the hotels, New York hotels. It was a substantial though small advertising agency. Parker started as a pageboy at NBC [National Broadcasting Company], the way NBC started all of their people. All the ones that are very well known now, including some of the recently retired ones, were starting at the time he was there. Claire got a job distributing Crisco. She went from door to door in New York passing out cans of Crisco, which is a lard kind of thing. She had many stories to tell.

SMITH:

You stayed in New York for a couple of years, then?

FRED MEIERS:

No, I only stayed in New York until it got hot. [Barbara laughs] I couldn't bear it. I was given a leave of absence. This is very unusual for anybody to be employed and leave after being there just a few months, but they said I could have a leave of absence. I forget what the reason was.

BARBARA MEIERS:

To go back to school, no doubt.

FRED MEIERS:

That I had to go to California. Maybe, I don't know. But anyway, the letter came to me giving me—you know, they had to approve it officially, and it took time. I was still in Long Island when the letter was forwarded to me by my parents saying that I was given so much leave of absence. I hadn't even left New York. We had to get license plates for the car from California. Parker's car

had been staying at his sister's on Long Island because nobody was using it in the city, of course, and it took forever for plates to come. I think I was in New York about six months, something like that.

SMITH:

Then you came back to California and finished your education?

FRED MEIERS:

Yes. I finished my A.B., right.

SMITH:

This is the middle of the Depression, right?

FRED MEIERS:

Exactly.

SMITH:

It doesn't sound like it though.

BARBARA MEIERS:

No, it was.

SMITH:

Did the Depression have any effect on you?

FRED MEIERS:

Oh, yes.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Tell about where you stayed in New York and how you lived.

FRED MEIERS:

The three of us lived in one room. The toilet was on the next floor, if you please. For a while, you know, we had no money whatsoever. We lived on oatmeal. When we entertained, which we did often, we had raisins in it. [laughter] There was a curtain at one end of the room, and the bathtub was behind the curtain. The floor was so dirty that one couldn't walk on it. It was

really a crummy place. I remember the first time that we were in New York, maybe ten years after this, we went back to look and the place had been torn down. I'd heard in the meantime that it had been torn down. The address was on Fifty-seventh Street, but it was very far west. Money was really a problem. I remember we were absolutely broke before our first paychecks. Or maybe it was before we got jobs. I wired my father and he sent—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Forty dollars, you said it was.

FRED MEIERS:

Fifty dollars.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Forty you told me.

FRED MEIERS:

Was it forty dollars? We went to the movies and I was pickpocketed.  
[laughter] Money was really short.

SMITH:

But it still sounds like you had the freedom to move about and go from job to job, that that sort of thing didn't concern you too much.

BARBARA MEIERS:

No.

FRED MEIERS:

No. No.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Adventurous spirit.

FRED MEIERS:

It should have if I had any sense, but it was just [how] one did things.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Well, it really was so different then than it is now.

FRED MEIERS:

Everybody was in the same boat. I mean, most of the people that I knew—

BARBARA MEIERS:

You didn't feel threatened in the same way that you do now in a situation like that. As he said, everybody's in the same boat. Everybody's very friendly, everybody's helpful. If your car breaks down everybody stops and helps you. I mean, it's just that it was a different world, really.

FRED MEIERS:

One of my high school friends who was in New York was going to a very famous acting school. I was interested in acting, too. I had a chance to get a scholarship to go to this [school], and I was invited by his aunt to come live where he lived. His aunt was a very well known character actress, and they lived very well. But no, it didn't seem quite what I wanted to do right then.

SMITH:

Were you painting during—?

FRED MEIERS:

No, I wasn't. I did some little stuff, nothing that amounted to anything.

SMITH:

But at this point you had not really focused in on it yet.

FRED MEIERS:

Right, right. I had taken some work, before I left San Diego, with Ilsa Ruocco and with Mr. [Everett] Jackson, head of the art department. I took advanced courses. Officially, I wasn't an art major because I was doing all this other stuff (filling academic requirements) so I could go into advanced courses without taking the prerequisites. I took advanced painting without having any college painting. I took two design courses.

BARBARA MEIERS:

From Ilsa.

FRED MEIERS:

With Ilsa.

SMITH:

What was the approach in the painting class? Was it beaux arts tradition still?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Everett Jackson—

FRED MEIERS:

Everett Jackson worked in the style of Mexican mural painting. He was very interested and had worked quite a bit in Mexico, so this was attractive to me. He's a Texan. We still occasionally see him at celebrations in San Diego.

SMITH:

Did he do WPA [Works Progress Administration] murals, that sort of thing?  
Post office—?

BARBARA MEIERS:

No.

FRED MEIERS:

I don't think so. We have other friends who were doing that and also doing things in the WPA-sponsored theater. Some of the Globe Theatre people worked in WPA theater in San Diego later.

SMITH:

So you were already very much interested in, say, the work of Rivera and Siqueiros?

FRED MEIERS:

Oh, yes. Not as much in Siqueiros as Orozco and—

BARBARA MEIERS:

How about [Jean] Charlot, because of—?

FRED MEIERS:

Chariot, yes. One of my other teachers was interested and worked on the Chichen Itza excavations which were headed by Jean Chariot. I was interested in him, too.

SMITH:

In terms of North American artists, were you interested in, say, [Thomas Hart] Benton? Did that kind of approach appeal to you?

FRED MEIERS:

Not as much. He's too squiggly. I was interested in—[phone rings; tape recorder off]

SMITH:

You had been saying that Benton's too squiggly.

FRED MEIERS:

You said of the American painters.

SMITH:

Yes.

FRED MEIERS:

I was more interested in European—I was interested in the Bauhaus, and I was interested in Picasso, Cézanne, and Gauguin. I thought in general that American—I was interested in Mexican painters in general. American painting was too dull for me. No color.

SMITH:

What about West Coast painters? How did you view those?

FRED MEIERS:

There weren't any. In San Diego there was a sea—there were several people who painted waves. Then there was Maurice Braun who did covers for some magazines, and they were sort of pastelly kind of landscapes. But aside from Jackson, there really wasn't anything that was very stimulating. And I was pretty local in San Diego. There were people up here [in Los Angeles]. There was [Stanton] MacDonald-Wright and later Jean and Arthur [Ames].



BARBARA MEIERS:

Millard Sheets.

FRED MEIERS:

Well, Millard, of course, but later.

SMITH:

We'll get into that when you get up there.

FRED MEIERS:

Right. But it was a very drab scene, local scene, so one had to look afield.

BARBARA MEIERS:

With your interest in French, too, you just really—

FRED MEIERS:

Now, how did I get interested in it?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Because you were interested in the painters, and you really got involved. And the literature, you read so much in French.

FRED MEIERS:

Yes, but I was just wondering why I got interested.

BARBARA MEIERS:

I think your interest in the French painters and so on came about very naturally because of your involvement with French culture.

FRED MEIERS:

I still am very interested in French writing and art.

SMITH:

Had you planned to go and study in France?

FRED MEIERS:

Well, there wasn't the wherewithal to make those kinds of plans. In college I talked about the exchange student situation. I became part of the Alliance Française thinking maybe this would lead to something.

SMITH:

Your stepfather was a floor layer. Construction must have dropped pretty sharply in the Depression.

FRED MEIERS:

There wasn't too much work, and times were very tough.

SMITH:

Were you living at home while you were in college?

FRED MEIERS:

Yes, the first two years. When I was still in high school I lived with this teacher part of the time, part of the week.

SMITH:

Everett Jackson?

FRED MEIERS:

No, Emery Shepherd. Also I had lived at my grandmother's house part of the time. My mother really didn't approve of my not being at home, living at home, so I could never move out, which I thought I wanted to do because in growing up, I felt that we were incompatible.

SMITH:

You and your mother?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Well, their interests. There just weren't similar interests.

FRED MEIERS:

I wanted to be with people with whom I had more intellectual interests in common, but my mother didn't approve of this. Since I wasn't of legal moving-out age I didn't move out. So I was always at home part of the time.

## **1.2. TAPE NUMBER: I, Side Two (September 3, 1986)**

BARBARA MEIERS:

Unlike Fred, my contact with Mexico came much later in life. I grew up in Washington, D.C., and my interest in ethnic things was stimulated by my visiting the Smithsonian Institution, which I just adored and spent as much time in as possible. As far as really becoming acquainted with Mexico or Mexican folk arts, it wasn't really until I came to California.

FRED MEIERS:

You have to go back to the beginning, right?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Right. Well, I was born in North Dakota, Grand Forks, North Dakota, in 1916. My father was a professor of physics at the university [University of North Dakota].

SMITH:

What was your father's name?

BARBARA MEIERS:

His name was Albert Hoyt Taylor. He was doing a lot of very advanced work in radio, some of the very early experimental work in radio. My mother was the librarian there, and her name was Emma Hickman [Taylor]. We left there when I was very small—I was only about a year old—to go to Bellmawr, New Jersey. The government had asked my father to come and establish the communications center for the war in Europe. Of course, we were already involved in World War I. We were there in Bellmawr so my earliest memories are there. Then we moved from there to Washington where he was with the navy but still doing research work. He was down at the Bellevue Laboratories on the Anacostia River still working in advanced radio work. We first lived in Georgetown when we moved there. I can remember that as sort of an interesting—

FRED MEIERS:

I didn't realize that you lived in Georgetown.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes, we lived in Georgetown. At that time where we lived there was only gas light. I can remember this being a very strong impression on me, it being very dim. I also remember that I swallowed a prune seed, and my father told me I'd have a prune tree growing out my ears. [laughter] Then we moved over to Chevy Chase where I lived probably till I was about eight years old. We loved, of course, going to the zoo there. We spent a lot of time in the Rock Creek Park and the zoo. We were already going to museums in the Washington area. Then eventually we moved out to the other side of Washington, closer to where my father's work was so he wouldn't have to be driving all the way across the city. We lived on Pennsylvania Avenue, actually, clear out on the way to out of town into Maryland. There I went to a grade school to which we walked, very close by. Sometimes walked and sometimes took a bus to the high school, which was across the Anacostia River back into northeast Washington. I can remember there that I loved to walk through the old congressional cemetery. There were wonderful old monuments and tombs and tombstones. A lot of the tombs had figures, had sculptures on them. I can remember being very interested in that. [John Philip] Sousa was buried there, I know, in that cemetery. In fact, it was a very famous cemetery. I was probably the one in the family who took most of the visiting friends and relatives to all of the museums in the city, the sight-seeing. Of course, I did spend a lot of time there, as I said, in the Smithsonian. I especially loved the exhibitions of the ethnic groups, the habitat groups that they set up.

SMITH:

American Indians—

BARBARA MEIERS:

American Indians, Africans, Eskimos, all these different things. I was particularly drawn to crafts. I loved the exhibition of kites, for instance. They had a wonderful display of kites from all over the world. I can remember the beautiful little kites from India, you know, that we saw years later—

FRED MEIERS:

Sure, right.

BARBARA MEIERS:

—and enjoyed so much.

SMITH:

This was a permanent exhibition?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes. My mother had some art training. She had done some pottery and was very much interested in the arts. We had quite a lot of objects at home that were very fine craft pieces: Appalachian baskets, our Cherokee Indian basket that I still have in here now, and an old apple butter jar that was my grandmother's. It was a very nice old jar that probably came from one of the jug towns in either—it could have been in the Middle West because they were from the Middle West. Her parents lived in Indiana and spent most of their time there, although her father [William Raymond Hickman] was born in Kentucky. He was a Methodist minister and, of course, he was moved around somewhat. So they lived in Atlanta, Georgia, one period of her life. He was very much interested in the black people and their education, and he became involved in an early college, establishing a black college.

SMITH:

Do you know which college?

BARBARA MEIERS:

No, I really don't. The whole feeling in my family was of an interest in art, and they encouraged me very much. I started drawing very young. They encouraged me to do all kinds of drawing, and I studied some in high school. I really didn't know that I was going to major in it. I think it was Spelman College, which was established in 1881. My grandfather held an administrative position there. I was interested in sociology, and took a lot of that in my first year in college. I went to the University of Maryland my first year and then decided I wanted to go to [University of] Wisconsin [Madison]. So I went there as a sophomore.

SMITH:

What was it that drew you into Wisconsin?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Well, Wisconsin had very good anthropology and sociology teachers, and at that point I thought I was interested in sociology. Also, I had an aunt and uncle who lived there. My uncle was librarian at the university there.

SMITH:

What is his name?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Lawrence Burke. So I went there and started in taking a very, very heavy course. I had an advisor that said—unlike Fred's [advisor] that told him to take his academic things first—he said, "You're taking too many heavy academic things. Don't you want to take something else that's a little lighter?" I said, "Oh, I've always wanted to take some drawing." So I got involved in taking drawing in my sophomore year. Right away, I became interested and decided that I really wanted to major in art education. The art department was in the School of Education at that time, so we had to take both; we had to be prepared to teach when we left the department.

SMITH:

So your goal was to—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Was really to teach.

SMITH:

To teach elementary? High school? Or community—?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Well, whichever. In the community, in the public schools. I really had a very heavy program with art, though, the last three years there. I was even going to school on Saturdays. I did take a lot of craftwork at that time, too, because I really enjoyed that aspect of art more than I did the painting and the drawing.

SMITH:

What kind of crafts were you interested in?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Well, I was doing jewelry making, and I did some pewter work, spun metal, learned how to work on a lathe. Then I took some sculpture and was interested in that. I really enjoyed that very much. When I graduated, I had a job there in Madison in the public schools. I taught there for two years, and then decided that I wanted to do some graduate work. At that point, I was back in Washington for summer and had heard about the summer school at Claremont Colleges under Millard Sheets. It was beginning to get quite a bit of publicity, it being a very interesting and successful summer program. I began to investigate. I still didn't know whether I was really going to go there, or someplace else. But I was in Madison then, taking a summer school class, and decided that I really would like to go West. I had two teachers that I worked with there that were very influential. One of them had said, "Go to Columbia [University]. That's where you ought to go." The other one said, "No, go West. Everything exciting is happening out West."

SMITH:

Were they talking about Teachers College?

BARBARA MEIERS:

About Teachers College, right. This was at Columbia. The other one had been connected with some of the WPA [Works Progress Administration] work. For instance, on the murals and the post offices and so on. He had been involved in doing one for Texas. He had some contact with things that were going on in Texas and in California.

SMITH:

Do you remember his name?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Gil Wat—

FRED MEIERS:

Jim.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Jim Watrous. James Watrous. So it sounded kind of interesting to me, really, to go to California. I drove down to Saint Louis with a friend who was leaving Madison to go down there, and then got on the Greyhound bus in Saint Louis and came out to California. I stopped on the way. I stopped in Colorado Springs, where I had an interview with Boardman Robinson and looked over the school there. I wanted to see if I was really interested in going to the Fine Arts Center there at Colorado Springs. There I went to the Taylor Museum, and saw the New Mexico santos and things of that kind. That was the first time that I was aware of anything of that kind. It was really fascinating.

SMITH:

Did your interests in art have a predilection towards an ethnic kind of abstraction at that time?

BARBARA MEIERS:

No, not really. I don't know. You might say, just with my greater interest in the craft things. You might say that. I don't know.

FRED MEIERS:

You were, especially in college, interested in crafts, weren't you?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Well, I enjoyed working, right, much more in that field.

SMITH:

At that time in Wisconsin, were the crafts considered to be part of the fine arts, or something really quite different?

BARBARA MEIERS:

They really were right there in the school of art education. It was felt that you had to be prepared to teach all kinds of things if you were going to be teaching in the public schools. I think that's the reason they included them right in with the other fine arts.

SMITH:

Right. Did you also have an interest in Gauguin, Cézanne, and Picasso?



BARBARA MEIERS:

Not very early. Although I had a very good art history teacher there, Professor [Oscar] Hagen—who is actually Uta Hagen's, the actress's father. He was a very brilliant art historian. He wrote a book [*Art Epochs and Their Leaders: A Survey of the Genesis of Modern Art*]. He particularly was interested in the German expressionist school, so we had a lot of information on that. I really first became interested in [Edvard] Munch and [Oskar] Kokoschka and people like that. Then I had a little more history later and became interested and more aware of people like Gauguin and Picasso. But it really wasn't until, I think, my graduate days, that I became as much involved or interested in them.

SMITH:

Were you aware of what was going on in North American art at the time?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes, because this Jim Watrous, that I worked under, was very much interested in [Thomas Hart] Benton and John Steuart Curry and Grant Wood. We had a lot of slides and material that he showed. I was really aware of it and found it interesting.

SMITH:

So you came out to Claremont—

BARBARA MEIERS:

I came to Claremont on the bus—

SMITH:

Just for the summer?

BARBARA MEIERS:

No, I came out thinking that I would go to school. Got off the bus on Foothill Boulevard—it went through Highway 66 at that point—and walked down College Avenue with my worldly possessions—really, my suitcase. It was in August—hot! It was about 105, I think, that day. I went to the college, and had

an interview there and inquired about housing. I had a sister at the University of California [Los Angeles] then who was working on a master's degree.

SMITH:

Up in Berkeley?

BARBARA MEIERS:

No, right here in Los Angeles, in biology. She was living in a little house in Beverly Glen Canyon, when there were such things. I took the red car—the old red car was very much going in those days—and went clear out, to Pomona, into Los Angeles, and stayed with her until school opened. Of course, I decided that I definitely liked, I loved Claremont from the first time I saw it. The eucalyptus trees and the wild things that were growing in the fields. I just loved everything about it. The palm trees and the date fronds hanging down and the—it was really very, very exciting, so, you know, I stayed. I was taking work both with Millard Sheets and with Albert Stewart, who was the sculpture teacher then, and decided that I would do my major work in sculpture.

SMITH:

What classes did you take from Sheets?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Both drawing and painting, watercolor.

SMITH:

Do you have any recollections of the style of teaching? How he set up the class and the sorts of criticisms he would make?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Well, in his life-drawing classes we worked from a model—I really don't remember anything particular about his way. I know in his watercolor classes we spent most of the time out [doing] landscape painting.

SMITH:

With watercolors.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Right. So we were always out roaming around looking for wonderful places to paint. The Chino hills, the hills south of Claremont, the Pomona hills, and areas around Brea Canyon. We did a lot of drawing as well as watercolor painting.

SMITH:

We're still talking about the period prior to the Second World War, right?

FRED MEIERS:

Yes.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes. This is in 1939-40.

SMITH:

I did also want to ask you if the Depression had any effect on your personal fortunes, or your family's?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Well, you know, it was a hard time for my family. They were determined to send all four of us to college. We lived very, very simply. We didn't do a lot of the things a lot of people did. We rarely went to movies. I can remember going to maybe two movies when I was growing up—as a real youngster. We didn't ever go out to eat. My mother believed that we needed to all stay home and be together as a family. My father didn't like to eat out, anyway. We had a very rich family life. They were both very interesting people, educated and involved. My father, especially, in his work. He was interested in talking about it a lot, especially with my brother [Albert Hickman Taylor], who was interested in the same field. I remember many a discussion at the dinner table, when the salt and pepper [shakers] and the napkin rings and everything were parts of the [laughter] discussion, and the layout of an installation of something that they were making. We also were very much thrown on our own to create and do what we wanted to do. We were encouraged to be creative and to make our own amusement. We were involved with—I made costumes for all of the neighborhood. We put on theater shows that we did on our lawn and had our audience of the neighborhood. My brother rigged up lights from the attic, and it was all very exciting. I did a lot of drawing. I did lots of paper dolls. I loved paper dolls. I was involved, already, with fashion and

clothes. I sewed at quite an early age, actually, and loved doing that kind of thing. I still have paper doll collections that I've given our daughters.

SMITH:

To get back to Claremont, then your field shifted to sculpture. What kind of sculpture were you doing?

BARBARA MEIERS:

As a beginning student there, really, we were, of course, given projects, various assignments. We did work from a model. I did several things from the model.

SMITH:

I'm wondering in terms of the way they taught it. Was it still traditional, or were they bringing up people like [Constantin] Brancusi?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Pretty traditional.

FRED MEIERS:

Very traditional.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Albert Stewart worked, really, in a pretty classical style. We weren't unaware of these other people. I was very much interested in the Egyptian reliefs. What I was planning to do with my thesis was to do reliefs in the Egyptian manner. I never finished this, because Millard Sheets decided that he needed me to teach in the public schools in Claremont. [laughter] The art teacher was dropping out, and they were without an art teacher. Millard decided that I should be the teacher. I'd had the experience, of course, with teaching, so he talked me into going into teaching there and not finishing my degree.

SMITH:

Wasn't he concerned that you wouldn't finish?

BARBARA MEIERS:

No, not really. I came back and worked a little bit more on it, but I never finished. I never did that final—at that time, you had to do a written thesis as well as this project, and I really felt rather unsympathetic to that whole idea.

SMITH:

Did you study ceramics while you were there?

BARBARA MEIERS:

No.

SMITH:

Back in Wisconsin?

BARBARA MEIERS:

A tiny bit, just enough to say that I've had the experience. In sculpture I had learned to cast, so I knew something about casting. I think we had a little bit of experience in coil building. I don't think I ever learned to throw on a wheel.

SMITH:

What was the role of the art teacher at that time? What was the art teacher expected to do?

BARBARA MEIERS:

There in Madison, where I first taught, the art teacher had a very, very influential position, really. It was an unusual situation for art teachers. We had a supervisor in the public schools there who had some very advanced ideas as to what should happen in the public schools. She didn't believe that the art should be left up to every room teacher to devise. She felt that they needed to be trained people that would come into each classroom. So in the system there were trained art teachers from kindergarten all the way through high school. My first year, I taught everything from kindergarten through high school. That was another way she believed, that we should be teachers who were tried out, put into the system, and put through all these different things before you had your own school. So my second semester I had my own school.

SMITH:

What do you mean, your own school?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Well, I taught in one school instead of teaching all over the whole system.

SMITH:

Was that for all the classes?

BARBARA MEIERS:

I had the elementary school, yes, for all the classes. In some situations we had to go into the classroom and teach them; in other situations we had an art room. We had our own art classroom, which was really quite unusual for those days. When I came to California, I found that it really was not as advanced in what they were doing. Of course, I had the whole system of Claremont, both high school and grade school, because the school [system] wasn't that big. The town wasn't that large. So I was really the art supervisor there, and worked with the classroom teachers as well as going into their rooms. I took my work, and went into each classroom in the grade schools. Then I had my own classroom in the high school and junior high.

SMITH:

How long did you work as an art teacher at Claremont?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Oh, I was there—what?—I think only about a year and a half—wasn't it—when—well, we were married in 1940. We met, of course, there in Claremont, and were married in the fall of 1940. I was teaching then and Fred was teaching in another town and we got together on weekends. Then the war came along very shortly after that. It was about the beginning of the war, when we as a country were involved in it, that I stopped teaching.

SMITH:

Did you continue to work?

BARBARA MEIERS:

I finished that year and then I went, after Fred had left and gone off to the Pacific, I went to New Mexico. I was very much interested in the Indian country and things by then. I went there and spent the whole summer in Taos.

One of my high school students [Joanne McCrossen], whom I'd become very friendly with, had lived in New Mexico in Santa Fe. She went with me, and we had a studio in Taos. I did a lot of drawing and sketching and visiting. We became acquainted with one of the Indians who took us out to the pueblo and we got to meet his mother and aunt who were dancers. He was an artist himself. It was a very, very interesting experience.

SMITH:

Do you remember his name?

BARBARA MEIERS:

His name was Juan Mirabel. Then I felt, really, that I didn't want to go back to the teaching situation so I stopped teaching then. I thought for a while I was going to go and work in one of the relocation centers. You know, they had moved the West Coast Japanese to one of the big centers in Arizona. They were on one of the reservations [Gila River Reservation]. I thought for a while maybe I would go and work there and teach art and work with them. But I decided against that, came on back to Claremont, and became involved with craftwork in connection with therapy in the hospitals during the war.

SMITH:

With—?

BARBARA MEIERS:

The naval hospital. I trained a group of Scripps College students in various crafts. We worked with all kinds of materials. We had to work with a lot of salvage things then, because some things weren't available. We learned to use tin cans and parachute ropes, I remember. Things that were not considered good enough to use by the navy they'd given us, things that were obsolete or faulty. Plastic materials, all kinds of things. I really sort of kept one jump ahead of my students, teaching myself all kinds of things as I went. I learned to do all of that wonderful knotting that we were doing. Macrame you know, long before the macramé thing took over here many years later. I taught myself out of the maritime knotting book and learned to do all kinds of really interesting things. We did wonderful mesh bags and rope-soled shoes. We learned how to do Egyptian card weaving, which was a fascinating craft. We did a four-ply

weaving that you could do with cards as your loom. We tied it to the end of the beds and worked with the men in the hospitals this way.

SMITH:

Did you have to take any art-therapy classes?

BARBARA MEIERS:

No. This was really only therapy in the sense of occupying their minds and keeping them busy with some artwork of different kinds. It was done through the Red Cross. We went out once a week to the naval hospital in Corona. We worked in both the orthopedic wards and in the tuberculosis ward. They had a very big unit there of tuberculosis. Later, a group from Pasadena asked me to come and train people over there. I trained a group there and worked with people that were in the hospital there, at the old Huntington [Hotel] which was turned into a hospital. The old one on the arroyo. Isn't that one called the Huntington? Not the—

SMITH:

It's the one that's going to be the federal court building?

BARBARA MEIERS:

I guess. It's still empty now?

SMITH:

Yes.

BARBARA MEIERS:

That one. That one was a hospital at that time.

FRED MEIERS:

The one that hangs over the arroyo.

BARBARA MEIERS:

We actually worked there with people who were disturbed mentally. Many of them were—well, they were just people who couldn't stand the stress of war, had come back and were having to stay there for some length of time. We



even went into some of the locked wards. A lot of the people did very interesting work, and, of course, it was a very rewarding experience.

SMITH:

Were you continuing to do your own sculpting then?

BARBARA MEIERS:

No. I really did very little. I did a little bit of wood carving. I did one piece that I'd started when I returned to work there in the summer. Then I went on and I finished that. But I really didn't go on with it very much after that. I found myself more and more interested in craft things, really.

SMITH:

But you were continuing to do your own craftwork?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes. I did a lot of sewing, and I made my own clothes. I loved to do that. I made almost all of my own clothes. I got involved with dying things and, you know, a lot of this kind of thing. It was creative.

SMITH:

Did you try to sell any of your crafts?

BARBARA MEIERS:

No, I didn't. No.

SMITH:

Let's find out how you [Fred] got to Claremont.

BARBARA MEIERS:

I got there faster. [laughter]

FRED MEIERS:

Yes, you did.

BARBARA MEIERS:

He had a lot of diversionary—

SMITH:

You got your A.B. at San Diego State with a French major?

FRED MEIERS:

Yes.

SMITH:

At that point, then, you had to make some decisions, I guess, about what you wanted to do, or about what you were going to be doing?

FRED MEIERS:

I think, actually, the thing that led me to—there were several things, actually, that led me to Claremont. One was that Henry Lee McFee was going to be teaching at this famous summer session which was occurring, which was also the one that attracted Barbara.

SMITH:

Do you remember what year it was?

FRED MEIERS:

This was 1939, was it?

BARBARA MEIERS:

No. 1940 was the summer where Henry McFee was there.

FRED MEIERS:

1940? I see. Okay.

BARBARA MEIERS:

We went there—I went there in 1939, and you arrived there in 1939.

FRED MEIERS:

Right. I was interested in Claremont. I was interested in going to Pomona College. I was interested in getting a scholarship, but I didn't. Somebody whom I—my competitor in another high school in San Diego—who, incidentally, later became sort of my competitor—

BARBARA MEIERS:

[laughter] Right.

FRED MEIERS:

—in graduate school, in a sense, in Claremont—got this scholarship. I was offered a scholarship to Occidental [College] but that didn't ring any bells, so I went to San Diego State. As part of my work in French I did a paper on Provence. It just happened that at one of the folk-dance parties, one of the professors from Scripps [College] was there. I was telling him about the paper that I was working on and the difficulty I was having getting material and illustrations, etc., for it. He very generously gave me a lot of information, source material, and then sent me a lot of photographs that I could use in connection with my paper. He was a German and he was a professor of culture, something like—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Something fairly highfalutin', as I remember.

FRED MEIERS:

Yes.

SMITH:

Do you remember his name?

FRED MEIERS:

His name was [Arnold] Bergstrasser. I don't remember his first name. Somehow I don't remember exactly how I decided, but I decided that I was going to do graduate work in art at Claremont. I went up in the fall and started my graduate work. That's right.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Sure, in the fall of 1939.

FRED MEIERS:

Not to a summer session. The summer session we attended was the following summer. So it was '39 that we both landed in Claremont.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Right.

SMITH:

And you moved up there?

FRED MEIERS:

Yes, right,

BARBARA MEIERS:

The summer session that was before that in 1939—I really can't remember who was there, but, you know, I had heard about it clear back in Washington.

FRED MEIERS:

The historian, the writer who came again to some other summer session that we went to—

BARBARA MEIERS:

That next summer session where we were in '40.

FRED MEIERS:

—was sort of the kingpin of that one. He was a popular art historian. I can't remember his name.

BARBARA MEIERS:

What is his name? It begins with a B.

FRED MEIERS:

You [Smith] wouldn't know the name.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Well, he might though. [laughter]

SMITH:

It begins with a B.

FRED MEIERS:

[Clarence J.] Bulliett.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Bulliett.

FRED MEIERS:

Didn't he write a book called *Apple and Madonnas*, or something like that?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Something like that. And Henry Lee McFee and—

FRED MEIERS:

But we didn't go there; that was the next summer. We weren't aware that he was going to be there.

SMITH:

So there was something about Claremont that attracted you in and of itself.

FRED MEIERS:

Yes, yes. It was attractive.

BARBARA MEIERS:

It's much more natural that he would have heard about Claremont in San Diego than I would have clear back there. It still amazes me that I landed out here, you know, at the same time.

FRED MEIERS:

I kind of talked to some of my friends. Jimmy [James] Clark, I thought, should come up with me. I did have friends who—Marion Abbott was a friend who was going to Scripps, and there were some other connections. Through mutual friends in San Diego I did know the lady whom I later rented an apartment place from. I had been in Claremont earlier when I was hoping to go to Pomona [College] and had also performed at Padua Hills Theatre—which is in a little community above Claremont. I was attracted to Claremont. Only after enrolling in the Graduate School did I meet Millard Sheets, the personality boy.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Well, he really was the catalyst, you know.

FRED MEIERS:

The dynamo. I didn't realize that he was going to be an important influence in my life. In retrospect, working with Millard Sheets was a stimulating and rewarding experience.

SMITH:

What kind of paintings were you doing at this point?

FRED MEIERS:

Well, I really hadn't done much as an undergraduate in San Diego—I had done an egg tempera project that went on and on. It's a painting about twelve by eighteen inches that looks sort of Seuratish.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Seurat?

FRED MEIERS:

Yes. Do you remember it?

BARBARA MEIERS:

No.

FRED MEIERS:

It's in the attic. I think I'll have to go explore sometime to see if it's still there. Anyway, I think it took me six months or a semester to paint this. I did this under [Everett] Jackson. I didn't do anything except classwork up to the time that I went to Claremont. The atmosphere with Millard was one of absolute freedom, and you could do whatever you wanted. I mean, no schedule—you went with a group and you painted, but I don't know whether we did that every—no, we did that probably a couple of times a week. The rest of the time the model was there so naturally we took advantage of the model. Then there seemed to be some other time and we worked on whatever we wanted to work on.

BARBARA MEIERS:

It was very informal, really.

FRED MEIERS:

There was this vague thing about a terrible project that one had to do.

BARBARA MEIERS:

That master's project plus thesis.

FRED MEIERS:

I think we did get stuck working on this. There was no training in connection with this, no conferences. We were just told that we were going to do this thing and we had to work on it. My god, it was hanging over one's head. You'd go work on it every once in a while, but you never got anyplace on it.

[laughter] I think one person did one, actually completed his project. I don't think anybody else in that year's program did.

BARBARA MEIERS:

They really changed things very much after that year. Well, they changed it from a master's degree to a Master of Fine Arts degree, which involved much more work in one's field, and no written thesis requirement.

### **1.3. TAPE NUMBER: II, Side One (September 3, 1986)**

SMITH:

We were talking about your classes with Millard Sheets, your work with him and the project. I was wondering if the Claremont [Graduate School] art school encouraged you to develop a particular kind of style.

FRED MEIERS:

No, there was no—we were just encouraged to work and to produce.

SMITH:

Was there any kind of consciousness of being here on the West Coast? Of being West Coast artists? Of producing an art that grew out of the West Coast?

FRED MEIERS:

No. Because we were painting landscape the art was—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Did have a Californian—

FRED MEIERS:

Had a particular kind of look. And because we were working with Millard Sheets and because of his way of teaching, we had an influence. He was the kind of teacher who taught by painting on one's painting—

BARBARA MEIERS:

He did.

FRED MEIERS:

So a lot of the paintings—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Looked like Millard Sheets.

FRED MEIERS:

—were little Millard Sheetses because he would paint on everybody's paintings, especially in the beginning. I think it's a perfectly legitimate way of teaching, but it isn't the only way.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Well, in my case, working with Albert Stewart, there wasn't anything like this in the way of—let's see, his background—he had worked with Paulanship and with a very, very strong classical feeling. His whole idea in working was that you needed to really get a good grounding in knowing what the figure was all about. He believed that you really had to learn about construction and drawing. He was a fantastic teacher as far as teaching—you learned how to draw in there as well as just your working—

SMITH:

Did you work with clay, or marble, or—?



BARBARA MEIERS:

We worked in different materials. I worked in clay, and I worked in—I carved plaster and cast, learned how to cast. I worked in terra-cotta clay, cast from that, and then worked in wood carving. He really was primarily concerned with your learning how to construct a body, really. That's the way he taught.

FRED MEIERS:

He was a very—

BARBARA MEIERS:

A very good teacher.

FRED MEIERS:

—discipline—very scary—you know.

BARBARA MEIERS:

He frightened a lot of people. Lots of students cried in classes.

FRED MEIERS:

Pent-up emotion. He looked as though he might explode at any moment. Sort of a foreboding kind of person, forbidding.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Well, yes. He demanded a lot from his students. He was very demanding. Fortunately, he thought I was good. [laughter] He did.

FRED MEIERS:

Right, right.

BARBARA MEIERS:

He really encouraged me. It's too bad I couldn't have gone on with it a little longer maybe.

FRED MEIERS:

Right.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Who knows?

FRED MEIERS:

Right. But Millard was quite the opposite in his—

BARBARA MEIERS:

No, he was very encouraging to everybody.

FRED MEIERS:

His main contribution to teaching was an enthusiasm and a building up of the students and finding something good in what they were doing. Very positive approach. Not too much in the way of a concrete kind of teaching, but strong in building an enthusiasm. As one knew him, building up a contact, an appreciation for other kinds of art that he was involved in and owned.

SMITH:

Such as?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Primitive arts.

FRED MEIERS:

Primitive arts.

BARBARA MEIERS:

He was very much interested in pre-Columbian art.

FRED MEIERS:

Primitive art, pre-Columbian especially.

BARBARA MEIERS:

He was interested in folk art, too.

SMITH:

How did you become interested in the New Mexico, the Southwest Indian?

BARBARA MEIERS:

In New Mexico?

SMITH:

New Mexico and the Southwest Indian cultures?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Actually, at home we had Indian rugs on the floor. My parents were interested and had some knowledge of the Northwest Indians—North Dakota and the Wisconsin area—so that it wasn't completely foreign, the interest in American Indians. The work done there in New Mexico I became acquainted with, of course, when I went out there. Really lived there and got to know some of the people.

SMITH:

Were you interested in it from a design point of view or from a mythological—  
?

BARBARA MEIERS:

No, really more from the design point of view, I would say, from the artistic point of view. I was very taken with the colonial pieces: the santos, the painted chest, the old carved chests, the retablos, and that kind of thing. Plus the Navaho jewelry, the wonderful jewelry of all different kinds. It's very stimulating. I liked that landscape and everything about New Mexico. I still just love it. Really, really enjoy it out there. The adobe and—it was fun to draw. I loved to draw the adobe buildings and fields and the big cottonwood trees and the whole look of the place. The Indian [Juan Mirabel] that I got to know, as I said, was a painter, and he did very interesting primitive paintings. Beautiful things. Very flat. Not at all influenced by Western, American ideas.

FRED MEIERS:

He painted in traditional Indian—

BARBARA MEIERS:

More traditional—

FRED MEIERS:

—style.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Right. But more like a primitive, too. Not—if you know some of those paintings—it's like some of the paintings you see on the buffalo hides. That kind of thing, except a little more developed. He did paintings of the dances, the festival dances that they did. Especially, I remember one of the winter dances with the deerhead masks, and that kind of thing.

SMITH:

There seems to be a growth of interest in Southwest subjects among artists at that time. I'm wondering what it was that was appealing.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Well, there were a lot of people there. Of course, the writers and artists, D. H. Lawrence, Mabel Dodge Luhan, and Dorothy Brett all lived there. I met and got to know Dorothy Brett. There was a big art center there. They were really very much involved, both in painting and in writing. There were people that had come from the East Coast many of them from New York.

SMITH:

Who?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Well, Georgia O'Keeffe, but she came later.

FRED MEIERS:

She was there by '29.

BARBARA MEIERS:

For a visit.

FRED MEIERS:

Yes. I think her first visit out there was in '29. O'Keeffe first visited Taos in 1929 on a visit to Mabel Dodge then summered there in New Mexico off and on, staying at a guest ranch until 1940 when she bought property.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Was it that early?

FRED MEIERS:

And she moved out there—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Well, she didn't move out there—

FRED MEIERS:

—quite early.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Right. But it was, I think, not until—well, I really shouldn't say. We could look it up.

SMITH:

Yes.

BARBARA MEIERS:

But I think there was—you're right—there was quite an interest in Southwest things developing then.

SMITH:

Now, you [Fred] got your M. A. in art?

FRED MEIERS:

No, I didn't. I went to Claremont [College] Graduate School for a year and a summer, and then the war—no, I got a teaching job in a high school.

SMITH:

Teaching art?

FRED MEIERS:

Yes, art and stage design.

SMITH:

I wanted to ask you, in terms of the theater, what you were interested in. Was it classical, or were you interested in the contemporary things that were going on as well?

FRED MEIERS:

You mean my earlier interests that we were talking about?

SMITH:

Well, yes, the time you were at Claremont. No, it was—

BARBARA MEIERS:

San Diego State [College, now San Diego State University].

SMITH:

San Diego State?

BARBARA MEIERS:

San Diego State, and the earlier—

FRED MEIERS:

Well, my theater work—I was interested early, much earlier than that.

BARBARA MEIERS:

And in New York.

FRED MEIERS:

It was when I was in high school. There were all kinds of stuff. All kinds of literature, all kinds of plays. I'd set myself a project for reading all the best plays that had ever been written, just for my own satisfaction, when I was in high school. It just seemed something I needed to do. This worked into my college French studies, with emphasis on the classical French dramatists of the nineteenth century. It was just a continuation of this interest.

SMITH:

Well, I guess we should move on to how you two met. Was it while you both were going to school at the same time?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes. We met in Millard's painting class, right? Either painting or drawing.

FRED MEIERS:

No, the first time we met was in the seal [court] at Scripps [College].

BARBARA MEIERS:

Oh, all right, to be specific.

FRED MEIERS:

Yes. But we were in classes together there, and there was a small group of graduate students, art graduate students there.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Well, we had a lot of common interests, of course.

FRED MEIERS:

Right.

BARBARA MEIERS:

We started driving out to the desert, I remember, and this wonderful car—that was the same car—wasn't it—that went to New York?

FRED MEIERS:

Yes. [laughter] Dorcas.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Dorcas.

FRED MEIERS:

This car belonged to this friend of mine.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Parker [Totten].

FRED MEIERS:

He acquired another car in the meantime, and I didn't have one, so I brought this car with me to Claremont.

BARBARA MEIERS:

And what was it? A model—

FRED MEIERS:

I think it was a '30 or '31 little Ford—

BARBARA MEIERS:

No top.

FRED MEIERS:

With a rumble seat.

BARBARA MEIERS:

A rumble seat and no top.

FRED MEIERS:

So we had little trips around the countryside.

BARBARA MEIERS:

We went on wonderful trips because we loved the desert. I'd already started going to the desert with this sister of mine [Harriet Taylor] who was doing biology. One of the things that she needed was horned toads because she was doing all kinds of work with horned toads. We would go out there and collect horned toads. [laughter] I'd been going down there with her and some of her other friends. Then in the springtime I remember Fred and I went down on our first trip. Didn't it rain on the way back? Wasn't that the one?

FRED MEIERS:

Could be.

BARBARA MEIERS:

I think so. Four of us went down, and there were two in the back seat under drawing boards trying to keep dry in the rumble seat. [laughter]



FRED MEIERS:

No windshield wiper, and—

BARBARA MEIERS:

No. He'd stick his head up over the [windshield] to see where he was going. We had so many good laughs. That's sort of the beginning, I think. [laughter]

SMITH:

So when did you two get married?

BARBARA MEIERS:

We were married at the end of that summer session that next summer. We just didn't have time to get married before then. [laughter] We were so busy, I remember. Right at the end of the summer session Fred and a friend of ours, Warren Wheeler, decided that they needed to go on a painting trip to Baja California. First they thought that maybe I should go, too. Fortunately, I didn't because I don't think I would have survived it. [laughter] This was in the heat of August. They went on this painting trip down to Baja in this little car, the same little car.

FRED MEIERS:

This little car. This is another one of these things where one didn't know—we hadn't planned exactly where we were going on this trip. But somebody said as we crossed the border—and we were asking about going down aways—and they said, "Well, I don't know whether that could go on that road or not."

BARBARA MEIERS:

That car.

FRED MEIERS:

I think that was a challenge. So we found out? it could go. Actually, in practice, there wasn't any road. It was before the road was made.

BARBARA MEIERS:

It just wandered down, you know. It was just sort of tracks on this—

FRED MEIERS:

Yes, except in the places where there weren't any tracks, say, in the dry lake, or when there are lots of rocks where there is a rocky area. You just sort of had to imagine where the road is. You see some evidence of it up aways so you went over there. Much digging out of sand.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Sometimes they would go maybe five miles in a day.

FRED MEIERS:

In a day because of the digging out.

BARBARA MEIERS:

They'd get stuck, you know, and then they'd have to—then they had terrible things happen like—

FRED MEIERS:

And heat.

BARBARA MEIERS:

—getting dug out. I should let you tell it. Being in the middle of this so-called road then, on this path, and not [being able] to get out of it—

FRED MEIERS:

Having to spend the day—

BARBARA MEIERS:

And having to spend the night there.

FRED MEIERS:

Five miles in the day and we were in the midst of this sand, so we just stopped there. There wasn't anybody going by so there wasn't any reason why we should get out of this spot where we were. Except that in the middle of the night there's a tremendous noise. It was a big blustering truck and people getting out, yelling and screaming at us to get out of the way. We said, "We can't get out of the way. We—."

BARBARA MEIERS:

"We just dug out of the sand." [laughter]

FRED MEIERS:

So they blustered and then—with a truck they could drive any place so they drove around our car.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Well, the upshot of it was that the car caught on fire from just too many jiggles, I think, joggles.

FRED MEIERS:

We got as far down the lower California peninsula as Santa Rosalia which is about half way down.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Did some great paintings, watercolors.

FRED MEIERS:

We did some nice paintings. A man came up to us in this town and said, "Let's see your papers." "What papers?" "Well, you have to have permission to be in this country." "No, we don't have anything like that." So he said, "Well, there's a choice: I can either send you to Mexico City to jail or—"

BARBARA MEIERS:

All the way to Mexico City?

FRED MEIERS:

Yes. "—or I can pretend that I didn't run into you and you can turn around and go back." My friend about died at this point because we had planned to go across the gulf on a ferry and go to the mainland. We said, "We'll go back the way we came. Thank you." So we—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Started back.

FRED MEIERS:

I think the axle broke about that time, and we had run out of money, too. So we had to wait for money to pay for the axle, and then we started back. We hadn't gone very far and we were out in the midst of a desert. We had water and such, food. And the car just caught on fire and burned up. [laughter]

SMITH:

I wonder what you [Barbara] must have felt—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Well, that's the thing. The thing was, you know, I was back at home not knowing, thank goodness, what was going on. There wasn't any word from anybody. How could there be any word. So I thought, "Well, I better just go on a trip or do something because I'm not going to sit here and wait." So I went up to visit a friend in Yosemite who was up there being a maid in one of those cabin situations. I forget the name of the place, anyway.

FRED MEIERS:

She was a maid?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes, that's what she did.

FRED MEIERS:

Rosamund [Henriques]?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Sure.

