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P. George Bird Oral History Interview, 2016 April 19

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Oral History interview with P. George Bird (GB)
Conducted by Alexis Braun Marks, University Archivist (ABM)

Also present for a portion, Laura Bird (LB)

Recorded 2016 April 19

First in a three part series of interviews

ABM: We are recording this day the 19th of April 2016 with P as in Paul George Bird and myself University Archivist at Eastern Michigan University, Alexis Braun Marks So we will start with three basic questions about who you are and then will go into a little more about your time at Eastern. You can stop me at any point, you do not have to answer all the questions

GB: There is nothing on here I will not answer...

ABM: Well if you decide as it comes up you think to yourself I don't know about that you can say pass. What year were you born?

GB: 1927

ABM: Where did you grow up?

GB: In Wisconsin.

ABM: Where is Wisconsin, it's a big place

GB: All over, several places

ABM: Anywhere specific, Rice Lake, Oshkosh, Milwaukee, Madison

GB: Madison is as good as anyplace

LB: But where did your family live?

GB: Really in Green Lake, that is right in the middle of the state.

ABM: I did my graduate work at Madison, so you and I are both Badgers

GB: Oh you did? [sings] Here we go Wisconsin, Wisconsin in the red

ABM: Can you tell me where you attended Elementary, Middle and High School?

GB: Green Lake, Wisconsin

ABM: All three?

GB: All Three

Time Stamp 2:47

ABM: So, now we are going to turn to your early career at Eastern, which at the time when you were hired was the Michigan State Normal College...

GB: That's right

ABM: Can you recall when and how you met William Work?

GB: Of course I can. Uh, he ah, he had graduated from Cornell. His father was the professor of tomatoes. He had produced more varieties of tomatoes than anybody in the country. And that is where he came from. There was a man there, a professor there, whose name of course I don't remember, but who was very well known in the theatre world as being a big guy and that is where Bill [William Work] went to school. And when he graduated there he looked for an assistantship somewhere and this gentleman there sent him to the University of Wisconsin and to Fred Burke who was technical director and designer of the theater. And uh, that is where I met him. I met him there, he had an assistantship and I just came in as a student and we met and talked and got talking and seemed to get along all right. And then we got involved with a production for a director, who I never cared much for, but he did, Bill did and we got involved in designing the lights and that was built and built and built and we worked and worked and worked on the darn thing and we never did get it straightened out but that is what happened and that is where I met him and how we got to know each other.

ABM: Great

GB: We worked together

ABM: You and Work, Worked together.

How did he [William Work] entice you to come to Ypsilanti?

GB: At the time I, I came here, I was offered a job at University Nebraska. And there were two problems with the University of Nebraska as far as I was concerned. One was that I think Lincoln was a lovely city but the [...] that I thought was not so hot. Not true it was very hot...anyway the other problem which was more important was that I would have had to teach all communication and I wasn't interested in that.

ABM: So the appeal of going to the Normal College was that you could just teach theatre?

GB: No, I couldn't just teach theatre, I would have to teach both.

ABM: Okay

GB: But I could teach both, if I went to Nebraska I would be in a department of communication and would not be allowed to teach outside of it.

ABM: That makes sense then. So when you started at the Normal College in the fall of 1955, I got that date right, right. That was part of the English and Speech department.

GB: It certainly was.

ABM: Okay, so you and William Work were the only two who taught theatre at the time? Is that correct?

GB: I think that is 100 percent correct yes.

ABM: I just wanted to make sure I had those facts straight. So before Quirk was built in 1958, was Roosevelt school the only place on campus where stage productions were held?

GB: That is not so...

ABM: Okay?

GB: There were at least three other places where productions were held...

ABM: Can you tell me where those were on campus? If you recall...

GB: One was the religious center...you know the...

ABM: Starkweather?

GB: That's it.

ABM. That's it? Starkweather and Roosevelt? What was the other one?

GB: Um, the administration building had a theatre in it.

ABM: Boone Hall had a theatre in it? Interesting

GB: It did indeed. Not only that, but they all had theatres in them.

ABM: How do you mean?

GB: Small theatres but there they were, small theatres in all those buildings.

ABM: So, were there stage productions with sets.

GB: I think you are over playing it.

ABM: I am just sort of curious, because...

GB: I know what you are trying to say. The answer to that is yes and no. For example in Roosevelt we used to go over there and make posters, but I don't remember making any sets there.

ABM: So when there was, well, what was one of the first shows that you produced at the Normal College.

