

AGARS, JOHN

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(Transcription of Tape 1, Side 1)

This is another of the many interviews of former personnel from Central that we identify as part of the Living History Project. I am Milo Smith, a member of the Project Committee; and being interviewed today is Mr. John Agars, a long, long time member of the Art Department on campus. I know him as primarily Professor of . . . “What were you Professor of, John?”

J.A.: Well, when I first came to Central, I was hired to teach printmaking and art appreciation.

M.S.: I was going to say printmaking, but I thought that that might be too narrow.

J.A.: Yeah, that’s right.

M.S.: Uh, where did you come from, John?

J.A.: Well, um, I have a page here and we might as well start at the very, very beginning. I was born on November 16th, according to my mother, on November 17th, in Riga, Latvia. Um, arrived in the United States in 1949. We stettled in a small rural community by the name of Kent, in Western Washington.

I went through the Kent public schools from grade school through high school, graduated in 1956, became an American citizen in 1957, spent from 1956 to the end of Winter quarter 1961 at the University of Washington and I got a Bachelor of Arts degree in Fine Art at the University of Washington, and then, um, got a graduate assistantship at WSU and worked on my MFA degree there for two years and completed my MFA, again in fine art, in printmaking, um, and then after I finished at WSU, I worked for a little while in Seattle, for perhaps six months or so, and then, late in 1964 – uh, ’63, I got a job working as a curator at the State Capitol Museum in Olympia; and that job lasted until mid-summer, late summer of 1964. In the early Spring of 1964, I ran into Reino Randall, who said that he was going on leave and that Central was looking for someone to take their place, and that I should give Louis Kollmeyer a phone call – and I did that and the rest is history.

So, I came to Central in 1964 as a one-year replacement for Reino Randall, and I graduated from Central in the year 2000, after teaching here for 37 years.

M.S.: Who was Chairman of the Art Department when you came, John?

J.A.: Frank Bach was Chairman. I think he had just become Chairman, due to Reinol going on professional leave.

M.S.: Okay. So your duration in the Art Department went through several Chairmen?

J.A.: Quite a few several chairmen, yes indeed, (chuckle) including myself.

M.S.: Uh, what was your first impression of the school and the town?

J.A.: Well, it was a sunny day and the wind wasn’t blowing when we got here and I got fooled into thinking this is going to be a pretty swell place. And I think, after 37 years, I think it’s still a pretty swell place.

M.S.: Good. Glad you came.

J.A.: Thank you.

M.S.: Now, tell us about the history of your progression in the Art Department through any ranks that you held.

J.A.: Academic ranks?

M.S.: Academic ranks.

J.A.: I think that all blurred together. It really didn't make much difference. I started as an instructor and then as an assistant professor and associate professor and full professor; and most of those steps came in fairly reasonable time.

M.S.: Good.

J.A.: I don't feel that I was passed over for very long, rank-wise. Um, so it was a pretty normal progression through the . . .

M.S.: What was your feeling about the Art Department, itself, when you came?

J.A.: Well, I think that it was clear back in the early '60's when Central was growing by leaps and bounds, that there was a lot of opportunity here for establishing a career for a young faculty person, as I was at the time. And we were in Barge Hall for a number of years and then we started planning for a new building and so there was a bright light on the horizon, clearly; and all of us who were here in the mid to late '60's were very, very actively involved in planning for the new building and sort of establishing what we would ideally like to see in our own academic areas of specialization.

M.S.: Did the new building fulfill your hopes and ambitions for it?

J.A.: No. (chuckle) Well, what happened was that, um, we misunderstood and were really never clear about what about preplanning meant; and that in the long run got us into some trouble because we had all collectively assumed that preplanning meant that the architects would go out and see the world and visit the best art buildings in the country, and then give us one that was even better than that; and that wasn't what preplanning money was for, which I later learned in serving on many college committees and planning for new buildings. Uh, preplanning is, in fact, a term that is used to find out where the utilities are going to run underground and where they already are and where they aren't; and it really has nothing to with planning the design or functionality of the building, it's to do with planning the site, rather than the building itself. And we didn't really understand that, and so we kept assuming that the architects would understand that in certain rooms in the building, ventilation is a must – and in other rooms in the building, there are other specialty issues that are involved – uh, evacuating acid fumes from printmaking area where I was teaching hadn't been in the original plan for the building. The building was on the first floor, and subsequent to us moving into the building, they had to figure out some way of conducting a very, very corrosive amount of nitric acid fumes through two floors that exit outside of the building someplace. And there were other parts of the building that had those same ventilation problems which actually, finally got cleared up last fall. I think they finally got the new ventilation system in the building.