FRED MEIERS:

I didn't know that.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Oh, yes. She was working in one of the camps, you know, where they—

FRED MEIERS:

When the art students—

BARBARA MEIERS:

That's what she was doing. So I stayed with her and we had a nice time. Hiked up to the top of the falls and did all those things. Walked back by moonlight. It was beautiful. Then finally came on home. A few days later there's a knock on the door in the middle of the night, and here's Fred, probably weighing—what—about 110 or maybe less, something like that. [laughter]

FRED MEIERS:

We were both very light at this point.

BARBARA MEIERS:

We were both very thin anyway.

SMITH:

You hitchhiked home?

FRED MEIERS:

No.

BARBARA MEIERS:

No, he said, "I've been riding on an apple box. I've been sitting on an apple box riding all the way from—" I forget where. It was in the bus. He did take a bus.

FRED MEIERS:

It was called a bus but it was a truck. I don't need to tell all these details. But anyway, it was a very primitive means of transportation on which I traveled several hundred miles. Eventually, there was a second-class bus that we transferred to which would periodically run out of gas. Guess who walked to find the gas?

BARBARA MEIERS:

The passengers.

FRED MEIERS:

Well, it was us usually.

SMITH:

At this time you were already quite fluent in Spanish, or pretty good with Spanish?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes, he [was].

FRED MEIERS:

Yes, sort of. So we were married shortly thereafter.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes, we were. [laughter]

FRED MEIERS:

Barbara's landlady hurried and got us married.

BARBARA MEIERS:

[laughter] We went down to the Los Angeles court—what's it called down there—were married there.

FRED MEIERS:

[Los Angeles] City Hall.

BARBARA MEIERS:

No—Hall of Justice. We went to Laguna Beach for a few days. We had a little house down there. Did you do some more painting?

FRED MEIERS:

Yes, yes.

BARBARA MEIERS:

[laughter] I don't think so. Right.

SMITH:

Of course, the war had already started in Europe.

BARBARA MEIERS:

No.

SMITH:

In Europe.

FRED MEIERS:

Yes, right.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Oh, in Europe. Yes.

SMITH:

Did you think the United States was going to get involved in the war?

FRED MEIERS:

We weren't war enthusiasts.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Shall we say.

FRED MEIERS:

We weren't, you know, with this outwardness and patriotism and all that. That wasn't our way of thinking.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Well, as a matter of fact, at the University of Wisconsin I was one of the what they called pacifists then. I was marching with them and doing all this kind of thing, just like the way people did it here later and especially, during the Vietnam thing. So we really were not at all sympathetic with the idea of our getting into it.

FRED MEIERS:

In spite of the local feeling in Claremont which was let's get in there.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes.

FRED MEIERS:

We didn't have this kind of feeling.

BARBARA MEIERS:

You know, there were lots of—most of our friends were—one of them joined the ambulance corps and did that kind of thing, refused to go. Another one went into conscientious objectors and—in fact, several of them did.

SMITH:

Did you [Fred] consider being a conscientious objector?

FRED MEIERS:

I didn't know about this. I might have, but I couldn't think of any justification. I had no religious affiliations that would sustain that viewpoint, which is what, really, most of them have to be built on.

BARBARA MEIERS:

And our very, very good friend Warren, who was the one who went on this trip to Baja, had thought about doing all different things. Then in the end—it was as if to prove something to himself—he joined the marines of all things.

FRED MEIERS:

Did he join the marines before I was away or not? I forget.

BARBARA MEIERS:

No. You'd already gone.

FRED MEIERS:

I'd gone to the Pacific.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes.

SMITH:

Were you drafted?

FRED MEIERS:

I was just on the point of being drafted.

BARBARA MEIERS:



Then he decided he'd rather not.

FRED MEIERS:

I decided—I applied for a commission. I really worked hard at this, trying to get a commission in the navy. At this point, I was teaching high school.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Teaching stage design.

FRED MEIERS:

I thought that I was convincing them [the United States Navy] that there was some connection between what I was doing and doing this [making stage sets], being the reverse of photographic interpretation.

BARBARA MEIERS:

That's what he got his commission on.

FRED MEIERS:

So I got a commission. I thought I got a commission to go to school to learn how to do photographic interpretation, but I was given a commission and promptly sent to Admiral [Chester W.] Nimitz's staff in Honolulu.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Immediately.

FRED MEIERS:

Without any training whatsoever. Nothing. I worked in communications on the staff in Honolulu.

BARBARA MEIERS:

This is getting a little bit ahead of something that I wanted to get into because—see, we were married in September in '40. Then, at Christmastime the next year, we went back to Washington [D.C.] because they [Barbara's family] didn't know Fred. They hadn't even met him, except for my mother, who visited us in spring, 1941. So we went back to visit my family. At that point we were interested in folk art and in Mexico. Especially Fred. He went to talk and visit with René D'Harnoncourt.

FRED MEIERS:

He was the head of the Indian division [Bureau of Indian Affairs] in the [United States] Department of Interior. He later was the head of the [New York] Museum of Modern Art.

BARBARA MEIERS:

D'Harnoncourt, you know, was very interested in Mexico and folk art.

FRED MEIERS:

He, as a young man, had lived in Mexico. Subsequently we came to know some of his other associates. He worked in a shop—in a folk art shop actually—in Mexico, that I had earlier visited.

BARBARA MEIERS:

But even that early [1941]—if it had been the right time we probably would have gotten involved in folk art.

FRED MEIERS:

We were talking to him about—you were there, too, weren't you?

BARBARA MEIERS:

No, I didn't go.

FRED MEIERS:

With D'Harnoncourt?

BARBARA MEIERS:

I think I had the flu or something.

FRED MEIERS:

I see. We were talking about buying in Mexico, crafts suitable for selling in the U.S.

BARBARA MEIERS:

We thought there was a possibility of this kind of thing, even that early.

FRED MEIERS:

We had an interest in this.

BARBARA MEIERS:

But because of the war, it was just the wrong time for anything like that to happen. So he wasn't very encouraging as far as anything happening that way.

FRED MEIERS:

Well, we weren't actually in the war. This was—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes, we were.

FRED MEIERS:

That's right.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes, we were. December 7, wasn't it?

SMITH:

Of '41.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes.

FRED MEIERS:

Of '41. And we were in Washington. We went to Washington maybe two weeks after Pearl Harbor.

SMITH:

I thought you said it was December of 1940.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Oh, I'm sorry. No. It was December 1941 that we went there. We were in the war. It was the wrong time for anything like this to happen.

SMITH:

At that point what kind of folk art were you thinking of bringing into the United States? Had you already started to define your interests?

FRED MEIERS:

No, I wasn't thinking concretely. We wanted to talk to him because we knew of his experience, that he was very aware and had worked in connection with Mexican folk art. But I didn't have any idea of what kind of things that we would be interested in, or anything about business either. That came much later.

BARBARA MEIERS:

So we were both teaching then that whole year, '40-'41. I was teaching, in Claremont and he was teaching in Norwalk [California, at Excelsior Union High School].

FRED MEIERS:

I was teaching in a high school.

SMITH:

Then the war came. During the war you worked your entire service with Admiral Nimitz?

FRED MEIERS:

No, I worked with Admiral Nimitz for about a year. I got bored with the routine of Honolulu and I wanted to see something else. I went down in the harbor and saw a beautiful ship, a battleship. Then a little later I heard of a job that I could fill. It happened to be on this ship. It was a staff job. I applied for this and got it very shortly.

BARBARA MEIERS:

But before this, before the war broke for us, we had gone to Mexico. That was the summer of '41. That was really my first introduction to Mexico.

SMITH:

Where did you travel to?

BARBARA MEIERS:

We went down by way of Loreto [Zacatecas] and drove down that way through wonderful mountainous country, down through an area, a little town called Tamazunchale [San Luis Potosí] where our car—

FRED MEIERS:

In the tropics.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Very tropical region. Our car broke down up in the mountains. Fred stayed with the car, and I came back with some Texans that had come along. We went back to the town to get help to go out and tow the car back. We spent several days in the town while our car was getting repaired, and it was a charming area where the people were—well, they were all still dressed in their costumes, the men in their wonderful big full blouses, hats, wraparound pants, and sandals. We made an acquaintance of a woman who did a lot of the clothing. We had clothes made for ourselves like the regional clothing, which was fun to do. She had her little Singer sewing machine in her house on a dirt floor. Sewed up our clothes. That, really, was my introduction. In fact, this little book, the Frances Toor book [*Mexican Popular Arts, 1939*], was the first time I really had begun to know what the folk arts were. I got a lot of information out of this. I read several books about Mexico. I read D.H. Lawrence's [*The*] *Plumed Serpent*. Then Stuart Chase had written a book [*Mexico, A Study of Two Cultures*] about a town in the Middle West [Muncie, Indiana]—

FRED MEIERS:

Tepoztlan [Morelos].

BARBARA MEIERS:

—of this country, and it was compared to Tepoztlan in Mexico. It was a comparative study of the two towns. That was very interesting to me. I did some more reading and, especially using this, the Toor book, finding the places where these various crafts were made. That's when we went down and started looking for some of these things. We went to Mexico City. We went to the Bellas Artes palace [Palacio de las Bellas Artes] where there was an exhibit of folk art. We looked and found the regions where they were made. I can

remember especially just loving the big pots that were from Guerrero with the wonderful brown, dark brown painting on them, figures on horseback, and that kind of thing. Fred says he remembers that they were sitting on the floor.

FRED MEIERS:

The exhibit consisted of a bunch of folk art pieces standing on the floor below the normal gold frame paintings in Bellas Artes.

BARBARA MEIERS:

There really wasn't a folk art museum at that time. At least we weren't aware of one.

FRED MEIERS:

There were several places that we went to, privately run places, shops—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Shops, right.

FRED MEIERS:

That had gallery situations, too. But they weren't extensive at all in Mexico City.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Right.

SMITH:

Was there anybody in the Los Angeles area at the time who was, to your knowledge, importing folk art?

FRED MEIERS:

Olvera Street. But Olvera Street was always Olvera Street, sort of the down here's where—

BARBARA MEIERS:

The quality of the things there was not that great.

FRED MEIERS:

The taste level was not too high; it was nonselective. There are several, a couple of shops on Olvera Street now that have very good selections of folk art.

SMITH:

But at that time—

FRED MEIERS:

But at that time it was very limited. More a Tijuana kind of selection. Very hard to find anything the least bit special.

BARBARA MEIERS:

And then from Mexico City we went to Toluca [estado de Mexico] which, of course, had a wonderful market. Friday market was just a wonderful—it's a big, big market.

FRED MEIERS:

It's one of the biggest—it is the biggest market in Mexico.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Still is a really big market. We really went through that and loved it. We met a woman there who took us to her home. We went through piles of blankets, and bought blankets. That's what we mainly bought on that trip.

SMITH:

This is in 1941, summer.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Right.

SMITH:

Do you remember the woman's name by any chance?

BARBARA MEIERS:

No, do you [Fred]?

FRED MEIERS:

Well, we weren't in touch with her later.

BARBARA MEIERS:

But it was really a wonderful experience, going through all the blankets and picking out the ones that we wanted. We came back with quite a nice group of—they were regional blankets, I assume, made right there.

SMITH:

At this point were you interested in authenticity and something that reflected the indigenous culture?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes. That was one reason we went to the museum because we wanted to see what they might consider representative, and what would be there, too.

FRED MEIERS:

We had a feeling, sort of a sensitivity. How do you say it? We knew quality, sort of, instinctively. At least we thought we did. We've always thought we had this, and other people have agreed that we do and did.

BARBARA MEIERS:

It's what the Japanese call—

FRED MEIERS:

A "good eye."

BARBARA MEIERS:

A "good eye." [laughs]

FRED MEIERS:

We were looking for things that were satisfying to us. It wasn't a matter of their being authentic; it was a matter of their being aesthetically satisfying. Incidentally, they were usually authentic, whatever that is.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Well, there is a difference.



SMITH:

Have you ever tried to formulate what your "good eye" consists of?

BARBARA MEIERS:

It's really difficult.

FRED MEIERS:

No, no.

BARBARA MEIERS:

It's really a matter of taste, whatever that is. That's made up of so many elements in one's background, really.

SMITH:

You see something and it does something to you.

FRED MEIERS:

It clicks.

SMITH:

It clicks.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Right.

FRED MEIERS:

Right.

SMITH:

You can't necessarily explain it.

BARBARA MEIERS:

No, it really is very difficult to explain.

FRED MEIERS:

One can explain it by examples, you know: You look at a bunch of stuff, and then you pick out—they're all the same things, but some of them are better than others.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Design is very much involved in it.

FRED MEIERS:

Yes. Proportion, color, texture, all contribute and make up the reasons for choosing one thing over another.

SMITH:

You [Fred] had said that your earlier interests had been Gauguin, Cézanne, and Picasso; and you [Barbara] had talked about crafts in the Smithsonian [Institution] and German expressionism. How were those things pushing you—?

FRED MEIERS:

They're all related. This is part of the whole picture. There isn't any separation. I mean, I think one arrives at these choices and interests because they're the things that satisfy and that one chooses because they are right for one's sensitivities. These interests, on my part, started in, oh, in seventh grade when I started being in touch with the broader world of art.

SMITH:

Then the war intervened. Beyond your trip to Washington and your trip to Mexico, had you begun to take the next steps towards importing things, starting a business? How far along were you?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Well, you know, we had all these different urges. I think we had more interest in the folk art than we had in actually thinking of forming a business or formulating any kind of concrete plan. We knew we wanted to go back and see more.

FRED MEIERS:

After this isolated interview and thinking about Mexico, as a possible thing that we might get into, maybe importing, then we didn't think about it anymore. We became immersed in—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Surviving the war. [laughter]

FRED MEIERS:

In teaching and then the war.

BARBARA MEIERS:

He went off, and I didn't see him for three years. He didn't come back on leave or anything. I stayed on in Claremont where I did that therapy work, continued working in crafts, doing this kind of thing, and having my trip to New Mexico and getting really excited about New Mexico. I would have loved to have bought kachinas and santos and jewelry and all kinds of things but we had no money. None. We were living very, very simply. This friend and I had this little place together, and I think the two of us probably lived on thirty-five, forty dollars a month, period. There wasn't anything left over. But I really was enjoying all those things. I did buy one or two kachinas just before I left, which we still have.

FRED MEIERS:

Then the war ended.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Then the war ended and Fred came back to go on with his studies.

FRED MEIERS:

Then I went back to school.

BARBARA MEIERS:

He went back to school.

FRED MEIERS:

And we started a family. We were living in Claremont. We had our two daughters [Mayde and Susan]. I worked as assistant to Millard Sheets in the

galleries at Scripps [College]. Then I was the assistant director of the art department of the Pomona county fair [Los Angeles County Fair], which used to put on a big annual major show for the L.A. area.

BARBARA MEIERS:

I don't know whether you [Smith] ever go out to the Pomona fair in the fall?

SMITH:

No, I didn't go to it.

BARBARA MEIERS:

They used to really have wonderful art exhibits.

FRED MEIERS:

Yes. They were very interesting shows.

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FRED MEIERS:

We continued to live in Claremont. I was working, studying, which really consisted of my working on my own. That's what it amounted to.

SMITH:

You were painting?

FRED MEIERS:

I was painting, yes.

SMITH:

Had your style matured as your interest—?

FRED MEIERS:

Yes. I had worked with—about this time, my style, I developed my own kind of work.

BARBARA MEIERS:

And he did some interesting paintings as a result of his travels in the Pacific. He did paint some during the war on leave. He had some time to spend in Guam and in Hawaii. He did some paintings in watercolor. Then when he came home he went on and did some very interesting oil paintings, one of which was exhibited in one of the big national shows—

FRED MEIERS:

It was some sort of competition, yes.

BARBARA MEIERS:

A competition, a show.

FRED MEIERS:

I had a show right after the war in La Jolla [California] of some of the stuff that I'd done.

SMITH:

Watercolors mostly?

FRED MEIERS:

Yes. They were all watercolors.

BARBARA MEIERS:

About then we were going to have our second child—

FRED MEIERS:

And Millard [Sheets] suddenly produced a job and said, "It's time for you to stop graduate school. Here you go." [laughter] I started teaching at Long Beach City College.

SMITH:

Teaching painting?

FRED MEIERS:

Yes. Teaching painting and design.

SMITH:

Then you moved out to Long Beach?

FRED MEIERS:

Then we moved here.

SMITH:

Oh, here.

FRED MEIERS:

Right.

BARBARA MEIERS:

We were still in Claremont until Susan [Meiers] was about a year and a half, remember.

FRED MEIERS:

Oh, I commuted.

BARBARA MEIERS:

He commuted to Long Beach—

FRED MEIERS:

For about a year.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Right.

FRED MEIERS:

And then we discovered Palos Verdes.

BARBARA MEIERS:

We came down here because we were interested in a cemesto house, which was a fascinating material. You could put up—it was like a preconstructed—

FRED MEIERS:

It was made in one of the aircraft industries. It was a compressed material.

BARBARA MEIERS:

It was fireproof and it was insulated.

FRED MEIERS:

It had insulating qualities. It took a minimum amount of wall space. It could be very thin. We became interested in this.

BARBARA MEIERS:

And there was a house down here in this area.

FRED MEIERS:

We came down here to see this house.

BARBARA MEIERS:

That's how we happened to know about this area where we live.

FRED MEIERS:

Then we thought this would be a good place because it's convenient to Long Beach and it's convenient to Los Angeles.

BARBARA MEIERS:

And it has a nice climate.

SMITH:

I'd like to talk a little bit about the Los Angeles art community after the war. Now, you're established as a teacher. Were you part of, quote unquote, "the Los Angeles art community?" Certainly at the county fair you were.

FRED MEIERS:

In that sense, when we were in school and working in Claremont we were in, really, a very conservative art community. We were aware of things of—I can't think of the gallery? What's the name of the gallery?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Ferus [Gallery].

FRED MEIERS:

Ferus. We were aware of Ferus but we had no direct connection with it.

BARBARA MEIERS:

We went to exhibits in there.

FRED MEIERS:

Yes, we saw the exhibits.

BARBARA MEIERS:

We went to the [Los Angeles] County Museum [of History, Science and Art] shows.

FRED MEIERS:

But we weren't involved. We were in touch with some of the artists. Darrow was a part of that setup as a good friend.

SMITH:

Darrow?

FRED MEIERS:

Yes.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Paul Darrow.

FRED MEIERS:

But we really weren't involved at all. Most of our art contacts were people who were in teaching, you know.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Well, through Jean and Arthur Ames, we were aware of the gallery that handled their things and some of the people that were working there.

FRED MEIERS:

That was a very conservative gallery, Hatfield's.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Right, the Hatfield Gallery.



FRED MEIERS:

Which still goes on in the Ambassador [Hotel]. [now out of business]

BARBARA MEIERS:

But we also met, I did, Lorser Feitelson—

FRED MEIERS:

Yes, we did, and I did.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Who were advanced in their work.

FRED MEIERS:

And [Helen] Lundeberg.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Right, really much more avant-garde.

FRED MEIERS:

The people that we knew were people that had been avant-garde people for years. It didn't suddenly happen. None of this suddenly happened the way, it seems to me, the way people think, that suddenly there was this thing that was completely different. These things are evolved out of something previously, out of a gradual kind of thing, change.

SMITH:

Were you on top of what was developing in New York, the abstract expressionists?

FRED MEIERS:

Sure, sure.

SMITH:

So that was percolating out here?

FRED MEIERS:

It was much stronger in San Francisco, of course. There was really a larger group—well, a very positive thing, and that kind of—there just wasn't the group feeling in Los Angeles, probably because the absence of structure in Los Angeles made for a less cohesive situation than in San Francisco.

SMITH:

Were you involved at all with Artists Equity?

FRED MEIERS:

I was in Artists Equity very early and then didn't pay my dues.

SMITH:

Were you [Barbara] involved with Artists Equity?

BARBARA MEIERS:

No, no.

SMITH:

By very early you mean—what—before the war?

FRED MEIERS:

Let's see, I can't remember whether it was before the war or right after the war. It was when it was first—I think it was when it was first organized here. And California Watercolor Society, which is another professional organization. Actually, I don't like organizations. I don't like [being] organized, even this kind of stuff.

SMITH:

Neither the Artists Equity nor the Watercolor Society did anything for you that you could see?

BARBARA MEIERS:

No.

FRED MEIERS:

No.

SMITH:

Some of the county art fair shows were quite controversial in the late forties and early fifties. The [Los Angeles] County Board of Supervisors, I think it was 1949, passed a resolution after the county art fair saying that avant-garde artists were unwitting agents of Moscow.

BARBARA MEIERS:

I believe it. Our friend from Santa Cruz, they were extremely critical of that painting of his. It was a Christ, and it caused quite a to-do. They thought it was sacrilegious.

FRED MEIERS:

Who is this?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Head of the [University of California] Santa Cruz art department.

FRED MEIERS:

Oh, Doug.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Sure.

SMITH:

Doug?

FRED MEIERS:

[Douglas] McClellan.

BARBARA MEIERS:

That was in one of those shows about that time.

FRED MEIERS:

Right. We had a Cézanne, if you can imagine, in the county fair. Somebody got a hold of me—not once, but several times. "This is communist, Cézanne."

[laughter] "This is communist work. This shouldn't be shown in the public situation."

SMITH:

Who was this person?

FRED MEIERS:

Just—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Public—

SMITH:

A person of influence?

FRED MEIERS:

No, no.

BARBARA MEIERS:

That was an extremely conservative group there.

FRED MEIERS:

The Los Angeles County Fair is in Pomona, and there are a million people through the art galleries—or were in those days—during this two-week period of the fair. You really got a lot of cross action of a very broad cross section.

SMITH:

Were you involved in selecting paintings for the county art fair?

FRED MEIERS:

Millard Sheets was certainly responsible for it. I contributed, too.

SMITH:

What were the criteria for selecting one artist over another artist, or one painting over another painting?

FRED MEIERS:

These shows were not competitive shows. These were thematic shows or material shows so the criteria were set up or were historical. They always had some kind of a theme.

SMITH:

Still, local artists were trying to get their work into it?

FRED MEIERS:

No. No, not in these. You're thinking of the county museum shows.

BARBARA MEIERS:

This is the fair that he's talking about, the county fair in Pomona.

FRED MEIERS:

The one that I was involved in, where I worked. I showed my own work in the county museum shows. I submitted to, and once or twice I got into those shows.

BARBARA MEIERS:

The county show in Los Angeles.

SMITH:

At Exposition Park?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes, it was in Exposition Park.

FRED MEIERS:

Yes. Before it was in—

BARBARA MEIERS:

It was called Los Angeles and Vicinity Exhibitions.

FRED MEIERS:

Those were the supposedly controversial shows.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Some of them were, right.

SMITH:

I see, okay.

FRED MEIERS:

They weren't controversial at all. They showed just a broad, broad spectrum of artists' interests.

BARBARA MEIERS:

But, you know, it's the same thing that they got into later on with the [Edward] Kienholz thing. You know, the county supervisors. If there's one person on there [the board] that's a very, very conservative person, he's got to say his piece.

FRED MEIERS:

Terrible.

SMITH:

So the shows that you were dealing with at the fair were American and European art?

BARBARA MEIERS:

All kinds of things.

FRED MEIERS:

We did a clay show from earliest times.

BARBARA MEIERS:

That's clay, C-L-A-Y.

FRED MEIERS:

Yes, you're right. Yes.

BARBARA MEIERS:

All kinds of wonderful things from pre-Columbian sculpture. Han, Ming Dynasty, Chinese, and all kinds of things down to the present.

SMITH:

Did you get to travel around?

FRED MEIERS:

Yes, yes.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Not very far afield; in this area.

FRED MEIERS:

Not far afield.

BARBARA MEIERS:

But he met interesting people in this area.

FRED MEIERS:

There is really a wealth of art that's available—

FRED MEIERS:

—from here to Santa Barbara. There are some fantastic collections.

SMITH:

It sounds like in the course of working in this thing you may have met important people in terms of your later business work. People who might be interested in collecting folk art, possibly?

FRED MEIERS:

Actually, we met lots of interesting people. As it turned out, I don't think we used any of these connections to—they didn't serve us directly, at any rate. Our connections that helped in folk art developed later through newer contacts with people who were in a selling and buying situation nationally.

SMITH:

But perhaps you were getting an idea of how the collector's mind operates?

BARBARA MEIERS:

No.

FRED MEIERS:

Perhaps.

BARBARA MEIERS:

We really didn't think of our business in that way, as just selling to collectors. We really didn't.

FRED MEIERS:

No.

BARBARA MEIERS:

We were interested in it being a very universal thing and having lots of people, really, have it, enjoy it, and use it in their homes.

FRED MEIERS:

And inexpensive.

BARBARA MEIERS:

And inexpensive. We were so sold on folk art as an expression, as a warm kind of thing. We felt that everybody would be interested in it. We didn't start collecting collector's pieces, really, for a long time.

SMITH:

In your classes at Long Beach City College what were you teaching specifically?

FRED MEIERS:

I was teaching painting, design, drawing, and gallery. I did galleries there—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Gallery management, yes.

FRED MEIERS:

Shows.

SMITH:

What were the students supposed to get out of your classes?



FRED MEIERS:

Well, in the design classes they were supposed to learn about color and relationship of shapes and texture. There were very simple problems that involved—sort of spoon-fed with the hopes of instilling some kind of basic ideas of design organization. We followed more or less the same kind of basic design course that UCLA provided. I worked with a very interesting group of people. There were five people in the department. The department had a very good reputation as far as quality of teaching and information provided.

SMITH:

In the gallery, were you showing student works, faculty works?

FRED MEIERS:

No. In the gallery we tried to provide as stimulating an exhibit as we could. I was the head of the thing, but the other people contributed with ideas. The first show that we did when we built the gallery was a show called "Search in Five Directions" or "Search in Seven Directions." I can't remember what these directions were, but it was an arbitrary setup to produce visual images that had nothing to do with time or a particular kind of culture. It performed a visual stimulus. It really was a challenge and a stimulus to the people seeing this combination of material that we assembled in this first show.

BARBARA MEIERS:

What kind of things did you have in it? What kind of pieces?

FRED MEIERS:

There was a huge variety of pieces. I wish I could remember what these directions were. [laughter]

BARBARA MEIERS:

Is that the one that had the kites and the—

FRED MEIERS:

You know, I can't remember. The only thing that I can remember concretely in it was a T'ang horse that we had put together. It was a T'ang horse. It was about like this. It was ours. We put it together—it was in fragments—and it

kept falling apart. It was missing one leg, and a dowel held up that one spot.  
There were all kinds of things in the exhibition and all different-sized things—

BARBARA MEIERS:

All different periods.

FRED MEIERS:

Textures. There were some lead pieces that we borrowed from Charles and Ray Eames.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Toys and things, too.

FRED MEIERS:

Maybe there were kites.

BARBARA MEIERS:

I'm pretty sure that the kites were included.

SMITH:

Was this the major gallery in the Long Beach area for a while?

FRED MEIERS:

This was the gallery of Long Beach City College. This preceded the gallery that we formed later, the municipal gallery that we formed later in Long Beach. We did the selection of paintings for the initial exhibit. We were involved in the formation of that.

SMITH:

When was that?

FRED MEIERS:

I don't know. Let's see. About mid-fifties, I think.

SMITH:

To start a—

BARBARA MEIERS:

A municipal gallery.

FRED MEIERS:

The earlier plan was that there was to be provision for galleries in the convention center and the municipal auditorium, which are now built. In the meantime a residence building became available. You've been to Long Beach—?

SMITH:

Yes.

FRED MEIERS:

That building became available. The understanding was that that would be a temporary building, but it's never gotten beyond having that situation. It's a terrible place as a gallery. It's all right as a building, but it's just impossible as a gallery. It's so limiting.

BARBARA MEIERS:

The shows at Long Beach City College Fred did were really pretty exciting. We used to alert the community around here about them. We'd get a group together and go over, for the opening nights. The other thing that he did was to have a forum series—

FRED MEIERS:

Oh, that's right.

BARBARA MEIERS:

With very, very interesting lectures.

FRED MEIERS:

We had—

BARBARA MEIERS:

[Richard J.] Neutra to—

FRED MEIERS:

We had a forum series sponsored by the art department of the Long Beach city schools [Long Beach Unified School District], I guess, it was sponsored by. I think we had them once a month. We usually did a thematic kind of thing. So there'd be some connection between various lectures over a semester—and requested people to have some relationship between a group of different people who were speaking over a period of, say, four or five months, something like this. We had lots of interesting people. Architects, painters—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Ralph Altman was on the series.

FRED MEIERS:

Right, right.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Very good lecturer.

SMITH:

Your shows, were they primarily art history based?

FRED MEIERS:

No. None historical.

SMITH:

So you were dealing with contemporary art mostly here in Los Angeles?

FRED MEIERS:

Anything. They weren't necessarily paintings.

BARBARA MEIERS:

It could be related to design and objects from all kinds, from every aspect of life.

FRED MEIERS:

Yes.

SMITH:

To stimulate people.

FRED MEIERS:

Yes, yes. We thought of it as a very good tool for teaching. There was a small department in a building that's built around a patio, and the gallery was right in the center of it. There was the gallery, studios, small lecture hall offices, and that was it.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Of course, they did have student shows, too.

FRED MEIERS:

We had an annual student show, right.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Sure, like most schools do.

FRED MEIERS:

We did have paintings. We did show paintings and we did show sculpture, but we showed lots more than that, too.

SMITH:

You were continuing to paint throughout this period.

FRED MEIERS:

Right.

SMITH:

The painting you showed me that you did of your family?

FRED MEIERS:

Oh, yes.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Well, right now he has a nice group of paintings, some of them from earlier—that's a watercolor that was done quite a while ago. There are various ones around that he worked on.

SMITH:

What were you trying to accomplish in terms of your own work? Did you have particular areas that you were exploring or interested in?

FRED MEIERS:

I don't work that way, consciously formulating a way of what I'm doing. Maybe it is a good idea to do this, but it is not my way. But I've been looking at some of my work recently, and I notice I spent a lot of time working on things that are right around here. Somebody was here the other day and said, "This is sort of a good picture of Palos Verdes," the bunch of paintings that are around here.

BARBARA MEIERS:

He's stimulated by his surroundings, you know.

SMITH:

So your paintings were objective rather than—?

FRED MEIERS:

Yes, yes, entirely, stimulated by subject matter.

SMITH:

And your palette, what kind of colors were you—?

FRED MEIERS:

Quite bright. Usually quite bright. If not bright, quite a bit of dark and light pattern. Quite a bit of punch from dark against light.

SMITH:

That's certainly California light.

BARBARA MEIERS:

I was teaching my little private classes right out here on the terrace. I had the neighborhood classes.

SMITH:

Children?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Children, yes.

SMITH:

Not any of the local housewives?

BARBARA MEIERS:

No. I always really enjoyed teaching children. I did that for a little while, too, while our girls were growing up.

SMITH:

Did you continue to do your crafts work?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Not so much. I was still sewing. I made the girls' clothes, made my own clothes, and was involved in that way. I wasn't doing much of anything else. Too busy with the girls. Actually, also being involved in the community.

SMITH:

What kind of community activities?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Well, I got involved in the PTA for a little while. Then I was interested in the political things that were going on so I was going door to door.

SMITH:

Such as?

FRED MEIERS:

The Democratic club.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Democratic [Party] things plus election things. At that time we were trying to get our own school system. We were part of the Los Angeles system. We

wanted to have our own system, so that took a lot of campaigning and doing to get things established that way.

SMITH:

Were you interested in both national and local issues?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes, I've always been interested. Oh, yes, I was out campaigning for Helen Gahagan Douglas at one time. [laughter] Then [Richard M.] Nixon won. We had some interesting experiences.

FRED MEIERS:

The Nixon—?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Well, Nixon defeated Helen Gahagan Douglas—

FRED MEIERS:

Yes, okay.

BARBARA MEIERS:

—during that race.

SMITH:

You were a Democrat, I take it?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes. We were some of the few Democrats in the area, I might say.

SMITH:

In Claremont.

BARBARA MEIERS:

No, here.

SMITH:

Oh, here. Were you involved in the Progressive Party? Did that appeal to you?



BARBARA MEIERS:

No, it was really the Democratic Party that I was involved in.

SMITH:

Were your family Democrats, or is it something you developed?

BARBARA MEIERS:

No, no. My family were very much Republicans. I can remember them saying what a terrible person Al Smith was. Very strong Hoover people and all this kind of thing. [laughter]

FRED MEIERS:

Doesn't it sound terrible?

BARBARA MEIERS:

But in high school I had a very, very interesting teacher for both civics and some economics that I took. She was very much of a progressive and a little bit on the socialist side, I would say. At least my father [Albert Hoyt Taylor] thought so. We had great arguments. She influenced my thinking quite a bit. Of course, I went on—when I went to [University of] Wisconsin [Madison] I was exposed to quite a lot of very left thinking there, too. At the time that I went there the university was being investigated as being red. I was very, as I said earlier, involved in that pacifist kind of thing regarding the war.

SMITH:

Were you an isolationist at all, or was it more—?

BARBARA MEIERS:

No, not really. I always felt that we had a responsibility, too. But like so many liberals it didn't all necessarily mesh, some of those—I didn't follow the ideas of the fellow travelers and the left-thinking people during that period either. I know my sister had some friends that were going in that direction. I visited in New York there and it was rather shocking to me, some of their ideas and their playing of songs, the communist songs.

FRED MEIERS:

Why was it shocking?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Well, I felt it was a little disloyal. I could understand their feeling of protest, but to go so far as to be a member of a communist party was not—

FRED MEIERS:

Oh, I see what you mean.

BARBARA MEIERS:

And they were.

SMITH:

As I understand, Torrance was one of the sites of the very first fair-housing integration cases, in the early fifties.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Oh, it was? I didn't know that.

SMITH:

I was wondering if you had been involved—

BARBARA MEIERS:

No, no, I wasn't. That's interesting though.

SMITH:

Actually, it was a very important legal case—

FRED MEIERS:

I didn't realize that.

SMITH:

So you campaigned for [Harry S.] Truman in '48 and [Adlai] Stevenson—

BARBARA MEIERS:

I campaigned for Stevenson—very much so. We, through our interest, actually got to meet Eleanor Roosevelt and talked to her a little bit. Very interesting. She was to speak at the college, wasn't she?

FRED MEIERS:

Yes, my college.

BARBARA MEIERS:

One of our friends just wrote and asked if they could pick her up at the airport and take her to their home before she went. She said, "Sure." So she was there for dinner and discussion with a small group of people before she went on to the lecture.

SMITH:

How did you feel about the Korean War? Did you think that Truman should have committed American troops? Did you support Truman's decision to send American troops into Korea? That certainly must have been an issue that came up from '50 to '52 in the elections.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes. I think I probably went along with him on that one. The Vietnamese thing I felt very differently about. I really felt very much opposed to all of that. I don't remember feeling very strongly about the Korean—opposing that, anyway.

SMITH:

Another thing I wanted to ask you about today is your house, which is rather—I mean, it's a very nice house, an unusual house. You built this house yourselves?

FRED MEIERS:

We built it—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes, we built it.

FRED MEIERS:

Yes, we did, right. We built it in—

BARBARA MEIERS:

'Fifty-one.

FRED MEIERS:

'Fifty. We moved in [the] first of 1951.

BARBARA MEIERS:

That's right. January '51 we moved in.

FRED MEIERS:

We had a hand in the designing of it. We had an architect, of course, to work with us because we didn't feel that we were competent.

SMITH:

Who was the architect?

BARBARA MEIERS:

What's his name?

FRED MEIERS:

His name is Don Johnson—

BARBARA MEIERS:

That's right.

FRED MEIERS:

Who is a friend of Sam Maloof's and was recommended to us by Sam.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Right.

FRED MEIERS:

He was able to put ideas—we got all kinds of things together that we, aspects that we wanted to be included in the house.

SMITH:

Such as? The part of the "good eye" is revealed in your house, apparently.

FRED MEIERS:

Yes.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Right.

FRED MEIERS:

Such as having this kind of thing here, this glass. Part of something we wanted, and part of having walls that had a minimum overhang such as that there, that wall, that part of the bedroom that's over there. We were interested in there being a dropped ceiling. We wanted high ceilings, but we wanted a drop ceiling, which is a characteristic that we admire in Japanese structure.

BARBARA MEIERS:

We liked, you know, having the out-of-doors accessible visually.

FRED MEIERS:

Right.

BARBARA MEIERS:

That's a big influence, of course.

FRED MEIERS:

We wanted it to be as open as possible. We wanted it to have radiant heat in the floor.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Which is what we have in the floor, copper coils.

FRED MEIERS:

I think Don put these together and gave us a good solution. Then later our friend Willard Walters designed the dining area and the addition to our bedroom and bath.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Helped us do the addition. That part was added later, and, also, this part of that room in there, too. It was a very small house to begin with. We did it very simply and on a GI loan.

FRED MEIERS:

I, concretely, with the help of a student, built the studio, which is—I forget whether you've been down there.

SMITH:

You built that yourself.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes, right.

### **1.5. TAPE NUMBER: III, Side One (September 17, 1986)**

BARBARA MEIERS:

My father [Albert Hoyt Taylor]'s work in radio eventually led to the discovery of the principle of radar in 1922. He was later awarded a presidential citation for his work in 1922 when he discovered the principle with his assistant, Leo Young. Then, from about 1925 and '30, they worked on this reflection phenomenon. That's what they called it. In 1930 the naval research laboratory published in scientific journals this principle of echo signals. They went on later to develop it into the form of radar. But in the meantime the British had been working on it. Because of the urgency at that time, of the war, the British—

FRED MEIERS:

Which war?

BARBARA MEIERS:

World War II. The British were given a lot of money to work on it, and they actually produced the first working radar. But my father, in a sense, was the father of radar because he was the one who discovered the principle.

SMITH:

I see. So that's a big thing, actually.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes, it really was. He was given this award, this citation, much later after the radar was in use and was developed here in this country. In fact, I think it was probably 1946 or so when he was given that award, as I remember it.

SMITH:

Did you go back for the reception?

BARBARA MEIERS:

No, no.

SMITH:

I also had wanted to ask you about your involvement in the peace movement at the University of Wisconsin [Madison]. It sounds like you got a little radicalized when—?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Well, I was very much interested in the peace group there. They called themselves pacifists then and were protesting our getting involved in the European situation. Really, it was a protest against getting involved in more violence, in a way, rather than an isolationist [movement]. There really wasn't any feeling that America shouldn't do its part.

SMITH:

So you weren't really connected with the America First people.

BARBARA MEIERS:

No. Definitely not.

SMITH:

Were you involved in other kinds of, quote unquote, "left-wing" activities?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Not really. I was very much interested in the liberal viewpoint. I was taking the New Republic magazine at the time when a lot of libraries were taking it off the shelves. This kind of thing. Nothing really extreme.

SMITH:

Were you very active in this organization?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Not really.

SMITH:

You would go to the meetings and demonstrations.

BARBARA MEIERS:

I went to the marches. They had some of that kind of thing and bonfires and gatherings and speeches, that kind of thing.

SMITH:

You were active in the Democratic Party?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes. Oh, definitely. Of course, I really got my early beginnings of interest in a "liberal" viewpoint from a teacher that I had in high school. I was just very strongly influenced.

SMITH:

What was that teacher's name?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Her name was Mrs. Hall. I can't remember her first name. I took civics and economics from her and became very interested in Stuart Chase's ideas, technocracy, I believe it was called.

SMITH:

Were you very much aware of poverty?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Oh, yes. At that time we had the Bonus Marchers in Washington [D.C.], and they were camped out all along the Anacostia River. We saw those when I went to high school.



SMITH:

Every morning?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Right. When we'd go across the bridge to go to school we saw these people all camped along the river, washing their clothes and so on. It was pretty shocking. We had people coming to the door, constantly asking for work or anything. My mother [Emma Hickman Taylor] was very good with working with people, always giving them something to do and feeding them. She always felt that she liked to have them do something and not just give them charity.

SMITH:

You had mentioned before that your parents were very conservative, politically and socially.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Politically they were. My mother was not socially. She was—it's difficult.

FRED MEIERS:

How is one conservative socially?

SMITH:

In terms of values.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Awareness of society and values.

FRED MEIERS:

Oh, class consciousness?

BARBARA MEIERS:

She had a very interesting background. Her father was interested in early development of Negro colleges and a lot of ideas that were sort of beyond his day.

FRED MEIERS:

You didn't mention that he established a well-known college.

BARBARA MEIERS:

I did earlier.

FRED MEIERS:

I don't think you did, honey.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Well, the thing is I don't know the name of it.

FRED MEIERS:

It sounds to me—

BARBARA MEIERS:

It was a black college [Spelman College].

FRED MEIERS:

No, DePauw.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Oh, that one. He was a chancellor of DePauw University.

FRED MEIERS:

Yes.

SMITH:

Your maternal grandfather?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes, the same one who was a Methodist minister.

SMITH:

What was his name?

BARBARA MEIERS:

His name was [William Raymond] Hickman. This was my mother's father. This was all in Indiana. He and the family lived there for a good bit of my mother's growing up. DePauw University was a sectarian college at that time. He was president, I believe, of DePauw, or chancellor. I don't know which one. He also was involved with Purdue [University] in some capacity. No, this was my great-grandfather, John Samuel Hougham. There, again—I'm not sure—but it was one of the administrative positions. Mother went to DePauw University. My mother graduated from DePauw.

FRED MEIERS:

I thought it was interesting that your mother established a library school. It was quite unusual for a woman to be establishing something of this kind in her time.

BARBARA MEIERS:

And she was the librarian at the University of North Dakota when she met my father and when they were married.

FRED MEIERS:

Did she establish the school?

BARBARA MEIERS:

No. She didn't establish that school. She worked under—

FRED MEIERS:

No? Was it at [University of] Wisconsin?

BARBARA MEIERS:

No. She was a member of the first class when the library school was established at the University of Wisconsin.

FRED MEIERS:

Okay. I'm sorry.

SMITH:

Let's skip ahead in time to where we left off the last session. You had been teaching at Long Beach City College for a number of years, and you decided to

quit teaching and start a business [Fred and Barbara Meiers, Inc.]. Was the idea to start a family business with the two of you working equally together in it?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes.

FRED MEIERS:

I think so. It became impossible for me to teach. I couldn't face teaching after we had been in Mexico, where we had gone on a vacation in the summer of 1957. It was a very good period for us in Mexico in certain ways. We enjoyed it visually very much. We enjoyed being with the people. It was our first experience of being with Mexicans fairly closely, living fairly closely, for both of us.

SMITH:

Where did you go?

FRED MEIERS:

We had originally planned to go to Guadalajara. We had arranged to have a house that was leased to a friend of ours who had come up here. But on arrival we discovered that there were more flies than we could cope with.

BARBARA MEIERS:

With no screens.

FRED MEIERS:

It was one of those occasions where there's an infestation of flies. It was just fantastically bad.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Everything was just covered. On top of that there were people living in the house.

FRED MEIERS:

There were two or three maids, en famille, and it was obvious that we were just going to be overseeing things. We definitely didn't count on our

experience going in this direction. It didn't take us more than maybe half an hour to look around, case the joint, and decide that it wasn't for us. It was a nice house in a very nice residential area. So we got into our car and went down the road to [Lake] Chapala.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes. We stayed in Chapala for one or two nights—didn't we—while we looked around Guadalajara and Tlaquepaque [Jalisco], where we found some great things.

FRED MEIERS:

But we looked in Chapala to find a place to stay. We reacted to Chapala quite negatively. Everybody seemed to be more or less stoned.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes.

FRED MEIERS:

There was none of the, you know, person-to-person contact that we were used to having. And we couldn't find anything that we wanted to live in.

BARBARA MEIERS:

There were lots of retired Americans there already. It was a little colony. It didn't have the feeling that we wanted. We wanted something that was more natural, real Mexico.

FRED MEIERS:

So we went down the road.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Toward Michoacán.

FRED MEIERS:

I don't know where we stopped after that until we arrived in Pátzcuaro [Michoacán]. I was very ill. [laughter] I had the usual problem.

BARBARA MEIERS:

But the feeling of the place was wonderful. Just right.

FRED MEIERS:

We drove into the little town. One of the street boys appeared.

BARBARA MEIERS:

On the corner.

FRED MEIERS:

I asked him if he knew a place that was for rent. He said, "Yes, I'll take you." It was only half a block. Down the road, to the left from the street corners that turn off, to the right to go into the center of town. We just turned off to the left for, possibly, a block. We knocked on the door. We could see as soon as the door was open that this was it.

BARBARA MEIERS:

It was a wonderful place.

FRED MEIERS:

It was a two- or three-story—it was built on a hillside. We couldn't wait to get in. There was a balcony with beautiful potted plants all along.

BARBARA MEIERS:

It was built of that pinkish stone that's typical of that region. Wonderful color.

FRED MEIERS:

We talked with the lady [Senora de Manza], the owner, and she was friendly in a reserved way. Yes, she would rent the space. We developed two very nice rooms.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Big rooms.

FRED MEIERS:

Very tall. Twelve, fourteen feet tall. They were large bedrooms.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Then, of course, I wanted to cook. I wanted to be able to get our own meals.

SMITH:

You didn't rent the whole house?