GB: ME?

ABM: Yeah, you. Or assisted with in production.

GB: Uh, the magnanimous lover.

ABM: Great, so let's say the magnanimous lover, had a set and you sold tickets to it, and the tickets said performance in blank...would those have been in Roosevelt, or in...

GB: They would have definitely been in Roosevelt.

ABM: Ok, so that is my question. Because when we see programs in the archives for say orchestra performances, all of those were in Pease Auditorium, um and we have seen some photographs of very early stage productions in Pease, but no photographic record of stage productions by the University in Roosevelt, although we know they happened in Roosevelt. So I guess that is what I was curious to know more about, which goes into the next question about what it was like to have a stage production that wasn't designated as a theatre for the University. Because Roosevelt was a functioning K-8 School.

GB: Yes it was. And we had come there to perform on occasion and found a pep-rally on the stage.

ABM: So what would, so the magnanimous lover let's say was running over two weekends

GB: A Terrible play...

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ABM: I have never seen it, so I won't make a point to. Um, so let's say it was going to run two weekends. What happens to the set? What happens to the set in between those weeks in Roosevelt?

GB: I haven't the faintest idea

ABM: Did it stay on the stage?

GB: Apparently.

ABM: Oh, okay...Well you would know, I wasn't there.

GB: I don't remember at all.

LB: That is not what he told me. [faintly]

GB: What's the matter?

ABM: [directed at Laura] Sure...you can talk loud.

LB: I thought you told me about having to take the sets down after each performance.

GB: You talking about Roosevelt?

LB: Yeah

GB: Okay. Let's go back.

ABM: Yes, let's go back.

GB: You are correct.

LB: I am correct.

ABM: Let the record show that Laura was correct...

GB: I will now tell you something that you couldn't care less about. There was on stage in Roosevelt the biggest grand piano you ever saw. And it was in a wooden cage, and you couldn't take it out of the cage under any circumstances, it had to stay in the cage. But we had to keep moving the cage every night so we could do the show. So we had to move it every night, fine and dandy we had to move the cage. One of the things we discovered very soon was they didn't sweep under the cage, they swept around the cage. But that's beside the point, anyway. Yes, the sets had to come down every night, why because they had 8 o'clock band practice, so everything had to

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come down, leaned against the wall all the way around the darn place, and the cage sat out there in the middle. But that had to happen every night.

ABM: Did that impact how you designed for your shows.

GB: It impacted the fact that you didn't design very darn much.

ABM: I guess that would make sense. Did you ever enlist students from Roosevelt in the cast of your productions?

GB: I never did but I know Bill did. Because he did some shows that had little kids in them. Yeah you do know...

LB: I don't remember. I wasn't around with Bill Work, I never met him.

GB: But, but, but, you have seen that show. You directed that show.

LB: Ah, Wilderness?

GB: No. About the icebergs coming...

LB: Oh, The Skin of Our Teeth? No...

GB: Yeah. He had kids in that. Why I don't know. Why he ever did it I don't know.

LB: I don't know why I ever directed it either.

GB: It is not a good play. Anyway that is beside the point. Let's help the young lady get something done here....

ABM: No this is all very helpful. Are there any other stories you would like to share about putting on productions in Roosevelt, or some of those early productions in your first few years at the Normal College?

GB: Sure. Uh...

ABM: I want to hear them all, the good the bad and the ugly.

GB: Anyway. Uh, what show is it where the trap door has to open? [looks to LB] Uh, is that uh...

LB: Are you talking about the foreigner?

GB: No.

LB: No. Cause that is much later...

GB: No, no, no...talking about the early days.

LB: Well let's pretend we know the title. What happened?

GB: Okay, what happened was. We had a, well this is not nice. But we did it. We had the guy there that was supposed to keep his eye on the place. So bill and I got him drunk, and we cut a hole in the floor.

ABM/LB: [laughing]

LB: I hadn't heard that one.

GB: And then we put him down the hole. And then we nailed it shut, but he got out. Desperate means produce desperate things...

ABM: Did they take the repairs out of your paycheck?

GB: Nope, no. Because Bill always gave him a case of beer for Christmas.

ABM: Grease the wheels right? You gotta know how to grease the wheels. So I would like to know, the next couple of questions are directed at sort of the design process of Quirk. I have read through a number of articles where you talk about, being able to design a theatre, was sort of the carrot to bring you to campus and sort of what kept you there in the earliest years. Is that true?

