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RAY STRONG

An Interview Conducted By

Donald Oman

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*DIED JULY 3RD 2006
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RAY STRONG

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Mr. Ray Strong

Born January 3, 1905 in Corvallis, Oregon.

Resident of Mill Valley from 1948 to 1965.

Mr. Strong is now a resident of Santa Barbara, California. He was interviewed in June 1978 while vacationing in Sonoma County.

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Introduction

Ray Strong has exhibited at the Macbeth Gallery, New York; Cowie Galleries, Los Angeles; Corcoran Gallery, Washington, D.C.; DeYoung Museum, San Francisco; Palace of the Legion of Honor, San Francisco; Gumps, Graves Galleries, Maxwell Galleries, and City of Paris Rotunda in San Francisco, and also at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art.

Commissions include Keene Valley Parish Murals, New York; post office murals in San Gabriel, California, and Decatur, Texas; and paintings in Lassen, Rainier, and White Sands national parks. His painting of Golden Gate Bridge under construction hangs in the White House. He painted the prehistoric backgrounds in Bacon Hall at the University of California in Berkeley and the kudu background at the Academy of Sciences in San Francisco. The Junior Museum of Palo Alto commissioned him to do murals, charts, and panels, and the Museums of Natural History in Santa Barbara and Morro Bay commissioned him to paint their bird backgrounds.

RAY STRONG

Donald Oman

My name is Don Oman, and I am interviewing Ray Strong, West Coast landscape painter. At the moment we're sitting out-of-doors at a picnic table adjacent to Salt Point Park on the Sonoma County coastline. Today is July 23, 1978.

To begin, Ray, how about a brief personal history. Where were you born and when?

Ray Strong

I was born in Corvallis, Oregon, January 3, 1905, the third child. My father at that time was finishing up his studies at Oregon State. I guess the most important thing about the birth is that my umbilical cord was tied by my own father. The birth was quite rapid and the doctor wasn't there, so my father did the honors.

My father's father owned several mills in Monmouth, Oregon and Corvallis, and father used to run logs down the Willamette River in the spring. He decided he wanted to be a lawyer; he didn't want to end up being a mill-owner.

They tell me the next important thing was that I slept through the 1906 San Francisco earthquake. Memorial Church was tumbling down, the rest of the family woke up, but I just went from wall to wall and slept through it.

I guess the next important thing, as far as I'm concerned as a painter, was that we had lots of rain in Oregon. I started painting my first watercolors when I was about eight. My mother's mother who had been a milliner and was a widow, painted the usual Bierstadt sort of things. There'd be a deer coming out of the woods, a snow-capped mountain, a lake with fir trees. I'd make copies of these. But I very quickly shifted from those

to the National Geographic. There was another quite talented boy in the neighborhood, and on rainy days we would sketch and make watercolors.

When I was fourteen father's health went back on him. He was a lawyer. When he didn't feel well he would come home from his office and sleep on the sleeping porch. The man he was working for owned a berry farm about thirteen miles east of Portland. For his health, and also because it was wartime (or on the verge of wartime) and because berries and jams were quick energy for the soldiers, father went out and managed the farm.

In the moving I discovered some old oils and started painting my first oil paintings. I finished my grade school there and four years of high school. I was quite good in basketball and baseball, particularly.

There was one good painter in Portland, Clyde Leon Keller. All through my high school days, we'd paint every Sunday. It didn't matter whether it was raining or snowing or what the weather was. He had a tarp, and we'd build a bonfire. We painted mostly the Columbia Slough. This was wonderful training, because he was a very fine, outgoing painter. I think he's probably gone now. The last time I saw him he had a pacemaker on, but he was still painting, still filled with boyish enthusiasm for being an artist.

When it came time to go to college my father wanted me to go to University of Oregon. I didn't want to spend four years and maybe picking up things I didn't want. I wanted to become a painter and go directly to art training, so I came down to the California School of Fine Arts--with a little help from my wife's brother and my own brother.

The interesting thing about the California School of Fine Arts at that time is that it was held in the old Mark Hopkins mansion atop Nob Hill. I studied there the first season, and then they moved down to a business building on lower California Street the second year. I had a certain feeling of what I wanted to do. I went to the Grand Canyon one summer with Jimmy Swinnerton and some painters. When I came back the California School director wanted to see what I was doing. He took a look

¹Gresham, Oregon.

at them. Of course they were studies of the Painted Desert and Kayenta in Indian Country.

He said, "Ray, about ten or fifteen years from now you're going to wake up and find you're ten or fifteen years behind the times. Here's what you should be doing," and he held up some of the avant-garde Paris painters. I talked with Jimmy Swinnerton about it. I said, "Actually, I think I should go to a better school in the east. I just don't feel I'm getting what I want--being able in time to paint my own country in Oregon." So the following year I went back to New York to the Art Students League through New Orleans. Took the boat. That was a wonderful experience.

I came back out and built a cabin in Oregon. In 1928 I finally decided to get married. I married the daughter of a philosophy professor at Stanford. We went back to New York together in 1928, she to study violin and I to study painting. I got a scholarship at the Art Students League and made friends with some of the best painter students at that time. I did a lot of Lower East Side, subways, elevateds--kind of George Bellows sort of thing.

