BANC
MSS
2003/250
c
BANC

The Bancroft Library

University of California • Berkeley

Regional Oral History Office
The Bancroft Library

University of California
Berkeley, California

Marjorie W. Bissinger

A LIFE DEVOTED TO ART: THE SAN FRANCISCO ASIAN ART SOCIETY AND THE SAN FRANCISCO ASIAN ART MUSEUM

With Introductions by
Paul A. Bissinger, Jr.
Thomas A Bissinger
Peggy B. Pressman

Interviews Conducted by
Eleanor Glaser
in 1998-1999

Copyright © 2003 by The Regents of the University of California

Since 1954 the Regional Oral History Office has been interviewing leading participants in or well-placed witnesses to major events in the development of northern California, the West, and the nation. Oral history is a method of collecting historical information through tape-recorded interviews between a narrator with firsthand knowledge of historically significant events and a well-informed interviewer, with the goal of preserving substantive additions to the historical record. The tape recording is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. The corrected manuscript is indexed, bound with photographs and illustrative materials, and placed in The Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, and in other research collections for scholarly use. Because it is primary material, oral history is not intended to present the final, verified, or complete narrative of events. It is a spoken account, offered by the interviewee in response to questioning, and as such it is reflective, partisan, deeply involved, and irreplaceable.

****

All uses of this manuscript are covered by a legal agreement between The Regents of the University of California and Marjorie W. Bissinger dated September 24, 1998. The manuscript is thereby made available for research purposes. All literary rights in the manuscript, including the right to publish, are reserved to The Bancroft Library of the University of California, Berkeley. No part of the manuscript may be quoted for publication without the written permission of the Director of The Bancroft Library of the University of California, Berkeley.

Requests for permission to quote for publication should be addressed to the Regional Oral History Office, 486 Bancroft Library, Mail Code 6000, University of California, Berkeley 94720-6000, and should include identification of the specific passages to be quoted, anticipated use of the passages, and identification of the user. The legal agreement with Marjorie W. Bissinger requires that she be notified of the request and allowed thirty days in which to respond.

It is recommended that this oral history be cited as follows:

> Marjorie W. Bissinger, "A Life Devoted to Art: the San Francisco Asian Art Society and the San Francisco Asian Art Museum," an oral history conducted in 1998-1999 by Eleanor Glaser, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 2003.

Copy no. 1

Marjorie Seller, 1991, on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Asian Art Museum.

Marjorie Bissinger -- Asian art patron

Wyatt Buchanan, Chronicle Staff Writer
Friday, January 10, 2003
©2003 San Francisco Chronicle | Feedback

Marjorie Walter Bissinger, who helped start San Francisco's Asian Art Museum and dedicated herself to its growth for the rest of her life, died Tuesday at her home in the city. She was 90.

Mrs. Bissinger, who fell in love with Asian art while accompanying her husband on business trips to Japan, was key in convincing Chicago philanthropist Avery Brundage to donate his vast collection to the city in 1959.

As Brundage searched for a home for his collection, the Society of Asian Art -- a group of San Francisco residents who met to discuss and study their personal collections -- wooed him with the city's potential as a bridge between the East and the West, said Emily Sano, the museum's current director.

That included parties, meetings with the mayor, and one event -- captured in a museum photograph -- during which Brundage danced with Mrs. Bissinger.

"We like to say Marjorie danced the collection out of Avery Brundage," Sano said. "I cannot imagine that Mr. Brundage would have been so easy to persuade if not for someone with the intelligence, commitment and charm she had."

After she helped win the collection, Mrs. Bissinger served as a volunteer registrar, cataloging the items as they arrived. The museum opened its doors in 1966.

She was a commissioner of the museum from its inception until her death and also served many years as chairwoman of the museum's acquisition committee.

Mrs. Bissinger was fond of collecting apsaras, which are flying Buddhist divinities. She also took courses in Asian art at UC Berkeley. Outside her role in the museum, Mrs. Bissinger was a patron of both the San Francisco Opera and the San Francisco Symphony.

For her 90th birthday in November, Mayor Willie Brown issued a proclamation in her honor during a party at City Hall.

Her death comes three months before the museum's new home opens at Civic Center Plaza.

"It is our greatest heartbreak that she did not see the building completed, " Sano said.

Mrs. Bissinger was born in San Francisco to a family that started a home furnishing business here in 1851. She attended Miss Burke's School for Girls and studied at the Sorbonne in Paris. In 1931, she married Paul A. Bissinger, a businessman and civic leader. After his death, she married Robert Seller in 1976. He later died.

She is survived by two sons, Paul A. Bissinger Jr. of San Francisco and Thomas N. Bissinger of Pottsdown, Pa.; one daughter, Peggy Pressman of New York City; and six grandchildren.

A memorial service will be held today at 1 p.m. at Temple Emanu-El, 2 Lake St., in San Francisco. The family suggests memorial contributions be made to the Asian Art Museum, 200 Larkin St., San Francisco, 94102.

©2003 San Francisco Chronicle | Feedback

TABLE OF CONTENTS--Marjorie W. Bissinger

INTRODUCTION by Paul A. Bissinger, Jr.

My first experience with history, in an academic sense, seemed to me to be largely a matter of memorizing dates, battles, treaties and royal lineages. While there was a certain amount of color and drama attached to important individuals and events, my recollection is that each event or epoch was provided, neatly and tidily, with just one interpretation.

Of course, we all know today that history is as much a matter of perspective and time as it is deeds and facts. Events take on altogether different interpretations depending on who is doing the viewing, the personal experiences and points of view that make up the lenses through which the events are seen or experienced, and the clarity—or sometimes obfuscation—that comes with the passage of time.

It is for these reasons that my mother's oral history is so valuable. While she and her sisters, Nell and Carol, grew up in the same prosperous German-Jewish San Francisco household, with the same parents, and resided within blocks of each other throughout their lives, their respective experiences were nonetheless uniquely different. My mother's recollections, therefore, rather than expanding on her older sister Nell's oral history, paint an entirely new portrait by virtue of her own experiences and perspectives.

Just as my mother and her sister grew up together but differently, I feel that I had a wholly different experience than my sister and brother. Importantly, I was the first male of my generation on my mother's side of the family. An early influence on me was the fact that I found myself at the frequent family gatherings surrounded by female contemporaries, my sister and four cousins. It was a very matriarchal setting, laterally as well as vertically.

Another major influence during my early years was the expectation that one perform—dance, sing, play an instrument, write, act, paint, weave or sculpt. It was a lively and competitive environment. Cultural matters, current events and general gossip were the usual topics of conversation. Business and financial matters, on the other hand, were rarely discussed. Even so, I knew from as far back as I can remember that I was to go into business.

As I look back on my mother's adult life, I feel that she has had at least five separate although partially overlapping "incarnations": first, as my father's wife, companion and hostess supreme to an exceptionally gregarious and public man (I remember their elegant dancing parties on Divisadero Street with the garden tented over and beautifully lighted, my mother being the best dancer in the crowd); second as the wife of Bob Seller, an extraordinary tennis player and the most genuinely caring friend of the underdog that I have ever known; third, as a pivotal figure in, and passionate advocate of, the creation, growth and success of our distinguished Asian Art Museum; fourth, as

a world traveler, including challenging and adventurous trips in recent years to destinations such as Bhutan, China and across the Silk Route; and lastly as a devoted and memorable grandmother to her six grandchildren.

My mother's life has been diverse, full and rewarding, and I am thrilled that she has memorialized her experiences in this oral history. Our children and our children's children are fortunate to have her experiences and perspectives recorded for posterity.

Paul A. Bissinger, Jr.
February, 1999

INTRODUCTION by Thomas A. Bissinger

It is said that there have been more inventions and more discoveries in this century than in all the rest of recorded history. Thus, it seems especially fruitful to have a witness, Marjorie Walter Bissinger, born in 1912, record in 1998 her recollections of her time in this century of change.

An oral history is subjective. Like all fiction, it is a story or stories. Stories are the base and root of civilization. It is what we retain when all the facts and figures have faded to dust. Stories are about the life, with all the quirks and mystery that shape the individual, bring her into focus, and then recede, to become part of a larger story.

And so it must be with Marjorie's story. In it, I will look for the thread that weaves all her recollections together. Rarely does one perceive this thread or dwell on it consciously. It is Marjorie's gift that she leaves us, her children, her friends, and those curious seekers who wish to know more about a certain kind of upbringing, San Francisciana, Asian art, and family.

That this story is spoken rather than written gives it an immediacy that I find vital. Marjorie's story will, in turn, remind us of our stories, and, in so doing, our society is enriched.

I am grateful that my mother has given of herself in this way. She has worked for many years assembling the family genealogy. Now, her part of it is written down, in her own words. I can't wait to read it!

Thomas A. Bissinger

INTRODUCTION by Peggy B. Pressman

Our home at 2500 Divisadero Street was a big house. I am sure it never seemed so enormous to me because that was where I grew up.

My parents' bedroom was a spacious room with lots of windows, a fireplace and window seats. We entered the bedroom by going up two steps, and to the left was my mother's dressing room. There were mirrored closets on two walls and a dressing table. On the table were assorted crystal bottles with gold and silver tops, powder, puffs made of feathers, perfume bottles, a gold, monogrammed comb and brush.

The green bathroom was somewhat of a family room. There, my mother reclined in the bathtub with a pumice stone while my father shaved with Barbasol, the three children wandering in and out. In the dressing room, the closets floor to ceiling were filled with fabulous evening dresses and "hostess gowns". I especially remember a green satin strapless dress with a big bow in the front. With that she wore a beautiful necklace and earrings. Mom put these jewels on with great assurance and sprayed on her Scapparelli. My father bought these evening gowns—sometimes with me, and most often with Mom. Occasionally, Mom would say, "Which do you like better—this one or that?" I liked to be asked my opinion and tried to answer what she would like best. I was there to please, which is probably what we both knew. I thought my parents were glamorous and my mother very pretty. A great deal of time was spent on dressing and preparing for the evening, and it was a time I liked the best. We never tangled at that time. Did we? Oh yes, but dressing was and remains one of the nicest recollections of my childhood.

Peggy B. Pressman

INTRODUCTION by Terese Tse Bartholomew

I met Marjorie Walter Bissinger in 1968 when I began working at the Asian Art Museum (at that time known as the Center of Asian Art and Culture) as a research curator. From the very beginning I found her a friendly, down-to-earth, and forthright person, someone with whom I could communicate effortlessly. Whenever she comes into the museum offices, she says hello to everyone, addressing the staff by their first names. She is always a welcome sight!

Marjorie has donated numerous beautiful objects to the Asian Art Museum; for many years she chaired the museum's Acquisitions and Loans Committee. Unlike most of the other members, who were wedded to mainstream Asian art, Marjorie had supported the acquisition of unusual pieces suggested by the curators. Among her many gifts is a Bidri ware hookah base from India. When this piece was first offered to the committee, it was unpolished and needed conservation work. With her discerning eye, Marjorie recognized the true beauty underneath and purchased it for the museum. This piece turned out to be rare, and it is now one of the outstanding objects on display in the Asian Art Museum's Indian galleries.

Marjorie has wide interests in and love for Asian art and has collected whatever appealed to her, including Chinese ritual bronzes, jades, ceramics, and paintings; Japanese screens; Luristan bronzes; Indian and Southeast Asian stone sculptures; Indian miniature paintings; and a unique collection of Yixing ware teapots. Marjorie is also interested in Asian culture. The museum has always been host to many Chinese VIPs, and Marjorie--who studied Mandarin for many years--speaks a few words to these visitors and makes them feel right at home.

Marjorie is an excellent traveler; nothing fazes her. I was fortunate enough to be her roommate when we traveled to Bhutan in 1990. Her pluckiness put me to shame. In one hotel we were told that hot water was not available. While I stood pondering what to do, Marjorie went ahead and took a cold shower up in the Himalayas!

It is her custom to give the Asian Art Museum staff two large jars of English hard candies and toffees every Christmas. We love these candies and polish them off in no time, but what we like best are the containers. We vie with one another for these large candy jars. Within minutes of their being placed on the Chinese altar table in the main office, someone will have claimed them.

Even as she honors tradition, Marjorie is a "hip" person, at one with the times. She uses e-mail and carries a cell phone, embracing new technology to a degree that is remarkable for someone her age.

To invoke the ancient Chinese blessing: We wish our dear friend Marjorie Bissinger happiness as deep as the eastern sea and longevity comparable to the southern mountain. May she have many more years to enjoy the state-of-the-art technologies of the twenty-first century.

Terese Tse Bartholomew
Curator of Himalayan Art and Chinese Decorative Art
Asian Art Museum—Chong--Moon Lee Center for Asian Art and Culture

INTERVIEW HISTORY by Eleanor Glaser

Marjorie Walter Bissinger might be eighty-nine years old at the time this is written, but age hasn't lessened her interest and activity in Asian art in her native San Francisco. She is still involved with both the Society for Asian Art, which she helped found in 1958, and the Asian Art Museum, the only museum in the United States devoted solely to Asian Art. She served as president of the society's board from 1965 to 1968 and has held numerous positions with the Asian Art Museum.

Mrs. Bissinger has been a member of the Asian Art Commission from the time it was established in 1969, she worked hard to pass the bond issue that secured the second Avery Brundage Collection of Asian Art—his first collection was given in 1959. She is a member of the Asian Art Museum Foundation, and has served as chairman of the foundation's trustee commission relations and of its acquisitions committee, as well as serving on the exhibitions and publications committee. As a tribute to her devotion to the museum, the Marjorie Bissinger Gallery was dedicated in 1987.

Two previous oral histories conducted by the Regional Oral History Office were helpful in preparing to undertake Mrs. Bissinger's memoir, those of James Mack Gerstley, an early member of the Asian Art Commission, which worked to establish the Asian Art Museum as a separate wing of the de Young Museum, and Katherine Field Caldwell, a scholar in the field of Asian Art. Mrs. Caldwell stated that Marjorie Bissinger was enormously helpful as part of the group that founded the Society for Asian Art: "She had actually acquired some Chinese works of art of quality, and she was very active and an effective promoter."

Mr. Gerstley's oral history gives a good overview of museum developments, and in his volume he said, "My friend Marjorie Seller is enormously generous herself. She wouldn't think of going to ask anybody for money, because it makes her feel shy. It makes her feel that she's asking for herself." Another useful oral history, "Recollections of a Life in San Francisco, 1912 on," was conducted by Helene W. Oppenheimer in 1984 and is part of The Bancroft Library's collection of donated oral histories.

September 11, 1998, was the date of my preliminary meeting with Marjorie Bissinger, which took place in her brown-shingled home on outer Broadway. After I rang the bell, the door was opened by a slender, casually dressed, attractive white-haired woman who extended her hand and said, "Hello, I'm Marjorie Seller." And we were on a first-name basis from then on. In 1999, Marjorie resumed the name Bissinger, which was that of her first husband, Paul. This was after the death of her second husband, Robert Seller.

Our interview sessions were held in Marjorie's comfortable upstairs sitting room, which held photographs, bookcases, a desk, a couch, and a chair.

A table between the couch and chair held a dish of candy--usually lemon drops--and a glass of water on a silver tray. I had requested water when first asked if I would like something to drink, and in subsequent meetings Jessie Reyes, Marjorie's housekeeper, always had the water ready for me. Another example of Marjorie's thoughtfulness was that after each interview session she had Jessie drive me downtown to a BART station.

A closet at one end of the sitting room held a Xerox machine, some food, a refrigerator, and microwave. Marjorie explained it was hard for her to maintain her weight, so the items of food made it unnecessary for her to go downstairs to the kitchen for a snack, and it was easier on her back, which two operations hadn't improved. But from her busy schedule and the way in which she carried herself, one would never suspect any health problems.

For this first meeting, Marjorie had set out a large number of scrapbooks as background information for me. These were filled with newspaper clippings of Paul Bissinger's extensive civic activities. He was in the hide and wool business, and Marjorie accompanied him on his many trips to Japan. Her first interest in Asian art was stimulated during a visit to friends in New York City, and it was on these trips to Japan that Marjorie began collecting Asian art. Her intense interest in Asian art led her to take college courses, and she studied Chinese for eight years. In addition, she made many trips to the Far East.

Marjorie Walter Bissinger is a member of a family active in the arts. Her uncle, Edgar Walter, was a famous sculptor, and while her father was primarily a businessman, he drew cartoons, played the mandolin, and saw to it that his daughters studied art at the California School of Fine Arts. Marjorie's mother became an accomplished bookbinder, her sister Nell was a well-known painter, and her sister Carol is a talented weaver and basket maker. Mrs. J.B. Levison, in a 1967 oral history conducted by the Regional Oral History Office, said this of the Walter family: "Talent runs right through that family."

According to staff members of the Asian Art Museum, one aspect of Marjorie's usefulness to the museum was her relationship with Avery Brundage. They enjoyed going dancing when each was widowed. In fact, it was said that Marjorie was so charming she waltzed Brundage out of his collection. I was very amused by her vehement "No, oh no," when I asked her if she had considered marrying Brundage.

Although hers was a privileged upbringing that included a governess, private schooling, and two family trips to Europe, I found Marjorie to be forthright and down-to-earth. Several times, while the tape recorder was turned off, she and I would chat about our travels, comfortable shoes, and useful handbags. I was surprised to learn that at one point she had taken sewing lessons and made herself a suit. An old-fashioned treadle sewing machine in her guest bedroom attested to that endeavor.

When Marjorie was asked from whom she would like to have introductions to her oral history, she suggested her son Paul A. Bissinger, Jr.; her daughter, Mrs. Peter Pressman; and Mrs. Terese Bartholomew, curator at the Asian Art Museum. All were pleased to fulfill this request.

The edited manuscript was sent to Marjorie for her review, and she chose to use her computer to make a number of changes. Additions to her memoir are in parentheses and some are dated. Included in the appendix is a family tree originally printed by the acclaimed Arion Press, which Marjorie painstakingly reformatted to book size on her computer.

Eleanor K. Glaser,
Interviewer/Editor

INTERVIEW WITH MARJORIE BISSINGER

I EARLY YEARS, BORN IN SAN FRANCISCO, NOVEMBER 3, 1912

[Interview 1: September 24, 1998] ##[1]

Family Background

Glaser: Marjorie, would you tell me where and when you were born?

Bissinger: I was born in San Francisco on November 3, 1912.

Glaser: Where was the family home at that point?

Bissinger: On the corner of Clay and Buchanan Streets. It was one of the old Mark Hopkins homes and it was huge. It was a very large house with a very big lawn sloping up (as we were on a hill) and leveling off, between the house and the garage, which used to be the carriage house, and had a long driveway into it. I know we could park four or five cars in it, and it had an upstairs also where my uncle Edgar Walter had a studio. The house and the garage were painted a dark red. It took up almost a half a block. It was a very large piece of property, and it went around on Buchanan Street. The entrance was on Clay, and off Buchanan Street there was an alley that cut that block in half, and the house went back to the alley.

When I was little there was the milkman who came to the door, the lamplighter who came to light the street lights every evening at dusk, and the organ grinder with his monkey came around often. We also had the leisure time to pick daisies and dandelions on the lawn, play hopscotch on the sidewalk, and play in Lafayette Park up the street from our house.

Glaser: How many people did it take to run that house?

---

[1]## This symbol indicates that a tape or tape segment has begun or ended. A guide to the tapes follows the transcript.

Bissinger: Well, in those days it took a lot. There was a cook and a downstairs maid and an upstairs maid and a houseman who lived in what was then called a Chinaman's room, in the basement. You don't say that anymore. The kitchen was in the basement also, as they were pretty much in those days. Then we brought the kitchen upstairs where there had been a billiard room. That went, and the kitchen was put in there instead.

Glaser: Tell me the names of your parents and of your siblings, please.

Bissinger: My mother was Florence Schwartz Walter, and her parents died before my mother was married, so I never knew them. I have a picture--yes, there they are. My mother's mother came from Keokuk, Iowa. Her name was Nettie Cohen Schwartz.

My father was John I. Walter, and his parents were Caroline Greenbaum Walter and Isaac N. Walter. My mother and her sister Pearl married my father and his brother Edgar. My Aunt Pearl died in her twenties of pernicious anemia, which I don't think exists anymore, or can be cured. (I think at this time, I should say that my middle name is Pearl, Marjorie Pearl Walter, named after my Aunt Pearl, obviously.) My uncle had a studio upstairs in the garage, and he and Pearl were living with my parents when she died in our home.

Glaser: He was a famous sculptor.

