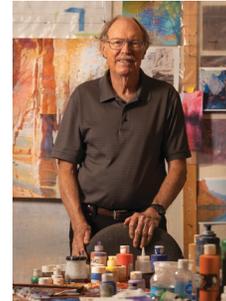




MERRILL MAHAFFEY  
1937-

Honored as 2019 Historymaker  
Western Landscape Artist and Educator



The following is an oral history interview with Merrill Mahaffey (**HM**) conducted by Zona Davis Lorig (**ZDL**) for Historical League, Inc. and video-graphed by John Blake at The Arizona Heritage Center in the Arizona Historical Society Museum on September 18, 2018.

Merrill was selected as a 2019 Historymaker by the Historical League.

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

**ZDL** This oral history interview is being conducted with Merrill Mahaffey on September the 18<sup>th</sup> 2018, at the Arizona Heritage Center, an Arizona Historical Society Museum. Merrill was selected as a 2019 Historymaker by the Historical League. The interviewer is Zona Davis Lorig. Merrill, first of all, congratulations on your selection as a 2019 Historymaker. We're very happy to have you join our group of Historymakers.

**MM** Well, thank you. I appreciate this recognition.

**ZDL** Would you begin by saying your full name and telling when and where you were born?

**MM** My name is Merrill Dean Mahaffey. I was born in Albuquerque, New Mexico in 1937. Is that what you wanted?

**ZDL** That is exactly - and you're married to Jeannie?

**MM** I'm married to Jeannie Shirk Mahaffey. I've been married to her since 1975. I had a previous marriage when I was 19 years old to Justine Helm and that changed after 13 years of marriage and two children. When I remarried, I acquired a daughter who was then three years old and she's a joy in my life. I'm certainly glad I got her along with the marriage.

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**ZDL** Oh wonderful. Your father was a surveyor and I've just heard you tell Carrie he was a landscape architect?

**MM** Well, he went to college. He started in 1928. His father was a sheep rancher in western Colorado. He had four sons. I think three of the four, well four of the four went to college. He had - let's see, he had five sons and a daughter. The four sons were two years apart starting in 1902, then 1904, 1906, 1908, and then there was a daughter born in 1912, I think, and then in 1914 or '16, I haven't figured this out, was another son. That son wanted to be a rancher. The others wanted to be out in the world, and they could hardly wait to go to college. And they all did and they, all except for one of them, went into - one of them became actually a farm and ranch loan officer. Another one was in the soil conservation service to restore the lands after the windstorms and the Dust Bowl. He was down south.

My father had a degree in botany, which was converted to a master's degree in landscape architecture because he liked plants. But his experience with the ranch, it was easy to convert that to a graduate degree in range management. The government under Roosevelt was hiring people to help recover from the Dust Bowl and range management was one of the big issues because historically they had overgrazed all the lands in the west. So, every state everywhere was hiring these young fellas to go out and help restore the land. So, I grew up with that awareness in the family.

**ZDL** You went with your dad quite a bit, didn't you?

**MM** Yeah, for a while - he divorced when I was 2 ½ years old and so he didn't have anybody to take care of me and he had to do mapping, field work, survey work for the government and so he took me with him. And we camped. We stayed in people's ranch houses and bunk houses. He got along well with the ranchers, of course, because he knew their life.

And they knew he knew their life. So, it's real easy to cut through a lot of awkwardness. So I had an art opening in Boulder, for example, in the 1980s. This guy came over to me and he said, "You don't know me, but I knew you when you were just a little boy. You were with your dad in your government truck and I babysat for you." He was a petroleum engineer for Exxon, I think, based in Denver. And his family ranch, I don't wanna get too off the track, it was one of the hideouts for the Sundance Kid.

**ZDL** The Sundance Kid?

**MM** Yeah and that gang. They used their place and I went to their place years ago on a river trip and you can see where they'd written their names on the side of a cave right on about, you know, half a block from the ranch house.

**ZDL** Oh, pretty close, weren't they?

**MM** Yeah, so my dad came in right at the end of that era of the bad guys. It was the Dinosaur National Monument area, Brown's Park, so Utah, Wyoming and Colorado conjoin and there's a lot of outlaw history there. He met a lot of the ranchers who remembered their personal history knowing the outlaws. One he got acquainted with was the Grounds family. Now this gets complicated, but it helps answer a lot. The Grounds family had founded a silver mine north of Kingman, Arizona in Mineral Park. Now people that know northern Arizona history know Mineral Park. It was the Grounds family that had the mine, started the mine. The original Grounds cowboy found the minerals on the ground, silver. Sparkled in the sun. He stopped, got off the horse and said, "Damn, this is silver. I'm gonna go file a claim back in town."

The money they got from that mine they used and bought up two big ranches in northwest Colorado on the border with Wyoming. My dad met these families up there when he was mapping that area. They had surveyed the area under the Powell survey, they'd graphed it all out, but they didn't have any details of what was there, so they just put in the rivers and then used field men to go out later and add detail. And that's what I did as an infant was ride around and see that country and be coddled by those people. I got to sit on their horses and play with their dogs and things like that.

Then we moved into town and my father went into the grazing service as a range manager. Now these are the guys who went out and inspected the range land to make sure that the ranchers weren't overgrazing.

**ZDL** Is this part of BLM? Bureau of Land Management?

**MM** Yes. That's the the name of the original Bureau of Land Management. He and one of my uncles both were doing that, and my uncle was in Wyoming and he had a badge and he wore a gun and rode a horse. Because that's how they met these ranchers on their own terms. They had to ride out and look at the range land.

And, of course, some of the ranchers didn't want those guys checking up on them because they were trying to squeeze every dollar they could out of the grasslands. And it was the government's job was to make sure that there was enough grass left to reconstitute itself through the winter and come back in the summer. So those were interesting days.

And then - 'cause my dad being out there, he ended up spending a lot of time in this big warehouse building making maps and at the end of World War II they had airplanes flying grids photographing all this country and they were piecing these mosaics of photographs together to make maps that would show a whole national forest. These would then be photographed and made into maps you could hand out to people to use.

**ZDL** So that occurred after World War II?

**MM** Yes. And that was why we had art supplies. We had colored pencils and ink and things, and he worked in this place that had copy machines. He'd bring home a stack of paper and I got to draw all over that paper. It was called scratch paper and I scratched every one of them I could.

