

**Interview with James O'Rourke**

**Interviewed by Catherine Murphy for the Heritage Education Commission**

**Interviewed on November 12, 1985**

**James O'Rourke - JO**

**Catherine Murphy - CM**

**CM: Jim, it's nice to have you here. And let's start by trying to get a little biographical information from you. Where were you born and raised?**

**JO: Well, I was born in Langdon, North Dakota, and grew up on a farm actually and was born of primarily Scandinavian and some Irish grandparents.**

**CM: There had to be some Irish there, with a name like O'Rourke.**

**JO: But I think growing up on a farm has something to do with interest in creativity and so on, and interest in art and so on. Both of my parents and at least two of my grandparents, both the O'Rourkes and the Gustafsons, were somewhat interested in art so there was always a little bit of interest in art. But I did not really get involved in art until I actually started college although during my high school days, I was planning on being an architect and was constantly drawing plans for houses and buildings, and so on. So when I started college, I actually was thinking of going to maybe NDSU or maybe the University of Minnesota, but got sidetracked at Concordia College in Moorhead and that was in the fall of 1952. And I've actually spent most of my life since then in Fargo-Moorhead and this community and so I thought I'd go to Concordia for a year or two and then go on to one of the other universities to study architecture and by the time I'd gotten to my senior year, I still hadn't gotten around to architecture, I'd gotten so involved in painting and drawing.**

**CM: Through the Art Department, so you declared a major? You majored in Art as an undergraduate at Concordia. And those were in the years of Cy Running, who must have been a major influence.**

**JO: Well, yeah, I think Cy Running and Betty Strand had unbelievable influences. They were the whole Art Department at that time, and they obviously were both very good teachers. They were very good teachers for me, but I think they were for a lot of other people also. And Running taught classes with a lot of emphasis on design and principles of design--the real backbone of art; and I guess Betty Strand would come along and say that there was a lot of expression and feeling and other things in art also. And it wasn't until actually, as I say, almost getting ready to get out of college, I discovered I still hadn't taken architecture. I did go away one summer to the University of Idaho and studied both French and architecture there.**

**CM: That's an interesting combination. [Laughter]**

**JO:** Well, I was always having problems getting my foreign language requirement done in college and then I had to really check it out and see whether I really wanted to be an architect or involved in the visual arts more as a painter or an art teacher. I guess at that point I was thinking of either being probably a painter or a teacher. But, of course, I still liked architecture very much; but I decided I would rather not pursue that at that time, although I was still thinking about it. It has always been in the back of my mind, and it's always been really an interesting part of my life. Actually, the interest in architecture has never--I guess from my early childhood right up to the present time, I've always loved architecture--big old houses in particular. My grandparents lived in great houses, and it was a love from early childhood to have great houses, restore them, study them, and collect them perhaps.

**CM:** That's been evident in both your creative work that includes a lot of architectural woodcuts of local historic places are notable.

**JO:** Yeah, you're right. When I draw or do prints or paint, I primarily do things that have architecture in them.

**CM:** That maybe led you to finding the Martinson house. What came first--the idea to develop a gallery?

**JO:** Oh, sure, but that really goes back to the earliest days of Moorhead. I was fortunate sort of to be here when a lot of the things got started. When I was at the end of my freshman year, I wasn't taking any art yet in college. I was still majoring in history. I also have a major in history, too, so historical things have interest to me. But at the end of my freshman year, I went with one of my friends, Arnold Lahren, to see, I think, probably one of the first art exhibitions, well certainly one of the earliest ones around town here; there were ones earlier. But AUW was having their first show and it was over in the fieldhouse in one of the lower rooms at Concordia. And I'd never been to an art exhibition honestly before that. That was like in the spring of '53. I still remember a painting I saw of Betty Strand's there, of still life on a red table, and it seemed so much fun, that idea that you could actually just spend your life painting pictures and drawing than having to do a lot of the other things that people have to do, so I really then decided, well, when I come back to college in the fall, I have to study painting and drawing and that's how it all got going. And, of course, that year I went over to MS--I remember a show over at Moorhead State University that had actual original works of Picasso and Matisse in it; it was really pretty fine things. I didn't understand them too well at that point, but it was pretty exciting. And then the same spring of that year, Concordia opened up the Berg Art Center and got that building going and started having regular exhibitions there; and I got involved, actually, in unpacking art and hanging shows right away, helping with exhibitions while I was in college--installing shows. I always liked hanging art and things and probably was pretty good at doing that sort of thing.

**CM:** Well, what great early--it's interesting to look back and try to trace the threads of, you know, what brings a person along. But for you to remember the actual painting, I think, of Betty Strand's, in the first art show is very interesting.

**JO:** I think it's part of being a visual artist. You know, remembering these things. And a lot of these things just happened in those very early days. I know in the early days, too, at Concordia, in a show that they were having at the Berg Art Center, of West African art--were the first real objects I'd ever seen. And they were from a gallery in New York, and there were objects for sale. There were some very fine things, and so I acquired my first piece of artwork. I bought a little bronze Ashanti gold weight, a little man in a tree--beautiful little piece--\$25--this little gold weight. It's worth a lot more today. But I sold a suit to one of my roommates, Paul Narveson, and then bought this piece. There was a little piece of ivory; I wish I'd sold another suit, but I thought I should keep something to wear for special occasions. [Laughter] But it sort of was one of those wonderful ways to start your art collection.

Then, of course, after Concordia, I spent three years primarily around Washington, D.C., as part of the U.S. Army in the cavalry; I was in a cavalry regiment and stationed near Ft. Meade, Maryland, and Washington, Baltimore, and New York. So I'd spend all my weekends in the museums there.

**CM:** That was an advanced degree in art education, wasn't it?

**JO:** It was planned. I really enlisted in the 2nd Cavalry Regiment that would be stationed out east near these museums for eight months to a year, and then I would spend the next couple of years in Nuremberg [Nürnberg], Germany, and I thought this was too good to pass up. And so that's how I spent my time. I spent all my time in museums and galleries, and particularly in Baltimore, Washington, D.C., and New York. And then spent almost two and a half years living in Nuremberg and then traveling.

