



Arizona Historymakers™*

ORAL HISTORY

In Our Own Words: Recollections & Reflections

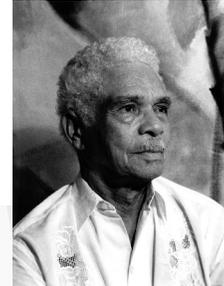
[Historical League, Inc.](#) © 2010



Arizona
Historical
Society

J. EUGENE GRIGSBY, JR.
1918 -

Honored as a Historymaker 1992
Nationally Known Artist and Educator



J. Eugene Grigsby, Jr.
photograph by Kelly Holcombe

The following is an oral history interview with J. Eugene Grigsby, Jr. (**EG**) conducted by Sandra Meyers (**SM**) for the Phoenix History Project on July 28, 1977 at Dr. Grigsby's home in Phoenix, Arizona.

Transcripts for website edited by members of Historical League, Inc.

Original tapes are in the collection of the Arizona Historical Society Museum Library at Papago Park, Tempe, Arizona.

SM: Dr. Grigsby, tell us about your decision to come to Phoenix and the events of your arrival.

EG: W. A. Robinson had been principal of Atlanta's Laboratory High School in Atlanta, Georgia and, while I was still a student at Morehouse College, he hired me to teach an art class at the laboratory school for a semester. [Atlanta's Laboratory High School, known as "Lab High," was a private, experimental institution run by Atlanta University at the height of segregation. Its purpose was to offer an advanced, liberal education in a supportive, challenging, intensely personal environment. It was closed in 1942.] In 1945, Mr. Robinson became principal of Carver High School in Phoenix and recruited a new group of educators including myself. He wanted to include art as part of the curriculum at Carver and offered me a position as head of the art department.

But I wanted to stay on the East Coast. I'd taught in colleges in North Carolina and in Florida and was working on a commercial art venture in North Carolina. I didn't know very much about Phoenix – didn't know anything about Phoenix. But no other jobs materialized, and the ones that did offered me only half of what was offered here which was the magnificent sum of twenty-eight hundred dollars a year. So I chose to come to Phoenix and teach at Carver which was then a segregated school located on the other side of the railroad tracks on Grant Street.

I arrived in Phoenix from North Carolina on the last day of August 1946. I had to leave my family in North Carolina because our youngest son had been born only a week before. My wife Rosalyn wasn't well so it was two months before they came to Phoenix. I started the art department at Carver High and

*"Historymakers is a registered trademark of Historical League, Inc."



Arizona Historymakers
ORAL HISTORY
In Our Own Words: Recollections & Reflections
Historical League, Inc. © 2010



taught there until the school was closed in 1954.

It was rather rough going those first few years, both financially and otherwise. Carver was poorly furnished and poorly equipped with used books and materials donated by other schools. We started the art department from scratch. There was no art taught at all before I arrived, so we had to use a regular classroom. Even so, we offered all types of art – sculpture, painting, ceramics, even photography. After a few years we had the opportunity to have our own art room and I was able to design just what I wanted. It was still a one-teacher operation but I taught all the art courses that every other school offered. We had classes in jewelry-making, painting, ceramics, photography, and art history. The classes were small so I could work with the kids individually. We also had double periods which was quite an advantage.

One of the graduates of Carver is now teaching photography at Brooks Institute of Photography at Santa Barbara, one of the top photography schools in the country. Another teaches at Arizona State University. I met one of my former students who was in town recently to attend his father's funeral. He told me he is teaching in a high school in Brooklyn, New York. I could go on talking about a number of students I had who are doing well.

The first summer we were in Phoenix I took care of the certification requirements. The second summer I went back East to teach. I must say, other than the brief period during my senior year in college, I had never taught in a high school before coming to Carver. The third summer I was told I could make a lot of money in California pitching watermelons, so we went to Blythe, California and I worked for the sum of twenty-five cents a ton. I made fourteen dollars once, but that was the most I ever made in a single day. Many days I made nothing at all.

That is when I decided it would be better to go back to school on the G.I. Bill. I had four years already and I was reluctant to go back to school. I already had a master's degree. But for the G.I. [Bill] you had to be working on a higher degree. I decided to do it and chose New York University, but I could only go during the summer. I couldn't afford to take off a full year from teaching, so it took me many summers of going back and forth to New York. In fact, it was twelve years from the time I started in 1950 until I finally completed my course of study for a Ph.D. in 1963.

SM: Was all that because there was no way to get a Ph.D. in art at ASU?

EG: Arizona State University didn't offer a Ph.D. in art at the time. I don't think any schools in California did either. There may have been one, but in my search to find out which schools were considered the very best, two constantly came up, Columbia University and New York University. I started at Columbia and went there for two summers but found I had to take off a full year before I could complete the work. But at NYU the summers would count as residence; that's why I chose to go there.



Arizona Historymakers
ORAL HISTORY
In Our Own Words: Recollections & Reflections
[Historical League, Inc.](#) © 2010



When Carver was closed in 1954, I got a position at Phoenix Union High School. This was shortly before the Supreme Court decision outlawing segregated schools. I was hired to teach at Phoenix Union and the art department had three art teachers. Four years later in 1958, I was made department chairman and stayed there until 1966 when I went to Arizona State.