Bissinger: Yes, he had a lot of works in Washington, D.C., on buildings. He did the horses over the proscenium arch of the Opera House here, and I think there are two masks on the walls on either side of the stage, too. Also there is one of his sculptures on the front entrance of the PG&E Building on Market Street. We loved him, he was wonderful. He was very attractive and he was a bohemian. He had studied in Paris and lived there for some years. There was an unfortunate incident because he married his model right after my aunt died and my mother never forgave him. That was regrettable. She did not let us speak to him again, at least not on her property, where she was around, so my grandmother, Caroline Walter, invited him for tea every Monday afternoon and invited my sisters and me with him. So we had those lovely tea parties after school, with Uncle Gar, as we called him.

My mother's parents were Nettie Cohen Schwartz and Isador Schwartz. My father's parents were Isaac and Caroline Greenbaum Walter.

Glaser: And your siblings' names?

Bissinger: The eldest was John and he died at eleven years old. I remember him as being very thin and pale and he had a limp. When he died at eleven, I was then seven and Nell was nine. So then there was Nell and me and my sister Carol, who was six years younger.

Glaser: Before I ask you more about your family, I'd like to know about the various other families to which yours had a connection.

Bissinger: Our relatives were the Lilienthal family and the Bransten family because my father's first cousins were Florine Haas Bransten, Alice Haas Lilienthal, and Charlie Haas. Those were the families that we really grew up with. Jewish society in those days was pretty inter-families. The Branstens and the Lilienthals and my grandparents, Isaac and Caroline Walter, all lived on Franklin Street. We were on Clay and Buchanan, which was not a big distance, so we kind of jockeyed back and forth a lot. We were in and out of each other's houses all the time.

My mother's sister who died, and Edgar didn't have children. My father's sister Marian and Edgar Sinton had three daughters, but they lived in San Mateo so we didn't get to see a lot of them, but we saw them. We were very close then and we still are.

Glaser: Isn't there a connection to the Walter Haas family through marriages?

Bissinger: Well, Madeleine Russell who was brought up by the Sam Lilienthals because her parents died when she and her brother Billy were little. Her father was Charlie Haas. But other than that we do not have a connection with the Walter Haases.

Glaser: Well, Edgar Sinton is a relative by marriage.

Bissinger: Yes.

Glaser: And he was a cousin of Walter Haas.

Bissinger: Yes. So by marriage we have a connection, but not ourselves.

Glaser: I see.

Bissinger: Because there were no boys in this family the Walter name died out. I feel very badly about that because it's like we just don't exist anymore. There are no Walters.

There was a cousin, Edwin Walter in New York. The family business was D. N. & E. Walter, which was carpets and draperies and rugs, wholesale. It is now over a hundred years old, it

was sold, and it doesn't exist anymore as a store, it's a holding company.

Edwin Walter's son Stephen Walter, who died a few years ago, was a lawyer and he moved out here to be part of D. N. & E. Walter & Co. He had two children: one is Daphne, who married Bob Bransten, the son of Ellen and Joe Bransten. And Jennifer, who married and lives in New York.

Glaser: Was your father the president of D. N. & E. Walter?

Bissinger: Yes.

Glaser: At that time it was a substantial business, wasn't it?

Bissinger: Oh, yes, very much.

Glaser: But he was able to take quite a bit of time off in the summertime?

Bissinger: He took a lot of time off to spend two months at Tahoe every summer, and there wasn't much communication. We had a three-way telephone. What do you call it?

Glaser: Was it a wireless sort of thing?

Bissinger: No, it was a telephone, on the wall of the dining room. Ours rang three times and somebody else--

Glaser: Oh, a party line?

Bissinger: Yes. And so if you heard another ring--two long, a short, or something like that--but ours was three. That was the only communication, except the mail, and he never went down to San Francisco. I don't know how that worked, but it did.

Glaser: He must have had a good staff.

Bissinger: Yes, I guess so.

Glaser: What were some of your father's activities in the community?

Bissinger: My father was interested in the arts. The whole family was artistic, and of course my uncle Edgar Walter was the professional artist. My father was a cartoonist and he amused us a lot by drawing pictures for us, but his interest was in the Art Institute. My mother had the Grabhorn Printers print an editorial written by John Barry, who wrote for the *Call-Bulletin*. At that time he was the editor, and he wrote this

editorial in the paper after my father died which praised my father very highly. He spoke of him as being such a genial lovely gentleman, warm and friendly and outgoing, and his contribution to the art world of San Francisco, which of course was the San Francisco Art Institute as well as his other interests.[2]

{added, 1999: I would like to add that Mischa Elman, who at that time was a famous violinist, was a guest at our house for dinner whenever he came to San Francisco, as was Albert Bender, who was a great supporter of Bay Area artists and contributed heavily to the art community and to books and literature.}

My father died at fifty and he had not been well for years. But he seemed to have enough energy to do all of this because he certainly was active and busy.

Glaser: He was also on the board of Temple Emanu-El and the SPCA.

Bissinger: Oh, SPCA--yes, he liked that. Yes, of course the temple, where he was a board member, and he was very friendly with Rabbi Martin Meyer, who with his wife was a very good friend of the family. His daughter Luise was one of Nell's best friends, and her brother Adolph who worked at D. N. & E. Walter & Co. was also a good friend of the family.

And then came Rabbi Louis I. Newman, another one of my father's friends.

When my sister Nell did her oral history,[3] she spent a good deal of time explaining that in her view our parents were anti-Semitic. That is absolutely untrue. It's so absurd. I don't know how she could have even thought of it. Here was my father on the board of Temple Emanu-El, my mother was on the board of Mount Zion Hospital. Our friends were Jewish, mostly --my father had many Gentile friends of course, rabbis were close friends, we all went to Sunday School; I don't get it.

Willa Baum asked me if I would mention Bob Sinton and Jim Hart somewhere along the line because I knew them from way back in childhood. I don't really have too much to say except what

---

[2]See appendix.

[3]Nell Sinton, *An Adventurous Spirit: The Life of a California Artist*, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 1993.

wonderful men they were. But Bobby, Bob Sinton, when I was discussing this subject with him said, "Well, all of our parents were snobs." In those days our families were very snobby. They didn't accept Russian Jews or Polish Jews--just German Jews.

I think we were all brought up to be snobs, we went to private schools. But certainly we were not anti-Semitic. We grew up with nothing but Jewish people, so how would that be possible? So now I've put my two bits in. I asked Willa if I could change it or do something in Nell's oral history and she said, "No, of course not." So I'm doing it myself.

Glaser: Fine.

Bissinger: That's all there is to say about that.

Glaser: What was your relationship with your father?

Bissinger: You know, I was only seventeen when he died. Nell and I had such a bad time together. We fought so terribly--at each other all the time. He used to knock our heads together and get mad at us. But I certainly loved him--he was absolutely wonderful. He was fun and charming and lovely, and he did nice things for us. He played the mandolin and sang to us. We had this big roof garden on the upstairs of our house, off of my room on one end, and off of my parents' room on the other end, (covered on that end) and he used to sit there and play his mandolin and sing songs to us and it was a real treat. And he taught us how to make batik out there. [phone rings--tape interruption]

Glaser: Your father died of Brights Disease, that's nephritis, a kidney disease.

Bissinger: Yes, today he would have been on dialysis, they say. That was really sad. He had terrible headaches. This man was amazing. He took us to Europe--the whole family (Mother and three daughters) plus the English governess, plus his mother--six women to Europe twice when we were children. I don't know how he did it. And he always had headaches; he didn't feel well. He was remarkable. Always cheerful, always jolly, wonderful.

Glaser: It must have been such a blow to your parents when they lost their one son.

Bissinger: Yes. My mother did have a lot of losses because she lost her parents before she was married, she lost her only son at eleven, she lost her only sister in her twenties, and she lost her husband at fifty. So she was pretty gloomy about it, but

she was pretty worn down by then. She was in mourning for a long time, which was hard.

Glaser: How long did she survive after your father's death?

Bissinger: Oh, she lived to be eighty-eight, that was forty-two years later. She was only forty-eight years old when he died. She died of emphysema in 1971. She smoked until the very end.

Glaser: I imagine she was depressed. Was it difficult for you?

Bissinger: Oh yes. Even back then she should have gone to a psychiatrist or a therapist, although I'm not sure there were too many of them around in those days, it wasn't as common as it is today. She should have had help, and she was like that until 1952 when she finally sold this huge house that she was rattling around in alone. She sold it in 1952 and built a new one with Wurster as the hero-architect, and she kind of brightened up, even before that. She had brightened up before that, and somehow it was a big change and she got very modern. It was great and it was quite remarkable.

Glaser: What were her interests?

Bissinger: She was a fine bookbinder. I think she started this in her fifties and became one of the very well-known bookbinders. She started taking lessons from Belle McMurtrie Young in San Francisco who was one of the greats, and then she went to Paris and studied there for several months. She came back and became one of the finest bookbinders in the country. She exhibited at the Legion of Honor, she exhibited at the Brussels Fair, she had many exhibits. Her work is just beautiful. I have several of her books. We gave all her equipment to Mills College, that was through Jim Hart, and they started a bookbinding class there. It is very popular.

She also was president of the Book Club of California, so she really blossomed by that time because she loved what she was doing and she did it so well. She was so meticulous. If you could have seen all this equipment and the stuff she had to deal with: paring the leather very, very thin and doing the sewing and the gluing and then the gold--what do you call that?

Glaser: Gold leaf?

Bissinger: Yes, the gold leaf. I'll show you some of her books downstairs. She did that gold leaf and engraving, and this in tiny print. She was so careful and meticulous, she was amazing.

Glaser: Had she displayed any of that meticulousness and patience prior to getting into bookbinding?

Bissinger: Yes, well, she was always awfully neat and tidy about what she did. She also did the beautiful designs on the books which are spectacular. The books themselves that she bound were also beautiful. They were all either photographs by French impressionists, that sort of thing (some were originals), or good literary people. So that's what her great contribution was, but she didn't really do very much between my father's death and this.

Glaser: You mentioned your mother was on the board of Mount Zion Hospital--

Bissinger: Yes, that was way back.

Glaser: --from 1928 to '36. And then she did research with your father's doctor.

Bissinger: Oh, my goodness, I forgot that. That's really important. His doctor was Dr. Tom Addis at what was then Stanford Hospital just down the street from us. After my father died, she went to work for Dr. Addis and did all his statistical work, used a slide rule, and ended up writing a book with him.

Glaser: What kind of background did she have for doing this?

Bissinger: None. She was very capable.

Glaser: She must have been very bright.

Bissinger: I think she was, but you know she didn't ever display this particularly. She was totally wrapped up in my father, anyway, so I would say she was not a great mother because she was a little bit distant.

We had an English governess until I got married. She was still with my sister Carol. Her name was Jeevie, Miss Elsie Jeeves, and she was a wonderful governess. She was a little hard on us, very strict, we got punishments. My mother didn't take too much interest in us, Jeevie did most of it.

You asked how much help we had in that house. Other than Jeevie, when Carol came along there was a nurse by the name of Prudie, Prudence Beers. She was very pretty. And Jeevie took care of Nell and me at that time.

Nell was so bad. Jeevie left once because Nell was so rude to her. She was really a terror. She admits it in her oral history, and Jeevie left. She said she wouldn't put up with it any longer. I have a letter that my father wrote pleading with her to come back, promising that Nell would behave herself. [laughs] And Jeevie came back.

Glaser: What was your relationship with Carol?

Bissinger: Oh, it was fine, but I didn't pay much attention to her. She was five years younger.

Glaser: That was a lot at that age.

Bissinger: She was very cute. Oh, I hated breakfast because at breakfast Carol sat there staring at me, with those big round eyes and I got mad. But I had a good relationship with her.

Glaser: Why was she staring at you?

Bissinger: I don't know. I have no idea. I have asked her. She probably doesn't remember.

Glaser: Maybe just to see what an older sister was doing.

Bissinger: I don't think she stared at Nell. [laughter] I have asked her. She says she stared at everybody. But it was a good relationship as far as it went. She was awfully cute and she was very original. She used to lie in bed, lay in her crib I think; she was that little, maybe? No, she must have been older, but she had an imaginary family and the family consisted of Pusha Backstone and Yankie Greenebaum, [laughs] names like that, and she talked to them. She was very creative and original.

Glaser: Sounds very imaginative.

Youthful Activities

Glaser: On your first trip to Europe with your family, were you old enough to appreciate all you were seeing?

Bissinger: It was 1923, I must have been eleven. It was crazy. I mean, I don't know why my father would even have wanted to do this. There were two limousines. We drove all through France, Italy, Czechoslovakia, Germany, and England. We three sat in the back

seat. I've always wondered about this: we used to read the funny papers in the car which made my father furious. But where did we get funny papers?

Glaser: Probably from the *Herald Tribune*, the European edition.

Bissinger: Maybe. Do they have comics?

Glaser: Not now, but maybe then they did.

Bissinger: Maybe, I don't know. But Jeevie took charge of us. We traveled with three wardrobe trunks and a hatbox--you know, one of those big things for the hats and shoes? And of course you go by ocean liner and automobiles meet you. I guess the trunks must have been sent ahead to the hotels, because we couldn't have gotten those into cars. And suitcases. You set those big wardrobe trunks up, you know, and they opened out and had drawers just like a dressing table.

Jeevie took charge of all of that and then she took us sightseeing every day. I think we must have seen every church in Italy and every museum. Nell was the eager beaver and I tended to be rebellious. I forget about Carol, she was little. My grandmother was there, always complaining a little bit.

She was lovely. I loved my grandmother. She was wonderful to me and she cared about me, but she was a little difficult on the trip. I remember no matter what we ordered at meals, hers had to go back if she liked somebody else's better.

Glaser: Was your second trip much like this?

Bissinger: Yes, and I got punished a few times, I forget for what. Now I'm glad we did it because, you know, I learned so much really in spite of myself that going back in later years I knew a lot already.

Glaser: You probably absorbed more than you realized.

Bissinger: Sure.

Glaser: What about your religious education?

Bissinger: We went to Sunday school every Sunday and otherwise [phone rings--tape interruption] we didn't celebrate the holidays, we didn't do anything religious at home. You know, it was typical for our families in those days. We were Reform Jews, as was Temple Emanu-El. I don't know any of them that observed Passover or Hanukkah--none of my relatives as I can remember,

but we did go to Sunday school. And my first husband, Paul Bissinger, came up from Stanford to teach Sunday school. He taught me when I was thirteen, and I was in love with him then. I think that's really all the religious training. On Yom Kippur we got to stay home from school. I don't know why, but that was done also.

Glaser: Did you experience anti-Semitism?

Bissinger: Of course. That's brought out in this book also, sure. It didn't bother me really, but I was aware. I mean I had good friends. I liked most everybody, and I think they liked me. You know, it was a good class but when the dances came along, I was not included.

Glaser: Which school was this?

Bissinger: Miss Burke's. I was not included in the dances, but I had my Jewish friends. It didn't seem to matter to me. I had my crowd. I went with my crowd on weekends or whatever, and they did their thing.

Glaser: I'm surprised your parents didn't put up some objection that the Jewish children were excluded from the dances.

Bissinger: No parents did.

##

Bissinger: It was the way it was. We accepted everything. I had no feeling about how the girls felt about me. I liked most of them. Some often came along with my Jewish friends, so it didn't matter to us. No Jewish girl could be president of her class. Madeleine Russell was the first one to be president of her class.

Glaser: Why was this difference made for her?

Bissinger: I think times changed a little bit, and she was especially bright.

Glaser: Because she came along after you?

Bissinger: Actually she's only two or three years younger than I am, but there were Jewish girls in her class, Marjorie Gunst Stern, Louise Steinhart Loeb, and Madeleine, I guess just the three of them were a few years behind me.

And of course the cotillion. Even my daughter at that stage didn't get invited. The first girls that got invited to that were Rosalie and Fritz Hellman's daughters. Peggy was invited to all the dances all year long, and there were lots of boys who were crazy about her. When the cotillion came, no. We took her out to dinner that night and to a movie. We felt badly for her.

Glaser: Well, you had a lot of other things going on.

Bissinger: I had my whole Jewish crowd--many of them.

Glaser: And you had quite a number of lessons and sports. You had piano lessons.

Bissinger: That's right. Piano lessons with Mrs. Canfield, who I think was not a very good teacher. And Nell, who was much more ambitious and aggressive than I was, changed that. She insisted on having a better teacher. I forget his name, George McManus, but he was one of the top piano teachers.

Piano, riding--we rode our own horses, Nell and I did. Carol didn't, she didn't like riding. We went out to the riding school on the streetcar, always. Nobody took us anyplace.

Glaser: Where were the horses kept?

Bissinger: At the Seventh Avenue riding stable, in those days Seventh Avenue below Fulton. We rode our horses up Seventh Avenue, no traffic across Fulton Street, into the park, and we rode out to the beach. We did that several times a week, I think. Then we would go from riding to downtown to the Women's Athletic Club (now the Metropolitan Club) and swim. We competed in both of those sports, and diving (swan dive and jacknife). I had (don't have them anymore) several trophies from both sports.

That's French and riding and swimming and elocution lessons. Mrs. Sharman came and we had to say, "This is the house that Jack built," and go on and on without taking a breath. You learned how to breathe, it was probably very good.

And art school. My father took Nell and me to art school every Saturday morning. The art school was in the old Mark Hopkins house, which they rebuilt after the earthquake. Anyway, the art school, which now is the San Francisco Art Institute on Chestnut Street. was in the Mark Hopkins house (not yet a hotel) in a big classroom, and I remember very well the charcoal drawings which we did. I don't remember what else

we did there, but we went there for a few years, I think. My father felt it was really important for us to learn art, so that was the beginning.

Making paper dolls was one of my hobbies, I made clothes for them and had a whole box full. I also took art classes--well, I went to kindergarten in the Ansley Salz back yard. That was a small group of the Salz's friends' children, and I think Mrs. Salz gave art lessons, I did a little sculptured head I was very proud of, gave it to my parents for Christmas, and it was on my parents living room table for years. I don't know where it is now, I don't know what happened to it. So I did have a little of an art career.

Glaser: Did you have dancing lessons?

Bissinger: Oh, aesthetic dancing, from Mrs. Rush, in the ballroom of the Haas-Lilienthal house on Franklin Street. I have a picture right there of the three of us in these silly draped dresses which we had dyed ourselves and my sister Carol standing there naked. That was a photograph by Dorothea Lange, which is in the Dorothea Lange Collection at the Oakland Museum. They have 10,000 of her photographs.

Dancing and of course dancing school, which everybody did. We all went to Miss Miller's dancing school to dance with the little boys who always had hot perspiring hands. [laughs]

Glaser: In that photograph, were those the costumes and the sort of dancing you were doing then?

Bissinger: Yes. Not Miss Miller's of course.

Glaser: Was this influenced by Isadora Duncan?

Bissinger: I think she was a student of Isadora Duncan. Nell and I were dancing. I don't know how Carol got into the picture there. But if there was anything more ungainly than Nell and me, you know, looking like that.

I wrote myself a lot of notes for this, so I have my lessons listed.

My parents went to Cuba with Charlie Haas and a man named Charles Wolbach. I have a picture of them sitting in Havana at an outdoor cafe. Anyway, they came back with castanets for Madeleine and Nell and me and we took castanet lessons, at Madeleine's and our house.

Glaser: Who taught you?

Bissinger: Oh, I don't know. I know they were castanets. And then of course tennis lessons. But that was later, I was maybe fifteen by then. My parents didn't approve of that because it seemed to be a waste of time because I hung around the tennis club. I played up at Lafayette Park with the Filipinos and Japanese there. Then I asked to be able to join the California Tennis Club and they said no way, because it just wasn't in their thinking. I guess they knew what was going to happen, so they let me join. As a matter of fact, the reason I got in (because it was hard to get in) my mother had a manicurist come to the house by the name of Miss Ruth, and Miss Ruth manicured the nails of the president of the California Tennis Club and she got me in.

Glaser: Did your parents consider this unlady-like?

Bissinger: No, they were not thinking tennis. They approved of Nell swimming--we all swam, of course. Nell swam across the Golden Gate. That's quite a feat.

Glaser: Indeed.

Bissinger: My father really loved that. She went out to Baker's Beach every morning at five o'clock and swam out there with these two fellows. I went with them once and it was so awful. Ugh! So cold and so early in the morning and the seals were swimming around there with us. I hated it. Nell loved it. When she swam across the Golden Gate my father was in a boat trailing her and everybody was very proud of that.

Glaser: I must say, that's quite an achievement.

Bissinger: It is quite an achievement, yes. But for some reason or other they didn't approve of tennis at that time so that was too bad. But it didn't bother me any. And they were perfectly right. I hung around the tennis club and came home late and probably didn't get my homework done. But they did come around and my father came to watch me play in tournaments, unhappily, as I didn't win very often.

Education

Glaser: It sounds as if you were a very busy teenager with all these classes and lessons in addition to regular school.