**CM:** What marvelous young experiences to have and exposure to a vast world of historical and great art.

**JO:** You know, besides enjoying all of the art in all of the museums in Paris or London or Scandinavia and all over, I also, as I started thinking about Fargo-Moorhead, I started thinking how nice it would be to have an art gallery and eventually a museum in Fargo-Moorhead. I was thinking about it while I was living in Nuremberg. In Nuremberg there were a lot of little galleries that were sort of part bookstore, part gallery. So my first thoughts in Moorhead would be a bookstore. We needed a nice bookstore, and would have a gallery in the back room. We'd have little shows and so on. But before I even got back to the country in early 1960, I'd already changed my mind that we would sell some books in a book shop, but we'd have really an art gallery. And then I told my brother about it, my brother Orland, who had by this time come to Concordia and also majored in art and was teaching elementary education--sixth grade out at McKinley School in Fargo--about the plan of a gallery and he was interested, too. So, we liked art. We didn't know a lot about business, so we decided we should start an art gallery. We'd both do it; he'd quit teaching. The two of us together--we didn't know a lot of economics at that point; but it was a good idea. While we were getting the gallery ready, I got to know Barbara Glasrud who was the chairman of the first Red River Annual Exhibition, and she'd met me over at Concordia where I was hanging art exhibitions, so she wanted me to come and help hang the first Red

**River Annual show over at the Gardener Hotel, so there I got to know Phyllis Thysell and other people in the community interested in art and I worked over there hanging the show. Interestingly enough, I entered a piece of my work in the show and it got juried out. [Laughter]**

**CM: Oh, that's terrible! I wonder who the juror was. [Laughter]**

**JO: Oh, I remember. [Laughter]**

**CM: How disillusioning!**

**JO: But the funny thing is that sort of thing, you always go to the show and see works that weren't as good as yours. You see a lot of things better, but you also see things that weren't as good as yours and I always think of that. I've often told people about how not to get discouraged about shows. Actually, I hung the show but wasn't part of it.**

**CM: How would you describe what you thought of as the mission or function of a gallery? Your plan was to have rotating art exhibits?**

**JO: Yes. My brother and I, as we talked about the gallery, we never thought of it just as a dealer gallery, although that's how it began in a sense, but we had sort of in mind that it would evolve into an art center, a community art center, which would sort of evolve into a museum eventually. So there was the idea that it would be an evolving process. And so the main things, like, well, it's true of a gallery, an art center, or even a museum, would be regular rotating shows; and so when we started the gallery we had a group show and we invited 25 artists, practically every artist that we knew from Robert Nelson up at Grand Forks who was up there and Charlie Beck at Fergus Falls who was ill then and wasn't in the opening show and Cy Running, Betty Strand at Concordia, Elsa Hertel who was painting in Fargo, and Al Charley [spelling] was an art teacher over at Valley City, and people like Leroy Aasland who had gone to Concordia with me and had been a student there. Anyway, by 25 artists we had probably everybody who painted in the--.**

**CM: In this region at that time.**

**JO: Yes, right. Twenty-five people, 125 works. Last summer, when we celebrated the 25th anniversary of the gallery and museum, we invited artists, too, and we had 178 artists in the show. And we didn't quite include everyone, but we tried to. So it's a change in art in that much time. It's really changed. We'd probably have to have 200-250 artists. Every year the show has grown. Every year on the 18th of June, the day we opened the first gallery on Center Avenue in Moorhead, every year we celebrate it by inviting artists to come back; and every year it gets bigger.**

**CM: You're going to have to build an annex or something to exhibit it all because that show was hung in both the Plains and the Rourke.**

**JO:** It got so big, we had to have it in both buildings. So anyway, we started right downtown in Moorhead in the old Daily News building in the summer of 1960 and after a year there, we had primarily one-person exhibitions. The first fall the first one-man show was Robert Nelson, and 25 years later we had a show of his again to help celebrate the 25 years. And Philip Thompson, again 25 years later--we just have a show right now of Phillip's work. And we're having a show opening in December of Charles Beck, sort of the end of our 25th anniversary year, perhaps the major living artist in our region right now. And so we started having these shows. We discovered quite fast the economics of--.

**CM:** I was going to ask about that. How do you keep the finances moving?

**JO:** Well, from looking at other galleries, like the Kilbride-Bradley Gallery in Minneapolis--we learned from that going there a lot while I was a student that selling art supplies, having art classes, selling books, renting art, doing all these different things together; and so, the first gallery, we did all those things--art supplies, art classes, books, even good design items like Swedish glass and things of that sort. And still it wasn't enough income. The first gallery--my brother went back to teaching after a couple months of gallery. We turned to teaching. We were kind of dreamers and didn't realize just the expenses--how high it would be. And then after one year in the old Moorhead Daily News building we moved to a lower rent building, which happened to be the old Red River Scene [spelling] building on 19 North 4th Street. And before I'd even moved the gallery there in the summer of 1961, Ed Fuglestad who had been a biology teacher of mine at Concordia, had talked to me about purchasing the house that they lived in at 523 South 4th Street; and it was sort of interesting. I'd seen it advertised for sale; I had actually gone out and looked at it. It was a great pleasant surprise when I saw it was for sale because when I was a student at Concordia, I used to look at three houses in Moorhead particularly--when going for walks, I loved to walk and I would go and look at the Comstock House, which since that time is now a State Historical Site, and a white Italianate house on South 5th Street, which turned out to be the Franklin Sharpe [spelling] house, and the house that Fuglestad lived in, which is the Martinson house/Rourke Gallery building. I used to go looking at these three buildings. Well, I couldn't believe it when I saw this ad--9 bedroom house for sale with a half-acre yard and so on. So I tried to buy the house for the gallery to move it there, but it was just impossible to come up with enough money. But downtown we were losing about \$500 a month. In my whole life, I was losing about \$500 a month; but I could figure out if I could quit renting a building downtown and quit renting an apartment and live in the back part of this great old house and have the gallery there, it would probably solve our financial problems; and of course, I went to look at the house and sure enough, the house is laid out very nicely for a gallery. The flow of rooms one to another isn't like a lot of old Victorian houses with lots of little rooms. The rooms are open very nicely, and I could just see the art hanging.