**ZDL** Did you spend any time with your mother?

**MM** Well, I had - see, I had my birth mother. She ran off to Texas with a cowboy in 1940 while my father was out surveying. She got tired of being left at home and made friends in town. And they divorced. I stayed with the father 'cause they assumed that she had abandoned me. He came home from a trip and found me in the house alone crying. You know, this didn't go down well with the divorce court.

**ZDL** Probably not.

**MM** And so I didn't know her until I was 21, 22 years old. And she wrote me a letter and said she was in Texas and she was a marine biologist. And her dad was a doctor and her brother was a doctor. And her uncles were doctors.

**ZDL** Was she very young when she married your dad?

**MM** Yeah, she was about 21, I think, and he was probably 25. But he remarried and, well, she must've left in 1939, I was born in '37. He remarried in 1940 to a local girl in Craig, Colorado and I had a grandpa from that deal who was an ex-boxer in the mining towns. He told about being in Globe, Arizona and Silver City and Telluride and he grew up in Leadville. His family had immigrated; he was an orphan. He immigrated from Wales. So, this was a very interesting thing. And they came into Denver eventually. But he used to tell us stories about the old mining towns and he ended up having a laundry in Ouray, Colorado, the first steam laundry. And there's a photograph of him with a wagon. It's a big box and that was the laundry wagon with a team of horses, and it said, "McDonald's Steam Laundry." He went on to have laundries in different towns and ended up in Craig, Colorado. So that's how my father met my mother. And she raised us. I had two sisters then through her. And anything I wanted to do, I got to do. She confessed later she was afraid I wouldn't like her, so she spoiled me.

**ZDL** I can imagine.

**MM** And I took advantage of it.

**ZDL** You were how old when they married?

**MM** Well, I was three years old, yeah, when I met her.

**ZDL** Kids pick up on that pretty quickly.

**MM** Oh, right away, yeah. She was good. She encouraged music. She encouraged us to - I didn't take dance lessons, my sisters did.

My father was on gymnastics and wrestling teams in college, so he taught us how to wrestle and do gymnastics and my little sisters were really good in gymnastics. And they went on to do ballet and I went on to take music lessons. I heard my mother playing music on the radio all day every day and I knew all the songs and found out I could - I could just play them.

**ZDL** By ear?

**MM** By ear, yeah.

**ZDL** What did you play them on in those days?

**MM** Well I'd hum and whistle, but... I took piano lessons, which I didn't like. I didn't want to learn to get good. I wanted to be good.

**ZDL** And not practice.

**MM** Yeah, this has been the bane of my musical career. But then in the fourth and fifth grade, they got me to take up clarinet. My mother wanted me to play saxophone, my dad said it would be cheaper to get me a clarinet. So, they got me this old metal clarinet.

**ZDL** The B flat clarinet?

**MM** B flat clarinet, yeah. And I learned to play it and I learned to play all those radio songs on my clarinet. And that led to us having a dance band with some other kids who learned how to play by ear. And one of them graduated with a degree in music composition at USC; the other one worked for various TV orchestras and pit bands on Broadway for a career; and I took a music lesson in college. I took saxophone lessons and had to drop out or I was gonna get an F. And it was because I was working two nights a week playing for dances and painting pictures the rest of the time.

**ZDL** And you didn't have time for that.

**MM** Yeah, I had to go play outdoors. I had shotguns and pistols and rifles and skis and whatever I needed to be outside.

**ZDL** Who taught you to shoot?

**MM** My dad. But all those uncles, my dad included, had pistols. And when he died, the first thing I wanted was his pistol. And I got it until my sister married a guy who went to Vietnam and when

he came home, he wanted the pistol and I was at ASU, hardly needed it. So, he took it. But later I bought my own.

**ZDL** Did you hunt?

**MM** I hunted. In high school, I had a deer, an elk and pheasants and rabbits. Yeah, and when I was first out of college teaching art in a small community in western Colorado, Glenwood Springs, I was a subsistence hunter. I got a deer. It didn't matter how big its horns were, male or female, it was food. And I went fishing; I loved catching trout. And that provided several meals. I'd catch them and keep them and freeze them and we'd have them for dinner. And when I moved to Arizona, that all stopped.

**ZDL** That stopped.

**MM** Yeah.

**ZDL** When do you recall becoming interested in art?

**MM** Well, I remember in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, we had to draw and color with crayons - jack-o-lantern heads. Little pumpkin. And I drew a pumpkin with a cowboy hat on it. And my teacher called my parents and said, "Your son seems to be precocious." I was in trouble a lot, too. Not bad, I was naughty.

**ZDL** You were mischievous?

**MM** Yes, yes. I talked all the time. That was a big thing. I got spanked in first grade for getting out of my seat and going back in the corner to where they had a little - some kind of science thing they were doing. And I think - I think I understood too soon what the lesson was going to be about and filed it away and started doing my own thing and then they'd say, "Merrill, would you read your section now?" I'd look around and see what page we were on cause I'd already read the chapter. And, you know, we all know that story.

**ZDL** Did you take art classes in high school?

**MM** No, I took a college art class at night. Yeah, when I was 14. I think I just did it one winter, but after that I had paints in my studio - in my bedroom on a little table and I painted pictures, like I painted hot rods and things like that. And I always drew cartoons and I thought I would be an illustrator or an advertising artist, go to Art Center. I'd heard about these things until I got a catalogue from Art Center and saw that there was no way I could afford to move to California and go to Art Center. So, I had to go to the local college and major in art.

**ZDL** And that was Mesa Junior College?

**MM** This is Mesa College, yeah.

**ZDL** In Grand Junction?

**MM** Yeah. I'm glad I didn't take art in high school. I knew they had a bad teacher because there weren't any good art works when they put up their little spring art shows. I wouldn't see anything very good and I thought it's not the kids' fault, they're not learning anything. And I guess I was a little snotty about it, but you know, I didn't see ...

I had a friend later, an artist, Paul Pletka, who came from Grand Junction and his mother was the art teacher. He went on to become a very well-known artist and I think he's still living in Santa Fe and does wonderful things. There's a piece of his in the Phoenix Art Museum that's a masterpiece.