M.S.: And the building is named for whom?

J.A.: For Reino Randall. It's (*inaudible*).

M.S.: Reino Randall.

J.A.: That's right.

M.S.: And I laughed when I found out it was going to be named Reino, because he's the only person I had any trouble with in that one year I served as acting Chairman of the Art Department. I finally had to go to Reino and say, "Would you please not ride your bike in the building."

J.A.: (chuckle)

M.S.: He was riding in, riding it onto the elevator, going up to his floor, out of the elevator, down the hall, around the corner, and he would lock it on the little hand railing (*inaudible*) office.

J.A.: (chuckle) . . . and was chaining it to his hand rail. (chuckle) Yeah, I remember that.

M.S.: Suddenly, I would be walking to my office in the morning, and there are seventeen, eighteen bicycles in the hallway.

J.A.: Oh, that's – Yeah, I remember that. That was the (*inaudible*) period.

M.S.: So, I stopped him to say, "I'm sorry, I'm Milo Smith, temporary Chairman of the Art Department. Would you please not ride your bike in the building; and I am going to warn you that this is a friendly warning. The next time, I will not warn you, I will call the campus police. Well, pretty soon, the students were very good and they quit riding their bike in the building, but not Reino Randall. He continued.

J.A.: He kept . . . Did he push it into the building?

M.S.: Pardon?

J.A.: But that was at a time before there were bike racks outside the building where you could lock up your bike.

M.S.: That's true.

J.A.: That's right.

M.S.: That's very true. That was, however, no excuse for riding a bike down the hallway. Um, who were the Chairmen under whom you served in that department? Or can you recall?

J.A.: Well, let me see if I can recall. We started with Louis Kollmeyer and then you, and then, I believe (George) Stillman came after you, and after (George) Stillman came Jaba the Hut for a year. That wasn't her name, but we'll leave it at that. Jaba the Hun, um, we didn't like her very well and she didn't like us very well, and that didn't last very long; and then after that, I believe that . . . No, excuse me. I think I chaired after (George) Stillman, and then came Jaba the Hun. And then came Connie Speth and then Michael Chinn. And now, I believe, William Folkestad is Chair.

M.S.: Um, John, this is an awkward question for you to answer, but I think it would be worth, for the record – why were there so many different Chairmen of the Art Department? You'll have to recognize that it was an uncommon number.

J.A.: Yes and no. As I recall, um, Louis chaired the Department for a long time. I think he must have chaired the department for at least a decade, or more. Um, and I think that there were some disagreements about how the ever-diminishing budget was getting divvied up. Sort of towards the end of Louie's stint, it

became harder and harder to get an adequate budget for the things that everybody thought they needed. And I think that (George) Stillman, again – I think he served at least three, four year terms. He was there for a long time. And I think I, I got hired as a sort of a temporary Department Chairman for the first four years and then one more temporary year, until we decided whether we wanted to spend our money on another faculty person or whether we wanted to spend our money on a Department Chair. Um, I think that the one year, um, person that we had, really didn't understand what the department was about and what we were trying to do, and had sort of strange priorities and a strange way of dealing with people and that just – collectively, we all decided that that didn't work. And then, um, Connie Speth's term ended because she retired and there was no animosity about that. Um, and um, Michael Chinn, I believe a year ago, accepted a promotion to Assistant Dean of the College of Arts. And so William Folkestad is there now and I haven't been keeping in touch with the folks there; but he was – I believe that he was elected as a replacement for Michael Chinn, and I have no idea how, you know, what the future has . . .

M.S.: How did you feel, John, about the financial support for the department in the way of equipment and materials, especially?

J.A.: Well, I think there were some years when it was better than other years. On the whole, I think that as the State began to change its priorities about the purpose of education, that the funding became scarcer and scarcer, not only for maintaining facilities and upgrading equipment, but also for maintaining a successful faculty. And I throw that clearly in the lap of the State legislature that has to decide how to spend a limited amount of money.

But, I would like to say that during the four years that I attended the University of Washington, um, I had a summer job that paid a little bit – ten cents more than minimum wage, as a matter of fact. Minimum wage was a dollar and I got paid a dollar ten for working night shift in a cannery. I usually worked what was then the official 48-hour workweek, which now is a 40-hour workweek, um, back in the good old days. You probably remember that. Forty-eight hours was a normal workweek. But, anyway, um, with what I earned in those three months at the cannery, I had more than enough money to go to school at the University of Washington – to pay all of my expenses, tuition, and the whole ball of wax. I lived at home, but I commuted from Kent to Seattle, and whenever I would stop every third day or so at the gas station in Kent, the guys would sort of shake their heads and they would say, "You drive all the way to Seattle, every day, and then home again?" (chuckle) So, anyway, if I was king of the world, I would try however it's possible or not, um, to get tuition as low as it could possibly be; and I think that I don't owe the State of Washington a dime for the money that they paid out for me to go to school, because I paid that back in spades through all the years that I worked and paid taxes as a fairly well salaried person. And I think that making students pay for the future is sort of a bad thing. I think that the State should pay for educating people and then expect those people to pay the State back after they have been educated and not the other way around.