**CM:** And the windows are so good in that house. The light is so good for viewing art.

**JO:** So it would make a great place. Well, we couldn't buy it so then I moved the gallery to 19 North 4th Street--had a great show there of Eric Hoaglund [spelling], a Swedish sculptor and glass maker, and also Frank Sampson, an artist from Edmore, North Dakota, who

teaches at Boulder, Colorado, and is one of the half dozen major artists that have come out of the state of North Dakota. Well, we had a couple great shows and then Mr. Fuglestad said to me one day when we were talking, you know, that I wanted the house. They'd just sell me the house with no down payment or anything.

CM: So they were interested in passing it on for a purpose.

JO: Sure. He was a very generous man, and he really trusted a young person, I guess, you might say, that sort of had a dream. So, I mean, Mr. Fuglestad and Mrs. Fuglestad are kind of unknown heroes in the history of the gallery. So I did the strange thing of buying the gallery building with \$200. That's all the money I had. [Laughter] It was a joke with our insurance people and the savings and loan that carried the mortgage, and so on, on this project. In August of '61, bought the house.

CM: Handles the real estate; that's remarkable.

JO: And then with the help of 11 college students--one of the interesting things about the gallery and the museum--we've always had lots of students working for us over the years. And there were 11 students there, and between these students and myself, we got the building ready in seven weeks--painted and repaired and all the things that needed to be done and moved the gallery and the classes and the whole program right out there in seven weeks. It was the miracle of all time. And so it was also another miracle in financing to then have buying a house--this great old house--and then also paying rent on a building downtown at the same time. But eventually in a few months by another miracle I was able to trade the lease off to Moorhead Linoleum to move into that building and then get their building--their lease ran out. And finally I was through.

CM: You were thrust into a lot of business arrangements that probably you hadn't anticipated.

JO: And also with the house--a lot of people said, "Will people come out there?" And so the thing we discovered with the house was that moving out there, attendance really grew out in the house and also sales of artwork, which were terribly important in those days, and actually things boomed in the house. People loved the house and got to have a great affection for it. And so it worked out well. The house in those days was stuccoed and didn't look as beautiful or as handsome as it does today, although it probably looked more like an art gallery and not as much like a residence as it does.

CM: What year was it you acquired that?

JO: August of 1961. So the gallery was just a year old. And I suppose after the gallery, the next big thing was in the fall of '62, I had members who said--I guess they were tired of buying so much art and wondering how we were going to survive--said why don't you start a membership. We'd like to come to the gallery, but we know it costs money to send invitations and print things. You know, we're filling up all of our walls. A lot of my friends and acquaintances were buying art and doing everything to keep the place alive in a sense.

And so we started a membership and we had a couple hundred people on our mailing list. I expected we would have 200 members, but the first year we had 25 and the next year 37 and 50, 60; it kept growing. And I think it was one of the things that made the gallery important and kept it going when people always cared about it. And it was a combination, I think, of showing the best art we could find--we always tried to have good art all the years, not just things that somebody might think was pretty or would sell well--but trying always to have the best art that was available in the community and region and the longer we ran the gallery, the further out we would move in the area of art, where we got art from. And then the classes helped immensely. I remember your children coming to class.

CM: I'm sure the community, any community, 20-25 years ago, needed some education toward art because it wasn't as much a part of people's cultural life, at least in a community way. It certainly never had been in this area.

JO: Right. There had not been too much art before that. I made a study of art and I still do--someday I'll probably do a book or something on the history of art in the area--there would have been one painter, Karlstrom, who had lived in Moorhead and died before the gallery started. But there hadn't been a lot of art prior to Cyrus Running and Nels Johnson over at Moorhead State, and so on, but just the very beginning, so I was fortunate to be here, in a way, when it just all got started because I think people supported it more enthusiastically, perhaps in the '60s and '70s, because it was something that was important and new and adding something to the community, so the support was very good, I think. As I look back at it, I sometimes wonder how it all survived in those days.

CM: Well, but it takes a long time and a lot of patience and endurance, I think, to weather all the times of maybe not quite enough support. And probably in those early days there were not sources of public support as there are now.

JO: Not in the very early '60s, but by '65--spring and summer of '65--we had decided that the space was just not enough at Rourke Gallery. We needed more room; the membership was growing; the classes and things were kind of good that year. Everything was booming, and so from our membership and also from other people, primarily the membership--I remember people like Tom Gunkelman and Phyllis Thysell and a lot of community people who were members of the organization got together in the summer; and particularly in the fall of 1965 we had a meeting at the gallery to establish a nonprofit corporation, the idea being we would move the gallery eventually out of the gallery into a larger space and become the Red River Art Center; and so we had a meeting in September-October at Rourke Gallery and got the Red River Art Center going. And, again, community support was so great. People wanted it, and that was, I suppose by then, a miracle--the membership of the Red River Art Center hit about 500 people in the first few months of the establishment, even before the doors opened. So people in the community really have cared about, I think, the arts. I really believe that sincerely, more than other communities this size because I remember during the '60s, I had people, like from the Des Moines Art Center, coming up and talking to us--how do we get so many people to join, become members, or how do we get so many people to come to previews and openings and so on.

Here's an older, more established community, but our membership size for the size of the community has always been extraordinary, for the visual arts.

**CM:** Well, I know on a statewide level, through the State Arts Board programs, that this is truly a unique program in the state, outside of the Twin Cities. The only other program that could compare at all is in Rochester, and I don't think that's been nearly as extensive a program as this.

**JO:** I don't know exactly why we've been able to do it because I know our membership has been larger, percentagewise, than other communities. And I think it's partially that the program that we offer is more varied and more extensive--we've always had lots of things going on--people, you know, not being able to make it to all the shows and so on. We've tried various things over the years and I know in the fall of '68 we tried--just how many exhibitions could you have open and have how many people come in, and we found that, you know, if you were actually selling art and wanting people to come and take out memberships, that probably you could have four or five exhibitions a month and the more you did, the more you'd get there. It was just like running a circus or something [laughter]--the more rings you added to the circus the more people would come. And we tried that; of course, it's hard to keep up such a pace. We did in the fall of '68; we had something like over 12-14 shows open at Rourke Gallery just to see--you know, as an experiment just to see--.