FRED MEIERS:

No.

BARBARA MEIERS:

No. We were really right there with the family, too, in the other adjacent rooms.

FRED MEIERS:

I think the senora had her room just inside the entrance.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Main entrance.

FRED MEIERS:

This big balcony went to our two rooms. It went down to a little broadening in the balcony where there was a mirador and an area where we had our dining table.

BARBARA MEIERS:

We had our own stove there.

FRED MEIERS:

There was a little stove there and we cooked.

BARBARA MEIERS:

I learned how to cook with—what kind of heat is that? Propane? Butane? One of those things.

FRED MEIERS:

A beautiful view of Lake Pátzcuaro right outside. We looked down into a lower garden.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Down into a patio. It was beautiful.

FRED MEIERS:

Out into the milpas, beyond the hills and directly below us. Behind us, too. It was really a beautiful situation. Just without any domestic responsibilities.

BARBARA MEIERS:

There were children in the family.

SMITH:

Your two daughters [Mayde and Susan] went with you?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Oh, yes. Age eight and eleven. There were some children. We had hoped that maybe they would learn to speak Spanish, but somehow they never got beyond just grunting at each other. [laughter]

FRED MEIERS:

Instead of learning either Spanish or English—

BARBARA MEIERS:

They got along fine. [laughter]

FRED MEIERS:

—they resorted to grunts. [laughter] These were bright children, too. They were all going around grunting. It was probably something above that, but that's the way it sounded.

BARBARA MEIERS:

But anyway, it was companionship. It was really very pleasant.

FRED MEIERS:

Then we went for our first meal.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Poor Fred. I really don't know how he got up the driveway. Tell him about the driveway.



FRED MEIERS:

The driveway consisted of—

BARBARA MEIERS:

This is an absolutely closed building to the street, the way they all are.

FRED MEIERS:

Cobblestone street.

BARBARA MEIERS:

You open this big gate—

FRED MEIERS:

Not so big a gate; that was part of the trouble.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Well, just wide enough for the car. [laughter]

FRED MEIERS:

It's very rainy there so the curbs are about this high. You have to get from the cobblestones there up into this little entrance for a car, to say nothing of these little runways.

BARBARA MEIERS:

They had built these little ramps that you go up on.

FRED MEIERS:

Not one little driveway—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Not just one solid thing.

FRED MEIERS:

—but two little, sort of, runners on which you drive the wheels up. They weren't very—they seemed very narrow because I was constantly feeling worse. [laughter]

BARBARA MEIERS:

It was terrible.

FRED MEIERS:

But we got the car parked in there. I don't know why or how, but we decided the thing to do was to go have something to eat.

BARBARA MEIERS:

So we had to go out again, probably because I was hungry. [laughter]

FRED MEIERS:

So we went to the Hotel Dolatri, which was the main hotel, and went into the dining room. I felt increasingly bad. I felt so bad that I couldn't stay in the chair; I had to lie on the floor.

BARBARA MEIERS:

He was lying on the floor in the restaurant. They didn't pay any attention. This is the "normal" thing to do. [laughter]

FRED MEIERS:

That was our first day—

BARBARA MEIERS:

First day in Pátzcuaro. That really is a wonderful city though. It still has its old colonial feeling. They've kept it that way. It's really wonderful.

FRED MEIERS:

It's a national monument and it's protected. They're not allowed to introduce anything that's not in keeping with the colonial buildings.

BARBARA MEIERS:

The people were all still wearing their costumes: the women with those wonderful heavy wool skirts and all the belts tied around, the belts that are around them.

FRED MEIERS:

Full blouses.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Right.

FRED MEIERS:

Silk usually.

BARBARA MEIERS:

The fish necklaces with the little silver fish.

FRED MEIERS:

Coral color and silver.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Dangles in their ears. Really wonderful.

FRED MEIERS:

The town is laid out with two squares. It was laid out early, I believe, in the fifteenth century.

SMITH:

Fifteen hundreds?

FRED MEIERS:

Yes, after the conquest.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes.

FRED MEIERS:

Probably the sixteenth century. I think the Bishop [Vasco de] Quiroga, who did lots in Michoacán, was influential. He, actually, was the person who designated what the various villages were to be responsible for and make.

BARBARA MEIERS:

As far as the crafts.

FRED MEIERS:

Paracho [Michoacán], for instance, was in the mountains, and they were to work in wood. They especially made guitars.

BARBARA MEIERS:

It became a center for guitar-making.

FRED MEIERS:

Uruapan [Michoacán] and Pátzcuaro did lacquerware. Santa Clara del Cobre [Michoacán] made—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Copper, wonderful copper.

FRED MEIERS:

—many different kinds of copper pots and plates. I started to say that the village was laid out around two squares, as is often the case in Latin America. The second one was a huge square surrounded by—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Wonderful trees and houses.

FRED MEIERS:

—charming colonial houses, big scale.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Big, yes. They had a wonderful market there that met on Friday. People would come. You'd see the Indians coming from out of town, all over, with things on their—

FRED MEIERS:

They came from all around the lake.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Right. Well, all the villages. Different places would come in bringing their things. Attending market became a regular thing for us.

FRED MEIERS:

About six or seven pueblos around the lake.

BARBARA MEIERS:

They started coming in Thursday night, they'd set up. It was just wonderful visually with all of the people with their wares, their nets strung up. There were things that they strung up—I always remembered something—

FRED MEIERS:

Those are for shade.

BARBARA MEIERS:

For shade, yes. Wonderful baskets. Beautiful little—tascaletos—things made of the tule that was around the lake.

SMITH:

The reeds?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes, and straw products from all of the wheat straw and other straw.

FRED MEIERS:

Lots of fish, especially little dried fish in assorted sizes. Variations on pescado blanco—

BARBARA MEIERS:

That came from the lake.

FRED MEIERS:

From this size to—well, the big ones aren't too big. [indicates size] About so.

SMITH:

Six inches or so?

FRED MEIERS:

A little bit larger—

BARBARA MEIERS:

They're quite small.

FRED MEIERS:

—but quite small. With their heads they're eight inches.

BARBARA MEIERS:

From the lake there, Lake Pátzcuaro.

SMITH:

You spent the summer in Pátzcuaro?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes.

FRED MEIERS:

Pátzcuaro.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Then came back, and he told the college he just didn't think that he could come back to school. They very nicely gave him a leave of absence.

FRED MEIERS:

We arranged it so that it was more than a leave of absence, since I was on salary. I guess that's a leave of absence, yes.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes. You'd been teaching there seven or eight years.

SMITH:

So it was a sabbatical then.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Well, it was sort of like a sabbatical because he'd been teaching there seven or eight years.

FRED MEIERS:

'Fifty-seven was my eighth year.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Right.

SMITH:

I was going to ask if you had any trepidations plunging into a new venture?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes, yes.

FRED MEIERS:

Sure. Of course.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Of course we did. With the family—it was—all the time we were in Mexico we were gathering things that we liked. I think we were already beginning to think a little bit about the possibility of doing something since Fred was so determined to get out of teaching. We contacted some people in the market that did belts in wool, beautiful wool belts. We began to gather some of those. And [we contacted] some of the other early contacts we made there. Well, we bought blankets. We had this very [points to rug in living room] rug woven for us there.

FRED MEIERS:

It was a bed cover. We were so cold that we had to have additional covers.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Pátzcuaro is seven thousand feet [in altitude] and it's very chilly.

FRED MEIERS:

In some areas it was quite chilly.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes, it was very chilly.

FRED MEIERS:

With rain every afternoon.

BARBARA MEIERS:

There was no fire, no fireplaces or heating. In fact, we bought candles by the pounds and burned them to heat ourselves. Every afternoon at four o'clock we would light all the candles and have tea. [laughter]

FRED MEIERS:

We would go to bed in one room, the four of us, getting under the covers and lighting all the candles. [laughter]

BARBARA MEIERS:

It was chilly. It was.

FRED MEIERS:

It took the chill off.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Then we went to Morelia [Michoacán] from there. We'd go to the Morelia to get warmed up. Just that little distance away it was a much different climate.

FRED MEIERS:

A little lower and much more sun.

SMITH:

Were you beginning to look out for special towns that were noted for their crafts?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Oh, yes. We had already done all our research on this.

FRED MEIERS:

A little bit.

BARBARA MEIERS:



Had quite a bit of knowledge about what were done in the different towns. We went to Tzintzuntzan [Michoacán] which has the straw things and some of the tule.

FRED MEIERS:

It's also the site of a large pyramid, a well-known pyramid. A strange, truncated kind of pyramid. It's a Tarascan village. We went there quite frequently. We became acquainted with some people—especially one family from whom we bought pottery and straw things, including that pot that's right over there with the—

BARBARA MEIERS:

What was his name? Teófilo?

FRED MEIERS:

His name was Teófilo Saldivar. His sister [Consuelo Saldivar] still has a business selling Tzintzuntzan pottery.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Didn't we work with them later on some of the quantity things that we bought? The straw mats?

FRED MEIERS:

We worked with Nabor Ramirez with straw mats, who had a little shop, a puesto, there. He came from one of the outlying villages. Later we saw him in Iguatzio [Michoacán] rather than in Tzintzuntzan. We bought some of the well-known tan and dark brown decorated ware, which is well-known Tzintzuntzan ware.

BARBARA MEIERS:

The off-white one with the—

FRED MEIERS:

That's the one I'm referring to, dear.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Oh, well, I would call that an off-white with an almost black line.

FRED MEIERS:

Okay, if you'd like.

BARBARA MEIERS:

We have some of those. Then we went to other places. We took some little trips. We went up to Guanajuato.

FRED MEIERS:

That's right.

SMITH:

Initially then you stayed in the midriff region of Mexico?

FRED MEIERS:

In Michoacán.

SMITH:

Michoacán. Guanajuato? Queretaro?

FRED MEIERS:

We didn't go to Queretaro. We did go to Toluca [estado de Mexico] which has the largest market in Mexico.

BARBARA MEIERS:

At that time it was—it's a great market.

FRED MEIERS:

It spreads over, probably, on market day, I think they say ten blocks at least. There's a huge indoor market as well but the surrounding streets are all full of people, sellers and buyers as well on market day. I think that at this point we also went to the regional folk art museum that is in Toluca.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes, I think we did then.

FRED MEIERS:

They had a shop, a selling shop, where we were able to buy a number of things. Also, they were very helpful and gave us sources.

BARBARA MEIERS:

They were very generous about giving the names of their craftsmen. We'd gotten the name of somebody who was doing very beautiful whitewood things. Everything from—

SMITH:

What was his name?

BARBARA MEIERS:

His name was Manuel—Rojas?

FRED MEIERS:

Manuel Rogel.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Right.

FRED MEIERS:

I think. He was from quite a ways away, Ixtapan de la Sal [estado de Mexico].

BARBARA MEIERS:

But we found that out there in Toluca.

SMITH:

What were you looking for?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Well, you know, we were especially interested in any of the villages that made things, that had some particular craft that they were doing.

SMITH:

Were you buying in quantities then?

BARBARA MEIERS:

No. Just a few of this and that. We were planning to bring it all back with us in the car. We really didn't buy very much.

SMITH:

How much did things cost at this time?

BARBARA MEIERS:

I was looking at some of the invoices just recently. Can you [Fred] give him any idea of—

SMITH:

Just in general.

FRED MEIERS:

Last night we were looking at some figures. One of the things that we had bought was a head bank. This was bought in Tlaquepaque. A Tonalá [Jalisco]-type decoration, bruñido, very well done. Whether it was the first ones or something within the next year, the price was probably something like thirty-five cents, which is really nothing. As we soon learned, after—we weren't thinking about it. We didn't know enough to think about this kind of thing: to know about what kind of prices one had to have, what kind of mark up, and what one's expenses were. We weren't aware of anything of this kind. We knew that these things that we were buying, obviously, were inexpensive. A rug like this that was woven to our design probably cost, at the most, fifteen dollars.

BARBARA MEIERS:

We saw this one go from a pile of wool to the rug. A family—

FRED MEIERS:

And it didn't go smoothly because we met a man—we became acquainted with different people, and we met a man who sold sarapes. They do beautiful sarapes in Pátzcuaro. Heavy, dark natural wool, and usually with a band, not right at the edge of the rug, but about eight inches in. There's usually a broken band of white natural wool with a slight bit of decoration. We decided that we would like to have one with bird decorations. We cut out a paper bird shape

that we thought we'd like and talked to our friend the serape salesman about it. He said yes, that it could be done. He bought the wool.

BARBARA MEIERS:

By the wool he means just the unspun wool.

FRED MEIERS:

We had to give him money to buy the wool because it was an investment. Then we watched it get spun. That was fairly easy because they were used to spinning all this wool for their weaving. Then they came to the problem of the birds. There was a little old man who was going to weave it. He sat at the loom, and he sat there for a couple of days. He was accompanied by a little pile—two piles: one of the wool, and the other his wife. [laughter] [She] was another little pile, but she was smashed. I think part of the problem was that he was, too. At any rate, after the third morning, I think it was, a young man who turned out to be the cousin of the wool entrepreneur said, "If you don't get started on this, I'm going to start weaving." There didn't seem to be much response.

BARBARA MEIERS:

The old man started weaving but he didn't know what to do when he got to the birds.

FRED MEIERS:

So Moises replaced the older weaver, and he knew how to do pattern weaving. He dashed this thing off in no time flat. [snaps fingers] I think probably in less than a week, there we were, under our heavy cover. [laughter]

SMITH:

Were you also buying santos? retablos? those sorts of things?

FRED MEIERS:

We bought a few small pre-Columbian things.

BARBARA MEIERS:

I don't think we bought any santos.

FRED MEIERS:

We didn't see any. We didn't find any.

BARBARA MEIERS:

We bought some milagros. We did buy a few milagros, little silver milagros, but not the paintings.

FRED MEIERS:

There was a little shop that we had heard of in Pátzcuaro that made very nice milagros. The trouble with the little shop was that it was never open. Never open. One day we found it open and we ordered some. They were fairly expensive. They were a nice grade of silver.

SMITH:

What do you mean by fairly expensive?

FRED MEIERS:

Probably a dollar. [laughter]

BARBARA MEIERS:

Right.

FRED MEIERS:

We were sort of taken in hand by the family where we lived, and they were very intent on our not paying too much for anything.

BARBARA MEIERS:

That we lived with. They were intelligent.

FRED MEIERS:

They knew the prices and they knew how to deal. They counseled us.

SMITH:

Who was this family? Do you remember their name?

BARBARA MEIERS:

We certainly should. We kept in touch with them. The young man, one of the young men, kept writing to us for years afterwards.

FRED MEIERS:

I have their name [Manza]. I have to look it up. I think we could put it in later. The sixteen year old son was named Guillermo Manza.

SMITH:

What did they do?

FRED MEIERS:

They didn't do anything. The children—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Well, the older son—what did the older son do?

FRED MEIERS:

The oldest son drove a bus, I think. I think that his father was a lawyer, but he wasn't there. The parents were separated.

SMITH:

Sort of middle class.

FRED MEIERS:

He lived in another city, another town. Middle class. There were three children: two in school—no, there were four children. Miguel—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Miguel. Miguel was the one that we stayed in touch with.

FRED MEIERS:

No.

BARBARA MEIERS:

He was about sixteen.

FRED MEIERS:

No, that wasn't the one we stayed in touch with.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Wasn't that Miguel?

FRED MEIERS:

No, Guillermo.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Oh, that's right. Right. Miguel was older.

FRED MEIERS:

We didn't like Miguel too much.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Guillermo was about sixteen.

FRED MEIERS:

Right. Then there were—I forget the other two younger ones' names. Another boy—

BARBARA MEIERS:

A boy and a girl [Maria] that our children actually had more to do with.

FRED MEIERS:

Right.

BARBARA MEIERS:

It was an interesting family.

FRED MEIERS:

For instance when I needed a hat, I think somebody was sent with me to—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Negotiate. [laughter]

FRED MEIERS:



To be sure and get the right quality.

BARBARA MEIERS:

It was very helpful.

FRED MEIERS:

We went to a hat store. I could have done—I'm sure I would have been satisfied. [laughter] I still have the hat, incidentally.

BARBARA MEIERS:

We were associated with them in other ways, too. When we wanted to cook we would get the maid, Gudelia, to help get the fire started and so on. When we wanted to get a chicken in the market—cook it, and you had to buy a live chicken—somebody had to kill that chicken, and it wasn't going to be me. [laughter] Gudelia didn't want to kill the chicken either so it was the senora, the senior member of the family, that killed the chicken. [laughter]

FRED MEIERS:

Then daily there was a—I think he was American.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes, he was. Oh, Canadian.

FRED MEIERS:

Canadian, that's right. Married to a Mexican girl with a—

BARBARA MEIERS:

He lived there in Pátzcuaro.

FRED MEIERS:

—handful of children and who was really having a rough time adjusting. I think it was mainly just making enough to feed his children. I don't know what he did.

BARBARA MEIERS:

He had a dairy. He was involved with dairy products, remember? He sold milk and—

FRED MEIERS:

It seemed that every day he came there to teach—it must not have been every day. That would have been a little excessive—to teach English. They all sang. Every night they sang the same song. Do you remember the song?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes.

FRED MEIERS:

"¿Que sera?"

BARBARA MEIERS:

"¿Que sera?" [laughter]

FRED MEIERS:

In English and Spanish.

BARBARA MEIERS:

The students were a group of children. I think it was his children as well as the children of the family. I think there were others that came as well.

FRED MEIERS:

Oh, yes.

BARBARA MEIERS:

The community—he was teaching English.

FRED MEIERS:

It was remunerative.

BARBARA MEIERS:

He taught English primarily by having them sing in English. It was pretty interesting.

## **1.6. TAPE NUMBER: III, Side Two (September 17, 1986)**

SMITH:

Were you buying masks or munecas? or were your purchases more utilitarian objects?

BARBARA MEIERS:

We bought some utilitarian things, pots, because I wanted them. I love them. They're still there in the kitchen now. I used them to cook with when we were there in Pátzcuaro. We also bought a lot of toy things. We were interested in whistles and banks.

FRED MEIERS:

Lots of different kinds of whistles.

BARBARA MEIERS:

And banks.

FRED MEIERS:

In Pátzcuaro we bought little mugs, that we used to drink from, and pitchers.

BARBARA MEIERS:

I bought some of the very nice green plates that come from Patamban.

FRED MEIERS:

Patamban ware.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Sold there in the Pátzcuaro market.

FRED MEIERS:

In Tlaquepaque [Jalisco], before we had gone to Pátzcuaro, we bought a number of different kinds of things in the market and in the ceramic museum there, which is a marvelous place. Fantastically beautiful. It was, at one point, a wealthy man's country place. He lived in Guadalajara and had this country place. It was a sixteenth-century building.

BARBARA MEIERS:

It's one of my favorite buildings in Mexico.

FRED MEIERS:

Beautiful patina on the walls.

BARBARA MEIERS:

We bought toy banks and things there. In fact that's where we bought some of the Julio Acero pieces that we have, Acero the teacher of Candelario Medrano who is so well known now.

SMITH:

Then you returned to the United States when the summer was over?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Right.

SMITH:

Where did you plan on selling—?

BARBARA MEIERS:

We really hadn't planned this.

FRED MEIERS:

We hadn't planned on selling anything yet.

BARBARA MEIERS:

We started showing them to people, to various people we thought might be interested. One of them was Curt Wagner, who has a shop in Redondo Beach of very nice contemporary furnishings. He was interested in the things, felt they were unusual. We showed them to—

FRED MEIERS:

The Altmans.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Ralph and Pat [Patricia B.] Altman.

FRED MEIERS:

Who, at this point, had a shop. I think we talked about this earlier.

SMITH:

No, we didn't.

FRED MEIERS:

The Altmans had a shop [Altman's Antiques] on La Cienega [Boulevard].

BARBARA MEIERS:

A gallery.

FRED MEIERS:

When we came back from Mexico we showed them the things and they thought that they liked the selection. Later it developed, after we became a little more focused, that they bought quite a bit of the folk art that we initially brought back from Mexico. When we first came back, since we hadn't really decided that I wasn't going to teach—the decision didn't come till after we got out of Mexico, really. In fact, I thought that I was going to be teaching, then it developed that it wasn't possible for me. Psychologically it was impossible. We began to think and to talk to people concretely about the idea of some people buying some stuff that we would bring out.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Other persons were Jim and Monza Stevens who had the Balinese Shop in Pasadena.

FRED MEIERS:

This was a little bit later, dear. It wasn't this initial—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Probably by '58 though, the next spring.

FRED MEIERS:

By '58, yes. Right.

SMITH:

They sold only Indonesian—?

BARBARA MEIERS:

No, they had folk art from all over the world. They had all kinds of things. They were very helpful. They not only placed some sizable orders—

FRED MEIERS:

They gave us one of our first big orders.

SMITH:

What do you mean by big order?

FRED MEIERS:

Which consisted of probably twenty-five hundred pieces of a small toy that they wanted to give away.

SMITH:

A toy that you had found in Mexico. A particular toy?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes, yes.

FRED MEIERS:

A particular toy.

SMITH:

Where was this from? Do you remember?

FRED MEIERS:

Yes. They knew the toy. It was a very common thing. It was a little hen pecking a little tiny acorn cover.

BARBARA MEIERS:

It has a weight on the bottom.

FRED MEIERS:

There's a little rock—

BARBARA MEIERS:

They make this kind of form in many countries.

FRED MEIERS:

It's a basic—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Folk art base.

FRED MEIERS:

—art form that appears in many cultures.

BARBARA MEIERS:

You move it, and the weight hanging underneath makes the hen peck at the bowl of food. They ordered a lot of those.

SMITH:

Where did you get it from?

FRED MEIERS:

I went to Celaya, which is in Guanajuato, to—I probably had to go there and order them because I didn't have a source, and then go back in a couple of weeks and collect them.

BARBARA MEIERS:

That's what you did with so many things. That's the way it worked.

FRED MEIERS:

That's the way it was done.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Sure. We were just reading some of the letters that we had gotten saying, "I'm so sorry, I didn't get your things off in time." Or "I'm so sorry, I didn't receive your letter soon enough and I sold forty of them. Now you'll have to wait for another such and such a time till I get seventy more." Whatever it was. That was sort of the story of our lives.

SMITH:

Were you dealing directly with the craftsmen at this time?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Many times.

FRED MEIERS:

At this point we were dealing directly with the craftsmen. We were dealing in such small quantities that it didn't amount to anything for anybody, really.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Another one of the first things we did in quantity were the head banks, those head banks in Tlaquepaque. Those were really some of the very early things that we did in any kind of quantity.

SMITH:

How did you balance this quantity-versus-quality question?

FRED MEIERS:

The whole thing was built on our taste. If it didn't meet our standards we didn't deal with it. Then we had to find people who could meet our quality standards and also meet some kind of time schedule, or indicate by delivering that they were serious people that we could count on.

BARBARA MEIERS:

You understand that you always pay in advance, so we always did this to get them started. But it was always a matter of Fred going there. This is what he did: he started in right away that fall, 1957, after we got back from the summer in Mexico. Then we began to talk to people with shops and find that people really were interested. They kept saying, "We've never seen anything like this around here."

FRED MEIERS:

Of just a few little things that we brought back.

BARBARA MEIERS:

"Why don't you do some importing?" So we were encouraged enough for him to go back then, right away, in the fall. He spent a whole month down there



just researching, looking, and finding. It was a slow process, for months, just getting things started.

FRED MEIERS:

Actually, it was more like one year that we spent finding the best craftsmen and the best sources in Mexico.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Then we had the problem of how to get it up here, because so many people didn't know how to pack. There were no packing facilities at all. Fred actually started bringing things back himself—working with the people down there, seeing that it got packed down there, putting it in his car, and bringing it back. Sometimes he would come back and we could hardly see him under all these papier-mâché things sticking out every place. It was a small business, as you can see. It was really not a business for quite a long time, but it was a beginning.

FRED MEIERS:

In Celaya we discovered two people that did some making of things and some commissioning of things.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Was this [Alfonso] Cabrera?

FRED MEIERS:

Cabrera and [Abraham] Puga.

BARBARA MEIERS:

I think you should mention their names.

FRED MEIERS:

They were located on the same street. Not in the center of town, but on the same street, curiously enough. They seemed not to get in touch with each other. They probably did but they didn't refer to one another. Each one [was] very much a closed little corporation. They both dealt with similar things, kind of things that Celaya's known for: papier-mâché, the dolls—

BARBARA MEIERS:

The masks.

FRED MEIERS:

—all different sizes from here to this—the seated dolls that always have names on them. And bright colors—bright pinks, bright blue, bright orange, bright red. Papier-mâché masks in a number of different forms—animal forms, lions, foxes, clowns, princesses, and kings.

BARBARA MEIERS:

They also did the little animals, the little papier-mâché animals on wheels. The little horses on the little piece of wood and on the wheels. This was a toy.

FRED MEIERS:

They did them in all sizes. [indicates size] Up to this size, right. From three-inch-tall to thirty-inch-tall horses.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Even the big horses that you could sit on, right?

FRED MEIERS:

Thirty inches tall.

SMITH:

At that point were they primarily producing for the Mexican market?

FRED MEIERS:

Oh, yes.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes, yes.

FRED MEIERS:

This was strictly Mexican market stuff. Everything that we've talked about has been for the Mexican market.

SMITH:

Were there other Americans at the same time who were coming down and buying things to bring back?

FRED MEIERS:

I'm sure there had been—we weren't the first ones. I think maybe we talked about this. There was a shop in La Jolla [California]. Maybe we didn't talk about this. There was a shop, a Mexican shop in La Jolla—I don't know whether it was when I was in high school or in college—that had quality stuff. In Los Angeles, apart from Olvera Street, there was a shop where we saw some of these things. They were well received by the market. This was about—I think this was about '49.

BARBARA MEIERS:

That early?

FRED MEIERS:

'Fifty maybe. It was on Wilshire [Boulevard] or Santa Monica [Boulevard] in the west part of Los Angeles. You [Barbara] don't remember it?

BARBARA MEIERS:

No.

FRED MEIERS:

We saw our first tinajera there. We also saw our first head bank there.

BARBARA MEIERS:

What kind of a shop was it?

FRED MEIERS:

It was a Mexican shop.

BARBARA MEIERS:

All Mexican?

FRED MEIERS:

All Mexican. They didn't last. Maybe they lasted—six months?

BARBARA MEIERS:

It was a very special market. I mean, there really wasn't at that point that much—

FRED MEIERS:

We talked to them. They were very well received by people at the gift shows. They probably couldn't solve the packing and shipping—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Shipping and delivery problems, [establishing] any kind of consistency in quality of delivery. That really was the big problem.

SMITH:

How did you ensure consistency in quality?

BARBARA MEIERS:

We just persevered. You know, he spent a lot of time down there. He was down there so much working with them

FRED MEIERS:

In the beginning, I saw the stuff, and then I ordered—

BARBARA MEIERS:

He told them what he didn't want, what he didn't like.

FRED MEIERS:

Then I inspected it when I picked it up.

BARBARA MEIERS:

It was really because it was such a small business that we could do that.

SMITH:

Yes.

FRED MEIERS:

I had no problem.

SMITH:

For the Mexican domestic market, are there different standards for quality of the crafts sold in Mexico than it would be for crafts sold here?

FRED MEIERS:

It depends on what we're talking about. Different kinds of things have different demands.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Right.

FRED MEIERS:

There is nobody more particular than a lady who's buying an embroidered blouse.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Or a pot to use for her cooking.

FRED MEIERS:

And it has to be just the way she wants it to be.

SMITH:

In either Mexico or the United States.

FRED MEIERS:

Both places. The pot in Mexico is, or was at that point, something—a clay pot is something that they cook in. That doesn't have any connection with the United States, comparable use. But it seems to me that the buyer of the blouse in the United States is not nearly as particular as the buyer who's dealing with the little person who's made this thing. I don't know how many people I've seen—ladies, shop owners, receiving this thing and saying, "No, I don't like that. That's not what I want. Take it back." [Barbara laughs] This poor soul has sweated her days away making this damn thing. It seems to me that they have a quality in mind in this situation. When we come to something like, say, dinnerware—which is much later in the story—the quality is a huge problem in the United States. There can't be any blemishes in the dish at all.

There can't be any holes in it, any stilt marks, or any accidental paint that just gets on the plate because it was slopped on. On the other hand, these things are all just "Oh, that's just the way it is" in Mexico, and are accepted. "That's the way it is. Here it is. This is the way it looks."

SMITH:

Did you find it hard for some of the craftsmen to understand what your standards were? To accept even why they should worry about the accidental paint?

FRED MEIERS:

No, not early. The main thing that we were looking for was a visual thing. If it was satisfactory to us aesthetically, that's all that counted.

BARBARA MEIERS:

We were working with things that they were already making—

FRED MEIERS:

They were making them—

BARBARA MEIERS:

For generations had made them.

FRED MEIERS:

This is one of the things that we learned very early: If you're working with folk art, you work within the people's vocabulary. Slight changes, slight differences are possible. But you don't—say, they're making elephants. You don't say, "Oh, make chickens." That's an absurd example. You can move a little bit. You can modify something very slightly, but the craftsmen have to understand and see. We always worked with the people and didn't try to get them to do anything—initially we didn't try to get them to do anything that they weren't used to doing.

BARBARA MEIERS:

This rug was the first attempt, and it really was quite an ordeal to get it made.

FRED MEIERS:

If we had done this in another area where they were used to pattern weaving, there wouldn't have been any problem at all. Some people weave stripes. These people were used to weaving in stripes. They were beautiful stripes but they didn't know how to put patterns in.

SMITH:

Did you ever deal with the regatones?

FRED MEIERS:

What are they?

SMITH:

I guess you could call them wholesale dealers. The Mexican salesmen who would go from village to village, pick up things and take them to the various marketplaces.

FRED MEIERS:

Usually the people that did this dealt in things that we didn't have any interest for. They usually sold dresses, yard goods, shoes, or utilitarian things—

BARBARA MEIERS:

More for the Mexican populace.

FRED MEIERS:

That were machine made and had a different emphasis.

SMITH:

Did you have a chance to meet and talk with Paul Bourne at all?

FRED MEIERS:

No.

BARBARA MEIERS:

You mean John?

SMITH:

Paul Bourne from Oaxaca. Or Arthur Train?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Oh, yes. Yes, we worked with Arthur Train. We started with Arthur Train early in 1958, in the spring of '58.

FRED MEIERS:

Arthur Train became our main source of materials from Oaxaca.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Quantity folk art.

FRED MEIERS:

With Arthur Train we were able to have quantity because Casa Schöndube, of which he was a partner and had organized the thing, was in touch with and had the idea of selling folk art from all over Oaxaca. Then they broadened it, hoping to do it to the whole area from Puebla clear through. Not beyond Oaxaca, not into Chiapas.

BARBARA MEIERS:

He did have things from the Isthmus [of Tehuantepec].

FRED MEIERS:

It's still Oaxaca. With him we made the step in the folk art from these few little things to quantity delivery of folk art.

SMITH:

Then you were shifting your attention to the southern part of Mexico for the first time.

FRED MEIERS:

Right, yes. At that point we gave up—I think, at least for a time, we gave up doing anything in Guadalajara.

BARBARA MEIERS:

We weren't working there.

FRED MEIERS:



We had also developed the contact in Uruapan in Michoacán, which developed into our production of place mats.

BARBARA MEIERS:

The handwoven cotton.

SMITH:

Who was this contact?

FRED MEIERS:

Initially it was a man by the name of Aurelio Herrera. Then after—I think it was about two years, a year and a half or two years—we met some people by the name of [Walter and Bundy] Illsley—Americans who had worked with Herrera, who had taught them how to weave. Walter had been in China as an engineer. Later they had met and married in Mexico. They are both very liberal. She was a Quaker. No, he was a Quaker; she was Jewish, an artist from New York. He was in China setting up water systems. They met and married in Mexico later and set up a water system in a village in Mexico. They were sponsored by [Lazaro] Cardenas. They set up a water system in a village in Michoacán. Subsequently they decided that they wanted to do something with weaving. She was interested in designing, had some kind of art background.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Walter was a very imaginative and ingenious person.

FRED MEIERS:

Very good mechanically. They were a good combination.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Right.

FRED MEIERS:

He was able to devise strange ways of making things work, sort of [like] Rube Goldberg. This is before your time.

SMITH:

I know who Rube Goldberg is.

FRED MEIERS:

Oh. [laughter]

BARBARA MEIERS:

It was a big problem to know how to really set up dyeing, for instance, how to do really good dyeing. The dyes down there were very bad at this point.

FRED MEIERS:

How to set up—how to make things, make small machines that are necessary for one thing or another. How to make a wheel that'll take a thread that's a thousand yards long, and how to do it simply. And how to—all kinds of—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Solve problems. He was a great problem solver.

SMITH:

Illsley is his name?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Illsley. Walter Illsley.

SMITH:

What was his solution to the dye problem?

FRED MEIERS:

The solution to the dye problem was to buy dyes that were of the best quality.

BARBARA MEIERS:

From the best sources available instead of trying to work with what they did down there. Also, he set up the way they dyed the yarn. Didn't they do it right there at their place?

FRED MEIERS:

Of course.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Didn't they have a big bathtub to begin with? [laughter]

FRED MEIERS:

Sure.

SMITH:

Did the craftsmen traditionally make their own dyes and materials? Or were they buying them from the cities?

FRED MEIERS:

In small-scale isolated places, in primitive situations, they depended on natural dyes. In Oaxaca and in the south they depended on natural dyes. For the most part, at the point when we got into it, there was a lot of dyeing going on.

BARBARA MEIERS:

It was the local commercial dyes that were not good quality.

FRED MEIERS:

This brilliant kind of color—the hot pinks, the turquoise—that one associates with Mexico and Mexican color, one blast of the sun and its intensity is reduced. A week in the sun and it really changes.

SMITH:

In the Mexican market did the Mexican buyer really care whether the dye lasted? Was this art that was supposed to last very long?

FRED MEIERS:

Apparently the Mexican market wasn't demanding enough.

BARBARA MEIERS:

No.

FRED MEIERS:

It wasn't until about the time we were coming along that people began to think that they didn't have to face dye or fabrics that would either wash out or—what's the matter?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Nothing. Somebody's coming to the door. We'll have to turn this off. [tape recorder off] The people really—it was another case of their accepting what was. That's the way I feel about it, you know. So? The dyes ran. Or they—I mean, their clothes looked like that. They just accepted it. That's the way it was.

SMITH:

Does that have to do with the way they washed clothes?

FRED MEIERS:

It has to do with washing and with the sun. The thing is that we don't know how popular handwoven fabric was in Mexico, so that's an unknown as far as I'm concerned. It existed and people used it. People, say, in Guadalajara, used lots of handwoven fabric for curtains. There was a little windowpane kind of design that was popular. There were several variations of a natural white fabric cotton that was much used. Aside from that and some heavier kind of fabrics with either slight coloring in them or no color, the large-scale use of the fabric I am not sure existed.

BARBARA MEIERS:

You found it in old costumes, you know, very handsome examples of handwoven fabric in costume pieces. But for the general use—

FRED MEIERS:

It existed extensively in villages, isolated villages as Barbara said.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Right.

FRED MEIERS:

In connection with the Huicholes whose costume is an essential part of their—an important part of their culture.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Some of the Otomí [are] beautiful.

FRED MEIERS:

And the various villages of Oaxaca, Chiapas, of Puebla, and many other parts of Mexico. But I was thinking more of the acceptance by a middle-class society. They didn't, as far as I can tell, did not use the handwoven materials. They used cheap factory-made stuff. The main quality that it had to have was to be cheap.

SMITH:

With Illsley and Arthur Train, you would place your orders with them and then they would find the appropriate craftsman to fill the order?

BARBARA MEIERS:

No, working with the Illsleys was quite different.

FRED MEIERS:

With the Illsleys we designed fabric,

BARBARA MEIERS:

Right from the beginning we designed our own fabrics.

SMITH:

This started fairly early on?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes, '59.

FRED MEIERS:

This started in '59.

SMITH:

You very quickly moved into designing fabric, having it made, and importing it?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Right. Fabric was one of the first things we did as far as the designing and working in quantity.

FRED MEIERS:

Looking over some notes, we found that one of our first sales in fabric was to a friend of ours, a Jungian analyst, psychiatrist [Albert Kreinhedder]. We found an order of this particular fabric, fifty yards of this particular fabric, which is a nice sale. There was another sale to one of his clients.

SMITH:

Were you selling to individuals? Or to yardage stores?

FRED MEIERS:

We were selling wherever we could sell.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Anybody that we could sell to.

FRED MEIERS:

The emphasis from the beginning was wholesale.

BARBARA MEIERS:

One of our other early customers for fabric was a woman who was designing and making her own line of clothes. She was right here in Manhattan Beach [California].

SMITH:

Do you remember her name?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes, Cynthia Kriz. She just loved the fabric.

FRED MEIERS:

We were working with Aurelio Herrera when she started with us.

BARBARA MEIERS:

When we had the original weaver.

SMITH:

You were not actually selling her Mexican folk art fabric, then.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Well, it was in the sense that it was handwoven and it was done in the manner that they do. It was their cotton, their way of weaving. The difference was that we picked out the colors and decided on the stripe relationship a lot of the times. They were accustomed to weaving stripes and solids.

SMITH:

Did you change the stripe patterns at all?

FRED MEIERS:

Oh, we changed them completely.

SMITH:

In what sense? How did you change them?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Stripe relationships.

FRED MEIERS:

We designed the stripes.

SMITH:

Increased the number of colors? Changed the colors?

FRED MEIERS:

Everything. Working with the Illsleys there was no limitation on the kind of color that could be produced. The only limitation was in the nature of the medium. That is to say one has to know what happens when you take red and green and fill it with yellow. You have to know all kinds of things that you can't find out any other way other than doing.

BARBARA MEIERS:

You have to know something about weaving.

FRED MEIERS:

You have to know something initially about color. You have to know something about what you want, and you have to know something about the

purpose that you want it for. You are designing so you have to have things that satisfy your aesthetic needs.

SMITH:

You had your art school training—you had an extensive crafts background. Did you find that that was enough to be able to go and do this? Or did you have to set up a little handloom that—

FRED MEIERS:

No, we did it there in Michoacán using the actual looms that the fabric was made on.

BARBARA MEIERS:

The Illsleys were already working with a group of weavers. You might [want to] tell them a little about the weaving people, which is pretty interesting—Tarascan Indians.

FRED MEIERS:

These were Tarascans. The nucleus of this weaving factory was a group of people who had been living in Paricutin [Michoacán]. Paricutin?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes. That's the village where the volcano erupted and buried it.

FRED MEIERS:

They had been moved out of there and then had been trained by the Illsleys to weave.

SMITH:

Had been trained? They didn't weave before?

FRED MEIERS:

They were farmers.

SMITH:

Where did he get the idea that they would be able to weave?



FRED MEIERS:

For survival.

BARBARA MEIERS:

[laughter] They must have shown some—

FRED MEIERS:

There's something about Mexicans that permits them to do things that are needed. There's an interest that may be pre-factory psychology, which means that they are capable of solving problems that might be insurmountable to us.

BARBARA MEIERS:

And adjusting.

SMITH:

So he took these ex-farmers, set them up with looms, and—

BARBARA MEIERS:

They were working both there at the Illsleys' manage and also in their own homes. So it really was a cottage industry kind of thing.

SMITH:

Did you get to know any of these people?

FRED MEIERS:

Oh, yes.

SMITH:

Can you tell me about any of them in particular?

FRED MEIERS:

Yes. Antonio was in charge of doing the work. Antonio later. became the head, sort of was running the warping, which is quite a process. It's a very important part of the weaving. He was in charge of dyeing later.

SMITH:

Do you remember Antonio's last name?

FRED MEIERS:

No, I don't. Seems like I've known him forever, but I've always known him as Antonio.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Then Cecilio—

FRED MEIERS:

Excuse me, I'm talking about Cecilio.

BARBARA MEIERS:

I was wondering because I thought Cecilio was—

FRED MEIERS:

Cecilio's older brother—now I'm confused. I don't know whether his name is Antonio or something else that began with A. When I first went there [he] was in charge of the workmen. He was a little erratic and not really as constant—[didn't have] a kind of disposition that made it possible for him to go on year after year working on this thing. These people spoke Spanish but they spoke it as a second language, of course. They were very gentle in general. The Tarascans are very gentle, nice people to deal with.

BARBARA MEIERS:

You worked a lot with Cecilio, especially with the colors.

FRED MEIERS:

I worked especially with him because of all these colors. We did lots of designs.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Wasn't he in charge of the dyeing and the color, to be sure that the color was constant?

FRED MEIERS:

He had a very good eye.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes.

FRED MEIERS:

Later on we became involved with the Herman Miller [Textiles and Objects Company] through Alexander Girard. It was absolutely necessary for there to be accurate repetition. These sales were large and were made to architects and designers through Herman Miller. This was all done on a national scale. There were very elaborate large presentations put out by Herman Miller. A designer or an architect makes a sale to his client of a certain color and weight of fabric. It isn't acceptable if it comes through looking some other way. You can't say, "Oops, we missed it."

BARBARA MEIERS:

That was in 1960 when we started working with Herman Miller. That was following right along pretty fast.

SMITH:

Yes. Cecilio had been a farmer before—?

FRED MEIERS:

I wouldn't want to enlarge on this too much. I've never talked with Cecilio about earlier times.

BARBARA MEIERS:

About his background.

FRED MEIERS:

These people were young. I mean, I think Cecilio couldn't have been more than eighteen—or something like this—when I first remember seeing him.

SMITH:

How much did the Illsleys pay their workmen and the weavers?

FRED MEIERS:

I don't know this.

BARBARA MEIERS:

They were very fair in their treatment of the people.

FRED MEIERS:

They were very generous people.

### **1.7. TAPE NUMBER: IV, Side One (September 17, 1986)**

BARBARA MEIERS:

We were talking about the Illsleys [Walter and Bundy] and their relationship with their workers, who really were an extended family. They were so generous.

FRED MEIERS:

It was quite normal for there to be several people in addition to their family living in their household. I don't remember whether it was one of Antonio's—Antonio was the brother of Cecilio. It was one of their younger sisters, I think, who was there for a period of years as part of their household. There were always people coming and going. The Illsleys were very active in the community, working for better schools, better doctors, better everything for the people.

BARBARA MEIERS:

They were very much involved with the lives of their workers, too, helping them in one way or another. There were always things going on. Every time Fred went down there would be a new—[laughter]

FRED MEIERS:

Always crises.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Somebody had run off with somebody, kidnapped somebody as a bride, or somebody was very ill.

FRED MEIERS:

In connection with the problem of not knowing what they paid, I'm sure they paid more than the suggested wage scale.

SMITH:

Were they unionized?

FRED MEIERS:

Initially I don't think it was. I know it wasn't. It came under social security very early in the business. Maybe it was unionized. This is a point that I don't know.

SMITH:

I would like to come back later to discuss aspects of the business. I think now we should go back and look at some of the artesanos that you were discovering.

FRED MEIERS:

Right. It was on the suggestion of [Ralph and Patricia B.] Altman that we found—is this working?

SMITH:

Yes, it's working.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Craftsmen in Acatlán [de Osorio, Puebla].

FRED MEIERS:

That we found a source of the folk art that had come into their shop. I went to Acatlán, Puebla, which is close to the Oaxaca border, which is close to—not very far from [the city of] Puebla is what I meant to say. It's fairly close in miles but quite a ways in relative time. Acatlán was a pottery village. Initially I found somebody, a Professor Juárez, who made traditional Acatlán-type products.

SMITH:

He was a schoolteacher?

FRED MEIERS:

I don't know. I assume that he was. He used this title. It's always handy in Latin America to have a title, and that was his.

BARBARA MEIERS:

What did he make?

FRED MEIERS:

He made traditional colonial candlesticks. [indicates size] About so, so, so.

SMITH:

From a foot to three feet? A meter?

FRED MEIERS:

Yes, No, not a meter? I'd say seventy-five centimeters. He made ducks, angels—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Were these black or terra-cotta?

FRED MEIERS:

Black and terra-cotta.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Both.

FRED MEIERS:

But very shortly after I made my way to Herón Martínez.

SMITH:

Was he already quite well known by this time?

FRED MEIERS:

He was not very well known, actually, but it was obvious that he was bright, energetic, creative, and growing.

BARBARA MEIERS:

He was quite an entrepreneur within his own community.

FRED MEIERS:

When we first met him he lived on the hillside. It was not very steep, but the street had little, sort of, steps, which made it a little difficult to drive up on. It

was cobblestone and quite wide. It was an interesting household consisting mainly of girls—I think his wife, daughters, plus, probably, relatives. At that point he was working with white, white forms with polychrome—small areas of many colors.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Was the white applied to the terra-cotta?

FRED MEIERS:

The white was used as a color, was applied to clay.

BARBARA MEIERS:

To the terra-cotta base. Paint? What was it?

FRED MEIERS:

It was painted.

SMITH:

Was he making his own paints? Or buying them?