In 1958, Victor D'Amico, the educational director of the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA), invited me to represent the United States at the Brussels World Fair as an art teacher in the Children's Creative Center. During my summers in New York I would attend conferences at MOMA. I got to know D'Amico and he got to know my work because I would bring in projects that we were doing here in Phoenix.

I taught art in a group of six teachers for three months in Brussels and I was the only teacher who was not on the regular staff of MOMA. It was quite an experience to work in the Center with kids who had come from all over the world. When I got back to Phoenix, I was able to use that experience to set up a number of art programs at community centers, housing projects, and day care centers around the city.

During the summer of 1958 while I was in Brussels I was able to take off from my studies at NYU. That was all right and I had completed much of my course work by that time. But the G.I. Bill stipulated that if you dropped out of school, you were out. You couldn't go back. That threat made it difficult to continue my schooling because the following summer, when I left Phoenix for New York, our youngest son had the mumps and then contracted meningitis.

I was planning to take our older boy with me to stay with my parents in North Carolina. But my wife decided at the last minute to take his bags back out of the car and keep him home. So I got a ride from Phoenix to Omaha where I could catch the train through Chicago and onto New York. That was the least expensive way I could get to NYU. Well, when I got to Omaha and called home, my wife told me that our older son had gotten the mumps. By the time I got to New York, he had come down with meningitis too. My wife wouldn't tell me that she also had contracted the mumps because she was afraid I'd come home and lose my G.I. eligibility.

SM: She was the hero, in other words.

EG: Oh, yes, very much so. Those were just a few of the things we went through in those years of struggle, but I did earn my Ph.D. Two years later in 1965, when the University of Arizona celebrated its seventy-fifth anniversary, they awarded *Medallions of Merit* to seventy-five citizens who they considered had made contributions in various fields. I received one of those medallions. That same year the National Gallery of Art celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary and awarded medals to twenty-five art educators and art historians. I was lucky to receive one of those.



Arizona Historymakers
ORAL HISTORY
In Our Own Words: Recollections & Reflections
Historical League, Inc. © 2010



I received yet another award, an honorary doctorate from the Philadelphia College of Art in 1966. I was among a group that included a member of the board of trustees of the college, the renowned German art historian, Irwin Panofsky, and the American realist painter and watercolorist, Edward Hopper. It came about because the dean of the college, who was the equivalent to a college president, met me during a conference at Harvard where we were both serving on a committee. For a number of years, going back and forth to the East coast, I had visited him and we had discussed the things I was doing, not only about my classes but about the subject I was working on for my dissertation. He was an authority on African art and I'd talk about all kinds of issues with him. It wasn't a matter of him visiting my class for one afternoon, but over a period of years. So he had known the kind of art projects we were doing, and evidently they must have struck him as being sound and worthwhile.

Early in 1966, the dean of the college had come to visit my classes in Phoenix. He had invited me to spend a week in Philadelphia with their graduate students and discuss some of the things we were doing in art education in Phoenix. But when I got a telegram to confirm my visit back East, I realized it wasn't only to come and talk with the students and work with them, but to receive an honorary degree.

SM: Did you ever receive offers to teach at the university level?

EG: I had received offers several times to go to Arizona State University, but couldn't afford to make the switch. I did work on a part-time basis as a faculty associate at ASU from 1954 to 1958. Dr. Harry Wood had become the chairman of the art department at ASU. I had gotten to know him well. He saw what we were doing at Carver High and Phoenix Union. I taught one class on the introduction of art at ASU for four or five years.

SM: At the same time you were teaching high school?

EG: Yes. I also taught a class at the Jewish Community Center from 1950 to 1958. I taught at the Center when it was still on the Heard property on Central Avenue. When it was moved to Camelback and 16th Street the classes really developed, but that was the same summer I dropped out of the program and went to the Brussels World Fair. I taught at the Center only one more summer after that.

SM: Was this an art appreciation class, an adult education type of thing, or did people receive credit for it?

EG: There was no credit. I taught painting classes, mainly.

SM: You have mentioned that you taught photography. Are you proficient in many different media?



Arizona Historymakers
ORAL HISTORY
In Our Own Words: Recollections & Reflections
Historical League, Inc. © 2010



Arizona
Historical
Society

EG: I am. I think an art teacher should not impose his limitations or his specialty on his students. Students have a wide range of interests and, whenever possible, such interests should be drawn out and the student ought to be encouraged to work in those areas. For this reason the art teacher needs to have a working knowledge of a number of different types of activities. I had learned photography working in a NYA [Network for Young Artists] job at Ohio State University while I was studying for my master's. Wilson Riles, the California councilman and community activist, talked to me about his photographic work. He had come from Louisiana to attend Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff as a freshman and had no money. They gave him an NYA job pushing a cart, then another NYA job at Ohio State developing pictures. I learned photography from him.

