

Phyllis Thysell
Narrator

Tim ?
Interviewer

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I: This is the Heritage Education Commission Oral History Project of Architecture and Fine Arts. We are meeting with Mrs. Phyllis Thysell this afternoon, who will be discussing her experiences and attitudes regarding her involvement in the arts.

Phyllis, would you explain something about your background before we get more specifically into the...your involvement with the arts?

PT: I was born in Parkston, South Dakota and raised in Mitchell, South Dakota. And hmmm, had an interesting college experience at Dakota Wesleyan [University]. That school was, hmmm, hard hit by the Depression in the 1930s, and my uncle Bert, who was an insurance man in Mitchell, carried the school through those years without any payments for their insurance. When I graduated from high school, he said, "I don't care where you want to go to school, Phyllis, but the first couple of years, you're going to go to Dakota Wesleyan," so that they'd pay back what they owed him. After attending Dakota Wesleyan, I went to the University of Minnesota, and graduated from Minnesota in 1945. I taught at Chaska, Minnesota. And then married Vance Thysell in 1946, and we moved to Hawley. Vance opened an office in Moorhead, and my involvement with this whole community began at that time.

I: How did you become interested in arts activities, Phyllis?

PT: Well, I think, as I mentioned before to you, Tim, hmmm, I think I have a little inherent interest in it. Hmmm, maybe...I think I have maybe a little talent for the arts as a producer that I have never taken the time to expand. Hmmm. I think that has given me an interest. I've always been very perceptive to color, and form, and shape, and enjoyed having arts around me. And so I think I assume that everybody else should be enjoying the arts also.

Hmmm. When we came to this area, there wasn't an art museum or gallery. Hmmm. We went to Minneapolis often, and when I went to Minneapolis, I would attend various functions at the Minneapolis Art Institute, and the theatre, and the symphony. And so, hmmm, while here, I have...I have had an opportunity to support and enjoy the symphony all these years, which I'd...which has been just a marvelous, marvelous part of this community, and I am just so thrilled

at how it has matured and is now such an important part of the arts scene here in Fargo-Moorhead.

Hmmm...I met Jim Rourke, and I think Jim probably...hmmm...provided that opportunity for me to become actively interested...or involved in the arts. I had the interest, and made every opportunity to view and enjoy the arts. But it was Jim who started his gallery. And my mother and I both were very interested in that gallery. And when he first bought that house, we used to walk over to the house and sit with him in his office, which was the kitchen. And it was still kitchen-like. It still had the sink and every...his big desk and the sink. And discuss the progress of his work, and how he was trying to become established in the community.

Hmmm. I recall one evening when we were having dinner, we got a frantic...or I got a frantic call from Jim saying, "The City Council is going to close the gallery. We...we have to save it." And he said, "Could you, and Tom Gunkelman, and Cy Running come down to the City Council and speak on our behalf as to the value of the gallery?" And I said, "Oh, yes, I'll call them right away." So Cy, and Tom, and I dashed to the council, and you know, presented our reasons for thinking that this indeed was a great contribution to the community.

The point was, the neighbors had complained that it was...there was too much parking and so forth, and it was getting to be a problem. [Coughs] Well, the outcome of the meeting...the council's action was they classified it as in another classification, and therefore it was...it remained. So I've...I appreciate so much the Rourke Gallery, because it was the first opportunity to really...hmmm...view a lot of interesting art and varied art.

Prior to that, the only art exhibition that occurred regularly in the Fargo-Moorhead area was the Moorhead Branch AAUW Art Show, which was strictly an exhibition. There was no judge. Anybody could exhibit. And I worked on that for years, and years, and *years*. And it was Barbara Glasrud who finally persuaded AAUW that it should be a juried show. Then...I belong to the Junior League, and the Junior League started, ah, the Red River Annuals. And [unclear] and I...I think we were the chairpersons for the second or third Red River Annual. And I've been actively involved in the Annuals for years and years.

I: Now from the Annual then the Red River Art Gallery emerged, didn't it, or evolved?

PT: No. It...the Red River Art Gallery now sponsors the Annuals. The Red River Art Gallery is the result of a concern that...that well, actually, Tom Gunkelman and Allene Larson[sp?] and I used to get together and discuss the [coughs] the lack of arts in education in the area. And we all agreed that the Rourke was providing that marvelous service of... hmmm...giving opportunities for artists to exhibit.

But we thought that there should be an expanded opportunity for education in the arts. Not that we wanted to compete with the gallery, but that we wanted to add to what it provided. So we got together and, hmmm, used to meet in Tom Gunkelman's cutting room at his Black Interiors, and made plans to start a gallery that would be accessible to more schoolchildren, and whose facilities could be used in a broader, educational plain than what we thought was at the gallery.