**CM:** As a test program.

**JO:** Yes, and every other week a new program would open on the main floor and another one upstairs just to see what would happen. And it worked--membership zoomed and attendance zoomed. The more things we did the more people would come in. You would think it would almost be the other way--you'd wear them out; but not really. And I think over the years that has been one of the things that we have done is just have a lot of different programs--.

**CM:** A lot of activity and diversity.

**JO:** Yes, quite varied and not trying to please--you know, I think it's easy to please some of the people all of the time, maybe. Every now and then, we please different groups of people in trying to have one big show that will please everyone. And so, I think organizations sometimes try too hard. You have to show new, experimental things and things that are sort of "off the wall" you might say and you also have to show the more traditional things. And we were lucky in the community; there was no other art besides, then, of course, to backtrack a little bit--of course, for awhile there was both the Red River and the Rourke; but neither building is very big, and we could use space.

**CM:** Did the Red River idea materialize partly because the old post office became a potential space that could be used or was that a lucky accident? A lucky accident, really, wasn't it?

**JO:** Yes, we had actually used the old post office building for jurying the Red River exhibition one year. One thing I should mention is that after the first year the Red River Annual was in the Gardener Hotel; and, of course, the next fall, the Junior League, which sponsored the show in those days, moved it to Rourke Gallery on Center Avenue in Moorhead and then the next fall the third Red River Annual was out in the house.

**CM:** That was really a major art show that brought artists from maybe outside the immediate region into--.

**JO:** And bringing in an outside juror and so on. It's been a very important thing; it was much more important, perhaps, in the early days than it is today. We still do have the Red River Exhibition, but in those days, it was the big thing of the year. The Junior League sponsored it and they put lots of effort as well as money into doing a great job, and it was the main visual arts thing of the year in Fargo-Moorhead--one of the biggest things that happened every year.

But as we mentioned early, in operating the house, it got more and more crowded. So the Red River Exhibition would be at the house, but we would have it juried--one year it was in the old post office building; the year before that it was in the old library building, sometimes in old storefront buildings on Broadway or in Moorhead--you know, any empty space just for the jurying of the show. But space became such a problem, not only for the Red River Exhibition, but art classes--just expanding programs; so we needed more space. So the Red River really evolved from the Rourke Gallery needing more space and just good support for the activities. We had not really planned on ending up with two organizations. That was one of those quirky things that just happened and at the time, it probably seemed sort of sad, maybe, but in a sense, in retrospect, it probably added a lot of vitality, even more vitality--if the more things you do, the more support you have--if that holds true, then perhaps the best thing for the visual arts was having both the Rourke and Red River operating as two separate organizations. They operated separately and during that time the Red River Art Center, starting out with Robert Sharleen [spelling] as the first Director, and he was there for three years and opened with a magnificent show of 300 years of American art and I would think that the Red River peaked in its very earliest days; it had very good membership and started out very big and strong. But sometimes you have to grow and know kind of where you're going. And I think it suffered somewhat over its years of history from kind of changing directions so often, while out at Rourke we had one line and never changed direction at all, in a sense.

**CM:** There were two different focuses here between a gallery and a museum. The Red River was always organized as a museum, right?

**JO:** Or community art center more than a museum.

**CM:** Okay, all right. But the idea of acquiring a permanent collection of art for the community must have come into consideration here.

**JO:** Well, somewhat, but I look at, you know, traditionally an art gallery is primarily a dealer, in a sense, although there are art galleries--the National Gallery, the Winnipeg Art Gallery--that are museums; they are called art galleries. But traditionally a dealer--Rourke Gallery started out as a dealer-type gallery and the Red River started out as an art center, a community art center, which is not quite the same as a museum again because usually art centers are not particularly interested in acquiring art; you know, they're not against acquiring art but they are more of a place for temporary exhibitions, classes, music, you know, more of an event sort of thing and not a museum. And I think maybe in a sense the focus of the Red River Art Center and Rourke Gallery were too close together. And if they got closer, I know Red River Center got involved in selling art and so on--things that Rourke was doing--and then pretty soon you're really--the closer they got together, the harder it was perhaps on Red River. And, of course, the longer Rourke Gallery was around, the more and more it became a museum and less and less a dealer gallery; and there was a tendency for the Red River to start out more like a museum and evolve--there was a tendency in changing directors and, of course, on a nonprofit organization like the Red River Center Board, compared to the Rourke Gallery. At that point in history, I still owned the gallery, and so it moved in what direction I wanted it to move in, even though we had a supporting membership. The members gave their money, but they didn't say how to run the gallery. They just supported it, which was kind of a nice way to have [laughter]--a good way to run an organization, to have people not only buying art but also giving money to come there, too. And so, I think perhaps that the longer they operated, there was a tendency to be harder on the Red River, because you know the Board would change and a new director. They had four different directors during that time and four directors in nine years is hard on an organization and then sometimes there would be no one in between because of finances and, again, trying to figure out how to keep this organization afloat takes an awful lot of hustling.

**CM:** Right. Well, I have memories of how difficult it was to keep and finance that old post office building--various negotiations with the City of Moorhead, the building needed a lot of repair and reconstruction in order to function. So, I know that was a long and hard-fought battle to convert it and to keep it.

**JO:** Yeah, it was, I think, too big a problem for a new fledgling organization. I think, had the Red River operated maybe with a smaller-sized organization, since all of a sudden you have this big building with its leaking roof and its major problems and how does a brand new board of directions, maybe one director, and a part-time secretary--how do they cope with the problems, seeing how many people are working there today. And so you wonder about those days. Well, anyway, they did have good people that worked very hard and they kept the organization alive for nine years, and I think that must be a great credit to the presidents of their Board and they had good people--Randy Stefanson was one of the presidents, Phyllis Thysell was one of the presidents of the Board, and people that worked so hard on the organization and good directors. They had four different directors for the museum--Claudia Baker, the last director, just did a tremendous job. I've often thought I should find her and try to hire her as our education director at the museum.