17:07 Time Stamp

GB: Run me thorough that one more time.

ABM: So when Bill [William Work] was asking you, encouraging you to come to the Normal college, was part of that conversation "If you come George, you are going to get to help me design a theater."

GB: Okay. No. It is quite different. There was a Vice President, and this is really important. Jim Green, James Green, James E. Green as a matter of fact. For which the lobby is named and then covered over with glass so you can't read it, awful thing. An awful thing to do, but they did it, but that's beside the point. The point is, he was Vice President in charge of development and one of the things he wanted to do was put a new theatre on the campus. He *wanted* to do it, and his wife wanted to do it, probably more important for him, but that is beside the point. Anyway, he did. And uh, he came into the office one day and said "Well, how are you Bird?" and I said "Ok, how are you?" he said "fine, we are gonna get a new theatre." I said "Good, let's get at it." And he says "okay, let's sit down over here and talk about it." And we did.

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ABM: So was it just the two of you involved in that process? Or were there other people, nothing happens at the University without a committee.

GB: Will Bill Work of course was involved. And the department head, John Sattler, was of course involved. And, President...sure everyone was involved. The president...in fact the Vice President was opposed to it.

ABM: So the Vice President, are you talking about Bruce Nelson?

GB: I am talking about Bruce Nelson. Lovely man, too religious for theatre. He just plain was too much on that side of the game...[Laura gets up to leave] Where are you going?

LB: I have to go...

GB: You can't! You are missing the rest of the story...

LB: I know, and it is driving me crazy!

ABM: I will share the recording with her. So Bruce Nelson was too religious for theatre?

GB: That's the way I felt about it. Uh, he, I don't recall what religion he was or is...is he still with us?

ABM: He is, he just celebrated his 100th birthday, but he has dementia and his daughter says he isn't doing well, so.

GB: I liked him a lot, he seemed to like me, but the theatre was not his thing. I always felt it was a religious thing, but I don't know that. He may just plain not like it.

ABM: So it, you are sort of designing. There are lots of people involved, um. But it seems as if, it was primarily you and Jim Green having a conversation about design. So what kinds of things did you take into consideration when designing the space?

GB: The first thing that happened, was that we took a very long and expensive trip around the area, looking at new theatres that were being built. And we learned one thing very quickly, they were all lousy.

ABM: What makes you say that they were lousy?

GB: There was no ingress or egress. There was no way to get from the back to the front of the house. It was just, they were just not good theatres, period. Site lines were bad. Um, the number of seats, way, way too many. What would we be doing building a 10,000 seat theatre here? Who's going to come? They just were not good theatres. So, we learned a lot about bad theatres but not a lot about good theatres.

But um, I...ho, ho, ho...I was teaching a course called theatre planning and of course I had a text book, so of course I knew all about it, at least I could talk about it, but that was about all I could do. But I could talk about it.

ABM: So how did the process of designing Quirk, did you ever teach that theatre design class again?

GB: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

ABM: Was it easier to teach after you had had the experience?

GB: No, no. Because nobody wanted to take it. It was too much work, because the final project was to design a theatre and that's a big job. So, no, nobody wanted to take it. Anyway, where were we when I interrupted myself.

ABM: No, its okay. So, we are talking about what you were taking into consideration with the design of Quirk. So you found out what bad theatres were...

GB: One of the things that became rather important to a lot of people was the, which way it faced...

ABM: On campus?

GB: Would it face up the hill, down the hill. That was very important to some people. Was it to me? I didn't care which way it faced. But that's beside the point. The point was, there were people who thought it out to go one way and people that thought it should go another way...

ABM: Who won?

GB: I don't think anyone did. I don't think anyone was pleased with the way it turned out.

ABM: Really?

GB: Well the whole idea was, that we wanted everyone who went to school in that University community to walk by the theatre. And to see what was playing tonight, or next week or next month or whatever. But that never happened.

ABM: Right, it is very much on the outskirts of campus, right sort of where it is placed.

GB: Right, but that is sort of what we wanted to have happen. And it just pain never happened.

ABM: So what are some of the other things that didn't turn out quite how you wanted them to?

GB: Well, I want to tell you something you know. You know Eastern. You know Eastern pretty well... never has enough money to do things right, never. You have heard that?

ABM: I have experienced it and I haven't even been there that long...