I was able to further my knowledge of photography while I was in the Army in Germany. We discovered a photography shop in an abandoned camp that our troops had taken over. I found chemicals and papers, made some cameras out of old equipment and became the unofficial battalion photographer. It was that kind of experience that I put to use when I came to Carver. There were several students interested in photography, so we found a closet and made a darkroom out of it.

I did not know until I left Ohio State that it has one of the finest ceramics departments in the country. I wish I had been aware of that, but I had a very good friend who did ceramics and I dabbled in it too. I had bought a kiln and had made other things in ceramic. When I came to Phoenix, the kids wanted to make clay. We made pieces and had them fired at a place on Van Buren; then we bought our own gas kiln. The owner of the ceramic shop came and helped us set up the kiln and together we made ceramic objects.

A number of students got interested in the chemistry of glues and got involved in that. I had taken a course in jewelry at Columbia University in New York from a man who was working on his doctorate while acting as a teaching assistant. He had written one of the definitive books on jewelry. He was an excellent teacher so I brought some equipment back to Phoenix and taught jewelry-making to my students in art class.

I learned to do weaving when I was teaching in Daytona Beach, Florida at Bethune-Cookman University in 1941. After classes ended for the day, the home economics teacher – the aunt of Senator Julian Bond from Georgia – used to teach me the art of weaving. I remember I wove a piece of cloth that I gave to my sister for a jacket.

You get interested in a variety of things, and by doing them over and over, you can build a great proficiency. You know the technique, you know what needs to be done, you can help a student get started and that person can move onto the limits of his or her own ability. That has been my philosophy in teaching kids. Not so much doing it for them, but encouraging them to develop ways of doing for themselves and learning specific techniques. That's one of the things we, at least I myself, stress at the



Arizona Historymakers
ORAL HISTORY
In Our Own Words: Recollections & Reflections
[Historical League, Inc.](#) © 2010



university. Some students get confused. They expect me to show them exactly what they need to do. Instead I have them develop their own special methods.

I taught a class in African art at the university this summer which was quite different from what the students expected. First of all, I didn't expect to have such a big class, thirty-six students, but I told them that together we would write a book instead of using a regular text. I told them they would write the text for it and that's what they did. After the first week or so of getting oriented, they went off into small groups and explored and did research. Not only did they do general research, but they researched the actual making of objects, and came back with drums. One girl did a beautiful job on a drum by cutting down a palm tree, hollowing it out, and stretching a hide over it. They also made sansas, the little finger pianos.

My philosophy in art history is the theory that there's a dimension to making things which gives you an understanding, that just reading about them or looking at pictures wouldn't suffice. Despite the grumbling, and some of them grumbled in the beginning, at the end of the year they felt very proud of their work. Each one of them reproduced their papers, or we had them reproduced. Some of their papers were twenty-five or thirty pages long, this for all thirty-six students. We made up fifty copies and the project resulted in being something big, something they could take home with them.

I mention the book project because we did this even in high school. We had kids in high school doing research. Wilson Riles, the California activist, talks about basics today. But I've felt for a long time, and I understood this when working with kids at Carver, that the students had to learn to read in order to paint, in order to follow directions, in order to understand what they were doing, to be able to read about artists and art history. Not only did they have to learn how to read, but they had to learn how to write in order to communicate verbally.

SM: Was Carver a Black high school?

EG: Yes.

SM: I see. Totally?

EG: Totally, until the last couple of years when there was a movement toward desegregation. The last few years before it closed in 1954, they allowed anyone to go to Carver and they ended up having two or three Mexican kids and maybe one or two White kids there. Black kids could go to Phoenix Tech and there may have been one or two who went to Phoenix Union, but Carver remained almost completely Black until it closed.

SM: Going back to the chronology of your teaching career, did you earn your Ph.D. and then receive an offer of a position at ASU?



Arizona Historymakers
ORAL HISTORY
In Our Own Words: Recollections & Reflections
Historical League, Inc. © 2010



Arizona
Historical
Society

EG: Yes.

SM: But did you take the offer?

EG: No, I didn't. They had offered me the position before I got the Ph.D., but after I got it the amount they offered increased, so that it matched the amount I was getting teaching in high school. I had the mistaken impression that I would not be working so hard at ASU. When I taught at Phoenix Union, I found myself going down to school at seven o'clock in the morning and staying there until five o'clock in the afternoon, sometimes going back at night and working for a couple more hours. I thought I would have only one class at ASU, but I found out they wanted me to teach two classes, a class on methods of teaching art and a class in life drawing. I had student teachers so I realized that this might be an opportunity to spread my philosophy. I talked with people around the country – Victor D'Amico of MOMA; Hale Woodruff, who'd been my art teacher at Morehouse College in Atlanta; and a number of others. They all encouraged me to make the move. I was reluctant, but in fact, I did make the move.

SM: Do you mean from high school to college?

EG: Yes. I accepted a position in San Francisco. I resigned from Phoenix Union and made my way to San Francisco, but decided I didn't want to be there after all. I wired back telling them I didn't want to take the job. I told the people at Phoenix Union I wasn't going to teach at San Francisco. After I got back to Phoenix, I remember that the principal and the vice principal of Carver and I all went out together, had lunch and a drink, and we were happy.