FRED MEIERS:

No, he was buying them. Maybe making them. That I'm not sure of. The colors seemed fairly fast color.

SMITH:

These were not glazes.

FRED MEIERS:

No, these were paint, applied paint over fired clay. Most of the polychrome things in Mexico are done this way, not in glaze.

BARBARA MEIERS:

What was it? A casein-type paint?

FRED MEIERS:

Not at this point. That was quite a bit later. It wasn't washable, nor did it have an additional protective coat—which was a tradition in Matamoros [Puebla]

and, also, in the Guadalajara area, where the craftsmen worked in similar bright color. I found the product. He is the one who made the thing that the Altmans had received.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Had some of the pieces.

SMITH:

What was this thing?

FRED MEIERS:

I don't know exactly what it was.

BARBARA MEIERS:

I can't remember now.

FRED MEIERS:

There were many different forms. It was more than its being a thing; it was a look.

SMITH:

Yes. Martínez claims to be the first one to have developed the Tree of Life. Do you have any information on whether that's a valid claim or not?

FRED MEIERS:

I don't think that is. Did you read Raul Lopez's thesis?

BARBARA MEIERS:

On Herón Martínez?

FRED MEIERS:

Herón Martínez.

SMITH:

Yes, yes.

BARBARA MEIERS:



The Tree of Life was being done and had been done in Matamoros.

FRED MEIERS:

We understand that the Tree of Life as such was first done in Matamoros. As far as we know it was done there.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Of course, they were doing it in Metepec [estado de Mexico], too. How early, I'm not sure. Certainly by the time Martínez was coming along it was being done in Metepec, or had been done.

FRED MEIERS:

As far as we're concerned it had been done a long time before Martínez thought of working. But he's a very energetic person, as I said. We were interested in buying quite a bit from him. We were beginning to buy larger amounts, but there was a big problem, and that was shipping. There were no facilities in Acatlán. It's really a primitive situation. No hotels. Oh, there was one. There was a bus stop where there was a so-called hotel, but it was very primitive.

BARBARA MEIERS:

That was really what led to—

FRED MEIERS:

It was a real problem, how to get things other than going and getting them, which was the way the people there were used to functioning. People from Mexico [City] went to Acatlán and collected the stuff.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Someone took a truck and trucked it.

FRED MEIERS:

I think probably it's the same way now. It was through—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Arthur Train.

FRED MEIERS:

—on Herón Martínez's recommendation that we went to Arthur Train in Oaxaca. He was in the habit of coming there and collecting and shipping. After six months, I would say, at the most, we transferred our business to Arthur so that we could work in bigger quantity with Martínez.

BARBARA MEIERS:

He was working in a wholesale way in Oaxaca. We bought through Arthur Train rather than directly from Herón Martínez. It was the only way we could work in any kind of quantity.

SMITH:

Train would take care of the shipping and the quality control, that sort of thing?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Right.

FRED MEIERS:

Right. Arthur Train and Clothilde Schöndube had set up a business. That must have been about 1955. I'm not sure of this date. It wasn't very long before we were starting. Their ideas were very similar to ours, to make available the best Mexican folk art. Arthur had a young lady working in his shop named Herlina. She was seventeen, eighteen years old, and they married.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Her name was Pacheco, wasn't it?

FRED MEIERS:

Herlina Pacheco. She came from a tin-working family. Her mother made beautiful little nichos with little colored flowers made of colored foil paper.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Tin flowers, I remember, she'd make.

FRED MEIERS:

There were a number of variations of this done in Oaxaca, but the Pacheco ones were the best ones.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Eventually, when Clothilde got out of the business, the business became Pacheco. We did business with Arthur Train under the name of Pacheco for several years.

FRED MEIERS:

The Pachecos did lots of ornamental things. Christmas tree—very beautifully executed tin ornaments. The father was a very good craftsman. Her brother as well was a good tin craftsman. He later became part of the Train business. Still later, [he] established his own tin business, which, I understand, he continues to do.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Tin was another thing that we could get in some kind of quantity and would work as a commercial product up here.

SMITH:

Largely Christmas ornaments?

FRED MEIERS:

From these people at this early stage I think it was largely Christmas tree ornaments. Yes.

SMITH:

Getting back to Herón Martínez: you mentioned that it was his look that was appealing. Could you try to define what it was in the look?

FRED MEIERS:

The look of—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Of the work.

SMITH:

Of the work that drew you to it so strongly, and drew the Altmans.

FRED MEIERS:

The attraction was that it was unique. It was something that didn't exist except as done by Herón Martínez. The look was curiously sophisticated. Probably Martínez was influenced by some outside influence. He has told all kinds of people all kinds of stories about—

BARBARA MEIERS:

His influences.

FRED MEIERS:

—the sources of his inspiration. I don't remember these things except that he does take credit for incorporating some pre-Columbian influences into his work.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Zapotec Indian, isn't it? The heritage of the region?

FRED MEIERS:

I'm not sure. Probably, but I wouldn't—I'm not positive what kind of Indian. There are several different overlapping or closely situated—

BARBARA MEIERS:

These were very happy pieces, also. They had a playfulness to them that was charming. He used circus figures and acrobats, animal acrobats.

FRED MEIERS:

They were called "cirqueros," but they really weren't circus. They were more acrobats, acrobats with birds—

BARBARA MEIERS:

He used the Brementown musician theme—with the animals all piled up and the rooster on the top—which was just charming.

SMITH:

Were these common themes in Mexico?

BARBARA MEIERS:

No, they weren't.

FRED MEIERS:

No, no. They weren't at all.

SMITH:

Where did he get them from?

FRED MEIERS:

This we really have no idea. There's very little written about this. Raul Lopez—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes. Read Raul Lopez's—I've never read it so I really don't know what he decided. Do you [Fred]?

FRED MEIERS:

—wrote a thesis after interviewing Martínez, really, at length. His idea was that regardless of the truth of what Martínez was saying, it was worthwhile recording it. I'm not sure that he completed this thesis. Pat Altman would know this.

SMITH:

I'll check that out. We might want to discuss this further in the next session.

FRED MEIERS:

Right, right. But it was very attractive. When we introduced it up here, it was—not that we were the first to introduce it. Some friends—actually, we became friendly with the people who had wandered into the Altmans' and sold them one or two pieces.

BARBARA MEIERS:

That started this.

SMITH:

Who were these people?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Diane and—

FRED MEIERS:

These people were teachers. Their names were Claude and Diane [Hansen]—I have their name someplace; I don't have it.

SMITH:

We'll get it later. It can be filled in. Were they importers, too?

FRED MEIERS:

No, they were teachers. They were very interested in folk art. They lived—

BARBARA MEIERS:

They had taught in several different—

FRED MEIERS:

They taught later in Morocco—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Hansen is the name. Hansen.

FRED MEIERS:

Right, Hansen. They taught in Morocco, they taught in—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Bolivia.

FRED MEIERS:

In Bolivia.

BARBARA MEIERS:

In American schools in these different countries.

FRED MEIERS:

Very sympathetic, very pleasant people. Really loved folk art. They gathered some things for us in Africa when they were out there. A few things.

BARBARA MEIERS:

We thought maybe we would work with things other than the Mexican things. In fact, we did a little bit for a while.

FRED MEIERS:

We experimented to see if—

BARBARA MEIERS:

They thought maybe they could buy for us there and we would bring things in. They did do a little bit of buying for us. We never really got into it as a business.

FRED MEIERS:

It didn't work, for various reasons.

SMITH:

Was this something that was new? That suddenly there would be a number of very strong individual views, artistic styles developing such as Herón Martínez's?

FRED MEIERS:

This is a very interesting question. This is the next stage—this is the stage of individualization of folk art. The artist is a folk artist but his work takes on an individual character.

BARBARA MEIERS:

And he's known by his name.

FRED MEIERS:

He's known by his work. His work is identifiable.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Folk artist-craftsmen ordinarily work anonymously.

FRED MEIERS:

This individualization is unusual.

BARBARA MEIERS:

There were other people at that same time who were becoming individual artists.

FRED MEIERS:

We worked with, I think, all of these people in Mexico. These were the most creative of the folk artists. Among other ones are Teodora Blanco and—

BARBARA MEIERS:

[Amado] Galván, [Primitivo, Raul, and Luis] Sesate.

FRED MEIERS:

Manuel Jiménez with the wood work, the Aguilar family in Oaxaca.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Ocotlán [de Morelos, Oaxaca].

SMITH:

There's actually quite a few, and I think we need to discuss each of them. Did you work enough with Martínez to get a view of how his workshop operated?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Oh, sure.

SMITH:

Was it a family operation? Did he have his kids and his sisters and his grandkids—?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Oh, yes.

FRED MEIERS:

Yes, they were all working.

SMITH:

His designs only?



FRED MEIERS:

Yes.

SMITH:

So isn't there the possibility of buying something that's signed "Herón Martínez," but you're really buying his brother-in-law's work?

FRED MEIERS:

Sure.

FRED MEIERS:

Actually, he had a brother—who also was a potter and was doing the same kind of things as Herón was doing.

SMITH:

What's his name?

FRED MEIERS:

I don't know his name.

SMITH:

Can you tell the difference between their work.

FRED MEIERS:

Oh, yes. The difference is very obvious. Acatlán, being a pottery village and being in Mexico, anything that was made—if there was some indication or thought that it was saleable, it was copied. So there were other people who were copying Herón Martínez, but they couldn't do it as well as he could. Nor did they have the facility to make larger pieces. Herón Martínez was very skilled as a technician, as a ceramist. He could make big, big things.

SMITH:

Up to a meter high?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Well, yes.

FRED MEIERS:

Yes, yes.

BARBARA MEIERS:

He did those large—like the big black goat out there and the animal planter that's out there through the door. Those are all his pieces. He made even bigger ones.

FRED MEIERS:

I was thinking of the more complicated kind of structures that required engineering. If you at UCLA look at the large—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Tree of Life.

FRED MEIERS:

Tree of Life that they have that's mounted on an animal, the base of this is an animal.

BARBARA MEIERS:

It's a "Flight into Egypt."

FRED MEIERS:

I think it must be a meter high. Extremely fragile. It's a Tree of Life. The whole thing is open. That's really a feat to bring off, to have the thing dry and to fire it. They fire in a very primitive kiln with dung and cactus.

SMITH:

The Tree of Life, he would shape it by hand rather than making molds.

FRED MEIERS:

They used a combination. They used molds wherever they could.

BARBARA MEIERS:

The animal base would have been made with a mold.

FRED MEIERS:

Usually, the forms are a combination of a molded form, and then the extensions, which give it its character, are hand formed. For instance, in the figure that we're looking at right out there, the goat, is a cántaro upside down with an addition of a head.

SMITH:

Is that a form that he developed?

FRED MEIERS:

Yes.

SMITH:

Have other artists picked that up from him?

FRED MEIERS:

I don't think so. I don't know why they haven't. He has done this technique in many different sizes for various uses. There's a candle—

BARBARA MEIERS:

It's like a lantern.

FRED MEIERS:

Yes, with a handle and a dome, which he evolved from a similar form. This basic form is very common in the village in making animals, making bulls. They apply four legs and the head to a small shape which may be a small cántaro.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Fred, did he make some of the traditional cántaros there, too? Did he ever do those that the village is so well known for? I remember seeing a photograph that we have of all of these big pots lying—it seems to me that there were some in his yard, too.

FRED MEIERS:

Later, Martínez, when the demand increased, became sort of a center for distribution. [He] sold the produce of a number of different craftsmen, including people who made different macetas of different sizes, many with heads and legs, animal and bird forms, decorative—

BARBARA MEIERS:

As well as the traditional big utilitarian ones.

FRED MEIERS:

Yes.

BARBARA MEIERS:

You don't think he may have ever produced those. I wondered just how he started out, whether he produced any of the utilitarian things before he got into the other, or his family did. Was it a family business?

FRED MEIERS:

Yes.

SMITH:

He learned from his father and mother then?

FRED MEIERS:

This I'm not sure of. I'm really not. I never did discuss this. Maybe I did discuss it. It's a little hard for me to separate what he told me and what other people told me. I never was sure that any of it was based on fact. I just had the idea that it was a lot of fantasizing.

SMITH:

Is there a religious or mythological dimension to his work?

FRED MEIERS:

No. I think not—possibly there is in later stuff. The work that I'm familiar with—I hadn't seen the work in recent years—but it seems mainly decorative. It seems more and more dependent on smoothing the technique, perfecting the technique. And making them in larger pieces, making them more and more elaborate.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Grander and more impressive. That's the kind of things he does now.

FRED MEIERS:

He's very skilled.

SMITH:

He's traveled widely, as I understand. Did you notice that he was beginning to introduce other, non-Mexican techniques, imagery, into his work as he went to Japan or Europe?

FRED MEIERS:

No. It seems there may be influences, but I think he borrows from the past of Mexico. I was more conscious of this than noticing influences being introduced from his travels.

SMITH:

He is also credited as reintroducing into the Mexican ceramics the mermaid imagery. Was he already starting to do those when you first met him? Or was that a later development?

FRED MEIERS:

This just doesn't make sense at all for him to claim that. The [San Bartolo de] Coyotepec [Oaxaca] people had been doing mermaids as early as the thirties. I think Frances Toor talks about this, suddenly being conscious of seeing this. I'm not sure that it was introduced even as late as the thirties. Martínez is about our age. We have a large—mermaid from Martínez—

BARBARA MEIERS:

What's left of her.

FRED MEIERS:

She was a Halloween casualty on our porch.

BARBARA MEIERS:

She's not all whole. We had several of them, large.

FRED MEIERS:

This tall. [indicates size]

BARBARA MEIERS:

It's probably a little taller than that.

SMITH:

Three feet or so?

FRED MEIERS:

Yes. I'm sure that there were smaller ones, too. This would have been made in the late fifties or early sixties.

SMITH:

The rather large size of things he's doing, those were made for export? The large-scale pieces? Was that something that developed as you came into the picture, and other people—?

FRED MEIERS:

I think so. When I first went to Acatlán there weren't any of them. No, let's see. No, he did them early. He did those large figures. Teodora Blanco is reported to have seen Martínez figures, standing monas, at Casa Schöndube and saying, "Well, I can do that," and going home and making large figures. This is one of them.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Outside the door, the big one.

FRED MEIERS:

The heavy figure, which is very different from Martínez's but it's a size similar to the large Martínez monas.

BARBARA MEIERS:

The big things that he's doing now, I would say, have been encouraged by people from Mexico City as well as by foreign buyers. They're definitely show pieces. I'm sure there are people in Mexico and in the government and so on that have bought pieces and encouraged—

FRED MEIERS:

There was an important show in Mexico City of Herón Martínez in the sixties. It included some very large pieces. The president of Mexico bought one of

these pieces and they were priced at relatively large amounts of money. I mean, prices that were unheard of.

SMITH:

What are we talking about?

FRED MEIERS:

Maybe a max—I'm really guessing. Five hundred dollars.

BARBARA MEIERS:

That large piece that is at UCLA is a fairly good size but not large in the sense that we're talking about as the show pieces. The one that we gave to UCLA, the Tree of Life, we paid about \$125 for. That covered some shipping. That gives you some idea of what—

FRED MEIERS:

That's really expensive.

BARBARA MEIERS:

And that was in 1965, something like that.

FRED MEIERS:

Shipping costs roughly, for a piece something like that, were approximately equal to the cost of the piece.

SMITH:

When you worked with Martínez would you give him an order that you wanted certain types of cántaros?

FRED MEIERS:

Oh, yes.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Oh, yes.

SMITH:

And the sizes? You would specify size?

FRED MEIERS:

Yes, sure.

BARBARA MEIERS:

But working from the things that he made.

SMITH:

Yes. Did he produce things speculatively for you that he thought you would like?

FRED MEIERS:

Yes. He would tell me about things, and I would say I would take so many of them. I think I ordered most anything that he would suggest that he was making, except his furniture. [laughter]

SMITH:

Why not his furniture?

FRED MEIERS:

It was a little too Aztecan for me. [laughter]

SMITH:

Which means?

FRED MEIERS:

It was a little creepy-crawly.

SMITH:

I'm still not quite seeing it.

FRED MEIERS:

It didn't—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Did it have applied design?

FRED MEIERS:



It was covered with hieroglyphics.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Similar to his painting on his pieces?

FRED MEIERS:

No.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Linear kind of—

FRED MEIERS:

Well, maybe.

BARBARA MEIERS:

His decoration is a linear kind of decoration that builds to quite a pattern.

FRED MEIERS:

It was different because they were black and the decoration was incised. It was covered with—it was just solid decoration. It was clay, of course.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Oh, clay furniture.

FRED MEIERS:

Yes. There were swags and—quite baroque. It just wasn't anything that I could cope with. [laughter]

BARBARA MEIERS:

Were these meant to be used?

FRED MEIERS:

He used them in his house.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Really? How fascinating.

SMITH:

They put cushions on it to make it comfortable?

FRED MEIERS:

No, no. They weren't seaters. They weren't things to sit on—they were tables, as I remember.

SMITH:

How many Martínez pieces would you buy in a year?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Oh, goodness. At one period we were working with Alexander Girard and Herman Miller and sending a lot of stuff to New York. That was in '62, '63. That's when the biggest quantity—

FRED MEIERS:

That wasn't all from Martínez. This was when it was extended, when Martínez was buying from many other craftsmen and the whole—there were churches in the hundreds. Hundreds of people.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Oh, yes.

FRED MEIERS:

In sizes, there were little angels and little figures on horseback, and bigger figures on horseback. Then there were acrobats, bigger. There were piles of animals.

BARBARA MEIERS:

He did wonderful churches.

FRED MEIERS:

There were all the churches from [points to different pieces in the room] this size to that one.

BARBARA MEIERS:

It's not there, dear; it's outside here.

FRED MEIERS:

Oh, that one.

BARBARA MEIERS:

It's a terra-cotta undecorated one.

SMITH:

Usually he painted them, didn't he?

BARBARA MEIERS:

He did both.

FRED MEIERS:

In this early period they were painted, but they were also available in black and in terra-cotta.

BARBARA MEIERS:

How about the little white ones? He had some little white churches, too?

FRED MEIERS:

You mean plain ones?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes.

FRED MEIERS:

Well, we said they were decorated.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Oh, the little white ones with the—

FRED MEIERS:

Those little white ones are the village—are not Martínez.

SMITH:

Take something like [points] the cántaro there. How much did you pay for that kind of a piece?

BARBARA MEIERS:

I could tell you exactly by just looking at these invoices. Do you want me to look up some of this or not?

FRED MEIERS:

Maybe we should insert it later.

SMITH:

Yes, we can insert it later. Actually, I was thinking more in terms of the—

FRED MEIERS:

Yes. I would say probably under ten dollars.

SMITH:

For a big piece like that?

FRED MEIERS:

Probably.

SMITH:

How much would you sell it for?

FRED MEIERS:

If it cost ten dollars we should have sold it for about fifty dollars.

BARBARA MEIERS:

But we didn't.

FRED MEIERS:

So this must not have cost that. It probably cost five dollars because we sold it for less than twenty-five.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Right at the beginning of our business—

FRED MEIERS:

I think about twenty dollars.

BARBARA MEIERS:

—we really didn't know enough to mark up prices sufficiently.

FRED MEIERS:

Very soon in the folk art I established 500 percent mark up to cover all that unpacking and repacking and breakage, plus transportation.

BARBARA MEIERS:

And so much breakage. We had so much breakage.

SMITH:

That was the wholesale price that you're talking about?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes. We were always wholesale.

SMITH:

Then the retailer would charge whatever—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Double that.

FRED MEIERS:

He would double that.

SMITH:

A piece like that, how long would it take Martínez to make it? What are we talking about in terms of his shop's investment, the time and labor that goes into it?

FRED MEIERS:

Well, it would take—whoever made it would be making a bunch of them. Probably, in a day—this is a supposition—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Well, they'd have to dry it—

FRED MEIERS:

—they would make ten of them, among other things. It would take a day to make ten of them.

SMITH:

But they'd be doing other things simultaneously.

FRED MEIERS:

They were making smaller things, too. Then they would have to fire them.

SMITH:

The color in that comes directly out of the fire.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Right.

SMITH:

So there's no painting or decoration?

FRED MEIERS:

No.

BARBARA MEIERS:

No.

SMITH:

That's cast from a mold?

FRED MEIERS:

It's partly cast—the basic shape, yes, the big shape. Then it has the additional [features] hand formed.

SMITH:

The head.

FRED MEIERS:

Yes.

SMITH:

How would that have been made?

FRED MEIERS:

Probably from another mold with the small parts added.

BARBARA MEIERS:

The beard and the ears added, probably.

### **1.8. TAPE NUMBER: IV, Side Two (September 17, 1986)**

FRED MEIERS:

[Herón] Martínez was another one of these people who had a highly-developed ego. He was another one of these Mexicans who introduced himself as "Herón Martínez of international fame."

SMITH:

But he did have international fame—didn't he?—in folk art circles.

FRED MEIERS:

Yes. Oh, yes, he did.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Eventually.

FRED MEIERS:

But there were a lot of people who don't.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Who don't introduce themselves that way. [laughter] He had a car that he parked out in front of his house. Fred said he never drove it.

FRED MEIERS:

Quite some time before he knew how to drive he had a car.

BARBARA MEIERS:

It was a status symbol.

FRED MEIERS:

As he became more and more affluent, he acquired more and more house, which is normal. Then he acquired hi-fi. I don't know whether he had electricity. I think he did, yes. But there were sort of incongruities. Having this car out there in this street that one couldn't drive up was a little—[laughter]

BARBARA MEIERS:

Because of the steps.

SMITH:

What kind of cultural tastes did he have, his interests? Was he interested in art in general?

FRED MEIERS:

Not when I knew him. He was interested in making things and getting on. He liked what he was doing. He liked the results of it. He enjoyed life.

BARBARA MEIERS:

He had a very good business.

FRED MEIERS:

He enjoyed his position in the community. I'm not sure how involved he was in the community, or whether there was too much common ground.

SMITH:

Did he have apprentices?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Outside the family? I don't know.

FRED MEIERS:

I'm sure he must have at some stage. When I was dealing with him there wasn't any evidence of any apprentices other than these people within his family. He encouraged his children to stay in school and advance in some profession.

SMITH:



What did his children do?

FRED MEIERS:

I don't know the answer to that one.

SMITH:

Did they go to the university?

FRED MEIERS:

I don't know. I can't remember this.

SMITH:

You had mentioned Professor Juárez?

FRED MEIERS:

Yes.

SMITH:

What happened to him? Did you continue buying from him?

FRED MEIERS:

No, I didn't. After I found Martínez, I no longer bought from Juárez. After Martínez had, in turn, put me in touch with Arthur Train, I didn't go to Acatlán.

SMITH:

Directly.

FRED MEIERS:

Yes.

BARBARA MEIERS:

We were buying from Oaxaca.

SMITH:

Did you have any sense of how strict or loose Martínez's quality controls were in his shop? Was he very concerned about the quality of each and every product?

FRED MEIERS:

The painting and the decorations seemed to be consistently good.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Somebody must have been because we really got consistently very good work.

FRED MEIERS:

It was very good work.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Very little that we could complain of. It was good.

FRED MEIERS:

Every once in a while you could see evidence of a new painter or an inexperienced decoration.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Then there was this introduction of somebody else's idea of what kind of color he should use, which was a disaster. We went through that one period.

SMITH:

When was that period?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Arthur Train had decided that he would like to have him use some different kinds of color.

FRED MEIERS:

In lieu of white.

SMITH:

It's also recorded that he was one of the first people to use acrylics, to switch over to acrylics.

FRED MEIERS:

Yes, that's true.

BARBARA MEIERS:

He probably was.

FRED MEIERS:

That, however, wasn't his idea. That was Arthur Train's doing.

SMITH:

How did you feel about that? Did you think the acrylics were an improvement or a step away from—?

FRED MEIERS:

Actually, it made the life of the piece, the freshness of it—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Last longer.

FRED MEIERS:

—more durable. As long as he maintained the same kind of color that he was using—which was equally easy to do in acrylics as it was when he was using, water-based paint that he used earlier—I couldn't see anything wrong with it. There's nothing pure about his work. I mean, what he was doing, really, wasn't folk art; it was his own expression. So if he wanted to change medium, it doesn't bother me at all.

SMITH:

That raises some interesting questions. What is folk art?

BARBARA MEIERS:

When does folk art stop, and when does individualization begin?

SMITH:

He was not a trained artist in the classical sense.

FRED MEIERS:

Right.

SMITH:

Not in the sense that the two of you were.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Oh, no. He came out of a folk art tradition.

FRED MEIERS:

He came out of a folk art tradition. He came out of a folk art community. My feeling is that he absorbed this by osmosis if not an apprenticeship, which is the school of the folk craft.

SMITH:

Let's shift over to Teodora Blanco. You met her about the same time?

FRED MEIERS:

Yes, a little bit later, but essentially the same time.

SMITH:

It strikes me that you say that Martínez is really design oriented; whereas Blanco, besides being design oriented, is also trying to say something with her pieces.

FRED MEIERS:

Teodora Blanco was a very interesting development. Similarly, she came from a pottery village [Santa Maria de] Atzompa [Oaxaca]. She was early a very skilled person. Early, she worked in her village's tradition, for instance, making little traditional figures and pots. You can see in that figure in front of me that has little pots under her arms. As well as the things that she inherited and knew instinctively. She was essentially very much a part of her culture. In her personal expression she not only expressed ideas that nobody had thought of but incorporated, as well, influences of her Zapotec background. She seems to me as probably the most creative, definitely the most creative woman folk artist. Not necessarily the best known. Probably the best known is Dona Rosa. But I think that she was one of the best, most inventive, most creative people in folk art in Mexico. She was definitely at the stage beyond folk art, a highly individualized artist. Before her death she was widely recognized internationally, she spoke at international conferences, international craft conferences.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Where did she do that?

FRED MEIERS:

I know she did it in Mexico. I don't know whether she traveled internationally. She always had a terrible time financially. She was sort of a hypochondriac, too. She had children. The man that she lived with, really, was no good. He had a separate family. She was a wife of, you know, the second family. He seemed to just come around and get her pregnant and then be off. She was always struggling, lived for years in an absolutely terrible situation physically in an awful hovel. No running water, nothing. Not even the most primitive conveniences. Later, as she did better financially, I think she gave this man the little bit of money that she was able to accumulate.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Oh, sure. That's what happened all the time. She sold her pieces very well. Everything she made. She got pretty good prices for them toward the end.

SMITH:

What are we talking about by pretty good prices?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Like when the Basslers [James and Veralee] were buying them later on.

FRED MEIERS:

Well, that was so much later, dear.

BARBARA MEIERS:

I know. But as I say, she still had a hard time all of her life.

SMITH:

How did you come to track her down? How did she come to your attention?

FRED MEIERS:

I found her work in the museum in Mexico City in 1957, 1958.

SMITH:

Indigenista?

FRED MEIERS:

Museo de Artes Populares [Museo Nacional de Artes Populares e Indigenistas]. The first time I went to Casa Schöndube in Oaxaca I saw some of these figures.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Arthur Train was selling the things.

FRED MEIERS:

Including that one. [points]

SMITH:

Which one?

BARBARA MEIERS:

The biggest one there.

FRED MEIERS:

The roundest one, yes.

SMITH:

You bought that in '58-'59?

FRED MEIERS:

Yes.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Was it that early?

FRED MEIERS:

Oh, yes.

BARBARA MEIERS:

I was there when we bought that, too. It was standing outside in the back, in the yard.

SMITH:

When you bought it did you know whether you were buying it for your collection? Or for your home? Or for just something that might sell?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Not really. No, we thought it was wonderful. We had already bought a lot of her things before we bought that.

SMITH:

From Arthur Train?

FRED MEIERS:

Yes.

BARBARA MEIERS:

There, again, we were selling a lot of her things to Alexander Girard for his use and work that he was doing. Like the La Fonda del Sol that he did the display and decoration for.

SMITH:

Would you sell him big figures like this or the more standard—? She also did a lot of standardized—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Small pieces, too.

SMITH:

Smaller pieces, right.

BARBARA MEIERS:

She did animal musicians. She did the animals that had the rough surface that they planted the chia seeds on, which was a traditional kind of thing they did in that area.

SMITH:

The chia—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes. We bought many, many, many—in fact we were taking her whole production for a number of years. We got to keep a few of them out of all of that. Alexander Girard has a wonderful collection of them. There's a marvelous collection there at the Santa Fe [New Mexico] folk art museum [Museum of International Folk Art] which is part of his collection. He used a number of them, as I said, in his work there when he was doing the La Fonda del Sol restaurant in New York.

SMITH:

Did you get to know her personally?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes. Yes, we did. We would go out to see her personally, even though we usually worked through Arthur Train and, later, Enrique de la Lanza. We would pick out the pieces usually there at her home and then they would ship them to us.

SMITH:

From what I've read many of the pieces have folk stories attached to them. I wonder if any of the pieces out here—were there stories that she told you that are attached to the pieces?

BARBARA MEIERS:

No, she didn't—

FRED MEIERS:

Actually, I don't remember her ever saying anything about any stories. She was very reluctant to talk about them [the monas] in any detail. I think of a form that occurred every once in a while, which was of an American woman tourist with a camera going like this [gestures] that she found rather amusing in some way. She would laugh whenever she thought about one of these figures. But the kind of things that represented her, that showed her imagination, were things that really told no story. They weren't expressions on that kind of level; they were expressions of more psychological or unconscious expressions rather than something that had a story. One time she did a



building that told a story, I remember. It was something like Goldilocks, or some kind of story at this level. As far as figures telling a story, I don't remember any evidence of this. We, at one point, were buying her whole production, which was fairly sizable. That's the reason that we happened to have as many. We were able to save quite a few. Some time we'll have to look at some of the small ones which, within their small scale, give a good indication of a number of different expressions.

SMITH:

Could you give an example?

FRED MEIERS:

Yes. There were many figures that are market figures. They are women sitting around with things, with pots, that they have around them. Beautifully made little pots, market vendors. There are other ones that are anthropomorphic with animal heads. Nobody, but nobody, was doing anything like this. Nobody thought of anything like this. She was an innovator.

SMITH:

In terms of other Mexican folk art?

FRED MEIERS:

Right, right. And yet, her work unconsciously reflects her Zapotec background.

SMITH:

Was Zapotec her native language?

FRED MEIERS:

Yes.

SMITH:

She was a Spanish speaker as well?

FRED MEIERS:

Yes.

SMITH:

Was her Spanish very good?

FRED MEIERS:

Yes, fluent Spanish.

SMITH:

But her main. language, daily-use language in the family would be Zapotec?

FRED MEIERS:

This is a guess. I would say probably, but I'm not sure. I'm really not.

SMITH:

The tall figures, each one seems to have such a different personality.

FRED MEIERS:

Yes.

SMITH:

Do the figures represent people that she knows?

FRED MEIERS:

I'm not sure that they do. I think, at least in talking about them, she didn't refer to them as people, in spite of the fact that she often inscribed a name on a figure.

BARBARA MEIERS:

She put the name on them.

FRED MEIERS:

I think she just got involved in these things as the thing that she made.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Did she call them monas?

FRED MEIERS:

Yes.

SMITH:

The nahual was a very common motif.

FRED MEIERS:

I don't think that she did any nahuales. I don't remember seeing any.

SMITH:

The animal figures on the chest, isn't that a nahual motif? At least it's been interpreted that way.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Some people think that that was her expression of a nahual, that she was interpreting it that way. We have not talked to her about that. This is nothing that she ever talked to us about. She was a very religious person. Her Catholicism was very, very important to her. Our conversations with her were more about her relationship to the church and the community.

FRED MEIERS:

She was very much a part of the community, highly respected in the community in spite of her more or less unacceptable marriage partnership.

BARBARA MEIERS:

We spent an Easter with her in her village. Walked with her up through the town, into the procession, and up to the little shrine on the top of the hill. She was greeted everywhere she went. She was really quite a personage. But as far as the nahual idea and her use of those anthropomorphic forms, she never talked about this kind of thing with us.

FRED MEIERS:

Now that I think about it, it was our request or suggestion at some point, that she make some figures that had animal heads. This was a request of Sandro's [Alexander Girard].

BARBARA MEIERS:

That was after he had already seen some that she'd made.

FRED MEIERS:

Perhaps. Or maybe the request was to make some—

BARBARA MEIERS:

She did those little ones. We have little ones that have animal heads, too, as well as those large ones that she did later that we sold to him.

FRED MEIERS:

The little ones were animal musicians, remember?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Well, there were actually a few of the women figures that have animal heads, too, like the larger monas.

FRED MEIERS:

Okay. I don't remember those.

BARBARA MEIERS:

I told him that she did animal musicians and various kinds of smaller forms, too. The chia forms—

FRED MEIERS:

She was a very warm person and a humble person. Not self-effacing by any means, but very much in touch with one. There was something going back and forth when you were with her.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Some of her children were working with her. Even when they were little they made some things. There's one now who is going on with her work.

SMITH:

Did she have a workshop in the same sense that Herón Martínez had?

BARBARA MEIERS:

No.

SMITH:

How do you compare the working conditions?

FRED MEIERS:

Black and white.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Right. [laughter] Absolutely different.

FRED MEIERS:

Her workshop—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Just amazing.

FRED MEIERS:

—in her best condition was a room in an adobe house that had no furniture in it. It was a good place to keep the clay moist.

BARBARA MEIERS:

It was dark.

FRED MEIERS:

Dark. Part of the time it was so dark that they worked on a porch with a concrete floor. By her previous standards it was good. Her firing was in a circular pit with, I think, dung and cactus.

BARBARA MEIERS:

I just couldn't believe it when I went there and saw that she could achieve something like these big pieces, really big, fire them in this pit in this primitive condition out on that backyard and have them come out whole.

FRED MEIERS:

Somehow she was able to make a body, make a clay body. By clay body I don't mean the figure; I mean the composition of the clay.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Consistency of the clay.

FRED MEIERS:

Which combined ingredients that are sufficiently related, so that her firing was sufficiently high in this very primitive condition and that her pieces are quite durable. They're much, much better than the normal kind of body that is used in her village, which has to be made about [indicates size] so heavy in order to resist breaking,

SMITH:

You mean about two inches thick?

FRED MEIERS:

Well, not two? it's more like one inch thick. Her things are thin. They're like this. [indicates size]

BARBARA MEIERS:

And it's very hard clay.

SMITH:

Half an inch thick?

FRED MEIERS:

No, an eighth of an inch thick.

BARBARA MEIERS:

You can feel it. You can see it right here on the top of this one.

FRED MEIERS:

I don't know where this information came from.

BARBARA MEIERS:

She really did it though.

FRED MEIERS:

From the earliest that we were acquainted with her, this is the color, and this color represents something that is atypical.

BARBARA MEIERS:

The color of the clay.

FRED MEIERS:

Yes.

SMITH:

She never discussed technical matters with you then, like why she chose this color. Did she even want to know whether you liked the color or not?

FRED MEIERS:

No, this was never discussed.

BARBARA MEIERS:

No. We liked it.

FRED MEIERS:

I didn't think of it.

BARBARA MEIERS:

No. She did it, they were great, we liked it, and there was no reason—to have any discussion about it.

FRED MEIERS:

She did use terra-cotta as an applied color. She applied to this. [points to object in room]

BARBARA MEIERS:

There's a change of color on this one.

SMITH:

Like on the dove?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes. There's some up there, too. [points]

FRED MEIERS:

She did that on a number of pieces.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Did she have anybody that could really help her with these? Did one of her sons early begin to help her? Think of trying to lift some of these things around.

FRED MEIERS:

I know, I know.

BARBARA MEIERS:

What did she do?

FRED MEIERS:

The children were very small, you know. Her second child was named for Arthur Train. They were very small so they weren't too much help.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Who helped her? Do you know?

FRED MEIERS:

I really don't know.

SMITH:

Did she use molds at all? Or is every piece individually shaped?

FRED MEIERS:

She used a shaped hump.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Not a mold.

FRED MEIERS:

Not a mold. I accused her once—not directly because I wasn't, at this early stage, in touch with her—of using a doll's head for the face. The answer was that it wasn't at all true. I'm not convinced that it wasn't true, because this particular group had very doll-like heads.

BARBARA MEIERS:



She went through different periods when the faces changed very much, and then also the shapes of the bodies. They went from having a waist to heavier—or vice versa. I don't remember which.

FRED MEIERS:

No, they went from being heavy like this [indicates size] to getting thinner.

BARBARA MEIERS:

To getting to be tall and thin. Then they began to spread out again. Like that later one in the other room was heavier.

SMITH:

Was she knowledgeable of Mexican art? Of the history of Mexican—?

FRED MEIERS:

I doubt it.

SMITH:

Was she aware of the katerina figures?

BARBARA MEIERS:

I don't think so.

FRED MEIERS:

I doubt it.

BARBARA MEIERS:

I'm sure that she saw some of the pre-Columbian things around in the museums. She would have been aware of that. She had a regional museum there.

SMITH:

You mentioned that she had seen the Herón Martínez piece in the museum.

FRED MEIERS:

No, not in the museum? at Casa Schöndube.

SMITH:

Oh, that's right.

FRED MEIERS:

No, our conversations never were extended to the point of including this kind of discussion.

SMITH:

Now that her children have taken over the business can you tell a marked difference in what's being produced?

FRED MEIERS:

Actually, we haven't been in touch with it in several years so we don't know what's being produced. There are various people that are making things that are influenced by Teodora. Before her death these were well under way and made her change her work from this kind of look to one of being solidly covered with decoration.

BARBARA MEIERS:

She did that consciously, you think?

FRED MEIERS:

Oh, yes.

BARBARA MEIERS:

To prevent people from copying?

FRED MEIERS:

To distinguish her stuff from other people's.

BARBARA MEIERS:

To distinguish herself.

FRED MEIERS:

Now these super-decorated kind of things are very common.

BARBARA MEIERS:

They're being done by other people.

FRED MEIERS:

They're done by the husband who developed into a Teodora follower after her death, I gather.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Wasn't there a sister or a sister-in-law—

FRED MEIERS:

Then other people within her family, including—

SMITH:

Either Luis [Blanco] or Maria Blanco? Do you know them?

FRED MEIERS:

Is Maria the daughter?

SMITH:

I believe so, yes. Or the daughter-in-law.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Luis is the son—

FRED MEIERS:

There's a daughter-in-law who, apparently, is doing work influenced by Luis. Luis is the oldest, isn't he?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Son.

FRED MEIERS:

The oldest son—I think. I'm really not clear on their names.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Is he the one that organized the business? Or was it Arturo [Blanco]?

FRED MEIERS:

This I'm not sure of.

BARBARA MEIERS:

I think it was Luis.

FRED MEIERS:

I think so. I understand that they've organized it to the point of exporting work in addition to their own, and have organized sort of a village distribution.

SMITH:

I asked you similar questions about Martínez but I wanted to ask you this about Blanco as well: You were buying her entire production pretty much. How many pieces are we talking about within a year?

FRED MEIERS:

This is hard to tell, because it would be considerably smaller. It was essentially one person's work.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Right.

FRED MEIERS:

It wasn't a family. In Martínez's case it represented a possibility of a whole village. So I would say a maximum of—. [pause] It's hard to say because—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Well, it would be a certain number of large pieces—

FRED MEIERS:

Large and small.

BARBARA MEIERS:

And then a lot of smaller pieces.

FRED MEIERS:

Say 150, 200 pieces.

SMITH:

How much would you pay her? I know this would probably vary from year to year, but take a year when you were buying her entire collection.

FRED MEIERS:

This is sort of hard to tell for us because we bought it in combination with a lot of other stuff. We didn't keep this kind of figures.

SMITH:

So you would pay Arthur Train, and then he would pay her.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes. Oh, yes.

FRED MEIERS:

Right.

SMITH:

Another story that seemed to be floating around about her was that she was a victim of witchcraft. Did this ever come up in your discussions with her, dealings with her? Was she worried about—?

FRED MEIERS:

She worried about her health.

BARBARA MEIERS:

She went on pilgrimages.

FRED MEIERS:

This is something that I wasn't aware of. It's just that I wasn't aware of it. Other people who were good friends as well with whom we've spoken about her hadn't heard anything of this. She did worry a lot about her health, took lots of medicine, and had various ailments and several operations.

BARBARA MEIERS:

She really wasn't in very good health.

SMITH:

It's also mentioned in one place that Manuel Jiménez was her curandero?

FRED MEIERS:

He lived in such a different area. I think that's very improbable—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Unlikely.

FRED MEIERS:

—that he would be anybody's. That's very curious. It sounds like gossip.

[laughter]

SMITH:

Well, I just picked it up reading some of these things. So she was really quite a traditional person in terms of her way of living.

FRED MEIERS:

Yes.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes.

SMITH:

Then she probably combined traditional medicine with modern medicine?

FRED MEIERS:

No, I think—well, most people at this educational level do.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Right.

FRED MEIERS:

But she went to various doctors in Oaxaca.

### **1.9. TAPE NUMBER: V, Side One (February 12, 1987)**

SMITH:

When we last left off we finished talking about Teodora Blanco and Herón Martínez. The next artisan artist that we're going to talk about is Rosendo Rodríguez. I wonder if you could tell me how you met Rosendo.

BARBARA MEIERS:

He was working in the museum in Tlaquepaque [Jalisco], the regional folk art museum there, as a packer for them. We had gone down—this was in 1962 on a trip looking for crafts—and met him there in the museum. I think Fred probably knows a little bit more about exactly how we worked out the business of his packing for us than I would know.

FRED MEIERS:

We needed somebody to gather materials for us that we would be ordering and shipping and we asked him to do this. He left the museum shortly and worked for us packing folk art for a number of years until we decided that it would work better for him to be working for a business down there. At that time he transferred to Artesanos de Tonalá that we were associated with,

BARBARA MEIERS:

We felt it would be better for him that he had a steadier occupation and social security.

FRED MEIERS:

To have social security.

SMITH:

As a packer; not as an artist.

FRED MEIERS:

As a packer. Early on, we were working with Herman Miller [Textiles and Objects Company] in supplying artifacts, folk art, for a shop in New York that they were opening at the instigation of Alexander Girard. Rosendo went to Metepec [estado de Mexico] to pack for us a group of large candelabras, bright colored, typical Metepec folk art.

BARBARA MEIERS:

There weren't many people that really knew how to pack and who could ship things out for us.

FRED MEIERS:

And the material is extremely fragile; not very well fired. Rosendo went there and packed and was very much interested, very obviously interested in what they were making and in these things, so we encouraged him to make something. He started off with a bang and made a candelabra.

BARBARA MEIERS:

He was really inspired by the Metepec Trees of Life. He started, I guess, his first piece, which was an Adam and Eve candelabra, and it was wonderful. So Fred encouraged him, and he went on making them. We bought everything that he made, and made it possible for him to have a little additional income, too, that way.

SMITH:

His ceramic work was an addition to his packing work?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Right. He really was just self-taught and inspired by various people that he had been in contact with in Tlaquepaque and especially by his experience in Metepec.

SMITH:

Working at the museum, was he knowledgeable in folk arts of the region?

FRED MEIERS:

Not really. He wasn't from—Rosendo was from—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Santa Cruz [de las Huertas]?

FRED MEIERS:

No, he wasn't from Jalisco; he was from—

BARBARA MEIERS:



The north, right.

FRED MEIERS:

This escapes me right now—a state farther north and farther east.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Which really didn't have any folk art to speak of.

SMITH:

Was it Nueva Leon? or Durango?

FRED MEIERS:

NO, no.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Can't think of the name of that place. Anyway—

FRED MEIERS:

It'll come up.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Of course, he was exposed to a lot of it [in Tlaquepaque] there in the museum.  
He saw it.

FRED MEIERS:

And he became familiar with the craftsmen. He was sensitive to what they were doing, and appreciative of what they were doing. I think Candelario Medrano probably influenced him without his necessarily realizing it.

SMITH:

How did he learn the technical part of the craft?

FRED MEIERS:

Let's see. He made a little kiln and—

BARBARA MEIERS:

He really was self-taught. He just figured it out. [tape recorder off]

SMITH:

You were saying Rosendo came from which state?

FRED MEIERS:

Rosendo came from Zacatecas.

SMITH:

Do you know what the background of his family was?

FRED MEIERS:

I think that they were farmers.

SMITH:

Coming from Zacatecas, a different region in Mexico, did you see that influencing both the design and the subject matter of his pieces?

FRED MEIERS:

The thing was that he didn't—I don't think that he was aware of anything in Zacatecas. His subject matter was influenced by suggestions on my part and on the things around him. After he began to be a little confident in what he could do technically he began to use more and more of his own ideas. He took on, for instance, a vehicle of expression— Let's put it this way: After a while, he'd had enough of candelabras, and he started making boats. The boats would be an expression of whatever was going on at the time. There was one boat that showed a revolutionary shooting a baby, and lots of people all around on this boat. The boat was a form of a background.

SMITH:

A revolutionary like in the 1910 [Mexican] Revolution?