**CM:** When did the Red River Art Center, then, become the Plains Art Museum?

**JO:** Well, interesting enough and after we got both--we were operating the Rourke Gallery separately--in the early '70s we decided that we were going to stay in the house. Up to that point, I never knew for sure; and then we started fixing up the house--adding the side stairways, we used the basement; we decided we were not going to move down to the--there was always a question in the early days: When would Rourke and Red River become one organization, you know, and when it was not going to? Well, it seemed after about four or five years, it wasn't going to be so we started fixing up the house and we had four different galleries in Fargo in that time, too. We were so crowded, we would open up in free space in downtown Fargo, various galleries, first in the old Milwaukee Depot in the fall of '71 and then again in '72 we were over on 18 South 8th Street where the Unitarians are now, and then by '74 we were on Broadway above Black's in space that Black's store donated to us for the third Fargo gallery. And at that point in history our membership had reached the point that we were in a sense, very strangely, we were a private business with a much larger membership and a much larger program than the Red River Art Center, which was a public organization. People were getting to wonder what was going on; this was getting a little strange. So in the summer of '73, Rourke Gallery became a nonprofit corporation with its own Board of Directors, and so on, and a much smaller Board than the Red River. We had, at that point, 7 Board members and I think they had 25 or 27 or something. Sometimes large boards for small organizations can be almost a problem.

The big moment for art in the community came in the fall of late '74. In fact, I got a call from a couple Board members from the Red River Art Center (I was in Minneapolis) saying they really wanted my opinion on a merger of the Rourke and the Red River; you know, this sort of thing. It was very strange [laughter]; the call came long distance. People had mentioned it before, but people are always talking to me about getting the organizations together and at that point, Al Bloomquist was on the Board of the Red River Art Center and he had always been a very good supporter of the Rourke Gallery and to him it didn't make sense, businesswise, that these organizations were doing the same thing a few blocks apart and it should be one organization. And they had a lot of financial problems by that point, and things had been going very well at the gallery; and so our Board and museum council, and so on, voted in the spring of '75 to merge with the Red River Art Center and three of their Board members joined our Board of Directors. And the corporation was primarily the corporate structure of the Rourke Gallery with three people from the Red River, and our staff at the gallery at that point, at Rourke Gallery we had finally had about two and one-half regular staff members and so besides myself, in '75 then, when we finally got both the Rourke and the Red River Art Center together, along with the Fargo gallery--three galleries--we had besides myself, there was Susan Hunke working at the gallery, and Elizabeth Harris Hannaher, and Trygve Olson, so there were four of us working there. Claudia Baker had been the Director at the Red River Art Center at that time, so by 18 June 1975 then we had the merger of the organizations. We were then 15 years old. Rourke Gallery was 15, and Red River was 10 years old. So, it finally came about.

**CM:** That was a propitious move. It was hard to get there. And was it at that time that there was a change in the name--it became the Plains Art Museum?

**JO:** Well, the people at the Red River Art Center didn't really want to be known like the members of the Rourke Gallery Corporation, so we changed our corporate name to the Plains Art Museum, with three galleries: The Rourke, the Red River, and the Fargo were the three entities within this Plains Art Museum. But then we eventually, in trying to run a good, tight operation discovered that we quit having the last Fargo Gallery, then; we decided we'd better just concentrate on the Rourke and the Red River and our last Fargo Gallery was next to Old Broadway in a space the Herbst Department Store donated to us and these ventures in Fargo were always very good, I mean for the organization, but we were just always overextended. It was nice to have more space for shows, but we'd always find it was much the same people coming to places. We always hoped we'd get a new group of people by having a place in downtown Fargo, like when the Whitney [spelling] Museum opens a place in downtown New York or in the business district, but the community is so small that we would never find that we got any real new people and the same people would come to Rourke or the Plains or the Fargo Gallery; so we finally in '76 then quit the Fargo Gallery and after we did that, sometimes so many different names and stuff, we just quit using the Red River name and just called the Red River the Plains Museum and kept Rourke's name, which was the same. So all the names evolved, but it was no easy thing again, once we got the building. It was very interesting--we needed space so badly and it's such a handsome building.

**CM:** And a historic building.

**JO:** Yeah, beautiful building.

**CM:** And the alternative was that it might be torn down, wasn't it? I mean the City was considering--.

**JO:** The City had considered it, you know, and it had been for sale--developers and so on. There was a point where you could buy the building for somewhere around \$25,000 or \$30,000. In fact, I once thought about it in the '60s that I would buy it for my house [laughter] and then live in it; then I was scared about the leaking roof. Well, once we got the building, of course, then, and the organization together, there was certainly interest in it. Our membership at the time of the merger--Red River had around 300 members; we had about 500 members. And, of this, the total membership probably came out to about 600; there were a couple hundred people who were members of both organizations. So we had about 600 members in the organization--for the size of the community, very good. And we were fortunate at that point, there were some really good things going with CETA and there were still grants--it was much more easy to get money and help to keep a place going, so the early days of the museum--. As a museum, we were able to get, besides our two or three paid staff, half a dozen staff members through CETA grants. We were getting people with Masters degrees in art working in the museum and paid for by the government, so during the '70s this went along very well. We could get staffing for the organization. The biggest problem we had in those days was the condition of the old post office museum building and the roof leaked terribly and the building's wiring was bad and it seemed like everything was bad except the fact that it was a basically beautiful, handsome building, if you looked at it. And so, that was the big problem and one of the major problems we've

had all the time is just to get the building back into shape. And, of course, eventually to get enough money to fund the adequate staff for a museum. A museum and a gallery, particularly a museum operation, or any gallery, too, it's a fact of being open every day practically of the year--takes a certain number of people just being there physically all the time. It runs much more, I would say, like a business or a corporation, a typical business, than, say, the performing arts, where you can have slack periods and very busy periods. Other times you can kind of close down quietly and regroup for a few weeks, but at the museum, we opened a great big show one day and then worked hard for a month or so getting ready for it and the next day it was the same thing over and over again. And with both buildings operating I think it helps to get a good membership but it takes a lot of effort and sort of orchestration to keep everything running right. So with the fixing up of a building was an important thing with the museum building and we there were fortunate when we started to get the building fixed up, we were able to get the first phase of it--to get the roof on the building which was the first thing to do and get some adequate wiring into the building, taking care of the most important crucial things in the first phase in 1981. The City paid for about 25% and the Minnesota State Historical Society about 50% and we started a group called the Linden Associates at the museum--a group of people who would pledge \$1,000 over a three-year period and it was patterned after the C-400 Club at Concordia [laughter].