I think that's pretty much a brief history of my studying and marrying and where I started from in Oregon.

Mr. Oman

What is Betty's name?¹

Mr. Strong

Betty is Elizabeth Rumsey Brown.

Mr. Oman

Tell me also about your family, about your children.

Mr. Strong

We both were studying in New York during the depression. I was making pastry one winter while I was

¹Mrs. Ray Strong.

going to art school. We used to have to deliver early in the morning. We'd work all through the night making Kruller Kinks with a southern recipe of three little doughnuts holes. I became very socially conscious of troubles in America. The people who had been playing the stock market lost everything in the 1929 crash. You'd have to walk away from the buildings, because they'd just take off from a window and jump out. This was true also down on the Lower East Side, in the Jewish and Italian section. I began to do a lot of thinking and reading about economics and why there was this unemployment. There were a lot of unemployed architects and other people on the street corners selling apples. This struck me as particularly ironic because the apples were from Oregon! I thought, "Something's happened to America that we have this terrific waste of talent."

Mr. Oman

This would have been when? Twenty-nine, '30, around in there?

Mr. Strong

The first time I went to the League was in the thirties, yes, the early thirties.

You asked about children. It was ten years before we had our first child. We had come west and started a little artist cooperative in San Francisco. We had our son, who has turned out to be a veterinarian in Upper Lake. I guess he's thirty-eight already.

After five or six years we decided we didn't want a spoiled brat on our hands. We thought we'd try to get a girl--and did. We got Barbara, who has turned out to be the brains of the family. She's an art historian, very much interested in primitive art, pre-Columbian, and art generally. She hasn't married. Both children have a love for animals, and we have a fine family.

Mr. Oman

When did you first go to Mill Valley? Did you know Mill Valley and Marin before you moved there?

¹Timothy.

Mr. Strong

Yes, we did. Betty's father was getting close to retirement age, and they built a cabin in Inverness. During the four war years I was a little old for going into active service, but I became the man who put in all the benches and tables on the Liberty and Victory ships. There were three men doing it before I worked out a kind of a Yankee jig. I did it all by myself, and I did that for four years. Almost every weekend, to get away from the welding and red lead and the utter chaotic confusion we'd go to Marin.

Mr. Oman

At what yard was this?

Mr. Strong

This was Richmond Yard No. 1. I'd commute every day from Berkeley. I'd gone to Berkeley because I'd first worked for the Forest Service and then the Park Service as staff artist, under the WPA Special Skills Program, so I¹ was already there. We had had the Art Students League¹ in the city before that, and I used to commute over to paint for the two government services. That was a marvelous experience.

I did educational material, things for county fairs, paintings for the offices, and all kinds of things of that sort. I got very interested in the Little Waters² project of Roosevelt. I was quite keen about the early ecology movement which Roosevelt picked up from the earlier Roosevelt, from Teddy. That was a very fertile period of studying, a very fertile place to be.

Mr. Oman

Did you do any of your dioramas?

¹Ray Strong organized, studied, and taught at the Art Students League of San Francisco with Maynard Dixon, Frank Van Sloan and George Post. They later formed the Artist's Cooperative Gallery on Maiden Lane.

²One of FDR's soil conservation projects.

Mr. Strong

Yes, I did some dioramas for them. They used to take me out on locations. I went down to Three Rivers and the Kaweah colony¹, and we did one for the Blue Grouse, which is a high mountain bird; I created the background. For the '39 fair², a little bit later in that period, I did the whole "Science in the Service of Man" paleontology exhibits of early California landscapes and history.

Mr. Oman

That was the World's Fair on Treasure Island in San Francisco Bay?

Mr. Strong

Yes. That was marvelous training ground for a painter who pretty much knew early where he wanted to go in painting the West. I was working with paleobotanists, paleontologists, and geologists. They'd say, "Well, Ray, this was five million years ago," and they would describe some part of America that is now kind of a repeat of the same kind of thing. So that was a rich learning process for me that's in my work today. It gets stronger because it has the substance of this stuff under it.

Mr. Oman

You had been painting from time to time in Marin County before you moved to Mill Valley?

Mr. Strong

Oh yes. Every weekend that we could get away we would go to Inverness. . . .

Mr. Oman

This would be in the thirties and forties?

¹The Kaweah cooperative community.

²Golden Gate International Exposition.

Mr. Strong

All the way through the early middle thirties and into the war years, through the forties.

Mr. Oman

When did you actually move to Mill Valley?

Mr. Strong

We lived in a backyard cottage in Berkeley. It was called a garden cottage, in somebody else's back yard. There was a four-story building in front of us. Of course I always wanted to paint, and I kept my painting going on weekends by going to Inverness and staying with my father-in-law. We'd take the kids out, of course, for picnics. While they'd beachcomb, I'd always make a sketch or two--generally one sketch. So I kept the painting going all through the war years.

Mr. Oman

You built a home in Mill Valley on Lovell Avenue?