BARBARA MEIERS:

No, this was the Castro influence and the whole Cuban crisis. That was during that period. He had lots of bearded revolutionaries that were all over the tops of the boats, looking very much like Castro. It was very interesting. Then another time the Bolshoi Ballet, I guess, influenced. I mean, he heard about it and knew it was going to be there in Mexico.

FRED MEIERS:

It appeared in Mexico.

BARBARA MEIERS:

So he had ballet dancers all over the boat.

FRED MEIERS:

Then when he didn't have something particular to say he always resorted to revolutionaries. They just flowed out readily. He doesn't look like a revolutionary.

BARBARA MEIERS:

No, not a bit. [laughter]

FRED MEIERS:

He's a very, sort of, self-contained, quiet little man.

BARBARA MEIERS:

But somehow an awful lot of his little figures are carrying guns. I think maybe this represents something Mexican, in a way, and goes back to their feeling about their revolution.

SMITH:

Was he sympathetic to Castro?

FRED MEIERS:

I think so, yes. Without asking him, I'm sure he was. I probably have four or five hundred little revolutionaries that haven't taken their position in any piece. See this boat right here. [points] This is a Candelario Medrano, but it's the same kind of construction. The form is made, and then the little figures are plugged in. In Rosendo's case the little figures are very important. They're beautifully made and very expressive—they show a very expressive use of the material and a real understanding of the clay. He used it very imaginatively to form clothes, to form parts of the body, or to form whatever.

SMITH:

The figures generally are—what—an inch high?

FRED MEIERS:

The figures vary from, say, two inches. Well, maybe an inch. In something like a bullfight, where there are many, many, many, to an important church, where the figures are important and he's really interested—then he'll make them still bigger than this, sort of, norm.

BARBARA MEIERS:

His boats eventually took on—some of them took on the form of mermaids. The front, the head, was the head, and then the end of it tapered off into a tail. Then it had the little mermaids all over the back, the top of the boat. He would do this kind of thing.

SMITH:

Did that reflect the influence of Herón Martínez? Or was it an independent—?

FRED MEIERS:

I think it was an independent [idea].

BARBARA MEIERS:

Independent, yes.

FRED MEIERS:

Then he did very nice trains. That was something he did quite early, too.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Revolutionary trains.

FRED MEIERS:

Covered with revolutionaries. Little cars, about four or five inches long and about four inches high, with four to six revolutionaries on top of each train car.

SMITH:

By a revolutionary, you mean somebody that's bearded?

BARBARA MEIERS:

No.

FRED MEIERS:

No; if it's carrying—

BARBARA MEIERS:

A gun.

FRED MEIERS:

A machine gun.

BARBARA MEIERS:

And I'm not sure they were always revolutionaries.

FRED MEIERS:

Well, they all have machine guns.

BARBARA MEIERS:

They have guns, not all machine guns; some of them are just guns strapped over their shoulder, you know.

FRED MEIERS:

Oh, are they?

BARBARA MEIERS:

But they have guns, so they could be soldiers, you know.

SMITH:

Zapatistas? or Villistas?

FRED MEIERS:

I'll stick to the revolutionaries. [laughter]

BARBARA MEIERS:

He thinks they're revolutionaries. On the other hand, later he decorated some of his large bull forms and horses—just lots and lots of wonderful figures

carrying flowers. Market people, you know, carrying flowers for sale, fruit. There again he built this large form first—very interesting the way he did it—and then he plugged in these figures later. He put them on a wire into a hole.

FRED MEIERS:

The structure of it was based on the same principle of an armature similar to the armature of a candelabra. Then he would cover it with leaves, with clay leaves. On top of the clay leaves he would load the cake still further with figures.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Some of the big bull figures would have a bullfight—

FRED MEIERS:

Or two.

BARBARA MEIERS:

—on top, as well as underneath, complete with matadors and the works. Very fun.

SMITH:

The boat form, is that a traditional form?

FRED MEIERS:

Not—well, it is now. [laughter]

SMITH:

Can you explain that?

BARBARA MEIERS:

I think he might have seen Candelario's and been influenced by his boats.

FRED MEIERS:

Quite some years ago I understand that either Corita [Kent] or the other sister at Immaculate Heart [College]—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Sister Mary Magdalena?

FRED MEIERS:

—asked Candelario to make an ark. This was a long time ago. I don't know exactly when it was, but probably sometime in the sixties. Candelario produced an ark with a drooping tent-like shape, quite a free kind of shape. I think that this was a source for Candelario's future arks, which became frozen into this bottom part of a very tight boat-like shape supported by multiple legs.

SMITH:

So the boat forms started coming in the sixties then?

FRED MEIERS:

Candelario's boats started about then.

SMITH:

And Rosendo's?

FRED MEIERS:

Rosendo's started—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Maybe '70.

FRED MEIERS:

I would say shortly thereafter. But Rosendo's were smaller and more expressive. Candelario's first were very free and expressive, but then they became formalized. Rosendo's continued to, because of his interest in the details of the people that he put on them, become more timely and personal. Whereas, the figures on Candelario's, Candelario didn't make within the family. He knew an old lady who made these little figures that were more or less symbolic figures. They were sort of gob-like figures.

SMITH:

Goblin-like?

FRED MEIERS:

No.

BARBARA MEIERS:

No, just a little gob of clay.

FRED MEIERS:

A-gob-of-clay-like figures. But you could recognize that they were figures without there being very much of interest in them.

BARBARA MEIERS:

This was later. Candelario's earlier things had wonderful, beautifully sculptured and molded figures with faces and hands beautifully done. But later, as he began to really produce in more quantity, too—I think that has a lot to do with it—he turned them over, the figure work, over to the old lady who made all these to plug in.

SMITH:

The literature seems to indicate that Candelario has a serious problem with quality consistency.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes.

SMITH:

His work varies very greatly.

FRED MEIERS:

Yes.

SMITH:

Did you try to do anything to up-grade his quality?

FRED MEIERS:

In connection with Candelario, I refused some of his stuff and asked for corrections, asked him to look at the stuff and do it better.



SMITH:

How typical was that of your relationship with the artisans as a whole? Would you refuse work that Teodora had done if you weren't satisfied with her? or Herón? or the Aguilars?

FRED MEIERS:

No. It just happened that it was possible in this situation where I had a representative who was on the spot. In these other situations I wasn't on the spot, and we were buying large quantities of material and the quality wasn't a hundred percent desirable. But it arrived, and there wasn't anything I could do about controlling the quality at the source.

BARBARA MEIERS:

No, we had to deal with quite a lot of poor quality. We went through stages with Teodora when she would have some bad periods and the material really wasn't very interesting. We still have a few of them around.

SMITH:

Did you try to communicate that to her?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes, we did. Sure.

FRED MEIERS:

Yes, we sent criticism.

BARBARA MEIERS:

And the fact that we would respond favorably and want more of this kind of thing, you know. It was—

FRED MEIERS:

Sure. It wasn't all—we responded favorably; it wasn't just responding negatively.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Right. It was more of that thing, and we said, "We like this."

FRED MEIERS:

For the most part we were delighted with most everything we got from people, especially these very special people.

BARBARA MEIERS:

What Candelario did, it was really very uneven.

FRED MEIERS:

Candelario had, I guess, for a long time—I don't know whether it was all his life—had a drinking problem that I'm sure got in the way of his work. Then there were so many people working on his work, the children. I'm sure that they were doing it when they were really small, too.

BARBARA MEIERS:

It just wasn't always controlled.

FRED MEIERS:

Didn't always work out.

SMITH:

Did you ever talk to Rosendo about Candelario's work? Do you know what Rosendo thought of it?

FRED MEIERS:

I think he always thought that it was interesting. Sometimes he thought that—he was interested in his color; the richness of his color, the strength of it, and sometimes the subtlety of it. In Rosendo's things time makes them more interesting and more subtle. They started out—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Pure color.

FRED MEIERS:

They usually are quite blatant in color, and lots of Candelario's, in the beginning, are rich.

SMITH:

Did Candelario have a special technique for mixing his colors?

FRED MEIERS:

No, I think he just messed the colors together. It might have been just carelessness in mixing paint.

BARBARA MEIERS:

It just kind of happened.

FRED MEIERS:

He'd be painting with green and he'd put the brush in the red paint and mix, and it would just do what green does to red. It just makes it a little more subtle.

BARBARA MEIERS:

He really did have a wonderful feeling for color. Really rich. There's a group right over there, those angels, for instance, that have wonderful variation. It's not all just pure color right out of the box; they're mixed colors.

SMITH:

He used tempera colors? or acrylics?

FRED MEIERS:

Candelario mainly used—well, in later years I think he used housepaint-type color. Pardon?

SMITH:

Just regular housepaint that you find at the Sears?

FRED MEIERS:

Yes. Bright, bright. Then before that he used the kind that everybody used, powdered pigment that you bought from the hardware store and then add some kind of medium.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Then they spray it with a—

FRED MEIERS:

They don't spray it, dear; they coated it with shellac.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Excuse me. Right.

SMITH:

How much professional contact did Rosendo have with Candelario, either as an artist or as a packer coming to pack his things?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Well, he did pack, you know. He packed his things.

FRED MEIERS:

Not too much contact, actually. The Candelario pieces would be delivered to Rosendo.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Did Rosendo go out to Candelario's?

FRED MEIERS:

No, the things were—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Usually no.

FRED MEIERS:

Sometimes to see how the order would be coming.

BARBARA MEIERS:

That's what I was wondering.

SMITH:

But they're not very far away from each other.

FRED MEIERS:

A few miles; maybe six or eight miles. I think Candelario, earlier, would bring his things to Rosendo. Then later it was one of the sons who would bring them.

SMITH:

So there was some personal contact?

FRED MEIERS:

Oh, I see what you mean.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Sure, sure.

FRED MEIERS:

Yes, sure.

SMITH:

Do they know each other on some kind of friendly basis, social basis?

FRED MEIERS:

I don't think, other than these—

BARBARA MEIERS:

No. Just the business contact, I think.

FRED MEIERS:

—these things, these meetings, delivery, that they had very much contact.

SMITH:

The Trees of Life, of course, are a very traditional Mexican form, right?

FRED MEIERS:

Yes.

SMITH:

Didn't Rosendo do something unusual with them? He changed the form.

FRED MEIERS:

He put these leaves all over everything. In the first things that he did he used the structure of the candelabra, but he put sort of a forest of leaves—or say it's a tree—put leaves on the tree, the Tree of Life. The first leaf things that he did were cutouts, or sort of biscuit Adam and Eves.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Almost like they're cut out with a cookie cutter. They were flat,

FRED MEIERS:

I'm sure he made a slab of thin clay, cut out an Adam and Eve, and put it up there.

BARBARA MEIERS:

And the leaves, too. The leaves at that time were tall and thin.

FRED MEIERS:

That's right.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Don't you remember?

FRED MEIERS:

Yes.

BARBARA MEIERS:

They were long and quite different from what he did later.

SMITH:

Did his family work with him? Was it a family workshop situation?

BARBARA MEIERS:

The family was very small, I mean, young as a matter of fact.

FRED MEIERS:

They were unborn as a matter of fact.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Right at the beginning.

FRED MEIERS:

In fact, he married after we knew him. He lived in one of those—the word slips me now. Where people live in a yard and there are a bunch of little stalls where families live. Do you know what I mean?

SMITH:

I can visualize it but I can't think of the word. Like a courtyard type of situation.

FRED MEIERS:

Yes.

BARBARA MEIERS:

His wife did some very charming little things. I'm not sure that she made the little things that went into—she did some beautiful little trasteros for us. But did Rosendo make the little objects?

FRED MEIERS:

No, neither one of them made them.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Neither one of them made them. Oh, they bought them out of the market.

FRED MEIERS:

Right. Little tiny dishes that they put into trasteros.

BARBARA MEIERS:

That they put into this very nice little cupboard—and the little trastero was made of clay.

FRED MEIERS:

No, initially it was made of wood.

BARBARA MEIERS:

There was one wood one, but, afterwards the ones that she made were clay.

FRED MEIERS:

That's right. She helped him on those, right. They worked together and—

BARBARA MEIERS:

But the rest of the family—it wasn't until years later when they grew up. One of the boys helped.

FRED MEIERS:

One of the boys now is a painter at El Palomar [de Guadalajara].

SMITH:

Ceramic factory.

FRED MEIERS:

Yes.

SMITH:

So the children did work in the workshop.

FRED MEIERS:

Right. [tape recorder off] And for a while, we'd been importing some huge paper horns from Italy. We were experimenting with doing some importing from Europe.

BARBARA MEIERS:

They were paper flowers. It was a horn with huge flower at the end.

FRED MEIERS:

They were about three feet long—it was a flower—that was about twelve, fourteen inches in diameter. Four or five flowers made a real bouquet. We thought, well, the flowers were selling very well and they are just ahead of the interest in Mexican flowers.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Paper flowers.

FRED MEIERS:



So we thought, let's make some paper flowers in Tlaquepaque. So we got some ideas together, designed the flower, and then showed Rosendo how to make it. And Rosendo set up a little paper flower factory. His wife really ran it. They made many, many, many—some very pretty little solid kind—bright pinks and oranges, etc.—flowers that were very timely. So his family was very much growing up around this kind of stuff in the household.

SMITH:

What is Rosendo's wife's name?

FRED MEIERS:

She died in childbirth, her fourth child.

BARBARA MEIERS:

A long time ago. I don't know her name.

FRED MEIERS:

I can't remember her name now.

BARBARA MEIERS:

It's very sad. He raised the children.

FRED MEIERS:

He didn't remarry. He had a sister and mother, who—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Helped in this situation.

FRED MEIERS:

—helped to raise the children.

SMITH:

Did you see that personal tragedy get reflected, expressed in the work he was doing?

FRED MEIERS:

No, not really.

SMITH:

He has what sounds like a very interesting background. He worked as a bracero in the United States for a while?

FRED MEIERS:

Right.

SMITH:

Has he ever talked to you about what he thinks about the United States?

FRED MEIERS:

I think he quite liked it. In fact, for several years he was studying English, thinking that he would come up here. He did come up here, and was at the Los Angeles County Fair demonstrating his work—in the late sixties?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes.

FRED MEIERS:

I think it was about this time that he thought that he would like to come up here. Then he visited us, of course. Then later when we did the Mingei [International Museum of World Folk Art] show of Mexican folk art [*iVivan los artesanos!*], he was very well represented. He came up and was really delighted. I think it was one of the highlights of his life.

BARBARA MEIERS:

I think that it was at that point, really, that he realized that he was an artist. He really was such an unassuming, gentle, quiet person. He did these things because he really liked to do them. He loved his work. He really enjoyed it. But when he saw the exhibit and everything all displayed so beautifully, he looked all around and he said, "Why, I am an artist." That was really wonderful.

SMITH:

From the beginning, then, he was producing for export, right?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes, through us.

FRED MEIERS:

That's right. We didn't sell it in Mexico. There wasn't very much—there isn't very much production. It's not like Candelario.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Just the one person.

SMITH:

So do you think that influenced his approach?

BARBARA MEIERS:

It probably did.

SMITH:

That he knew he was producing for an American market?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Well, I'm not sure about that. Maybe.

FRED MEIERS:

It might have well influenced, except that I doubt that his mind worked that way. We would ask him to do so many of such and such, you know, and make suggestions and directions.

BARBARA MEIERS:

You know, we would say, "Why don't you make a truck," or "Why don't you do a mermaid," or, you know, "Do a Ferris wheel," or whatever. Usually, it's something that we knew would be within his experience or contact. He would respond, and it was always his own expression. But I really think that he produced his things the way he did because he liked them that way. They were so expressive. He never got to the point where he was just pumping out things. There were always little changes. I mean, he thought about it. I think the fact that he was producing just as an individual and in small quality—we weren't asking him to produce tons of everything. He didn't have that kind of

pressure on him to make things, maybe, more pumped out. But that, in a way, kept him being more creative, I think.

FRED MEIERS:

It also worked the other way. It meant that this was sort of a recreation.

BARBARA MEIERS:

He had to do other work to survive.

FRED MEIERS:

He didn't have the facility to produce a lot of stuff, enough stuff to live on. So this was a relaxation and an expression, creative expression to him, and, incidentally, augmented his income.

SMITH:

What kind of quality controls did he have?

FRED MEIERS:

Just his own discipline. His work, practically always, was good. Some was "gooder" than others. I can only think of one time when suddenly a Betty Boop-type figure arrived. I thought, what is happening now? I asked if the size of the eyes could shrink in case we were going to have more of these creatures, [laughter] and they did shrink. But every once in a while—that, I guess, was one of my objections. Every once in a while. There were some little boats that had ladies in them. They were Xochimilco-type boats with flowers and all kinds of stuff in them. And sometimes the eyes would be sort of monumental.

BARBARA MEIERS:

With much eyelashes, you know.

FRED MEIERS:

They were out of character with the general look his things.

SMITH:

Can you connect that face with anything in particular in his life that might have triggered it?

FRED MEIERS:

No, it probably just happened. Somebody else might have—one of the boys [Geraldo, Istanislao, or Mauro] might have painted them.

BARBARA MEIERS:

I think one of the boys painted those with those eyes like that. I really do.

FRED MEIERS:

They, early, developed a skill which Rosendo didn't develop as fast with the brush. You know, boys growing up, they would be more apt to paint calf-like eyes.

SMITH:

What's happened to his children?

FRED MEIERS:

Well, the oldest is a painter—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Is that Gerardo?

FRED MEIERS:

That isn't quite his name, but it's sort of that.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Almost. [laughter] I think it's Geraldo, isn't it?

FRED MEIERS:

One of them is an athlete [Istanislao Rodríguez].

SMITH:

Professional athlete?

FRED MEIERS:

Semi-professional the last I heard. I haven't heard—

SMITH:

Football? Soccer?

FRED MEIERS:

Soccer, yes. A daughter is married and has produced at least one child. Somebody else—maybe he's finished his studying to be an architect. An architect means sort of a contractor, really.

SMITH:

In terms of life in Mexico, has Rosendo done pretty well economically?

FRED MEIERS:

Not really. No. With the inflation, it's very hard without an education to do very much, make a decent living.

SMITH:

I was wondering that since his pieces seem to be crafted with a consistent level of quality, did his pieces command higher prices?

FRED MEIERS:

Yes.

SMITH:

So on a per unit basis he made good money?

FRED MEIERS:

On a per unit base he did well, but I think he didn't produce enough to really make it too profitable. Working in the factory was a constant livelihood—

BARBARA MEIERS:

That really worked very well.

FRED MEIERS:

But a livelihood. Not too luxuriant a livelihood, to say the least.

SMITH:

Since the collapse of the peso how have the artists that you worked with fared? Have you been in touch with them? Since their income is so much dependent on export, evidently, on sales abroad?

FRED MEIERS:

We haven't been in touch with craftsmen for several years, and this is when changes have really been rampant.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes, right. The peso has dropped so much more since we've been out of touch with them, really.

FRED MEIERS:

I can imagine that they haven't done very well, because they've never really done well. Candelario, who has sold his work very readily and in large quantities relatively, lives sort of on the brink of disaster. It's just depressing to see the way they live. They have no sense of order.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Well, I think it's partly management, too

FRED MEIERS:

Right.

BARBARA MEIERS:

They just don't know how to manage.

FRED MEIERS:

And the liquor problem.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes, right.

FRED MEIERS:

And also senility is really pretty distressing.

**1.10. TAPE NUMBER: V, Side Two (February 12, 1987)**

SMITH:

Moving on to Candelario—

BARBARA MEIERS:

We've talked quite a bit about him, as we've talked about Rosendo.

SMITH:

Right.

FRED MEIERS:

Initially—I think I said? maybe I didn't—we heard of Candelario through Jorge Wilmot, who mentioned him to us in the early sixties. He was very enthusiastic about him, about his imaginative figures. In general, Mexican craftsmen aren't too imaginative. They have some form that evolves. They evolve a shape, or they develop a shape, and then they repeat it. But Candelario, as Teodora did, seemed to find things in his unconscious, in his imagination, that had no connection to the things that were necessarily going on around him. And out came fresh kinds of expressions. So we were very interested in seeing Candelario's work, and responded to it immediately. I think that a few years earlier we bought from Candelario without knowing who he was—

BARBARA MEIERS:

We bought it either in the museum or in one of the shops, you mean.

FRED MEIERS:

Or from him.

BARBARA MEIERS:

From him?

FRED MEIERS:

I think that we went to his house and bought—when we were first in Mexico in '57. When we were first in Guadalajara, I should say. When did we go to Julio Acero's? Because Julio Acero was Candelario's teacher. I think we might have mentioned this in an earlier tape.

SMITH:



No.

BARBARA MEIERS:

No?

SMITH:

Not on tape.

FRED MEIERS:

We bought Julio Acero's work in 1957, the first time we bought it. I don't remember whether we bought it from him or from the—

BARBARA MEIERS:

We went out to his house. I remember going into his little house where he was working.

FRED MEIERS:

Okay.

BARBARA MEIERS:

We may have bought a few things there, but we also bought from the museum. He actually adopted Candelario Medrano, and he was his teacher.

FRED MEIERS:

In fact, he wanted him to marry, so Candelario said, one of his daughters—but he had another idea. Candelario had another idea. So that didn't work out for him to do, to be a part of his family in that way.

BARBARA MEIERS:

So actually, a lot of the forms that he used were forms that Julio had done. The animal forms, some of the goats, the rabbits, and those seated figures are very similar. He took off from there on his own.

FRED MEIERS:

Candelario's work became more and more expressive, to the point of being expressionistic rather than having the more precise treatment given by his teacher, this is true, especially, in his more mature things.

SMITH:

Was that something that was already pretty fully developed by the time you met him?

FRED MEIERS:

No, it was just coming.

SMITH:

Do you think, in terms of the interaction that you two had, that the kinds of things that you were selecting to buy influenced the development of Candelario's style?

FRED MEIERS:

I think that had quite a bit to do with it. Rosendo has said that it was because of the volume that we bought of Candelario's that his fame was started.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Candelario's, yes.

SMITH:

How much were you buying from Candelario?

FRED MEIERS:

Well, it didn't sound to me as though we were buying that much.

BARBARA MEIERS:

It's just that they don't produce all that much. He wasn't at the beginning, but we bought everything we could get our hands on.

FRED MEIERS:

We're talking about Candelario. I don't know. Let's see. [pause]

BARBARA MEIERS:

It's hard to give any kind—

FRED MEIERS:

Maybe a maximum of a hundred pieces a year.

SMITH:

These are big pieces.

BARBARA MEIERS:

At the earlier—that's at the beginning. Later, maybe more; including some of the smaller ones.

FRED MEIERS:

Including smaller ones, a lot more than that.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Sure.

SMITH:

How much would you pay for an ark or a cathedral?

BARBARA MEIERS:

How much would he get, you mean?

SMITH:

Yes, how much would he get?

FRED MEIERS:

I can't—. [pause]

BARBARA MEIERS:

We'd have to do research on that. The peso has changed so much in value and it wouldn't mean anything to say, you know, two thousand pesos.

FRED MEIERS:

I think early single figures, something like this, would have been maybe twenty pesos. And one could do maybe ten or fifteen a day. It's hard to do this by the day because nothing can be completed in a day. But working in multiples, I would guess that that would be maybe twenty pieces in a day, smaller pieces.

BARBARA MEIERS:

For most of the time that we were working the peso was worth about twelve to a dollar.

SMITH:

Yes, eight cents, it was about eight cents.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Right.

FRED MEIERS:

For a long time.

BARBARA MEIERS:

For a long time, right, most of our business life.

FRED MEIERS:

But now the larger pieces are, I think—I don't know right now, but—maybe five thousand pesos? Probably quite a bit more than that.

BARBARA MEIERS:

More.

FRED MEIERS:

But a couple of years ago that's where they were.

SMITH:

The cathedral forms, did he get that from Acero as well?

FRED MEIERS:

No. No, those were his own.

SMITH:

Was that an innovation?

FRED MEIERS:

Yes, yes. He did lots of innovative things. His teacher did some interesting little figures that were dancers.

BARBARA MEIERS:

They represented a particular dance that was done in the area, danza de los tastoanes.

FRED MEIERS:

They were very refined and just beautifully done little things.

BARBARA MEIERS:

With masks.

SMITH:

The tastoanes?

FRED MEIERS:

The tastoanes, yes. Candelario did some of those. Very interesting. Later, much later, Candelario did tastoanes asi [like so], fifty centimeters tall and then marvelous tastoanes that were about like this, [gestures] Very expressive figures, completely removed from outside influence of, completely personal expression. He did lots of strange animals. Monkeys, seated monkeys. I don't know where he got the monkeys, but they were—

SMITH:

Would these be nahuales?

BARBARA MEIERS:

No, these weren't nahuales.

FRED MEIERS:

No. He did nahuales.

BARBARA MEIERS:

He did those, too.

FRED MEIERS:

Early, he did traditional nahuales. They were very beautiful. He made them with bumps representing fur—which were characteristic of the area—with things that had been stolen on their backs.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Later, he put a figure on the back.

FRED MEIERS:

Later, the figure developed the rider.

BARBARA MEIERS:

And a story to go along with it, I think.

SMITH:

At the same time, the figures were getting larger?

FRED MEIERS:

No, they stayed the same. Usually, they stayed about this size. [gestures]

SMITH:

A foot.

FRED MEIERS:

Yes, maximum. A little less than a foot.

BARBARA MEIERS:

They used a mold as the basis for an awful lot of the figures. It was even used in Acero's work, you know, that body.

FRED MEIERS:

Right.

BARBARA MEIERS:

It was used over and over again—horses, dogs, all kinds of things—just depending upon how you turn it, the kind of legs you add to it, and so forth.

FRED MEIERS:

In contrast to Rosendo, who's very easy to talk to—you know, there's a give-and-take always, verbally, with Rosendo—Candelario was not easy to talk to. I couldn't—it was as though something—he wore a mask or something, always doing an act. I think the liquor had a lot to do with it.

SMITH:

He had a family workshop? Everyone worked—?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes, very much so.

FRED MEIERS:

Yes, right. They worked in the yard in little buildings.

SMITH:

Have his children continued—?

FRED MEIERS:

Two of the sons [Serapio and Benito] are craftsmen. And apparently—I don't know the daughter, but according to some things that I've heard, she's very good, too. Then I think there's one daughter that's up here, in the States. One of the sons is very talented and has set up a second—he's been out of the family household for quite a while, maybe six or eight years. Maybe more than that.

BARBARA MEIERS:

I can't remember his name. The other one's Serapio.

FRED MEIERS:

Benito I think, but I'm not positive. It begins with B. Serapio lives in the family home. He's older. I always felt it would be nice to get through to him [Candelario] and really be able to talk with him, but—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Never did.

FRED MEIERS:

Never had luck in this connection.

SMITH:

You mentioned that some of the nahuales had stories connected to them.  
Were there stories written on a piece?

BARBARA MEIERS:

No.

FRED MEIERS:

This is Rosendo who did this.

SMITH:

Oh, Rosendo.

FRED MEIERS:

Yes. Some of those are very interesting.

SMITH:

The stories were actually told on the piece, either visually or with words? Or was it just that Rosendo would tell you a story?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Of his pieces?

FRED MEIERS:

No, there are written messages.

BARBARA MEIERS:

On the piece. It's part of the design. He did a group of figures in swings, particularly devils in swings, or calaveras. He had quite a few messages going on around one of these. I think at that time he must have been feeling a little approach of age or something, because he was talking about death on one of them. It's very interesting. I don't know where that piece is, or we could look at it.

FRED MEIERS:



Maybe I should go get it.

SMITH:

Sure. [tape recorder off] Well, we were talking about Rosendo's nahuales and the stories that he would write on them. [Lenore Hoag] Mulryan mentions that Candelario had a strong belief in the supernatural.

FRED MEIERS:

I think that there's something in his work that would indicate something of this kind. But as I say, it hasn't been possible—I didn't find it possible to talk very much with him.

SMITH:

What about Rosendo? Does he have a strong belief in the supernatural?

FRED MEIERS:

I haven't discussed this with him, actually. I'm not sure that he does.

SMITH:

Do you think he shares the traditional folk beliefs of Mexico, believes in things like susto?

FRED MEIERS:

I would think so. But it isn't anything, in connection with Rosendo, that I have especially noted. It isn't something that's come up and that he's brought up or that I've brought up. He usually likes to talk about the things that he's making, things that are related to them, things that he would make, and about people and problems with people.

SMITH:

Like people at the job or people in the community.

FRED MEIERS:

Yes. He's quite down-to-earth.

BARBARA MEIERS:

His work reflects interest in football, soccer games—one of his boys being the athletic type—and his interest in bullfights that he shows in his pieces. He does quite a lot with that.

FRED MEIERS:

He's very much interested in his family. Very family oriented.

SMITH:

You mentioned that one of his sons is becoming an architect or a contractor.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes.

SMITH:

Was he very much involved in his children's education?

FRED MEIERS:

I'm sure he's very concerned and supportive, but he found it amusing that his son wanted to be an architect. I don't know why—he thought it was sort of a joke. Being an architect a few years ago was a thing that all the kids wanted to do in Guadalajara. It was the popular thing to be studying, and his son fit right into this. Rosendo wasn't too sure of the outcome of this, whether it was going to work for him. I haven't heard how he's coming along.

SMITH:

I understand that when Candelario started out, he was making primarily whistles. Was he still making those when you met him?

FRED MEIERS:

Yes.

BARBARA MEIERS:

And banks.

FRED MEIERS:

Everything used to be whistles and banks.

SMITH:

Is that an actual whistle?

BARBARA MEIERS:

It's like a toy. Yes, they whistle.

SMITH:

Made out of clay.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes.

FRED MEIERS:

You know those little black angels in [San Bartolo de] Coyotepec [Oaxaca]?

SMITH:

Yes.

FRED MEIERS:

Those are whistles. There's a little slit forming a slot in the bottom of the thing. You can blow it, and there's a little escape for air someplace else.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Well, they were toys.

FRED MEIERS:

Early, everything was made as either a bank or a whistle.

SMITH:

When he was making the banks and whistles, was that primarily for the Mexican market?

FRED MEIERS:

Sure, sure.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Sure.

SMITH:

Did you import the banks and the whistles?

FRED MEIERS:

Sure. I had those banks and whistles as a child. Then they just got bigger. I think they're still making them—

BARBARA MEIERS:

I think they still put slots in the backs of a lot of those animals.

FRED MEIERS:

But the next size down are the whistles.

SMITH:

I have a couple of follow-up questions on Teodora Blanco from our last session. Mulryan says that her family was in a better than average financial position and that was the reason why Teodora was more free to experiment. That doesn't seem to ring true with how you described her life.

FRED MEIERS:

It would have to be a very low average, because for years she lived without either indoor or outdoor plumbing of any kind.

BARBARA MEIERS:

But was this before she was married?

FRED MEIERS:

Oh, no, no.

BARBARA MEIERS:

I think she's talking about her earlier years, as she grew up. Her family—

SMITH:

Teodora's parents.

BARBARA MEIERS:

—was a little more than the average income.

FRED MEIERS:

This I don't know.

SMITH:

You don't know.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Maybe so. When we knew her, she had her own household and had been married—

FRED MEIERS:

She hadn't been married. She was never married as far as I know.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Oh, okay. She was living with somebody.

FRED MEIERS:

Sort of, yes.

BARBARA MEIERS:

She already had children, and she lived on a very low income.

FRED MEIERS:

I don't know whether you were at her house that she lived in in the sixties.

BARBARA MEIERS:

No, I didn't see that one. I didn't see it until later.

FRED MEIERS:

That was really something.

BARBARA MEIERS:

And that was still pretty simple.

SMITH:

What do you mean by "really something?"

FRED MEIERS:

It was really terrible. There wasn't even an outhouse.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Were the floors dirt floors?

FRED MEIERS:

Sure. And I think—I don't know whether it was adobe—I think it might have been cane. It might have been adobe, but a tiny little thing.

BARBARA MEIERS:

This was after she had left her family, her parents, so this may be very well true what she said.

FRED MEIERS:

That she was able to make a choice? I remember reading that.

SMITH:

Yes. She was free to experiment because she came from a better than average financial position; whereas other potters had to just keep doing the same thing.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Making tiles, or whatever.

SMITH:

Right.

FRED MEIERS:

I really would—I don't know the source of this. The story that I probably said earlier about her starting to make the large figures—she went to Casa Schöndube—did I say this?

SMITH:

Yes, you mentioned this, but it won't hurt to go back over it again.

FRED MEIERS:

She saw some Herón Martínez pieces and she said, "Oh, I could do something like that." And she went home and cooked up something like this figure right in front of us, which is one of her early pieces.

BARBARA MEIERS:

It's a very early one.

SMITH:

Her mother and child figure.

FRED MEIERS:

Right.

SMITH:

With the pots—

FRED MEIERS:

Yes.

SMITH:

And the flower leaf—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes, they are appliqued—

FRED MEIERS:

She did these stimulated by a figure of similar size of Martínez's. And it's my understanding that before that she had done traditional—I know that she had done traditional pots.

BARBARA MEIERS:

And the little figures, too, the little green glazed animalitos?

FRED MEIERS:

She had also done a particular kind of jarra, which has the means or the know-how that would make it possible for her to do this applique, clay applique, on her figures which she did.

SMITH:

Which are the buttons and the flowers?

FRED MEIERS:

Buttons, and the flowers.

SMITH:

And the earrings? Is that applique?

FRED MEIERS:

Well, it's a free-hanging—no, just the things that aren't free. I think the earrings are—

BARBARA MEIERS:

They're really molded right next to her head there. The flowers, leaf forms, and stems are more the kind of thing he's talking about.

FRED MEIERS:

Was there some other question about Teodora?

SMITH:

Yes. This also relates to one of the things that Mulryan says, which is that Blanco was one of the most traditional of the potters she's studied. And yet again, in terms of our discussion, she really comes across as, perhaps, the most innovative?

FRED MEIERS:

I really don't know what she meant by traditional. She's one of the people with the most imagination among the craftsmen in Mexico: Teodora, Martínez, Rosendo, Candelario.

SMITH:

Would you say that the content is traditional?

FRED MEIERS:



I would say that it's based—no, I couldn't say that there's anything conventional about it. She has the limitation? she has the limitations of the medium. Unless she was thinking of her conforming to—and her thought patterns to her Zapotec background, which I feel that someplace in her unconscious this seems to come through. At least there's some connection between some of their expressions and her expression, except that her use of involved forms and very heavily decorated areas is an individualistic and personal approach; whereas, the conventional Zapotec art is pretty formalized. So I don't really know what Mulryan means by that word.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Traditional. I don't either.

SMITH:

So from your perspective, Teodora was very innovative and unique.

FRED MEIERS:

Yes.

SMITH:

Because you did mention that there was no one else except her who had her talent in [Santa Maria de] Atzompa [Oaxaca]. There wasn't anything even similar, even remotely similar.

FRED MEIERS:

That's right, until she came. Now there are other—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Now there are people doing similar things. Then there are the people that did the tall figures with the animal heads at Atzompa.

FRED MEIERS:

Yes.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Those came after Teodora, right?

FRED MEIERS:

Well, they were—while she was still living those were being made. I don't know how old a form that is, but it was probably stimulated—I would guess that that work was possibly stimulated by Teodora.

BARBARA MEIERS:

And there really isn't any connection with her work and the [Isthmus of] Tehuantepec figures, you think.

FRED MEIERS:

No.

BARBARA MEIERS:

I was wondering. I was just trying to think what she might have meant by traditional.

FRED MEIERS:

No, it was Herón Martínez. Arthur Train told me this. She said this to Arthur.

SMITH:

Another artist that I thought we should talk about is Manuel Jiménez.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes, the wood carver, since we're in Oaxaca.

SMITH:

How did you hear of him? When did you meet him?

BARBARA MEIERS:

We started working with Arthur Train at Casa Schöndube in about 1962, and it was shortly thereafter that Fred went out to Arasola [Oaxaca]. Originally, we bought some Jiménez pieces through Arthur Train. We saw them there at his shop. But eventually we went out to the village, met him and talked to him, and actually bought directly from him later.

SMITH:

Was Jiménez working in a town tradition, village tradition, or a regional tradition in what he was doing?

FRED MEIERS:

His work was very personal. Initially, he was making small figures which he colored with a pen, and he would make texture on the white wood with a—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Little linear kind of pattern, unlike what he does now with the color, the whole solid color, which he did later.

FRED MEIERS:

Some of the things that we liked especially were mermaids that he made early. They're very—I don't know how to describe them.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Very strange.

FRED MEIERS:

They are.

BARBARA MEIERS:

He used—what was the material he used—?

FRED MEIERS:

Ixtli, ixtli hair [maguey fiber].

BARBARA MEIERS:

Ixtli hair, and dyed it black. We got some with very black hair. And—

FRED MEIERS:

Different sizes.

BARBARA MEIERS:

And, of course, playing a guitar, an attached guitar.

FRED MEIERS:

I can't remember just at what point the color came. I think it came quite early.

BARBARA MEIERS:

We have some of the mermaids that have inset eyes made of seeds—some of the early ones—and then just the tail has color. Very interesting. Then he did enormous ones after a while, just really big pieces.

SMITH:

What do you mean by enormous?

FRED MEIERS:

Up to about thirty inches tall.

BARBARA MEIERS:

They were good-sized pieces.

SMITH:

How much material were you buying from him?

BARBARA MEIERS:

We bought a lot early, when we were working with the Herman Miller T & O [Textiles and Objects Company] shop.

FRED MEIERS:

Well, probably seventy-five pieces. No, it must have been more than that. Probably a couple of hundred pieces a year.

SMITH:

I'd like to get some idea of the differences between a woodcarving workshop—the kind that Jiménez had—and the pottery workshops that we've been talking about so far. I presume he can't mass-produce things the same way that a potter can?

FRED MEIERS:

No, he began by himself, worked by himself. Woodworking is much slower, of course, because of the nature of the material. He worked in his house, and things were relatively—well, I would say they were neat. He always lived in a

substantial place, not very big. His family—I don't know whether it's one son or whether there are more than one son who work on the material now. So it's become a family operation, but early on, it was a one-man show. He must have been, for the village, pretty well off because he served as a—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Lender.

FRED MEIERS:

As a userer.

SMITH:

What was his main source of income?

FRED MEIERS:

His work.

SMITH:

His woodwork.

FRED MEIERS:

His wood figures.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes. He did very well. His things sold very well.

FRED MEIERS:

And his prices were—

BARBARA MEIERS:

They were good.

FRED MEIERS:

His [pieces] rapidly increased in value. He was able to sell these things at a good price.

SMITH:

While we're on the economic situation, what are the factors that allow someone like Jiménez to be well off from doing his work, but a potter, who can really mass-produce much more, seems to be stuck in poverty?

BARBARA MEIERS:

It really depends so much on the person, the character. And also on the whole family, the wife, I'm sure. I think Jiménez was probably a much shrewder and careful person. His house, his whole—everything looked more like he really had things under control. This was never true of Candelario, for instance. And with Teodora, you know, she had this no-good husband that just appeared on the scene, got her pregnant, and was off again. She really was struggling all the time with taking care of children, bringing them up.

FRED MEIERS:

And her own physical problems.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes. She wasn't well a good bit of the time. So I think that had a lot to do with it. It was really the question of the kind of person they were and how well they managed what they did make.

SMITH:

How much were Jiménez's pieces? How much have they been going for?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Well, of course, they've increased very much in the last few years.

FRED MEIERS:

Yes. I think they sell up here for about a hundred to—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Three hundred dollars.

FRED MEIERS:

Three, four hundred dollars.

BARBARA MEIERS:

For a piece like this. [points]

FRED MEIERS:

So they're selling in Mexico for a hundred thousand pesos. He's probably well off in Mexico now.

SMITH:

I noticed that the Folk Tree had a piece by Rosendo. I'm sure it was by Rosendo. It was about so high, a little over a foot, a devil kind of figure that they were selling for twenty dollars.

FRED MEIERS:

A devil?

SMITH:

A devil kind of figure.

FRED MEIERS:

I don't remember what that could be.

SMITH:

It was painted very, very bright green.

FRED MEIERS:

Was it Candelario?

SMITH:

No, I think it was Rosendo. Perhaps my memory is confusing me, but I think it's Rosendo. Regardless if it's Rosendo or Candelario, it's striking to me that here's a ceramic piece that's selling for twenty dollars and you're talking about a wood piece that's selling for ten times that amount.

FRED MEIERS:

These wooden pieces, I was thinking, would be bigger, but because of the nature of the material, wood is a more expensive—it commands a bigger price in general.

BARBARA MEIERS:

And it takes longer to do. It really does. Then Jiménez is now very well known. He really is quite famous. That has made his prices go up.

FRED MEIERS:

The movie [Manuel Jiménez, Woodcarver] helped a lot.

SMITH:

Yes, but aren't Rosendo and Candelario as famous?

FRED MEIERS:

They are well known, right.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Not as well known as Jiménez, not for as long a time.

FRED MEIERS:

Candelario probably was.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Well, yes, he is, he is.

FRED MEIERS:

But it is—I think it has to do more with, as Barbara said, with the personality of the person, the breaks, and the medium that makes his economic situation very different from these people.

SMITH:

Did you bargain over prices with your artists?

FRED MEIERS:

In connection with Rosendo, he would ask me to suggest prices, and then later he would know the range that was economically possible to pay. I always paid Rosendo more than anybody else, really, knowing that he didn't produce very much.

SMITH:



But it wasn't because his work could command higher prices?

BARBARA MEIERS:

No. In general, we didn't bargain with artists.

FRED MEIERS:

Yes. We would talk about—Candelario was sort of difficult in this respect because he didn't have any idea of what he charged for the same thing the day before.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Right. [laughter]

FRED MEIERS:

He didn't know what he wanted or what he thought that something would be worth.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Well, eventually one of the sons took over that aspect of it.

FRED MEIERS:

Maybe they would double the price, so it was a little—

BARBARA MEIERS:

It was difficult at times.

FRED MEIERS:

When you were dealing with something like that you'd have to say, "Hey now, yesterday," blah, blah, blah. But in general, I don't think we bargained too much about prices.

BARBARA MEIERS:

No. It's not like going to a market and bargaining.

### **1.11. TAPE NUMBER: VI, Side One (February 12, 1987)**

SMITH:

You were saying that [Manuel] Jiménez might have—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Well, Jiménez's prices were pretty well set by the time we got to him. He'd been working with Arthur Train, and they had set up quite a schedule of prices.

FRED MEIERS:

Arthur Train was very good in this connection. In addition to trying to represent the best people in the area, he also got them to think realistically about their prices so that it was possible to do multiple sales of their work. I know that he did have trouble early with Jiménez, getting him to make prices that he could resell. It's always difficult for somebody who is maintaining a situation, maintaining a center where craftsmen's work is available, and having the craftsmen themselves sell at the same price as they sell to the store. Somebody comes and buys—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Direct and an individual.

FRED MEIERS:

The craftsmen don't understand about protecting themselves and the person that's selling for them. It's not a concept that comes readily. They don't realize that they're possibly cheating themselves by not maintaining the price that their stuff is selling at in a shop over a period of time. Jiménez attracted a lot of people out to his place and sold directly.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes, they would go down there and buy direct from him.

SMITH:

He was selling at wholesale prices.

FRED MEIERS:

Right. But Arthur sort of worked this out with him, and, of course, that was one reason we always bought through Arthur Train. We didn't buy direct with Jiménez until years later, except for a few pieces after we weren't working

with Arthur Train. But the large quantities that we bought through the years were bought through Casa Schöndube.

FRED MEIERS:

We were sent to Arthur Train through [Herón] Martínez, who didn't do any packing or shipping. He suggested that we buy through Arthur Train.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Maybe we talked about this before.

SMITH:

A little bit, yes. It's mentioned in a couple places that Jiménez was a curandero?

FRED MEIERS:

I don't know about this. I was not really familiar with him.

SMITH:

Did he make pieces that had magical significance?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Most of them really had either a religious subject matter—he did wonderful things like the—I'm trying to think of the Arab on horseback and the—the nacimientos, of course. He did wonderful nacimientos. And he did angels, marvelous angels.

FRED MEIERS:

Some of those figures, some of the females looked like brujas.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Well, those were the mermaid kind of things.

FRED MEIERS:

I know, dear, but I was just thinking of this connection. I don't think that I saw any pieces which I would connect to magic.

BARBARA MEIERS:

And he did San Miguel and the devil, that kind of thing.

FRED MEIERS:

He did some devils, that's true.

BARBARA MEIERS:

But it was so often with the San Miguel.

SMITH:

You mentioned that Teodora [Blanco] was quite religious. Of the other artists we've discussed—

FRED MEIERS:

Yes.

SMITH:

—were any of the others also religious? I mean, devout? Candelario [Medrano], Rosendo [Rodríguez]?

BARBARA MEIERS:

No. I don't associate that with them, but she really was.

FRED MEIERS:

Teodora had this special connection, practically literally, with the church. But I don't remember any occasions with any of the others of any special religious quality.