GB: When the theatre was finished, the builders came over...and incidentally we could talk about them too if you want to...and said for 1,000 dollars we can insure the roof for 20 years. And Eastern said we can't afford that...and within two weeks the roof fell in, completely fell in. All the seats in the back of the theatre had to be replaced, floor had to be replaced, the ceiling, it all came in.

ABM: Two weeks?

GB: Yeah.

ABM: That is incredible, I have never heard that story before.

GB: Well I will tell you another one. Somehow, in order to save money...again saving money...they hired three different companies to supply HVTE [HVAC], you know hot cold, whatever....well you know ok, they did. Well, its never worked. I mean, they don't work together. They just don't work period. The heating in there has ALWAYS been awful. Warm, in one spot, cold in another spot, and it is always going to be that way. For a 1,000 dollars they could have taken care of the whole thing, they didn't.

ABM: So let me ask you, having, I mean you went through that process of designing the space, and seeing the space built, and seeing the follies of the University pretty early on in your tenure there.

GB: Yes.

ABM: Why didn't you go? What made you stay?

GB: I liked it. I liked it here. I mean, I liked the size of the school, which at that time was quite small and uh, I enjoyed where I was and I enjoyed what I was doing. Why would I want to leave?

ABM: Sure, that makes sense. I was just curious. Other people of a different persuasion would have wanted to wash their hands of the situation.

GB: Yeah Sure. Many may, many, many, people have said to me, why in the world would you stay there! Cause I wanted to, dumb question.

ABM: That kind of follows into the next question I have, uh which was you came to the Normal College when the enrollment, was, what was it around then, 2800 students?

GB: About 3,000

ABM: And then there was that very rapid growth of the student population where it was like, every other year it is doubling in size. So I would like to ask you what that was like to be on campus and the impact on your teaching...

GB: Well of course, everything changed. First of all, we had two groups of people that were moving in. One was the group that was hiding, and the other group is whatever it is. And uh, the Canadian hidiers were all over the place, why not and uh, the other group was there too.

ABM: So when you say the hidiers, you are talking about people that were enrolling in college so that they wouldn't be drafted?

GB: Wouldn't be drafted, exactly.

ABM: Do you think that is what amounted for the rapid growth in enrollment?

GB: I think that accounted for some of it. I think some of it is accounted for by other things. Like the building to dormitories so that there was someplace for people to live if they didn't want to commute. We have to remember that this was a commuter school and then boom, boom, boom all of a sudden here come the dormitories. Actually there were four almost immediately and then those dreadful towers got built. They are awful.

ABM: They are still awful

GB: But that other one that is built back of our house is a great thing, I think.

ABM: You are talking about the Apartments, right? So the ones if you are driving toward Huron Parkway they are on the left of Oakwood drive?

GB: Yes. Those are fine. And if they had done that in the first place, we would have been a lot better off. But, they didn't.

ABM: So when there was a big boom in students enrolled. Did you see a lot of changes in your department?

GB: What do you mean by changes?

ABM: Faculty, course offerings, programs, interest...

GB: Faculty, almost none. Almost, almost no increase in faculty. What happened in some cases was that someone who was a teaching assistant became a step higher and got a little bit more money and taught another class. Or, as one department head said to me, if you haven't got enough to do I will give you another class.

ABM: So they were essentially, stop-gap through lecturers...adjunct faculty. Not so dissimilar to how it is now in some departments.

GB: Of course I don't know about that. But anyway, we did struggle through that and of course the University blossomed in terms of size they built Rynearson stadium without a football team, but they built it anyway and there is sits, empty.

ABM: Well cause you are quite the football fan I hear?

GB: I love football. But there is one thing about football that makes it fun.

ABM: The crowd?

GB: No. Winning. That is something we don't understand. We never win. In fact we lose more than any other team in the country. But that is beside the point, the point is it ain't no fun when they lose all the time.

ABM: That is very, very true. So did you notice a difference when you were there in the early years that you knew all the other faculty that were on campus.

GB: Of course I did! I would see them on campus and we would stop and talk. Now I see them on campus and I don't even know who they are.

ABM: Because it is not just the student body that changes...I mean the whole dynamism of the university changes. The relationships with other faculty, administrator.

GB: Well I knew every administrator in the early years. I knew every faulty member, we would have lunch together every day, almost every day. I hate to think of what we had that place is long gone. Anyway that is beside the point, the point is I knew everybody and everybody knew me, it was a congenial atmosphere, very happy, very friendly, very happy there. And then the mobs came.

ABM: Which mobs? The Mobs of students, or the mobs of unrest?