But the dean of the School of Fine Arts at ASU called me and wanted to talk. I went over and he put teaching at ASU in the form of a challenge. It didn't have anything to do with money; it had to do with teaching. I guess it was just one of those things. He challenged me, convincing me that I should make the move. I really didn't want to because I enjoyed teaching kids in high school. It took me four or five years before I really pulled away. I think if anyone had offered me a chance to go back to teaching high school students after I'd been at the university for a year or two, I would have gone back.

SM: Is that so?

EG: Yes. When I work with student teachers, I visit the schools. I get to see many more schools now than I did before and I have a twinge of regret each time I walk into a classroom. In high school you work directly with students. Whereas at the university, your influence is more indirect.

You cannot teach teachers to teach, an impossible task, like teaching somebody to draw. In high school teachers help students to become aware. Teachers need to become sensitive to people, more concerned, more understanding. Teachers have to learn that they need to develop their own way of teaching and not



Arizona Historymakers
ORAL HISTORY
In Our Own Words: Recollections & Reflections
[Historical League, Inc.](#) © 2010



imitate anybody else. The biggest problem is that many student teachers expect to be given a formula, "This is how you teach." I've had people complain at the end of the semester, "You didn't teach us how to teach." Some of the same people will come back and say, "I'm glad you made us do these things." I made them go out into the community. I made them read and I made them do many things which they considered at the moment to be busy work. Again, a lot of reading, a lot of writing which artists, in particular, and teachers hate to do.

I can understand that. Doing writing myself has been one of the more difficult things for me. I used to get so mad, excruciatingly mad, at my major professor at NYU each time he would chop up my dissertation and throw it back at me and I would have to rewrite it. It was sentence structure and paragraphs and all those things which were difficult for me. It finally came together and I gained very much from writing it, but I never would have done it if he hadn't made me.

In 1941, when I went to Florida to teach an art class at Bethune-Cookman College in Daytona Beach, they had also assigned me to teach an English class. I have a minor in drama which I got through the English department at Morehouse, so on my credits it looked like I had a minor in English. Well, I knew nothing about English. The head of the English department said, "When you teach sentence diagramming . . ." I'd never heard of diagramming a sentence, but it was part of the class that I was going to teach. So I arranged for another instructor to teach me each day what I needed to know right before each of my English classes, and then I'd repeat it to my students. I found that to be the worst way in the world to try to do anything, imitating somebody if you don't grasp what the whole thing is about. That experience gave me great insight.

When I first came to Phoenix and was registering students, there were only a few teachers at Carver and the student body at its most was no more than six hundred, usually about four hundred. The principal said, "If you don't get any more students in your art class, you'll have to teach math or something else." I knew math was worse than English. Well, when the next person came by, I said, "Don't you want to take art?" He said, "No." "But, it's a good course." Again he said, "No." I said, "Well, you're taking art," and I signed him up for the class because I had to have more students.

SM: It wasn't a required course; he didn't have to take art. In other words it was elective.

EG: That's right. So this kid got trapped into taking art and I told him, "If you don't like it after a week you can get out, but I want you to try to do something." By the end of the week, he said, "I don't like it. I want to get out." I said, "But your agreement was you were going to try something." So on the first day he made a drawing, threw it on my desk and said, "I don't like it." Next day he did a watercolor, just took brush and paint and threw it on the paper, tossed it on the desk and said, "I still don't like it." He did that every day 'til Friday and on Friday he saw me pouring plaster into a milk container and he said, "What you gonna do with it?" I told him, "I'll carve it."



Arizona Historymakers
ORAL HISTORY
In Our Own Words: Recollections & Reflections
Historical League, Inc. © 2010



I described this student in one of my articles as a kid who had been accustomed to carving on desks and even on fellow classmates! He was a holy terror, but he knew that something had to be hard in order to carve and here was this liquid. I was talking about carving and it got him curious. He saw it set up and said, "Can I take some home?" He did and came back with a nice little carved figure. He never said anything else about getting out of the class. In fact the following year, when he was missing from a class, they'd always send to the art room for him. He dropped out of school in his senior year to join the army; I think that was during the Korean War. He got into food services and developed the specialty of ice carving. He lives in Tacoma, Washington and he said he makes a good living. He's retired from the service and whenever he wants some extra money he carves ice. He gets a thousand dollars for an ice carving. Sometimes people have to have experiment with different things before they realize what they like and what they don't like. Attitudes are very important in developing one's sense of self, one's ability to do things, attitudes and discipline, as well as concern about doing things right.

SM: It sounds like you have definitely been instrumental in guiding at least a few people into the field of art.

EG: Well, a few of them, yes, but a great, great number of them have not gone into art. I ran into a girl just this past week. We had gone out to a toy shop, and while on our way there passed a health food store. I walked in, and lo and behold, one of my former students was the manager of the store. She told me she's still painting.

I had one of my most gratifying experiences when I talked to one of my former students and he told me about his paintings. I knew this student worked on a garbage truck; I think he was the driver. I said, "Why don't you come by during class?" This was when I was at Phoenix Union. He showed up with about forty paintings. He would spend his extra time, after he left work, painting. I think those students are much more gratifying to hear about than the person who's gone into art as a profession because very few of them really do.