CM: That was a good model.

JO: And we made some changes, giving people a nice little bronze if they gave money to the fund--pledged money to it--and then we also realizing that our problems would not always be restoring the building and also we might want to come back to people for \$1,000 every so often, we started with different--you could give money to the restoration of our two buildings or you could given money to the art acquisitions for buying works for the permanent collection or for the endowment fund or for just general operations, and people pledged enough money in the first phase to raise our amount of funds for the first phase of the restoration in '81 and again last year for phase two when we got the building rewired and the rooms repaired--the plaster and restoration work like that and now this fall we're going to start out with final kind of phase of the restoration of the museum building--phase three of elevator for the handicapped access and we're going to build a little space on the east end of the building, actually extend the east end of the building. And I know the people again will come through with the money for this last phase. We, in this particular phase, will be spending about \$250,000; and we will raise, I'm thinking, around immediately about \$17,000 or so coming from our own members and through Linden, which would mean around another 48 or 50 Linden members to come up with that much money, and it would--.

[Begin Tape #1, Side 2]

JO: --mean some money out of general operating budget plus again the City of Moorhead and the State Historical Society.

**CM:** Well, it's an amazing collaboration of sources, but the community support, I think, has been traditionally strong and continues to grow. It must be a very supportive feeling to you to have that kind of community involvement.

**JO:** Yeah, I think so. One thing I should mention, too, is that with moving into the Red River Art Center building and Plains Museum was the fact of starting to have bigger, more important shows. I suppose that is another exciting thing that happened in the late '70s. The first show we had in the building when we moved in was something that I'd always wanted to do and never had space at Rourke Gallery was a show of Cameron Booth. Cameron Booth was a painter who had graduated from Moorhead High School in 1916.

**CM:** I didn't know that.

**JO:** Had an interesting story about his high school graduation. He was short a little bit of credit for graduating from high school, so the superintendent let him graduate if he'd paint a painting for him. I don't know what happened to the painting, but he got out of school. He always used to tell that story about Moorhead High. And when I was in college and used to go down to The Cities, he was one of the big artists in the late '50s (well, his full life)--he was a major Minnesota artist. He had worked in New York with Hans Hofman [spelling] and the abstract expressionists and then, well, around 1960 or so, decided he'd spend his last years painting horses. He loved horses, and he came back and taught at the U of Minnesota and painted and during the last 15-20 years, primarily horses. But he had graduated from high school in Moorhead. I didn't know that until I got to know him; and, as I said, as a student, he was one of the great artists living in the state. I never thought I'd hardly ever get to know him, but by 1970, on the tenth anniversary of Rourke Gallery, 18 June, the Minneapolis Tribune did a big picture story on the gallery and he wrote me a letter telling about his experiences in Moorhead and offered to give me a painting and he was so congratulating us on this great gallery. The sad thing is he never made it to the gallery although he was planning on coming up. He wanted me to come down and see him sometime. It took me three or four years and finally I got down to see him and, of course, it was sort of exciting when I actually ended up sleeping in his studio at his house. And so the first show we had at the new Plains Art Museum after we moved into the post office building was a show of Cameron Booth--it was a magnificent show. He couldn't make it up for that show. Then, a couple of years later we had another show and that one we actually had at Rourke Gallery, and he was going to come up then and he got ill. He was going to come up and pick the awards for the midwestern show and come to his opening, and so he never made it. He just died in the last couple of years, and he was James Rosenquist's teacher. Rosenquist gave the eulogy at his funeral, and so on. He'd been one of the great influences on Rosenquist.

Well, after that, with the building, we were able to start planning some major shows and these have been things like the Andre Kertesz show that we had in '78 and, of course, there the great part not only doing the show of Khertesz, the great photographer, was that he came for the opening. I had said in an introduction to the show, or in a statement, that he was the greatest living photographer in the world. I'd forgotten that Ansel Adams was still alive, too, who was also one of the great living photographers; but I guess I always cared so

much more about Kheresz personally than Ansel Adams that I had forgotten momentarily about Adams, but I had said he was the greatest living photographer. Well, when he arrived, he gave me a copy of Figarro [spelling] after he got off the plane and a book from a show that just opened at the Pompidou [spelling] in New York that, in French, said, "The greatest living photographer in the world." [Laughter] I was relieved--

CM: That someone else had said so.

JO: So, then that was followed by Luis Jimenez who did the fiberglass sculpture--he'd been commissioned by the National Endowment to do a piece in Fargo and we then had a show of his at the museum; in fact, we had a couple of shows. I think three shows by the time the work got done. Luis sort of finishes a work when they get ready, and during the process we wanted people to see his work so they would not get upset in the community when they finally got his piece on Broadway, so we had shows in the museum.

CM: Well, there was considerable controversy about the subject chosen. It seems to me the first idea was square dancers, and that was not acceptable to the people involved with the Commission.

JO: Yeah, many communities--they just commission an artist who may not really relate too well to the community and then bring the art in and just dump it on the people, and it's such a shock when they see it; so we didn't want this to happen, so the best thing, of course, is for the people to come and see the art in the gallery, and meet the artist and sort of get familiar with him because I've always believed if you kind of come and look at it and think about it and get used to it, you'll probably like it. You know, try it out. It will probably appeal to you. So we had the show with the End of the Trail/Electric Sunset, a beautiful piece of an Indian on a horse, and then in the same show, Man on Fire and the Barfly (Statue of Liberty)--three of his half-dozen major works were in the show at the museum along with other smaller pieces, and so on, and it was a big success. People really liked the work. I was pleasantly surprised and at that point we got a grant from the National Endowment to buy works by living American artists. We had planned on buying a Scholder and a Rosenquist with the \$10,000. We got \$5,000 from the National Endowment; \$5,000 we had to raise ourselves. And so fortunately we'd gotten a bequest from Clara Kornberg [spelling] and we had money there plus we could raise some other money from people in the community and we had raised enough money, and I was actually on the plane flying out to meet Fritz Scholder. I'd talked to him, but had never met him before, to buy a Scholder; and we were thinking of getting a Rosenquist.