GB: both

ABM: Yeah, so that kind of the next question that I had, which is to what degree was your work, either in the classroom or the productions you chose impacted by the social, racial and political unrest...

GB: a hundred percent

ABM: a hundred percent...

GB: We had shootings on campus, we had...I came out of rehearsal one night and found at least two feet of glass all over the campus. All the windows had been broken in every building and Vice President Green (James E. Green) was out there with a shovel, trying to make room so that people could walk through, the police were there, the army was there, we had the state police, we have the United States army, the marines were even there, they came in on airplanes and dropped down. And we came out of rehearsal, here we were, there were about 15 of us standing outside of Quirk and uh, Jim Green suddenly appeared he said, "What the hell am I going to do with you guys?" I said, "Jim, I'm okay if you want me to go home." He said "okay, let's do that." And so we went home. Oh yes, definitely the reaction there. They broke every window on campus that night. How they did it I don't know, but they did it very well.

ABM: Wow, do you remember the group that was responsible for that or what it was in response to?

36:26 Time Stamp

GB: No I don't. I don't remember particularly what it was, it was a general thing anyway. It wasn't a bing, pop, it wasn't that. But it certainly was the other thing.

ABM: Right, was that about the same time that there was the sit in at Boone Hall, where they closed the administrative building?

GB: It was indeed.

ABM: Okay

GB: In fact it may have just been exactly that time.

ABM: What was that like, going to campus? Was there a general feeling of unsafeness?

GB: Oh yeah, oh yeah, very definitely. Well you know, if you were walking down the street you would be stopped by somebody and they would want to see your identification, they would want to see if you had any firearms.

ABM: It is like a police state, that is crazy.

GB: Yes. It did happen. It happened.

ABM: Did you have any students who opted to leave the university because of what was happening?

GB: Not that I know of. There may have been, but I don't know.

ABM: Do you remember any faculty leaving because of what was happening?

GB: Oh, ah, Certainly I do. But I am not going to name them.

AMB: You don't have to. I was just curious.

GB: Yes, there was faculty on both sides. There was faculty that agreed with the students, there was faculty that agreed with the faculty. And never the twain shall meet. There were faculty that supported the students breaking the University apart if they could. They would do everything they could. I could name you at least eight faculty members who would have done anything to get rid of Eastern Michigan.

AMB: really?

GB: I could have. I could do that, do you want me to? No, I am not going to. Don't worry...But I could.

AMB: I wouldn't ask you to do that...

GB: You can ask, it won't happen. Some of them are still living here. In fact I see one every once in a while...I duck. No, it is, quite seriously, there were plenty of faculty that wanted to get rid of the University. But it was it just the University, or was it this whole idea of what was going on in the world. I think it was probably both. But you know in many ways, for some of those faculty, Eastern was a symbol of success. And we can't have that...

ABM: So, success in what way, a symbol of what kind of success?

GB: I don't understand the question.

ABM: Well you just said that for them, Eastern was a symbol of success. So was it the success of an institution and bureaucracy? Or that it was...

GB: A symbol of the President's social situation, which was not what they wanted.

ABM: And you are talking of President Sponberg, President of the University or President of the United States?

GB: I am not talking about Sponberg at all, I never mentioned Sponberg.

ABM: I know but you just said President...and I didn't know if you were talking President of the University at that time...

GB: No. I am not talking about Sponberg. However I knew Sponberg quite well.

ABM: What was your take on Sponberg? Do you mind sharing?

GB: Well let's just say, I wasn't a big fan. In fact...well...

ABM: This can be off the record.

GB: Okay...

[Paused recording 40:40-41:44]

ABM: Would you mind my asking what your take on Elliot's [Eugene Elliot] departure was?

GB: I will be very happy to tell you. I will tell you two things about Gene Elliot, three things. One. He was a gentleman. Number two, he lived on campus. Number three, he built a house of local woods, he was a great gardener and a very close friend of mine and I loved him dearly. And I think you probably know someone else who likes him pretty well too...right?

ABM: Right (in reference to our mutual friend and emeritus faculty Reinhard Wittke)

GB: He was a really good President. Why did he get fired? Because, I can tell you exactly why he got fired...

ABM: Do.

GB: Cause...does it end up in there?

ABM: It will be off the record I promise

[paused recording at 42:48-44:25]

ABM: Well those were the questions that I had for today. I don't want to be inconsiderate of your time. If you have other things...if you want to keep talking...

GB: If you want to ask me some more, I will try to answer.