A mother showed me some drawings done by her ten-year-old which were fantastic and she complained that her husband wouldn't let her hang them on the wall. I had known them when they were high school students and lovers; he was in the art room only because she was there. The art room was the one place he could get to talk with her because I don't think they permitted him to see her at home. They finally married and now they have this kid who does fantastic drawings. It is interesting to go back and see former students in the community, to see what they are doing, just what is happening.

SM: Can you compare what it was like to be a Black artist and teacher first in North Carolina and then in Phoenix? Were they different, and if so, in what way?

EG: Quite, quite different. Completely different. I grew up in Winston-Salem, North Carolina and I was



Arizona Historymakers
ORAL HISTORY
In Our Own Words: Recollections & Reflections
Historical League, Inc. © 2010



an integral part of the Black community. The fringes of the White community around us housed workers in various services. I knew the museum staff and the museum director who had become interested in me. He introduced me to an artist who lived in New York, Robert Gwathmey, the famous Black social realist painter. It was Robert Gwathmey who directed me to art school.

I made my way to New York in 1938 and spent a year studying at the American Artists School. Again, there was little money and I had little realization of the cost. I was quite naive. I incorporated myself and sold shares to take myself through art school, and raised the magnificent sum of one hundred and twenty-five dollars to last me for a year in the city. I had the desire and I was going to do it. I enrolled in the smaller school, American Artists School, instead of the Art Students League because it was much less expensive and the teachers were comparable.

I spent the year in New York studying and learning a great deal from the poet Langston Hughes in the *Suitcase Theatre*; Dick Campbell, the founder of the *Rose McClendon Players*, a Harlem theater troupe; and many other theatre and art groups. I was very much part of the art scene, the Harlem Renaissance. Charles Henry Alston, who was the first African-American instructor at the Art Students League, was one of the people who befriended me. When I could no longer afford to stay at the YMCA, Alston invited me to live at the *Harlem Art Workshop* where he was the director. I agreed to take care of the studio, keeping it clean and that type of thing, in exchange for living quarters. Romare Howard Bearden, a famous Black artist and cousin of Alston, was also associated with the Workshop. Bearden had a worldwide reputation as a fine painter and maker of collages, although his undergraduate and graduate degrees were in education, science, and mathematics.

Jacob Armstead Lawrence, who had studied at the American Artists School the semester before I arrived, worked out of Alston's studio too. Jake Lawrence is well-known as a Black narrative painter. We became good friends and he and I worked very closely together. Eddie Kurchville and Norman Wilfred Lewis, the Black figurative and abstractionist painter, were also a part of that group of artists and writers who formed what was called the *306 Group*. A whole gamut of artists, writers, dramatists, and theatre people were all in that mix in Harlem. I'm sure I learned as much from that experience as I learned from my formal studies, watching and working with these people. Of course I had many, many jobs. I scrubbed floors in the ten-cent store and I even had a job cooking. When Hamburger Heavens opened, I worked in one of the first as a cook.

SM: What happened when you came to Phoenix? How was that different?

EG: Coming to Phoenix we were in a very small community, but almost immediately I came into contact with art teachers from other schools and that broadened my horizons in many ways. We met with members of two or three different groups, the *Urban League* and the *Arizona Council for Civic Unity*. They included people of different backgrounds, mostly Whites, some Mexicans, a few Indians;



Arizona Historymakers
ORAL HISTORY
In Our Own Words: Recollections & Reflections
Historical League, Inc. © 2010



Arizona
Historical
Society

whereas in North Carolina my contacts were very limited, only with the Black group on a social basis.

We got involved in a number of activities in Phoenix. The *Arizona Council for Civic Unity* was run by a doctor, whose name I can't recall, who was very much involved in the Urban League. We were involved with the NAACP and we became members of the Unitarian Church. One of the student teachers I had at Carver – who told me how hard it was for them to get permission to do student teaching at Carver – taught at the Jewish Community Center. When he gave up the job at the Jewish Community Center, I stepped in and took over. This put me in touch with a lot of other people.

I became a part of the *Civic Orama Festival*, the only Black person in that group. My family was the first and for a long time, the only Black family at the Unitarian Church. There were a number of reasons that we got involved there. Phoenix had no Black Presbyterian Church. When we went to the Presbyterian Church downtown we didn't feel welcome at all, so we just stopped going. But we felt the kids needed to have some church to go to. A friend of ours, the director of the Urban League, a neighbor of ours in the same complex of G.I. housing on 7th Avenue and Buckeye Road, was a Unitarian. He brought us to his church, the Unitarian Church, and we got involved with the people. They were nice and some of them became friends. It got to be just a natural, normal thing to make friends and contacts on a much broader basis than we had originally in North Carolina.

SM: In other words, Phoenix was more open.