**ZDL** So then after Mesa Junior College, you went to Sacramento State University. How did you decide to go there?

**MM** My oldest uncle had a job in California. He went out during the war years to work in the shipyards, ended up in Sacramento building homes. His oldest daughter, seven years older than I, who was born in a homestead near Grand Junction, majored in art in college and her art teacher was Wayne Tebow. Now people who know California art know Wayne Tebow. She'd been watching me over the years, they'd come back to Colorado usually every summer. She's the one who told my dad it was okay for me to major in art. He was afraid that I was going to be effeminate and she said, "Don't worry about that. Let him study art."

**ZDL** It wasn't that you might starve to death?

**MM** Well, I might. They didn't bring that up. I thought I could study advertising there. So, I got to Sacramento and I took a painting class and I was pretty good. Now, there were older students there - see this is when the Korean War veterans were going through their education, too. Most of the friends I made were older and that was to my good fortune because I was with a more sophisticated group of people.

I met Fred Shidler when I was in Sacramento and several other artists that have done well in California and have gone on to be college art teachers or high school teachers. I made friends with this guy, I think it was contemporary art, modern art history class. He was from Hawaii and the only thing I remember; he was older and there's some guy who was a super surfer of all time, Hawaiian guy. They named a hotel after him down on the beach. That was his cousin. So, he talked a lot about Hawaii, but he had moved to California and he said, "You're gonna be an artist." He says, "Why are you going to school here? This is a teacher's college." And I said, "Well, it's because my cousin lived here and I had a place to stay, you know? I could live here, and I could afford it." He said, "Well, you need to go to an art school." And I said, "Well, I know,

but I can't." He said, "Well, there's one in Oakland that I went to. Maybe you could go there. It's California College of Arts and Crafts. They have scholarships. Maybe you could apply there." So, I did. And I was accepted. I didn't get a scholarship, but I thought just to send a portfolio and be accepted was a pretty big deal for me and so I got married, as if it wasn't hard enough to go to college.

And my dad couldn't help very much. I think he paid tuition to get me into the art school the first semester and maybe the second.

**ZDL** You don't recall what that cost was for tuition in those days?

**MM** Well, it was \$260 a semester.

**ZDL** Oh, you remember exactly.

**MM** I could go to Sacramento State for \$115 a semester. And I could afford that, but the \$200, I ended up the second semester paying \$40 a month, or maybe it was \$60 a month for four months, that was probably how it worked out and I said I can't, I mean, we're starving here. I can't do this. We lived in Oakland and I was going around the neighborhood picking up pop bottles and I'd take them down to the grocery store on the corner and cash them in and then buy a bottle of milk. Oh, I was so poor.

**ZDL** What was your wife doing at that time?

**MM** She was working for Canada Dry as an office worker. And that was in Albany, so I had to get up every morning. We had a little Chevrolet, my in-laws, my mother and father-in-law, gave us for our wedding and I would drive her over at 7:30. It's just past Berkeley in the part of Oakland that's closest to the bay. I could go down Telegraph Avenue and then take a left turn down into San Pablo and go across to Albany and drop her off at Canada Dry. And then I learned I could go from there about eight blocks and I could be at the bay where the marina was, or I could go back up Telegraph Avenue to the west portal to the Berkeley campus and there were bookstores and two art supply stores. I could go in the art supply stores and look at art books. I found a book on Salvador Dali and I said, "Wow, this is exciting stuff. I'm in the big time now, I'm in California." Got this book and I opened it up and Salvador Dali says, "I am the world's greatest artist." Now, back to the question about the ladies, men seem to be able to say, "I am the world's greatest artist."

**ZDL** Yes.

**MM** And women know better.

**ZDL** You think they're more realistic?

**MM** Yeah, I guess that's it. And when women do that sort of thing, you know, they become Lady Gaga or something. And to me it's quite acceptable, it's back to tooting your own horn. Women are reluctant to do that; it's a cultural thing and apparently when you're a female, you get too forward, then you become the victim of predators. You know, it is a complicated issue.

**ZDL** It is a very complicated issue.

**MM** And I've found in my personal experience that the girls in my classes in college were usually the best artists in the room. I never had any problem with it. My sisters were good at everything. I did adopt male roles that I've had to unlearn, and I'm not perfect yet, but I'm working on it.

**ZDL** Well congratulations on that. I've often wondered, when I started researching your background, did the California plein air artists have anything to do with your decision to go to California to school? I know they started waning around the 30's, so they probably didn't.

**MM** Those were kind of the old guys. I was listening to Dave Brubeck. I didn't want anything to do with the old guys. But there was something going on there. It was called the Bay Area School of Painting (California School of Fine Arts) which was Richard Diebenkorn and people like him.

**ZDL** So it was an evolution from those plein air artists, you think or not?

**MM** Well, you know, there are generational things. The plein air painters were the teachers for the Bay Area school who were the abstract expressionists. But the abstract expressionist attitude generally involved using subject matter because the plein air teachers taught you to look at nature and look at people and make that your subject. And when I was in the art school is when I got the purest exposure to this. Navan Olivera was teaching print making and Richard Diebenkorn was teaching painting. Now I didn't have either one of them for teachers. They were on the campus.

My teacher was a guy named Jason Schoener. Loved his name. And he was actually from The Cleveland Art Institute, but he lived in Maine and he brought something of an East Coast mentality to his classes. It had to do with art history. These other guys, the guys who were painting these big thickly painted nudes with paint dripping down the surface and all this stuff were a little bit repulsive to me. Though I got used to the idea that a drip on a painting wasn't a mistake, it's a visual element, you know. We got language. We came into language for this sort of thing. And I saw these guys building these big canvases. I said, "Now that is art." So that was the big influence. I'd go over to the art museum and I'd see all of these big paintings.

My first trip into the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art I went on a bus tour with students from Sacramento and they pulled up and we got out and walked up the steps and went inside and we went into the auditorium, the big lecture auditorium in the forward part of the building. And I looked around and over on the wall was "The Three Musicians" by Picasso and it's about 8 feet by 8 feet and I said, "Yes,

this is the big time. That's a Picasso." You know, I was really impressed and then, you know, I saw Monet and Pissarro and Mondrian, you know, all of these things. Maybe not the great examples, you know, San Francisco didn't get the best, but this is the first time I'd seen anything that I had read about in a book, so I thought it was pretty important to have that exposure, and when I came back to Colorado and met artists that had gone to the University of Colorado, or one of the state colleges - Denver University, there was no way I was gonna go to graduate school in Colorado. They had to make a trip to see that stuff. I lived with it. And so, when I came to ASU, I was really snotty, you know, because I'd had that experience.