Bissinger: Well, school in those days got out at ten minutes of one, at least Miss Burke's did. We walked to school, on the way we picked up Rosalie Hellman, who was Rosalie Green in those days. She was a cousin. There were a lot of those cousins because Rosalie's father, Louis Green, was a brother of my grandmother. Of course they were all Greenebaums in the first place.

Rosalie lived around the corner from us as did Ruth Hart, who was Ruth Arnstein at the time. (She married Jim Hart). She was my sister Carol's best friend. They lived next door to each other, the Greens and the Arnsteins.

And to get off this for a second, Ruth Arnstein's cousin, another Arnstein family, the Walter Arnsteins, lived on the corner of Washington and Laguna. And their daughter Cassie, was one of my best friends. Nell and I both kind of shared Cassie, she was between us in age. We spent a great deal of time in and out of each other's houses. That was not a relative, but our parents were close friends. Alice Arnstein was one of my mother's best friends.

Alice Arnstein was one of the first people I knew who opened a shop. You know, nowadays these are boutique small shops. She opened a gift shop on Sutter and Powell. You know Mrs. Scheuer whose--

Glaser: The linen shop?

Bissinger: Yes. Mrs. Scheuer worked for Alice Arnstein way back then. I thought that was amazing because she was totally untrained in anything like this. She had beautiful gifts and was very successful. The shop was called CARGOES and Agnes Brandenstein was her partner.

Back to where we stopped, we dropped in on Rosalie Hellman and picked her up and we all walked to school together. School got out at ten minutes of one so we took the streetcar home, and my mother was always waiting for us in the living room, playing the piano. And then we would have lunch at home, so we had all afternoon to do these activities.

Glaser: Did you feel that you got a good education in what was really a limited period of time?

Bissinger: At Burke's? Not really. I didn't get a good education because I don't think Miss Burke's was a good school for the unmotivated student (me). I believe that Nell and Carol and I are quite bright people. I don't think any of us are stupid. I think we could have gone to college. I was a poor student.

I didn't like school much (the studying). I don't think I had awfully good teachers. Of course many girls from Burke's went to college. Nell and Carol and I did not. Nell went to a finishing school, came home and got married; Carol went to a finishing school in Washington, D.C., came home and got married; and I went to Paris, came home, and got married.

Paris

Glaser: Tell me about Paris and about your parents letting you go to Paris.

Bissinger: My father had died in March and then I got a letter from my friend Ruth Koshland (this is the branch of the Koshlands that lived in Boston). A lot of those Koshlands were in the wool business in Boston, but they came out here every summer, and Ruth and I were very close friends. She wrote me a letter and said, "My parents are going to spend a year in Europe. I'm going to school in Paris, will you join me?" And my mother very generously said yes. That was hard for her because Nell had just gotten married and then I went. So poor Carol had a bad time because this was right after my father died and my mother was pretty gloomy to live with. But anyway, it was a wonderful year for me.

Glaser: Was it as much to get away from your mother as anything?

Bissinger: No, I mean, how could you resist an invitation to spend a year in Paris? No, I didn't even think twice, and I think my mother was very generous to let me go. So I went in June or July, I guess, of that summer. Ruth had just graduated from a school in Boston where French was the major, and so her French teacher and another teacher were our chaperones. We had an apartment at 4 Avenue Matignon in Paris and we went to the Sorbonne and took French studies there.

I studied sculpture as well. My uncle Edgar Walter told me to go to his friend, Monsieur Vuerchose in Paris on the rue de Vaugirard, and so I went probably two or three times a week and had my sculpturing lessons. Ruth studied the piano. She was a beautiful pianist already, and she practiced three hours a day, so we were both busy with those things. Then we went to the Cordon Bleu and studied cooking, which I never took to. And we had history-type lessons, walking the streets of Paris. We would walk in historic neighborhoods and learn about them. We also took diction lessons from an actor in the Comedie

Francaise, and he was a very dashing teacher. We would take our lessons backstage in the theater. That was pretty much busy work.

It was a very nice apartment--two bedrooms, a living room, a kitchen, and a dining room, as I remember. In a nice neighborhood, at 4 Avenue Matignon.

Glaser: Which arrondissemont is that?

Bissinger: Well, it was off the Champs-Elyses, the 8th arrondissemont.

It was a wonderful year. We went over by ship, of course. This was 1930, there were no planes. Her parents took us to St. Moritz for Christmas, where we took tango lessons. I was pretty ungainly; Ruth was beautiful. Ruth could do everything. And we went to Lake Garda in Italy for Easter.

Ruth had many talents: she was a pianist, she was a beautiful dancer, she was a beautiful ice skater, she took ballet lessons. She was so graceful and she did a lot of that. After that Ruth went to Smith College and then married Mick Hellman, Marco Francis Hellman. That was Mrs. I. W. Hellman's son, and they lived here. Ruth took flying lessons and she flew a bomber, a B-2 I think it was, during the war. She was flying bombers around the United States, and she was grounded because she buzzed the town of Sweetwater, Texas. [laughter] But she was a multi-talented person.

Glaser: You must have been pleased that upon marriage she settled in San Francisco.

Bissinger: Yes, I should say so. But they lived in New York for years, though, before that. They didn't live here right away. Ruth died at the age of sixty, scuba diving. She just came up out of the water and she was dead.

Glaser: Oh, my.

Bissinger: It was terrible. Everybody grieved because Ruth was very, very loved. She was so well-liked and she always had boys swarming around her. She was very charming and attractive and feminine.

Friends and Dating

Glaser: When you came back to San Francisco, also even before going off to Paris, what were the activities of a teenager at that time?

Bissinger: What were the activities? You know, I don't know because Paul was up at Tahoe that summer. I came directly from Paris to Tahoe and I didn't have many friends my age since I'd been gone a year.

When I came home from Europe to Tahoe, Paul was visiting with his friends elsewhere on the lake. I was at Tahoe all summer and after I came home to San Francisco Paul started taking me out. My mind was pretty much on him, and I really don't remember what anybody else was doing.

I enrolled at the art school; my uncle Edgar Walter was teaching there and I again started studying sculpture. Then I got engaged and stopped everything.

Glaser: Well, before you went to Paris you were probably dating.

Bissinger: I just graduated from high school. I was seventeen when I went to Paris. I wasn't even eighteen then.

Glaser: But weren't you doing things with other boys and girls, dating kinds of things? That's what I mean.

Bissinger: Oh, sure. Okay, the crowd. The boys were Dick Elkus, who followed me around. That went on for a long time. There wasn't anything on my part; he used to call for me at school and phone every night, and my family used to tease me. Actually, he drove me crazy. Lee Rosner and Joe Haber and Lloyd Ackerman were also part of the crowd.

You know, most of these people are dead. Lloyd died in China during the war. His sister Anne was one of my best friends. She was a classmate at Burke's school. Anne's parents were Lloyd and Louise Ackerman. Mrs. Ackerman was one of the Sloss family. Cassie Lilienthal--what was she doing? She also went to Burke's School, and went on to Smith College.

Glaser: Did you go to movies? Did you go to dances?

Bissinger: We went dancing a lot, dancing to the big bands. Oh, absolutely, every weekend you went dancing. The boys brought you either a corsage of gardenias or an orchid almost every weekend.

Glaser: Really!

Bissinger: Yes, Jim Hart was one of them.

Glaser: Nowadays that sort of corsage would only be given for the prom night or something like that.

Bissinger: Oh, absolutely, yes. No, not every time, it was a little bit special.

Jim Hart was shy and we all loved him. He was funny in those days. He was just a little bit too educated for most of us. He was simply one of the crowd, but we always felt that he was a little--what is the word?

Glaser: Was he more intellectual than the rest of you?

Bissinger: Oh, definitely. Turned out to be too, but he was always lovely. We loved him. He was a little bit on the shy side, but he giggled a lot and he was funny. He was one of my dates, and he lived across the street from us on Clay Street. He was on Buchanan.

That was pretty much the group. That's the boys. The girls: Cassie was one of our group. You know, there weren't very many. I don't have and I never have had all my married life, old best friends--I just didn't have a lot of them, and some I don't know what happened to them. There was a friend Dorothy Katchinski, who my parents frowned on a little bit of course. "Who was she?" You know, the expression in those days was, "Who are their people?"

Elizabeth Salz, of course, but she was pretty risque, Salzy had a little car--that's the Ansley Salzs' daughter.

Glaser: What made her risque?

Bissinger: She always did a little bit more than anybody else. She married a black man, which of course in those days was very unusual.

Glaser: Did the marriage last?

Bissinger: Yes. She died young of cancer. It did last, indeed, they had children. But Salzy used to come by, it drove my parents crazy. She used to come by in her little yellow some kind of a car, honk the horn and pick me up and we'd go riding. That didn't sit well with my parents. There was Elizabeth Lilienthal, my cousin, who was one of my best friends. and

Dickie Kahn, she and her sister, Billie, married the two Elkus boys, Eugene and Dick.

I had a very close friend from Burke's; her name was Betty Broemmel. That was Broemmel's Drugstore here, which is no longer in business. I used to visit Betty in Ross and she visited me at Tahoe.

There have not ever been very many survivors of all these people. I don't know what happened to a lot of them. And Alice Reinhart. The ones who stayed around were Cassie Arnstein and Anne Ackerman, who were my lifelong friends, and have died in the last few years. I didn't have bridesmaids at my wedding, just my sisters.

Rampart on the Truckee River

Glaser: You haven't talked about your family home up in Tahoe, which sounded quite special.

Bissinger: It was. My father and his brother were fishermen, and so that's why we were on the Truckee River. My father and his brother Edgar walked from Truckee all the way up to Tahoe City looking for a spot that they would like on the Truckee River. They chose a perfect one two and a half miles from Tahoe City.

The first house that was built was a long log cabin-y kind of house. A log house with big, wide, log steps. I'm bad at description. And then this very big long front porch with a swing, held by two chains from the ceiling. The swing was very popular, everyone wanted to sit on it. Then there was regular wicker furniture.

The inside was one very, very long room with a huge wonderful fireplace. You know, a stone fireplace for the mountains and chairs and a sofa. The other side was the dining room, no separation, which had this very, very long table. During the summer we had maybe fifteen or twenty people at meals all the time because we had a lot of company up there, house guests.

The major theme was fishing, and so every day both my mother and father were in the river fishing. (My mother not every day.) We fished and had lots of friends and company, all ages. Then the grandchildren came along and they were there all summer.

##

Glaser: How much staff did you have?

Bissinger: There was the Chinese cook, Fong. He was with my mother for years. He was such a good cook. Food was marvelous, huge meals and totally without regard to fat, cholesterol, et cetera. He always had a kitchen helper. Then there was the downstairs maid (she waited on table and cleaned the dining room and living room, et cetera), and the upstairs maid, who did the bedrooms and personal laundry, et cetera. I mean, there was no upstairs, but there were those two people. Was there a houseman? Oh, there was the caretaker. The caretaker had his own house, a little house up the hill, with his wife Elsa, and daughters Helen and Ruth. And the chauffeur who lived above the garage. Harry, the caretaker, did a lot; he took care of the grounds and started the fire every morning early in an outdoor furnace which heated the hot water which came from a spring up the mountain behind us.

The grounds were undeveloped. Inside the house at either end of this big room, my parents had a room and a sleeping porch at one end, and we had a room and a sleeping porch for the three of us at the other end. Our house in San Francisco also had a sleeping porch, where we grew up. It was cold out there and the sleeping porch at Tahoe was freezing at night.

So I think that was all the help there was. There was Agatha and Katherine and Fong.

My grandparents had another house across a small garden and my aunt and uncle, Marian and Edgar Sinton, had half of the house. There were two rooms and two sleeping porches in that house and a kitchen. The kitchen was subsequently used for the grandchildren. They ate their meals over there until they got old enough to eat with us.

As we got older we started sleeping in a tent. There were two tents up above on the hill. I guess we all spread out into those and later they were turned into two little cottages. I mean they were just two rooms. The help slept in tents at first, also, and then a house was built for them with just two rooms.

I want to tell you how we got to Tahoe in those days. We went down to the Ferry Building with our car, a big touring car with isinglass windows, I think, and put the car on the boat. It was a Sacramento River boat with wonderful accommodations. I remember those rooms, they were so roomy and comfortable. We

drifted up the Sacramento River to Sacramento. We would leave San Francisco about six o'clock at night, and the young people would sit on deck and play their ukeleles (which I did), and sing and have a jolly time. We got to Sacramento at six in the morning and drove all day to Tahoe on dirt roads. It was quite an experience. It took us almost all day to get there.

Glaser: It sounds like a dusty trip.

Bissinger: It was. We were of course always my grandmother and Jeevie, the three of us, and my parents. How'd we all get in that car?

Glaser: You probably had jump seats in the back.

Bissinger: Maybe. I think we did.

Glaser: Was your house located close to where there's an inn right on the river?

Bissinger: No, it's further up. I think I know what you're talking about.

Glaser: Closer to Squaw Valley or closer to Tahoe City?

Bissinger: It was two and a half miles from the Tavern and Tahoe City. There was a bridge from the road to our house. There were railroad tracks, too, parallel to the road. The help came up by train. The train went to Truckee and then there was the little narrow gauge train line that went from Truckee to the Tavern and stopped off at our house. The name of our place was Rampart because the big rock across the river was called Rampart. We had a sign at the entrance to the bridge and a little gazebo kind of thing that was built out of thin logs. We would sit there and wait for the mail every morning. The mail came in a canvas sack, with Walter Lodge stamped on it and mail was thrown off the train and picked up by the same train in the morning to go out.

My mother used to send the laundry down in a big hamper. The laundry went down and came back up as well as a lot of produce--fruit and vegetables.

Glaser: Do you mean the laundry went all the way back to San Francisco?

Bissinger: Yes, where the laundry man who stayed there was doing the laundry at our house, the laundry went back and forth, probably once a week. And the vegetables and fruit also came up because the Tahoe City market wasn't awfully good in those days; you could get staples. Today it's a supermarket.

So that was kind of the event of the day for us children, for us to sit down there and wait for the train. Then Jeevie would walk us up on the trail to Tahoe City every morning, two and a half miles and back on the train tracks, so we walked five miles every day. Jeevie was big on walking. We walked every place in San Francisco when we didn't take a streetcar, which was quite often.

And then going home from Tahoe, I don't know why it seemed so much quicker because it took all day. We drove from our place to the ferry boat in Oakland, there was no Bay Bridge or Golden Gate Bridge then, and home. It was quite a big ordeal to get there and come back unless you took the train. We would stop in Sacramento for lunch.

Glaser: It wasn't the situation of a man coming up from the city on the weekends and his family staying for weeks on end. It was too long a trip to do that.

Bissinger: Yes, just about, except the husbands did. But this is way back when we were children. By the time our husbands did, there were paved roads.

Glaser: Yes.

Bissinger: But the grade up to the summit, the cars puffed and puffed and sometimes just died. It was quite a trip on a dirt road up to the summit. It was an experience. And the heat, of course, driving up in that terrible heat and there's no air conditioning, and we children complaining.

The Sam Lilienthal family stayed at the Tahoe Tavern in the summer. They were there pretty much of the summer, too.

Glaser: You've mentioned Tahoe Tavern several times and I've heard about it, but I don't know exactly where that was located. Was that near the Fanny Bridge? The bridge at Tahoe City?

Bissinger: Oh, with the gates that let the lake water into the Truckee River.

Glaser: Right.

Bissinger: Yes, only just go on across the bridge and the Tavern was there. It's still there, and it's now condominiums. I took the Tom Bissinger family up there for a week a few years ago and it's lovely. It's got beautiful views of the lake and it's right on the lake and so families stayed there all summer. That was true of the Sam Lilienthals. They used to come down

and fish at our place. On the two times we went to Europe, they rented our house at Rampart.

Up there on the lake (we were almost the only people on the river) were people like the Sidney Ehrmans. Their house has been turned over to the state, so you can go through there now as a tourist. There were two Walter Heller families, but the Walter Bear Hellers had a house there. The Dick Shainwalds, they were cousins. Ruth Shainwald was related to my father. Who else had houses then that we know? I knew a lot of the people, but forget them now.

So there was a certain amount of visiting back and forth. The roads weren't very good in those days so you didn't do it very often, but we would go over to the Ehrmans for dinner, they would come to us for dinner. The Rosners and the Habers also had houses.

Dick Haber has been affiliated with UC Berkeley, I think he was the Public Relations Officer, he's my age, now retired.

Glaser: Did your family do anything on vacations other than Tahoe and Europe? Did you go to Yosemite or anyplace else?

Bissinger: No. I wanted to go to camp like my friends did, and my father used to say, "Well, this is camp." No, we never went to Hawaii, never went to Yosemite that I can think of. Well, we must have because I remember Yosemite, always. I think we must have, but I really don't remember small vacations. It was Tahoe every wonderful summer. I think I also remember visits to Del Monte Hotel, a very popular spot.

More on Relatives

Bissinger: To go back to those early days, my grandfather, Isaac Walter (I have this picture here) took three of us out to the beach every Sunday. He's sitting in his overcoat and his hat on Ocean Beach here. We would go out on the streetcar and he would take us down with our pails and shovels and sit there with us on the beach Sunday mornings.

Glaser: Who is the young boy? Would that be your brother?

Bissinger: Yes. Carol isn't in here because she wasn't born yet, so I must be the one with my head down. But that was always the best treat.

The Schwartzes and the Stahls

Glaser: Interesting. And you had an uncle on your mother's side who was in the coffee business?

Bissinger: {June, 2000--I just saw Kenneth Mills in New York, he is the only child of Beatrice Stahl and he said the Stahls came from Posen in Eastern Germany near Poland, but I do not find it on the map.}

Now, in looking at my family tree, it says that my mother's father, Isador Schwartz (born in 1852) and his brother--they were the Schwartzes. They were born in Wroclaw, West Poland, or Kempen, West Germany, I am not sure of that. My mother's aunt was Rosa (Rosalie?) Schwartz, who married Adolfo Stahl. We called her Aunt Zillie. But first, there was Nettie Cohen, my mother's grandmother who was born in 1863, and who came from Keokuk, Iowa. She married Isador Schwartz, who came from Wroclaw, in West Poland or Kempen, West Germany (I don't know which). Now I'm thinking of some of my mother's relatives because you know I said there were none. Of course there were. The Stahls had three children: Beatrice, who married Carley Mills from New York, (subsequently divorced) and John Stahl and Lionel Stahl. The Stahl men and somebody called Benjamin Bloom, who was another relative of my mother's had some coffee business in Guatemala and Salvador, called Guata coffee. And Uncle Jonas Bloom who came for dinner fairly often. My mother spent some teenage years in Guatemala. But she was not like me, anxious to talk about herself or her life, so I never found out about it. I couldn't get anything out of her about her background.

I knew Uncle Adolpho and Aunt Zillie very well, we saw a great deal of them. My mother and her sister got married in their house on Jackson Street, and it had double stairways that met half way up and a lot of red brocade. What did you ask me?

Glaser: About your relatives' coffee business.

Bissinger: That's all I really know about it. But Guatemala was always a a big name in my life as I remember it. I knew very well that they had spent a lot of time in Guatemala and then even some in San Salvador. Benny Bloom and his wife, Aline had a hospital named after them and they spent a good deal of time in Salvador. It's too bad I was not better informed. That's one reason why I'm doing this, so my children will know a lot more than I did about our family.

Glaser: It sounds very exotic.

Bissinger: Sounds it, doesn't it? The Stahls had a party where the whole house was decorated in orchids. They had seats at Temple Emanu-El and were regular attendees.

Glaser: Really!

Bissinger: Aunt Zillie then went to live in New York after her husband died. I guess because her daughter Beatrice was married to Carly Mills and they lived in New York. They had one son, Kenneth Mills who lives in New York, and I see him usually when I'm there. And her two sons, Lionel and John Stahl, lived in New York--no, John lived in Paris, with the Bankers Trust. We always used to visit Aunt Zillie there in New York.

That is more relatives than I had said before, isn't it? But not many young relatives to play with.

II PAUL BISSINGER

[Interview 2: October 20, 1998] ##

Family Background and Business

Glaser: What do you know about Paul Bissinger's youth, his family, and their business?

Bissinger: Well, he was born in Portland. His father came from Germany and went to Portland where there was an uncle who was in the hide business--hides, wool and tallow. His mother came from Baker, Oregon. Paul was born in Portland and had one sister, Helen. They moved down here when he was little--I don't know exactly what age--and his father then opened the Bissinger Company hide business in San Francisco on the corner of Front & Jackson Streets.

Glaser: I wanted to ask you about that because in something I read among your papers it said the business went back to the eighteen hundred something. But that wouldn't be true if Paul was alive when they moved down, unless he was born before the turn of the century.

Bissinger: No, Paul was born in 1905. He died in 1969 at the age of sixty-four. But the business was started by his great uncle, Sam Bissinger, in Portland before the turn of the century.