Mr. Strong

I meant to mention that. One of the reasons I became a Marin County painter for a while was that our landlord in Berkeley wanted to up the rent and wanted the tenants out, so I had to look for a place. We had been going over to Marin County looking around. I was in San Francisco one day, and Ann Rice was there, Dick O'Hanlon's wife. She had seen me during the depression days in the city, and we were friends.

I said I'd been looking for a place. I wanted to find some land and build. She said, "That's interesting. The Gravesons have some land. There's been some sickness in his family, and they want to sell the lot right above us. You'd better take a look at it." I took a look and the same day said yes!

My father came down from Oregon. He's a great carpenter--a great jack of all trades. He came down, and we built the house at 383 Lovell. The interesting thing about the house is that we moved all our worldly goods as soon as we got the joists and subfloor on. We put up a tarp

and built the house around us. Father, of course, having gone through the earthquake, built probably the strongest building in Mill Valley! Jim Chesnut, who's a great carpenter and also a friend, gave us a hand. Father put in great big reinforcing rods and hooked every joist. The joists came from a big warehouse that was being torn down in San Francisco, and they're about three inches through, three-by-tens. It's built like a fortress.

It was a great experience for me. In fact, I think anybody who designs and builds a house has one of the important experiences in life. I think it contributed, also, to my own painting. A little bit later in Marin County I got at odds with the president of the junior college over the particular kind of a museum we were trying to do, which was really a museum for peace and understanding across the world. My carpentry skill came in very handy then. I was on temporary credentials at the college, so I turned back to carpentry to feed the family. I got private students, largely through the little community college. Mr. Foster and a number of the people who were there wanted to paint, so I picked up teaching and kept on going.

Mr. Oman

Did you start coming to Marin before the bridge was built? Did you come over on the ferry?

Mr. Strong

It was all ferryboats, even when I went to the shipyards every afternoon.

I knew where I wanted to finally end up, because Marin County is probably one of the most paintable bits of landscape in the world. The hills, the contours, the fog, the nature of the economy--largely cattle farms--it has a mammal-related feeling. It's a humanized landscape. Going out to the shipyards we'd watch the fog breaking over the shoulder of the mountain. Later, when I moved to Mill Valley, we built on what I call the first sunshine belt--not on the north slope where Sugar Loaf is but where the air conditioning breaks over. It was a beautiful place to live and to raise the two children. They went to Mill Valley schools and practically through high school. We sold our house and moved to Santa Barbara in 1965.

Mr. Oman

You've been to Mill Valley currently. Do you see changes? It's a much more bustling town now than it was in the thirties.

Mr. Strong

It was a quiet town. The only time it got a little busy was when the city people came over to hike up Tamalpais. Then we'd get the backpackers. They came by ferry. The trains weren't running. They must have bussed to the bus depot. But during the week it was quiet. The town is kindly treated by the shoulders of Tamalpais; it sort of got in between the shoulders.

The trees have covered most of the bad architecture. There is good architecture, but most of it is not so much to be looked at but lived in! I still to this day think it's one of the nicest places to live because it's out of the rush and the roar of the flatlands that feed into San Francisco--down the peninsula, for instance.

Mr. Oman

You mentioned Dick O'Hanlon and some of the other people you knew in those early days. I think you knew Bart Perry. Do you recall other people in Mill Valley in those earlier days who may still be around or who were noted for one reason or another?

Mr. Strong

The great fun of living in Mill Valley. . . . When we built the house, when we were bulldozing, we ran into very heavy adobe. I think it's an old lakebed. It was in the springtime, and when the bulldozers were working, the adobe would get into great big balls about the size of half of a barrel. I would get down below them and try to stop them. Three or four of them broke loose and almost came down on Dick O'Hanlon's. He lived on a little stream that went right underneath his house. I think an old man used to run goats on the land, and he also harvested the eucalyptus trees.

Anyway, Dick and I became friends. He came up and took some photographs of dad and myself when we were building the house. Then he built his great big barn studio.

I can remember the opening of that. Sam Newsom put up a great big drawing. At that time Dick was doing little things that you could put in your hands--owls and small things.

Mr. Oman

Was he sculpting out of rock?

Mr. Strong

Right out of the rock. He'd pick up a rock. You'd walk down to see him, and you'd see some chalk around a particular rock. He would let the rock speak to him, whether it was a grasshopper or an owl or whatever the shape suggested. He picked them up in Santa Barbara and all up and down the coast. Sam Newson, who had quite a sense of humor, did a great big charcoal sketch on a piece of wrapping paper. He drew a big-scale thing, like Henry Moore, that said, "Let rocks their silence break." He was more or less asking Dick, "Come on, scale up, boy. You've got a barn!"

Mr. Oman

And he has done that.

Mr. Strong

Oh yes! Bart Perry was there, working for a time as a carpenter. We worked together. When Dick was pouring his foundations they called me down. He had about a nine-foot wall, and we used everything to try to save that wall from collapsing. The weight was terrific, and it was poured pretty rapidly. That was dramatic.

Mr. Oman

Did you ever get involved in community affairs in Mill Valley or have any problems with the city fathers?