ABM: Is there anything that you...let me ponder because...what I find most interesting about the work that I do, is looking through the records of those earliest years [that you were on campus] because we have the papers of Elliot and Sponberg, and Nelson that there was, that there appeared to be, a lot of thoughtfulness on the part of them, in terms of researching and informing themselves before they made decisions. At least that is what seems to be reflected in the documentation they left

behind. So I guess my question to you would be. Did you feel as a faculty member on campus, listened to, that there was a response to concerns...whether it was the rapid increase in enrollment, or the unrest that was happening on campus. I mean what were someone the conversations that were taking place, whether it was amongst all of the faculty, or amongst administrators. I know it is kind of a loaded question.

GB: Well, truth of the matter is, people were scared to death. They really were frightened. Because all this junk that was going on...what's going to happen, what is going to happen. Suppose they will burn down the University? They could. Yes they could, they could blow it up, of course they could. Will they do it? I don't know. There was that unrest and it was very, very uncomfortable. But on the other hand, we all, powered through it somehow. I don't know how, but we did. Not very well maybe, but we did the best we could.

ABM: When did you hit that moment, if you remember, when you go 'Okay, I think we are going to be okay?' It is all to our backs now, and we can start to move forward. Was there a point in time?

GB: Yeah, I think so. But it is from my own experience. It has nothing to do with anybody else. It was in the...bicentennial. That to me was the stopping place. Why? Because so much was going on in the theatre at that point that was so good, I thought, that it was going to help. And I think it did, but I don't know that it did.

ABM: What good things were happening in the theatre at that time?

GB: We were producing a group of five of the best American plays ever written.

ABM: Can you list the five for me?

GB: Probably not?

ABM: Can you try?

GB: Laura could, but I couldn't.

ABM: And that would have been the 1976 season. Who were the faculty in the theatre department at that time?

GB: Faculty? Uh, this would be in 76...Jim Gousseff, Parker Zellers, me of course, would there be any others...Parker Zellers...oh yes, he is in Louisville now, Bob McElya [Mitchell R. McElya]...who else would be there.

ABM: Was Jinny Koste [Virginia G. Koste] on campus by then?

GB: Jinny Koste, was definitely on campus and definitely part of the faculty. In fact Jinny Koste was always a part of the faculty. Did you know her?

ABM: No I didn't. But I have worked closely with Pat Zimmer and the Drama and Theatre for the Young program and working with them to document their very important and long history on campus.

GB: She was never as important as she should have been. What do I mean by that? She should have been given an honorary degree, she should have been given all kinds of things. She was the outstanding director of Children's theatre in the country and they...blew her away. Why because the department head didn't like her that's why.

ABM: Who was the department head?

GB: I am not talking about that...

ABM: Ok, I will not ask again...

GB: But that is exactly what happened. I went to the department head and said 'She has got to get an honorary degree, damn it!' and he said 'she gives us a million dollars we will give it to her.' Of course she didn't have a million dollars in her whole lifetime.

ABM: Of course not, she was a professor at Eastern. Which one of us has a million dollars?

GB: Not me.

ABM: Not me either. Do you mind if I ask you about your time in Madison...

GB: Ask me anything you want.

ABM: I am so curious about your work as a magician and your interest in the circus.

GB: Why are you interested in that?

ABM: Well, when I did my graduate work at UW Madison, I worked closely with the folks at Circus World Museum, and I noted in one of your articles that you had an expansive Circus collection and an interest in circus culture and had done some work with them. So that is why I was curious.

GB: So you worked with Circus World Museum?

ABM: In Baraboo...

GB: What a great place to work. I used to go up there in the winter when they were painting and just watch them. Those guys were geniuses.

ABM: The ones that were painting the large canvases.

GB: Yeah. And the vehicles, the wonderful vehicles that they built. I went there every summer and spent two or three weeks there every summer, and I had friends that were performing there, that helped too. Cause the all did a performance, one in the morning and one in the afternoon and they were good performances. Um, very good friend of mine was there for several years. Wayne Franzen? He was killed by a tiger while performing.

ABM: What a way to go...

GB: In front of a children's audience. That was even worse, the poor guy. Well anyway. I spent a lot of time at Circus World I wrote a lot of articles for them, I wrote a lot of articles for Circus magazines, I was a member of the circus historical society, a member of the circus...well, I love circus. But you know after Wayne was killed it kind of went down the drain...that really killed it for me. Saw it on, watching television one night and there it was the headline. Oh, and I recognized the vehicles and thought, oh he's dead and he was. very. Dead before they could get to him. But that is beside the point. Ask your next question, that I can maybe answer.