CM: Was this before an exhibition of Scholder? Or before he was a juror?

JO: Yes, this was my first visit with Scholder, and he had been one of these people--once we were in an adequate sized building, we wanted to do a show of. But also since Fritz Scholder was born in the Red River Valley, in Breckenridge and grew up in Wahpeton, along with Rosenquist, were probably the two greatest living artists that were actually born right here in the Valley. So they were kind of the prime pieces to buy for a couple of our first major works to buy for the museum. But I'm flying out there to see Scholder, heading

to Phoenix--I was looking at the printing that we had done for the Jimenez show and Luis' work was in the museum, and, oh, we've got to have the Barfly; we've got to buy that, too. So, on the way there I tried to figure out a way to get all three--get a Jimenez, a Rosenquist, and Scholder. We managed to do it. We just sort of reapportioned the funds a little bit, and somehow managed to get all three. [Laughter]

That was one of my great experiences--going to see Scholder. I'd talked to him on the phone and had written to him over the years and had been anxious to see him. But it's still in my life one of those memorable experiences of getting off the plane and going directly to his house and he told me to come at about five in the afternoon and he'd be through painting by then. And I went to his house, he met me at the gate and let me in, and we went and looked in his studio at some things; he showed me immediately some paintings that were available for the amount of money that I wanted to spend. Then we went through and looked through things in the storeroom; he had a huge storeroom of other things that he'd collected, like Earl Linderman--those were the first real Linderman paintings I'd seen; I'd seen picture before, but not real paintings--and then we went and looked around the house. He collects. It was a wonderful experience. I collect things. I love to see people who collect things, and he collected everything--African art, Egyptian art, and contemporary paintings, and this whole house full of things. And then we went out to dinner, and then we came back and about that time, at 9:30 or so, I had to really make the decision, you know, and I've never before bought a piece of art so fast.

CM: That isn't much time, is it, to think of--?

JO: Not really. Something that will be with you forever. You can't bury it like doctors. Find your mistakes. If you're having to make the decision of some art that will be hanging in the museum as long as--forever, in a sense--hopefully it will be there forever--it will be good enough that they'll always want to keep it around. So, I picked out the painting Kiva Rest--a painting of a seated man and a Kiva. I looked at other ones and there was one of a kind of nude but I said I don't think I would want that, and he agreed that for our first Scholder painting perhaps we'd want some other one; and after I picked out the painting, he said it would be crated, I wrote out the check, gave it to him, and then he told me that he had very interestingly selected the paintings for the amount of money I wanted to spend, everything in that price, and then he'd taken one from his own collection that he always wanted to save, as sort of a test to see--people do that sometimes--to see whether you could pick the best painting out of a group. I picked the best one.

CM: You did.

JO: Yeah. [Laughter]

CM: That's marvelous. Well, I'm sure that won his respect and attention, which led to some further involvement with him, one of the major artists in our country.

JO: I still enjoy the painting. I still wasn't quite sure and when it came back to the museum, I breathed a sigh of relief. I got back before the painting did. The day we

uncrated it and looked at it, it still looked good. I still wasn't quite sure and I really had this horror that we had to spend \$5,000 on a piece of art and then find out you didn't really like it would be a horror to live with. But it was and is really one of the paintings that give a lot of pleasure. So, when we also, as I say, managed to buy the Barfly (Statue of Liberty) as well--now that piece of art was--I didn't know what people would think of it, so when I came back, I decided we should get it, but I started telling people, "You know, we're thinking about buying the Barfly." And everyone said, "Great, I really like it." And I was surprised.

**CM:** But she is overwhelming! [Laughter]

**JO:** But there are apparently some people who don't like the piece. No one's ever told me, face to face, they don't like it.

**CM:** No, I haven't heard criticism of that. I hear a lot of criticism of the downtown sculpture of the Sodbuster; I don't know why, but people are not as receptive to that.

**JO:** I don't know either. I don't know about the Barfly because I always say "Everybody likes it," and people say, "No, I don't think everybody likes it," but nobody's ever told me they don't like it. And maybe it's because I'm so enthused, they don't dare. [Laughter] But anyway, everybody liked it, so we acquired it and it's very strange about the whole thing with Jimenez is that we had a show of his. I'd run into curators and directors of other museums and they'd say, "God, I really admire you for having a show of Jimenez; we want to do that; we'd like to do a show of Jimenez," but they apparently have communities or boards of directors or people who don't--fiberglass sculpture in these bright colors and these strange sort of themes; you know, the cliches of the end of the trail and lightbulbs--it's just too much for some museums or their members to take. But here it seems that people have enjoyed them. So, if we could have one Jimenez, why shouldn't we have another? So we applied to the National Endowment and they gave us another grant for buying art by living American artists so then we acquired the End of the Trail/Electric Sunset.

**CM:** But a National Endowment grant for acquisitions is always based on matching funds. Don't you have to raise a match? Does that program still exist?

**JO:** No, unfortunately not. I loved it [laughter]--my favorite thing. Well, that grant, then, the first one we ended up getting Scholder, Rosenquist, and Jimenez. Well, the second grant, the major one we got was another Jimenez and we raised the money for that by having an art auction. The artists contributed art and we sold the art and took the money from the auction to match the grant to get the piece. We also in that grant bought a number of smaller pieces by actual artists living right in the community. The grant has to be living American artists, but it doesn't have to be, say, in your community. In fact, when you apply for the grant, they want something--. Apparently we'd get a grant every time we asked them. Apparently they liked the direction our collection was moving in. So, we got the other one and they are always kind of a problem. They're bigger than the museum; we don't really have room for them, but it's better to have works that are too big for your

museum than someday when you build a new museum or add on to your museum, your works are too small. That happens to some museums. They move into their new museum; they look like little paintings. They don't fit well in the new museum building. So somebody was complaining one day about the size of those and I said, "Well, it's ready for our next wing."