M.S.: Who are some of the people, John, that you, in thinking back, you are especially pleased that they were so helpful to you?

J.A.: Well, I think . . .

M.S.: Probably, within your department, especially.

J.A.: Yeah, um, I think from the get-go, that first year when Reino was gone, I had his whole office and then when Reino came back, he and I shared a little bitsy office in Barge Hall, but we were the only two faculty people on campus who had a private bathroom in our own office.

M.S.: Mmm . . .

J.A.: It was – our office was the old green room when Barge was Washington State Normal School.

M.S.: Yes.

J.A.: And so we had a little bathroom in there. We couldn't use it, but it was there, a wonderful little storage space. Reino was a great help, (*inaudible*) was a great help, Sara Spurgeon was a great help, Ramona was a great help. Those old folks that were here really, really saw to it . . .

M.S.: That's good.

J.A.: . . . that we young bucks would sort of pay attention. Um, but we were all very interested in the department we were interested in seeing the department grow. We were interested in our own careers. Um, we had sort of decided that Central was a good place to be, and so we sort of put our roots down. Um, land was cheap back in the good old days, wasn't it? We bought ten acres out on Wilson Creek Road, one morning. My wife and I were driving around saying, "We should find a place to build a house." We were driving, and there was a little crick running along the edge of the road and we said, "A crick, trees. This looks good." So we bought ten acres and um, planted trees and planted more trees. And then, when we got ready to build our house, we were able to sell the back seven acres to make the down payment on our house which was probably about three thousand dollars less than a car that I bought four years ago. (chuckle)

M.S.: (chuckle) John, what was your feeling about Ellensburg, the town, when you first arrived and began to adjust?

J.A.: Well, I remember a conversation with John Woods, one day. I said, "Why don't you guys, you know – why doesn't the Ellensburg Chamber of Commerce sort of ring the bell and say, "Look at us. This a wonderful place to live!" And they said, "Shhh! We like it just the way it is."

M.S.: (chuckle)

J.A.: And I think that there was a lot of, you know, old geezer wisdom in that. We did like it the way it was and we still like it the way it is. And I am sort of amazed at - you know, I can't imagine where the people are coming from who are building these enormously expensive houses all around us. Um, but they are and I guess they're not enormously expensive. They're – you know, we couldn't afford to buy or build a house anymore now at the prices (chuckle) houses are.

M.S.: Uh, John, a lot of people who come to Central feel that they simply cannot exist in such a small, out-of-the-way community; and consequently, they spend most of their salary on gas, running to Seattle on weekends.

J.A.: Yeah.

M.S.: Were you able to adjust to the small town atmosphere?

J.A.: Well, yeah. Um, we liked the small town atmosphere to begin with. We're outdoorsy people. Um, once in awhile, we would – my parents lived in Kent. Francie's parents lived in Pullman. So, you know, maybe once a month or every other month we would go visit our parents, but most of the fun that we had was right here; and Ellensburg was, basically, a perfectly okay place for the staple things that we needed, which was furniture, a car and groceries and . . .

M.S.: Did you – Do you recall ever having developed about Central and its location in a small town when it came to participating and supporting student activities? Did the town support well – Do you feel that the town provided for these young, college-age kids?

J.A.: I think, on the whole, yes.

M.S.: Good.

J.A.: Um, again, I don't recall ever feeling like students didn't have opportunities to do whatever they wanted to do here. There were sometimes problems with getting very specialized art supplies. Um, but I think between the college bookstore and Jerrol's, probably ninety percent of what we needed was here and then when we did need things that were - particularly in graphic design, when we needed that were very, very specialized, then we could mail order stuff like that from Seattle and that took care of it.

M.S.: Now I'm going to ask you for a moment, to put your modesty aside. What did John Agars provide the Art Department that you are especially proud of today?