ABM: Well I am curious, that interest in the theatre. Did that interest influence your classes, the productions you chose, your set design.

GB: Well...

ABM: Or was it just a side hobby?

GB: I guess I don't' really understand what you are after...try me again.

ABM: So um, let's see if there is a way to get to the point. I have an interest in quilting, but it doesn't necessarily interest my work. But I also have an interest in organization, which very much influences the work that I do. So my question to you is. Was your interest in circus, and circus culture, and the artistry, did that influence the work that you did in the theater?

GB: I am sure that it did. Now, you just brought up something that I think is really, really important. That somehow circus posters are art! And they need to be preserved and some are and some are plain gone. And they will never ever be replaced, they can't be. I think that is awful. I think circus posters are art. Period. Great art? Wonderful art? Good art? Yeah.

ABM: Well art and its beauty and importance is always in the eye of the beholder. But I think that is also true of theatre posters.

GB: Exactly! Why should they be any different. What are they? Catch people, grab them!

ABM: So did you design some of those early theatre posters. Was that part of your responsibility as the producer and director of the plays on campus?

GB: Yes. But I can't name any. Yeah I did. In the early days. We made our own silk screen posters. We made them all.

ABM: Who is we?

GB: My first wife.

ABM: Not you and another student, or you and a lecturer. It was a family affair of getting the word out?

GB: No, we had a basement filled with posters. Day after day after day, because they were all drying.

ABM: I hope you had a big basement.

GB: It wasn't that big.

ABM: What is your favorite magic trick? You don't have to tell me the secret behind it...

GB: Well, it is a very, very old one. But it is a very, very good one. It is the woman in the box. In which point a young lady is introduced and she stands on top of a box. She gets her hands tied together. She gets her feet tied together. Then they lower her into the box. Then they close...no, they don't close the curtain yet, the curtain still stays open...and then they...no then they close the box. She is in the box now, locked in the box. You ready, it counts one two three, on three the curtain opens and she is standing on top of the box, still tied. And the box is still tied.

ABM: That is a good magic trick.

GB: It is a very, very old one. And there are two variations on it which I ain't gonna tell you neither. But they are both really, really good...it is a great trick, and that's what it is a great trick. It's not magic. It's a trick, but its a great one.

ABM: Was there always a group gasp in the audience when she would appear?

GB: Of course, of course. Cause it happens just boom, boom [clap, clap] just that fast. That's all it takes...bing, bing [clap, clap] ...and she is out, of course she has been out for a long time, she has been standing behind the curtain all that time. Just a matter of dropping the curtain. But they don't know that, but you will tell them.

ABM: No, your secret is safe with me. This has been...

GB: But I don't want you to tell you know who...

ABM: No, I would never tell him (Wittke)

GB: He would have too much fun playing something with it.

ABM: Have you seen Reinhard lately?

GB: No, how is he doing?

ABM: He is okay, his eyesight is pretty poor, but he is still at home. He has a couple of hiccups over the winter for a couple of short stays. But he gets around pretty well, which I think is good and he has a good caretaker. He is organizing his stuff for me, so he has a purpose which is good and his grandson is helping him out, so I think that is good too.

GB: What a great guy he is...

ABM: He is.

GB: So lucky to have him here. I hope somehow he can be memorialized here.

ABM: We are doing our part as best we can in the archives to preserve the travel program that he did that was so remarkable...

GB: Yes it was

ABM: And then just the teaching that he did, he has a very long history such as yourself. And a lot of alumni who have nothing but wonderful accolades, which I hear is the same for you. With maybe the exception of your History of the Theatre class...I hear that class was legendary. Any comment to that?

GB: I am not a legend. I am an old man sitting here trying to stay alive for a while. But that is beside the point, the point is he is a great guy and we were so lucky to have him and we are lucky he is still with us.

ABM: I think he would say the same about you.

GB: But he will tell you all about the presidents.

ABM: He has shared a little bit with me.

GB: Yeah, but he loved the first guy....he [Elliot] was a real gentleman.

ABM: Everyone that I have talked to that knew Elliot has nothing but really wonderful things to say about him. Very above board...