Mr. Strong

Not in the town itself. I had to make a living while I built the house. I had a certain gift of gab, I thought, and one day I decided to go over to the junior college. The man who was there was a fan of Maynard Dixon. He asked me where I'd studied and who I'd worked with and who

I admired. I took a couple of paintings over. They were going to give me a good teaching position, but then they decided to prove me out.

The Adult Ed man was a retired colonel, rather young to be a retired man. Ed Cadogan had me start out and take over some of the worst classes they had. One was called a Design Workshop. I started out teaching how to make leather belts and pound copper into relief; etching, painting, design, and composition. It was three or four nights a week, as I remember. After a year I had proved out on that, so they began giving me a class in landscape and drawing and the rest of it. So I became an art teacher. It was a very interesting thing.

Back in the 1941 period, after I'd finished doing the things for the University of California that I was interested in, I felt the sense of change. Change is about the only thing that stays true in life, and I thought, "Well, we're at an age where we certainly need to change things." So, in that open period before my work in the shipyards, William Gordon Hough and I drew up a plan for a science exhibit in a children's museum in Palo Alto. It was financed through a foundation grant but got no further because of the war. I stored the model in my home.

Then one day one of my College of Marin students, who was a little brighter than the rest, got married and wanted to live in my studio in Mill Valley. One day he walked into the basement of my house and saw this model of the Palo Alto job. Incidentally, it was called "Life Through the Ages, A Story of Change." He said, "Gee, that's exciting." It gave him an idea; he decided to promote the idea that the senior class should have a little ever-changing, living museum at the College of Marin.

He got the senior class to sponsor it, and they had me come and explain what could be done: They could use photographs and keep it living and changing--tell the story of where we came from, the story of evolution, but come right on up and look at the world and its problems today. It would be the whole sweep of life. Students from different departments would contribute to it. But we'd have to have a building to put it in.

The students said, "What shall we do about that?" I said, "Why not ask for the best architect in the nation?"

Why go in between? Ask for Frank Lloyd Wright." So they went to the president, and the board of trustees put up some money for it. We wrote a letter to Wright, and he said sure he'd be interested, come on back to Taliesin ("shining brow" in Welsh). When we landed in Kansas City the newspapers were carrying headlines that the Korean War had broken out.

Well, we got to Wright's. We had shipped a scale model ahead, so he had seen the scale model. He said, "That's very plastic." Then he said, "Let me see your hands." I showed him my hands. I knew what was in the offing! He said, "Ray Strong. That means strong life. What do you do?" I said, "I'm a painter." He said, "Why don't you make the real thing, three dimensional? Why don't you be an architect?"

I said, "I like the country. I like painting." He said, "My name means 'maker.' Come on, stay here for a week or two. You can stay up there next to the tower where some of the students are." Before I knew it I was pitching wheat into the thresher, I was digging out stones, and I was doing this and that and the other thing. I became part of the work force. So we were there for two weeks.

Between twelve and two the students would play recorders. They had a pretty far-fetched chaplain, a man who wished at the moon, a sort of occult person that Mrs. Wright was interested in. They would do these religious dances on the stage. I would go to the drafting room and draft. Wright would come by and look at my floor plan of this new type of museum.

He said, "This looks to me like it's going to be the new university, where the people themselves put in their ideas of where we came from and what we are and what we should be doing about making a better and more qualitative life." He was quite complimentary about it. The man who had built Bear Run was there, and this was quite a feather in our caps to have a little chance to talk about it.

To try to cover this fast: The people at home were very much in favor of this--until we got back. Then suddenly there was talk about a garrison state. The museum we had in mind was a museum for peace and understanding. Before we left, Mr. Wright said it would be very difficult

to get money for it. Even so, I gave the drawings to Ward Austin, the college president, who was still interested in it at that time. We made contact with the Carnegie Foundation, and he took it with him to Washington. While he was there he saw a survival museum.

Before he left we decided it would be an awfully good idea to make a mockup and put up some of the kinds of exhibits we wanted. There were several different people in the geology department and others who were interested. So we did this.

When he got back he was furious. He gave a talk to the whole campus, and it looked like we were going to get into a very hot part of the cold war, in general thinking. For a couple of days he wouldn't let me talk to anybody. This museum during wartime was sponsoring something that dealt with understanding and peace. It was kind of unfortunate timing. If it had come maybe ten years before or ten years after, it probably would have gone farther.

Well, we never got our museum. The old barn we were working in was torn down. It was a wonderful experience, I think, for everybody involved in it. We all grew. I never did have any bitterness about it. In fact, when we tore the barn down I just stood and watched it and smiled--picked up a couple of the old hand-hewn nails. It was an organic piece of architecture. It wasn't pseudo-Spanish like the rest of the campus; it was really a fine old building.

Mr. Oman

As I recall you lived in Mill Valley until 1965.

Mr. Strong

Yes, I think the house was started in '48 and I taught in '50 and '51. Then Cecil Tose gave me some work. I did some kudu background for the Academy of Sciences in San Francisco, and I commuted. After I'd lost the job at the university I taught privately and painted. I also worked a couple of days a week at the Academy of Sciences, which again was excellent training because I was dealing with visual things. Some of the ideas that came in there: There was one traveling exhibit on Canada, another one on atomic energy, another one on the brotherhood of man. A lot of stuff that was in my museum moved into the Aca-

demy of Sciences.

