

M: This is Carol MacDonald, and today I am interviewing [Robert A.] Bob Bryan for the Harn Museum of Art Oral History Project. Today is January 14, 1993. Would you please state your name for the tape?

B: Robert A. Bryan.

M: Where were you born?

B: Lebanon, Pennsylvania.

M: Could you tell me about your family? Do you have brothers and sisters?

B: No.

M: Where did you grow up?

B: I grew up in Miami, Florida.

M: Where did you go to college?

B: I went to undergraduate school at the University of Miami in Coral Gables, and I went to graduate school at the University of Kentucky.

M: What was your major?

B: In undergraduate [school] it was English, and in graduate [school] it was English.

M: When did you first encounter the proposed art museum?

B: Well, it was during the time that I was the academic vice president of the University. I cannot remember the exact year. I think it was probably about 1980 when Dean [Joseph] Sabatella [of the College of Fine Arts] and I began to talk about it with some degree of seriousness.

M: Tell me about your personal history at the University.

B: I came to the University of Florida in 1957--the first Ice Age--as an assistant professor of English. Over the years I finally became the vice president of academic affairs and then provost and vice president for academic affairs. I became the vice president for academic affairs in 1974, and the provost and vice president in 1985. Then I was the interim president in 1989-1990, and then I retired.

M: So you and Dean Sabatella discussed the museum. Do you remember what you talked about?

B: Yes. I remember that he was increasingly frustrated as the years went along with that little gallery that we had, because he could not put on the kind of shows that he wanted. That gallery could not accommodate all of the on-campus needs--the faculty art shows, graduate students' art shows, undergraduate art students' art shows--and we kept saying to ourselves, "Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could find a way to build an art museum?" Yet we were reluctant to even think about putting it on a fixed capital outlay list for state money because an art museum [was not very high on the priority list]. We had so many other priorities--ag. buildings, animal science, expansion of the physics building, a computer science building[, a science library, and many other projects]. All of those things just took priority over an art museum. So we realized that the only way we could get it done would be through private donations. When we first started talking about this, we had no idea how we could get that money.

M: Did you have anything to do with the fund raising? It was so successful.

B: Yes. Well, we were successful largely because Dr. Cofrin said that he would give us the money. I mean, before Dr. Cofrin [came along,] we went to Mr. Jim Richardson, who had been a professor here in business administration, and to Bill Chandler. Bill Chandler, a lawyer downtown, and Jim Richardson, a retired professor of business, were the leaders downtown in trying to excite the University, provoke the University, [and] encourage the University to do something about an art museum.

As I said, there was not much we could do because we were not willing to put an art museum on our fixed capital outlay list, so we were going to have to try to do it by raising money privately. I really think that probably Jim Richardson and Caroline Richardson, his wife, were instrumental in talking Dr. Cofrin into making the donation that he did. Well, when he made his donation, there was not much else to do but round up the state match and build the building.

Originally, we had won a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts [NEA] to put on a competition for the design of an art museum. They [the NEA] gave us \$50,000 and said we could put that up for a prize. So we had originally some very good architectural firms from around the country send in designs. The prize-winning idea was to put the building over next to Yulee Hall in the Yulee Hall pit, in that depression. We were going to build it around that pit, and it was to be sort of wedge-shaped; the winning design was a wedge-shaped building that was one story and brick. It was kind of modern.

M: That was Mr. [Thomas] Porter who won, from [Toledo] Ohio.

B: Yes. Then along comes this money from Dr. Cofrin, and the next thing I know--this about 1987--I go down to see Mr. [Marshall] Criser, who is the president [of UF], and he is sitting in there with Representative Jon Mills, who was about to become speaker of the [Florida] House [of Representatives]. We can check my dates to find out when he was speaker. This was just before the session began in which he was speaker that we had this conversation. Jon Mills had talked to Mr. Criser and said, "What we really ought to do is put the new art museum, since we now have not only Dr. Cofrin's money but the state match, over on the west side of the campus, along with the performing arts theater," which was originally planned to be built on the campus of Santa Fe Community College. Mills worked out a deal with the president of Santa Fe Community College, who then was Alan Robertson, to put the performing arts theater on the University of Florida campus. Then we were going to build an exhibition hall that would be the exhibition part of the Florida Museum of Natural History. So we would have this triangle--triad, if you will--[of] the arts, the performing arts, and then natural history. That is what we did, except we have yet to raise the money for the third building, the exhibition hall for the Florida Museum of Natural History.

So the art museum's location was changed from Yulee pit out to the west side of campus, right by 34th Street.

M: There were a number of sites investigated; there were six proposed sites. Can you comment on those as to why they were not chosen?

B: I cannot remember them now. What were they? Do you remember what they were?

M: There was one by the [J.] Wayne Reitz Union, there was one by Brownlee. I do not know where the others were.

B: Now, was this before Jon Mills's vision?

M: Yes.