GB: Somebody used to serve beer...you have a friend who used to serve beer, in a bar...you know that. He went to Elliot and said, 'Mr. President, as you know I work in a bar, and I know you are a very religious person and I should probably shouldn't do that.' Elliot looked at him and said 'do as you want to do.' That is what I mean by saying he is a gentleman. He could have said no, you got to quit that but nope, he didn't do that. He was smarter than that.

ABM: Yeah, I am sure he knew good eggs when he saw them. Otherwise he wouldn't have hired you both.

GB: Oh sure...

[paused 1:03:41-1:05:00, discussion of setting up a return visit]

GB: Whatever you want to do we can do.

ABM: Okay, I just want to be respectful of your time.

GB: My time doesn't amount to anything. It is very short and that is all there is to it. So let's just it and be done with it.

ABM: This is really lovely. I really like talking to you, so thank you for letting me do this.

GB: Happy to do it. Any more good questions? You got a nasty one, give me one good nasty one.

ABM: Well you won't answer any of my nasty questions...

GB: Okay, pick one.

ABM: What was the biggest scandal you ever worked through at Eastern.

GB: Which president?

ABM: Pick one of the Seven [Bird taught under seven different administrators] Kirkpatrick doesn't count.

GB: Okay, who is the one who took the job in order to get his wife dried out?

ABM: I have never heard that! I have no idea.

GB: Well, there was one there. And that is exactly what happened. They um, the GOP dragged him in here, said 'dry her out' and then get out of here. And that is exactly what they did do.

ABM: Got him in, dried her out and then got him out of office?

GB: It worked out just fine for the GOP. I am not sure how she is, I think she is dead. I am not sure.

ABM: That is a good one, I had never heard...

GBL and then there was the one, want one more?

ABM: yeah

GB: Okay. We'll hire him s president if you get him to make you a rose garden.

ABM: You personally?

GB: Yep.

ABM: So he came to campus, he interviewed, and they came to you and said he won't take the job unless you make him a rose garden?

GB: That isn't quite right, but it is close.

ABM: and did you do it?

GB: Yep.

ABM: Was that the residence that was on campus, or the residence that they built. Or is that too telling...

GB: It was on campus.

ABM: How many roses did you plant.

GB: Well I got them whole sale [laughs] But I think I planted 24.

ABM: You had to buy the roses, or you got reimbursed I hope.

GB: I bought the roses but I didn't pay anything for them, because the company gave them to me because I knew the company very well. We were good friends, because I grew a lot of roses. I grew over three hundred.

ABM: The pictures I have seen are spectacular

GB: They ain't spectacular but anyway. That did happen. I can plant a rose garden so we can have a president whoopee.

ABM: Was it worth it?

GB: They all died...

ABM: All the roses

GB: Why? Because the plant department would not take care of them. They wouldn't water them, they wouldn't do anything.

ABM: Did anybody lose their job over it...obviously not you...but anybody over in plant?

GB: In the first place, our um maintenance structure here ain't so hot. IT is pretty awful. It is better than it used to be...

ABM: Well I guess if the roof of your theatre collapsed in the first two weeks it would have to be better.

GB: Yes

ABM: No way to go but up...

GB: You are right. But the problem is, we have never really had a good director of that program. Bill Smart, did you know Bill Smart? He was director for years and we all called him not so...because he couldn't do anything right. And uh...they have never taken care of things like they should, I believe. But I think the camps looks better now that it has in a long time.

ABM: I think it does. John Donogan has done a good job cleaning up the campus with the resources that he has, which is to say, not a lot. But yeah...they are slowing trying to improve some of the buildings that haven't been improved upon for a very long time.

GB: Well they need to be.

ABM: Of course they do. It is embarrassing to walk prospective students through Strong hall when the floor is crumbling underneath your feet.

GB: But on the other hand you can walk them through the theatre in that building too...there is one there. Every building has a theatre in it. Some of them are quite

small but. All most all of them have an elevated stage of some sort....and if you poke around you will find them.

ABM: Every single building?

GB: I think you will find that to be true. Now Welch might be an exception. I am not sure about Welch. I don't remember...we used to do posters there...yeah there is an elevated stage there. Sure, because we had posters all over it. Sure, we had to make our posters, what the heck...

ABM: Where is the elevated stage in Welch, do you recall?

GB: Well, are you familiar with the light over the center of the room...that is where it was.

ABM: oh okay...

GB: You should probably find some remnants of that somewhere.

[Paused 1:12:00-1:13:28 for nurse attendant]

GB: I hope this hasn't been a waste of time for you.

ABM: No this has actually been very enjoyable for me.

-Finished 1:13:32-