Mr. Oman

As I recall, after you left Mill Valley you moved to Santa Barbara.

Mr. Strong

For about three years after the war I made a living. Then there was a recession, and I had one show in Los Angeles and only sold a couple of paintings. Betty wanted to do some traveling, so we bought tickets to New York, then got on a boat and went to Europe.

I stopped first at the Grand Central Galleries, and they were interested in my work. I had slides of it. They said, "A lot of people go to Europe and want paintings of it after they get back. They get quite an experience out of it. We'll give you a show when you come back."

We went, and in the process of working, trying to get down to Majorca with another Mill Valleyan that was there we ran into a flood. The flood wiped our car out from under us, so we came on back home. I never did get the show at the Grand Central.

When we got back I was without work, unemployed. There was no possibility of being hired back at the College of Marin because I had opposed the whole establishment, with a good solid backing by the faculty and students. I was a stormy petrel, so I didn't even think about doing that.

A man I had worked with, who had been a graduate student when I made the University of California paleontology story of the ancient landscapes, had become the director of the Santa Barbara Natural History Museum. A few weeks before I came back from Europe he was asking about me. Somebody who saw me on the street said, "There was a man here looking for you, a Mr. Vanderhoof. He's got a new wing down there, and he needs to have some backgrounds painted."

I got on the phone and, sure enough, he invited me down. The next thing I knew I was artist-in-residence to the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History, for which I did a whole chapel for birds. I thought I could do it

in a year, but it took almost three years. I did some botany backgrounds. About that time I had to start looking for another job.

I started to go out to the University of California at Santa Barbara. I was all slated to have a class in Taft and other places where the other faculty members (who were content to stay close to home) wouldn't go. I was going to take landscape painting out to the outlying places.

At the last minute my classes were cancelled. They said, "We've got our own people; they can use the money." Well, they never have gone out. The man at UCSB said to me, "Ray, I've heard that you're a very likable fellow, but really, we have to undo everything you're doing. You're painting landscapes, you're painting realistically. We really look at things a little differently from that." I said, "How do you know how I teach? For instance, I have a textbook of Kenneth Clark's, 'Landscape into Art.'" He said, "I use that in my class." I said, "You've done something rather strange here, that you can't stand to have one realistic painter of California because of what you think art should be in this university. Don't you think you're short-changing students who come in here who might like to paint the mountains or paint California as they see it in its own right?"

James Armstrong, one of the very finest artists, heard about this, and he said, "That's not the first time the university has showed such a prejudiced, kind of dogmatic, view of what art should be. During the thirties, during the depression, we had an art school here. Let's start a cooperative guild art school. Let's pick the five best artists in town that really know their craft of painting. So we did. Douglas Parshall, Joseph Knowles, John Gorham, Armstrong, and myself. We added a sculptor, Duane Loppnow, Forest Hibbits of Buelton, and a few more. We lasted for eight years.

The Adult Education program is a very strong and a very beautiful one. I never gave up teaching Adult Ed, which I was also doing at the time. In fact, a lot of our student body originally came from there.

After a couple of years we were in the black all the time. It was marvelous, the Students League Cooperative

School. I believed in it; we all did. But then we were only paid \$5 an hour. Then Brooks Institute which is a quite famous photographic school, offered to merge with us. Mr. Brooks was a man who had started with a laundry and had gone into photography. He had always wanted to go into fine arts, too. He upped the amount per hour and did some national advertising.

Then we started taking a lot of what I called the Reagan rejects. We picked up a number of teachers who had been let out under the Reagan austerity program. We already had some abstract painters and avant-garde teachers, but unfortunately we overloaded on that end so that it kind of weakened the faculty balance. A couple of our teachers became administrators. We finally ended up by really not being necessary as an art school. The GI bill didn't bring to us enough of those students who went to Chouinard and other art schools instead.

In the middle of this Mr. Brooks decided he didn't like the way our students dressed and the way they wore their hair. He was taking a little loss on the national advertising, and he soured on the thing. He pulled out. We stayed in the black for a little while, but finally our student body just didn't come up to the overhead, and the art school finally went under.

The City College down there has marvelous art classes, and Adult Ed is magnificent. Several of our administrators finally went back to teaching there.

That's about the story, as far as my biography is concerned.

Mill Valley? For the first seven years in Santa Barbara we almost ate our hearts out because we didn't like it. It's too close to Los Angeles. There's not the fog, there's not the vitality, it's not nearly as paintable as Marin. We'd always come up every time we had a chance. The fact that I'm talking to one of my dearest friends-- this is where we would come and stay every time we had a chance.

Mr. Oman

While you were in Mill Valley, weren't you active on

¹Chouinard Art School, Los Angeles.

a commission advising on architecture or something of that sort?