J.A.: Well, I think that there was a point in about the late '80's, when the department was vacillating about the importance of the graphic design program and whether or not computers would play a significant role in our building. And there was so little financial support available, at that particular time from the university, that we ended up printing tee-shirts and sweatshirts and selling them to the students in the dorms, in order to buy the first two Atari computers that we needed for the graphic design students. Um, when I went to Ed Harrington and talked to him about computers, when that was starting to happen in the mid to late '80's, um, he had already allocated what little resources there were and I said, "Ed, what about students in graphic design? They need computers." And he said, "What do they do with computers in graphic design?" And I said, "Well, have you looked at all of the graphics that are on television?" He said, "Is that how they do that?" And so, I think that there was a lot of - back in - you know, in the '80's - Um, I also remember one of the folks in the math department who had just gotten a computer, being very pleased that students could take a class and in one quarter, they could learn how to draw a cube and a circle and a triangle by programming a computer to do that. He said, "In one quarter, they can learn how to draw a triangle and a circle and a square." And, uh, I thought, "Well, that's not quite the kind of computer learning that we need to do." (chuckle) But, we did get our two Atari's, and then eventually, in about 1990, we finally got five MacIntosh computers and a printer and a scanner a couple of other peripherals. And then about four years later, we started talking about a proper computer lab and I feel that because of the joint efforts of John Agars and Glen Bach, um, and with a tremendous amount of support from Michael Chinn, by the way, um the Art Department has an absolutely beautiful, state-of-the-art computer lab now, with brand new computers every two or three years. Um, it's the only building - excuse me, the only room in the building that is air-conditioned. Not ceramics, not sculpture, not the wood shop - the computer lab has air-conditioning. And I sort of snicker about that a little bit sometimes.

M.S.: Now, John, I suspected you may not have known, in the year that I was with you people, as your acting Chairman, I was in hot water half the time because of things that the Art Department faculty felt were very important; and I supported you.

J.A.: Mmm hmm.

M.S.: But the complaints came to me. They didn't come to you.

J.A.: That's right.

M.S.: One, nude models in drawing classes.

J.A.: Ohhh! Well, I have. . . I have - having taught life drawing for a number of years, um, I have a very, very good explanation for that. Any fool can learn how to draw a brick, because when you draw a brick, you can draw a cube, you can draw a pyramid, you can draw an oblong brick or a brick-brick and it doesn't matter. If you can't draw a hand or a leg or face or a human body, you still haven't learned how to draw. And so, the discipline of learning how to look at what you are drawing is, probably, most efficiently learned and has been most efficiently learned for hundreds by looking at the human figure, because once you can draw the human figure, then everything else is simple.

M.S.: I used to respond by telling the critics, or rather encouraging them to inquire as to what is being done in other schools, other places. Are we ahead of the times or are we behind the times? Well, once some of the townspeople started inquiring and they found out that reputable art departments all had nude drawing classes; and there were a number of students who made their tuition money by modeling.

J.A.: That's right.

M.S.: Now, the second area that I was in hot water about – you might remember that down in the sculpture labs there were some projects in which students were – students and faculty were creating fiberglass . . .

J.A.: Oh, yeah! Oh . . .

M.S.: Uh, human organs. Uh, a four-foot penis in the hallway in red fiberglass. And, where I got complaint was when the Art Department was occasionally visited by elementary school children, especially from Hebel Elementary.

J.A.: Right.

M.S.: The teachers would call ahead and would make arrangements and they would bring their children up, and the children would visit the various studios and learn what happens in an art studio. Well, of course, the teachers immediately (chuckle) would come to me and say, "Dr. Smith, can you get those things out of the hallway, because our children are recognizing what they are, and they're going to go home and tell about it." And come to find out, they did. And I started getting telephone calls from irate parents, wanting to know what we were doing to their children.

J.A.: (chuckle) Ahhhh, right.

M.S.: Uh, that I could not defend. I did not ask them to stop doing that. I just asked them, "Please get them out of the hallway. Keep it in the studio." And because you can control access to the studio, but you can't control access to the hallways, and that was in the hallways – we had an young man whose name happened to be Smith, who turned out this four-foot penis with a scrotum and he insisted that it had to be out in the hallway. Well, I didn't pay any attention to it when I first saw it, until I started getting complaints and then all I asked him to do was to please get it out of the hallway. Please put it in a studio where people will understand what you're trying to do, because these children don't and their parents don't.