Glaser: But the firm was established by his father?

Bissinger: The firm here?

Glaser: Yes.

Bissinger: It was, but the first firm was started in Portland.

Glaser: I see.

Bissinger: And then at one time or another, there were branches in Calgary, Canada, Vancouver, Spokane, Seattle, Portland, Troutdale, Boise, Reno, Salt Lake, Woodland, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. After Paul finished college, he went east and he was in the theater.

Glaser: Did he have just the one sister?

Bissinger: One sister, Helen, who was married to Fred Bloch. She had one son, Bob, who lives here, actually around the corner. Bob is married to Eva, who is from a family who were from Germany. She was brought up in London and is a lovely person. She and I are very close. Paul's mother's name was Heilner. She had three brothers, and there was one that never married. One of them married late in life and they had four children, so there were those cousins. Paul went to Pacific Heights Grammar School, then to Lowell High School, and then he went to Stanford.

Glaser: Was the family involved at all in the Jewish community?

Bissinger: His father was president of Mount Zion Hospital at one time, and he was on the Board of the Jewish Home for the Aged. They were temple-goers.

Glaser: Well, compare it to your family. Were they more involved?

Bissinger: They were pretty similar. My father was a director of Temple Emanu-El and I would say it was somewhat similar.

Glaser: Okay.

Bissinger: I think they were not really very involved. His father married Millie Heilner and she died quite young and then he married Selma Lowe.

I don't know much about Paul's childhood or youth. He taught me in Sunday school when I was about thirteen years old. He and some of his friends came up from Stanford and taught Sunday school. And I was in love with him then!

Theatricals

Bissinger: Paul used to put on plays at the temple. And of course I had to be in those plays and stay up all night to be in the mob

scene of The Devil's Disciple. [laughs] My parents didn't approve of that very much.

Glaser: I understand that he organized the Temple Players while he was going to Stanford.

Bissinger: I'm not sure of that time. He did The Dybbuk and did The Devil's Disciple and others whose names escape me right now. He had an assistant who put on plays also, and I was in all of those as well. I had a part in those, but just mob scenes with Paul. Her name was Lucille Goldberg, and of course I had a crush on her also. [laughs] I had a crush on all my drama teachers. I think that's typical of young girls and their drama teachers.

Glaser: In Fred Rosenbaum's book about Temple Emanu-El, *The Architects of Reform*, he credits you with giving him the photograph of Carolyn Anspacher that appears in the book.

Bissinger: Yes, I gave that picture among other things to the Magnes Museum. Carolyn Anspacher, of course, was a good friend of Paul's. She was very theatrical and she was in most of his plays.

Glaser: The Dybbuk created quite a stir in the town.

Bissinger: Yes, and the Magnes Museum and Seymour Fromer borrowed Paul's scrapbooks. They did a story on the impact of The Dybbuk on young people of that day. So that's been written up. It was quite an impressive performance because they had Nahum Zemach from Russia come to direct it. Paul produced it, but Zemach directed it, and yes it was a pretty remarkable performance. I guess Carolyn Anspacher had the lead in that. And of course that's where Janet and Mortie Fleishhacker met. She was this beautiful young girl who had been educated in Italy for a few years. She came back and was pretty glamorous and beautiful, and she started playing in the Temple Players. Mortie was an actor in it and that's how they met and married. That's not Paul's childhood, really, but I don't really know too much about that.

Glaser: You started off by talking about when he sailed for New York after he graduated from Stanford.

Bissinger: Yes, that's right.

Glaser: Or do you want to talk about his activity at Stanford?

Bissinger: Oh, he was the dramatic manager there, so he was responsible for the theater at Stanford. Then after Stanford he went east, against his father's wishes, to be in the theater. He walked the streets and got hired by a famous producer, Dwight Deere Wyman, and got a part in The First Little Show, which was one of the big shows at that time. They tried out in Atlanta, and I have pictures of that. He played along side Libby Holman, and Fred Allen and Clifton Webb, if you remember them. And Paul even got to sing once. He had absolutely no voice, and he couldn't carry a tune, but they somehow allowed him to sit on top of a roof with Libby Holman singing--[pause] Hm, what was it he sang? "Moanin' Low." He was assistant stage manager besides having little parts. He was there less than a year, and his father really insisted that he come home and go to work in the business, which he did. He was at Bissinger and Company until he sold it just before he died.

Glaser: But there was more to his work in drama because he produced a lot of plays for the Concordia Club.

Bissinger: Oh, yes. When he came back from New York, he also produced a show in San Francisco. I have a program and sheet music that was composed. The show was called "Hi There" and he had a good cast of Broadway people. I have pictures of that, too. I guess you saw them. The theme song was called Dream Music, written by Griff Williams, who was the successor to Anson Weeks of the Mark Hopkins big band. It wasn't a great success, but it was a big production. It played at the old Columbia Theatre and Alexander Leftwich was the director.

Then Paul settled down to work at Bissinger and Company, and he started putting on the Concordia shows. Dick Sloss wrote the lyrics and Sam Glikbarg wrote the scripts. Those were great fun.

Glaser: By that time were you married?

Bissinger: Oh yes. I hung out at the Concordia, a lot at dress rehearsals, and Jane Sloss and I would sit there watching, we enjoyed it a lot. They were really good shows. Of course, you know, a lot of the Concordia Club members were in it and they had a ball.

Glaser: I understand that they did Dream Boy, a spoof on Marcel Hirsch's longevity as president of the Concordia. It was a parody of Wintergreen for President.

Bissinger: Yes, that's right. [laughs] They were great shows. I think they played three nights, and got a big crowd each performance.

Courtship and Marriage, 1932

Glaser: Tell me about your courtship and how you and Paul connected after you came back from Paris.

Bissinger: I went off to Paris when I was seventeen--became eighteen over there. Back to Paul's youth, there was a crowd of Jewish young people. The crowd consisted of Paul, Paul Wolf, Charlie Rosenbaum--oh, I forget them all. The girls were Yank Neustadter.

Glaser: Pardon me?

Bissinger: Mary Ann Neustadter. She was called Yank, Yank Neustadter Abrahamson (after marriage) and Gert Lederman Isaacs and Rosalie Wolf--Rosalie Walter at that time, my cousin. Nell was a little bit on the fringe. I think she was younger than the rest of the girls but she was in the crowd. So I knew Paul. As I said, he had been my Sunday school teacher. He used to come to Tahoe and come over to our place, of course. I remember his beautiful Pierce Arrow roadster. That was so glamorous, and I thought he was pretty dashing. He used to come over a lot, so I knew him through Nell and Sunday school and whatever. And he also lived across the street from us when I was young. I came back from my year in Paris, Paul happened to be up at Tahoe, visiting friends. He came over to our place and I didn't know he was paying attention to me. But he did go home and write me and asked if he could come and drive me home. My mother said no. [laughs] I don't know why. So I went home (not with him) and he took me out several times. We went out to Lake Merced one day and he asked me to marry him. It was a Sunday. And then old fashioned, he came home and asked my mother if he might marry me.

Glaser: Did you have any questions in your mind?

Bissinger: No! No, I nearly fainted. [laughter] Oh, no, I should say not! I mean, this was more than I could have hoped for. I was so young--you know, I was still eighteen. And we were married three months later.

Glaser: Did your parents feel that you were too young?

Bissinger: Well, I didn't have a father then. My mother had one reservation and that was that Paul had gone to Europe with one or two of his friends. Oh, and Dick Friedlander was another

one of the boys. Paul had gotten sick, so he went to the American Hospital in Paris where they told him he had some kind of a kidney malfunction. My mother knew this, and so when I told her he had asked me to marry him she said, "Well, I don't think so." She said, "You know, Paul's had kidney trouble." My father had just died six months before that of Bright's disease, but I guess he would have been on dialysis today. So Mother said, "Well, I don't think so." That totally shattered me. Dr. Addis, who was my father's doctor, was just down the hill at what was then Stanford Hospital. Mother said, "I think he should see Dr. Addis," which he did. Mother was there, listening and watching, and Dr. Addis said there was no trace of anything. So that was that and we made plans to get married, which we did in January of 1932. I was just nineteen, that's pretty young, and proceeded to have three children by time I was twenty-seven.

Glaser: But first tell me about your wedding. What was it like?

Bissinger: Oh, the wedding was beautiful. It was at our house which was a beautiful big old Victorian--already described--so the wedding took place there.

Glaser: How many guests did you have?

Bissinger: Oh, I don't know. I would say maybe 125 or around that number, not more.

Glaser: Were you married by a rabbi?

Bissinger: Yes, by Reichert [Rabbi Irving F. Reichert]. I had two bridesmaids, who were my two sisters, and Paul had two best men, who were Paul Wolf and Charlie Rosenbaum. Then there was dinner. There were tables set up in the dining room (the bridal table) and the living room.

Honeymoon

Bissinger: We went to the Fairmont Hotel that night and then left the next day for a Panama Canal trip on the *S.S. Virginia*, which took, I don't know, ten days? I forget how long it takes to get around the Canal. Then we spent some time in New York, a few days with all his pals who had been his best friends when he was living there. These were very attractive, interesting fellows. One of them was Malcolm Reiss. (Actually Malcolm was not there at the time, he was in Mallorca.) Malcolm lived in New York

all of his grown-up life. His mother was here in San Francisco, and he didn't have any other family. He married Lucia Alzamora. Her father had been ambassador from Peru to the United States. Malcolm was one of Paul's best friends from childhood. A fellow by the name of Greg Williamson, who was very attractive. He created the Lucky Strike program on the radio. Was it the Lucky Strike Ten Tunes?

Glaser: Oh, yes, on radio?

Bissinger: Yes. That was Greg Williamson. And Jack Wiggin and Lester Vail--Lester Vail was such a character. He was wonderful! He had been an actor. In fact he had starred with Joan Crawford once in the movies. I really loved Les, he was very attractive, and his wife Betty--I mean these were all lots of fun people, all bright and talented. I was so out of step. [laughs] I didn't drink and we used to go out night after night. We weren't there that long, but every time we went to New York we were out every night. Where'd we go? I guess we went to places where they had entertainment, nightclubs. These people were all so sophisticated. Of course Paul was seven years older than me, anyway, so these were all older people and I was a child. I would sit there drinking my Coca-Cola while they did their drinking. I did feel quite inadequate.

Les was wonderful to me. He always kind of took care of me, and Jack Wiggin the least. His wife, Mary, used to be secretary for Myrna Loy (a movie actress at that time) when she would be in New York. Malcolm was just wonderful to me, he was so sweet and gentle. I used to have lunch with him every time thereafter when I was in New York. Malcolm died young of a massive heart attack, so we lost him early. And Paul, and I guess the others are gone, too. So that was my New York experience. Then we crossed (which ship I cannot remember) to Europe, where we stopped in Mallorca where Malcolm and his wife Lucy were living. He was writing. Malcolm was a writer and Lucy as well, she wrote for magazines like *Good Housekeeping* and *Reader's Digest* and translated the *Reader's Digest* stories into different languages, or at least her language.

They had this little house in Mallorca where we stayed with them a few days. Of course I arrived with two trunks and suitcases. My mother sent me off on this honeymoon with a hat and shoe trunk--you can imagine! [laughs] They couldn't even have them in their house; we had to leave them someplace. I was pretty out of step there, too. This was all a whole new world for me--writers. Malcolm wrote a couple of books and then he ended up as a literary agent. But you know, it was way over my head, and I was just trying to act grown-up. [laughs]

Glaser: Were you that uncomfortable?

Bissinger: No, they didn't let me be uncomfortable. They were so nice to me and so they didn't let me be uncomfortable. Then we went to Paris after a few days. I guess then home after that. So that was a pretty good honeymoon.

Glaser: Yes, I think that's quite adequate. [laughter]

Bissinger: Paul loved boats, so that's why were on ships so much.

Children

Glaser: It must have been almost anti-climactic to get back to San Francisco.

Bissinger: Oh, I think I was probably glad to get back.

Glaser: You were ready?

Bissinger: Yes, I think so.

Glaser: Where did you set up housekeeping?

Bissinger: My mother had picked out a house for us at 3885 Jackson Street. It was a very nice small house. We started life there and then I proceeded to have two children in thirteen months. We thought the house had outgrown two children, so then we built this huge monster on the corner here of Divisadero and Pacific. {1999: it is the Decorator's showcase this year.} We had a wonderful housekeeper, Anna, ($75 a month!) who left when we moved. When we lived in our Divisadero Street house, we had several different kinds of help, and in 1949 Lillian and Lorenzo Kennedy, a black couple from Mississippi, came to us. They were treasures and stayed until 1951 when Lorenzo died. We went over to Oakland where they had a little house, and we sat at his bedside when he died. Then, in 1953, Lillian came back, and stayed until 1966.

Glaser: Tell me about the children.

Bissinger: Well, Peggy was the oldest and Paul followed by thirteen months.

Glaser: Thirteen months! That's like having twins.

Bissinger: Yes, maybe worse because they're doing things at a little bit different time. It was a little work, but I had a nurse. I had a miscarriage sometime along the way and then Tom came along six years later.

Glaser: What are they doing now?

Bissinger: Paul is here. He's the only one that's here. Paul is an investment counselor, and he's been absolutely wonderful to me. He has been married to Kathy (Kathleen Bell from New York) for forty years and they have two sons, Stephen and Matthew, both in the arts fields. Stephen is a very successful sound designer, and Matt is at the Art Institute in San Francisco studying photography. He's a wonderful photographer already. I very much enjoy them all.

Peggy is married to Dr. Peter Pressman, a breast surgeon in New York, and they have been married twenty-eight years. She runs Peter's office and they have two sons, Michael and Jeffrey. Jeffrey is in Los Angeles working for Disney, and Michael lives and works in Florida. Peggy is a lovely and beautiful person. I go to New York to visit them once a year, and they come out here once or more times a year. We don't see each other often enough, but she phones often. I think I'll go to their house in West Hampton, Long Island, over Labor Day this year. I love it there and it is such pretty country and their house is lovely with beautiful grounds, and I love being with them. {1999: I recently enjoyed a great trip with them to Greece and a cruise through the the Greek Islands and Turkey, to Istanbul.}

Tom is married to Kristen (Cutler), who is a dancer. He was a hippie in the sixties, and he was in Selma, Alabama, participating in the Civil Rights march there for about three weeks. Then he lived in New York in Greenwich Village, where he was a theatrical director as his father was. After a time, he got a job in a theater in Philadelphia, where they lived until they subsequently moved to Pottstown, in the farmlands country. Tom and Kristen have two children: a son, Zachary (Zak) and a daughter, Esther (Esse) who is now living in Argentina. She's just turned twenty. She's living in Buenos Aires doing what she had wanted to do for a long time, which is to learn Latin dances, especially the tango, and studying Spanish, which she is fluent in already.

Glaser: What is Tom doing now?

Bissinger: After this theater folded in Philadelphia, he and Kristin moved out to the farmlands near Pottstown. They have this 200-year-

old farmhouse and twelve acres of property, and this house, which they have fixed up quite a bit. It's beautiful country out there. I try to go there every year. There's a spiral staircase that goes like this [makes a corkscrew gesture] and steep stairs, so it's not easy for me. The house is old and the floors are uneven and so forth. They fixed up the kitchen which is very nice. I love being there otherwise, because it's so beautiful, and I enjoy being with them. I take these wonderful walks. Tom is teaching playwriting at a couple of schools.

His son, Zachary (Zak), is twenty-five. He called me recently to tell me he's engaged. He's the first grandchild to get married. He's been going with a girl from India, Sunit, who is a lovely person. She's a medical student, second year in medical school, and he's a math teacher in Atlanta. They both live in Atlanta where they both went to Emory University. The wedding will be in Shreveport, Louisiana, where her parents live.

Community Involvement

Glaser: Well, I think we're going to go back to [in unison] Paul.

Bissinger: Oh, to Paul, that's where we want to be.

Glaser: You were married in '32, and he was elected president of the Junior Chamber of Commerce in '35.

Bissinger: Right.

Glaser: A very active young man.

Bissinger: Very. Very active doing his theatrical thing and civic duties.

Glaser: Was he a participating father?

Bissinger: Yes, I mean as much as I was. I don't think either of us were very good parents.

Glaser: Why do you say that?

Bissinger: We left our children with nurses and we traveled a lot. He went east on business every spring. I went with him and we were gone for several weeks at a time. My sister, Nell, lived next door with her children and so it seemed that there were

people around. My mother was here and nurses and everything, but it's not the same as a mother being home, and I was away a lot. I think we both were a little negligent as parents. You know, good mothers don't leave so often and I don't think we were home enough. And even when Paul was stationed during the war in Savannah, Georgia, I went with him and left my children home with the nurse and my sister next door for a few months with home visits for Christmas.

Glaser: How long were you gone?

Bissinger: I think it was three months. I came home for Christmas on the train--four days and nights on the train--and went right back again. It was about three months. Now, you know, I have a million regrets, but it's too late.

Glaser: I want to go back and have you talk more about what Paul did as the president of the Junior Chamber of Commerce. In your scrapbooks that I looked through, there were a lot of things that he did do as the president. He worked for the reconstruction of the Presidio and was active in promoting Safety Week.

Bissinger: This was the Chamber of Commerce? It wasn't the Junior Chamber, was it, when he did all these things? At least I don't remember it as being the Junior Chamber. It doesn't matter, I mean he did them both.

Glaser: Yes, it was when he was the president of the Junior Chamber of Commerce because he was elected president of the full Chamber of Commerce after he came back from the war. Among other things he did was he worked for having Yerba Buena as the site for the 1938 Exposition.

Bissinger: Yes. That's right. You know, he was quite awesome.

Glaser: In 1937 he was asked by former President Herbert Hoover to serve on a committee to raise funds for a Boy Scout extension program. Were you involved in any of these activities with him?

Bissinger: No, I just went along to all these events--all the dinners and events that you have to do. Treasure Island I was not involved in, but you know, I went with him a lot.

Glaser: What was your feeling about that? Did you enjoy doing that?

Bissinger: I wish I had enjoyed it more, I could have gotten a whole lot more out of it than I did. I thought it kind of a nuisance. I

did enjoy a lot of it once I got there, and then I used to say, "Oh, another one of these things." We sat at head tables, and who knows who you're going to sit next to. I wasn't very good at conversation anyway. I was too young for a lot of this.

Glaser: You have to have a store of small talk for those occasions.

Bissinger: Yes, well, I could do that somewhat, but I sure would have enjoyed it more now. I have learned a lot more and I would have done better. You go into crowds and it's like being a political person. I mean they barge ahead and everybody's shaking their hands and you trail along behind. I liked it; I was very proud of him.

Glaser: Did you feel as if you were just a follower, that you didn't really have your own identity?

Bissinger: Well, sort of, but we entertained a lot at home. Paul loved to entertain, so lots of people came to our house and then I felt like somebody because I was the hostess and people knew me. But I didn't have too much self-esteem or self-confidence in that respect then. I could have done much better today.

Glaser: I would think it's hard to have that sense of self when it's your husband that's the center of all of it.

Bissinger: Yes, it is, I guess. I think he could have been mayor. He had been asked to run for mayor. I certainly discouraged that, but he didn't want to do it either.

Wartime Naval Service

Glaser: I found that before going off to war he was on the board of Mount Zion Hospital, and then when he went into war he was in the navy.

Bissinger: Yes.

Glaser: Tell me about that.

Bissinger: He first went to officer's training school in Chicago, and when he came home he was told to go to New York, so I went with him. No, after that he was stationed in Savannah, Georgia, and we had a house on Tybee Island, which was a beach where the navy station was. We were there over Thanksgiving and Paul was also a wonderful cook. For Thanksgiving dinner in Savannah, Paul

left me with stuffing that he made and told me just what to do. When it came time to do it, I phoned him at the naval base and said I didn't know where to put the stuffing. (Obviously I was no cook.) [laughter] Anyway, we had company for dinner for Thanksgiving there and it was okay. It was an interesting experience because the South was so different.

Glaser: What did you do with yourself during the day when he was--

Bissinger: I don't know. Nothing. I did some sewing. I didn't do anything. I took walks on the beach. After that, Paul came home and was told to report to New York for further orders. I went with him again, and we hung around New York for a few days. Then he was ordered to go overseas, and so on Washington's birthday he left. I don't know if he knew where he was going, but he didn't tell me. He went over on the first LST to cross the Atlantic Ocean. It was one of those little skinny boats that didn't usually cross the Atlantic Ocean, but this was the beginning of the war. It went first to Bizerte in northern Africa, and then Paul was in the landings of Sicily, Salerno, Anzio, and southern France.