Mr. Strong

I suppose we have to give full credit for that commission to Thomas Collison, who was running the Mill Valley Record. As a young reporter he had served in Santa Barbara and was very much impressed by Pearl Chase and Santa Barbara Beautiful--such things as the quality of the architecture and the signs and the general community level of the visual elements. He was very concerned about telephone poles, particularly. He thought Mill Valley was a beautiful place, and he was crusading for this kind of a committee that would approve signs and try to upgrade the visual things that were eye offensive.

I forget who was mayor at the time. Wornum was there, and others. Anyhow, Vera Schultz put me on the committee for selection of a site for the Marin County Civic Center. At one time she was head of the library board, and I did a demonstration sketch for the librarians of the county. She thought I was quite articulate, and she'd heard about the struggle at the college, so I was on that commission first.

Then I became part of the Architectural Advisory Commission for the City of Mill Valley. I enjoyed it very much, and I hope it is still continuing to do good work. One thing that I was thanked for in the press was getting some bricks on one of the prefab tin things to make a filling station look a little more like it belonged.

Mr. Oman

You mentioned the civic center. There was a lot of politics involved in that, as I recall--whether or not there should be money spent for a civic center. It might be interesting to hear a little bit about the site selection problem. You've mentioned knowing Frank Lloyd Wright.

Mr. Strong

I suppose I should recap one of the most interesting experiences. When I was in the process of losing my job at the College of Marin, Mr. Wilson and a geologist,

Steve Bruff got in touch with Mrs. Livermore¹. They came to me and said, "Ray, why don't you drop trying to save the whole world with peace and understanding? Why don't you just do a story of the ecology and the quality of life and the democratic process? Do something called 'Man and Nature in Marin.'" So we did.

We made up a scale model. The students, who were very supportive of me, went up to Sacramento, with her support. Sure enough, we got \$8,000, and we did the story of the Indians, of Drake, before the bridge, after the bridge, and all of the volunteer processes of democracy. In addition, we put in a spiral chart of Sculptor Robert Howard,² which had three pylons with a spiral going up. Somebody said, "What does it mean?" So I had to put on there, "It means that three races of mankind are reaching upward toward peace and understanding." Then we had another exhibit by Cedric Wright which had to do with the birth of a child and a whole lot to do with the worth of the earth, kind of a Whitman approach.

It was a very exciting exhibit, and we got quite a bit of publicity in the doing of it.

Mr. Oman

Where was it held?

Mr. Strong

In the Art and Garden Center in Ross.

The year after that we tried to get part of the exhibit revived and some of it moved into the Education Department. It was a photographic story entirely, no art work. Ansel Adams. . . .

Mr. Oman

Were these Ansel Adams pictures?

¹ Mrs. Norman Livermore was president of the Marin Conservation League and Mr. Wilson, vice president. They were instrumental in getting fair funding from state pari-mutuel funds.

² Husband of sculptress Adeline Kent.

Mr. Strong

Oh yes. He did a magnificent set of just the poetry of quiet, beautiful. . . .

Mr. Oman

Did you know him?

Mr. Strong

I knew him because I had started an Art Students League with Maynard Dixon, and he was in a photo forum with some of the other leading photographers, Dorothea Lange, Imogene Cunningham. My wife ran that as a part of the Art Students League. This was during the Spanish Civil War days. We had all the posters of the Spanish Republic. It was a very live thing, right in the middle of San Francisco. If you were to categorize it, I suppose you would say it was a little left, as most of the young college and university people of the day were. We'd have somebody as a manager, and the next thing we'd know he'd say, "I'm leaving. I've joined the Abraham Lincoln Brigade."

Anyhow, that overlapped into the selection of a site for the Marin County Civic Center. Vera Schultz became interested in getting an architect for it. On her own she pushed and promoted and got Wright¹ to come out. Unfortunately, Mr. Fusselman and several other people had read Wright's earlier pronouncements of World War I, when he supported conscientious objectors, and they red-baited Mr. Wright. It didn't work; he could handle himself very well.

I remember attending the San Rafael High School meeting when he came out, shortly before he died. He showed his drawings and things. He had a marvelous bunch of trained students who had been with him for years. But the credit for the civic center goes, of course, to Vera Schultz.

Mr. Oman

Were other sites considered?

¹Frank Lloyd Wright.

Mr. Strong

We started with the Freitas ranch.¹ In fact I made a drawing of the hills of Freitas and the kind of thing I thought Wright might do, at one of the early meetings when they were still about to select an architect. I made a big, long landscape sketch of it.

Mr. Oman

The Freitas ranch is north of the present Civic Center location?

Mr. Strong

Yes, it's north and on the other side of the road, back of those hills. There was nothing in there at that time, just a barn. It's amazing, the growth that has taken place.

Then we looked at another couple of sites. There was a marvelous man there from the Marshall Ranch, Mr. Marshall himself. It was a very interesting commission. It was the first time I had ever been on a public commission. And, of course, Mrs. Livermore was on it. My wife doesn't think as highly of the civic center as I do. I suppose it does have shortcomings to people walking by on the outside, and you might need roller skates to move yourself horizontally, but it doesn't deface the landscape. It bridges across. I think it's pretty exciting. It's really the only civic job that Mr. Wright had during his lifetime. I think it meant a great deal to him.