J.A.: Milo, that was the '70's. That was the '70's. That was shock art. Um, and shock art has been around for a long, long time and probably will always be around because it's part of making an emphatic statement about something or another. I, personally, was never terribly interested in that kind of stuff, myself. Um, I tried when I did have social gripes, they were generally done in a much more subtle way. Um, but that was something that was – that was part of what mainstream artists were doing in the '70's and there are still a lot of mainstream artists are doing that stuff. I just got a brand new copy of Art in America and saw some very graphic things that, um, to me – I have to snicker a little bit, because, um, I've seen all that stuff – and I saw it thirty years ago. And so my inner voice said, "Oh, come on, I've seen this, you know, before, thirty years ago, and every year since then. You know. Why beat an idea that has been so exploited?" So that would be my response to that. It wasn't anything extraordinarily off the main path, back in the '70's, and it's still going on and it's a kind of a pass at making – it's like poems that bother my ears because they don't rhyme. Okay? That doesn't mean that their bad poems, it's just that if I hear a poem, I'd prefer to have it rhyme. Or a musical sound accompanied by somebody scratching on a chalkboard with their fingernails and I'm sure that you remember those kinds of things as well.

S.M.: Now, focusing on your own work, John, did you have an opportunity to introduce something in the area of printmaking, for example? Something that Central hadn't done before.

J.A.: Well, yeah. Actually, in all modesty, when I was doing my undergraduate work at the University of Washington, I studied with a man by the name of Glen Elps; and Glen Elps had a few years before I started going – actually, about the time that I started going to school there, he was starting to work with a procedure in printmaking that was brand new that no one had ever thought of doing before. It was a form of printmaking where a printing plate is made – is built up from sturdy, textured materials. Then, um, as opposed to the traditional approach which was that a piece of copper is destroyed – a beautiful, shiny piece of copper is destroyed by scratching and engraving and drawing into it. Okay. That’s a destructive art form Elps used to say. This is a constructive art form because we’re building something, we’re not destroying something. And so, in colligraph became a brand new art form that had never ever been, you know, around before. Um, no one had ever made intaglio prints – that is ink is smeared onto a plate, then whatever residue can be wiped off, is wiped off, and whatever is left on the plate, then is pressed into a piece of paper. The paper is lifted off and there is the image. In an etching or engraving, the ink remains in the lines that are etched into the surface of the plate, then the surface is wiped absolutely clean so that the shiny parts are white, the engraved parts hold the black ink; and then when you press the paper into the paper, then the ink is lifted off onto the paper. In - in colligraph, the same thing, except that in the shadow areas, in the valleys and in the depression parts or in the textured parts of the plate, the ink would remain, and that was the innovation in colligraph. Um, in 1959, while Elps was away on sabbatical leave for a couple of quarters, I actually made the first colored colligraph that had ever been made on planet Earth; and when he came back, he was mad as a hornet. Um, because he had always said when someone would say, “Can we use colored ink, Mr. Elps?” – he would say, “You have so much to learn about creating a black and white image, let’s leave color out of it, okay?” And so, um, he did eventually get over it and I made a series of prints that I was very, very pleased with. Um, I think the University of Washington has one in their archives, uh, the University of British Columbia has one. Someplace in New York bought one for their permanent collection. Um, one went to the Louvre, because a curator of prints from the Louvre was visiting at the University of Washington probably late – in the late ‘50’s, when word had gotten out about this new printmaking process, and when he got done with his conversation with Professor Elps, um, it was well into the lunch hour and me being a good boy, I was still working in the studio; and as the guy was leaving, Elps came over and said, “John, you give him one of your prints.” – and give, which was, back in those days sort of, you know, a big pat on the back that your instructor had recognized you. And so, that was – that’s my claim to fame - in art - in fine art. But I have a graphic design story, too. We have some work at the Smithsonian that Francie and I did together when we had the, uh, Women’s Year . . .

S.M.: Generally, John, were you encouraged to create new ideas and new ways to do old ideas throughout your tenure in the Art Department. Did it vary with the administration?

J.A.: I don’t think that that was even ever an issue. I think we just did that. That was just something that we do, as artists – that we make images that are primarily to satisfy our own, um, creative needs; and then if somebody else gives you recognition for what you’ve done, um, that’s a sort of an afterthought. But the main - at least for me personally, and I can’t speak for every artist – but for me the main thrust was to do something that I would do to please myself.

S.M.: There were some areas within the Art Department, in which students had an opportunity to create projects that they could sell and return the money back into tuition and fees. Uh, was there ever that kind of an opportunity for those students who were especially interested in printmaking?

J.A.: Oh, yeah. I think . . . well, one of the menus that students early on had, and I don’t know how that works now; but certainly for a long time, the Ware Fair was one of the places where students could actually bring things and, um, it was also a sort of a test. Is it something that someone would be willing to spend a couple of bucks for? Which isn’t necessarily a measure of, of – well, yes and no. How much would you be willing, in about three weeks, to pay for one of Christo’s banners that are now flying in Central Park? (chuckle)

S.M.: Um, did you have an opportunity to get to know or work with Ichabald Joffrey?