After a year and a half of that he came home with what was called combat fatigue. He came back on a hospital ship. So I went east again, met him at St. Alban's Hospital in New York, and he seemed fine. He had been sitting on deck getting sunburned on the way home on the ship and he looked good. Then he was sent to Morro Bay where we had a house for several months. Again I commuted by train. I think we had been to Coronado first. Yes, he was told to go to Coronado to get his orders, so we hung around Coronado in southern California for a few days. Then he was sent to Morro Bay, where I had the children come down and spend the summer there so at least I wasn't away from them the whole time. And then the war was over in late summer, 1945.

Glaser: He was awarded--

Bissinger: Oh, yes, he was awarded the Legion of Merit and was advanced to Lieutenant Commander and then finally Commander. He did serve with distinction, as it says on the award. After the war he never talked about those experiences, he never would, but I understand that it's typical for men who have been in overseas wars.

Glaser: Did he join a veteran's group or get together with other veterans?

Bissinger: No, he had something to do with the naval--academy? Did you read anything like that?

Glaser: No.

Bissinger: Well, I think he was involved in something to do with the Department of the Navy in a small way.

Resumption of Civic Affairs

Glaser: When he came back, did he enter into the family business again? At that point I imagine he was president.

Bissinger: No, he wasn't because his father, who died at the age of eighty-eight, would never let Paul be president. His father insisted on staying president himself. You never hear of an old man who doesn't want his son to become president, but this man was different. Paul was vice president. He was pretty unhappy about that.

Glaser: Did he ever become president?

Bissinger: No.

Glaser: You mean that he predeceased his father?

Bissinger: His father died and then Paul sold the business.

Glaser: Ah.

Bissinger: His father was tough. Newton Bissinger was a tough man. When Mayor George Christopher asked Paul to be a police commissioner, Paul was thrilled, as I was. I thought it was just great. When he told his father, he said, "Absolutely not, my boy. Absolutely not!" He was an old-fashioned German dictator. Paul came home so crestfallen. It was a shame. I said to Paul, "I won't hear of this. It just won't do." So I asked his father to go to lunch with me, and as I took my courage in my hands, with a martini to help, I told him that Paul must be a police commissioner. And he was.

We kissed and said good-bye after lunch was over. But I decided that he just couldn't go any further that time.

Glaser: Was that the only time anyone had ever stood up to him?

Bissinger: Probably. [laughter] But that was pretty bad. Paul by that time must have been in his fifties, at least. How a man can tell his fifty-year-old son that you can't do something at that age, that's pretty outrageous.

Glaser: Paul must have been a very good president of the Chamber of Commerce because--

Bissinger: Oh, he was. In fact, when I read about it now I'm awed. You know, he was quite awesome. I knew how good he was, I knew that, but it is pretty impressive to remember today what he did. When I read all this material in the scrapbooks, when I go back to the times that he was doing all this, he was very farsighted and creative. All these things like plans for the Ferry Building area and the Presidio and all that.

Glaser: And he led a successful fight to save Hunter's Point and the shipyard.

Bissinger: That was a big one. That's when he met Lyndon Johnson, who came out here to see it. Yes.

Glaser: Was that a difficult fight?

Bissinger: No, it wasn't. I think Johnson was very helpful to him. I guess it was the city politicians who wanted to get rid of it. This was not acceptable to Paul.

Glaser: And he had a very good relationship with labor.

Bissinger: Oh, yes.

Glaser: He looked upon the Bay Area as one economic unit. That's farsighted.

Bissinger: Yes.

Glaser: I would imagine most other businessmen were looking just at San Francisco.

Bissinger: Yes. He was very farsighted and very creative about everything he did.

Glaser: Under his leadership, the Chamber made a special effort to become acquainted with foreign students studying in the Bay Area, for these are their countries' future leaders. Now that certainly is creative.

Bissinger: Yes.

Glaser: When he was president of the Chamber, it instituted the Second Century of Progress program to promote economic development. The observation of the Chamber centennial was during his presidency.

Bissinger: Yes.

Glaser: Going through the scrapbooks is edifying because it gave me the chance to learn all that Paul did. For instance, in 1954 he was elected president of the San Francisco Federated Fund, which conducted the annual campaign for United Crusade. Earlier than that, in '51, he was named a director of the Wells Fargo Bank. He and his father gave the bank the director's table from the old Bank of California office in Virginia City.

Bissinger: Well, I guess I'd forgotten that.

Glaser: In 1950 he was chairman of the Western Lay Advisory Committee of United Service for New Americans and also associated secretary of United Service for New Americans. So one would be the Western and one the national.

Bissinger: I don't know anything more about that, either.

Glaser: I have the date for his being appointed a member of the police commission. That was in '56 to '64.

Bissinger: Yes.

Glaser: In your scrapbook there are pictures of you attending--

Bissinger: The policemen's ball. [laughs] Oh, it was a kick. It was really funny.

Glaser: Was it fun or funny?

Bissinger: Oh, it wasn't all that much fun. One of the three police commissioners, Tom Mellon, was great. And Harold McKinnon couldn't have been nicer. They were called the three Boy Scouts. They were really good picks, you know. Christopher was such a good mayor, anyway, and these three men were such good citizens and they did a lot for the police department, I think.

Do you have United Airlines there, the directorship?

Glaser: Yes. Also he was vice president of the San Francisco Musical Association, the director of YMCA, the board of trustees of the World Affairs Council, and director of the National Council of

Christians and Jews, and a Trustee of Golden Gate University, which is now over one hundred years old. It is pretty much a technical college, and mainly a night school for people who are already working. It's on Mission St. In 1961 he was awarded the Chronicle's gold medal for significant achievement. He was one of several men named "Builders of the Bay Area." Yes, he was terribly capable.

Glaser: That's a lot of activity.

Bissinger: How about the Symphony? He was vice president of the Symphony.

Glaser: Was that important to him?

Bissinger: Definitely.

Glaser: These probably were all important.

Bissinger: Yes, they were.

Glaser: The Golden Gate University I don't know anything at all about. Was that founded post World War II?

Bissinger: It's on Mission Street. It's over one hundred years old and is pretty much a technical college and mainly a night school for people who are already working. Louis Heilbron is on the board.

Hobbies and Homes

Glaser: What was really interesting to me was that he had a print shop in your home and he worked with your mother on fine printing.

Bissinger: No, he worked with me. [laughs] No, Mother was the bookbinder.

Glaser: It said he worked with his mother-in-law and they had an exhibit in a typographical section of the Golden Gate International Exposition.

Bissinger: That's not quite accurate. Where did you get that information?

Glaser: Everything I found was from your material.

Bissinger: That isn't quite accurate because Paul was the master printer, I was the typesetter. He was the creator of the design and

format. We printed a book that my mother bound. That might have been in there, but it wasn't that he worked with my mother at all.

Glaser: It's unfair that you're not mentioned.

Bissinger: Yes, it is. [laughs]

Glaser: Well, we'll correct that right now.

Bissinger: No, I worked with him. He created whatever we did and I set the type. We had, I think, two or three fonts of type and we had a small proof press which took a lot of work because we had to wet each piece of paper before printing. It was kind of a slow way of doing things, but it turned out well. I can show you--I don't think I have anything up here--but downstairs.

Glaser: It sounds like special paper. Where did you get it?

Bissinger: Paul would get it. I don't know, I guess some specialty place. I'm sure he consulted with the Grabhorns. Of course the Grabhorns were good friends of ours, of my mother especially.

We did a lot of brochures and broadsides and invitations. But we did print another book that my mother's bookbinding teacher, Belle McMurtry Young's husband, had translated from the French. We printed it for her and then she bound it for us.

##

Bissinger: As I told you, Paul built this little house in Carmel Highlands before we were married. After a few years we exchanged it for a house on the beach so the children could be nearby. We had that house until after the war, when Paul felt he didn't want to drive so far to get to a country home. In those days, I think it was at least four hours. I guess it's quicker now.

Then we foolishly bought a house in Diablo. We had friends there, Al and Esse Layton. They had been living there for quite a while, and we went over to see them one day. They said, "Why don't you get a house here? It's so wonderful." So we impulsively did. It was a lovely old house and we renovated it and had a good architect, Hervey Clark. The house was on the golf course and we put in a swimming pool. But it was too hot for me, I didn't like it. The summers there are very hot. Do you know Diablo at all?

Glaser: Yes.

Bissinger: Why are you laughing?

Glaser: Diablo is a select community, and in your scrapbooks you have photographs and magazine clippings of the house and it looked lovely.

Bissinger: Oh, it was. Yes, it was a lovely old house and as I said, we renovated it. I have to say I didn't like the East Bay because of the long commute. I hate that Bay Bridge.

Glaser: But then you went to Marin County?

Bissinger: Yes, we went to Kentfield.

Glaser: And you had a bridge there. [laughs] I'm going to keep you to it because now you had a bridge to go across, too.

Bissinger: Yes, but the Golden Gate is easier. If you cross the Golden Gate Bridge in the middle of the day, there's not much traffic. It's a much easier commute and it's shorter; it's only half an hour or less if it's in the middle of the day.

So we built a house in Kent Woodlands up on top of a hill. Wurster was the architect and Larry Halprin was the landscape architect.

Glaser: Was it cooler?

Bissinger: Well, it would get pretty hot, but Diablo stayed hot at night; Kent Woodlands didn't stay as hot. No, it was cooler. And I just like Marin County better.

Glaser: How long did you keep that house?

Bissinger: I sold it after Paul died, so that was in 1969 or 1970. I guess we built it in the late forties or early fifties. We had it quite a while.

Glaser: Does that mean that the Diablo house came before Paul went off to war?

Bissinger: No, after the war. After the war Paul said he didn't want to go down to Carmel anymore. He thought it was too big a distance, so he wanted get something closer, so we bought in Diablo. Then we got something still closer after that. I think we sold Diablo in five years, we were not there very long. Then I sold the Kent Woodlands house after Paul died. And now I'm glad to say I have nothing. You know, it gets to be a burden.

Glaser: It's a responsibility.

Bissinger: Yes, you're packing up all the time.

Final Illness, 1969

Glaser: Tell me about Paul's final illness.

Bissinger: That started in 1968 when he had lymphoma. I noticed a little lump under his ear. I'd been watching it for a long time and I said, "I don't like that. Why don't you see about it?" So he went to see about it and indeed it was malignant. So we went down to Stanford three times a week for radiation. Henry Kaplan who treated Paul was the famous radiologist. He was a wonderful, brilliant, kind and caring man and we became close friends. They pronounced him cured after six months. During the treatment he got a terrible case of shingles all over his body from the radiation. But they pronounced him cured, thank goodness. And we moved in here over Labor day, 1969.

Glaser: You mean in this present house?

Bissinger: This house. We sold the house on Divisadero Street earlier that year, and we moved in here over Labor Day. Paul had already had a scare. We were over there in Kent Woodlands one weekend and Paul was down underneath the house where he had a workshop. That's another thing he did. He built tables and things. He came up to the patio and said, "I just lost my speech for a minute. It's pretty scary." I said, "It sure is." We called a doctor and the doctor said to come in. He did say that he had had a warning of a stroke but that it was safe to go to Europe because he thought Paul could safely travel. So we did go to Europe and he died there in London.

When we got to Paris, we went out to have a drink at an outdoor cafe at the Rond Point and he said that he was dizzy. The next day we were invited to lunch by several business people and all of a sudden I could see (he was across the table from me) that he was stricken. He couldn't speak again for a moment, so I knew things were not good.

When we got to London we were out walking one day, and he said he was dizzy again. I guess we had been there a couple of days or more. I woke up the next morning and he was totally paralyzed and speechless. I called for an ambulance, we went to the hospital, and he never regained his speech or movement.

This went on for three and a half weeks and he died there. We had planned to leave for home the next day (after the stroke) but now we had a few weeks in the hospital before we were able to fly home.

The hospital was good. I was lucky not to be in one of those managed care hospitals. You know, a big one with wards. Paul was in the London Clinic. That's where Elizabeth Taylor goes and that kind of people. We were there for three and a half weeks.

Glaser: A private hospital, not part of the government plan?

Bissinger: Yes. I was lucky there. He had a nice room. The nurses were not wonderful except one who came over from one of the big hospitals every day, and she was marvelous. But without ever regaining anything, he died--kidneys just broke down and everything else did.

I was fortunate that the United Airlines Western European manager was there at my side all the time taking very good care of me. Peggy came over to be with me, and Paul Jr. came over towards the end, and this man arranged for Pan Am to take us all home. It was so sad and he was only sixty-four. As you can imagine, I was totally undone.

Glaser: That's an awfully young age for that to happen.

Talk about how Paul and other former patients raised funds to expand the facilities of radiation therapy.

Bissinger: Yes, he raised a million dollars for that. It was for the facilities and the waiting room, which had been unpleasantly small. The waiting room was a tiny room and crowded. So now they've built fine facilities and his picture and his name are on the wall. It's the Paul A. Bissinger Department of Radiology. There was a lovely dedication ceremony and it made me sad that he wasn't there to see it.

Glaser: Because he died just the year before it was dedicated.

Bissinger: Yes. Well, he could have accomplished a lot more in his life, but he had accomplished more in a short life than most men in a longer life span.

Glaser: I think so. There's always the regret that somebody who is accomplishing a lot is taken early.

Bissinger: I think in those days our diets were such--I mean he ate everything in sight, and loved to cook things like crepes Suzette, so that may have contributed to it, and he smoked a pipe.

Glaser: Had he had annual checkups or something that would show the condition of his arteries?

Bissinger: I don't think so, although he certainly saw his doctor regularly.

III BOB SELLER, MARRIAGE 1972

Tennis Champion; Jobs

Glaser: So you were a widow for quite a while?

Bissinger: I was fifty-eight. My mother was forty-eight when my father died. I was a widow for three and a half years, then I married Bob.

Glaser: Tell me about Bob Seller.

Bissinger: Bob was a tennis player, a tennis champion. He had grown up as a junior champion. He lived across the street from Alta Plaza Park, so the tennis courts were right there. He had attended UC Berkeley and when he was nineteen or twenty, Bill Tilden sent him a telegram and asked him if he would join his tour, so Bob of course took it. I think the amount of pay was something like $500 a month, but then during the tour Tilden reneged on that and he didn't even pay Bob. But anyway that was a pretty good time for Bob because he played with all the top champions and they toured around the country.

Then he went to work. Not right away, because he played a lot of tournaments which he won at some of the big tournament centers. He never played Wimbledon, but he played Forest Hills and other important tournaments. Bob never had much money. He once had a service station on California Street. And he was also a gambler. I have a lot of material on Bob here. I have a book where he's quoted as "in the gambling world." Anyway, he was indeed a gambler. He used to spend his time in Emeryville at one of these poker places, and he would be there for twenty-four hours on end.

Glaser: Was he a successful gambler?

Bissinger: No. [laughter] In fact, that's why he stopped. He was broke and he had by that time gotten married and had a child, so he had to stop gambling. He had to earn a living. He didn't know what to do, so he went to work on the waterfront supervising the loading and unloading of container ships.

Glaser: Wasn't he a longshoreman's clerk?

Bissinger: Yes. He discharged ships, meaning unloading them, I think he was in charge of overseeing it mostly, but he wore a hard hat and he worked at night. When I met him he was working nights on the waterfront. That's quite a switch from Paul Bissinger!

Glaser: Right. Seller is a German name. Was he part of the German Jewish group?

Bissinger: Yes. He, too, was born in Portland. He had a lot of relatives up there. He retired from the waterfront after we were married a few years and then just played tennis. He went out to the Golden Gate Park tennis courts every day.

Senior Tennis Tournaments

Bissinger: We traveled. We had wonderful trips. We traveled to the National Senior tennis tournaments, every summer, starting in the spring. It was hard court, indoor, grass, and clay. The clay was in Virginia. The grass was wonderful, that was at Agawam Hunt in Rhode Island near Newport, and it was really beautiful because you see just acres of green grass tennis courts. The indoor was here at the San Francisco Tennis Club or in Boise, Idaho. Hard court was in different places. The tournaments were all a lot of fun for me because I got to play tennis with the wives and that was great because it was always a good game, most of them were better than I was. We went to nice places, motels, some better than others. He won a lot of the tournaments. I don't have any of his trophies now because I've given them all to his family. He won several grand slams, which is all four tournaments, and the four of them he won playing doubles. He was a amazing player, very fast on his feet. For a while I did have the trophies all up here, but they're gone. There are two up there on the shelf, those two, which he got at the TransAmerica Tournament. They gave him an honorable trophy for having played in these tournaments when he was young.

Another travel tennis trip was with People to People, an organization which does trips for golfers, and just about any kind of groups, and they are somehow connected to the State Department. The year we went, we covered five European countries: Spain, Germany, Switzerland, Denmark and France. We played as a team against their teams, I got to play in a few events, and there were about twenty of us.

Bob had a good tennis life, but that's about all he did. He never gambled again but he had one volunteer job. He volunteered at Open Hand, delivering meals to AIDS patients for many years. He started when Ruth Brinker first started her operation out of a kitchen in Trinity Episcopal church on the corner of Bush and Octavia, and then he went out to wherever it was when they built a big place with a huge kitchen.

Death on the Tennis Court, 1996

Glaser: Then he died?

Bissinger: Well, he died just two years ago in 1996. He dropped dead on the tennis court at the Golden Gate Park tennis courts which was a wonderful way for him to go. We saw that happen now and then with these old men. They must have nine or ten entries in the nineties age group for these grand slam tournaments.

Glaser: Oh, my.

Bissinger: Yes, some of them go on even playing singles.

Glaser: Singles, oh, my!

Bissinger: Yes, they're slower, but they do it. So they play on until they're ready to drop, which he did.

Glaser: Well, as you say, that's a wonderful way to go.

Bissinger: Wonderful way to go, yes.

Glaser: He was eighty-six?

Bissinger: Yes.

IV A LASTING INTEREST IN ART

[Interview 3: October 28, 1998] ##

Early Classes

Glaser: Tell me more about your art education. I think in kindergarten you had some classes.

Bissinger: Oh, yes. This was the family of Ansley Salz in whose back yard we had kindergarten. Do you have that picture? I have it here.

[tape interruption]

Glaser: Now you're reading from Mrs. Oppenheimer's interview of you?

Bissinger: Yes. "Miss Lazerus came and taught Nell and me at home. I didn't go to school until the second grade. I went to kindergarten where there must have been just play because Miss Lazarus taught me the first grade at home. The kindergarten was at the Ansley Salz home on Clay St. Street. The school was in their backyard facing Washington Street. It was more or less a private affair, the children of friends of my parents and the Ansley Salzes. There must have been twenty of us. Their backyard was large and had a seesaw and swings. I don't remember what we did there. Actually the kindergarten later became the Presidio Open Air School. It was built on the lot adjoining the Salzes' backyard. Mrs. Salz founded it. She was not a teacher, nor the principal. I was about five or six when I went to kindergarten there."

That's all. I know Nell didn't go to school until the third grade and I went to school in the second.

Glaser: But there were art classes there?

Bissinger: Later, I think at Mrs. Salz's home or at a studio, maybe Forgie (Mrs. Lawrence) Arnstein's, I don't remember which, we learnt sculpturing. I made a little black head about this big that used to be on my parent's living room table. I don't know what happened to it. I've never seen it again.

Glaser: Did you study sculpture with your uncle, Edgar Walter?

Bissinger: I went to Paris first and studied there with a friend of his, a French sculptor, Monsieur Vuerchoz. I went to the Left Bank and studied with him for a year. When I came back from Europe I went to the San Francisco Art Institute, and my uncle was teaching there so I started to take from him. Then I got married instead, and I never took it up again. I decided I wasn't going to be an artist.

Glaser: Wouldn't you have done that just for your own satisfaction?

Bissinger: You know, my satisfaction seemed to be in marrying Paul Bissinger. [laughter] I didn't have anything else on my mind, so I guess I wasn't very motivated. I became motivated later on in life, but I don't think I thought of doing that again.

War Years

Glaser: Tell me about your activities during the war years. I know that many times you were away because you traveled with your husband, but while you were here in the city.

Bissinger: I was a nurse's aide at the San Francisco General Hospital. I took a training course first. I guess it was about six weeks or so, and then we were sent to hospitals. I was assigned to Ward J, which was a forty-bed ward. Fortunately it was the men's surgical ward, because the women were very complaining. When I did sometimes have to go over to the women's orthopaedic ward, the women were always complaining and asking for things, the men didn't. The men just sort of talked to each other and it was much easier.

Glaser: Were the women WACs or nurses? Oh, this was not the military hospital?

Bissinger: No, that was later when I was at Letterman. I guess I was at S.F. General two years, about as long as Paul was away. He was gone for a year and a half, and then when he came back I didn't

want to go out as far as San Francisco General so I went to Letterman. I was in the paraplegic ward. That was very hard.

Glaser: What did you do on the ward?