I remember that during the struggle he came out and gave a talk, trying to get the butterfly bridge, which was a gorgeous arch and bridge like the Swedish people do it. One of his students brought a scale model out. I met him at the American Express, and I went up to the meeting with a young architect. That was the last time I saw Wright. We never got the bridge. The steel people got a lot more steel. His was encased in prestressed stuff. It was a beautiful bridge.

Mr. Oman

This was the bridge intended to go. . . .

¹North of San Rafael.

Mr. Strong

From Richmond to San Rafael. Wright's idea for the bridge made a great big leap. It was to be assembled in sections. Polivka, who taught structural engineering for Stanford, was interested in it. It was the bridge that should have been built, but it didn't get off the ground.

Mr. Oman

During our conversation today you've mentioned a number of fairly famous people, artists and others. Can you think of any others you've known?

Mr. Strong

Yes, there's two others. You know, you meet maybe three or four or five people in a lifetime who may not have been famous at the time but became famous later or they were men who were outstanding and pushing forward in their fields.

The senior class student, Bill Morrison, who saw the scale model and took me to Wright, was one of the experiences. The second person was a man I did my first mural for in a little parish adjunct to a New England church in Keene Valley, New York. He had lost his second wife to cancer, and he came out and became part of the resettlement administration and ended up in the migrant camp program. He met a fellow by the name of Tom Collins, who was introduced to Steinbeck. The Grapes of Wrath was dedicated to Tom Collins. This man knew I was interested in the cooperative movement. We used to have him come and speak to open forums. We were promoting very strongly the cooperative movement as a middle way between capitalism and Marxist Socialism. That's where my interests were. He was from Denmark and knew what they had done there, so we had him.

I met Steinbeck very briefly. I was working on trying to visualize the American way--barn-raising and working together and pulling together.

The third person was related to the same thing. I went to Bennington College in Vermont to see if they would be interested in two geodesic domes. I did have some correspondence with Buckminster Fuller; I never got to meet

him. We were going to put the "Spiral to Freedom" idea from the College of Marin in Bennington. He sent me to see Dr. Parr, who was head of the Natural History Museum in New York. Before I saw him, however, he said, "Go to see the man who edits the Scientific American, Mr. Edy." He took a look at my plans and said, "You've got a great idea. It would be marvelous at Bennington; it would be marvelous at any college. This is really great. But," he said, "you've got to have blueprints, you've got to get things to read. It would take you a year to work this out to get it to where you could get funds for it. But go up and see Dr. Parr. He's got a design going that's very similar to yours."

I did see Dr. Parr. I spent one whole noon hour with him, and he showed me his design for a museum, which was never used. He had hoped it would be for the present anthropology museum in Mexico City, but they used a different plan.

His design was like mine, except that mine flowed in a circle, with interlocking spirals, and his was a zigurat on which you went with an elevator to the top and came down through the whole history of the world and contemporary challenges of how to make a world that would survive and live and let live. It was interesting to talk with him and feel his enthusiasm. I knew my ideas were right. So that would possibly be the third person.

The other ones are really minor people--paleontologists, geologists, fellow artists. At my age today, seventy-three, I'm a fairly good landscape painter. I may be an important one in history, after you jump from Keith or some of the other ones we've had earlier. I think I paint about as solid a feeling of the spirit and the feel of the substance of California. I think I'm one of the best at the present moment, and I think historically these things will be recognized as having some validity in the chain of representative painting.

Mr. Oman

You have a fairly interesting current program of painting going on for your Southern California sponsor. Do you want to mention that?

Mr. Strong

I'm very interested in it, but it's really kind of a

by-product. About three years ago I did a mural against pollution which was really a spinoff of working things out of my system after the flood in which I saw several hundred children wiped out in the south of France. I've already mentioned that. I did the mural first as a sketch.

Santa Barbara suddenly became the symbol of the ecology conscience of America as a consequence of the big oil spill on the coast there. I went down to see the artist on the News-Press as to what he was going to do about it when Udall came out to speak. The artist said, "I haven't got the stuff to do it, like Ansel, to blow up my photographs." I said, "I've got a sketch here with me." He took a look and said, "My God, that's like Picasso's 'Guernica.' It's got the same kind of feeling." We added the Anacapa Islands and some oil derricks to the sketch, and it was just right.

I became very interested in the Coastal Commission, and I have the most beautiful set of canvasses just waiting. I want to paint some of the outstanding landscapes in burnt sienna and black and white and cobalt blue, like Chinese landscapes, of the beauty of the California coast. Harold Gilliam, if you've been following him in the San Francisco Chronicle, has had a series of magnificent essays on the Coastal Commission and on California and the quality of life related to these things. I thought I might do, what I intend to do, I'm sure I will do, is to paint this series of canvasses. There will be two sets: One set which can be put on portable wheels and taken to county and state fairs where the average people flow in to celebrate their annual crops of animals and vegetables and jams and jellies; the other set to be taken to the universities and junior colleges, just to visualize. I think through the selectivity of painting I can probably get more attention for the coast than with enlarged photographs.