EG: Yes. It was much more open. More so than it is now, and we met all kinds of people. It was a smaller town in the 1940s and 1950s, and there was a cross-section of people active in the community. But as a place gets larger, you tend to get into unitary groupings. I remember our house down on Twelfth Street. This friend of ours, with whom we lived when we first came to Phoenix, got a place next door for us. He drove a garbage truck and had bought a house and a duplex behind his house which was paid for; owned a Cadillac; and kept his yard immaculate. He befriended us, and when we had a party he came along with people like Bill Mahoney – the future ambassador to Ghana – and others we had met from all over the city. Everyone came to the party. Everyone was together; it was one of the most enjoyable experiences I can remember.

At that time it was quite a thing to be able to make contact with a wide variety of people. Some were quite wealthy and some of them dirt poor; most of them were doing something interesting. The man who helped us set up the kiln, George Blake, became the campaign manager for Howard Pyle when he ran for governor. Later he became director of the State Fair.

I made contact with the artists in Scottsdale quite early. When we first came here, Scottsdale Road was paved but everything else was dirt. On the corner of First Avenue and Brown there was a ceramic's shop run by Matilde Davis, the painter Lou Davis's first wife. I got to know Matilde and Lou and that whole



Arizona Historymakers
ORAL HISTORY
In Our Own Words: Recollections & Reflections
[Historical League, Inc.](#) © 2010



group around Lloyd Kiva New, one of the founders of the *Institute of American Indian Arts*. That was the core of the art colony here.

Later on, people like Paolo Soleri and Charles Loloma and other artists established the *Fifth Avenue Art Center*. This is after George Blake's building on Brown and First Avenue had burned. The shop was a nationally known pottery shop. Some of those cups right here on the table are Matilde's. They are unique pottery cups, fired at Desert Kilns. A friend of ours gave these to us a couple of years ago because they knew we were great friends of the Davis's. When I was on a TWA plane coming back from Washington, there was a cup made of plastic that looked just like this one. I brought it back and showed it to Matilde. She and Lou had no idea somebody had copied their design.

That particular group helped me tremendously in terms of my teaching. We would go out to Taliesin West [Frank Lloyd Wright School of Architecture] quite often and bring our kids. People encouraged us to bring them out and show them Taliesin. I have pictures of them riding tricycles out there. One day we went out and I found Mr. Wright in the little theatre there adjusting the seats. I walked up to him very timidly and said, "Mr. Wright, I'd like you to come out and talk to my class." He looked up at me in his kind of glaring way and in his gruff voice said, "I wondered when you were gonna ask."

Mr. Wright came to Carver High and spent a half-day with the kids and he was delightful. He came out again, this time to Phoenix Union. After he died, I remember talking with his assistant who told me that he and Mr. Wright had been setting up another meeting because, "Mr. Wright enjoyed coming out to talk with the kids." I remember hearing Frank Lloyd Wright in a university setting. It was the first time I had seen him. He was quite abrasive and that's the reason I was a bit reluctant about asking him. But with the younger kids, he was delightful.

I also invited Otto and Gertrud Natzler to come to Carver. They are famous all over the world as master ceramicists. They proposed opening a studio and housing unit in the northern part of Phoenix, but the project was opposed by the residents who didn't want low-cost housing nearby. The project was going to be called *Hayden Homes*, and it would be what is known as a supplemental unit in which the government would pay a part of the rent according to a person's economic ability.

I talked about the need for an art-teacher-in-residence. Nobody really understood what I was talking about, but they agreed anyway. The plan was to have a person live at Hayden Homes who was an art teacher who would be able to work with the tenants. Everybody thought it was a good idea, but there was no funding for it. The Urban League didn't have money for it, but thought that Housing and Urban Development (HUD) would provide housing space for such a person to develop this service.

We happened to know of a woman who was interested in coming here to work on her doctorate. When she heard about the opportunity to live in and work with tenants in a housing unit, this determined her choice between ASU and the University of Oregon. She came to Phoenix. Just by luck, I was able to get someone to fund it. This funding came about through Lloyd Kiva New. [At the age of twenty-three, in



Arizona Historymakers
ORAL HISTORY
In Our Own Words: Recollections & Reflections
Historical League, Inc. © 2010



Arizona
Historical
Society

1946, Lloyd Kiva New, a Cherokee born in Oklahoma, ran a glass and mirror shop and art studio in Scottsdale, Arizona, where he also sold Cherokee-derived designs to Neiman-Marcus and other stores. In 1962 he and Dr. George Boyce founded the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, New Mexico.]

Joe Lincoln, the owner of Phoenix Point West and a hang glider enthusiast, incidentally, served with me on the board of *Southwest Ensemble Theatre*. At one of the board meetings, Joe and I talked about this artist-in-residence position and the need to raise some money to fund it. He said, "Come and see me and I'll think about it." So I called him the next morning, had a meeting with him, and he said, "I've never done anything like this, but how much shall I write the check for?" I said, "Twenty-five hundred dollars," which he made out to the Urban League and that check provided housing for the artist for a year. During the year she completed her doctorate and is now teaching at the University of Oregon.

Her dissertation is a study of her work with the tenants as an art teacher and explains how she was able to reduce the incidents of vandalism in the housing unit by getting the people involved. She invited everyone to parties and they did projects and held a crafts fair. A puppet show was set up and they brought in the band from the local elementary school. Her daughter was in high school at the time and was studying photography, so they set up a photography exhibit. My students from the university supplemented her work. This was one of the places that ASU students frequented and still do, to work with the tenants who made things for their apartments and personal items for themselves. As a result, the people had a much greater interest in their living space. During that time the tenant turnover was substantially less than in comparable units.