**ZDL** In California?

**MM** And it formed - it formed my character as an artist and my aspirations were big.

**ZDL** And that's where your first concept of these large canvases came into being?

**MM** Yeah, we had students in painting class who were working 4 feet by 5 feet. I took a picture of my first studio in Sacramento and I had a canvas that was probably about 4 feet by 3 feet. That was a big painting to me, but I could do it. I did best on that size. That was something I could handle. But when I came to graduate school, I started painting 4 by 5 feet, that was my size.

**ZDL** When you graduated from College of Arts and Crafts in '59...

**MM** I had a year at the College of Arts and Crafts and during that year, I was taking advertising, figure drawing, painting, advertising. I was really good in my painting class. I was fairly good in my life drawing class and I was a B student in advertising. Now, I wasn't dumb. Advertising is so competitive, and I thought, follow my strengths. These people are so much more sophisticated. I came from Grand Junction. They came from San Francisco, Oakland, Berkeley, the smaller cities around there, you know, that's where the student body came from at that school.

I made friends with a guy from Redding - he was so glad to be out of Redding and be in a city, you know? And he graduated and moved to Seattle. Those were the people that formed my character and Sacramento was actually kind of a step down except Tebow was in Sacramento and he lifted everything by the scale and the ambition of what he was doing.

**ZDL** So then how did you decide to come to ASU?

**MM** Well, I left the art school and went to Sacramento and got a degree in art, a bachelor-of-arts, with a minor in art education. I got licensed to teach art in California and that accreditation transferred to Colorado, so I'd left - my father died right then. My mother had two teenage daughters; she's by herself and I thought this is the time for me to go back and be supportive. I can probably get a job. I had a job offer in, I think it was, Modesto. It was a start, you know, a junior high school.

I could do that and then go to graduate school. My friends all went to Davis and Davis turned into this fantastic art program. I went back to Grand Junction, got a teaching job in Glenwood Springs, an hour and a half away and tried to be available to my mother when she needed support of some kind. My wife's parents lived there so we could see them, and they got to see the babies that were starting to come and meantime, wherever I lived, I made a studio and painted. I was able to sell a painting every once in a while, which told me that if I can do it once, I can do it twice. But at the end two years of teaching public school and I sold paintings in Aspen, and two more years in Grand Junction, I went back to Grand Junction. I lost ten pounds every year I taught school in Glenwood Springs and I was only 150 pounds. So, I thought it's too stressful, I'm too young. I was only 21 years old when I started. It's not a good age difference when you have 8<sup>th</sup> graders.

**ZDL** Well, that's a tough age.

**MM** Yes, it's a tough age. It takes a coach to handle 8<sup>th</sup> graders. Somebody that scares them. The little kids and I got along great. I did start a high school class and they liked me, and we did well there. But I didn't want to be a public-school teacher and I had ambitions to do something more. I had started selling work through an art dealer I met in Aspen who had a gallery in Houston. And he had the best gallery in Houston. He asked me to show in his gallery. It didn't work out so well because then I went to graduate school and changed my style, started gluing canvas scraps onto canvases and pouring paint on it and doing all this experimental stuff. I had to grow. I knew when I went to graduate school, I had to grow.

**ZDL** And that's here at ASU?

**MM** Yes. And the Houston art dealer said, "After you've finished your experimentation, why don't you get back in touch with me and we'll see if we have anything to work with." Twenty-five years later, maybe, I did. And I didn't do well. I did show in Houston with another gallery, did great. So, it had something to do with who his audience was and who my work appealed to. Part of that was 20 years later, there was a recession in the oil business and his main market...

**ZDL** In Texas and in Houston?

**MM** Yeah, his main market was selling resale impressionism to the owners of the oil companies. And my market was selling canvases to oil company office buildings. Phillips Petroleum, Exxon, you know, I'd have to go back and look, they all have my paintings. Phillips bought two or three very large canvases of Lake Powell, but that market dried up for me.

**ZDL** So what courses did you teach when you started teaching at Phoenix College, which is part of the Maricopa Community College System?

**MM** Yeah, we'll leave out the part I taught two years in Colorado and learned to cross country ski when it was below zero and call it fun. But I also improved my fishing abilities, but I didn't improve my art abilities, so I went through some more experiments. I got a call to come teach at Phoenix College. I accepted the interview on the telephone and the dean of the college said, "You're not one of those long-hair hippies, are you?" and actually, I wasn't. But I was going to be.

So, I said, "No, I'm not. I'm a serious artist and I'll be a serious teacher." He said, "You're hired." They were desperate. They didn't know what they were getting. And so, I came to Phoenix, you know, packed up the trailers and drove down here and that's when the freeways were being built between Flagstaff and Phoenix. That was an adventure in its own. I remember coming from Flagstaff at 7000 feet and I knew we were going down to a lower elevation where there would be saguaro cactus because I'd seen Arizona Highways all my life. And when we came down and down and down into Camp Verde, I thought, wow, we must have to go a long way across the desert to get to Phoenix because I don't see any room for a city here.

And we went down and then we went back up again. And then we got up on top and I thought, well maybe Phoenix is gonna be around here somewhere. But this is like 3000 feet. I think Phoenix is lower. And so, we drove and drove and drove. And then pretty soon we went down and down and down. It's like a staircase and we got down to the bottom and my first impression is, I got passed by a state patrol going 75. And I thought, well these guys don't have to follow the laws. What does that mean for me? My car wouldn't go 75 anyway!

I came into Phoenix and loved my job at the college. First year I had to teach interior design as one of my classes. I had worked for an interior designer in my first year after I quit teaching in Grand Junction. I lived two more years there and I worked for an interior designer who went broke, but I learned a lot of things about fabrics and furniture and stuff, so I did the best I could with that class, but I talked the college into letting me give that class to someone else and start teaching figure drawing because they didn't have any life drawing classes at Phoenix College. And that was another story. I eventually got a class to teach it at night off campus. They didn't want nudes on campus.

The Unitarian Church said it's okay if you want to use our classroom and teach it out here. And I ended up having 60 people sign up for the class. Well, you know, class size for something like that max would be 25. We made two sections out of it and a friend of mine...