B: Well, I can comment to this extent. I can no longer remember all those sites, but I remember that we rejected all of them because in those days we wanted to put the museum as close to the Department of Art as we possibly could, and we thought that it would be better to have it at the Yulee pit than anywhere else. That is why the Yulee pit idea won out.

M: Because it was close to the art department.

B: Yes.

M: When it came to recruiting a director for the museum, how did you choose the qualified person?

B: Well, we did the national search; we placed advertisements in the national journals, and I called some friends of mine around the country who knew about museum directors. I cannot remember now, but I am sure we had lots and lots of applications. I think we narrowed it down to four people. I cannot even remember who the four were, except, of course, Budd [Bishop]. We brought them in like we always do and had them meet with administrators and faculty on the campus and took them out to dinner and did the regular routine.

It became very clear to me within, I guess, a half hour of meeting and talking with Budd Bishop that he was the person we had to have. He was head and shoulders above all the other applicants we had invited on campus, so we went about getting him.

M: OK. There was a site problem and no utilities out on 34th.

B: Yes. I really fault our own office of planning and the campus architects. They told us that we could go ahead and put the building where it is now located and that it would be part of this triad. They gave us cost estimates for site preparation and did *not* take into consideration in those site preparation estimates the fact that they were going to have to have a relay station. I just do not know how that escaped them, but it did. Then suddenly we were hit with this enormous cost to build a relay station.

I think part of the blame has to go to the Office of Academic Affairs. We ourselves forgot to factor in and tell the University planning office to factor in the cost for running the fiber optic lines and things like that out to the new site. But the most frustrating thing, I think, of all was that sudden and sickening realization that we were going to have to spend money on a relay station. Boy!

M: And where did that money come from?

B: We took it out of various construction projects, borrowed it, took a little away from this construction project and a little away from that. Then we just practically that year bankrupted the regular campus improvement budget in order to get this blasted station built.

M: The design of the building is not like [other] campus buildings. Did you have any opinions on that?

B: Yes. [laughter] I do not like it. But then I am very traditional. I just do not like the design. I thought the design that we had for the original building, which was much smaller and much more conservative, the one over by Yulee pit, was wonderful. (I

would think it was wonderful because it was made of brick.) It fit in with the rest of architecture on campus. I somehow or other, in my naivete, envisioned a modern concrete-and-brick building that would be the museum. Well, of course, clearly, I was wrong. I tell you what--I like the inside of the building. The inside of the building just knocks me over. It is just magnificent. When you walk in, you think that you are in one of the great museums in Europe. It is just wonderful. But I would not give you two cents for the appearance of the outside of the building.

M: Why?

B: Well, it clashes with the normal architectural decor on campus. To me, it does not belong in north Florida. Besides, the damn building looks like it needs a coat of paint. Every time I see Budd--and he must be quite tired of this by now--I ask him, "When are you going to paint it?" [laughter] It does not fit a north Florida campus, with oak trees and brick and all that sort of thing. And here is this thing out of . . . Well, I do not know what is out of. Out of somebody's dream. But I must say that the inside is magnificent.

M: And the architect was a graduate of the University of Florida.

B: Yes! A wonderful man. Kha [Le-Huu]. [He is] just a wonderful man, a sweet, gentle, bright man. I really like him.

M: And Walter Netsch [the other architect who designed the Samuel P. Harn Museum of Art]. Did you meet him or talk to him about the design?

B: I do not remember being talked to about the design. I think Marshall was still president when they put the design up. I think if they had talked to me that we would have had some headaches. I do not know who would have won, but we would have had some headaches.

M: There already were some, so . . . [laughter] Did you have ideas or goals for the museum yourself of what you wanted to see?

B: My goals were considerably limited. I was ecstatic, once more, over the floor space and the accommodations that were envisioned in the original Yulee pit building. I had no idea that we could get the kind of museum that we got with the money we had. The Harn Museum far exceeded my own personal goals of what I thought the museum might turn out to be. Now, if that is what you mean by "goals," architectural goals, I have answered your question.

M: I mean functional.

B: Well, certainly the museum has exceeded any goals I had. I mean, the access [and] the space are just enormous. What worried me from the very beginning (and what, of course, still worries me and I am sure worries Budd) is that we do not have a lot of art to fill it up, and we have to spend a lot of the budget that we generate in renting good art. I am glad that we have someone like Budd as the director because his standards are uncompromising, and he will not go out and get a bunch of junk just to fill it up. See, that is a great temptation. You have this huge building, this magnificent building, and you do not have anything in it. Well, it has something in it, but it does not have a lot in it, and most of what it has in it is rented. So there is this temptation to take any kind of junk that comes along, particularly if it is free. [It is not unusual that] somebody wants a big tax write-off and dumps a bunch of material on you that is worthless. But Budd is not going to allow that to happen, and I am delighted with that. Does that answer your question?

M: Yes. Thank you. Tell me what you think about the purposes of the museum. What is your idea of what the museum should be doing on campus?