SMITH:

So the religious works of, say, someone like Jiménez, again, the predominant factor would be the design factor? Or the religious factor? A devotional factor?

FRED MEIERS:

On his part?

SMITH:

Yes. Well, in terms of how the piece would operate. Would it's appeal be design or devotional?

BARBARA MEIERS:

From his viewpoint?

SMITH:

From his viewpoint, and then from the customer's viewpoint, the effect that it has on people.

FRED MEIERS:

I would think both. The biggest thing that we ever had from Jiménez was a large nacimiento.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Thirteen pieces.

FRED MEIERS:

They were about this big. [gestures]

SMITH:

A yard, three feet high or so?

FRED MEIERS:

Yes. It was in the—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Fonda del Sol.

FRED MEIERS:

Fonda del Sol, for the Fonda del Sol in New York.

SMITH:

Right. We talked about that restaurant.

FRED MEIERS:

It was to be there. The point in having it was for the Christmas use, association.

SMITH:

What about David Villáfañez?

FRED MEIERS:

I don't know anything about him, personally We had no contact with him.

SMITH:

Did you purchase any of his work?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Oh, yes.

FRED MEIERS:

Oh, yes. But we had them from Arthur Train

BARBARA MEIERS:

We didn't get to meet him at all so we really don't know much about him.

FRED MEIERS:

One of the most interesting things that we had was a Day of the Dead piece that is in the Santa Fe [New Mexico] Girard Collection [at the Museum of International Folk Art]. It's an altar with many fruits, flowers, figures. It's about twenty-four inches wide, thirty-six inches tall. A very beautiful piece. Everything is related. All the shapes are related to one another except the peanuts that are in it.

BARBARA MEIERS:

As far as the scale, you mean, the size.

FRED MEIERS:

The scale, the mutual scale. Suddenly the peanuts are life-sized peanuts with everything else reduced in scale, so they look as though they are huge peanuts.

SMITH:

That kind of effect, do you think that's a conscious ironic choice by the artist?  
Or was it an accident? Or was it naivete?

FRED MEIERS:

Naivete.

BARBARA MEIERS:

I think that it's naivete.

FRED MEIERS:

He did some interesting things.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes. Those Indians we have are so wonderful.

FRED MEIERS:

He did some nacimientos that are very—and some various religious figures in nichos.

BARBARA MEIERS:

And the individual—the general that we have is so wonderful. Very different character than the Jiménez.

SMITH:

Can you explain the character through regional differences?

FRED MEIERS:

No, it's a personal difference.

SMITH:

But they're not working in different traditions?

FRED MEIERS:

No, they're within a few miles of each other. I think both would have been self-taught or—I don't know whether they came by their information from their family or whether just one day they started working.

BARBARA MEIERS:

[points] That's a Villáfañez up there— isn't it—the Madonna with the flowers.

FRED MEIERS:

I think both of those are Villáfañez.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Especially the one on the left, I know. I guess they both are.

SMITH:

I have another question about Jiménez: Did he have apprentices?

FRED MEIERS:

Just his family as far as I know.

SMITH:

Another group of artists that are very important are the Aguilar family? How did you come into contact with them?

FRED MEIERS:

Well, we saw them, saw their work represented at Casa Schöndube. When we started working with their work, with them, the father and mother were with the Aguilars, and the girls were growing up.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Timoteo. Timoteo Aguilar was the father

SMITH:

Who is Jesus Aguilar? He's mentioned as Josefina father.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Well, this is a question in my mind, too whether he was the father, because in some books we see "Timoteo and family."

FRED MEIERS:

I don't know about this name.



BARBARA MEIERS:

So I'm not actually sure whether the father's name was Jesus and whether Timoteo maybe was an uncle or a brother or another member of the family.

SMITH:

Josefina and Irene are sisters?

FRED MEIERS:

Yes. The father's work was much more sensitive than the daughters, and it was a more complete expression. He was big on funerals. He did wonderful funerals. And the mourners, they were so mournful and so sad.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Oh, they were so sad.

FRED MEIERS:

Just really beautifully expressive. And he did bells, very fanciful bells. Inventive shapes, animals.

BARBARA MEIERS:

And people.

FRED MEIERS:

One side would be—a person on the other side, an animal. Very charming sense of humor in these things. We bought lots of these smaller bells like so. [gestures] Just very attractive things.

SMITH:

You actually met the father.

FRED MEIERS:

Practically everything we bought through Arthur Train. We met the father.

BARBARA MEIERS:

When we went out to the village.

FRED MEIERS:

I can't say that we knew either of the parents, but we dealt with them over a period of years. They made very nice single figures that were—I think initially they were candleholders, a lady with a candle-holder out of the top of her head. Then they became single figures when it was more possible to sell larger single figures. Then the figures started getting bigger, too.

SMITH:

Was that in your request?

FRED MEIERS:

I'm not sure.

BARBARA MEIERS:

I think Sandro [Alexander Girard] might have been interested in that, Fred, in enlarging them.

SMITH:

Who worked with him?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Alexander Girard. He might very possibly have—

FRED MEIERS:

We might have asked them to do large ones for Alexander Girard.

SMITH:

The characteristic Aguilar face, was that an innovation of the family's?

FRED MEIERS:

I think so.

SMITH:

Or was that rooted in their village tradition?

FRED MEIERS:

No, I don't think there was any village tradition doing what they did before then.

SMITH:

In Ocotlán [de Morelos, Oaxaca]?

FRED MEIERS:

I don't see any evidence of it. Do you [Barbara]?

BARBARA MEIERS:

It was primarily a utilitarian pottery village.

FRED MEIERS:

Yes, right.

BARBARA MEIERS:

They made wonderful big pots and all kinds of things for use.

FRED MEIERS:

Incensarios. There was a village tradition in a form about four inches in diameter with—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Tripod, one with three legs.

FRED MEIERS:

Three legs, and little formalized, quite primitive figures close together around the edge.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Representing the souls. That was done in that village, too.

FRED MEIERS:

But I think that's the only—that's the tradition that they came out of.

BARBARA MEIERS:

That the Aguilars came out of.

FRED MEIERS:

The more or less realistic figures the Aguilar family invented.

SMITH:

Do you know when they started doing figures?

FRED MEIERS:

No, I don't, but it was before 1957.

SMITH:

At that time when you came down in '57, were they already producing for export or primarily for the national market?

FRED MEIERS:

I think primarily for Mexico.

BARBARA MEIERS:

And for tourists that would come in that would buy, but not for exporters.

FRED MEIERS:

At that point the United States wasn't too interested in Mexico. "Mexican" was sort of a nasty word.

BARBARA MEIERS:

It was "junk," you know.

FRED MEIERS:

Yes.

BARBARA MEIERS:

It really was an educational process, to interest people in it, when we started.

FRED MEIERS:

There were very few people who appreciated the stuff in the fifties; in contrast, you know, to the quantities of stores that carry Mexican things these days.

SMITH:

At the time that you first were introduced to the Aguilars' work, did the figures still have a utilitarian aspect to them? The candleholders, or bells?

FRED MEIERS:

Bells, yes, especially bells.

SMITH:

Did you suggest to them that they just do the standing figures? Or did Arthur Train suggest to them that they didn't need to have the utilitarian aspect?

BARBARA MEIERS:

I don't know about that.

FRED MEIERS:

I don't know; we might have. They might have just figured it out for themselves, too.

SMITH:

How much were you buying from them?

FRED MEIERS:

Lots of little stuff.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes, quantities of the little things,

FRED MEIERS:

Two or three hundred pieces a year, I would say.

SMITH:

Again, were you buying in bulk? Were you buying everything they produced?

FRED MEIERS:

No, no. I'm sure we weren't.

SMITH:

And this definitely was a family workshop.

FRED MEIERS:

Yes.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Oh, yes.

SMITH:

Originally the design was done by the father, Timoteo—or Jesus, depending on the source?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Right.

SMITH:

When did the daughters start to do design?

FRED MEIERS:

When did the mother—?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Well, we went down in 1973. The father had been dead for some time then, and the mother was very ill.

SMITH:

Do you remember her first name?

BARBARA MEIERS:

No, I don't.

FRED MEIERS:

I don't either. The mother was dying in '74.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Right. At that time, Josefina was already doing a lot of the work.

FRED MEIERS:

Right.

BARBARA MEIERS:

So it would have been probably in the late sixties that she was really starting to work in the quantity and be very much involved. There was another daughter, too. I'm pretty sure her name was Guillermina.

FRED MEIERS:

That sounds familiar.

SMITH:

There's Irene.

BARBARA MEIERS:

There's Irene, too. But there was another one, too, because I know some of our favorites were from her.

FRED MEIERS:

Yes, there's a third one.

SMITH:

To your knowledge, is there a division of labor between Josefina, Irene, and the third one?

FRED MEIERS:

Oh, they have separate households. They live next door to each other, but they work independently, in competition with each other. The husband—I forget which one's husband—has also learned to be a potter. And the son of Josefina has won prizes for his pottery. He did a marvelous little nacimiento. It's about so tall. [gestures]

BARBARA MEIERS:

Very tiny.

SMITH:

About an inch?

FRED MEIERS:

No, it's smaller than that. Maybe half an inch. We have one of those. It's really tiny.

BARBARA MEIERS:

He's pretty young still.

FRED MEIERS:

Well, he was when he did this.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Right. But it's very much a family thing with the children coming along, getting involved in it, too.

FRED MEIERS:

The girls are very facile. They like to demonstrate making a piece. They can make a figure like this, I think, in something like fifteen minutes. This isn't taking into account the preparation of clay, firing it, and painting it. But just in making the form and getting it together, they're very facile.

SMITH:

What about their quality controls? Have they maintained a consistent level?

BARBARA MEIERS:

It's pretty good.

FRED MEIERS:

I would say—I think it's a little uneven.

BARBARA MEIERS:

You do?

FRED MEIERS:

Yes.

SMITH:

Did you have any problems where you had decided you couldn't accept—

FRED MEIERS:

No, they weren't that bad. They looked—some of those bowls that Susie [Susan Masuoka] brought up—



BARBARA MEIERS:

Oh, later.

FRED MEIERS:

They were just pumped out so fast—

BARBARA MEIERS:

The incensario.

FRED MEIERS:

—that they just sort of sprinkled a little color on. It's sort of not enough, not enough attention to it to be too satisfactory.

BARBARA MEIERS:

I would say in general, though, when you think about all of them [the artesanos] that their [the Aguilars'] work really was pretty consistently good.

FRED MEIERS:

Okay.

BARBARA MEIERS:

It's not like Candelario's outfit. It's pretty good.

SMITH:

I wonder in the degree to which you made suggestions to them, as to things that you thought would be particularly marketable, and how that influenced the kinds of figures that they made?

FRED MEIERS:

I don't think that we did that with them. The contact with them wasn't that direct. Their expression seemed so appropriate to the clay that they used, and their technique, that we just—

BARBARA MEIERS:

We just left them alone, let them do their thing. [We] possibly did get them to do the larger pieces. That's the only thing that I can think of, that we would have really encouraged them, maybe, to do some of the bigger things.

SMITH:

As I recall it, at the Folk Tree, their pieces were the most expensive, going at the same rate that the Jiménez pieces were.

FRED MEIERS:

Oh, really?

SMITH:

Do they make a good income generally?

FRED MEIERS:

I don't really know this.

BARBARA MEIERS:

I would guess yes. I think they're, again, they're pretty well organized. They managed their production pretty well.

FRED MEIERS:

Were they large pieces?

SMITH:

Largish, but not—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Not like the one over there on the floor?

SMITH:

Yes, about that size. Maybe some even a little smaller. Even taking into account the difference of the size, they were relatively much more expensive than—what I recall to be—a Rosendo piece.

FRED MEIERS:

That's interesting.

BARBARA MEIERS:

I think their pieces have increased in price.

FRED MEIERS:

It's hard to tell about these things, because it depends on how many hands they go through, too. Although I think Rocky Behr probably buys directly from them. She spent some time in Oaxaca, I know, so she, I'm pretty sure, buys direct.

BARBARA MEIERS:

But we know their prices have gone up, you know. Because the most recent things we have were through Susie, and they're higher than we used to pay—

SMITH:

I have a few other artists that I think we can move through a little bit more quickly.

FRED MEIERS:

Okay.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Are you interested in the Metepec [estado de Mexico] people at all?

SMITH:

Yes.

BARBARA MEIERS:

The Modesto Fernández family. Well, we went down there pretty early. I think we began—our first contact with them was in '57, actually, when we first went to their shop and saw their pieces. We had seen some things up here before that and so we were looking for that kind of thing. But then we didn't—

SMITH:

What kind of pieces were they doing?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Mainly the Tree of Life, the candelabra things that we were interested in.

FRED MEIERS:

They did lots of nacimiento figures.

BARBARA MEIERS:

The pastores.

FRED MEIERS:

Pastores. They did horses, and some of the most popular things were the sirenas. These were all different sizes, from about eight inches long, ten, to twelve inches long. Then some were about half that size. The pastores were about twelve inches tall. This particular family business carried the name of the mother, Modesto Fernández. The tradition had come from her family. They took me to see—

SMITH:

What was the name of her family? Do you remember?

FRED MEIERS:

Modesto Fernández. Maybe the father's name could have been Modesto—I think he was probably Modesto Fernández.

SMITH:

Oh, Modesto was the last name?

BARBARA MEIERS:

That was her name, the family, yes.

FRED MEIERS:

No, Modesto would be the first name.

SMITH:

Of the father.

FRED MEIERS:

I'm actually not sure of this. I think her name was Modesto Fernández, too. But at any rate, they took me to see a church that, in a nicho in one of the towers, had a figure that was done by her father, a figure in terra-cotta that was related to the work that they were doing.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Her father.

FRED MEIERS:

Same kind as the current figures. I don't know whether we've talked about this before. Diego Rivera gave this technique to the clay craftsmen of Metepec. That is the technique of coating the bisqueware with a white covering of gesso, and then applying bright colors based in alcohol which makes for the brilliance of the pieces. Before this they did glazed-ware—concurrent with this the village did glazed-ware, dark green, blackish kind of color.

BARBARA MEIERS:

And kind of runny.

FRED MEIERS:

Glazed, but not this other kind of more perishable technique. There were mainly two families—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Mónico Soteno was one of the other craftsmen.

FRED MEIERS:

No, that was his son, the son of Modesto Fernández. The Soteno brothers were the sons of Modesto Fernández. Her husband's [name] was Soteno, and the boys were named Soteno. They go by that name.

SMITH:

So Fernández was the family name of the mother.

BARBARA MEIERS:

The mother, yes.

FRED MEIERS:

But I think currently the Modesto Fernández name has disappeared and one hears only, as far as I know, the Sotenos.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Who was the one that came up to the Pomona fair [Los Angeles County Fair]?

FRED MEIERS:

A couple of the Soteno brothers [Antonio and Mónico]; Francisco, who was the most talented of the brothers.

BARBARA MEIERS:

They were the ones who really started those enormous candelabras, weren't they?

FRED MEIERS:

Yes.

BARBARA MEIERS:

They're very big.

FRED MEIERS:

Well, they got bigger and bigger. Francisco Soteno did one that you've probably seen in the museum up on the hill, the anthropology museum.

SMITH:

The Southwest Museum?

FRED MEIERS:

No, in Mexico.

BARBARA MEIERS:

In Mexico City.

FRED MEIERS:

That huge one there. And I think there's one, maybe, in the downtown, the Museo [Nacional] de Artes Populares [e Indigenistas]?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Artes Populares downtown has one, I'm sure.

SMITH:

When you first encountered the Modesto Fernández household, were they producing primarily articles for use in traditional Mexican holidays? Even though they were fanciful, these things were utilitarian.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Well, the candelabras were. They had places for candles.

SMITH:

Not utilitarian in the sense of pots and pans but utilitarian in the sense that they added to the festivities.

FRED MEIERS:

I think probably they were sold, maybe as toys. Well, the things for Christmas-time, the nacimientos, would be for use, probably, in the house.

SMITH:

And the pastores.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes.

FRED MEIERS:

And the pastores before the nacimientos.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Right. But it was primarily for Mexico.

FRED MEIERS:

Sure.

BARBARA MEIERS:

There, again, the individual tourist coming down would buy them and bring them back themselves, but it wasn't for export.

SMITH:

How did the process develop when the candelabras started getting larger and larger? When did that start to occur?

FRED MEIERS:

Let's see. By the sixties, early sixties, we thought these were huge.

SMITH:

About a meter?

FRED MEIERS:

Yes.

BARBARA MEIERS:

We thought they were big. Heaven knows they were hard enough to bring in whole. You can imagine.

FRED MEIERS:

And they weren't fired very well.

BARBARA MEIERS:

[laughter] No.

FRED MEIERS:

I think, probably, individuals—maybe for a place, for a restaurant, or some place that they needed a big display piece, in Mexico—would have thought of asking for still larger pieces.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Right. Then the people in Mexico themselves began to get interested in it, like the officials. It became the thing to do, to have an important piece of folk art. Which, up until then, they really hadn't cared about. But I have an idea that that encouraged the bigness, too. They wanted a very impressive display piece.

SMITH:



How large were the pieces, ultimately, that you imported?

FRED MEIERS:

The biggest ones that we imported were this size. There was enough putting together with a thirty-six-inch piece.

BARBARA MEIERS:

[laughter] The others really required a truck, a single crate, and just bringing it up here all special just by itself.

FRED MEIERS:

And preferably a craftsman to go with the truck and the crate.

SMITH:

Did the Modesto Fernández work change as you were working with them? As well as larger, did it become more complicated?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes.

FRED MEIERS:

Antonio became more facile.

SMITH:

One of the Soteno brothers?

FRED MEIERS:

Yes. He was very skilled.

BARBARA MEIERS:

And the subject matter, too. He began to get all kind of different things on this. Originally there were Adam and Eves and nacimiento figures mainly, wasn't it?

FRED MEIERS:

Were they? I think they—

BARBARA MEIERS:

And now they're really full of all kinds of things.

FRED MEIERS:

Yes.

BARBARA MEIERS:

We really stopped working with Metepec a long time ago. It was too bright. The kind of color didn't work with many situations. It wasn't as saleable.

FRED MEIERS:

It was so perishable, and the color faded very rapidly.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Right. You put it in the sun and it faded.

SMITH:

Did you try to talk to them about changing the color? Or changing the dye additives?

BARBARA MEIERS:

No, we really didn't.

FRED MEIERS:

Not really because it was obvious that they were doing all right. They weren't going to suffer by not having me as a customer.

BARBARA MEIERS:

And I guess we really enjoyed the other things more. That probably was part of it, too.

SMITH:

Why?

BARBARA MEIERS:

We felt the expression was more interesting. It was something about the Metepec things that began to get more purely decorative. I think they were influenced by decorators along the line.

SMITH:

Mexican and American?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes. We really were just drawn much more to the other artists.

FRED MEIERS:

We didn't have a packer in Metepec that we could work with satisfactorily. We made several attempts, but that didn't work out, so this was sort of a limiting factor, too. You couldn't be running down there all the time.

SMITH:

Or having Rosendo run down there?

BARBARA MEIERS:

No.

FRED MEIERS:

It wasn't too practical. It's a long way.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Right.

SMITH:

One other artist I wanted to ask you about was Amado Galván in Tlaquepaque [Jalisco]. Did you collect any of his work?

FRED MEIERS:

We had some of his tile. He did a bunch of individual—tiles for us.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Using the bruñido technique. Beautifully done.

SMITH:

Bruñido technique?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes. Beautiful drawing.

FRED MEIERS:

He was in Tonalá [Jalisco]. We didn't have an extended contact with him.

BARBARA MEIERS:

I don't think we ever bought any of his figures and his pieces, did we?

FRED MEIERS:

Let's see, I guess we did. I'd forgotten about those.

BARBARA MEIERS:

A few of the—

FRED MEIERS:

We had some of his large traditional cats. There were some smaller ones, too.

BARBARA MEIERS:

In the bruñido technique.

SMITH:

Did Rosendo have much contact with him?

FRED MEIERS:

Let's see, when we were doing this—. [pause] Maybe a little bit; not very much. This was a long time ago. I think we did it in connection with the [Herman Miller] T & O [Textiles and Objects Company].

BARBARA MEIERS:

We really didn't work with it very long, though.

SMITH:

T & O?

FRED MEIERS:

T & O was the craft—shop that Herman Miller set up in New York.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Textiles and objects it was called.

SMITH:

Another craftsman we should talk about is Enrique Arevalo. Did you have much contact with him?

FRED MEIERS:

Let's see. We don't—no bells are ringing.

BARBARA MEIERS:

No.

SMITH:

The wool weaver in Uruapan [Michoacán]?

FRED MEIERS:

Oh, Enrique.

SMITH:

Enrique Arevalo.

FRED MEIERS:

Okay. Yes, we worked with him a little bit over a period of years. In fact I think he wove this. [points to rug] But this isn't his design.

SMITH:

You brought him a painting or design?

FRED MEIERS:

Yes, right.

SMITH:

A Fred Meiers work. He worked from that?

FRED MEIERS:

Yes. This is his. This rug with the watermelons, flowers, and animals is one of his things.

BARBARA MEIERS:

[points] It's on the floor over there.

FRED MEIERS:

And early he did a number of—he repeated all kinds of variations on arrangements of fruit and flowers on rugs.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Watermelons, he did some amusing things with watermelons.

FRED MEIERS:

He was more a craftsman than he was a designer. He's a very good weaver and craftsman.

### **1.12. TAPE NUMBER: VI, Side Two (February 12, 1987)**

SMITH:

I also wanted to ask you about what you had heard about Marcelino. I presume he had already died before you got involved in importing crafts and folk art?

FRED MEIERS:

I think that he was still alive but I'm not sure. He came from a village—from a crafts village, from a clay-producing village—Ocumicho, Michoacán. His contribution was not in technique but in imagination. As far as I can see, the materials that were used before Marcelino and after were not influenced—the subject matter after Marcelino was completely changed because of him.

SMITH:

In ceramics?

FRED MEIERS:

In ceramics. Before, there were little cast figures of dogs, and the traditional monos dressed in Tarascan costumes.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Very charming figures.

FRED MEIERS:

Yes.

BARBARA MEIERS:

And bulls with riders. We have some very nice ones.

FRED MEIERS:

But with him and the devils—which he dreamed up—and the volcanoes and snakes, seemed to open up a whole new realm of subject matter that seems to just go on and on as a source of community inspiration. Whereas, during his lifetime he was not thought of too highly, to put it mildly. I think he—well, there was, according to the stories, homosexuality—which wasn't too popular—in the scene. He had a homosexual alliance and that coupled with incest in the family didn't really please anyone, endear him too much to the community. I think he was eventually murdered.

BARBARA MEIERS:

That's what the story is anyway.

FRED MEIERS:

The church was not sympathetic to him at all, of course.

BARBARA MEIERS:

No, they didn't like the expression, his devils, and so on.

FRED MEIERS:

But his influence is fairly amazing.

BARBARA MEIERS:

It's tremendous.

SMITH:

He had a family workshop in this little village?

FRED MEIERS:

I really don't know. We bought in other markets, by the time we got to the village he was dead and the whole village was making pottery inspired by him.

BARBARA MEIERS:

And we bought from the museum [Museo Regional de Arte Popular de la Huatapera] in Uruapan at that time.

FRED MEIERS:

The first things that we found were in a little place in Pátzcuaro [Michoacán]—a little outdoor market in Pátzcuaro—the first Marcelinos—oh, I guess I'd bought from Victor Fosada, in Mexico [City], I bought the very first things.

SMITH:

Does Marcelino have a last name that you know of?

FRED MEIERS:

Let's see. [pause]

BARBARA MEIERS:

We don't know it.

FRED MEIERS:

I don't think I know it.

SMITH:

He seems always to be referred to simply as Marcelino.

FRED MEIERS:

Yes. What's Raul's name?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Oh, Raul would know.

FRED MEIERS:

Raul Lopez is writing a doctor's thesis on—

BARBARA MEIERS:



Not on him; he did it on [Herón] Martínez.

FRED MEIERS:

Well, on a group of people, and I think it includes Marcelino. I'm sure he knows—

BARBARA MEIERS:

But no, we don't know the name.

FRED MEIERS:

Pat [Patricia B. Altman] probably knows. She might know; she might not remember. But Raul, I know, would know the name because we've talked with him about [Marcelino] quite a bit.

BARBARA MEIERS:

But some of the early devils were really very interesting, interesting quality. Not as grotesque and not as—I don't know what it is about the ones they're doing now. These had a—

FRED MEIERS:

Well, it's what happens—Marcelino's had feeling, much feeling. I mean, they really had a quality about them. One of the pieces we have has very much the feeling of a [Rufino] Tamayo dog—a painting—crying at the moon. That kind of a feeling.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Well, I think his devils, too, had an archetypal quality, you know.

FRED MEIERS:

Yes. And the color was very muted. Now the things are inspired by Marcelino, but have very little connection with the inspiration. They're sort of self-perpetuating. They take off—the craftsmen see what each other are doing and they add or carry on, being many times removed from this initial inspiration.

SMITH:

How did they come to be so influential?

FRED MEIERS:

I think that it was from an economic standpoint, that these people in this village [Ocumicho] saw that the stuff would sell.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Sold? You think that—? Really?

FRED MEIERS:

I know it. So that's what they decided to make. They are a very productive village. [Alexander] Girard and I were there in the seventies some time, to this village—we had a few names of craftsmen. We didn't know what we were getting into because [even now] the village doesn't have a very good name, reputation.

BARBARA MEIERS:

It's unfriendly.

FRED MEIERS:

It's remote. It's up in the mountains in Michoacán and it's very remote, say, an hour away from the nearest major road.

BARBARA MEIERS:

The roads aren't good, and all this kind of thing.

FRED MEIERS:

So we didn't know what we were getting into, knowing the background of this village in this connection. We asked somebody to take us to one of these craftsmen whose names we had been given. Yes, he would take us. We went to this little house and they were there, busily making devils, friendly enough, you know. Then we thought we wanted to go to another one of these houses, meet them, and see what they were doing. We went outside, and there was somebody outside saying, "What's he want to do now?" And the little person who was going to take us said, "He wants to go to so-and-so's." He said, "All right, I'll take them." He was the head of the craftsmen's organization of the village. So he took us to maybe eight or ten different households.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Oh, really? That many.

FRED MEIERS:

And they were all making related stuff to this—all inspired by, you know. It's very interesting.

BARBARA MEIERS:

But they continued to make some of the traditional things, too, because we did buy some through the years.

FRED MEIERS:

He took us to these particular people who were making the devil stuff.

BARBARA MEIERS:

They weren't making any of the other things in this place?

FRED MEIERS:

No, they were making—everything was this kind of thing. But the traditional stuff—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Was still made.

FRED MEIERS:

—is still made. But these are the things that sell, and that's why they make them.

SMITH:

In one sourcebook, which was a Mexican book on popular arts, they mentioned that Marcelino's influence actually is national because he demonstrated that imaginative crafts would sell. And that opened the way for what followed, vis-a-vis Martínez, the Aguilars, or—

FRED MEIERS:

Did they give any dates of him?

SMITH:

Well, from the book it sounds like they're talking about the period right after the end of the Second World War to about 1960, that fifteen year period. It's not exactly precise. I'm wondering if you would agree with that.

FRED MEIERS:

I think they're sort of reading into it because these other people that we talked about earlier were coming along at the same time. A lot of times these feelings—well, you find it in all the arts. Feelings in one part of the world, then in another part, sort of explode and artists find themselves doing the same things.

BARBARA MEIERS:

And they're not necessarily influenced by each other at all.

FRED MEIERS:

They're not in contact. So Teodora [Blanco] starts her stuff; Martínez starts his stuff; Candelario [Medrano], Rosendo [Rodríguez], [Manuel] Jiménez. These are the individualizations of folk artists, and, I think, it's that rather than the influence of one person. I don't think that—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Well, these other people wouldn't even have seen his things that early.

FRED MEIERS:

And they wouldn't have responded. That's the thing, too.

BARBARA MEIERS:

They wouldn't necessarily have seen them at all. There wasn't that much communication.

FRED MEIERS:

His things sold. I think it's this other thing rather than his serving as a model. For instance, I can't think that—I know Teodora wouldn't have seen anything of his, and I doubt if Martínez would have. Candelario, I'm sure, wouldn't have.

BARBARA MEIERS:

No, Candelario wouldn't have. There just wouldn't have been that kind of communication.

FRED MEIERS:

Right. Some people were taking some of Marcelino's work into Mexico, in Mexico City, to Fosada. I don't know whether Marcelino took it in, or how they were in touch I never did talk with Fosada about—well, you know, superficially—about Marcelino. Initially I was just told that he had lots of trouble with the church, that the church didn't like what he was doing.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Right. The church didn't like what he was doing. They probably didn't like the way he was living more than—

FRED MEIERS:

That was the first thing that I was told.

SMITH:

The church in this village?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Right.

FRED MEIERS:

That the church did not like what he was doing.

BARBARA MEIERS:

They were trying to suppress them.

FRED MEIERS:

They didn't want him to make these things.

SMITH:

Did the church do anything to stop him?

FRED MEIERS:

This I don't know.

BARBARA MEIERS:

We don't know. That may have just been the way the story came out. It may have been really just more a major disapproval of his whole way of life. But we really didn't work very much with Ocumicho either. Only in a small quantity, compared with other things that we've worked with.

FRED MEIERS:

The Marcelino things, there was very little available. I think that he was living when we were first aware of him. We bought a few things. Then, I think, by the time we became more interested in it—the next time we saw anything, I think, probably, he was already dead. Although we did find—Sandro and I did find these things in Pátzcuaro.

SMITH:

Did you look for Huichol yarn paintings?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Oh, yes.

FRED MEIERS:

Yes, yes.

SMITH:

Were there particular artists you worked with among the Huicholes?

FRED MEIERS:

There was a feria in the Agua Azul in Guadalajara, an annual feria. Huicholes came there and then became part of—let's see. Initially there were very few and you sort of bought everything that there was. I don't know whether we bought it in Tepic [Nayarit]—maybe we bought it early in Tepic, too. Then a little later there was a Museo de Artes Populares built in Guadalajara. There was a group of Huicholes working there, and we bought there. Then eventually in our shop in Tlaquepaque we had Huicholes who came and lived there. They built a house in the yard of the shop and lived there.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Lived there and worked.

FRED MEIERS:

I don't know for how long a time that was. So we had some contact with them. Then we collected Huichol belts—the black and white belts—woven belts, that are very handsome. Really beautiful things.

BARBARA MEIERS:

We were really very much interested in Huichol costume things.

FRED MEIERS:

And the bags.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Their bags, the hatbands, and the belts. We collected quite a number of those.

SMITH:

Were there particular artists or craftspeople that you came to work with more closely?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Not individuals. You didn't, did you? I don't think so.

FRED MEIERS:

I don't think so.

SMITH:

Actually, it does sound like you dealt with the mestizo, the Mexican artisans as individuals, but with the Huicholes as a collective entity.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes.

FRED MEIERS:

I wasn't in touch with them over any extended time. Then I had the language problem, too. We didn't have any common language, which isn't any help.

SMITH:

Did you buy Otomí reed toys?

BARBARA MEIERS:

No, we bought these things from the Otomís.

FRED MEIERS:

We bought bags.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Wonderful bags made of this kind of wool.

FRED MEIERS:

Reed, toys?

SMITH:

Yes, they're well known for their willow-reed toys.

FRED MEIERS:

Oh. I don't think I know them.

SMITH:

Here were you looking, with the Huicholes and the Otomís, were you looking for real traditional products of their cultures?

FRED MEIERS:

Right, yes.

BARBARA MEIERS:

We bought these in some quantity.

FRED MEIERS:

There was a center of Huicholes in Zapopan [Jalisco], near Guadalajara, in connection with the cathedral there, the church there. One of the priests seemed to be very interested in them and sponsored them. So we were able to get some things there, too.

SMITH:



Did you buy in large quantities?

FRED MEIERS:

No, no.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Well, let's see. About how many would you say we had through the period?  
We just gave UCLA a group of—

FRED MEIERS:

I don't know. Low hundreds—of paintings.

SMITH:

The yarn paintings?

FRED MEIERS:

Yes. I don't know. I think we held on to all the belts, the black and white belts, that we could find. What do we have? A dozen, something like that. Not more than that.

BARBARA MEIERS:

The bags, too.

SMITH:

One last question on the masks that you bought: Where did you buy your masks?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Well, all around. Fred bought some from Victor Fosada in Mexico City, of course. Then he actually went to a village in Michoacán where they were doing a dance one winter and bought some masks from the dancers. Then he also bought in Oaxaca. Those were the primary sources.

SMITH:

Did you have individual artists that you worked with in terms of the masks?

FRED MEIERS:

No. Most of the masks had—let's see. [pause]

BARBARA MEIERS:

They weren't done as pieces of artwork from a particular person. The masks, especially there in Michoacán, were borrowed from one village to another for the dances. So it was a community—

FRED MEIERS:

Well, there were—I was in touch with a few mask makers, but they weren't as interesting. The work that they did wasn't as interesting as the ones that we just found.

SMITH:

Did you have trouble buying masks?

FRED MEIERS:

They're hard to find.

SMITH:

Wouldn't they have religious significance?

BARBARA MEIERS:

They wouldn't want to sell them, you mean, because they were using them?

SMITH:

Yes.

FRED MEIERS:

I don't know whether they had religious significance, but they were something personal with them and they didn't want to give them up.

SMITH:

Yes.

BARBARA MEIERS:

You know, they used them in their dances, and they just didn't want to have to be replacing them.

FRED MEIERS:

Some of the most interesting masks were from Oaxaca and were collected by a man by the name of [Ernesto] Cervantes, who had a shop in Oaxaca and one in Mexico. He had a group of masks in the shop in Mexico, so I was able to get a good group of masks there.

SMITH:

Did you buy masks for sale or for your personal collection?

FRED MEIERS:

Both. Then there was somebody in Guadalajara. I don't remember whether his name is Juárez or Suarez. He had very interesting old masks, and I was able to buy several of those. They were relatively expensive. He had a brother in Mexico that also had a collection, a very extensive collection of them, but he was interested in selling them, I think, as a collection, and they were still more expensive. These things were sort of out of my range.

SMITH:

By relatively expensive, what do you mean?

FRED MEIERS:

What do I mean. Several hundred dollars.

BARBARA MEIERS:

In order to resell anything, we really couldn't be buying them for that kind of price.

FRED MEIERS:

Because we weren't dealing—our business wasn't oriented to this kind of a mark-up, to this kind of price range. Then in Uruapan there were masks that we found. Our friends in Uruapan collected some masks for us, and the museum had some. I guess I never did buy any there, though.

BARBARA MEIERS:

But I think our collection has more masks from Michoacán than anyplace else.

FRED MEIERS:

Then I ran into a collection, an antique dealer, named Miguel, that I bought quite a few from in Tlaquepaque. Then Ralph and Vicki [Gray] in Michoacán had some very good masks that we bought.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Nicolas Mendez was a mask carver.

FRED MEIERS:

That was sort of a fluke.

BARBARA MEIERS:

His things weren't as interesting as a lot of other masks.

FRED MEIERS:

We just brought a few of those. And then some from the Museo [Nacional] de Artes de Populares [e Indigenistas] in Mexico.

SMITH:

In buying Indian art did you have different criteria?

FRED MEIERS:

How do you mean Indian art?

SMITH:

Well, like the Huichol or the Otomí, the non-Spanish-speaking—the still-tribal art.

FRED MEIERS:

No, I don't think so. We bought for art quality and what we liked.

SMITH:

What appealed to you.

FRED MEIERS:

Yes.

**1.13. TAPE NUMBER: VII, Side One (March 5, 1987)**

SMITH:

I'd like to ask you about the sources that you consulted when you began your investigations in Mexican folk art and began your business in the fifties. Who were the people that you went to visit and talked to? Who could lead you to the artists that we've been discussing over the past several months?

FRED MEIERS:

We found that in Mexico City, Victor Fosada, who had a small shop, was probably the source of some of the best folk art that was available. Victor Fosada, Sr., had grown up in Mexico and had served his apprenticeship in the Fred Davis—maybe we mentioned this earlier.

SMITH:

No, you haven't.

FRED MEIERS:

In the Fred Davis [Sonora News Art] Shop, which was an early folk art shop in Mexico.

SMITH:

In what period?

FRED MEIERS:

This would have been—. [pause]

BARBARA MEIERS:

Maybe the thirties, wasn't it? Thirties and forties.

FRED MEIERS:

Early thirties, late twenties.

SMITH:

Had you visited the shop during your honeymoon visit to Mexico?

FRED MEIERS:

I had visited before honeymoon days.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Right. He was down there in '37. Had you gone to the shop then?

FRED MEIERS:

I'm a little vague on this. There were several shops at that point, including [Ernesto] Cervantes' and, I think, the Fred Davis shop. Which incidentally wasn't called the Fred Davis shop, but I don't recall the name. I can find it some time. But at any rate, Fred Davis had two apprentices that I know of. The other one [besides] Victor Fosada was René d'Harnoncourt, who'd developed into a very prominent person in American art with his connection to the [New York] Museum of Modern

BARBARA MEIERS:

And as head of the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs.

FRED MEIERS:

Head of the Bureau of Indian Affairs in the [United States] Department of Interior in Washington [D.C.]. Victor Fosada told stories of going from the outskirts of Coyoacan [Distrito Federal] where he lived and attempting to reach the Zocalo when he was growing up and not being able to get that far. It was too far. He was a simple Indian, I think, in his background.

SMITH:

He couldn't get from Coyoacan to the Zocalo?

FRED MEIERS:

To the Zocalo.

BARBARA MEIERS:

It was too far to go.

FRED MEIERS:

I don't know whether he was walking or on a horse or—probably a combination of walking and something else.

BARBARA MEIERS:

But he obviously was more used to a close family and a village kind of situation. The big city was just—

FRED MEIERS:

Mexico has been and continues to be a really regional, small regional situation.

SMITH:

Mexico, the country.

FRED MEIERS:

Yes, Mexico, the country. So his country was actually in this area [Coyoacan], which wasn't the center around the Zocalo, but it was a removed one, far away. At any rate, I think with this background and the discipline of working in this kind of situation with Fred Davis—who had a very good eye—he maintained a shop that had real quality, the best of what was available in folk art. The Museo de Ceramica has always had good stuff, but the thing is that it's in such a prominent location that whenever anything especially good appears there it's immediately bought and disappears.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Disappears, often to somebody's private collections.

FRED MEIERS:

And Victor Fosada, by being slightly isolated—not what you call isolated, he's two blocks from the Zocalo and a block or two from the [Palacio de las] Bellas Artes on [Avenida] Filomeno Mata—was a little less available than the folk art museum [Museo Nacional de Artes Populares e Indigenistas]. And it was very interesting to talk to him about the pieces that he had. He gave me lots of information, and I was able to find very interesting things there in small quantities. Initially, we were buying in very small quantities. These would have been one-of-a-kind things.

SMITH:

You had mentioned that you dealt with many of your artists by buying through Arthur Train.

FRED MEIERS:

That's right.

SMITH:

Did you have a similar kind of arrangement with Fosada?

FRED MEIERS:

No. It wasn't as firm a commitment with Fosada. Fosada didn't have that kind of quantity. So it was just a matter of arriving there, finding what was available, and putting a bunch of things together.

BARBARA MEIERS:

A lot of his things were old things, antique pieces, that just were not available in any kind of quantity. You know, we found wonderful chests, like the old chests. And masks, very good masks. I think you did buy your pieces of [Pedro] Linares from him, didn't you?

FRED MEIERS:

Our first Pedro Linares pieces we got from him.

SMITH:

You have collected antiques?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes.

SMITH:

There are several nineteenth-century pieces.

FRED MEIERS:

These are from this early collecting with him. There are at least a couple of chests and there are a couple of very special Puebla late-nineteenth-century ceramic pieces.

BARBARA MEIERS:



And a retablo and the San Miguel figure in the nicho. You got that from Victor Fosada, too, didn't you?

FRED MEIERS:

I know the one you mean. I don't remember the source of that. Maybe.

BARBARA MEIERS:

I think so.

FRED MEIERS:

But that really wasn't our emphasis; it was small, inexpensive folk art.

BARBARA MEIERS:

That was being produced at the time, currently, and that we could get in some kind of quantity, too.

FRED MEIERS:

In some of these things he would have small quantity. We were working in very small quantity, too, initially. We didn't know what exactly we were doing. We just knew that we wanted to do this. I was going down there, getting a carload of things together until it was full, and then bringing them back. That consisted of a trip.

BARBARA MEIERS:

That's the way we started, just like that.

FRED MEIERS:

We did that for probably six months at least. This sort of process, maybe a year, for a year, developing sources that we could count on and finding what we thought of as the best craftsmen in various parts of the country. It was through Victor Fosada that we saw things, that made it possible to explore, find the people, and deal with them.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Then we knew what was available.

SMITH:

Who did he direct you to? Who did he lead you on to?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Some of the Ocumicho [Michoacán] pieces, I think, that originally—we learned about through him.

FRED MEIERS:

Oh, the Ocumicho was one of the things that we hadn't heard of before we reached that—

SMITH:

How about some of the Acatlán [de Osorio, Puebla] things?

BARBARA MEIERS:

The Acatlán things we were led to—I think we discussed this earlier—through Pat [Patricia B.] and Ralph Altman. Somebody had come into their shop with a piece of Acatlán ware and they showed it to us. And we—don't know the process of this, but we reached it with that suggestion. Perhaps we might well have seen some Acatlán stuff at Victor Fosada's and he might have told us how to get there. I don't remember that.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Well, one of the other main sources was the museum [Museo de los Artes Populares] in Tlaquepaque [Jalisco], where we went and saw all kinds of things from that region and attempted to start shipping things, with disastrous results. I mean, they just arrived all broken. It wasn't until we got somebody who really could pack that we were able to bring anything back.

FRED MEIERS:

Yes, that's where we found Rosendo [Rodríguez].

BARBARA MEIERS:

But we had discovered the different crafts that were available in that area in the museum, which had excellent quality pieces. In fact, some of the old pieces, examples of some of the really old ones. So we learned about what was available in the way of the figural pieces from Santa Cruz [de las Huertas, Jalisco]. And I think we probably saw some of the Candelario [Medrano] pieces

there and also Julio Acero [pieces]. People like [Amado] Galván and [Feliz] Solís were all represented there.

SMITH:

Was Fosada's store, in a sense, regional? Did he carry things only from the area right around Mexico City?

FRED MEIERS:

No, he didn't. He had things from Michoacán, he had things from Sierra de Puebla. I think he had some things from Guanajuato and some things from Jalisco, Guerrero. He had quite a broad range of coverage. [tape recorder off]

BARBARA MEIERS:

You were talking about Fosada still.

SMITH:

The Casa Cervantes was another source of information and material?

BARBARA MEIERS:

In Mexico City.

FRED MEIERS:

Yes. We found Casa Cervantes a very interesting source of material. The Cervantes family had originally come from Oaxaca. They had accumulated and used as decoration a number of masks, which we found very attractive and bought some twenty-five, thirty-five of them over a period of several months. They were interesting in that Mr. Ernesto Cervantes told us of the many chairs, many wooden chairs they supplied for the American market to an old-time Mexican importer, one of the first big-scale Mexican importers in the United States, Fred Layton.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Who handled quantity glassware—the rather crude, bubbly kind of glassware—as well as the painted chairs.

FRED MEIERS:

And tin.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes. He was based in New York.

SMITH:

Had you heard of Layton before the—?

FRED MEIERS:

Yes, we had heard of Layton. I think we didn't meet him until quite a bit later. The Cervantes people accumulated a very interesting collection of folk costumes, which we saw and which, much later, became available.

BARBARA MEIERS:

This was in the shop in Oaxaca, wasn't it?

FRED MEIERS:

No, he had them in the shop in Mexico. Not for sale; their personal collection. But it was very interesting to see this collection of very fine textiles. Many of which, in the fifties, were probably twenty-five years old.

SMITH:

Were there particular artists that Casa Cervantes sponsored?

FRED MEIERS:

No, this was a shop of folk art. At this point there wasn't—these individual artists were just beginning to develop. For instance, it was at this time in Mexico that I saw the first Teodora [Blanco] at the Museo [Nacional] de Artes Populares [e Indigenistas].

SMITH:

In Mexico City?

FRED MEIERS:

In Mexico, right. They had several pieces from this early period, very heavy form, shape.

BARBARA MEIERS:

That she used in her early—

FRED MEIERS:

I was really interested in these. But at that point, since I didn't have an adequate shipping solution, I could only do something three or four feet tall and twenty-four inches in diameter. Herón Martínez was developing as an individual artist. But it wasn't, I would say, until probably two or three years later that he really became completely individual. He was still coming out of his, you know—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Working in the traditional style.

FRED MEIERS:

Working in the traditional style. And it wasn't until he began making larger pieces that he became completely individual.

SMITH:

When you started in the late fifties, early sixties, your interest was not so much into collecting works by individual artists.