Bissinger: I made beds, took temperature and pulse, and the bedpans. The dirty work. But I had an awfully good time at the two hospitals. It was a good experience. The nurses were nice. They were very nice to me and so I really enjoyed that. I felt like I was doing what people should do during the war. I felt like I was doing something needed.

Glaser: Sounds as if it was quite fulfilling.

Bissinger: It was very. How many times a week did I go? Three times a week. My children were in school. I put Tom in the Sacred Heart Convent kindergarten because they kept him all day. So I was busy and didn't have to worry about getting home early.

Glaser: How did you handle rationing during the war years?

Bissinger: I guess just like everybody did. You know, you got your ration and just did what you could. It was all right.

Glaser: Were you able to keep your house staff, your help?

Bissinger: Yes.

Glaser: They didn't go off to war or to the industries, like the Kaiser shipyard?

Bissinger: No. I had a cook, she was an old lady. I had a nurse for the children. I had just the two and they stayed with me.

Glaser: Quite a few people had Japanese help and they were interned, they were sent away to camps.

Bissinger: I didn't have any Japanese help at that time.

Glaser: When you traveled to be with your husband, was it difficult to get a train reservation?

Bissinger: No. I traveled to meet him when he was stationed in Savannah, Georgia. I went there and commuted back and forth by train, like four days and four nights on the train. In those days, as you remember, it was slow.

Glaser: I do remember that not only was it slow, but it was hard to get bookings because the trains were used to move soldiers and sailors around.

Bissinger: I don't remember any difficulty, but I didn't travel all that much. During the war I went to Savannah, Georgia, and back and I don't think I went any other place. Then I went east because he came back on the hospital ship with what they called combat fatigue in those days. I don't know what they call it now.

Glaser: Nervous breakdown, I guess.

Bissinger: Yes. They didn't use those words.

Trip to Japan

Glaser: Then you had your first trip to the Orient in--

Bissinger: 1956?

Glaser: No, I've seen '51 and '53 in your scrapbooks.

Bissinger: Well, I have a diary, so I can find out. But I'm not sure I wrote in the diary the first time we went. Oh, yes, I did. It was Japan, and it was mind-blowing. It was so exciting. I was so lucky to be taken along because, you know, men didn't take their wives in those days.

Glaser: Why didn't they, was it a matter of expense?

Bissinger: I think it wasn't done because the Japanese wives didn't go out with them, and so I was always the only wife. Sometimes there would be some wives along, and they gave geisha dinners for us every night. A lot of entertainment, maybe too much entertainment, but it was wonderful. I went with him every time. I shouldn't have left the children the way I did, but those are among my regrets.

Glaser: That first trip was to Japan, obviously, if you speak about the geishas.

Bissinger: Yes.

Glaser: Was this the start of your interest in Oriental art?

Bissinger: Well, I became interested in it while I was there. We did not have the Brundage collection yet. Actually what all started it, I guess, was my friend in New York, Johnny Falk--that was Pauline Berwald's husband. Johnny had one of the great private collections in the country. It was Chinese ceramics and bronzes mostly. So I had kind of fallen in love with his things. In fact, I even bought my first objects when I was there in New York, with his advice and help. When I came home I knew I was hooked.

After our first trip to Japan I came back and this group of people were waiting for me, saying, "Will you join us? We have a chance to get the Brundage Collection."

Glaser: Did you purchase things on that first trip to Japan?

Bissinger: Yes, I did, nothing wonderful. I bought a few things, not much. When we went on those trips to Japan, I would be going to the dealers all the time and selecting things. Then I'd say to Paul, "Will you come and look at them?" And of course as husbands often do, he would say, "Okay, that's enough." We could have spent more money and we could have bought more things and maybe better too. If the men are collectors themselves, then they go all out, money's no object. But if it's the wife who's the collector and the husband goes along with it--he couldn't have been nicer about it, but "enough's enough." [laughter]

Glaser: And you had your purchases shipped home?

Bissinger: Yes, because at that time Paul's company did so much shipping of hides that the shipping companies would just ship them home for me. So that was great, I had free shipping.

Glaser: That's marvelous. You started to say that when you got home--Society for Asian Art and the Asian Art Museum--

Bissinger: Oh, this group of friends were waiting for me. The friends being Katherine Caldwell who was a professor of Asian Art at Mills College, Marjorie Stern, Alice Kent, Charlie and Kitty Page, and Jane Smyth, who now lives in the East, and--. Where is my first copy of the society? [searches for copy]

Glaser: These are the directors for the Society for Asian Art?

Bissinger: Yes, this is the core group [reading]: the co-chairmen were Mrs. Roger Kent and Mr. Paul Bissinger. The vice chairmen were Ed Grabhorn and Dr. Wallace Smith. The treasurer was Charles Page and the secretary was Mrs. Carl Stern. However, this is

not the first newsletter. It says here, "The Society celebrates forty years." This is when the museum opened.

Glaser: I note that the museum was founded in 1958.

Bissinger: Yes, this should be earlier. I don't seem to have one. This tells the story of the Society for Asian Art if you want to xerox that.

Glaser: Yes, I think that would be nice for your volume.

Bissinger: Oh, here we are. "The Society for Asian Art incorporated in March 1958." The original ones were Alice Kent, Marjorie Stern, Charlie and Kitty Page, Katherine Caldwell who was a professor of Asian Art at Mills College, and Marjorie Bissinger. Martha Gerbode and Jane Smyth came a little bit later and William (Stan) S. Picher.

The Asian Art Museum and Avery Brundage

Glaser: This is what I learned from Katherine Field Caldwell's oral history.[1] She said the director of Asian Art in Honolulu, who was Robert Griffith, gave her the idea of getting the Brundage Collection for San Francisco because Brundage had broken his ties to the Chicago Art Institute. Her friend Dorothy Erskine arranged a luncheon for influential San Francisco women: Marjorie Stern and Alice Kent and others. At the Sterns' home the Society for Asian Art was formed. They needed to raise funds for a wing of the DeYoung Museum for the collection. A public relations firm was employed and the women went with slide shows to various organizations. They had fortune cookies made with the message inside, "Vote for the Brundage Collection." A bond issue for $3,000,000 was passed to build an addition to the de Young.

She recalled you were not in the original luncheon group but not too much later came into the organization and were enormously helpful. She said you had acquired some Chinese works of art of quality and were very active and an effective promoter.

---

[1]Katherine Field Caldwell, *Family and Berkeley Memories, and the Study and Profession of Asian Art*, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 1993, pp. 209-210, 214.

What did you do to promote the Asian art?

Bissinger: I just worked with the others, I didn't do anything especially different. I worked with the others to pass the bond issue, and we went around to churches out at Hunter's Point and Diamond Heights, all over the city. We talked to the ministers of these churches, and they talked to their parishioners about the Brundage Collection and passing the bond issue. We worked very hard at that and then passed the bond measure by a two-thirds majority, which was truly remarkable.

It was very impressive considering that people didn't yet know much about Asian Art. Mills College and UC Berkeley had courses in Asian art, and I took three semesters from Katherine Caldwell at Mills because I realized I hadn't yet learnt anything about Asian art. After that, I felt that it hadn't done enough for me, so I then took three semesters for credit at UC Berkeley, under Yvon d'Argencé, who Brundage then chose to become the first director of the Asian Art Museum.

Our little group had such a good time, we laughed a lot. You know how it is when you're creating a new project, and you're starting out fresh. We courted Brundage all over the place--Santa Barbara and Chicago, San Francisco, as well as his wife Elizabeth, who was a very lovely intelligent woman, and who also had something to say about the selection of his objects.

Glaser: What was he like?

Bissinger: Brundage?

Glaser: Yes.

Bissinger: You saw his picture, he was a strong silent man. He didn't have much to say and he was tough. He drove a hard bargain. A lot of people didn't like him, but I loved him because of what he did for us, and I did like him personally.

He and I used to go dancing at Earthquake Magoon, to Turk Murphy's Dixieland band. That was after his wife died and my husband had died, so the two of us went dancing pretty much whenever he came to town.

Glaser: Was he courting you?

Bissinger: No, he had a lady friend on the Peninsula. No, he was not courting me.

Glaser: Would you have married him if he had courted you?

Bissinger: No, No! [laughs] He was a good deal older than I was.

Glaser: That's a very definite no. [laughs]

Bissinger: Well, he was aloof and tough. I was not attracted to him. I enjoyed being with him. We went to the Mark Hopkins or the Fairmont Hotel, or wherever they had dancing. But we gave up on the hotels because they always had a floor show, and you couldn't dance all the time. But with Turk Murphy you could dance, and Avery was a good dancer and I have always loved to dance. I was not attracted to him, I just enjoyed being with him and dancing.

Glaser: When you say he was tough, how do you mean that?

Bissinger: He drove a hard bargain when it came to drawing up contracts and things like that. He stood up to everybody and usually got his way. We were lucky to get the collection, and I don't think we lost out on anything because of his toughness, and in the end he was reasonable. Everyone was wonderful to him, and of course we all wooed him. We had some funny stories about him and his wife, which I've mostly forgotten. One was about Elizabeth Brundage walking into Jack's Restaurant with two right or left shoes on? That's not really funny.

All the events took place at either Alice and Roger Kent's house in Kentfeld, or Marjorie Stern's house or Paul and my house, (our two houses just around the corner from each other). In fact, the bylaws of the Society for Asian Art were drawn up at my house. Marjorie Stern kept the library at her house because people donated books. And a lot of the scholars from the East came out and lectured to us. We had many of those lectures at our houses. Husbands were very good about coming!

Glaser: Was this before the Asian Art Museum was established?

Bissinger: Oh, yes. We just had the Society for Asian Art, which operated out of our homes. It wasn't until the museum was built that we had an office there.

Glaser: But you did fundraising, didn't you? In going through your material, I read about a Marco Polo Ball that resulted in a $100,000 fund to benefit the endowment fund of the museum.

Bissinger: You know, I never liked fundraising. I don't do that. [laughter] I will suggest names to them and help them in any

way I can; I just cannot ask people for money. But fundraising, yes, when we put on these benefits, I have always worked on them. That picture of me that I just gave you, was taken at the twenty-fifth anniversary of the museum, for which I was chairman with Patricia Sprincin. I'll do anything like that. I don't want to straight out ask people to give.

Glaser: Aside from the Society for Asian Art, there's the Asian Art Foundation, the Museum Society, the Museum Society Auxiliary and the Connoisseur's Council. Can you talk about each?

Bissinger: The Museum Society and their Auxiliary have nothing to do with us. That is a misconception because so often in the paper you'll read that something took place in the de Young Museum that should have read the Asian Art Museum. We have really very little to do with them except that we share guards, engineers, et cetera, in our city budgets.

Glaser: The Museum Society is the de Young rather than the Asian Art Museum?

Bissinger: Yes.

Glaser: What about the Connoisseur's Council?

Bissinger: The Connoisseur's Council, that's us. And now we have something called the Jade Circle, which I am the co-chairman of with Sally Hambrecht.

Glaser: Tell me about the Connoisseur's Council, what is that?

Bissinger: Connoisseur's Council was created by one of our board members, Emmy Bunker, who is a scholar herself. When she was living here with her husband she initiated the Connoisseur's Council, which is for members who pay $1,500 a year, and are interested in the various aspects of Asian Art. They put on events, like visits to other people's homes and collections, interesting trips.

Once a year we have a dinner. At the dinner, the acquisitions committee members have selected two or three important objects that we couldn't possibly afford, because there is no endowment for acquisitions. So at the dinner everyone votes for one of the objects that they would like best for the permanent collection. Whichever object gets the most votes, that is then purchased with the money the Connoisseur's Council has acquired over the year. Besides this, they have events such as visits to people's homes and collections, and interesting trips. It's a very active group.

And then the Jade Circle, which is a newer group that's two or three years old. I agreed to be a co-chairman of that with Sally Hambrecht, as I already said. The Connoisseur's Council is $1,500 a year, Jade Circle is $2,500. The Jade Circle has events, openings, and wonderful trips like the Yangtze River trip last year. The Jade Circle is also pretty active. They do similar type things as the Connoisseur's Council so there's a little bit of a conflict, but it's okay.

Glaser: To go back to the actual start of the Brundage Collection coming to San Francisco and the start of the Asian Art Museum: in reading James Mack Gerstley's oral history,[2] he said that Mayor Joseph Alioto set up a separate commission and Brundage agreed to the contract and signed it in 1969, the condition of which stated that that would be for his second--

Bissinger: Oh, that was the second collection. Yes, because Brundage had another whole half of his collection that he hadn't given us yet and Los Angeles was trying to get it.

Glaser: The conditions of the contract stated that the city needed to raise $1,500,000 in eighteen months and the same amount in a further eighteen-month period. The day after the contract was signed, Fritz Jewett got a Chicago call from Brundage.

##

Glaser: Brundage needed $350,000 by the next afternoon. Jewett and Gerstley pledged the amount. That's the end of the statement, but Gerstley went on to say that you were a major donor in raising the money that Brundage asked for and wouldn't think of asking anyone for money but were enormously generous.

Bissinger: I guess I was. Not to match Fritz Jewett, of course. You know who he is?

Glaser: No, I don't.

Bissinger: He's the Potlatch Company from Seattle or Tacoma, and they are very wealthy. Actually, he moved down here just before that. The reason he was where he was, as the first chairman of the Asian Art Museum, was that we needed a chairman. When Alioto appointed Jim Gerstley and me (I think we were the first two),

---

[2]James Mack Gerstley, *Executive, U.S. Borax and Chemical Corporation, Trustee, Pomona College, Civic Leader, San Francisco Asian Art Museum*, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 1990, pp. 34, 35-36.

he told us we should form a commission of twenty-seven people. We didn't have a chairman and so I phoned Harold Zellerbach because he was head of the art commission at that time. I asked him if he could find us a chairman for the Asian Art Museum Commission and he did, he found Fritz Jewett. Harold took Fritz and me to lunch and Fritz agreed to take the chairmanship. We used to meet down at his office, in the Alcoa Building. Actually he resigned two or three years ago, I think it was. But Fritz has been very generous, always.

That was how we got started, with Alioto appointing this commission. Alioto was wonderful to us. I always loved him. I thought he was a great man and he was charming, and an excellent mayor. So there was our commission: twenty-seven members. That was after the bond issue had passed, of course. The building was built by Gardiner Daly, and it is totally inadequate now, but we are renovating an old building, the old Main Public Library which we'll move into in the fall of 2002.

Glaser: You'll have a lot more space there.

Bissinger: We'll have a lot more space and I hope I'm still here for the opening! [laughs] That's a few years off.

Glaser: Yvon d'Argencé was the first curator?

Bissinger: Yes, he was director and chief curator.

Glaser: Had he been Mr. Brundage's curator?

Bissinger: No. He had been teaching Asian art at UC Berkeley and he was the professor who taught me in my classes there. Brundage then asked him to be the director and the chief curator and so he gave up his post at UC and came to the museum.

Glaser: I read that after many difficult years they got rid of him and got Rand Castile.

Bissinger: d'Argencé was there from 1963 till 1985, and they were not all difficult years at all, probably just the last few, and then Clarence Shangraw, the chief curator, took over for 1985-86. Rand Castile came in 1986 until 1994, and Emily Sano came in 1994.

Glaser: What was the difficulty?

Bissinger: Well, I wasn't really for it. I was very sorry. Yvon was charming, and I liked him. I got along well with him, and he took me on a lot of trips with him, we had a good relationship.

I was sorry to see him go, but he had a formality about him. He kept the door shut to his office and he seemed kind of unapproachable to some people. I really forget the reasons now, but you know, it only takes a couple of people to get rid of one person, and a couple of people were just intent on doing just that. So it was too bad. I was sorry.

Glaser: Personality aside, did he function well?

Bissinger: Oh yes, he was brilliant. He died last year, he was living in France. He was a wonderful scholar, so he functioned beautifully that way. His personality was something to be desired, but as I say, I got along fine with him.

Glaser: Would you talk about the Asian Art Foundation?

Bissinger: Well, the Asian Art Museum Foundation is simply the body that was formed quite some years ago to handle the money. The commission runs the museum, but it wasn't set up to handle the money. I think they're trying to make some kind of arrangement so that there's not so much confusion, but meanwhile the commission runs the museum and the foundation now has a lot to do with it as well.

Glaser: And you're on both bodies?

Bissinger: Yes.

Glaser: Are you still on the various commission committees that you were on for such a long time?

Bissinger: I'm on the acquisitions committee, I enjoy that the most, and I'm on the executive committee and the exhibitions and publications committee.

I'm co-chairman of the Jade Circle. That's not so much, we don't meet that often. Many decisions can be made on the telephone.

Glaser: Were you or are you [laughs]--sounds legalese, doesn't it--chairman of the trustee commission relations?

Bissinger: No, I don't know about that. I'm not sure it even exists any more.

Glaser: There were some questions from Judith L. Teichman.

Bissinger: Yes, the city attorney.

Glaser: She suggested that you discuss Mr. Brundage's goals for the Asian Art Museum. Was it to develop the museum into the greatest center for the study of Asian art and culture?

Bissinger: Yes, first of all it was called that. It was called the Center for Asian Art and Culture before it became the Asian Art Museum. Judy was very helpful, she met with us a lot. Avery's goal was, yes, to make it the finest center for Asian art and culture in the western world. It's the only museum in the country that's dedicated solely to Asian art. A lot of museums have wonderful Asian art collections, like the Met [Metropolitan Musuem of Art in New York] and the Fine Arts Museum in Boston. St. Louis has a fine collection, Honolulu and Seattle and Kansas City and Cleveland do, but we're the only museum that consists solely of Asian art.

Glaser: And Brundage wanted a separate building, didn't he?

Bissinger: Yes. It's too bad it's attached to the de Young because that's not been a terribly good arrangement. We share the same guards engineers, and utilities, but it's not a great alliance. But we'll be moving, so we'll be independent.

Glaser: How were funds raised for that move into the old city library?

Bissinger: Well, it's been a struggle. We've raised a lot of the money. We have a wonderful board member, Jack Bogart, who has done a terrific job. I think he has at this point, which is quite remarkable in a city where there is seemingly a constant demand for funds for cultural institutions. We got about fifty-five million from the city, from the bond measure that passed. People have been wonderful, and Jack's gotten money from Japan and other Asian countries, as well as from this country.

Glaser: Oh, really?

Bissinger: Oh, yes.

Glaser: I have some more questions about Mr. Brundage. What was his attitude toward acquiring more objects than what he had given you?

Bissinger: That was okay, he didn't object, in fact he was pleased if people wanted to add to his collection.

Glaser: Were you able to sell any of his donations to acquire others?

Bissinger: Yes, we have. We have sold some at auction at Butterfields. Yes, we could do that. He was wonderful in every respect, but

no endowment. It's difficult for a museum to not have an endowment. Things are just that much harder. But we've been doing awfully well. There was a meeting on Monday and we're in good shape. In some ways he was easy to deal with. There was an object I gave the museum and he said, "Well, why didn't that dealer show it to me first?" [laughs]

Glaser: According to an article that I read, he gave you a piece of art.

Bissinger: Yes, I have a very lovely piece of jade. He pulled it out of his pocket one day and said, "Here." [laughs]

Glaser: Oh, casual-like.

Bissinger: Yes.

Glaser: What did you think of his collection? What was your personal reaction?

Bissinger: Oh, it's awesome. He's got objects there that are one of a kind. It's overwhelming, and it never ceases to amaze me. I go through the museum and I see things from Tibet, Bhutan, Mongolia, Southeast Asia, every Asian country. I never cease to marvel at it. There are so many, we have over 12,000 objects. He couldn't have done it today because, in the first place, there's not that much in the market place.

He should have not have left us with that debt because what we had to fill in was more like two million. He had bought and hadn't paid for these objects. He kept buying and buying and buying and the deal was always, "I don't have everything." It was too bad. We gladly paid for it in order to get it, keep it and prevent it from going to Los Angeles who wanted it.

Glaser: You're talking about the second installment of gifts?

Bissinger: Yes.

Glaser: Because you didn't have to pay for individual things?

Bissinger: No, just a large lump sum of objects he hadn't paid for yet.

Glaser: One of the reasons why I ask you to comment on the quality of Mr. Brundage's pieces was that I was speaking with Edith Coliver, and she said that while the bronzes were the best part of the collection, some of the collection were copies, not originals.

Bissinger: I don't think it's true. I know that on display there are no copies. The things that we disposed of, maybe they found that they were copies, maybe they were in storage and weren't as good quality. But the quality of his objects, especially the masterpiece pilgrim pieces, is wonderful.

The only things Brundage didn't buy were paintings. He bought some, but we are very short of paintings, and it's not easy to buy museum-quality paintings today, or you can at a very large price. But we do buy and receive gifts of paintings. Of course, the jade collection is as good as the bronzes, outstanding, and the ceramics and sculptures are very fine. We have been acquiring paintings, but our collection of paintings will never be up to the standard of the Met or Boston, or Kansas City for instance, who were collecting paintings. Brundage liked three-dimensional objects like sculpture and bronzes.