**ZDL** I wouldn't think you'd have room for 60 people?

**MM** No, no, they had, I think, three classrooms for their Sunday School, so one became my classroom and a friend taught next door. He was working at ASU and he taught a class to the other group and in that group of students was Eric Fischl. And Eric went on to have a career, as some people know. When you can teach life drawing in an art department, you've made it into a real art

department. Now, we're talking serious art and that was always a joke. This is serious. And I thought art was a serious thing, music was a serious thing, theater is a serious thing, and it's serious because it affects people's lives in big ways and it also makes a lot of money. Back to the story about the ladies struggling in the resale market. It's worth money and it does build an economy. You want a town to have culture and make money at the same time, build an art center and a couple of galleries will open and tourists will come because there's something to do when they get there. I don't want to get preachy about this, but art does create culture, which creates money. Because, where do you put your families? You take them to a town that has culture.

**ZDL** Absolutely.

**MM** And that's what we can offer now in this community.

**ZDL** Okay, I'm gonna switch to when you lived in Silverton, Colorado. It's a late 1880s silver mining town with an elevation of 9300 feet.

**MM** Yeah.

**ZDL** It was 500 to 600 people and it's a popular tourist destination in the summertime because of the Narrow-Gauge Railroad that goes through Durango up to Silverton.

**MM** Right, right.

**ZDL** But, it's pretty isolated, I would think in the wintertime.

**MM** Well I have this obtuse way of gaining fame and that's to go where nobody wants it and wonder why it's not happening. The spring of 1973, I had been a member of the Arizona Mountaineering Club since I came in '67. So, six years' worth of climbing the cliffs and the Superstition Mountains and especially Camelback, that was our local climbing center. I took mountain rescue training. We worked down at the fire tower in South Phoenix lowering litters out of a second-floor window down to the ground on ropes.

I was rescued on South Mountain. I was climbing on Camelback Mountain leading a group who climbed the Praying Monk. First you go up what they call the head wall, the first section and this is from that trail around the camel's neck; then you go up a little plateau area and the Praying Monk sticks up right here. So, I'd led the group up that. We all repelled off and then there was some time and they said, "We'd like to ..." I said, "Do you want to go on to the top?" I have about four people in the group. And they all said, "Yeah, sure we have time." So, I said, "Okay, we'll go up this route." It's called the neck route and it involves a place where you have to chimney. Now chimney is when you brace your back. You're in a crevasse, brace your back and put your feet against the wall and you kind of walk your feet and push your back and you scoot up. Now you put in anchors, so you don't fall clear down. I put in an anchor and started

climbing. Got about 8 feet above the anchor and my foot went skidding off and I dropped free space for about 12 feet and hit the rock, broke my leg, and the rope stopped me. The belayer down below stopped me from sliding down the rock. I was rescued. The mountain rescue team that I had trained with were very good. They put me on a stretcher, and they lowered me down. They actually put me in my van and drove me to Good Sam Hospital and I stayed there. I recovered.

So that spring, as soon as school was out, I was good on crutches going into my life drawing classes and teaching. I tried not to let it interfere too much. It was 16 weeks in those days. I don't know what it is now in a cast, full length cast. As soon as I got the cast off, it was the end of the semester and the doctor told me that I needed to exercise. I started going to the Y and working out, swimming at first and then finally using weight machines and getting my leg built, but he said the more hiking you can do and the more walking, the better.

So, I made a plan. I would go up to the San Juan Mountains in my van by myself and spend part of every day hiking and part of every day drawing. While I had been in the cast in bed, I decided it was a good time to really learn how to draw. I started with circles and with straight lines and then I got some marker pens. I started making these circles into designs and I filled page after page of my sketchbook. Then I started drawing three dimensional figures that were just geometry. And eventually I started drawing real things. And when I came back to life drawing after I was bedridden for three weeks, I started teaching again. I started drawing the figure along with the students and I was much better than I had been. And that got me interested in really - 'cause I'd been doing abstract art - really learning how to draw.

**ZDL** You have said that you didn't think you'd learned how to draw in your undergraduate or your graduate degree.

**MM** Well, I didn't learn to draw that way. I learned to do interpretative drawing. Now, anybody who did go to a real art center, learned anatomy. They learned how to render form. How to make something look three dimensional. They learned about light and shadows. I had to teach myself all this stuff because when I went to Sacramento, we just drew from the model and whatever you got, if it made a nice drawing, it didn't matter if it was anatomically exact. So, I faked a lot of things like hands, expressions on faces, in student life drawings. You can look. I was just one of those kinds of people. This time of rebuilding myself was to make myself graduate above that level, that college art quality of life drawing. And this isn't to be mean, but most people who get a four-year degree and major in art in college don't get the rigor of really learning how to draw. Then they know it. I mean, this isn't fair, but they know they're not getting that treatment. I knew it and when I went to Sacramento, I said, "Where do I study anatomy?" And they said, "Well, you have to go to the biology department." So, I went over and stood in line. This is back when they had tables and you got cards. I got up to the desk and I said, "I wanna take human anatomy." And my plan was to take art history, painting and human anatomy. And they said, "Do you have the prerequisites?" And I said, "What are those?" And they said, "Well, you have

to have biology 1 and 2.” I said, “Well, I have biology 1 and art school.” And he said, “I don’t think that’ll be enough to qualify you.” And I said, “But I want to be an artist. I have to learn anatomy.” And they said, “This is for doctors and nurses. We can’t use you in this class. You won’t learn what you want anyway.” So, I had to teach myself anatomy by observing. I did do a drawing of a skeleton. And when I first came to ASU, John Waddell was teaching figure drawing. His first assignment was for everybody to go home and draw a skeleton at least this tall on a piece of paper. Boy, was that drudgery. You know, because I knew so little, I could pretty well draw a skeleton from memory now. In fact, this is off the subject, but if I were teaching now, I’d combine life drawing with strength training in a gym - working out in a gym. And I’d say trapezius. And then we’d get to the model after the workout. The next session there’d be a model there. I’d say, “Draw the trapezius.” No problem.