SM: Is this a place right here in Phoenix?

EG: Yes, it is on 44th Street just south of McDowell. It is an extension of the kind of thing that we had been doing on a smaller scale with students at the university. It was made possible by some of the people that I had met earlier who were active in the community. They were sociable and friendly and set a good example of community involvement by attending exhibits and galleries, coming in contact with other people, discussing what was going on around town, and getting them involved in our programs at the university.

We would hold an exhibit at the end of each year at Phoenix Union, lasting about a week, and usually we'd get people from the community to come in to talk. One year we had a panel discussion on how the media could contribute to development in the arts, and how the arts could work with the media for greater understanding. Joe Lincoln was on the panel. Others were Jonathan Marshall, the publisher of the *Scottsdale Progress*, and Ray Walters, the editor of the entertainment section of the *Arizona Republic* Sunday edition.



Arizona Historymakers
ORAL HISTORY
In Our Own Words: Recollections & Reflections
Historical League, Inc. © 2010



One year we brought in art collectors like Bud Jacobson, the lawyer for Arizona Public Service and past president of the Phoenix Art Museum Board. Several other people came in who collected works of art and they discussed how they had built their collections. Some of them had started from practically nothing, but because they knew about art and knew something of art history, they were able to select works to build their collections.

We also invited a number of artists and graduates of Phoenix Union to come and bring their work. Bill Mauldin, the great World War II cartoonist, had graduated from Phoenix Union. We wrote him and he was kind enough to send a number of drawings which he donated to the school after the exhibit was over. Lou and Matilde Davis, John Waddell, and many other artists in the Valley came and talked with the students, particularly those from ASU. There was a cross-mixture of people with young kids. It's something of a reverse, this working with the students at the university to get them to become involved in the community.

I was on the board from the inception of *Opportunities Industrialization Center (OIC)*, which was started by the Reverend Leon H. Sullivan of Philadelphia. The purpose of OIC was to help people develop a stronger self-image, become self-sufficient and productive workers, and help them understand their background and heritage. Part of the program was to teach people the very rudiments of holding a job, keeping their own time, and staying at work for a full day. There would be a follow-up to see how well a person was able to do the work. After the indoctrination period, which was used to build this self-confidence, they would teach skills, but only skills for jobs that were available.

OIC also had a job development program. After determining the areas where jobs would be needed, people would be trained for those particular ones. Then they would follow through with the workers and see how they were doing. But I felt the thing that was lacking in the OIC program was the aesthetic component to help bring people out of poverty and to build life skills. Such attitudes seemed to be left out and didn't appear to be part of the program.

I was on the board of the *Arizona Job Colleges* from very early – when it was located out at the Phoenix airport – when it was just an idea, a concept. Lorraine Frank, the wife of John Frank [attorney in the 1966 Miranda Decision], got me involved. Ford Foundation funded the Job Colleges from the start. Then other government monies came in so it was moved to Casa Grande. First it was set up in trailers and then they built a unit and I served on the board until a couple of years ago.

But I kept talking about the need for someone to address the issue of taking people out of poverty. Our students would go out to Casa Grande and work with the people in a family oriented anti-poverty program. In this program they didn't train just the head of the family, but the whole family – father, mother, children. When our students would go out and work with them they saw the need for an art teacher, so they hired a person who was trained in ceramics. We had done the same thing at a juvenile



Arizona Historymakers
ORAL HISTORY
In Our Own Words: Recollections & Reflections
Historical League, Inc. © 2010



detention home, but it is difficult for us to get into such areas now because they've hired their own art teacher to work with those kids.

We hope that the person who is coming out here for his doctorate next year will work out. We tried a student who lived at the unit last year. She was able to do some things, but nothing like what was done the year before with the person who had greater ability. Of course, the artist who lived at Hayden Homes had taught at Sacramento State College, in high schools and in elementary schools, so she had a thorough background. The kid who was there this year was just a painting student who had no background in teaching art education.

One of the things we wanted to stress was the need for the education of art in which teachers would communicate, and not just do it themselves, but help and encourage the student. The Arts and Humanities Council would not give money for an art *teacher* in residence, but they would for an *artist* in residence. They would fund an *artist*, whether it was a painter or singer or whatever, who performs for an audience that would watch and see how a thing is done. But to provide money for an art *teacher* to help people to learn to do for themselves, they would have no funds for that.

We hope to continue our program next year and we are trying to work out ways to get HUD interested. We attended the National Art Education Association conference last year and were able to get a representative from HUD to listen to Grace Hampton present the background material on Hayden Homes. She explained how the work done there had resulted in reduced vandalism and much less tenant turnover. She was told that the only way HUD would ever get involved would be if the head of HUD, Patricia Harris, and the head of Urban League, Vernon Jordan, were to decide this was a good program.