J.A.: Oh, yeah! (chuckle) I have a letter in my file someplace from Ichabald Joffrey, stating that as far as he knows, I am one of the greatest living American artists – and he certainly is another. Ichabald Joffrey had an interesting way of using language, um, and absolutely was brilliant at capitalizing on using language. When he said there was another article about my work in the Ellensburg newspaper, he was absolutely right. Because he spent a substantial amount of money buying advertising space in newspapers all over the country; and the ads that he would place would simply say, “Ichabald Joffrey is the greatest living American artist.”

S.M.: Oh, boy.

J.A.: Then, he listed that in his résumé as an article that was published in the New York Times or the Ellensburg Daily Record or Time Magazine.

S.M.: Wow.

J.A.: Ichabald Joffrey had an exhibit list that was this long, um, and documented and notarized. A museum exhibit at the Whitney Museum, um, a museum exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art – and what he would do, is he would go into the lobby of the Museum of Modern Art, open his portfolio, um – the guard would come by and say, “No, no, no. You can’t do that. Close that thing. Get it out of here.” The notary would make note of the fact that Ichabald’s work had been on display in the Museum of Modern Art. Can you argue with that?

S.M.: (chuckle)

J.A.: It was on display in the Museum of Modern Art. ‘Kay? It wasn’t an invited exhibit, but his work was on display in the Museum of Modern Art – for ten minutes – until the guard told him to put it away. So he was quite a character. Um, and he invented a wonderful degree for himself, um, and documented it; and it was all on paper - a little hokey, but on paper, nevertheless. It didn’t pass the test of what we consider an academic degree.

S.M.: Well, it just happened that . . .

J.A.: But, yes, he was quite a character.

S.M.: The one year that I served part-time as Chairman of your department, was the year that Ichabald started contesting his separation from Central; and, uh, I remember the Dean said, “Milo, would you please go down to Ichabald’s office. You’ve got the key. And inventory his office and list everything – every piece of paper, every notebook, every pencil, every pen. Make sure, because he will know and so I went down and I inventoried his entire office. And then, my instructions were find a closet someplace, where all that could be locked, because sooner or later he is going to go to court to get all of his belongings back. Well, you might know that he came to campus and there were series of hearings and during a recess period of one of those, he looked me up and said, “Where is my stuff?” And so I took him up. We walked up, and I showed him the closet that his “stuff” was in, and, uh, I said, “I will let you take whatever you want, but I have to have it identified, and I have to have a list and it has to be witnessed by somebody other than you and me.” And so, I borrowed some students who did not know him and I said, “All I ask you to do is come stand by while he packs his stuff up and will you please make a list of it.” And I had a little nest egg of money that I paid those students to serve as witnesses, because I knew that he was going to sue the school and sue the department. It was a sad, sad, sad affair. And, he had a couple of student friends who were still in school after he left and they were feeding him all kinds of fallacious material. They were meddling with his mail in his mailbox. I didn’t know what was happening to it. I know that the secretary was putting it in his mailbox and the mailbox was often empty.

J.A.: Disappearing, huh?

S.M.: Well, these students were mailing him all this stuff. And you know what happened, of course? He insisted that somebody had been getting his mail. He hadn't. Well, then, I had to look up those students

J.A.: (chuckle)

S.M.: . . .and get them to swear, in court, that they indeed had sent him all of his mail. Okay. Um . . .

J.A.: You know, he got the – a Distinguished, um, Professor Award one year. And it may have been the very first year that that started. Remember the students started . . .

S.M.: Yes.

J.A.: . . . a program of giving a Distinguished Professor Award. Ichabald Joffrey taught two big sections - ninety students in each section - of Art Appreciation. As an assignment, a hundred and eighty students had to write a letter to the committee saying that Ichabald Joffrey was the best instructor on campus.

S.M.: (laugh) Ah, the man was a problem for himself.

J.A.: Yeah. And, and, and there was no arguing with a hundred and eighty for one guy and only seventy-six for someone else.

S.M.: Now, John, think back for a moment. Over all of your work that you did, teaching and advising and exhibiting, identify two or three proud moments for John Agars.

(Transcription of Tape 1, Side 2)

S.M.: Proud moments for John Agars.

J.A.: Proud moments – I think proud moments came almost at the end of every year and they were, they were hard. Because proud moments were when students that I had worked with for three or four years made it – they graduated. And I wish that we would hear more from students as is the case often in private schools, but, um, I think young people when they first start out in life are so busy taking care of themselves that they forget that a little nurturing would be a good thing. Um, that's not a gripe, by the way – I think that's just the way it is.