**ZDL** That’s very interesting.

**MM** It would be so much fun. So, by injuring myself, I learned a lot about bones and so my goal was to learn how to draw. I went up to Silverton and spent a week up there drawing every day. Toward the end of the week, I went back to Ouray, Colorado, which is where my step-grandparent’s family were. That’s where my grandfather had the laundry. When he was a young man, he also got in trouble for high-grading out of the Camp Bird Mine and he was a professional fighter also in those days. A colorful background, as they say. So, I had an attachment to Ouray.

I went over and took a road up the side of the mountain and from where I parked, I could look over the town. I could see Camp Bird Mine and the mountains adjacent to it that separate Ouray from Telluride on the other side. It was May and the snow was melting off, which exposed earth and rock, but in the shade, it was still snowdrifts. And I saw this pattern of white against dark, big shapes. The shape of a rockslide, only half of it would go white and part of it would be gray. And I started drawing this. I thought, this is abstract art. I’m not just imitating nature, I’m making abstracts and it’s from nature. And this is what I’ve been trying to do all these years and it’s right here in front of me.

**ZDL** That was your epiphany.

**MM** So that experience with the San Juan Mountains, I went back to Phoenix and started painting mountains and made a show out of it. It didn’t do well. People in Phoenix don’t like snow. I didn’t understand the complexity of that, but it’s true. So, I thought, instead of painting snow, why don’t I find abstractions in Arizona? And I went back out to these rock places where I’d been climbing and there was abstract art everywhere. And that became my career. So that was the importance of Silverton.

**ZD** Interesting. Okay, you wanted to make sure we talk about the Arizona Landscape Project.

**MM** Yeah.

**ZDL** And that was in the late 1970's. You knew what you wanted to do, you wanted to paint, but you didn't have the finances to do it.

**MM** I needed a plan. So, Bud Jacobson was one of the real patrons of art in those days.

**ZDL** Absolutely. He was an attorney at Snell & Wilmer. He's also a Historical League Historymaker of ours.

**MM** He was also a board member of the Phoenix Art Museum and I had met him - he probably had made an effort to meet me, 'cause I think one day he came over to my studio and I had these big canvases of my paintings of mountains. And I moved one and a cockroach ran out across the floor. He said, "Oh, eek. What is that?" You know, Bud was a very fastidious person and I thought, well, I just learned a lesson. Fred Shidler gave me a lesson. He said, "Always keep a bunch of art in your studio. You never know who's gonna be there." I worked really hard to always keep new paintings in my studio. And so here was my first interview with a serious looker and this spoiled it, so I called exterminators and never had that problem again.

But Bud took a liking to me and showed respect for what I was trying to do. So, I asked to go see him and made an appointment and went down. He had this wonderful office in the corner of the high rise that looked down over the city and we talked about art and I told him that I had this idea. I would like to take a block of time, like I have for sabbatical, to go to Silverton to draw and interpret Arizona. Well, he said, "I don't know how to get the funding to do such a thing." But I said, "I am aware that you helped John Waddell take some time off to do his bronze sculptures and get him started. Could you suggest anything for me?" And he said, "Yeah, we can do that." He said, "You'll need to get some people to sponsor you to have enough time to live on money that they would put up while you do your artwork." And he said, "I can suggest a few people, but I'd like you to go meet Judd Herberger." So, I called Judd and I went over to his office in Scottsdale and told him what I was doing, and he said, "Yeah," he said, "we could do a thing like that." He said, "You can make a plan and we'll sell shares. And each person who buys a share will be entitled to a painting."

**ZDL** Just to clarify, Judd is a real estate developer and a philanthropist.

**MM** Yes, in Scottsdale, right. At the time Judd was building homes in West Sedona, what became West Sedona. Judd was about my age and so we were able to communicate pretty easily, and I knew that his mother had helped John Waddell also and John had been my teacher at ASU. I'm skipping over things, but John had been my life drawing instructor and sort of a mentor when I was in graduate school, who told me, "Do what you wanna do. Don't worry about these teachers here. You do what you wanna do. You'll get outta here fine."

I asked Judd about this and he said, “Well, let’s get a plan here.” So, I said, “Okay, if I had two years, I could do ten paintings a year and then I could convert that into maybe a museum show.” And I’m not sure whether he or Bud or I kinda put this thing together, but between us, we came up with this plan that I would have a semester off. I would teach a semester, a semester off, I would teach a semester. That way I could have one full year without completely losing my contact with the college. We sold twenty contracts for twenty paintings for \$1000 each. That equaled my teaching salary and I knew how to live on that so I knew that this would work. I took a semester and I called it the Arizona Landscape Project and I drew a little map and I drew in all the places around the State that I was going to visit in this two-year period. About once a month, I would leave my new wife at home with my new daughter. I’d go off for a week with my van and I’d usually take someone with me. Jim Cowlin, a photographer friend, went with me on most of these trips and I would go some place and drive around and photograph and do watercolors, gathering information like my father used to do when he was making maps. And come back home with this information. Then I would do three weeks’ worth of painting. And that would be a unit. And one of them, for example, were the Kofa Mountains. Never seen any paintings of the Kofa Mountains.

**ZDL** No.

**MM** Well, I did some. I’d read Edward Abbey’s *Desert Solitaire*, so we went up to the North Rim, to the Toroweap Point, went to \_\_\_\_ and spent the night. We stopped first in Kingman and I went out to, oh, I forget her name, someone’s landing, it’s named after a woman. But anyway, one of the original Grounds family’s son was retired there and I went to see him and talk about family history and about the Grounds that I had worked for in Colorado as a kid. And he told me great stories about the early days and then from there, we drove around. I was just rapt because this was the real Grounds telling me stuff. John Grounds was his name and he wrote a book, which I bought a copy of and gave to Phoenix College after I read it. We went around to St. George, Utah and then straight south and spent a night in \_\_\_\_\_. It was really cold, I remember. This was April and came out at Toroweap Point. We hiked down to Lava Falls and back up and I did a painting from the view from Toroweap Point and took pictures from all directions in the morning, the evening. And then we circled around. We bypassed the North Rim turnoff and went on over to House Rock Valley and photographed Vermillion Cliffs and that area.