Glaser: Edith also talked about a time when a Thai prince came to take part in a symposium at the museum and was upset to find the museum had a lintel that was not supposed to have left the country.

Bissinger: That's the story of all museums. [laughs] The story of this provenance was that Brundage had to return the Thai lintel that had a figure like Vishnu. A Thai military person stole it and Brundage purchased it from a New York dealer in good faith. This was prior to '66, before we had a building. The lintel was claimed by the Thai government, so we had to send it back.

What else did Edith say?

Glaser: That's it.

Bissinger: The collection overall is of top quality, and the curators are excellent. We have a very good staff, and our present director, Emily Sano is great.

The acquisiitions committee doesn't have much money to spend, but we do the best we can. We raise it somehow, and there are always a few things we buy, and get one or two fine objects for the Connoisseur's Council dinner. Well, you never have enough. No museums ever have enough. They're always wanting to acquire and there's always something better to get.

Glaser: Was there a difficulty in acquiring Chinese objects at the time when China was closed down following the communist victory, when Mao Tse-tung became the ruler?

Bissinger: Yes, it was difficult for American collectors who had to buy Chinese art that was already in Japan or Taiwan.

Glaser: In the fifties. Am I right? I'm not sure.

Bissinger: Yes, you are. There is always this problem of where it came from, provenance. And there's often that question. We are very careful not to overstep that. You get in trouble if you do.

Back to the paintings. There's a family by the name of Tang, some live here and some live in New York, who have given us several very fine sixteenth-fifteenth century paintings. Then a contemporary artist, Chao Shao-An, who was an old man in his nineties when he died recently in Hong Kong, gave us his whole collection and his archives. So we're gradually accumulating.

Glaser: I understand Taiwan has a magnificent museum in Taipei.

Bissinger: Oh, that museum is superlative, every object is a treasure. Yes, that's worth going to see.

Glaser: In addition to these activities with the museum and the society, you were a founding member of the Chinese Cultural Center.

Bissinger: Yes.

Glaser: And you studied Chinese?

Bissinger: I did that for eight years. I had a wonderful teacher who I adored. He was the head of the Chinese language department at San Francisco State, Maurice Tseng. I've been very close to his whole family. Jane Lurie and I took lessons together to start with. He lived in Westlake, and Jane and I went out there every Sunday morning to have our lesson which usually lasted a couple of hours, and then they gave us lunch. We had a lot of laughs and we had a lot of fun doing it. He really taught us well. That section there [pointing to bookcase behind her] are dictionaries and this section is textbooks. We learned to write in calligraphy, and I could write in Chinese, but I'd have to brush up a lot to get back to writing now.

Glaser: Oh, that's difficult.

Bissinger: I have some gorgeous calligraphy here (mine!). I'll show you my works of art. I think he got tired of teaching us after a

few years, so I went then to two other teachers and kept it up for eight years.

One of our curators, Terese Bartholomew, who is Chinese, married to a westerner, let me come out to her house to have lessons with her husband Bruce Bartholomew. He works in the Herbarium of the California Academy of Science in Golden Gate Park, and travels to China often to study plant life there, so he needed to learn Chinese. The two of us had lessons from somebody called Betty Wang, and we really learned to talk pretty well. We had reading and conversation evenings. It was great.

I'm sorry I don't keep it up. I just don't have time. You have to do homework and it's very time-consuming. I'm just dying to do it again, especially the calligraphy. Just dying to do it again. When I was in China last year I was so bad. I could talk to myself a lot, but I get tongue-tied when I have to talk to people, except the maid in the hotel room.

Glaser: You're inhibited?

Bissinger: Oh, very, yes. If you don't speak a language well but you know a little of it, you get very embarrassed. But I loved doing that and some day, I keep telling myself, I'm going to take it up again. I hope I do.

I'd like to talk more about Brundage if I could because the museum people want me to. His house in Santa Barbara burnt up and he lost a good part of his Japanese ceramics, so that is lacking in the collection today. He had this beautiful home there and he had another one. I visited him down there once and stayed overnight. His wife was lovely, just lovely. He came here quite often.

I think the contract was worked out satisfactorily. Do you have any of that?

Glaser: I don't have the contract, but I have a reference to the contract.

[tape interruption]

Glaser: Among the points that Judy Teichmann wanted you to discuss was did Mr. Brundage want the museum to move to a larger building, one that was separate from the de Young Museum? I think that's probably a question because he expressed his displeasure with how the staff of the de Young Museum was handling his collection.

Bissinger: Well, I hope he did, yes.

Glaser: According to her, in 1969, when Brundage was ready to donate a second portion of the collection to the city, he felt the total collection should have its own museum and board of directors and staff.

Bissinger: Well, that was early on because at first, you see, the de Young trustees were in charge of it.

Glaser: Yes.

Bissinger: We were included, but they were in charge of it, and that he didn't like. Then Alioto came into the picture and formed this commission. He did the commission rather than a board of directors and trustees because it would distinguish us from the de Young trustees. Now the foundation is trustees. But I didn't remember that he wanted to move to a bigger building. You know, he got married again. Did you know that?

Glaser: No.

Bissinger: He married a countess. [laughs] A very young countess, and she was not nice to him. She was a German countess--no, princess, a German princess. I can't think of her name at the moment.

And that was too bad because she was not nice to him. You know he couldn't see. He had macular degeneration, and he had a terrible time with his eyes. She was really awful to him. He died in Germany and they say he needn't have died, that she just didn't get him to the hospital or didn't get him enough medical attention or something. That was too bad. He was married a few years.

Glaser: When did he die?

Bissinger: Well, I went to the funeral in Santa Barbara--when was that? I don't know; d'Argencé was still here.

Glaser: Would it be in the eighties?

Bissinger: Yes. I could easily look that up. We had a party that I was the chairman of for his eighty-fifth birthday at the World Trade Center. So he was here then when he was eighty-five, and he seemed to be in good shape then. His marriage was a terrible mistake, made everybody terribly unhappy. There's no fool like an old fool.

Glaser: Did she interfere with his collecting?

Bissinger: No, no, not at all. No, she just didn't treat him well.

Glaser: But his reputation was that he didn't treat his first wife very well.

Bissinger: That's right, as a matter of fact. [laughs]

Glaser: He got paid back.

Bissinger: No, he didn't. He had a lady friend down the Peninsula, I told you that. Yes, he was a ladies' man. And his secretary Monique somebody-or-other in Switzerland, the secretary for the Olympic Games, because you know he was the president of the Olympic Games all these years, too. They say maybe there was something going on there, too, with her. [laughs]

Glaser: He had the reputation, and I don't know how deserved this was, of being anti-Semitic.

Bissinger: They say so. I don't know whether to believe it or not. He was much too nice to me, which of course is always said and doesn't mean a thing. You know, you can't prove these things, so I don't know, but they did say that. I think it was because during the German Olympics he was there, maybe shaking hands with Hitler or something. He shouldn't have been, but it could be. That's all right, we would accept him anyway because of giving us the collection.

Glaser: Did he have children?

Bissinger: Two illegitimate ones. [laughter]

Glaser: When you say he was a ladies' man, you really mean it.

Bissinger: Yes.

Glaser: Did he accept them and provide for them?

Bissinger: Yes.

Glaser: Another thing that I wanted to ask you about was in 1969 you were a member of the Shanghai Sister City Committee.

Bissinger: Yes.

Glaser: What was involved with that?

Bissinger: Well, I had a lot of fun. The head of that was an awfully nice Chinese lawyer, Gordon Lau. He died recently and had a huge funeral.

The committee dealt with relations back and forth. I went to meetings and so forth. One time somebody had the idea, I don't remember who, but Edward Bransten, who was on the library commission, was in charge of it, of having an exchange library with Shanghai. I happened to be going to Shanghai right at that time, so Edward asked me if I would see them at the library, so I went. I had introductions and I went to the main library in Shanghai to set up this exchange library with San Francisco. That was a big kick. I met all the librarian people there about the videos and tapes and stuff, like books!! The exchange library is now at USF.

Glaser: Is it still going on?

Bissinger: I don't know if it's going on still, but they have the books.

Glaser: That sounds interesting.

Bissinger: Yes. It was. Oh, you know, the whole Asian Art scene has been so interesting for me. I've had such a good time.

Philanthropies and Honors ##

Glaser: Please talk about your award for National Philanthropy Day. The date of that was November 16, 1990.

Bissinger: Yes, well, I wasn't the main award winner; Nancy Bechtle was. She got the main award and I just got one of the others. It isn't that I've given such enormous amounts of money, but over the years I've given my time and you know, it all mounts up.

Glaser: Well, you've given a gallery.

Bissinger: But I didn't give a gallery. I mean, Jim Gerstley and I both were each given a gallery at the same time and next to each other and so they had a little ceremony for us. But that was just from what we had been giving, it wasn't any big donation to get the gallery.

Glaser: What do you mean that they were next to each other?

Bissinger: The galleries are adjoining.

Glaser: I see. I thought you had given money to establish the gallery.

Bissinger: No, they decided to name the two existing galleries for us, and we had over the years given money. So Jim has one, James and Elizabeth Gerstley, and I have the other, Marjorie Bissinger Seller. I'm always sorry that the name Walter didn't get in there, but too many names. But for the next building I am giving money. I have to, as they don't take those names and let them carry over.

Glaser: Really?

Bissinger: Yes, so I have to, in order to get my name on a gallery, which I want to do, or half a gallery, maybe. {2000: I am having my name over a small gallery of contemporary Japanese ceramics.}

Glaser: Well, there's your chance to get the Walter name in that.

Bissinger: Yes, I will. It will be called the Marjorie Walter Bissinger Gallery.

Glaser: But it also takes quite a bit of money to belong to the commission, doesn't it?

Bissinger: No, to the foundation, yes.

Glaser: I thought that in one case there is a small amount, like $300 to cover lunches and things, but other than that you have to be willing to give $10,000.

Bissinger: For both really, the $350 is for both, and the $10,000 is for the foundation.

Glaser: I see.

Bissinger: As you said, $350 a year for entertainment and stuff, and then over and above that there are always events like openings. There have been two lately: an Indian festival called Dewali and a Korean festival called Chusok. Those cost $150 and $125 a person. You're always having to shell out a little bit. It's not cheap to be on a board. [laughs]

Glaser: Yes, well, that goes with the territory.

Bissinger: Yes, it does.

Glaser: People are selected who they feel not only can be active on the board, but also who can afford it.

Bissinger: Yes.

Glaser: Tell me about getting the honor from the King of Sweden.

Bissinger: Well, I really didn't do anything special to deserve that. And in fact there were three of us who got the award. The King of Sweden has a fine Asian Art collection and we exhibited it here, and the Swedish government decided to honor us. It's a beautiful medallion about 1 1/2 inches, with four white enamel points attached to a crown, with a green ribbon that hangs on your lapel or dress, and a small one, the same, for a man to put on his lapel or pocket.

Glaser: But what I thought very odd was you have to return it upon your death.

Bissinger: I know, isn't bizarre! I have to tell my children to be sure to take care of it.

Glaser: "The restitution of decoration," to be returned upon your death.

Bissinger: Yes, isn't that funny?

Glaser: [laughter] I've never heard of anything like that.

Bissinger: I know. I must be sure to do it, because they'll come after me if I don't. [laughs]

Glaser: And that was in 1969?

Bissinger: Yes, they've probably forgotten me by now.

Glaser: Let me tell the full title: "The Ladies' Membership Insignia of the Royal Order of Vasa for Promoting Cultural Relations between Sweden and the United States."

Bissinger: It didn't take much to do that, did it? [laughter]

Glaser: And you have a certificate from the San Francisco Opera for being a thirty-year subscriber.

Bissinger: I forgot about that. It would be a lot more years now.

Glaser: You also have a 1986 award of merit from Dianne Feinstein, "In recognition of outstanding public service to city and county of San Francisco." You're a life member of the San Francisco League of Women Voters, and you got a certificate after fifty years of loyalty.

Bissinger: I didn't do much to deserve that either.

Glaser: Are there any other honors that I didn't come across in reading your material?

Bissinger: There's the nurses aid from the Red Cross.

Glaser: I didn't see a certificate about that.

Bissinger: Well, there's a lot of stuff here in this cupboard. {September 1999: I have just received the William R. Pothier award "Lives of Accomplishment" from the Senior Center, along with five other honorees, among them, Louis Heilbron. There will be an Award Ceremony Reception next Sunday at the Petit Trianon house on Washington Street.}

Trips to the Orient

Glaser: Aside from your business trips with Mr. Bissinger, you had many trips to the Orient with the Museum. Would you tell me about those?

Bissinger: Oh, gosh. I've been on the Silk Road in China, but that was not a Museum trip; that was with a friend, Nancy Pickford, (she wasn't my friend yet, until the trip and thereafter). Nancy has taken groups to China many times, she's an expert. There were just five of us in a mini bus, it was great, simply fascinating, and a marvelous and exciting experience.

Glaser: Who was your guide for that, a local person?

Bissinger: Well, Nancy herself.

Glaser: Oh, I thought perhaps you had a local Chinese person.

Bissinger: Yes we did. She had a super Chinese guide, Jian Hua, the best. He had been Dianne Feinstein's guide. Nancy traveled first class, meaning that we traveled as comfortably as possible in that part of the world. We did good things like riding a camel in Urumchi, and riding a small Kazakh horse in Turfan, and got great opportunities, and that has been one of my favorite trips.

Then I traveled with the museum to Bhutan. I don't know if you've seen my photo albums with pictures of my adventure trips, but I had some: the Silk Road, Bhutan, and Indonesia--

that was a cruise around the Indonesian islands, Bali, and several other islands, ending in Jakarta where I had a friend, Jed Frost who entertained for my friend June Arney and me. Well, I have a list of them handy because I always keep this little list of how old I was when I made these trips!

Glaser: So in 1986, you were on the Silk Road; in 1990, in Bhutan; 1991, Bali/Indonesia; 1993, Cambodia/Vietnam; 1995, Taipei and Hong Kong; 1997, China/Yangtze River.

Bissinger: Well, here's one of the adventure trips. [shows photographs] This is the Silk Road. We were riding horses. Here I am in the desert in China, (maybe the Gobi Desert, I'm not sure), riding a camel.

Glaser: That's not you. It is.

Bissinger: Yes, it is.

Glaser: That's not a good picture.

Bissinger: No. But here's this, it was a great adventure trip.

Glaser: Where were you with the camel?

Bissinger: In Urumqi, China, out in the desert in west China. This is Nancy Pickford, the tall blonde. She arrives in China and all these Chinese are flocking around and she knows them all! [laughter] She was wonderful to travel with.

Glaser: Interesting.

Bissinger: Where is my Bhutan book? Now, that's the one.

Glaser: I saw the photograph of you in the gown you got in Bhutan.

Bissinger: Oh, was it with the Dalai Lama? I bought the gown from the King of Bhutan's aunt, Ashi Tashi Dorji. It has a historic story in that she wore it when she gave a speech in representing Bhutan at the Colombo Plan. (I was able to get it as Terese Bartholemew, my good friend and the curator of Himalayan and Chinese Decorative art at the Museum, is a great friend of Ashi Tashi). And I wore it to greet the Dalai Llama when he came to the Museum.

Glaser: Right. That's a great photograph.

Bissinger: This is [getting another album] my hike up to the top of--

Glaser: The Great Wall?

Bissinger: No, this is Bhutan, Mount Taksan, up about 10,000 feet. Here I am up here.

Glaser: How exciting.

Bissinger: It was indeed. It was such a great trip. That's Mt. Taxsan. I loved my adventure trips. Those were the most exciting, this and the Silk Road.

Just to finish off the trips, d'Argencé took me on wonderful trips. Paul died in '69. In '70, d'Argencé asked me if I would like to go on a trip with him to Taiwan where we would attend a symposium on Chinese painting, with 100 scholars from all over the world. We were in the museum all day every day, listening to lectures and looking at objects in the museum. Dinners and get togethers every night.

Then we drove by bus down to the Toroku Gorge, which was also exciting--huge mountains and the gorge down below. Then I went with some of the scholars to Hong Kong, where we saw private collections.

d'Argencé took me to Carmel twice. One of the most famous contemporary artists, who died a few years ago, Ch'ang dai Chien, lived in Carmel. He was one of the greats of the Chinese contemporary artists, (sometimes called the Picasso of Chinese art) and I had two paintings of his (sold one to Sothebys later on, and kept the other). {2000: I have recently bought another.}

When we were there, Ch'ang dai Chien himself cooked dinner for us. d'Argencé also took me to southern California, to see Peter Drucker, the well known industrialist, at his home in Claremont, to see his very fine collection of Chinese paintings and Japanese Zen and Buddhist paintings. Another time he took me to see Joe Price at his home in Newport Beach. He has another fine collection. He has given a good many to the Los Angeles County Museum.

Other Activities

Glaser: I wanted to ask you about preventing the freeway through the Panhandle.

Bissinger: There was a move on foot to build a freeway through the Panhandle and Golden Gate Park and it just seemed absolutely outrageous, so I joined some group. I don't remember who they were anymore; I joined that group because I thought it was so important. We just phoned people and sent out literature and called on people. We won.

Glaser: I know that most of your activities have been within the museum. Is there any other civic activity you engaged in?

Bissinger: Well, I was on the Opera Guild board for many years, and they at one time, asked me to be president. When I looked around the table, I saw that I didn't want to do it. Many were the society people from the Peninsula who I liked very much, but I really didn't want to be president to them and have to conduct meetings. I don't like to do that anyway. But I stayed on the board quite a long time, and I had some good friends on the board.

At one time we were having a problem with the school children coming to the Opera. Paul knew Tom Mellon who was head of the--

Glaser: He was city administrator at one time, wasn't he?

Bissinger: Yes, and then he was president of the State Board of Education.

So three of us went up to someplace up north, near Redding to do what we could for the school children who enjoy going to the opera. I forget the details of it. It must be thirty or forty years ago.

Yes, I did do a lot for the Opera Guild. I was secretary at one time, and then I was chairman of the Opera Ball and the Folderol one year, and that was a big undertaking. It was held in the Civic Auditorium every year, and at the dinner each year were all the opera stars and we had to seat all of them, a tough job! Well, the seating I helped with every year, but this particular year I was asked to run the show.

Glaser: That's a big undertaking.

Bissinger: It sure was. I conferred with Kurt Adler (the Opera director), and Arch Monson, (his wife June Halsted, also on the board, and I were very close friends), and others. Arch was responsible for the lighting, that was his business. I also had to deal with the Ballet.

What other civic activities did I do? In the years way back I was on the board of the Visiting Nurses Association, and there was all the Chinese stuff. I guess that's it. I don't know, I was always doing something, I guess.

Glaser: We didn't expand on what you did for or with the Chinese Cultural Center.

Bissinger: Well, you know it hadn't existed, but a group seemed to think that it was a good idea to have a Cultural Center for the Chinese people, and I was asked to join the group, which became the committee.

Glaser: Is that in the Holiday Inn?

Bissinger: Yes, and they have nice exhibits of various Chinese media, paintings and art objects. It was a nice group, mostly all Chinese. Roland Lowe, he is a doctor, and Mel Ury (not Chinese!). I liked him so much. We all met quite often and decided how to start a Chinese Culture Center, and that we did.

Glaser: What does the cultural center do?

Bissinger: They promote art and educational programs, and they have exhibits. As a member still, I get invited to openings and projects that they sponsor. I think they serve a good purpose in the Chinese community, but I'm not involved with them any more.

Glaser: But this is mostly for the Chinese community as such, isn't it?

Bissinger: Yes, except for their exhibits, which include everybody. They have very good exhibits, so that's some of the same crowd who would go to the museum. They really want to serve a cross-section of Chinese and Caucasian.

Glaser: During those years when there was conflict between the Red Chinese and the Taiwanese Chinese, how did this affect what you were doing with the museum and with the local Chinese community?

Bissinger: As far as I know, there was no reaction among the local Chinese community. Maybe at the Chinese and Taiwan Consulates, but I don't know. I don't think there was any difference as far as we were concerned here. I've been in Taiwan five times. One was with d'Argencé for the symposium, one was with Paul many years ago, another one was with Alice Kent, also years ago (Alice Kent and I had some good trips together). One Taiwan trip was three or four years ago with Emily Sano, the director

of the Asian Art Museum here--maybe just five of us, to lock up the Chinese show from Taiwan to be exhibited here at the Asian Art Museum, that big Chinese show that was here and was in New York at the Met. So I think that's five. I got to know Taiwan pretty well.

I'm always ambitious and then don't carry out my ambitions--I really wanted to go to Taiwan and stay for a few months and study Chinese there, but I didn't. I thought I'd be lonely. [laughs] I was a little nervous about it so I didn't go.