In the process of this, one particular interior decorator called up one day and said, "I've got a great big interior up here and haven't got a big painting." I had painted a large painting, a favorite painting of my father-in-law's, which was in our dining room in Mill Valley. It's always been one of our favorite paintings. It's Black's Mountain near Point Reyes Station, a bunch of trees struggling up to the hill but mostly dry grass under low Indian summer sunlight, truly a very handsome

¹ Stewart L. Udall, Secretary of the Interior.

view.

I had this big painting because another bank had had a competition between the university and artists in town, but I never got the banker to leave Glendale Federal in LA and come up and take a look at it! The interior decorator came in and saw it and said, "I don't know whether we'll buy it or not. Let me put it up. Don't you have some other big ones?" I showed him a few more, and he said, "I'll take that; I'll take that; I'll take that." He took \$3000 or \$4000 worth of paintings and walked out of the studio, just to be put up for the opening of this bank.

Shortly after that I heard that a San Anselmo firm was going to be taken over by Santa Barbara Savings. I was up here on a trip, so I went in and said, "Who's going to pick the paintings for this interior?" It was a pretty good size interior. They gave me the name of a Sausalito outfit that was putting in the furniture. I said, "Oh no, I don't want what's going on the floor. I want what's going on the walls. Who will decide that?" They said, "There's a man, Tony Varesio, in the mother bank in Santa Barbara." I said, "Let me have his name and phone number."

When I got back I went down. A man came out-- Italian, naturally--in shirtsleeves. He said, "Ray Strong! Come on in! I went up and stood and listened to what people were saying about your painting. That painting makes the spirit of that bank, of what we're trying to do. I've got three banks for you.

"I want to have paintings that have a sense of place in the community where people are raising their children, investing their money, and living and doing their business. I'd like you to go up and take a look at Shafter. It will be hard to do anything in the valley; it's awfully flat. I'd like maybe something that has to do with the irrigation ditches--anything you want to do. You do what you want. I don't want to see any sketches ahead of time. You don't even have to talk to the manager; you just put them up."

I said, "Let's put them up on rental, on approval. If you want to rent and turn them back, fine. If you want to buy we'll apply the rent to purchase." He gave me a go-ahead on their branches in San Anselmo, Palo Alto,

and Shafter.

I was just recently down in Huntington Beach, and at the present time I'm on my fifteenth savings and loan branch! It's an absolutely delightful job. They have a contemporary architect out of Cal Poly who is a kind of a Frank Lloyd Wright by-product. Cal Poly is about the best architectural school on the Coast, I think. They're using redwood as redwood, beautiful linen drapes, Spanish tile. They have a very aware use of materials and simplicity.

They generally have in each bank a lounge area with coffee and cookies where you come in. The lounge areas and the conference rooms are all done with nice contemporary homespun weaving. I'd rather have my paintings in those banks than any gallery in the country because they're in the daily stream of people. It's an exciting commission.

I remember Steinbeck, in one of the earlier tales that had to do with Grapes of Wrath, where the banks were taking over and foreclosing. The neighbors, just like old barn-raising times, would get together, pick the sheriff up, and put him over the fence--then bid and buy the farm back at auction for a dollar. I always had the feeling that Steinbeck had about banks. So I've always felt a little guilty about painting for a bank, even though it's a fine community bank. It's like everything else; it has to grow. I think they've got sixty branches now.

I do feel I must get on with the coastal paintings. One of the paintings is going to be from near Salt Point here.

Mr. Oman

You're on your way this next week to the town of Mendocino.

Mr. Strong

This is a good way to wind up the interview. In the summer of 1951 I was waiting to hear back on an application to Maynard Hutchins of the Ford Foundation to fund the museum at the college. Even though we got turned down by the Carnegie I still had a tentative agreement; if I could get the funds, Wright would do it. I had lost my job, had finished the exhibit for "Man and Nature in Marin,"

and was unemployed.

I had a little cash I'd saved, and we went up to Mendocino. We were the only artists in the town of Mendocino. We lived entirely by the tide. If it was the right tide for fishing, we went fishing. If it was too foggy on the coast, we had a little, flat-bottom boat and we'd take a stream and row until we hit the bullrushes and catch butterflies and pick blackberries and catch a few trout. I think it was the finest summer in my whole life as far as family, my painting, and living is concerned.

Later on, a fellow from Sausalito came up and saw the village. He saw there was a lot of fog, so he put in a laundromat and a dryer. There were a lot of empty stores; the town was practically a decaying New England village. The lumbering industry had long since pulled out and was up at Fort Bragg. That one man, in not a very long time, got loans from the bank; the University of California Extension came up; artists came from all around the state. The beauty of the coast is incomparable. The Mendocino Art Center in Mendocino city is the kind of thing I think more artists should do all across the country--get out of the big cities, get out of the smog, get out of the pollution, get where the people are, the local people.

Foreign films came in. There's local little theatre; they act. The quality of life is wonderful. It's a town. They have to be careful they don't go the way of Carmel. They are fighting to keep the Point.

Over the last ten years or more, when I have a summer that I can do it, I like to go up and be a small part of teaching landscape at the Mendocino Art Center.

Transcribed by Ruth Wilson
Edited by Don Oman
Final typing by Mildred Antrobus