By this time, a week on the road, I was exhausted at looking at all this dramatic scenery. I was just burnt out. We got back to Phoenix. But that trip started me looking at the Grand Canyon. I went down to the Chiricahua Mountains, to the Dragoon Mountains, climbed every chance I got in these places. Finally, at the end of the two years, I had a show at the Scottsdale Center for the Arts. I had bought a new Ford Bronco when I started, and I had 50,000 miles on it that I had traveled in Arizona doing that project. I parked the car in the Art Center in Scottsdale with the paintings all around it. And then the people who bought the contracts came to the opening and they drew straws and then they got to make their pick. I guaranteed that I would have 30% more

paintings than I had contracts, so I had 30 paintings for 20 people. And everybody got a painting. And then I had ten paintings left over. And that worked out great.

**ZDL** It seems like an ingenious way to gain some money ahead of time so you could paint and feel comfortable.

**MM** Yeah, and see, the thing that always ate at me was the idea that I'm teaching, always splitting my time teaching, running home, painting the pictures, run back to teach, do things with my family, paint a little bit, run back to teach. What if my job was to be an artist all day? And just do my paintings, interact with my family, do paintings, interact with my family, go see things, do paintings, be an artist instead of this split personality.

I liked teaching. It was really fun, but I wondered what would I do if I had all my time to think about being a painter? And I found out and in doing this I found myself as an artist. And that's when I realized that most artists never get to paint long enough to find an individual viewpoint on which they can brag about themselves and build a career. You can't teach that in junior college, you know, you have to live to do that.

**ZDL** If you use specific colors when you're out in the open spaces that you want to depict, does that determine what medium you're going to use to do a painting?

**MM** I guess I have. When I was in art school, I had two semesters of watercolor and two semesters of oil painting. So, I could go either way with that and in life drawing, I liked pastels. I did a lot of drawings with pastels. I think I would treat watercolor as a sketching medium, in one sense, but in the studio I would try ideas by doing a watercolor and then if it looked like it could be a bigger statement, then I would stretch a canvas and use what I learned from the watercolor to enable me to do a big canvas. Some things I definitely knew were gonna be canvases, I didn't waste time with a watercolor. I just made a canvas. I did learn during those same developmental years that it was easier to sell a big canvas than a small watercolor.

**ZDL** That's interesting.

**MM** And art dealers like to sell the big canvases of course because the dollar volume is bigger.

**ZDL** Is this typical for artists, that you sell per square inch of the painting?

**MM** Yeah.

**ZDL** Is that you or artists in general?

**MM** Well, the difference between an amateur and a professional is the amateur sells it priced according to how precious it is to them. And the professional says they're all good, so we have to

base price on size. And then square inch is one way or square foot. I used to price by the square foot. You want a ten foot one or a six foot one? Now, I use square inches. But at some point, you establish a base price and then you raise the price incrementally as you get better known and there's more demand. And if it sells at that price, then this is the new price. And then you put it over here and if you sell several and prove that price, then this is your price.

At some point, you find you're making enough, you can live on it. That makes you a professional. Now, art teachers hate it when I say that. It's a very hard thing to do and it scares me every time I raise the price. What if they don't pay that next level? But on the other hand, I'm getting better as I get older and I know more. And I can paint a better picture. I'm doing one right now that I couldn't have done last year. I was working on it 10 years ago.

**ZDL** You were working on this concept or this actual painting ten years ago?

**MM** I was working on the technical concept of how to put a painting together. You know, think about painting as you have a surface. First you have to put an image into it and then you build the image out until it's finished, until it satisfies your vision of how that image should be. How you do this is based first on the idea of the skeleton and then you put the skin on it and then you put the makeup on the skin, or the clothes. And then you have the finished painting.

I reached that point when I was doing my Arizona series. How to make that finished painting and make one right next to it that looked like it came from the same person. Then you get in a style. What I found out is if you make up a style, all this and a bunch of this and a bunch of this, with a bunch of this going with it, I'm just playing, you have a style, but lots of people have that style of this, this and this. I call it geometry style. The only way you get a true style is to paint your way to it, step by step by step. And eventually the way you paint is determined by how you think and how your body works. Some people work this way. I like to work big marks, big shapes, and then I like to detail it. My wife works small images with incredible detail.

**ZDL** Yes. Beautiful floral images.

**MM** Yeah, very different. But I'm a more garrulous painter than she is. Everyone has their own style and I tell students you have to paint until you find yourself. It's a cliché, but you do. You paint your way into your own style. You don't get it by thinking it up and then doing it. That's conceptualizing, but that's not - that's not a real person. That's an idea that came from a real person.

**ZDL** But the main subject in your paintings is the landscape.

**MM** Yeah, but you know, it's sometimes I select a landscape because it's abstract. Sometimes I select a landscape because it's powerful. I think this image is powerful. There's a little boat right here that's 30 feet long. It's got ten people standing around out here. But look at the size of that rock.

You could park 20 boats right under that rock. I walked right up to here one day with Ted Hatch and there's a plaque on there that says, "Commemorating Peter Hansbrough." He drowned upstream and they found his body and they made a grave right there. And the Park Service made a bronze plaque.

**ZDL** Would you describe where you are for people who are looking at or reading about this image?

**MM** Okay, this painting is in the bottom of the Grand Canyon, in a section called Marble Canyon and these walls go up about 2000 feet to the rim and this is the Colorado River that comes in here, makes a turn and goes back here. We camped here and there's another campsite over there. And I'm looking about maybe a quarter of a mile or less over to that group that's camping there. And just upstream of that is a big rapid where I got injured when a beer can in a canvas bag whacked my knee going through the rapid. It was a serious injury. I walked right out of it. So, anyway, I put people in this one and I put this log in here because this is a narrative. This is telling a story. I'm describing the scale of the place, the light of the place, but also how did this big log get down in the bottom of that canyon? There are no trees down there. Well, it came down with a flood one year from Colorado or Utah. Which suggests there's a time when the river was this deep. We'll never see that again.

**ZDL** You love the Grand Canyon and you love to paint it, but so many paintings that you see of the canyon it's from a panoramic view, often from the South Rim.

**MM** Yes.

**ZDL** And they're beautiful, but you're just looking at a wide expanse. So many of your paintings, it's like you're looking through a magnifying glass because you're down in there, you're almost touching the walls.

**MM** Yeah, journey to the center of the earth. This is the big artery. This is a big bone. I tend to find this natural experience. The easy ones are the sunsets and the big canyons and the big mountain ranges silhouetted against the sky. And those are beautiful things.