BARBARA MEIERS:

No, it wasn't. It was more the traditional pieces. We were looking more for the traditional Mexican pieces.

SMITH:

You had mentioned the museum in Toluca [estado de Mexico] as an important source of information.

FRED MEIERS:

We found the people at the museum in Toluca very helpful. They made all their sources available to us. And among these was Manuel Rogel from Ixtapan de la Sal [estado de Mexico], who did very beautiful simple shapes in wood.

BARBARA MEIERS:

A very white wood. Spoons, birds, and ducks.

FRED MEIERS:

In the form of bowls.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Then there was the other man, Crispín Mánjares.

FRED MEIERS:

In the museum we saw and enjoyed the work that came from a nearby village.

BARBARA MEIERS:

San Antonio de la Isla [estado de Mexico]

FRED MEIERS:

San Antonio de la Isla, correct, which had combs that were made of horn. Combs, little pendants, and pins were also made in this village, but we were especially attracted to the combs. When we made our way to this village, we found that the man who had the best combs, whose work seemed to be the best, was Crispín Mánjares.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Very talented.

SMITH:

By best, did you mean that he was beginning to individualize his works?

FRED MEIERS:

That's probably true.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes, it was.

FRED MEIERS:

That's right. Definitely.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Well, he was a very fine craftsman, too. It wasn't just his creative way of working, but his pieces were all beautifully done. And there was quite a

variety of subject matter from these wonderful kind of Victorian-looking shoes, legs, mermaids, pigs, cows.

FRED MEIERS:

Horses, cows.

SMITH:

How big were these cows and—?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Not very big.

FRED MEIERS:

Well, they vary from—the legs were about six inches long by an inch wide; the horses were about three and a half to four inches long and two and a half inches tall; and mermaids varied in size from, let's see, about four inches tall by an inch and a half wide.

BARBARA MEIERS:

And, of course, the horn color was sort of a translucent tan, and then it was decorated with this dark brown, almost black, ink in linear designs. Just beautifully done. Flowers and—

FRED MEIERS:

Swirls. Calligraphic kind of design, slightly Victorian without the sentimental aspect of some Victorian—

BARBARA MEIERS:

And we found rugs there, also—didn't we—at that Toluca museum. Then the fabrics.

FRED MEIERS:

Also, they suggested that we look at the market to see more quantity than they had, and we found all kinds of blankets from different parts of Mexico in the Toluca market.

SMITH:

Not just regional?

FRED MEIERS:

Not just regional. There were especially regional ones there, but there were also blankets from Guanajuato and Michoacán. And we did see the fabrics there. One of our first contacts with the manta fabric—which we became very much interested in as a real source of something that there would be repeat buying and selling in.

BARBARA MEIERS:

It's the handwoven cotton.

SMITH:

Did you have particular artesanos that you dealt with in terms of the manta?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Eventually, yes.

FRED MEIERS:

We bought small pieces, a few yards of a number of different kinds there. We didn't, at that point—

BARBARA MEIERS:

We weren't in touch with the craftsmen.

FRED MEIERS:

We were feeling our way, and we just bought a few pieces of this. We didn't know, yet, that this was going to develop into an important part of our business.

SMITH:

Do you remember the names of the shopkeepers at the museum in Toluca?

FRED MEIERS:

No, I don't remember. The only person that I remember was a man that we met, aside from Crispín, who we thought very highly of. He's a first-rate



craftsman and designer. I just hope that he's famous, more famous than I'm afraid he is.

SMITH:

You didn't continue carrying the combs?

BARBARA MEIERS:

No, we didn't for very long. We worked with them during the period in our business when we were doing quite a bit with clothing, jewelry, and that kind of thing. It worked in very well with that kind of shop, dress shops.

FRED MEIERS:

We were in contact with boutiques and dress shops. Then later, when the Gustins [Yvonne and Jay] came to us and we started working with them, the direction did change, and this kind of clothing and related form wasn't—

BARBARA MEIERS:

This really was a small-quantity kind of thing, too, you know. It really was getting things like these from just one craftsman. You couldn't really get very many of them. So it didn't work out to work in any big way.

SMITH:

What was your source in Celaya [Guanajuato]?

FRED MEIERS:

We went to Celaya to find the papier-mâché masks, and papier-mâché dolls. We found—there were many other kinds of toys. We worked with—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Alfonso Cabrera.

FRED MEIERS:

And Jugueteria del Nino, two shops that were in private houses on a side street, both of which made papier-mâché articles.

BARBARA MEIERS:

They carried the traditional folk toys, tin spinners and tin toys of different kinds.

FRED MEIERS:

Several years later we found another place that was larger and had more complicated inventory.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Puga? Where was Puga?

FRED MEIERS:

No, Puga was Jugueteria del Nino.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Puga was the name of the man.

FRED MEIERS:

Abraham Puga. And the one that was larger was Pablo Chico. He had extensive toys. He had a real inventory which, unfortunately, we didn't have the need for. But it was really interesting to see.

SMITH:

What kind of toys were you looking for?

FRED MEIERS:

Were looking for—

BARBARA MEIERS:

[laughter] A little Spanish coming in here every now and then.

FRED MEIERS:

—"tipico" toys.

BARBARA MEIERS:

In some quantity we did work with the tin spinners, for instance. It depended a lot on the shops that we were working with at that time. We were doing all of our own selling at that time.

SMITH:

The shops here in the U.S.?

BARBARA MEIERS:

In the U. S., yes. And there were certain ones that we knew that we could work with, these certain things. The Balinese Shop sold hundreds of spinners.

FRED MEIERS:

They were very special toys. They were toys—we could recognize them when we saw them. But we weren't looking, for the most part, for a particular thing. We could tell, to a certain degree, whether something was saleable here.

BARBARA MEIERS:

And was interesting, as far as our aesthetic requirements, too.

FRED MEIERS:

And was satisfactory. We only were interested in the things that we liked, which eliminated a lot of stuff.

BARBARA MEIERS:

But these things sold, the spinners, along with some of the papier-mâché masks. As well as different kinds of banks, especially from the Tlaquepaque region. We had carried those head banks, that were so wonderful, for so long. We had hundreds of those. This kind of thing worked out very well for some of our shops.

SMITH:

Did you have any connection with Rubin de la Borbolla or any of the professional staff at the Museo Nacional de las Artes Populares?

FRED MEIERS:

No, we didn't. We worked more with the smaller people: Victor Fosada—as I remember now, there was a lady who was one of the assistant directors of the museum who started a shop one block below the Museo de Artes Populares. [We] worked with her not for very long, for some reason or another. I can't remember who.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Is her name Madrid?

FRED MEIERS:

No, Madrid was a shipping company that didn't work out. I think the reason we started working with her was that she had shipping facilities.

SMITH:

Why didn't you work with the Museo Nacional or get advice from them as to where to go?

FRED MEIERS:

We were advised here by some people who were doing some movies here.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Who had filmed in Mexico, wasn't that it?

FRED MEIERS:

Yes. That there've been many protestations of help available and then discovered, after counting on it, that there wasn't any. So we just thought we would not waste our time trying to work in this connection.

SMITH:

Were Frances Toor's works of any help to you in where to go?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes, very helpful. Especially the little book [*Mexican Popular Arts*].

FRED MEIERS:

The little early book, the earliest book, we found very helpful in general directions.

BARBARA MEIERS:

It had colored pictures of the folk pieces and did tell where they were available, what regions, what towns.

SMITH:

Did you find that, in the thirty years between when the book was written and when you were in the field, much had changed?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Not really. A lot of them looked just the way they were in that little book.

FRED MEIERS:

In fact, it's interesting seeing the [Frederick] Starr book [*Catalogue of a Collection of Objects Illustrating the Folklore of Mexico*].

BARBARA MEIERS:

Frederick Starr.

FRED MEIERS:

Which was—

SMITH:

Eighteen nineties, late 1890s.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Or 1900—something, yes.

FRED MEIERS:

It's amazing that those same forms are still available.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes. Pretty interesting.

FRED MEIERS:

I guess that shows how traditional Mexico is.

SMITH:

What about Anita Brenner? Did you find her helpful in her work?

FRED MEIERS:

We found her *Idols Behind Altars* very interesting. It was one of the things—I think we had become acquainted with that in the forties, right?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes. We both read it before we went on our trip that summer.

FRED MEIERS:

I'm sorry that we never did meet her. She must have been a very interesting woman.

SMITH:

Did you find her perspective to be accurate?

FRED MEIERS:

I think yes.

SMITH:

In terms of the culture, the people that you were dealing with?

FRED MEIERS:

I don't specifically remember anything that I really attached this to, that said to me this is absolutely right. Nor did I ever remember seeing anything that I challenged. It seemed good background material.

SMITH:

Was Dr. Atl [Gerardo Murillo] a useful resource for you?

FRED MEIERS:

Not really.

BARBARA MEIERS:

We weren't familiar, really, with his work until later.

FRED MEIERS:

I think—obviously, he was one of the important people in encouraging folk art early, but he didn't seem to have any particular connection with us.

SMITH:

What was your connection with Jorge Wilmot?

FRED MEIERS:

About 1962, Sandro [Alexander] Girard and I were collecting, maybe, for [Herman Miller] Textiles & Objects [Company], possibly. We worked on a number of projects, collecting for specific projects, and we went to Jorge Wilmot's studio, where we found him and Ken Edwards beginning their association together. We didn't have much time at that point, and we set up an appointment for me to meet Wilmot later, in a month or two. When I went back to meet him, he wasn't there, so I decided that he wasn't going to be one of the people that I would be counting on. But through the years we've seen each other, and it's been a fairly cordial relationship.

BARBARA MEIERS:

We consider him a very talented person, very creative in his work. I believe you did see Candelario's work at his place first.

FRED MEIERS:

Oh, that's right, on that initial meeting. Jorge Wilmot showed us some of Candelario's work and he was very enthusiastic about Candelario. So it was through this connection that we heard of Candelario, who became one of the people that we dealt with in quite some quantity later.

SMITH:

Would you consider Wilmot a folk artist?

FRED MEIERS:

No, I wouldn't consider him a folk artist. I think because of his formal education, because of his way of thinking, he's a sophisticated person. He isn't the folk type, if such a characterization is possible.

SMITH:

In your scouring through Mexico, were you interested in nineteenth-century and earlier pieces as well?

FRED MEIERS:

We were interested in these things. As we went into more quantity, this wasn't the kind of thing that we felt we could do. Not enough things were

available, and we didn't have the means or the interest in setting up an antique business.

BARBARA MEIERS:

It'd be more a gallery kind of approach.

FRED MEIERS:

We were more interested in things that we could do in quantity and that were inexpensive.

BARBARA MEIERS:

We did buy some for ourselves, though, when we could find things.

FRED MEIERS:

We bought some for ourselves, and we bought some that we sold, some antique things. Not in any quantity, however. [tape recorder off] There were certain ones that we knew that we could get the kind of quality that we wanted and in some kind of quantity. It's very difficult to work with somebody when you're only buying a few pieces. It's unsatisfactory for the supplier and for the one who's buying.

#### **1.14. TAPE NUMBER: VII, Side Two (March 5, 1987)**

SMITH:

There are a few more artists that we want to get covered before moving on: One was Hipólito.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes, Francisco Hipólito. We're not on yet, are we?

SMITH:

Yes, we are.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Oh, we are.

FRED MEIERS:



Francisco Hipólito we heard of through the Basslers.

BARBARA MEIERS:

James and Veralee Bassler, who were living in Oaxaca at that time.

FRED MEIERS:

We consider him a very special artist. Everything that we've seen of his has been quite special. He is one of these people who was probably born individualized.

BARBARA MEIERS:

He is one that we would consider an individual artist, not in the folk tradition, really.

SMITH:

What's his background?

FRED MEIERS:

We really don't know. We've never met him. The Basslers have brought the things to us.

BARBARA MEIERS:

We got the things from them.

FRED MEIERS:

We've ordered things from him, and they've—a while back, when they would be coming back from Oaxaca, they would bring us a van full of folk art.

BARBARA MEIERS:

It was after they had moved back up here when Jim became a member of the faculty at UCLA.

SMITH:

Hipólito is from what village?

FRED MEIERS:

He's from a village near Ocotlán [de Morelos, Oaxaca]. The name of the village I don't think of right now.

BARBARA MEIERS:

It's where that dance, the Jardinero dance is done.

FRED MEIERS:

But that's done in several places, dear.

BARBARA MEIERS:

I understood from them that—well, we don't know the name of the village.

FRED MEIERS:

It's very close to Ocotlán.

SMITH:

Why do you say Hipólito is born individualized? What do you mean by that?

FRED MEIERS:

He's an artist.

BARBARA MEIERS:

He works in wood.

FRED MEIERS:

He has considerable talent, native talent. He works in wood. We first saw small puppets. They were very good. They were carved, small figures, articulated.

BARBARA MEIERS:

This possibly could come from a folk tradition, puppets.

FRED MEIERS:

Well, possibly. We haven't seen anything quite like those.

BARBARA MEIERS:

The rest of those things really don't seem to come out of anything.

FRED MEIERS:

We've seen masks, which may be the way he arrived at this carving. But then we asked if he could do a large figure, a large puppet.

SMITH:

How large?

FRED MEIERS:

About two feet tall. And he produced interesting figure, articulated.

SMITH:

What kind of puppet was that? What kind of was he working with?

FRED MEIERS:

It's an undressed puppet. It's—

BARBARA MEIERS:

A head of a man with a beard. His articulated so that it can be opened, and there's a of wood in the back that the puppeteer would use to the movement.

SMITH:

Does his work fit into this other tradition pastores, judases, or tastoanes?

BARBARA MEIERS:

No.

FRED MEIERS:

No, no. He's made merry-go-rounds and Ferris wheels.

BARBARA MEIERS:

And wonderful bicycles. He made a group of bicycles.

SMITH:

Made in miniature, you mean.

FRED MEIERS:

Yes. The Ferris wheels that we've seen are about so tall. [gestures]

SMITH:

About a meter. a very imagery jaw is piece control of the

FRED MEIERS:

Yes, about eighty centimeters. Whatever he makes is good.

BARBARA MEIERS:

He did beautiful little bulls, like for a bullfight.

FRED MEIERS:

And a rider, horse rider.

BARBARA MEIERS:

A horse and rider.

FRED MEIERS:

Beautiful small-scale figures.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Again, articulated.

FRED MEIERS:

The bicycles are some of the figures that we especially liked. This, also, was a suggestion of ours that he tried.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Bicycle and rider.

FRED MEIERS:

Bicycle and rider. As with many other people, we've made general suggestions without constraints, and it serves as a stimulus. And lots of times good things come out.

SMITH:

Why did you suggest the bicycle and rider?

FRED MEIERS:

Well, just because the form interests us. It's a pretty satisfactory shape. You have the openness of the wheels.

BARBARA MEIERS:

There had been other craftsmen in Mexico that had done wonderful things with bicycles, too.

SMITH:

Well, Rosendo [Rodríguez] has done motorcycles.

FRED MEIERS:

Rosendo did motorcycles, yes, after, I think, inspired by Hipólito, perhaps.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Maybe, or the Ocumicho [Michoacán].

FRED MEIERS:

Or by the Ocumicho stuff. We told you that—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes, when he came to the exhibit.

FRED MEIERS:

Yes, we went through that. I don't know whether in the catalogue [*¡Vivan los artesanos!*] there are photographs of the bicycles.

SMITH:

There's one.

FRED MEIERS:

Is there? Of Hipólito?

SMITH:

Of Hipólito.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes, right.

SMITH:

Of course, that's a very different feel than what Rosendo did.

FRED MEIERS:

Oh, yes. The material immediately makes a different solution possible.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Now, what were some of the other craftsmen that you said you didn't want to forget?

FRED MEIERS:

Jumping around among some of the craftsmen that are, in my mind, important, I want to mention Cecilio, who's in Uruapan [Michoacán], who's name I don't remember right now.

BARBARA MEIERS:

The last name we can't remember.

FRED MEIERS:

But we worked with him. He was in charge of the dyeing and the warping of the fabric that we worked with for a number of years. He was a very responsible craftsman and very sensitive to color. In working with fabric, it was very important for us to get exactly the

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FRED MEIERS:

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BARBARA MEIERS:

You may have talked about this a little bit when we were talking about our weaving in Uruapan.

FRED MEIERS:

This man is a Tarascan. He grew up in the area. He was part of a group of people—I may have mentioned this when we're talking about it earlier—craftsmen—young craftsmen, actually—who were displaced by the Parícutin [Michoacán] eruption, the volcano, and learned to weave when they were quite young.

SMITH:

Right.

FRED MEIERS:

But he is such a responsible person and so sensitive to color and to the needs of the weaving craft that it's an aptitude and ability that's unusual. It's unusual in any society, and it's especially unusual to find this kind of development of character and craftsmanship combined in a person in Mexico. Another person that I'd like to mention is a painter—who's now in Tlaquepaque, but who is a Tonalá [Jalisco] painter, a traditional Tonalá painter—who worked in the factory at [El] Palomar [de Guadalajara] for a number of years. And his name is Magdaleno Ramírez. He's a master painter. He's probably the most gifted of the living Tonalá painters. He paints with marvelous control, marvelous brush control. The painters in Tonalá don't learn to put things together, to combine things. That is, their preoccupation and concern is not with making compositions, but their preoccupation is in accumulating certain number of shapes or forms that they know how to do. So this person is different, is beyond this. He has a feeling for composition, an innate feeling for composition, which isn't frequently apparent in run-of-the-mill painters.

SMITH:

Where did he get his training?

FRED MEIERS:

His training was from within his family. As I say, he came from Tonalá, which is a pottery village.



BARBARA MEIERS:

And his decoration is based on the traditional decoration.

FRED MEIERS:

It is traditional decoration.

BARBARA MEIERS:

It's traditional decoration. It's just that he uses it so beautifully.

SMITH:

When you say he is concerned about composition and most Tonalá painters are not, does this lead him into a conflict with other Tonalá painters? I mean, do they look at his stuff and say—?

FRED MEIERS:

No. No, they recognize that he is good.

SMITH:

Does it influence other painters to think more in terms of composition?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes, it does. Well, Fred used him as the painter when he was working with designs and new ideas down there.

SMITH:

At El Palomar [de Guadalajara]?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes. And in this sense, the man's work became a model for what these other people did.

FRED MEIERS:

He was used as a quality controller for a while—for a long time, actually—as the head painter. But because of personality problems—not between him and other painters, but in that he wasn't interested in being an administrator—this didn't work out for him to—

BARBARA MEIERS:

To do that for very long.

FRED MEIERS:

—be, quote, the "head painter." But in doing all the designs that I did for years there, I used Magdaleno to execute them. It was a very good relationship.

SMITH:

Does he have apprentices?

FRED MEIERS:

Yes.

BARBARA MEIERS:

He has his own business now. He's not with El Palomar and hasn't been for quite a while.

FRED MEIERS:

Hasn't been there for years. One of his sons is at Palomar. Okay. Then I wanted to mention, as a source of materials, Alicia Briseño at El Palomar. She is a woman who, for one reason or another, has been very much interested in folk art, in folk dancing, in most any kind of Mexican folk art, and who is a good source of—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Information.

FRED MEIERS:

—material on this area.

BARBARA MEIERS:

From that region particularly?

FRED MEIERS:

Particularly from this region.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Tlaquepaque and Guadalajara region.

FRED MEIERS:

She has done buying for El Palomar in other parts of Mexico, but she's especially knowledgeable about the Jalisco area.

SMITH:

During the entire period of your business, were you continuing to look for new artists? Or did you arrive at a comfortable group of artists that you pretty much concentrated on?

FRED MEIERS:

As we got more and more into Tonalá, into the—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Ceramic business.

FRED MEIERS:

—designing and various problems related to Tonalá—

BARBARA MEIERS:

The production of ceramics.

FRED MEIERS:

—there was less time and energy to be out looking for new people. And for a certain amount of time, for a number of years, we just worked with the craftsmen, with the folk artists that we were in touch with. And our main emphasis was turned onto production, quality control, and designing.

BARBARA MEIERS:

At El Palomar.

FRED MEIERS:

Then, at the same time, up here, doing distribution of the product that we were making in the United States.

SMITH:

Also, I notice that there's a tension within your interest between looking for the typical, and then being almost drawn off on a tangential, but important, fascination with the individualization.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Individual artists.

SMITH:

In your work, in your collecting, how did you balance between the typical and the unique, the individual?

FRED MEIERS:

I think the real thing that determined our interest in both of these areas—for us, there isn't really any distinction, aesthetically, any distinction between the two since it is a question of finding things that are aesthetically satisfying, whether it's on an individual-artist basis or as a folk art, pure folk art expression, and that is the basis on which we selected everything that we ever selected.

BARBARA MEIERS:

And obviously, as time went on and we worked more with these individual artists, we became more interested in their work and less in the run-of-the-mill repeat kind of thing that you found everywhere in the market. It was, really, aesthetically more interesting to us. Although, when we would go to the markets and find things that were just done by some unknown artists, some craftsmen in the tradition, we would buy those things, too, and sell them. There were a number of things. Especially when we would go to the Christmas markets, for instance. Christmastime is a wonderful time for things in the markets.

FRED MEIERS:

We could always find things that—not lots, but we could always find things that were satisfying to us. And if we could get quantity of them, they would be very saleable. But that was a problem, getting quantity of something.

SMITH:

When you retired from your business, were there younger artists that you were particularly interested in? Younger folk artists?

FRED MEIERS:

Actually, we weren't in touch with younger artists. Some of them—within the family of Candelario there are younger artists. We've talked about that.

SMITH:

Right.

FRED MEIERS:

Within Rosendo's family there are also younger artists.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Those really are about the only—

FRED MEIERS:

Whether those people will continue to develop in absence of, in Rosendo's case, the parent, one doesn't know yet,

SMITH:

Do you think Mexican folk art will persist, continue?

FRED MEIERS:

I think it's surprising that it's gone on this long, really, since it isn't satisfactory—especially in times of inflation, I think it's very unsatisfactory as a way to make a living.

BARBARA MEIERS:

It's too hard for them.

FRED MEIERS:

When you have industrialization, the factories have to take over because it's a more stable source of income.

SMITH:

Were there other artists?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Does that cover it?

FRED MEIERS:

I think those are the ones that I wanted to mention.

SMITH:

What about the fiestas? That's a big part of—

BARBARA MEIERS:

That's right.

SMITH:

The folk art comes out of, goes back into the fiestas.

BARBARA MEIERS:

One of the most exciting ones that I got to see was the one in a pottery village in Michoacán called Patamban. It's very well known, especially for its greenware pineapple jars. They're in the form of—you've probably seen them, with the pineapple shape and the top. It was very exciting, a whole-day fiesta. We drove out to this small village, a very difficult road. We were with the Girards at that time. They had decorated the village—especially down one street and then all of the cross sections—with wonderful displays at every corner of pottery and palm. And they had lined the streets with pine needles that they stripped from the trees. So on the whole street, you walked on this green pine, and it smelled wonderful. And then down the center they had taken—what do you call it? When you work through something?

FRED MEIERS:

Stencil.

BARBARA MEIERS:

A stencil, stencil forms, and using either colored sawdust or petals, flower petals had made designs that went all down the whole length of the street. And at each corner there was sort of a competition between the barrios of the city for this decoration. And then there was a use of cut paper that was strung

across the streets all the way down. Then the culmination of the day was a parade. There were women with bowls of flowers and fruit. And then there was a priest that came clear at the very end of the day and walked on this lovely pattern up to the church—or a little chapel, I guess it was—up in the hills, a little foothill. It was just unbelievable. Just beautiful.

FRED MEIERS:

These paper banners, pierced cut paper that were hanging from one side of the little street to the other, made just sort of a—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Like a canopy of just open—

FRED MEIERS:

Yes, a canopy, the marvelous light, airy kind of top over the street. And this beautiful little strip down through these little narrow streets, cobblestone streets, multicolored—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Brilliant colors. The marigolds were all in bloom at that time. This particular fiesta is the Cristo Rey celebration, which is the last Sunday in October, and the marigolds are used. And then the cosmos—which are wild, all over—and this wonderful lavender, and stronger pink, and deeper kind of purple color, with this marigold color is just unbelievable. Then the use of the pots on these barrio corners, each street corner—

FRED MEIERS:

Between the barrios. Every time you came to a separate area of the town there would be an archway made of—sometimes of cardboard, sometimes of some other kind of background material—on which they mounted tiny little pots to form an all-over pattern covering the whole shebang, covering the whole understructure.

BARBARA MEIERS:

There were different kinds of pots, you know. They made both the terra-cotta color and the green ones. Then they combined that with the palm, which is just beautiful. The young palm, the new leaf as it unfolds, is what they used

for the decoration. In fact, the uprights were very often full of this wonderful—

FRED MEIERS:

Then occasionally they used seeds which they—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Glued to the surface of this arch. It was just a real production.

FRED MEIERS:

Used them as areas of texture. It's really a marvelous celebration.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Just beautiful.

FRED MEIERS:

The whole town is involved in this competition, celebration.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Everybody is going along talking about how beautiful it is. And the people that are working on it, too, are admiring their own work, you know, and their neighbor's. And there are these baskets full of petals that they are using to make these decorations down the center of the street. Really just an incredible experience.

FRED MEIERS:

It's been much photographed and it's been on Mexican television.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Since we were there. We were there probably in 1974, '75, something like that.

FRED MEIERS:

That's probably the most overpowering—well, I don't know. It's one of the very most fascinating—

BARBARA MEIERS:



Beautiful, really beautiful.

FRED MEIERS:

Very successful celebration.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Well, the other one that I thought was so wonderful was in Teotitlan del Valle [Oaxaca] at Easter time, when we went there. The people were parading through the streets and the women were carrying babies dressed like angels.

FRED MEIERS:

With gold wings.

BARBARA MEIERS:

And these little crowns, you know.

FRED MEIERS:

Gauzy little skirts.

BARBARA MEIERS:

They were so wonderful.

FRED MEIERS:

Every once in a while, the angels would have to eat and the mothers would have to unbutton and feed the angels.

BARBARA MEIERS:

And there were these little stands all along the way where they were serving drinks, some kind of drink that looked like, sort of, a milky water. I remember being offered it, you know, and it was so hard not to—you didn't want to offend them. You [Fred] were afraid to have it, too. But that was a great experience.

FRED MEIERS:

I forget what this drink is.

SMITH:

Jamaica?

FRED MEIERS:

Oh, no. It looks like plaster.

BARBARA MEIERS:

It looks like a little plaster mix. [laughter]

FRED MEIERS:

It's powder on top of water.

BARBARA MEIERS:

I don't really know what it is or what it tastes like because we didn't indulge.

SMITH:

Horchata? Not like horchata?

FRED MEIERS:

It looks lethal.

SMITH:

It's an alcoholic beverage?

FRED MEIERS:

No, no.

BARBARA MEIERS:

No, I don't think so. But these little way stations, too, were very charming. They were made almost like little altars. Decorated beautifully, you know, and they had their little refreshments. And the people, as they would go by—and in the parades—would have little refreshments as they would go along. It was hot, hot, hot, hot that day.

FRED MEIERS:

This was in—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Easter, and that's a very hot time to walk.

FRED MEIERS:

These different little places were in different barrios. This was in Oaxaca area.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Out there in the weaving village of Teotitlan del Valle. That was a wonderful one. Día de los Locos in Metepec [estado de Mexico]; I didn't see that one. Or the one in Cherán [Michoacán].

FRED MEIERS:

And the Día de los Reyes in Michoacán, in Cherán, which is on the road down to Uruapan. There's a dance that lasts all day. It's a dance of the Moors and the devils. The dance is done in the center of the village,, and then—well, this is a pattern that exists in many places: The dance is done initially in the center of the village, and then it goes through various barrios. This was interesting because of the color of the costumes—which is mainly white with bright colored ribbons and embroidery—on both the men and women. Then everybody was—all the dancers, wore masks.

BARBARA MEIERS:

With wonderful hats with the satin ribbons that went clear down the length, clear from the hat down to the—

FRED MEIERS:

Don't get confused with the dance of the Moors.

BARBARA MEIERS:

The slides that we have from Cherán have those—

FRED MEIERS:

Okay.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Remember, with my brother in the picture?

FRED MEIERS:

Yes.

BARBARA MEIERS:

And those ribbons would go from the hats all the way down to the floor, to the ground.

FRED MEIERS:

Okay. There's the Danza de los Negritos, which has huge piles of ribbons.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes, they do, too.

FRED MEIERS:

Okay. These masks in this dance are used in different villages and they rent the masks. They're wooden masks and they rent them and schedule fiestas. For instance, they celebrate the Día de los Reyes on different days so that they can have the masks and use them in different nearby villages. Unfortunately, some of the masks are turning into plastic and rubber. They're using some of the worst of the commercial horror things, the type that we have up here at Halloween, in connection with these dances, too.

SMITH:

Right. That's a recent development?

FRED MEIERS:

Well, it's not recent. There was some evidence of it—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Back then? In the sixties?

FRED MEIERS:

In the sixties. But mainly they were wooden traditional masks. And mainly the masks were white; white with a gold tooth or two.

BARBARA MEIERS:

And a moustache, pink cheeks, pretty pink cheeks.

FRED MEIERS:

Right. Plus the devil masks. Then another sort of variation on the costume, also in Cherán, was in a dance by the little girls. It was for Corpus Christi. The girls were all done up in—I assume that this was peculiar to Cherán because it wasn't the typical Corpus Christi celebration that you find in lots of other places. But all these children wore tin crowns made of tin cans, and much satin and lace, bright colors. The visual affect was the main thing about it that gave it its interest because the dance was just a lot of, sort of—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Shuffling around.

FRED MEIERS:

Single shuffle steps that didn't amount to much.

BARBARA MEIERS:

What about the Metepec one? The local—what do they call it?

FRED MEIERS:

There was one in Metepec that was interesting. It was called the Día de los Locos. It was held only in the square in this case, in a big square. It was sort of an April Fool's Day. Everybody seemed to be at least half drunk and playing pranks on one another—and whomever was available.

BARBARA MEIERS:

On bystanders, too.

FRED MEIERS:

But the most interesting part of this was the competition of the yokes of oxen. The yokes were over scaled—they were decorative yokes that would encompass two oxen. The material they used—well, it was a yoke that would be about, say, two feet in height and maybe six or seven feet wide and the surface was all covered with seeds, a mosaic kind of decoration made up of seeds.

BARBARA MEIERS:

What kind of pattern?

FRED MEIERS:

Geometric pattern.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Geometric?

FRED MEIERS:

Yes. So there was a competition to see who made the best yoke. They were really interesting.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Is this where they decorated the bulls themselves, too?

FRED MEIERS:

And the bulls they painted. In some cases they put strips of shiny fabric on the bulls, sort of a belly-band kind of thing. It was visually very exciting. Then another interesting one was in Jocotepec in Jalisco—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Which is near Guadalajara.

FRED MEIERS:

Which is near the lake, near Lake Chapala. It comes in the month of January. I don't remember the exact occasion, but it's a celebration that's held in the evening. They have a large santo in a chapel there which is probably twelve feet high. This figure is carried down the main street of the town and all the people—many people of the town turn out—everybody has a candle—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Is it a Virgin?

FRED MEIERS:

No, it isn't.

BARBARA MEIERS:

What is it? Is it a Cristo? Or a saint of some kind?

FRED MEIERS:

I think it's a Cristo, but I'm not even positive that it—it isn't a Virgin. I think it's a Cristo; I'm not positive. The figure is so big that they don't hold it in an upright position; it's lying down. I mean, it's made to be in an upright position but it's difficult to carry it—

BARBARA MEIERS:

But they carry it horizontally. I see.

FRED MEIERS:

On this occasion, horizontally.

BARBARA MEIERS:

And they carried it out where?

FRED MEIERS:

They carried it around the main streets of the town; not very far.

BARBARA MEIERS:

With candles at night.

FRED MEIERS:

The streets are narrow, and the whole street jammed with the people with candles are just always dramatic.

BARBARA MEIERS:

And what about Zapopan [Jalisco]?

FRED MEIERS:

There are many long involved tales about the Virgin of Zapopan, which is a very famous Virgin in the Guadalajara area. Her home is in Zapopan, a town near Guadalajara. The Virgin spends quite a bit of time visiting different churches in the area. But when she eventually goes back to Zapopan there is a huge fiesta which goes on for five days—maybe a week—during which time there are hundreds of thousands of people that attend. This Virgin has her

own car, and it's an honor to pull the car. It's only the very high muckety-mucks who get to pull it.

BARBARA MEIERS:

They don't use the motor. That's strictly not part of the—

FRED MEIERS:

—are allowed to pull the car. A highway has been built for the purpose of this trip from Guadalajara to Zapopan. There's much parading of dance groups through the streets, which culminate and spend hours and hours and hours each of these days dancing in the churchyard. There are probably a couple of hundred dancers dancing at the same time, made up of maybe six to ten different groups of people doing different dances to different music.

BARBARA MEIERS:

[laughter] All in the churchyard.

FRED MEIERS:

All at the same time.

SMITH:

It must have been some churchyard.

FRED MEIERS:

Yes. It's a big churchyard. But there's one group right up against another group against another group, so you need triple hearing and sight to take it all in. It's really an experience to have all this sound coming at once from different directions. And everything is bright, bright. The dancers are all doing complicated kinds of dances? dances that are well known among the people who are into these things. There are a number of different kinds of dances that are traditional in Mexican culture.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Was this the one where the people crawl on their knees to the church?

FRED MEIERS:



Yes. Because there are these thousands and thousands of people, they don't do it—let's say that I haven't seen them going very far; just, say, a block or across the churchyard.

**1.15. TAPE NUMBER: VIII, Side One (March 5, 1987)**

SMITH:

There's a fiesta in Oaxaca that you wanted to talk about?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes, December 18. That's the celebration of the patron Virgin of Oaxaca, which is the Soledad. We started out in the evening walking through the town and all of the people were out. It was very dark; there weren't any street lights. People were all along the streets eating their supper and had their little lanterns. It was like something out of the Middle Ages. It was just wonderful. We walked up toward the square where the church is, got up where we could see overlooking the churchyard, and watched this wonderful parade of men carrying banners—that were so heavy, they really just staggered under them.

FRED MEIERS:

They were about twelve, fifteen feet high.

BARBARA MEIERS:

They were all in wonderful colors: rich purples, blues, and reds. And the banners were all heavily loaded with milagros, fairly good sized.

FRED MEIERS:

Very large-scale milagros.

BARBARA MEIERS:

They had a belt around them and then some kind of a fastening on the front so that they could carry the standard that way, in front of them. Those were so exciting. Then there were groups of young girls all in very white dresses that were all going into the church. And it was lighted; both by electricity—strings of lights around the churchyard—and then with candles—people carrying candles, too. And actually the culmination of that was the fireworks,

the castillos, which we didn't stay to see that night. I don't know anything more about it than that—do you?—of that particular festival.

FRED MEIERS:

No. It was just very impressive because of the size and the quality of these very beautiful milagros, and the quantity of them on these big banners.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes. And the fact that it was at night.

SMITH:

The Oaxaca festival is one that attracts quite a few Americans and Europeans, as well as Mexican tourists.

FRED MEIERS:

Yes. Well, it's a series of fiestas.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Well, there are several of them. This one is the December 18. Then there's the one with the radishes, which is the [December] 23, I believe— isn't it?

FRED MEIERS:

One reads lots about that. It's really beautiful.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes. It's really wonderful.

SMITH:

What about some of the—like the Patamban [Michoacán]? Is that—?

BARBARA MEIERS:

It's not very well known.

SMITH:

In some of these festivals you might have been the only Americans there?

BARBARA MEIERS:

At the time when we were there [Patamban], there were very few—

FRED MEIERS:

I don't think there were any Americans.

BARBARA MEIERS:

I don't think there were, no.

FRED MEIERS:

The [Rubin de la] Borbollas were there. At that point there weren't too many people from outside? a few.

BARBARA MEIERS:

It's a difficult place to get to, number one.

FRED MEIERS:

You get in there, and you might get rained on.

BARBARA MEIERS:

If it rains, there's no way to get out. The roads are like deep ruts, and they get filled with water. The taxi driver that took us said, "Oh." He said he didn't know whether it was going to rain or not. We got in there, and it did sprinkle a little bit. But then it quit and we were able to stay. But if it had really rained we would have left right then and there and not seen it at all. We've heard about times when it rained, and, of course, it ruins the whole thing. They've got all this beautiful display, the paper things and everything, and it just pours rain and everything's wiped out. [laughter]

FRED MEIERS:

That's it.

BARBARA MEIERS:

It's all so ephemeral, really.

FRED MEIERS:

It's very close in time to the Day of the Dead. So on this particularly trip, [after] we saw that—

BARBARA MEIERS:

We went on to other celebrations of the Day of the Dead.

FRED MEIERS:

We visited other very interesting things in connection with the Day of the Dead.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes. One in Tzintzuntzan [Michoacán] which was wonderful.

SMITH:

Perhaps we should wrap up some loose ends about the business. We've been alluding to it throughout, but there are a few things—my first question is: Which were the main stores that you sold to?

BARBARA MEIERS:

You mean when we first began?

SMITH:

Yes, let's start when you first began.

FRED MEIERS:

Our first customers were—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Folk art customers.

FRED MEIERS:

Yes. Were the Balinese Shop in Pasadena, which was run by Jim and Monza Stevens; Curt Wagner in Redondo Beach; and Van Keppel-Green in Beverly Hills.

BARBARA MEIERS:

And, of course, Ralph and Pat [Patricia B.] Altman.

FRED MEIERS:

Oh, of course the Altmans. It was called Altman's Antiques.

BARBARA MEIERS:

On La Cienega [Boulevard]. Those were our first stores.

SMITH:

Were there things that the stores wanted in preference to other things?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Well, sure. It depended upon their orientation, you know. For instance, the Balinese Shop loved the toys and smaller and less expensive things; the Altmans loved anything we could get in the way of old things especially, as well as the good folk art pieces, too, the pottery things.

FRED MEIERS:

When we started it was really sort of pioneering because Mexican was sort of a—you say "Mexican," and the reaction was—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Junk.

FRED MEIERS:

—negative. So there were sort of strikes against us in the beginning.

BARBARA MEIERS:

It was an educational thing we really had to do.

SMITH:

Well, how did you go about educating, and who were you educating? Was it the store owners or the public?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Well, it was the public, really. The store owners to some extent. They would look at it, you know, and maybe they liked it, and they would have to just try it. So we would have to convince them that this thing might work for them. We really were selling at that point. We were running around just taking out little samples everywhere. We would pack a load in the car and drive up the coast. That was the other thing that we did. We got some information from

the Balinese Shop people about other places to sell out of Los Angeles, and those were sort of our next customers.

SMITH:

You had mentioned once that you had done Christmas stockings when you started?

FRED MEIERS:

Yes.

SMITH:

Who were those for?

FRED MEIERS:

Those we did later when we were selling more in quantity. This was at the very beginning. Also in connection with this, we started selling fabric as yardage to a gal who was a designer [Cynthia Kriz].

BARBARA MEIERS:

Was making clothes.

FRED MEIERS:

And had a shop—

BARBARA MEIERS:

In Manhattan Beach [California].

FRED MEIERS:

Where she sold only her own designs. She was one of our first really serious customers as well.

SMITH:

I understand that May Company used to have an annual folk art festival.

FRED MEIERS:

An annual?

SMITH:

Yes.

FRED MEIERS:

They had store-wide promotions. May Company was not one of our earliest customers; came a little later. From Van Keppel-Green we developed customers in various parts of the country. I think we talked a little about this earlier.

SMITH:

Yes.

BARBARA MEIERS:

In connection with George Jensen in the East.

FRED MEIERS:

And then especially in some shops in the Northwest, Seattle and Spokane. Then one day the Gustins [Yvonne, and Jay] gave us a call. They wanted to come see us. We had started making place mats at this time, too.

BARBARA MEIERS:

By that time we developed the fabric enough so that we had confidence in the dye and the quality so that we could make some things of our own.

FRED MEIERS:

So we started making place mats here, cottage industry kind of thing here.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Producing them here so we could control the quality.

FRED MEIERS:

We made place mats and napkins and runners.

SMITH:

Now, were your color schemes your color schemes?

FRED MEIERS:

Yes, they were ours.

SMITH:

Where did those colors come from?

FRED MEIERS:

Out of our heads.

SMITH:

Did they fit kind of a general design?

FRED MEIERS:

Yes.

SMITH:

Color is such a fashion-oriented—

FRED MEIERS:

That's right. We designed fabrics—what we did was right for the time, and it was right for high-style market. And the people who were interested in it were—well, it wasn't just high style, but it included high style and sort of an upper-department store, upper-class, you know, Bullock's, Bloomingdale's, that kind of store.

BARBARA MEIERS:

But as far as the Gustin company went, the Gustins got in touch with us because they had been using our place mats in one of their baskets that they were selling. They used it in connection with display. They said they didn't like to have anything on display that they weren't selling so they wanted to know if we wanted them to sell our place mats. That's how we really got started with them, they were interested in our fabric.

FRED MEIERS:

We thought about it. We thought about it a long time and didn't make any move. Then they called us again a couple of months later and wanted to come see us again. We said, "Well, we thought about it, but in case we were to do anything with you, we would want you to distribute the other things that we have."



BARBARA MEIERS:

Something else other than just the place mats.

FRED MEIERS:

So they thought about it and they said fine, and gave it a whirl.

SMITH:

Were they national distributors?

MEIERS:

Yes.

SMITH:

Who were you dealing with in particular?

FRED MEIERS:

Yvonne and Jay Gustin.

SMITH:

They were the owners?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Right.

FRED MEIERS:

Yes. They're very nice people. We've worked with them for—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Nineteen sixty-one we started.

FRED MEIERS:

Over twenty years they did our distribution. We learned a lot through working with them about marketing.

BARBARA MEIERS:

They were very helpful about marketing.

FRED MEIERS:

Then we were working with folk art with them, and it was very difficult because of the lack of quantity of any one thing.

BARBARA MEIERS:

[No] continuity.

FRED MEIERS:

We had all these pots, all different kinds of pots. And to know what to do: How do you sell? You can't sell one-of-a-kind things when you're selling in a broader market. It's very difficult. You have to have—

BARBARA MEIERS:

A continuity, you know, a repeat kind of situation.

FRED MEIERS:

Repetition. One thing that we showed was a frog that was about this tall [gestures] with a great mouth. It came from Acatlán [de Osorio, Puebla] from Herón Martínez.

BARBARA MEIERS:

It's a little bigger than that. It sold like mad.

FRED MEIERS:

You know, somebody put it in an ad.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Oh, I have the picture of it. It was a full spread in the newspaper. It covered the whole page.

FRED MEIERS:

And so everybody had to have one of those things.

BARBARA MEIERS:

And getting these things up here, and getting them up here whole—I mean, the shipping problem was just unbelievable.

SMITH:

Made by Herón Martínez?

FRED MEIERS:

Yes. No, not really. They were made by craftsmen in Acatlán.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Made by his group of people in Acatlán, right.

SMITH:

So in order to get the quantity—

BARBARA MEIERS:

We learned a lot in the first few years, especially working with them in a different kind of situation.

SMITH:

What did you learn out of this frog incident?

FRED MEIERS:

You can't show it if you can't produce it, a word.

BARBARA MEIERS:

[laughter] You have to be sure that you can get something that you can really repeat and be sure of in order to show in a situation like a showroom in the Los Angeles [Merchandise Mart].

FRED MEIERS:

The thing is it's not as simple as it sounds because you can show a lot of things and no bells ring.

BARBARA MEIERS:

You mean as far as the public.

FRED MEIERS:

Yes. We had some figures about like this. They were heads, very interesting terra-cotta heads. We had hundreds of those and nobody ever bought them.

[laughter] Then there were some little cloth dolls made in Oaxaca. They were made of little scraps of cloth. Little figures, white, with little colored skirts.

BARBARA MEIERS:

We sold them as Christmas tree decorations.

FRED MEIERS:

They made very good Christmas decoration—

BARBARA MEIERS:

They were wonderful.

FRED MEIERS:

—Christmas tree decoration for a country kind of store situation, country look.

BARBARA MEIERS:

You know, and some of the stores wanted to order them by the thousands. And here were these little craftsmen, a few craftsmen making these little dolls. This is the kind of situation we got into.

FRED MEIERS:

Henri Bendel wanted a thousand to begin with. And these were done by one little—I think it was one little lady. We got five hundred, [Barbara laughs] but that was a big production to get five hundred.

FRED MEIERS:

Eventually we decided, when the people from Tonalá [Jalisco] came to see us—

BARBARA MEIERS:

That was what really changed the scene with the Gustin people, was that the people in Tlaquepaque [Jalisco]—

FRED MEIERS:

See, we'd been selling place mats and folk art, and you can't sell enough of that to really make it financially interesting.

BARBARA MEIERS:

And by that time we knew that we had to make more money than we were making, too.

FRED MEIERS:

We were learning about money along the line, too. All these things were too inexpensive.