There are a number of other things that I got involved in, such as the FESTAC program, the *Second World Festival of Black and African Art*, held in Lagos, Nigeria. I was co-director of the Southwest region. We divided the world into regions and the United States was broken up into eight different units. A man named John Howard from Arkansas and I were co-directors of the Southwest region. We worked on FESTAC for about five years. It was supposed to have been held in 1975, but the coup in Nigeria put it back and then there were assassinations which upset the timetable again. It finally came off from January 15 to February 12 1977. All eleven members of the board met in Washington once a month to select participants. We sent five hundred and fifty people. We had wanted to send as many as a thousand, but funding fell through along with pressures from the State Department.

So we finally sent the participants, the performers, and musicians. There was a colloquium in which scholarly papers were read. Dancers performed and all of the arts were represented, even the culinary arts. I met a man in San Salvador, Brazil who was going as a culinary artist. We sent four people from here – a student at ASU; a teacher from ASU who had been a freshman at Carver High School when I first came; the woman jeweler who had been at Hayden Homes, who now teaches at the University of Oregon; and a painter who has worked for the city of Phoenix, but was originally from Texas where he



Arizona Historymakers
ORAL HISTORY
In Our Own Words: Recollections & Reflections
Historical League, Inc. © 2010



Arizona
Historical
Society

went to school at Texas Southern University. There were many people from our region and a few from Houston. A group from Denver had been approved but the travel and transportation were tenuous. We were planning on three planes originally and got one plane from New York. We were not assured of a second plane. Only when we threatened to bring those people back from the first plane, did the State Department release a second one.

There have been all kinds of cultural exchanges between Russia and European countries in which thousands of dollars have been spent but there were all kind of hedges on our own exchange. Due to the efforts of several Congressmen, we were finally able to get a plane out of Sacramento to Chicago to then fly on to Lagos. The board was to go; there was room for board members and one member from each family, plus participants.

As for musicians and artists, we spent much of the year selecting the musicians and probably went through five thousand slides to select the artists. It so happened that the final proof of the book I'd been working on, during the five years we were planning the exchange, finally arrived. It was delivered just as I had returned from sabbatical in Africa, on the very day we were to leave. I was able to finish proofreading it and just got it into the mail.

SM: Was it a textbook?

EG: You could call it a textbook. I think it has a broader use than just as a textbook, though.

SM: I see. Is it a new book?

EG: It was just published. A number of schools have said they would use it in their classrooms. I don't plan to use it as a textbook but as a reference book.

SM: Do you find time to both paint and exhibit?

EG: Very little now, but I painted quite a bit and exhibited when I was teaching high school. I have less time now than I had then. In addition to teaching, I am volunteering for many civic activities. I mentioned I was on the board of the Phoenix Art Museum. When there was a city art commission, I served on it. I'm also advising editor for *African Arts Magazine*.

SM: Were there housing developments when you first came to Arizona, Dr. Grigsby?

EG: Yes, there were low-cost housing developments. There was the primarily Mexican Duppa Villa housing project. There was Matthew Hinson housing unit, which was Black and another housing unit too. Well, the Duppa Villa actually was White. I don't remember what the name of the Mexican one



Arizona Historymakers
ORAL HISTORY
In Our Own Words: Recollections & Reflections
Historical League, Inc. © 2010



was. But they were just like the schools, all segregated.

There was four-way segregation in Phoenix. There were White schools, Mexican schools, Indian schools, and Black schools. Actually, the Mexican kids were not segregated for high school. They went to Phoenix Union but the Black kids went to Carver. The Indian kids still go to the Indian high school.

SM: Where did you live when you first came here?

EG: For a few months we lived on Jefferson Street and Fourteenth Street. Do you remember the man I told you about who used to work on the garbage truck, who put us up when we first came to Phoenix?

We had just a single room that had two beds. Our youngest child, who was two months old, slept in a borrowed doll-baby bed. It was so crowded you could hardly open the door to get in and out. Next we moved to G. I. barracks on Seventh Avenue and Buckeye Road, a wooden structure. In the summertime we realized that it got really hot here. There was no insulation in our house and even the dishes got hot. We thought we wouldn't buy a cooler; there was a time when no one had any, but around the end of May, my wife relinquished and said, "Now, we're going to get something."

We stayed there for about two or three years, right there where the low-income housing unit was until our two and three-year-olds came in cursing like sailors. That's when we moved to Twelfth Street just north of Washington, where Lowell Wormley's office is now. We lived there until we moved here. The man, who we had first lived with, told my wife about this house and we wanted to go over to see it. At the time no Blacks lived in the area at all. The man in charge of the trust was a blind lawyer. He told us not even to come near. "Don't come close to it before you buy, otherwise you're likely not to get it."

SM: But you did get it.

EG: Yes. This has been the extent of our housing. We closed in the front porch right away and used it as a studio and workshop. Then we built a studio in the back, which has as much space as the house itself.

SM: This area has changed quite a bit.

EG: Oh yes, tremendously.

SM: It has become a really transient neighborhood.

EG: Yes, we're trapped because land has gotten to be so expensive. We look around and actually what we have is adequate. But it would be better if the house could be moved to some other place. My wife is particularly concerned when I'm away.