**ZDL** They are beautiful.

**MM** But, there are so many postcard views you can stand to look at before it doesn't mean anything to see it. So, my problem with the Grand Canyon was how can I explain the Grand Canyon in an interesting way and my way of doing it is to go into the structure of the canyon and this corresponds with my interest in geology. I was a rock collector in seventh grade science and it never stopped. And I'm still reading geology books to understand how and why this is what it is.

**ZDL** When was your first trip down into the canyon?

**MM** 1980, I think '80 or '81. My attorney who I had called to help me when I was in my Arizona Project, how to deal with the funding and the tax reportage and things, said, "Well, let's see, you're painting the Grand Canyon now." And I was doing these views from the rim. I'd go up there and camp and paint what everybody else painted. He said, "Have you ever thought about painting the inside of the canyon?" His name is Ed Lowery. He's an old attorney here now. I'll be having dinner with him next week, in fact. And I said, "Well, you know, sure, I know. I've looked down there. I see the river." And he said, "Well, have you ever thought about going down in there?" And I said, "Well, I've thought - I walked down there. That wasn't a whole lot of fun." He said, "No, I mean, taking a boat through the canyon." And I said, "Well, I have some friends from mountaineering club that did that." And he said, "Well, would you like to do it?" and I said, "I can't afford that. You know, I'm just a humble schoolteacher." And he said, "What if I could arrange for you to go down there?" And I said, "I'd jump right on it. I'd love to." So, he got me an arrangement to go with the Hatch River Expedition Company and see the Grand Canyon and it never stopped. I did thirty, I think thirty-four trips and probably did my last trip last year. I could be talked into going again, but I don't need to. I've seen more than enough material to keep me going.

**ZDL** My husband and I went on a trip with Ted Hatch's Expeditions and Ed Lowery and you and Jeannie and it was a wonderful experience. And then at night you would play the clarinet as the rest of us were drifting off to sleep.

**MM** Yeah, see I got to be a jazz musician after all.

**ZDL** Yes.

**MM** Wow, strange audience. They were trapped. But they also were pretty mellow and tired by the time I got my clarinet out and I heard that I put most people to sleep.

**ZDL** Well it's wonderful to go to sleep listening to the Colorado River and your beautiful clarinet music. I mean, that's a...

**MM** Yeah, I liked to play...

**ZDL** ...that's a lifetime experience.

**MM** I liked to play love songs.

**ZDL** You saw the Hopi Mesas one time and that was an experience that really touched you.

**MM** Well you know, I've sort of been around the Hopi Mesas. I think the first thing that really got me was going through there and seeing the peach trees. I'd come from a peach growing town, Grand Junction, and I'd - how do they get peach trees to grow here? I mean, they're growing right out of the sand. And then I learned later that they grew peaches in the bottom of Canyon de Chelly until Kit Carson interfered. To understand that these people have been on that land in those rocks, sitting on top of coal veins actually, living their life well. To my knowledge they're an extension of the Ancient Ones. They have a language that predates Apache and Navajo. A very fascinating thing and the alternative to the mesas, of course, is to see Canyon de Chelly and see

all the ruins in Canyon de Chelly. A wonderful experience I got was to teach a class for a week camped at the bottom of Spider Rock. We rode horses in, and we went out and painted every day and had critiques and stories and sat around the campfire at night and learned to see how the people had lived in that canyon. They ruined it. You know maybe some people don't realize that green stuff in the bottom of Canyon de Chelly is prickly pear cactus. Just like a jungle.

**ZDL** Well, it's the tamarisk trees that are horrible.

**MM** And the tamarisk, yeah.

**ZDL** They're trying to get rid of them, but it's very difficult.

**MM** The prickly pear is what my father was trying to prevent the whole west from becoming through overgrazing, but in the Reservations, they didn't have any control. That was up to the people that owned the land to take care of it.

**ZDL** I have a final question for you. You once painted a Sedona landscape and you decided to add the power lines and you didn't know if that painting would sell and I don't know the end of that story and I'm just curious.

**MM** Well I don't have any paintings of the red rocks with power lines, so I guess it did. I did a painting of a big form in the bottom of the Grand Canyon with jet contrails going through the sky in the background. And that didn't sell.

**ZDL** Really?

**MM** No.

**ZDL** So did you just take the contrails out?

**MM** No, I still have the painting.

**ZDL** You still have the painting, but the power lines in Sedona went.

**MM** I don't know that I painted them out. I might have.

**ZD** Okay, well I was just curious. You know, it's an interesting...

**MM** Well, looking beyond the idealism of my landscapes is my knowledge that people use this land and the only reason it looks pristine in most cases is because we set aside the most worthless pieces of land in the country and made them into National Parks. And because of that, we saved these dramatic areas from development. When I go out into ranch country, mining country, I'm not against that. In fact, I'm planning to do a picture of a big bulldozer - not a bulldozer, but a shovel thing in the middle of the Ray Mine out here by Hayden. People don't want to see the land depicted with the destruction and the development. It doesn't fit their ideals.

**ZDL** No, it's does not.

**MM** And I see it and I can document it in paintings, but I don't expect people to pay me to do it. That's just something - and I don't particularly want to do it to a lot of places. That's just the way it is. But copper mines are amazing. Why not paint a picture? You know? I have a few.

**ZDL** Well thank you very much for giving your oral history.

**MM** Well it's been fun to talk about these things. I hope that I'm not the last artist to get this kind of recognition and that's not your fault. It would be the fault of the artist not to engage the state and make their art about the state. I'm not the only one who has a way of seeing this.

**ZDL** Well, the Historical League has been pretty good about art history.

**MM** It's okay. I'm just trying to control the future a little bit.

**ZDL** But we've been pretty good about honoring artists.

**MM** You have.

**ZDL** Joe Beeler is a western cowboy - western artist.

**MM** Yes.

**ZDL** Ed Mell is another one we've honored and a cowboy western artist who had a patch over his eye. Um, and he died...

**MM** Hampton. John Hampton?

**ZDL** No, no. Much later.

*Merrill Mahaffey Historymakers Oral History Transcript*

**MM** Oh Bill Owen?

**ZDL** Bill Owen. Thank you. So, and I may have missed a couple, but we've honored those artists.

**MM** Yeah, yeah. Well, I encourage it and that's culture, right?

**ZDL** Thank you, Merrill.

**MM** You're welcome.

End of Interview

/gmc