Hmmm. We investigated a number of locations, among which was the old depot, Fargo Depot, on Main Avenue, which has now become such an interesting part of the Fargo community. And at that time, the railroad was completely disinterested in our taking it over and using it for anything other than a has-been depot. And hmmm, so one day, my mother and I were on an errand. We stopped at the corner of Main Avenue and Sixth Street in Moorhead at the stop sign, which is right at the corner of the old Moorhead Post Office building.

And I looked at that building and I...and it was empty, because we'd had a new post office built the year before. And I said, "*That* would be a marvelous gallery!" So we parked the car, and went in, and in that whole big building was just one little desk, with Robert Roberts'...the Clay County surveyor's secretary sitting at it. And I asked her if they were taking over the building for offices, or, you know, what was their reason for being there? She said, "No, we are just here temporarily until our own facilities are finished at..." And they were going to move then into them in the near future.

So here was this marvelous building. And so I went home and called [Richard] "Ray" Stordahl and...who was mayor of Moorhead at the time, and I said, "I would like to meet with you to find out about that building. And I have an idea for a use for it." So Tom Gunkelman and I met with him. And Ray deserves a great deal of credit, because he was very interested in the project. He assigned Jack Thompson, who was on the council at that time, to be the liaison between our group and the council. And Jack was very helpful in persuading the council that this was a good use for that building.

And hmmm, so we just simply threw publicity, and personal contacts, telephone calls to people, told them about what we were trying to do. And we, hmmm, we organized as a group, and became a group who acquired the building, and named it the Red River Art Center. And now the Red River Art Center...hmmm, let's see...how many years ago was it? I think it's been about five years ago now, became a part of the Rourke Gallery. And so it now is called the Plains Art Museum.

I: What did you think of that merger and then the development of the two since then?

PT: I think it's...I think it's been a good merger. Hmmm. Before the merger, there was a lot of misunderstanding that this was in competition to the gallery. And I think this has been, hmmm, a good solution to that. It is now a part of...and both facilities have an important part in the promotion of the arts.

One of the...I think one of the most difficult parts of this development of the arts in the community was to persuade the business community, city government, and so forth, that the arts really had a great deal to contribute to the community, that it was a valuable part. It was an economically good addition to the community; it wasn't just an out-go of funds, which I'm sure the city felt that was what it was for a while, because they were having to subsidize our being there. And...but I think now the community has recognized that this does add a whole new dimension to any community. I noticed the Chamber of Commerce now in all of its publicity

includes photographs of the Plains, and the Rourke, and of exhibitions, and so forth. And there was, once upon a time, when we would just beg them to do that, and they were unresponsive.

I: How did you go about trying to alter or change this bias against the arts of the community, to have them become more supportive?

PT: [Sighs] Well, we have done that, I think, through providing a great variety of exhibitions to interest a great variety of people. We have done it by, hmmm, contacting the educators, and trying to show them how they can utilize the facilities of the gallery in connection with their, you know, plans of education, and we have tried to combine other arts functions with our exhibitions, such as music performances. And one of the valuable things that we've done has been to provide a docent service at the gallery, so that people may come to the gallery, take a tour, have it...have the exhibition enhanced by explanation and additional information about it.

I: Now as a volunteer worker in the arts, how much time did you find yourself spending on these different projects?

PT: Oh, dear! [Laughs] Hmmm, we had...in the initial, you know, the early stages of the Red River Art Center, it would mean like every day, week in and week out, being there. Hmmm. We were just really a...you know, an unpaid staff. We finally...we did hire Mavis Sunday[sp?] to work as secretary for us for a period. And, hmm, but I worked there every day. And, you know, it was strictly a volunteer basis. Now I'm still on the board. I was the...Tom Gunkelman was the first president of the board, and I was the first treasurer of the board, and Cora Corwin was the first secretary of the board. And I've been president of the board several times, and we've had some...we've had some wonderfully competent boards. Hmmm. We have a very good board at present. We have a group of interested arts people who are in a position where they discuss arts...hmmm...problems, and give us possible...suggested solutions and so forth. So we have tried to use a great variety of the community as input into the arts.

I: Since it appears that if one is to be a volunteer in the arts community that one has to be willing to sacrifice a lot of time in those activities, do you find it easy to find volunteers to work with you on these projects?

PT: Ah, it's surprising how easy it is to find people. I will say that I think it's more difficult now. Hmmm. There seems to be less willingness for people to take responsibility which requires giving a lot of time. But nevertheless, we still do find people who are very interested in and willing to give their time and energies for the arts. We have developed a Friends of the Arts Committee, and that has been a marvelous group. They have given a lot of time to the development of the arts, and promotion of the arts, and have conducted house tours, and various other functions, which have been fundraising events, and have contributed to the financial success of the Plains.

I: How did your family react to all of this time you were spending away from them in the arts?