SMITH:

Your yardage operation in Michoacán, where does that fit in in relation to this chronology?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Well, that was in '61.

FRED MEIERS:

That started early.

BARBARA MEIERS:

We began with the Illsleys [Walter and Bundy] in 1961. So everything was happening at the same time, really.

SMITH:

Had the Gustins already gotten in contact with you?

FRED MEIERS:

No, they were a little later.

BARBARA MEIERS:

No, we started with the Illsleys first.

FRED MEIERS:

Yes, a couple of years before that.

BARBARA MEIERS:

We had already developed the fabric.

SMITH:

You were able to provide yardage and that sort of thing on a consistent basis?

FRED MEIERS:

Oh, yes.

SMITH:

On a quantity basis.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Oh, yes. We wouldn't have gotten into that if we hadn't.

FRED MEIERS:

This was the first thing that was commercial. That is to say that it was making some money.

BARBARA MEIERS:

A production kind of situation instead of, you know, a few pieces.

FRED MEIERS:

And shortly—well, a couple of years after that Arthur Kent and Ken Edwards appeared on the scene up here looking for distribution for a business.

BARBARA MEIERS:

They had heard about us in Mexico.

FRED MEIERS:

They were starting—they were hoping to do something.

SMITH:

Can you give me a little bit about their background?

FRED MEIERS:

Yes. Arthur Kent was born in South Africa, educated—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Brussels, partly.

FRED MEIERS:

—in a musical background training in Brussels.

BARBARA MEIERS:

And then came to this country.

FRED MEIERS:

Well, he came to this country earlier than this—

BARBARA MEIERS:

During this music—

FRED MEIERS:

—because he was sponsored by the Hudson Company and sent to Brussels for his education. Later [he] was in business in Los Angeles—a successful businessman who had a heart attack—and retired to Mexico.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Went to Mexico to retire.

FRED MEIERS:

[He] became involved with Ken Edwards, who was an American living in Tlaquepaque.

BARBARA MEIERS:

At that point he had left working with [Jorge] Wilmot and was setting up his own business.

FRED MEIERS:

Decided he wanted to set up his own business. They started a business together. At the same time that they started the business together they came up here to get somebody to distribute what they made.

BARBARA MEIERS:

And they came to us.

FRED MEIERS:

They came to us.

BARBARA MEIERS:

We saw right away the possibilities of developing the few pieces that they had made into a real line.

FRED MEIERS:

Well, we didn't do that immediately.

BARBARA MEIERS:

No, but one reason we felt that we wanted to work with them was that we could see that there was a possibility of doing something bigger. And by then we were working with the Gustins and we were interested in something that was much more like a production.

FRED MEIERS:

We needed a source that would produce a quantity of saleable material.

BARBARA MEIERS:

See, that was in '64 that we worked with them.

FRED MEIERS:

We could see that that had some of the characteristics that we were looking for.

BARBARA MEIERS:

By then we'd been working with the Gustins since '61 and we needed something. So we really worked with Jay Gustin, Jay and Yvonne. You know, discussed possibilities of things with them and what they thought about how it would work out as a line, and got into the design act down there and designed the line.

FRED MEIERS:

We decided that we wanted to do dinnerware. We said to the Gustins that we thought we'd like to do dinnerware and they said, "Oh, you don't know what you're getting into."



BARBARA MEIERS:

[laughter] We didn't know, certainly.

FRED MEIERS:

He said, "You might have a hundred of something and you can't sell a hundred of them because you don't have a hundred of something else, like that." But we decided we wanted to try dinnerware, and that became a very important part of the business.

SMITH:

Now you two designed the dinnerware?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Fred primarily. I got into the act, usually, by lots of times doing his drawings for him, that kind of thing. But it was primarily his ideas.

SMITH:

What was Ken Edwards's role in this?

BARBARA MEIERS:

He was a ceramist. It really was a collaborative thing.

FRED MEIERS:

The process with Ken was one of collaboration.

SMITH:

Did he design as well?

FRED MEIERS:

Oh, yes. He designed lots of the shapes. Usually we had to plant the idea and then he would produce what we asked for. Then I would do the decoration, surface, in the Tonalá tradition.

SMITH:

And this was the beginning of El Palomar [de Guadalajara]?

FRED MEIERS:

This was before El Palomar started.

BARBARA MEIERS:

It was really called Artesanos de Tonalá at that point. But there was a factory started, a small factory.

SMITH:

How did what you were doing relate to the true Tonalá tradition?

FRED MEIERS:

The decoration was based on their facility, their technique. The whole treatment was based on their experience.

SMITH:

So you hired people like Magdaleno Ramirez?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Right. And worked with them. So it really came from them.

FRED MEIERS:

Everything was designed in their terms.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Right.

SMITH:

Where did the finances come from when it started?

FRED MEIERS:

Oh, it was real rough going; mainly supported by Arthur Kent.

SMITH:

And the Gustins were the distributors?

FRED MEIERS:

The Gustins did the national distribution, right.

SMITH:

So what you were doing then was setting up a more industrial situation for what the Tonalá artists were already doing?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Right.

SMITH:

To guarantee supply.

FRED MEIERS:

Right, yes. That part of the responsibility was initially Ken's, to set up the production, and it worked for a while. Organization wasn't his long suit. After a few years we had somebody come in from outside, a French designer who was very organized. And the factory with over a hundred people really had to get organized. There had to be studies made to see that the process that's happening right under my hand didn't have to go half a block down the street for the following process to continue, but could occur adjacent to it, and then the third process could in turn be close by, etc.

SMITH:

Did you build the factory Artesanos de Tonalá?

FRED MEIERS:

Yes, right.

SMITH:

This was not. in Tonalá, however.

FRED MEIERS:

No, it was in Tlaquepaque. We named it Tonalá because of the painters.

BARBARA MEIERS:

The painters, primarily, from Tonalá. It was a Tonalá tradition of painting.

FRED MEIERS:

Then that became a problem because the tourists would go to Tonalá for the ware and it wasn't in Tonalá; it was at our place. [Barbara laughs]

SMITH:

Your laborers, your work force were who? Where did they come from?

BARBARA MEIERS:

All from the region.

FRED MEIERS:

The painters were all from Tonalá; others from Tlaquepaque.

SMITH:

Was this your first experience with getting involved in business?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes.

FRED MEIERS:

Yes, yes.

SMITH:

What kind of government regulations did you have to deal with in terms of operating a factory like this in Mexico?

FRED MEIERS:

This wasn't my responsibility; this was done by Arthur Kent. But there were lots of problems. It's very difficult to run a business in Mexico. There's so much red tape, so many problems that were multiplied by being in a Latin situation. It's bad enough to try and do anything in the States. I mean, we have all this paperwork that's necessary, but Mexico has just two or three or four or five times as much monkeying around.

BARBARA MEIERS:

So many decisions have to come from Mexico City, so that you're waiting forever and ever. For instance, things that have to do with our cloth business. They would have to have permits of various kinds for export, and all the paperwork would have to come right from Mexico City. So it meant lots of times they literally had to go to Mexico City.

FRED MEIERS:

Somebody would have to go to Mexico.

BARBARA MEIERS:

From Uruapan [Michoacán]. It just meant so many delays.

FRED MEIERS:

And the materials are very limited in Mexico.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Hard to get.

FRED MEIERS:

In working with high-fire temperatures it means that certain kinds of materials are necessary. The kind of materials that can stand this kind of [temperature] high fire, are not always available.

SMITH:

Couldn't you import them?

BARBARA MEIERS:

That's what they did, some of them, but it's very hard.

FRED MEIERS:

It's very difficult to import anything in Mexico.

BARBARA MEIERS:

And of course it's terribly expensive.

FRED MEIERS:

Mexico. doesn't, in general, believe in importing anything.

BARBARA MEIERS:

They try to keep everything out.

FRED MEIERS:

But one can import. There's one company that imports clay products from the United States.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Mexico City again.

FRED MEIERS:

But each time you get the product it has to be re-tested because it's not the same product that you had the last time you bought it. So you have to adjust your formula to the next batch of material that you're buying, that kind of thing. The gas that you buy varies in quality so that it's not the same gas necessarily.

BARBARA MEIERS:

The propane, or whatever it is.

FRED MEIERS:

One big bamba to the next one had different characteristics.

BARBARA MEIERS:

And the dyes, too. They had to go afield for many of those because the dyes then were not very stable, the Mexican dyes.

FRED MEIERS:

That was possible, to get international dyes. We developed the use of the best dyes in every which way.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Wherever they were, whether they were Swiss or British or American or whatever,

SMITH:

The Mexican government understood that—? Did you have to make an argument that you could import?

FRED MEIERS:

Oh, yes. Yes. There was a Mexican black. It wasn't any good, but it was available as a dye. So they said, "No, no. We're not importing any black."

BARBARA MEIERS:

No black. [laughter]

FRED MEIERS:

Very difficult.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Anyway, that's just sort of a sample of some of the problems that we had.

SMITH:

What about pollution laws? Obviously, dealing with ceramics you're going to emit some pollutants.

FRED MEIERS:

There aren't enough—Mexico is just barely awakening to the pollution [issue].

BARBARA MEIERS:

You mean in Mexico?

SMITH:

Yes. As a ceramics factory—and I suppose the textiles to a degree, too—you're dealing with materials that have pollutants.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Well, this Frenchman did something to help, I think, control situations better. Like a proper spray booth and this kind of thing, you know. And masks, wearing masks.

FRED MEIERS:

Protecting the workmen rather than the more social pollution.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Protection of the workmen from the—they're still working at it and trying to get it better. It's still far from solved.

SMITH:

Did the government have health regulations?

BARBARA MEIERS:

No.

FRED MEIERS:

Not really, no. Mexico is terribly lax, I mean, no electric code [is] required. When anything isn't required in Mexico there's no—I mean, they'll connect two wires together and—they want something, so they'll connect two wires together; disconnect it, take the wires apart. I mean, they want it turned off, separate the wire, and such solutions. But it's, after twenty years—

BARBARA MEIERS:

And the clay dust is very bad. It's terrible on your lungs. I was always concerned about Fred's. He had some terrible infections down there and I know that that clay dust was part of the problem.

SMITH:

Was your shop unionized?

FRED MEIERS:

Oh, yes.

SMITH:

How was working with the union? Did you have labor disputes?

FRED MEIERS:

There have always been labor problems. One of the main problems was that the head of the union was a terrible person and fought with everybody.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Well, the head of this particular union, you're talking about.

FRED MEIERS:

Yes.



BARBARA MEIERS:

There are many unions.

SMITH:

In Tlaquepaque or national?

FRED MEIERS:

No, in Guadalajara.

BARBARA MEIERS:

In general there's a lot of corruption. It's the same old thing as in so many areas.

FRED MEIERS:

The money so often goes into the hands of local union heads.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Goes into their pockets.

FRED MEIERS:

I mean, this particular man isn't small pickings. Too much graft goes directly to him, and he's very difficult. He's been in this position for years and years, and it's just sort of a half-time job just to maintain communication with the union.

SMITH:

We're into another interview that we're doing with a businessman whose company is primarily international trade related. One of the things he says is that Americans are very naive—and the government here, in particular—because you can't do trade in most countries of the world without having to bribe somebody, and that's accepted practice.

FRED MEIERS:

Yes.

SMITH:

Was the famous mordida connected—?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Oh, yes.

FRED MEIERS:

Oh, yes. Right. That's just part of it. [tape recorder off]

SMITH:

So the Artesanos de Tonalá was one company that you were involved with?

FRED MEIERS:

Artesanos de Tonalá was the initial company, and then there was a company set up called El Palomar. El Palomar de Guadalajara was initially a shop, and this has become—the Artesanos was the business that was concerned with producing Tonalaware.

BARBARA MEIERS:

The factory.

SMITH:

In El Palomar you designed the bulk of the dinnerware that was produced?

FRED MEIERS:

Yes.

SMITH:

But the El Palomar dinnerware had moved away from the Tonalá style?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Not really until in the last few years. We still were using the traditional decoration in one way or another.

FRED MEIERS:

The line that we call Tonalá—it's a little confusing, these names—is the name that we gave the initial design for dinnerware, the birds and flowers. Then the next design we did was called Veracruz, and it was a simpler thing. It had a broader band of brownish-gold—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Out on the edge.

FRED MEIERS:

And a series of three flowers and leaves. Then we did a design called Guadalajara which was a dark blue on the gray, a medallion center with a broad band of blue.

BARBARA MEIERS:

But all of these decorations Fred really drew out of the Tonalá traditional decoration. He would take different elements of it and develop them into a decoration for a line.

FRED MEIERS:

I designed things that were within their vocabulary.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Right.

SMITH:

It seems from some of the things that you showed me that the ceramic colors that you used began to change.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Well, they did begin to develop different kinds of colors.

FRED MEIERS:

In high-fire ware, for a long time, the color was very limited. You could work with blues—dark blues, light blues—and you could work with greens. And you could work with iron which was brown, dark brown. Or you combine another ingredient with the iron and get a lighter kind of brown, a golden kind of color. And you could work with black and white. But that was it. This was the sum total of the colors available. There are now ways of doing many, many different kinds of color. These are not available in Mexico; they're available in the States, however. There's a big range of color now possible at higher temperature.

BARBARA MEIERS:

But this was because we took ceramists from up here, hired them to go down there and act as consultants and ceramists in the factory to solve all kinds of problems and to help develop new colors and new approaches to—solutions to all kinds of different problems.

SMITH:

What kind of volume were you producing? Do you recall?

FRED MEIERS:

I don't know how to talk in these kinds of terms. No, I don't know what kind of volume we were producing. It varied. In the first years, lots of stumbling and groping along and lack of technical training on the part of the people who were working in the ceramics there. So there was just progress by and trial by error. Then when we began to get better outside advice, the production became better. Quality control was always a big problem. It was very foreign to the Mexicans—the idea—that everything that came out of the kiln wasn't saleable. And since we wanted to sell a lot up here, they were very unhappy with the thing called quality control and really resisted this.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Which we had to have in order to sell anything up here.

FRED MEIERS:

But there's no way in the American market that you can just sell everything, call it first quality, and get away with it.

SMITH:

Who was responsible for quality control?

FRED MEIERS:

I was the one that introduced the idea—and had to insist on its existence—and caused all the problem.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Our delivery, the delivery to us, was always the top quality. "Meiers quality" is what it was called.

FRED MEIERS:

Eventually there came a point where there were four classifications—"Meiers," then there were "firsts," then there were "seconds," and then there were "disasters." [laughter]

BARBARA MEIERS:

Of course, they sold a lot of the seconds in the stores in El Palomar.

FRED MEIERS:

They sold everything.

BARBARA MEIERS:

They sold everything they made.

FRED MEIERS:

Because the prices were so good, and then there were periodic sales.

SMITH:

In Tlaquepaque? In the store?

BARBARA MEIERS:

In the store down there, yes.

FRED MEIERS:

And people waited for the sales to come. The people in Guadalajara would wait for the sales to come, and then they'd get these tremendous bargains annually.

BARBARA MEIERS:

But anyway, you can see that quality control was one of our main problems and things that we worked out: to try to develop something so that the quality was good enough to keep selling up here and that the people would accept. We had to educate people up here, also.

FRED MEIERS:

I would say, early, if we were lucky, we would be getting about 60 percent of where it was either Meiers or first.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Possible to sell.

SMITH:

Possible to sell in the U.S.?

FRED MEIERS:

No.

BARBARA MEIERS:

No, possible to sell, period.

FRED MEIERS:

Maybe 25 percent would be possible in the U. S.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Up here. No, it was a small percentage. So as a result, of course, we didn't really get as much delivery as we wanted or could have sold. Because we did have a national distribution through the Gustin company.

FRED MEIERS:

And over a period of years we couldn't get enough to fill orders.

SMITH:

Over the period of the twenty to twenty-five years that you were operating in Mexico as a foreign investor and partner in the industrial situation, have you seen changes in the way Mexico treats foreign investors?

FRED MEIERS:

I would say the change—if there is a difference—has been so gradual that I haven't been aware of a change. And then, in that I was involved in such a small business, this isn't something that I would really be qualified to make

any kind of a statement about. I'm sure there are changes in larger-scale kind of dealings. But in general, Mexico has always been suspicious of any kind of large-scale investment that would be large enough to have any kind of control., This has always been a problem in Mexico.

SMITH:

Did you have to have Mexican national partners?

FRED MEIERS:

Oh, yes, yes.

SMITH:

Okay. We might move on to the subject of your donations and your involvement with various museums.

FRED MEIERS:

We for quite some years have been interested in UCLA and in forming the nucleus of a collection of folk art there. We started when Ralph Altman was first developing the cultural history museum [UCLA Museum of Cultural History], in which Dr. Franklin Murphy was very much interested.

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FRED MEIERS:

We've tried to give UCLA representative pieces of the best and as many different kinds of things that we've been in touch with, that we've been interested in. Pieces in all areas of Mexico.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Not just one piece. Often more than one piece of a given artist so they would have some over a period of time so that they can see some development, which I think is quite interesting to them.

FRED MEIERS:

Yes. The collection is oriented to serve as study material showing the progress within some of the artists that we were most interested in—from their beginnings to over the course of their lives, actually.

SMITH:

Within those criteria, was this selection of pieces donated made entirely by you?

FRED MEIERS:

Yes.

SMITH:

Did you work in conjunction with anybody?

BARBARA MEIERS:

No, we made the decisions. We've been in close contact with Patricia [B.] Altman all these years, since her husband's death.

FRED MEIERS:

And with George [R.] and Nancy Ellis. George was the curator—I forget his title—of the cultural history museum.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Before he went to Honolulu.

FRED MEIERS:

Not the director but the—

BARBARA MEIERS:

I think he was called the curator.

FRED MEIERS:

I think probably he's called the curator. They considered anything that we wanted to give as something that they would like to have. For quite a while they were interested in satellite exhibits.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Around Los Angeles.

FRED MEIERS:



We really enjoyed that idea of—in addition to showing at UCLA and their collection being used there, having it circulate—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Shown in different areas of the city.

FRED MEIERS:

To schools, colleges, universities. It's put into use and was available to a different kind of public than it is at the university. As it's working out now, that has become quite a problem, and apparently they're not as much interested in this direction anymore. I think they don't have the personnel to handle this kind of distribution.

BARBARA MEIERS:

They still do lend the material, though.

FRED MEIERS:

That's right

BARBARA MEIERS:

They lend it to lots of museums and exhibitors who borrow the material.

SMITH:

What kind of steps do you take to conserve your pieces?

FRED MEIERS:

Well, actually, we are pleased to have UCLA have the things so that they have this kind of responsibility. [laughter]

BARBARA MEIERS:

We've tried to take care of them here as best we could, just simply by being careful with them. And, of course, if something is broken off we glue it back on quickly so it doesn't get lost, that kind of thing. But we really haven't had to do very much conservation.

SMITH:

The thing that comes most immediately to mind is that many of these pieces have colors that fade quickly.

BARBARA MEIERS:

That fade, yes. The Metepec area pieces fade very rapidly, and we've tried to keep those things in the dark covered up and not in strong light.

FRED MEIERS:

We wrap things that have fugitive color and have them in the dark or in boxes.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Fortunately, a lot of the color that are used now, later, in the Candelario [Medrano] things and the Rosendo Rodríguez—the color is very fast. It's very good. And the Acatlán pieces have been very good, too, through the years.

SMITH:

Some of the pieces like the Teodora Blanco that we were discussing before, are there particular things that need to be done to preserve that kind of clay?

FRED MEIERS:

In this kind of climate there's not too much problem. The Teodora Blanco pieces are fired sufficiently—not high fire, but they're fired sufficiently so that they're fairly strong and they don't deteriorate rapidly. Ideally, they should be indoors, but we have some that are outdoors.

BARBARA MEIERS:

We have quite a few of the large pieces so that we really couldn't have them all in the house.

FRED MEIERS:

If we were in a different kind of climate, they wouldn't survive.

BARBARA MEIERS:

No. If it froze, for instance, you couldn't have them outside. Freezing would ruin them.

FRED MEIERS:

They would break.

SMITH:

What kind of records have you kept that would assist in identifying the pieces?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Well, because we were in business and we kept inventory cards very carefully—and inventory records, files on all of our suppliers, all this kind of thing—we've had a lot of materials to refer to as far as dates, information, and that kind of thing.

SMITH:

Have you tried to ascertain and note down who the individual artist was?

FRED MEIERS:

Insofar as was possible. There are quite a few pieces [where] that information isn't available.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Well, in some of the things that we bought in quantities—like, for instance, the little banks and that kind of thing—which are just a traditional piece that you can buy in the market, there isn't any artist attached to it. There are lots of people who do these things so we don't have those names.

SMITH:

What kind of involvement did you have in the putting together of the six potters show [*Mexican Figural Ceramists and their Works, 1950 to 1981*] or the Day of the Dead show [*Vive tu Recuerdo: Living Traditions in the Mexican Days of the Dead*], which were both shows that really quite heavily drew from your collection at UCLA's cultural history museum?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Oh, the figurative arts—? [Lenore Hoag] Mulryan's show?

SMITH:

Mulryan's show, right.

FRED MEIERS:

The initial purpose, as I understand it, was for that show to be a thesis relating to our collection. I think that was the goal. But it was sort of difficult to maintain it that way, and, maybe within UCLA they decided to change that direction. When we first heard of the proposal, that was the idea that it was supposed to have. We worked with Lenore in connection with what she did—provided suggestions and criticism of what she was writing as it related to us and the craftsmen whom we had known for years. We lent most everything that she thought she wanted from our own collection, as well as her having access to anything that was at UCLA that she wanted to use. So that was pretty much our involvement.

SMITH:

Then there was the Day of the Dead show.

BARBARA MEIERS:

That was Robert's show, Bob [Robert V.] Childs.

FRED MEIERS:

I think maybe we lent some things to that.

BARBARA MEIERS:

But we really had very little to do with it.

FRED MEIERS:

That was very much Bob Childs's show—and Pat [Patricia B. Altman].

BARBARA MEIERS:

And we weren't consulted on it.

SMITH:

Since we're on the question of shows, *iVivan los artesanos!* was the show that was at the Mingei [International Museum of World] Folk Art in La Jolla [California]. I gathered, drawing entirely from the materials that you've donated it to UCLA.

FRED MEIERS:

It was made up of a combination of quite a bit of the material that we've given to UCLA plus lots of the material from here.

BARBARA MEIERS:

And we've given a lot of it since then. I mean, some of it that was in the catalog listed as Meiers Collection has gone to UCLA since then.

FRED MEIERS:

In the Mingei show, I think there were about twelve hundred pieces, something in that area.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes, over a thousand pieces in it.

SMITH:

Were you the creators of that show?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes.

SMITH:

Did you decide what would be shown?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes, definitely. We were it.

FRED MEIERS:

We were the creators of the show. [laughter]

BARBARA MEIERS:

Right.

FRED MEIERS:

We did have advice and help.

BARBARA MEIERS:

On the installation, you mean.

FRED MEIERS:

Jan Harlow, for instance, designed the catalog.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes. Well, Jan Harlow and Robert Shaw.

FRED MEIERS:

Yes, that's right.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Jan Harlow started it, and then she had to go to Europe and Robert saw it through.

FRED MEIERS:

That's right. They were both responsible for it. Jan was responsible for design and financing her contribution—which was considerable—and also for financing Robert Shaw's, as well as the general concept of the catalog. I did the cover.

BARBARA MEIERS:

And then I sat on the—. [laughter]

FRED MEIERS:

Susan Einstein did the excellent photography. UCLA sponsored at least part of the expense of Susan Einstein.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Then we had help from other friends, too, in the community that raised money to see that the catalog could be produced—Caroline and Howard West.

FRED MEIERS:

The Wests raised the funds which turned out—

BARBARA MEIERS:

To be more than we thought it would be, the way catalogs always are.

FRED MEIERS:

We're fortunate that we created it then rather than now because—

BARBARA MEIERS:

We certainly couldn't have done it for what we did then.

FRED MEIERS:

Yes.

SMITH:

What were you trying to accomplish with the show?

FRED MEIERS:

We were trying to show a picture of Mexican folk art.

BARBARA MEIERS:

A good representation from all over Mexico, various areas. You know, quite a few examples of different areas and different—Day of the Dead, for instance, celebration, and we had a lot of skeleton kind of figures and cut paper. Then we had a wonderful group of the Teodora Blanco figures: all of her large ones plus lots of small ones that made a really great grouping, and dozens of wood pieces, the large wood animals.

FRED MEIERS:

For display purposes we organized it into divisions. We divided it into people, animals. We thought it would be more interesting to do this sort of a subject matter thing rather than trying to do it chronologically.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Or areas, or that kind of thing. Visually they grouped together much better.

FRED MEIERS:

We had villages, and within the people division we had a big wedding thing and dancing and dying.

BARBARA MEIERS:

We had a funeral scene. And we had devils, a whole thing of devils. Then another whole thing on angels, all kinds of angels in all kinds of materials.

FRED MEIERS:

And mermaids.

BARBARA MEIERS:

A whole section of mermaids in different materials, wood and clay.

FRED MEIERS:

And an area of Huichol tablas, and an area of masks. We did a big circle of the masks.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes, that was kind of a separate category.

FRED MEIERS:

[The circle was] maybe about twelve feet in diameter with a band of masks about that wide [gestures] with maybe seventy-five masks around the circle. But just a big donut kind of thing with an empty nothing in the center, which was a nice sort of dramatic kind of unit.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Then we had a couple of photographers' backdrop paintings which the Mexican photographers use—these are large paintings that they use—and they have the person come and put his head through the hole in the painting. We had some of those out in front of the museum at the night of the opening and people were having their photographs taken, which was a fun thing. And we had a band, a mariachi band.

FRED MEIERS:

It wasn't a mariachi band, dear; it was a group of musicians.

BARBARA MEIERS:

A group of musicians, right. They were strolling musicians, weren't they? Then the Basslers [James and Veralee] had some wonderful big papier-mâchés



heads and costumes that fit down over a persons body. They were just enormous, very tall. Do you [Fred] think twelve feet, maybe?

FRED MEIERS:

From the ground they're about six feet tall.

BARBARA MEIERS:

But then you put them on your body and you put them up on your shoulders, so they go up probably ten, twelve feet, something like that.

FRED MEIERS:

Right.

BARBARA MEIERS:

So they [the Basslers] got into these and wore them and sort of moved around through the crowds during the opening night. It was wonderful.

FRED MEIERS:

They were part of the display when the Basslers weren't inside them.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Right.

FRED MEIERS:

No, the Basslers weren't there. That wasn't in our show at all, dear. The Basslers were in Tennessee. That was at the initial show of the Mingei museum of international folk art.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Oh, that was the other show. That's right, I'm sorry.

FRED MEIERS:

It wasn't the Mexican show.

BARBARA MEIERS:

We did have these in our show but there wasn't anybody in them.

FRED MEIERS:

Right.

SMITH:

Which was the "initial" show?

BARBARA MEIERS:

The Mingei initial show was Folk Toys of the World, and we did show those pieces as Mexican pieces.

FRED MEIERS:

We showed a representative—

SMITH:

How did you get involved with the Mingei folk art museum?

FRED MEIERS:

Martha Longenecker, the director, is a longtime friend. We were in graduate school at the same time. She asked us to be advisors on Mexico.

BARBARA MEIERS:

They were really beginning to think about having a physical-building location. The museum had already been going a year or two showing in different places.

FRED MEIERS:

Without having a permanent exhibit space.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Right, having exhibits in various places.

FRED MEIERS:

We were asked to be advisors on Mexico, consultants.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Also in helping to design the building.

FRED MEIERS:

Design problems in connection with the building, to act as consultants with the architects who were doing the building.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Then we were on the board of directors for—six years I think it was.

FRED MEIERS:

Six or seven years.

SMITH:

Do you remember what years you were on?

FRED MEIERS:

We were on from the beginning, which was about—'77? No.

BARBARA MEIERS:

A little earlier than that.

FRED MEIERS:

About '76 probably.

SMITH:

Is there much financial support for folk art museums, folk art preservation?

FRED MEIERS:

It's very difficult. There are so many people seeking any buck that's available that it's very difficult to raise funds. The initial board of the museum was a board of people who had a common interest in folk art. The Hintons [Sam and Leslie], Sam Hinton is a folklorist and singer. He was on the faculty at La Jolla.

BARBARA MEIERS:

University of California, San Diego.

FRED MEIERS:

David Rinehart is a very interesting architect who did the facade of the museum and designed the interior space of the museum. Althea Lucic is a La Jolla woman, close friend of Martha's and longtime collector of folk art. Then

as things went on, we could see that there was a need to have a more conventional kind of board. We expressed ourselves strongly in the direction of having people who could commit money and were more directly in touch and interested in fund-raising, and so another board—I forget what it was called—was made. A larger board was made with this in mind, and this has functioned through the years. But it was very difficult to raise—especially in the beginning. The museum has been very successful, and it shows—

BARBARA MEIERS:

We've operated in the black.

FRED MEIERS:

From the very beginning.

BARBARA MEIERS:

It's really amazing.

FRED MEIERS:

Lots of volunteers. Practically everything was volunteer.

BARBARA MEIERS:

And Martha didn't have a salary. It really was done for love.

FRED MEIERS:

But it's established a worldwide reputation in this short period of time, and there are always people coming in from every place. It's very satisfying to the people who've been involved in it to have this kind of attention to it.

BARBARA MEIERS:

We've had some really very, very interesting exhibits. Some of our Japanese exhibits have been some of the finest ones, I think.

FRED MEIERS:

In connection—just to talk a little bit more about our show—we asked the architects who did the building, David Rinehart and Mark Appleton, to think about the show, and they made general suggestions of organization of space

for the show, which was helpful in doing the show. We persuaded George Johnson from the UCLA cultural history museum to help us do the show.

BARBARA MEIERS:

To help set it up.

FRED MEIERS:

To design and do the installation. George and I did the installation.

SMITH:

Physical installation?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Right, physical installation.

FRED MEIERS:

We had lots of help. We had lots of volunteer help. We did it in two weeks, working ten to twelve hours a day.

BARBARA MEIERS:

And I stayed up here and sat on the catalog. [laughter]

FRED MEIERS:

Well, to say nothing of our business.

BARBARA MEIERS:

And the business, right. [laughter]

SMITH:

The Mingei folk art museum, the name implies an homage to Japan and Japanese interest in folk art. Was there Japanese involvement in—?

FRED MEIERS:

Martha is very influenced by and admiring of Japanese folk art and had extensive, longtime connections with national treasures of Japan.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Shoji Hamada, [Keisuke] Serisawa, [Tatsuzo] Shimaoko. She was able to get all those people involved in the museum. One as an advisor, and all three showed their work here in exhibits. It was a wonderful connection, really.

SMITH:

Has there been interest in having a show of your collection outside of California?

FRED MEIERS:

We haven't entertained any thoughts of doing this. As far as we're concerned, we did that show, and we've done it. I've had my show period in connection with the Los Angeles County Fair and the gallery that I was in charge of at [Long Beach] City College, and I don't need anymore. We've been invited to show other places but—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Just the shipping alone is really an insurmountable problem. The material is so fragile. It breaks so easily. Just getting it around Southern California by truck is very hard. We insisted on doing our own careful packing.

FRED MEIERS:

I packed everything at UCLA.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Then when we took it down to San Diego we packed it all here, went down there, and then we repacked it down there and brought—

FRED MEIERS:

After the show we had to repack this whole thing.

BARBARA MEIERS:

You know, it's the only way. People don't understand, really, about packing folk art. It's very fragile.

FRED MEIERS:

If one doesn't do it himself and hires a commercial art packing company, the charges become—

BARBARA MEIERS:

Insurmountable,

FRED MEIERS:

Exactly.

BARBARA MEIERS:

We found our connections with the Japanese craftsmen very interesting because they were so much interested in Mexican folk art. In fact, they came to see us to get materials and information about getting more materials so that they could have exhibits in Japan.

FRED MEIERS:

Mr. Shoji Hamada was here at our house and warehouse, the first time, buying especially for his own collection, really enthusiastic about everything we had. He wouldn't eat—he wouldn't do anything; he just wanted to buy, buy, and enjoy the folk art. The next time he was here, he brought his wife, and he was interested in doing one of those big exhibits that the Japanese do in depth.

BARBARA MEIERS:

In a very fine department store there, for sale.

FRED MEIERS:

He bought as much as we could give him.

SMITH:

When was this?

FRED MEIERS:

In the sixties sometime.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Late sixties it would have been.

FRED MEIERS:

Okay, right.

BARBARA MEIERS:

We also gave him contacts in Mexico so he could go there and buy, which he did.

FRED MEIERS:

We put him in touch with places in Mexico to go there and buy. They had very successful show—sold everything that they had the first day.

SMITH:

In terms of balancing between your business and your collection, was it hard to decide what to keep and what to sell?

FRED MEIERS:

We had to sell because this was our livelihood, so it was fairly simple.  
[laughter]

SMITH:

But you've got so many Teodoras right here.

FRED MEIERS:

But we sold many Teodoras, many.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Oh, by many, many times what we have out here, because we bought her whole production for a long time. She was a very productive artist.

SMITH:

Do these represent the best of her work?

FRED MEIERS:

Yes.

SMITH:

Had you held back the best pieces?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Well, not necessarily. [Alexander] Girard had some of the very good ones.



FRED MEIERS:

This [points] is the only one that we have of this period. Girard has one from this period which he bought at the same time that we bought this one.

BARBARA MEIERS:

In his house, and he has a nice house.

FRED MEIERS:

Right.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Then this [points] is from another period and it's a very good example.

FRED MEIERS:

That's a very special one. And then this one is a very special one. [points]

SMITH:

Which one?

FRED MEIERS:

The one next to the bigger—

SMITH:

With the dove?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Right. Then there's one in the bedroom in there that is of a later date. Oh, no, she's right over there. That's right. She's a later one.

FRED MEIERS:

This is quite a bit later.

SMITH:

The ornate one?

FRED MEIERS:

Yes. This isn't as ornate as she got. We don't have anything from the most ornate period. Then there are some out there that are not the best.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Some of these out in the yard are not first quality. Most of them had been broken badly and we had to repair them.

FRED MEIERS:

Those three out there, for instance.

SMITH:

Did you have any involvement with the Folk and Craft Museum here in Los Angeles?

FRED MEIERS:

We were part of some of the initial meetings that were held. There was a meeting at Tom and Mary Freibergs' that was really a very beginning kind of meeting.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Just thinking about starting a folk art museum. Then we did an exhibit there. We had a show of Mexican folk art.

SMITH:

When was that?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Let me see. What year do you [Fred] think that was?

SMITH:

Approximately.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Late sixties maybe, or seventies, early seventies.

FRED MEIERS:

I don't remember whether it eventually opened in the late sixties—

BARBARA MEIERS:

It was fairly early in their life. Then we loaned materials for an exhibit that was called Los Angeles Collects. We loaned some of our pieces for that, too. The large mask and an angel parade ornament.

SMITH:

Is there interest in folk art at the natural history museum [Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History], in their anthropology section?

FRED MEIERS:

There was a big exhibit there years ago. I think it was maybe in the fifties at the natural history museum, before there was a separation between the art and natural history. I really don't know how much interest there is now. For a long time there was a very active shop there and we sold to that. And we sold to the [George C.] Page Museum.

BARBARA MEIERS:

We sold animals and things at the George Page Museum.

FRED MEIERS:

Folk art. But I don't know how much the historical part of the museum is interested in folk art. We haven't had stuff available and so they didn't—

BARBARA MEIERS:

We sold to other museums shops, in the country: the Brooklyn Museum, for example.

FRED MEIERS:

Which has a very good folk art shop.

BARBARA MEIERS:

And the Art Institute in Chicago.

FRED MEIERS:

We sold lots of stuff to the Art Institute shop.

BARBARA MEIERS:

And a little in Saint Louis.

FRED MEIERS:

The Art Institute shop was a very good customer.

SMITH:

The thrust of my question is: Where is the natural place for folk art within the museums? Has it had a place? Has it been recognized?

FRED MEIERS:

Not really.

BARBARA MEIERS:

The Brooklyn Museum shop was one of the earliest ones—Carl Fox at the Brooklyn Museum shop.

FRED MEIERS:

There are just a few people who were sufficiently sophisticated and had a sophisticated audience to warrant having extensive use of display and sales set up for folk art.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Carl Fox was one of the first ones to really show quantity and very good folk art in the Brooklyn Museum shop, and then he went to the Smithsonian [Institution].

FRED MEIERS:

No, then he went to establish a shop Mr. [Joyce Clyde] Hall set up in New York.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Hallmark. Then after that he went to the Smithsonian because he was there, too.

FRED MEIERS:

Is that so?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes.

FRED MEIERS:

That was later then.

SMITH:

Well, in your perspective, how does folk art differ from what would be anthropological art, or having arts that might be shown at the natural history museum as part of their exhibits on non-Western cultures?

FRED MEIERS:

From my viewpoint there isn't any difference, since we're essentially visually oriented and all these things have the potential of being satisfactory aesthetically, depending on how the materials are put together. From the point of view of museums, that isn't true. They have various theses that they're proving. They're interested in research and they're interested in showing the facts of life and progress and all kinds of aspects that aren't necessarily the most important ones to us. Does that answer—?

BARBARA MEIERS:

I think it's very hard to draw the line between what's folk art and what isn't, sometimes. Especially when you think of things like the Oceanic arts, masks, the aboriginal things, and yet, they are usually treated separately. But I find it very hard to define, really, where one starts and one ends.

FRED MEIERS:

We're more interested in the continuation and interrelationships of all things visual than we are in separating and compartmentalizing.

SMITH:

I gather through the Mingei folk art museum and through your general interest in folk art that folk art is an international thing, but you focus on Mexico. What is particular about Mexican folk art?

FRED MEIERS:

Well, initially, background, being close to Mexico from earliest childhood has made it very close. And I suppose just the accessibility of Mexico has been

attractive. We've had ideas about showing and becoming interested in other areas. As we said earlier, we've dabbled in some other areas but decided that there was enough to keep us concerned in Mexico.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Really busy in Mexico. We really enjoy the spontaneity, color, warmth, and so much of those aspects of Mexican folk art.

FRED MEIERS:

After investigating a little bit in other areas, we feel that Mexico is still one of the richest sources of folk art available, and things still continue to be invented. This is practically the only country which, on a large scale, is really producing this particular kind of stuff. [tape recorder off]

SMITH:

We're going to go back to some of the sources that you were dealing with. Barbara was mentioning that Enrique de la Lanza was an important source in Oaxaca. When did you meet him and under what circumstances?

FRED MEIERS:

Enrique de la Lanza worked for Arthur Train. Our first meeting with Enrique was the announcement by Arthur Train that Enrique had stolen his sweetheart and had disappeared with her.

BARBARA MEIERS:

[laughter] That's when we first heard about Enrique. He was not there because he'd run off with his bride, literally.

FRED MEIERS:

Her brother was madly searching for him. It was not a non-traditional tradition. Let's see, I did that backwards.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Then we did meet him shortly thereafter. He was there in the shop working.

FRED MEIERS:

Very shortly after this episode, maybe a year later, Arthur Train sold his business to Enrique, and Enrique became the principal source of Mexican folk art in the southern region, which earlier Arthur had been.

SMITH:

And the shop's name is?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yalalag.

SMITH:

So he changed the name of the shop?

FRED MEIERS:

Casa Schöndube was the initial shop, and that was succeeded by Yalalag, which was a much more centralized shop, just around the corner, a block from the main square in Oaxaca.

SMITH:

Somebody like de la Lanza, are his relationships with the artists on a cash-and-carry kind of basis, or does he supply them with money as they need it to make their wares?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Well, very often they did. Arthur Train did.

FRED MEIERS:

It's necessary to keep the craftsmen supplied with materials. Usually that's the way it is. If one is going to buy something, one has to pay for it in advance. Enrique had, especially, tin craftsmen that worked in his own taller [workshop] and produced there. He eventually had enough of their squabbling and said, "Here, this is the business: you run it? you own it."

BARBARA MEIERS:

Well, these were his in-laws, weren't they?

FRED MEIERS:

No, no.

BARBARA MEIERS:

No? That's another one. All right.

FRED MEIERS:

Arthur Train had in-laws who were also tin people. Eventually Enrique, several years ago, lost his beautiful shop site. It was a really great building, a colonial-type building in Oaxaca, stone, handsome building. In addition he had a small shop, a very small shop, in front of one of the churches. And he then had his big taller, which is located on the property where his house is as well.

BARBARA MEIERS:

He did his wholesale business from his warehouse.

FRED MEIERS:

But he gave up wholesale selling, and the last time we saw him he was selling only retail. About the same time that these changes were being made somebody by the name of Nicodemus Vázquez, who had—

### **1.17. TAPE NUMBER: IX, Side One (March 5, 1987)**

SMITH:

You were saying that Nicodemus Vázquez—

FRED MEIERS:

Nicodemus started at the same time that Enrique [de la Lanza] was closing his business. No, a little before this. Nicodemus Vázquez—who was from Yalalag [Oaxaca], the village of Yalalag—set up a little shop near the market. He's a very dependable and resourceful person. Over a period of two or three years we worked with him.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Longer than that, I think. We bought a lot of things from him.

FRED MEIERS:

Mainly buying things from [Santa Maria de] Atzompa [Oaxaca].



BARBARA MEIERS:

And wood things.

FRED MEIERS:

Wooden animals and figures of different kinds, carts, Ferris wheels.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Carts with devils in them and all kinds of things like that.

FRED MEIERS:

Plus tin frames and various kinds of tin crafts. Also at the same time, somebody by the name of Jaime and his father Ernesto set up a business—not in the center of Oaxaca but in the north side of Oaxaca, residential area. A business initially buying and then selling principally clay products from the region, including the areas from Acatlán [de Osorio, Puebla] to the isthmus—including Acatlán to the north and as far south as the Isthmus of Tehuantepec.

BARBARA MEIERS:

They were the source of the large chimeneas that we got and the tigre brazier kind of things, you know.

FRED MEIERS:

Hombre tigre? No.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Right. Not the—

FRED MEIERS:

A tigre head.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes, but used as a brazier.

FRED MEIERS:

Many types of forms of planters, typical pots, beautiful pots.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Large, typical pots from the region, really. Grain-storage pots and water-carrying pots. Traditional kind of things that we really loved and brought a lot of them in.

FRED MEIERS:

But gradually they expanded this to include wood figures, tinware—practically all of the materials that were available in the Oaxaca area.

SMITH:

Sounds like in most cases you had very little contact with the artisans.

FRED MEIERS:

That's true.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Not there. We didn't in Oaxaca.

FRED MEIERS:

Right. But these people are going on, doing this, making this stuff available. Also, Teodora [Blanco]'s son, one of Teodora's sons in Atzompa—we understand; we haven't been in touch with him—but he's selling considerable ware from Atzompa.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Wholesaling.

SMITH:

As a middleman?

FRED MEIERS:

Yes, as a local distributor to places in the United States and other places.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Just shipping and—

SMITH:

How important is the role of the supplier in terms of maintaining quality?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Well, somebody like these people that we're just talking about—

FRED MEIERS:

Like that? Very, very important.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Very important, very important. You really can't get along without them. They have a lot to do with it because they're in direct touch with the craftsmen. And they can say, you know—

FRED MEIERS:

It builds for much more confidence.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Right.

FRED MEIERS:

And it makes it more possible to make a business apart from—by pooling a group of people you can have enough material to make it worthwhile to buy the craft work.

BARBARA MEIERS:

And then he can encourage them to control the quality of craftsmanship because he won't buy if they don't. So it's very helpful. Somebody like Nicodemus is really indispensable. He was an exceptionally reliable person, too. He was somebody who always did what he said he was going to do, delivered on time—was really amazing.

FRED MEIERS:

He had very good relations with us, for instance, and with the people. He wasn't insensitive to the problems. Being from a place like Yalalag meant that he understood the problems of these people.

SMITH:

Is he an Indian?

FRED MEIERS:

Yes.

SMITH:

We discussed before, with [Francisco] Hipólito, that you suggested the bicycle, and we discussed in previous sessions that you were making suggestions to particular artists. With the middlemen would you make suggestions?

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes, we did.

FRED MEIERS:

Sure.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Yes. They would ask us lots of times. Nicodemus asked you [Fred]. He would say, "Do you have any suggestions?"

SMITH:

So what kinds of things did you suggest to Nicodemus?

FRED MEIERS:

In connection with Nicodemus we mainly suggested color. There are certain colors that work for certain stores or certain areas.

BARBARA MEIERS:

Selling situations.

FRED MEIERS:

There was one store that did very well with red, so we produced—especially thinking of them—red bulls and red horses. Then there are others that like orange and yellow. Then some people liked whatever would come along so we would have some green and some blue, etc.

SMITH:

Were there forms that you suggested? I mean, would you say, well, bells seem to be popular this year? or angel candlesticks?

FRED MEIERS:

Yes, we would order so many bulls, so many horses, so many donkeys, so many giraffes—no ostriches. [laughter] Then we would order bells, or whatever.

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