B: Well, since it is on campus, and since we regard it as a University museum first and foremost (we will come to the friction that causes in a minute), I regard it as something that is part of a student's education. I think it is a wonderful part of the student's education. I speak not just of people majoring in the humanities but people majoring in anything on this campus. To be able to go into a first-class museum and view first-class art is to me a very, very important, significant educational experience. So that is the first thing I think the museum does.

The second thing it does, I hope, is afford some degree of research opportunity and creative inspiration for our art faculty. A third thing it does--and here is the friction--is that it serves as a museum not just for the students and the faculty but for the region and, indeed, for the state--and, if you will, maybe even the Southeast. I do not know how grandiose I can be about this.

I think we have to do that. After all, this is a public university; it is a land grant university, and one of the things about land grant universities is that they provide all kinds of services to the citizens. So that is fine. I know we have to do that. I just hope that access to the museum for the students is not interfered with in an attempt to offer unlimited access to the public at large. I do not know how Budd is working that out. I guess it is working out all right. When I have talked with him he seems not to worry about it. Clearly, from the figures he has given me, we have a tremendous public success on our hands. Thousands and thousands of schoolchildren and general public [have visited the museum]. So that is fine.

M: What do you think of the exhibits so far? Do you think they are appropriate or too contemporary or . . .

B: Oh, when it comes to painting and sculpture I am not as conservative as I am when it comes to architectural design. [laughter] I do not know how to answer that question. I do not know what is appropriate or inappropriate [inside a museum]. I have no objection to having lots of contemporary art in there. I think it is fine. I think our permanent collections are probably going to be more modern or more contemporary than they will be classical or Renaissance or impressionistic or whatever. That is just the way it is going to be. But I would hope that we would always have a rental program whereby we bring in art from the past and show it, that we leaven what is naturally going to be a fairly contemporary permanent collection with those kinds of rental shows.

M: When you were teaching English, do you think you would have utilized the museum?

B: Oh, yes. Back in the dark ages, this University used to have something called the University College which taught six subjects to all freshmen and sophomores. Every freshman and every sophomore had to go through those six two-semester subjects before they could go anywhere into any college. One of those subjects was C-5, humanities. A lot of the curriculum in that humanities course had to do with painting and sculpture, and it would have been wonderful if I could have taken my classes in humanities over there to the museum. Had we had that museum when I was teaching upper division and graduate students, it would have been wonderful. We could have taken them over there to the museum if there had been art appropriate to the period that I was teaching. Of course, there probably is not much over there from the Renaissance.

At any rate, yes, I think it is fine. I think that is one of the good things about having the museum as far as using it as a teaching tool not only for the Department of Art but for the Department of History and the Department of Foreign Languages, the Department of English, the Department of Religion [and the Department of Psychology. What interesting things can be taught!] Great.

M: After you were vice president of academic affairs, what did you do next?

B: Well, I was vice president and then vice president and provost. Then I was interim president, and then I retired.

M: What do you do here now?

B: I just sit here and look good. [laughter] I am not on anybody's payroll. The University is kind enough to give me an office and telephone and computer. I help the [Florida] Foundation in their fund raising; I advise them. Because I have been here forever, I know many, many people in the state, and I know lots and lots of interesting things about many, many people in the state. [I know] how you should

approach Subject A and Subject B, what Mr. X does not like, and all that kind of business.

That is also the same reason that Dr. [J. Wayne] Reitz is here. See, Dr. Reitz is a former president, and he has an office right down the hall here. He also helps. In addition to that, I do other little things for the University when they ask me.

M: Do you think the museum has changed the cultural validity of the area? Do you think it is going to change?

B: Well, I do not know how to answer the question because I do not understand the concept of cultural validity. See, I am not over on campus; I seldom go on campus unless I am asked to for some specific reason. I retired, and then after about eight months I left Gainesville and went down to [the University of Central Florida in] Orlando and was the interim president down there for almost a year. I have just been back about five months. So I do not have a lot of experience with the community or with the University in terms of what the museum has done or how it has influenced either the University or the community. From what I hear and from what I have observed, which is not a lot, I think the community is more excited about the museum than the University. But I hope that is wrong.

M: Do you have any particular favorites as far as exhibits that have been at the museum so far?

B: Well, yes, I liked the exhibit of the paintings of north Florida. I just loved that; I just ate it up. Now, that is probably pretty bourgeois, but that is what I have liked the most, to answer your question. There have been some good things there, but that is the one that strikes me as the one I personally got the biggest emotional kick out of.

M: Does your family enjoy the museum as well?

B: My family is all gone, except for my wife. My two children are married and are living in Tallahassee, and I do not think either one of them has ever set foot in the museum. They come down here for football games, but they do not go to the museum after the game. We all go home and sit around [and admire the grandchildren]. But my wife, of course, enjoys the museum very much. We count ourselves fortunate in that respect, living in Gainesville and having this wonderful facility.