Um, I am enormously proud occasionally, to hear from former students, um, who are doing okay. Um, and so I don't think that – I don't think that it would be easy for me to say, "Okay, this was a really, really great moment." You know? Because of - great moments happened all the time. When somebody did something – a class project that turned out really, really well – that was a great moment for that person. Um, and depending on what kind of class I was teaching, most of the time students would do three or four or five projects during the quarter – a half a dozen at the most. Um, and in some cases, they have something that they have to finish every week, but it just kind of depends on the class and the project and so on. And once in a while, there would be somebody that would do something that was just absolutely, fantastically wonderful and they knew it, and we would all know it, and their peers would know it and those were all great moments. But I think that the occasional note in the mailbox or a phone call or, um, a postcard from a former student – those have always been great moments for me.

S.M.: Now, to change the subject just a moment. Do you recall any "town versus gown" problem when you arrived on campus?

J.A.: (big giggle)

S.M.: Or did any develop after you had gotten here?

J.A.: No, not really. I remember being a smart-aleck one time, to a woman who asked me why I – this was like back in 1964 – “Why do you have a beard?” And I had a fairly rude response for her, but, um, that was the ‘60’s and, you know, I still have that beard that I had in the ‘60’s and it doesn’t bother me one bit.

S.M.: Uh, did you ever . . .

J.A.: “Town and . . . town and gown.” Let’s . . . back to that. Um, I think that there were times – and again it really depended on how much energy we had as faculty and what sort of opportunities were there . . . Um, I think again, back to Reino Randall, um, who was on the Ellensburg Beautification Commission, and the year that he left, he nominated me to take his place on the Beautification Commission, but someone else wanted that job even more – and got the job. And so then, when all the dust had settled, I got a phone call from the City, and they said, “Well, your nomination to the Beautification Committee – Commission isn’t going to work, but, um, would you be interested in serving on the City Planning Commission?” And so I thought, “Well, we’re going to live here for awhile. Why not?” And so I served for a number of years on the City Planning Commission and that was a really interesting experience because it gave me a sort of a crash course on Ellensburg and the dynamics – how the community worked and I remember Lynn Thayer – you probably remember him . . .

S.M.: Mmm-hmm.

J.A.: . . .um, was the granddaddy of knowing everything about Ellensburg, um, on that committee; and so we worked and made friendships and, uh, that lasted for a long time.

I also remember Otto Jakubek sending students to help with various projects that the City Planning Commission had because they had the geography experience that was necessary for that. So, you know, I think that on the whole, I really can’t complain about any of the relationships that I encountered with City fathers.

S.M.: Good.

J.A.: I think that -that the city was generally available to people who wanted to participate.

S.M.: Good. Uh, did you discover when you came to the time when you and your lady decided to buy property that your association with Central was to your advantage when it came to involving yourself in indebtedness in this community?

J.A.: Um, yeah. And again, when we got ready to build a house, we talked with a fellow at the bank. We had looked at a prefabricated house which was built by a factory in Yakima, and it was a price thing back then, too. Um, and the fellow at the bank said, “You know, you’re paying too much for this prefabricated house.” Um, I had done my own drawings and they looked reasonably okay. Um, we art people can do that, you know? And so, the guy said, “Look, go find a local builder . . .” “Well, we don’t know any local builders. Can you recommend one?” So he recommended a local builder and I went with my little drawings in hand; and he said, “We can do this for you.” And away we went. And that was at a point where I hadn’t gotten tenure yet, but, um, I figured that if I kept my nose clean and didn’t do any really bad things, that that probably would happen. Um, my father-in-law was an academic at WSU and he was there for a good, long time and was very supportive. Uh, my own parents were very supportive. Um, and it all fell into place – very nicely.

S.M.: I found that my association with Central was almost detrimental because businesses were so very willing to offer me charge accounts.

J.A.: (chuckle)

S.M.: “Oh, you’re up at the college? Oh, well then, you want a new account with us!” Well, I had to rein myself in many times. I did find it to advantage, however, when I came, Victor Bouillon was at the bank and he was on the Board of Trustees, and partly because of that, uh, that bank really took care of Central people – and help us all go in debt.

J.A.: Yeah. Well, our guy - um, we wanted to sort of do some things that we really couldn’t afford to do and he said, “Don’t – don’t make your house a burden.” He said, “If you have to worry about house payments every month, then you’re not going to have a life, so we sort of arrived at a pretty good happy medium and it turned out to be good advice. And by the way, when we built our house, the interest rates had just started to inch up a little bit and he wrote a clause into our house mortgage that if the interest rates ever went down, that we could refinance. And when Nixon ran for President for his second term, the interest rates were flat, flat, flat and then all of a sudden, they went down. And so, on about the 30th of October, we went to the bank and we said, “It’s time to refinance.” And for a hundred dollars, we took two years off our house payments and then after that, the interest rates went right back up again.