PT: Well, I don't know. Hmmm. They have always been...they belong, they're...my children are members of the Plains. And, hmmm, they never complained about it at all. And I don't know. Yet we always managed to work it out. It never was a problem. I was involved in many organizations in the community, and I guess I was blessed by having a lot of very healthy children, and a husband who was enthusiastic about what I was doing. And...hmmm...we always managed to have meals together, and time together, and I...as I look back at it now, I often think, how did that work out? But, hmmm, my children were helpful in assuming responsibilities at home. You know, they made their own beds, hung their clothes up, and that sort of thing, so that I didn't have to be...hmmm...concerned about what was going on at home. And it all seemed to work out very well.

I: Do you regret any of this time that you've spent on these...?

PT: Oh, not at all.

I: No regret.

PT: No. It has been a marvelous experience in my life. I have met so many interesting people through it. And it's...you know, it's always pleasant to meet and enjoy people who have a common interest with you, because you have so much to talk about, and so much to be enthusiastic about. And...hmmm...it's fun to have someone...or not fun, but it's great to have someone to commiserate with about problems. Hmmm. It was one of the Indian artists who I respect and admire, was the...hmmm...was Oscar Howe. And it was through the Plains, which was the Red River Art Center at that time, that I met Oscar and Mrs. Howe. I contacted them to come as guests at one of our annual meetings, and that's been a nice, ongoing friendship. And, hmmm...oh, it's just opened all kinds of interesting doors for me.

I: What stands out in your memory in terms of some of the most successful experiences you've had as an arts volunteer?

PT: [Pauses] Well, I think...I think the most...I don't think that there's a particular event, or a particular exhibition, or a particular happening. I think the most outstanding event is the total progress of the development of this organization. That from really nothing, it has slowly but steadily...it's gone back a step or two, but it keeps going forward three or four steps. So...sort of like climbing a greased pole, I think. But I think that is what is most outstanding, is that it has developed continually, and is now, I think, a very stable and established part of the community.

I: What does the future hold for the arts within our community?

PT: [Pauses] Well, I think that the future is just...it's very exciting. I believe that there are now more enthusiastic art lovers in the community than there ever have been. And I think with the...you know, whether one approves of the gambling in North Dakota or not, that has truly contributed much to the arts world, because it has given us the funds with which to put ourselves in a position where we can make plans for bigger exhibitions to come in from farther away. I

think the variety of exhibitions which we will be getting in the future will be thing that we could never have afforded or have hoped to secure to this part of the country.

Hmmm. With the enthusiasm that is expressed in the community, I think the *demand* will be greater. Minnesota continues to have a very vigorous Minnesota State Arts Board. North Dakota has a state arts board, which provides guidance. Oh, and I think those two strong elements will contribute to what we do here. When I was on the Minnesota State Arts Board, I was appointed by Governor [Harold] LeVander, at which time Lou Zelle was president of the board, and Dean Meyer[sp?] was the Minnesota State Arts Director. And at that time, North Dakota didn't have an arts council at all. They had...the Legislature had voted that there...that they would organize an arts council. But they didn't vote any funds with which to function, which is sort of like having, you know, a car with no wheels. And [coughs] now with two such good boards, and with, hmmm...the National Endowment [for the Arts], which certainly is a promoter, I think that the future of the arts is very, very bright.

I: Mmmm-hmmm.

PT: I think the business community is much aware now of what the arts contributes. And so I do think that that is going to be a strong support for them also.

I: Now you've mentioned that there has been an increase of more enthusiastic art supporters in the community. What do you attribute that to?

PT: I think...well, I think the evidence of the Plains and the Rourke is one factor. I think the fact that so many young people...older people also, but the younger people have had a lot of travel experiences that the previous generations didn't have. So the younger...I think this whole bit of the younger people having exposure to different cultures, and to the arts in other areas, will contribute to their wanting and demanding an interest in the arts here.

I: What would you say is your vision or personal philosophy with the arts?

PT: [Pauses] I think my personal philosophy is that I would love to share it with just as many as possible. I want to persuade people who think that they are not interested in the arts that there is something in it for everyone. Hmmm. I wanted to dispel the idea that arts are only for people who have a lot of money for the expenditure of them. That's...that's just not true. It's a marvelous...it's a marvelous addition to one's life for anyone who has a very small income. We've debated this at the Plains for years. Should we charge an admission, or shouldn't we? Well, we don't. So it's a facility that is available to just anyone. You can walk in and enjoy what is there.

I think I would like to somehow impress upon...to make people aware of, hmmm, of all the art that is right around them. I think Cy Running did that in a marvelous way with his stark trees, which he, hmmm, used so frequently in his paintings. Hmmm, I think there are hundreds of people in this area who now drive through the countryside, looking at our bare branched trees, and appreciate those as art objects. Maybe they aren't appreciating...maybe they're not looking at

them and saying, “That’s an art object.” But they look and say...they say, “Look at the interesting way those branches go out from that trunk,” or, “Look at all the small little designs made by that tree.” Ah, I think that’s one of the things I would like to...I would like to increase people’s awareness.

I: On that note, thank you very much, Phyllis.

PT: You’re welcome.

[End of interview]