One other thing about the museum, I think, when we talk about why does it prosper, is the wide range of things, from going--we're talking primarily about living American artists--we've always cared about Charlie Beck or Cyrus Running when he was alive, or Robert Nelson--the best art from the area and the region, trying to show those. But then also bringing in other things. We started very early back in the early '60s; I didn't know much about oriental art, but we used to get things from the Beard Gallery in Minneapolis and Barbara Glasrud looked at some Chinese things. I didn't know some of the kinds of oriental things, enough about it myself, so when we got these things, Barb would come over and take a look at them and make sure they were what they were supposed to be because I didn't know what Kasu [spelling] or some name, I wouldn't know for sure without any experience in it. And we started very early bringing in other things, other than just the regional art. You get tired of looking at landscapes all the time, and you need a variety of things--bringing in Chinese things and little shows of Egyptian things and Persian things, all kinds of things of that sort. And then my interest in African art continued and I was fortunate to make the acquaintance of Merlyn and Daphne Skretvedt [spelling]--Merlyn was from out in rural Minnesota out in the Ada area and he and his wife, who was from the West Indies, in the Peace Corps they had been over in Ghana and collected African art; so we had their things at the gallery that they had collected. They loaned their things to us at Rourke in 1971 and we still have them. [Laughter] It was a good loan.

CM: Well, they probably think it's a good home for them.

JO: They live in eastern France now and he works in Switzerland, and their works have stayed with us all this time. I've bought a few things from them for my own collection of African art and then the next step with the West African art, another person who had been a student member--well, he'd been an architecture student at NDSU--Ernie Slingsby--ended up going to Ghana in the Peace Corps and designing buildings and while he was there he collected African art for himself and for me. And then his work eventually came to the gallery along with mine, and things were getting awfully crowded at Rourke Gallery before '75 when we moved into the museum. Once we moved to the museum, in '76 we had a show of just all these works on loan--my collection, Skretvedts', and Slingsby's--and we had this at the museum. And we were fortunate to have Dr. Roy Sieber [spelling] from Bloomington, Indiana, authenticate the works. Again, I'm not an authority on African art. I always tell people I look at it. If it looks like great art, I'm not interested so much in its religious or ethnographic reasons as the fact that it is a great piece of sculpture--its art, not its religious, purposes. And so Dr. Sieber came to the museum. It was a great joy and pleasure. He not only, you know, went through the art and did the things we wanted him to and gave a great talk, but he got very enthusiastic about what we were doing at the museum and talked to friends of his about the Plains Museum and our collection and what we were trying to do here. And so he then talked to Dr. Ernst Anspach [spelling] in New

York, a collector there, who since that time has given us pieces. I've even had to go see him and pick up a piece sometimes when he doesn't want to pack them up and then Dr. Albert Votaw who was in the diplomatic service and was killed in [unclear] when they blew up the embassy, who has been one of our biggest patrons that introduced the museum through Sieber. And then the other, Etteljorg [spelling] in Indiana, Harrison Etteljorg--and these major African collectors have been giving us African art continuously to build up our collections, so all of a sudden--.

CM: It's amazing. It's an international spy story.

JO: Well, my job is fun if I can get out of town and have time to go see some of these people. And some of the stories are really sort of fantastic, as just going to see them. The first time I went to see Ernst Anspach in New York (he lives up on West 79th Street, near the History Museum), I went to see him for dinner. And again, I was to pick up this beaded Yorba clan crown, and he also (I called it the door prize) also gave me the choice of two other pieces for the museum. You know, I could have this carved wooden head or I could have this cast bronze, I think, little heads in a rattle like piece. That was the choice I had to make. One or the other I could have. I couldn't have both.

CM: What did you choose?

JO: Well, I chose the cast bronze-type piece. It wasn't the showiest. I'd never seen anything quite like it before. The other head was a more traditionally carved, good piece of wood. So I took them away with me; he insisted on walking me out to get a cab. He was scared I'd take the subway back down and he said I'd probably be robbed on the subway. So then a couple weeks later, just before the last night I was in Manhattan, he wanted me to come to dinner again. And that night, like other nights I'd been there, he always would have some other collector or some other historian there to meet. Very nice, these collectors, about introducing you to other people and so on. But that night Sieber was there, from Bloomington, Indiana, and he told me during the course of the evening, after dinner, that that was a test to see whether I would take the best piece or not; and he said that he had cleverly put these two pieces just to see if I could pick the better one or not. That was the reason.

CM: People are always testing you.

JO: It's really funny, you know, and you don't want to make a mistake. You know, if it's a piece of art you don't know much about, like in the case of that piece, you have to just kind of wing it and think you are doing the best job possible. And I'd just look at it as art, not again whether I'd ever seen a picture of it or what its real purpose was, but how it looked artistically--was it a good piece of art or not.

CM: We're running long here, but I wanted to comment on not only have these programs been a wonderful community service and cultural resource for people in the community and an opportunity to bring world famous artists into our community and see their art and meet the artists themselves, but I think you've been instrumental in sponsoring and helping

**the careers of some young artists in this area--George Pfeifer, for example. Could you comment on a couple of people who you really have helped to nurture?**

**JO: Well, I guess Pfeifer is an important one. There are other artists, too. Gordon Mortenson [spelling], I know, has become a much better known artist than just our region, but he thinks kindly of us as we would have shows of his and show his art and stuff before he was a nationally known artist. And there have been a lot of young artists over the years. You know, not only do you want to show the more established ones, like Charlie Beck, but the young ones. I can't think of all the names. There's endless young artists. Catherine Mulligan would be a good example. I mean, we try to have a very strong commitment to artists of Fargo-Moorhead and North Dakota, western Minnesota, this region of the country. And our policy has been that we have shows of every artist, every professional working artist in the area, and we've held to this. That's another reason why we probably have a lot of exhibitions, a lot of things going on.**

**CM: Well, it was a thrill to participate in the 25th anniversary of the Rourke Gallery this summer and to observe and be a member and supporter of the Plains Art Museum this year. The community certainly has been fortunate to have somebody like you who's had the vision and the tenacity to hang in there.**

**JO: But it's only because of people like you, though, Catherine. I think that's the reason that it survived because of the support.**

**CM: Well, it's helped to develop a great deal of cultural vitality for this area; and it's a marvelous resource for all of us. Thank you very much on behalf of the Heritage Education Commission, Jim, and we'll let this tape go on file.**

**[End of Interview]**