S.M.: John, do you recall any students that came to you for advice outside of academics? Did you have that kind of relationship with students?

J.A.: I never really spent much time consulting with students off campus, but certainly personal problems, constantly.

S.M.: Constantly? That was the case?

J.A.: Oh, yeah. That was always the case.

S.M.: I had to be very, very careful about what I said, because they remembered everything.

J.A.: Yeah. But, I think that that was sort of part of the deal. Um, that the whole art experience is somewhat different than . . . than some of the more traditional academic experience in that we work very closely on a one-on-one basis with our students. There is very little lecturing and almost everything is a hands-on experience. So, yeah . . .we lived in that building from 8:00 in the morning, until 11:00 at night, or beyond, depending on what needed to get done.

S.M.: Do you recall your initial attitude when you moved into that glorious, new building and you left Barge Hall (*inaudible*) . . .

J.A.: Yes, I do. My feet hurt, because when we were in (laugh) – it was a beautiful, new building and we loved it; but Barge Hall had wooden floors and the new building has concrete floors, and we spent several years trying to figure out what kind of shoes we should be wearing on those concrete floors because, we were, you know, on our feet all day long . . .

S.M.: Surely.

J.A.: . . . and we would get shin splints. And Dick Fairbanks chose wooden clogs and some of the rest of us . . . I got a pair of Earth shoes. Do you remember Earth shoes? No heels?

S.M.: Oh, yes.

J.A.: What a dumb idea!

S.M.: You bet.

J.A.: I went to the shoe shop here in town and, you know, sixty dollar shoes – and I had rubber heels put on them. That helped quite a bit. The toes were comfortable, but the heels never really got comfortable.

S.M.: Did you take advantage of the fact that the Department did have a gallery?

J.A.: Yeah. The gallery was used for all kinds of things. There were student shows in there. Graduate student shows . . . um, not so much other graduate student shows, but the gallery really served a very important function of bringing artwork to campus, not just for the Art Department, but for anybody who chose to walk in there.

S.M.: Sure.

J.A.: Yeah.

S.M.: Uh, did you encourage students to capitalize on the salability of their projects?

J.A.: Not so much on the salability, as on the exhibit-ability.

S.M.: Uh-huh.

J.A.: Is that a word? That at the point where our students were, particularly as undergraduates students, it was more important for them to reach a level of peer approval, rather than a commercial level. Um, a commercial level comes by itself with time. Peer level approval is sending to juried art shows. And that was something that we – we encouraged undergraduate students to do – we insisted on graduate students doing. Because if they couldn't get into peer-reviewed exhibits, it meant that their work wasn't up to snuff as far as their peers were concerned.

S.M.: When did you actually sever your relationship, officially, with Central?

J.A.: Um, I haven't yet. I'm still serving on the Art Selection Committee. (chuckle)

S.M.: Oh. (chuckle)

J.A.: When I retired in 2001 – um, in 2000, I retired, officially, and then I taught part-time in 2001. And when I retired from that experience, I thought, "Well, I've paid my dues to society. I'm out of here." And then, Dr. MacIntyre (*inaudible*) called and said, "Would you like to serve as the old geezer on the Art Selection Committee?" And that has been a real fun project.

S.M.: Good.

J.A.: And, in fact, I feel that my history of being on Central's campus allows me to contribute information that has been already forgotten.

S.M.: Sure. Sure.

J.A.: . . . like artwork at Hebler.

S.M.: Well, John, I'm pleased to be able to tell you that I've always admired you. I liked you as a friend .

..

J.A.: Well, thank you.

S.M.: . . . not just as a faculty member over whom I had to crack a whip.

J.A.: Well, Milo, that's reciprocal. I remember playing a prank on you when you were our Department Chair. You asked us, um, in May one year, for a wish list of equipment. Um, and so everybody submitted long wish lists – wish lists, excuse me. Um, I found the most expensive commercial printing press that I could find and submitted that on a requisition form, which I think was the way you were asking for it – and somehow, it got buried in the sack. It signed - It got sent to Olympia and I think you caught hell for it.

S.M.: (laugh)

J.A.: It was like 78 thousand dollars or some obscenely expensive thing.

S.M.: Well, John, on behalf of the Living History Committee, I thank you for giving us of your time and your interest, to record for the future, some of John Agar's feelings and thoughts about Central. Thank you.

J.A.: Alright. Thank you.

END OF TRANSCRIPTION