Glaser: Are you as fond of Chinese food as you are of its art?

Bissinger: No, I don't even like Chinese food much anymore, do you?

Glaser: Yes.

Bissinger: I run into it often because people love to go to Chinese restaurants. [laughter] It's all right. I mean I like it okay, but I like any other Asian food better.

Glaser: Japanese food I do not like.

Bissinger: I love Japanese food. [laughs]

A group of us went to Vancouver: Madeleine Russell and a Chinese friend of mine, Sue Yung Li, and Alice Kent, I think, and Jane Smyth. The United States didn't have relations with China at that time, so this was a really exciting time for us to go up to Vancouver to see the Peking Opera. That was an interesting trip.

After the war I saw an ad for a dressmaking class at the Rudolph Schaeffer School of Design, which was then downtown in Maiden Lane. It was called a class on the French art of cutting, draping, and designing clothes. I took that for the duration, I forget how long, maybe six months, and it was great fun, I really enjoyed it. We made patterns and learned how to make pants and skirts and blouses and everything. Then I realized I didn't know how to use a sewing machine. [laughs] I then went to Singer Sewing and made a suit out of some Irish tweed which I had bought in Ireland.

Glaser: Did you enjoy doing that?

Bissinger: I loved it. That's another thing I wish I had time for. I want to do so many things and I don't seem to find time. I think I move a little bit slower than I used to.

Then I took some embroidery classes and ever since, I've been embroidering pillows, those pillows that you see in the guest room and the sitting room and the one I have in my bedroom, I made all of those. In fact, I have one going now. Do you know about the ping-pong team?

Glaser: No.

Bissinger: I have the dates and I have a whole bunch of pictures of them. I think when they came to the U.S. it was called Ping-Pong diplomacy.

Somebody called me and said the Chinese Ping-Pong team was coming and would I entertain them? So I said sure. The Secret Service came and cased the house and garden. They were here the night of the dinner.

Glaser: Was it in this house?

Bissinger: Yes. Paul had died and I hadn't married Bob yet. There were dignitaries with them, of course, and I think everyone enjoyed it. I know I did.

Glaser: Could you practice your Chinese on them?

Bissinger: Yes, my Chinese teacher, Maurice Tseng, came over. And a friend, Sandy Calhoun, who I've mentioned--he's one of our early founders--came over ahead of time with Maurice, and we talked about how we would say things and what we would talk about. It was quite something. I mean with the Secret Service all over the place it was a big, big moment.

Glaser: Did you have to feed these people?

Bissinger: Oh, yes, indeed. We had a big buffet.

Glaser: Was there any problem deciding what to feed them?

Bissinger: No, I just had the same kind of buffet we would have for our friends.

Glaser: Why not?

Bissinger: Yes, I don't think we did anything special. Some of our travels included the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth.

Glaser: I have a copy of your cards of admittance.

Bissinger: Oh, you do? Paul always liked to do those things. He would dream them up long before the event. We had a hotel room on the line of march at the Mount Royal Hotel, and we invited some friends to come up to our balcony and watch. That same trip we went on to Brussels and Scandinavia where somebody was being crowned, (in Brussels) I forget who, and so we followed that parade.

Then we went to Russia in 1937, I guess it was the same trip. That was pretty much propaganda. We were filled with terrible stories about the Americans, and of course how wonderful it was in Russia. But that was an early time to go there, but we saw a lot and much beauty in the cities, as well as much poverty. People looked very unhappy in Moscow, and much happier in Leningrad, now St. Petersburg. We were served caviar at every meal.

Glaser: Did you have to worry about your hotel room being bugged?

Bissinger: No, we didn't. We were there five days, and we had a guide. It was sure interesting at that time. We had a friend there; my father's doctor, Dr. Addis, his daughter was living there, so we exchanged black market money with her. Fortunately we didn't get caught.

Glaser: You could have been imprisoned. [laughter]

Bissinger: Of course.

I went to Seattle often for symposia in their museum. They have a fine collection of Asian art in Seattle, so I went several times to those. Alice Kent and I traveled to see museums elsewhere. We went to Taiwan (I said that) and Japan; we went to Cleveland where they have one of the finest collections of Asian art.

Glaser: Did you ever see the collection in Toronto?

Bissinger: Yes.

Glaser: I was so surprised to see that.

Bissinger: Yes, isn't it wonderful?

Glaser: I didn't know the quality, I have no way of telling you that, but--

Bissinger: Well, their Asian collection is very fine, one of the best.

Glaser: I think most of it was donated by a missionary.

Bissinger: I didn't know that.

Glaser: But I was just so surprised to see a Chinese collection there.

Bissinger: Yes, you would be surprised that all over the world you find these excellent museums that you didn't know about. Their director at the Toronto Museum was Henry Trubner. He is now in Seattle. He had been the head of their Seattle Art Museum. He is retired now. {2000: Henry Trubner died in July 1999.}

[Refers to a list] Have I talked about Marian Anderson?

Glaser: No, not at all.

Bissinger: Okay, she was a very good friend of ours. Leona Wood Armsby, who was the president of the symphony at the time--invited me to lunch to meet Marian Anderson, so of course I went.

Anyway, Marian had this wonderful manager, Joffe, an Israeli, and her accompanist was Franz Rupp. They were a panic, those three. We had lots of laughs together, the two men were very funny. And we got to be very good friends. We had her here often. She was a great lady.

Glaser: It's odd to hear you say you had fun with her because she was such an imposing figure with a look of reserve in all her photographs.

Bissinger: Yes, well, not when she was with these two men. [laughs] We bumped into them everywhere--in Bangkok, I think that was 1953, we got there and saw there was a concert by Marian Anderson, so we called her at her hotel, and we got seats right up in front at the concert and also she took us to Prince Prem Parachatra's house after the concert. Then we saw her in Rome. She was giving a concert there. And she came here often. She was a lovely person. It was such a privilege to have known her.

I've done yoga and Tai Chi and Feldenkrais, to better my posture and everything else.

I also have gone river rafting several times which is thrilling. I can't do that any more, of course. But I've been to the Rogue River twice, where we took a five-day trip in rowboats down the river. We fished and then stayed overnight on sandbanks in sleeping bags. We were with good groups: the Paul Wolfs, once with the Walter Haases--and Ruth and Mick Hellman.

Glaser: Senior or Junior? (Haas)

Bissinger: Junior, and that was deep sea fishing in Baja California. And then with the Sidney Liebes we did a trip on the Colorado River. And with Helene Oppenheimer and her brother and sister-in-law and a group, I did the Snake River up in Oregon. Have you ever done that?

Glaser: No.

Bissinger: Oh, it's wonderful, it's really back to nature, and so peaceful.

Glaser: Was this with Paul?

Bissinger: The early ones were with Paul. Every one was with Paul except the one with Helene Oppenheimer up on the Snake. I was alone then, Paul had died.

So that's all I have written down here, just all these little items that I probably hadn't mentioned. So I guess that's all I have to say.

No it's not! Have I mentioned having been in the Temple Players that Paul was directing? And staying up all night to be in a mob scene of "The Devil's Disciple"? My parents were furious because I wasn't home studying, I was in high school.

Glaser: Yes, you did mention that.

Bissinger: And I had French lessons all my growing up years.

Glaser: All those years?

Bissinger: No, but French lessons till I was eighteen and went to Paris. My mother even had Madame Bigorne come for lunch, thinking we would have to talk French. And of course Nell and I sat in dead silence, and Mother talked to Madame Bigorne. We also went to Madame Godchaux. We went to her house on Octavia and Vallejo once a week for French lessons.

I don't think I have any more little notes.

[tape interruption]

Bissinger: Gwin Follis was very helpful to us in the beginning. He went to Chicago to see Brundage.

Glaser: With Cyril Magnin.

Bissinger: No.

Glaser: No?

Bissinger: Cyril Magnin gave money for the Jade Room, the Magnin Gallery. He gave money for that, but he didn't have anything to do with Brundage at first. Gwin Follis was then chairman of the de Young Museum board. He went to Chicago to see Brundage and he was very helpful in getting the collection, besides those of us. We all worked to together, but I didn't want to leave him out.

Glaser: Okay.

Bissinger: As far as my collecting, I don't have one of the great private collections by any means, because I never had enough money to have one of the great collections. But I've collected an assortment of things that I love. I have a little of this and a little of that. I didn't stick to one area or one type of object, although I'm now restricting myself to apsaras. I have a few in my bedroom and a few in the living room. They are rather scarce and hard to find and are made of wood mostly, but I have a pair in bronze.

Glaser: An apsara?

Bissinger: They are flying angels with trailing draperies, and usually they have musical instruments. They are represented in different media in Asian temples. Do you want to come and see them?

[tape interruption]

Glaser: Well, you've lived a very adventurous life and a life of great contributions.

Bissinger: I've had a wonderful life.

Further Reflections on the Asian Art Museum

[Interview 4: December 17, 1999] ##

Glaser: Marjorie, there were some things that were not covered that seemed to be worthwhile for having another interview. About Avery Brundage, did he concentrate on one Asian country more than another in his collecting?

Bissinger: China by far the most and then Japan, he started his collecting with Japanese art, but his Japanese ceramics all burned up with the fire that burned up his house in Santa Barbara. Then after China and Japan are Korea, Southeast Asia, India, and some in the Middle East, like Iran.

Glaser: Is Vietnamese art included in that?

Bissinger: Yes, and people have given Vietnamese art, as well as some from Brundage. There's quite a large Himalayan and Indian collection and quite a large Thai and Southeast Asia collection, and Korean, but still China and Japan are the largest.

Glaser: Was there any difficulty in purchasing art because of laws prohibiting sales to foreigners or exporting without permission?

Bissinger: No.

Glaser: Nowadays it seems as if they're trying to prevent grave-robbing and things like that. You read about that a lot.

Bissinger: That's right. And of course there are so many fakes around now, because there's so much coming out of graves that are being copied. Yes, you have to be worried about fakes.

Glaser: Can you talk about the Cultural Olympics that Avery Brundage helped to reactivate in Rome in 1960, and also the 1964 Cultural Olympics in Tokyo at the time of the Tokyo Olympics?

Bissinger: You speak of them as the Cultural Olympics. What do you mean by that?

Glaser: I'm not sure. I just came across something that said for the Tokyo Olympics he loaned several of his best objects to the Tokyo National Museum's exhibition of world art. My question is, was it usual to have a Cultural Olympics in connection with the usual one? Maybe this is something that he just brought about himself?

Bissinger: That's right, there was an exhibit of some of his art collection in Tokyo during the Olympics of 1964.

Glaser: Okay.

[tape interruption]

Glaser: You said, when talking about the wooing of Brundage for his collection, "We had a lot of funny stories about things." Can you relate some of those anecdotes?

Bissinger: No, I can't. Marjorie Stern probably could, but I don't remember. I don't have that kind of a memory, but I can try to find out.

Glaser: I'm disappointed because that would add a great deal to your memoirs.

Bissinger: Well, I'll try to find out. {July, 2000: Brundage, being impatient, from having been used to giving orders as head of the Olympics, said to Marjorie Stern "Get out your hatpin and move things along."}

Glaser: You've said that Mr. Brundage concentrated on the Chinese exhibit, but in general in the museum is any one collection more important than another?

Bissinger: I don't think so. I would have to say they're all equally important. The Chinese is bigger in ceramics and bronzes and jades. I wouldn't say sculpture because I think India has the most, and Southeast Asia might be almost as large in sculpture. Japan has ceramics, and great sculpture and paintings.

And let's see, I should have a list of all the categories. There's sculpture, Brundage liked three dimensional objects. And paintings, Brundage was not especially interested in paintings, so there was not very good representation in that category. We are acquiring them as fast as we can, but we'll never catch up with some of the great museums. We have a good share of Chinese and Japanese paintings, I would say those are the biggest. And Japanese screens and Korean paintings and screens. Besides paintings, there are ceramics, jades and metal objects.

Glaser: Are there wall hangings?

Bissinger: There are wall hangings and textiles. He didn't collect much in the way of textiles, so we've been concentrating on that also--you were going to ask me something?

Glaser: I was going to ask you to define Southeast Asia. Which countries are those?

Bissinger: I'll have to look at a map. [gets an atlas] Thailand, Taiwan. We have some things from Burma (now Myanmar), the Philippines, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, India, and Sri Lanka.

Glaser: Do you have things in the museum from all of these countries that you've mentioned?

Bissinger: Absolutely.

Glaser: And the Philippines?

Bissinger: The Philippines, yes. We have material from Bhutan and Nepal in the Himalayas, and then we get into Mongolia in the North. Then over to the Middle East where you have Turkey and Iran, and we have some objects from those countries. I may have missed some countries--yes, Tibet of course, where we have quite a number of Tankas, and gold objects. And Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Glaser: That takes in many, many countries.

Bissinger: Yes. I'm still totally awed by the collection. I mean, the depth and breadth of his buying. It's very impressive.

Glaser: Did he visit each of these countries?

Bissinger: Yes. In 1939 he and his wife were on a cruise ship which stopped in China, Japan, Korea, Thailand, Vietnam, where he and his wife drove overland through the jungle to Cambodia.

Glaser: He must have had agents.

Bissinger: No, he never had agents, but he had dealers. Brundage picked out everything himself. He had an eye for the right things, and his standards were beauty, style, authenticity, age. The dealers would be waiting for him, and they would show him the best things and knew what he liked and wanted. Of course it would be impossible to amass this kind of a collection now, because it just isn't available. He shopped at the right time.

Glaser: Have any major collections been given to the museum since Mr. Brundage's?

Bissinger: Elaine and Jim Connell have given a very large collection of Thai ceramics, and that takes up a large space in one of the second floor galleries. They are now collecting Asian gold and it is spectacular. Jewelry mostly, like earrings, I've seen this collection in their home, and it is very beautiful.

Ed Nagel, in 1974, gave the museum his collection of fifty-six objects. They were Luristan and Khmer bronzes, Indian and Chinese sculpture, jades, and Chinese, Korean and Japanese ceramics. Another man, Gurshuran Sidhu, has given the

museum quite a number of Indian miniature paintings, as has George Fitch who has given a large number of Indian miniature paintings.

Right now we are getting another very large collection of Indian miniature paintings from Mr. Kapany, we have gotten some of them already, so you can see what a fine collection of these paintings we will have.

The museum has received gifts of several other Chinese paintings and Korean screens and paintings.

Then, the Tang family has given several early 17th, 18th century Chinese paintings which are incredibly good. They are from the Meiji period.

And lastly, a very old artist in Hong Kong, Chao Shao-an, has given us his entire collection of his own contemporary paintings, and his archives.

Glaser: Have any of the collections traveled back on loan to the country of origin?

Bissinger: Traveling back? What do you mean?

Glaser: To be exhibited.

Bissinger: Yes. There was an exhibit of some of the Brundage objects in Hong Kong in 1983. I was there for the opening with Judy Wilbur, and it was very well displayed. And in 1968 there was a big exhibition of the Brundage objects in Mexico City, and just last year there was a large exhibit of the jades in Paris at the Cernuchi Museum. (Of course these exhibits were not traveling back to the country of their origin.)

Glaser: Does the museum have any regulations concerning traveling exhibits?

Bissinger: Yes. The acquisitions committee also handles loans, so we have to pass on any loan that goes to any other museum. We mostly do, because any accredited museum that asks for exhibits usually takes good care of them, and complies with our regulations.

Glaser: Tell me about the process of sending something off.

Bissinger: It's expensive, it has to be packed up and sent by air. Always a curator accompanies the objects or they may send somebody to help with shipping the exhibit. It's a big operation.

Glaser: Is the cost of this borne by the museum that has asked for the exhibit?

Bissinger: Yes, and insurance is included in the cost. When we get an exhibit here we have to pay for it. It's very costly, and of course we have to raise the money. We have objects on exhibit now in Japan. We have one in San Antonio, Texas; they've had this same exhibit for several years. They keep renewing it. Then if we pass on it and decide it's all right for them to keep it another year we do.

I think we have some things on loan at the de Young. And once, for several years there was an exhibit of our Chinese ceramics at Disneyworld in Florida. I had taken my children and grandchildren there so we looked at it. It was very nice and they asked for it several years. It seems like a strange place for Chinese ceramics, but they are still there. Each loan must be renewed each additional time.

Glaser: Is it usual to loan an exhibit for a length of time like that?

Bissinger: Yes, if we approve it every year. Or we can say, "You can have it for two years." San Antonio just now has requested another year, and we decided it was okay because it's good for other people to see our objects as long as they are safe. Now we did send one large wooden Japanese sculpture to Japan last year, and that was debatable. There was a lot of pro and con on that because it's very fragile. It was going to a wonderful new museum there, the Miho. It was very sought after and enough of us felt that it was okay. The director and the chief curator thought it was all right as well.

Glaser: In what city in Japan is the new museum?

Bissinger: Near Kyoto. It's up high in the woods, and it also has western art. They say it is just beautiful, and the objects there are all masterpieces, so I hope to go there some day. I was discussing it today, in fact. Yes, we had sent this big wooden Buddha to that museum, and I think it's still there. But if we're sure that it has the proper climate control and if they're responsible people, we think it's valid. You know, it's good for our objects to be seen elsewhere.

Glaser: It rather validates your own museum.

Bissinger: Yes.

Glaser: I wanted to know about the relationship of the Asian Art Museum to other museums--the Fine Art Museums here and those in other cities.

Bissinger: Out of necessity we're under the same roof as the de Young so we share guards and engineers and utilities, and we share those in the budget, but otherwise we are separate. We hope that people know we're separate because we don't like to be spoken of as the de Young Museum or the Brundage collection in the de Young Museum. That annoys us because it's not.

Glaser: But other than that is there any relationship?

Bissinger: No. Like what?

Glaser: I'm not sure what, that's why I'm asking.

Bissinger: Yes, well there's the Museum Society, and I know that a few of our members have served on that board. Yes, there's communication, certainly. And I think they have a conservator of textiles that we have used. I think they have maybe have used some of our people if necessary. The Museum Society Auxiliary was very generous to us a few years ago, and gave us a large Korean painting.

Glaser: What about the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston or the Asian Collection at Stanford University? Is there any relationship at all?

Bissinger: No. We might borrow from each other and we're friendly and communicate, but not any special relationship. We have a relationship now with S.F. Modern Museum, MOMA, because the Asian is thinking about modern Asian art now, as that seems to be something we should pursue. We have an advisor by the name of Jeff Kelly. He is our advisor of modern art and is an expert in that field. He has lectured to us a few times. The museum is now considering whether to collect in that area. We would not have a big collection of modern art, and it's still in the discussion stage. [phone rings]

Glaser: Would you tell me about the conservation laboratory?

Bissinger: The conservation laboratory is excellent. They have several conservators for the different types of objects, such as paper (paintings), as well all the various materials that I mentioned before, and they do very good conservation work. I have a painting there now, being restored.

Glaser: I learned it was the first of its kind in western United States.

Bissinger: In the west, I guess, but the Getty certainly has the finest right now. And of course the Met in New York is tops. The Asian sends some of its paintings there to be remounted by Sondra Castile (Rand's wife) who is the chief conservator there, for paintings and works on paper. She has one of my paintings right now.

Glaser: Can you tell me about the library?

Bissinger: It's an excellent library, very complete. And we have a fine librarian whose name is John Stucky. The library has just about everything. What more can I say?

Glaser: Your Society for Asian Art did a lot of fundraising for the library?

Bissinger: Yes, we collected books before the museum was built when we were just the Society for Asian Art. We kept the books that came in at that time at Marjorie Stern's house.

Glaser: These were books that were donated?

Bissinger: Yes, we collected quite a nice sizeable little library and then turned it over to the museum, of course.

Glaser: I understand that there are more than 12,000 volumes in that library now.

Bissinger: Yes. And there are 12,000 objects in the collection too.

Glaser: Is the library used for research?

Bissinger: Yes.

Glaser: Can outsiders as well as the curators use the library?

Bissinger: I'm not sure. You know the collection now is valued at about $4 billion, and it's by far the finest collection in any San Francisco museum.

Glaser: Were you involved in the docent program?

Bissinger: No, never. I don't like to speak in public. It was out of the question for me.

Glaser: But in setting it up as a training course were you involved?

Bissinger: No, I had nothing to do with it.

Glaser: Can you talk about the training course?

Bissinger: Yes. It's a very serious business. It's three years and for college credits and they really work hard. It takes in every country. Well, you can imagine if it takes three years what that consists of. They have a lecture every Friday morning and it's very intense. The lectures are given by scholars from the Bay Area universities, and the museum's curators as well.

Glaser: What is the commitment on the part of each docent?

Bissinger: I really don't know. I think they're committed to give a certain number of tours a week. They have to show up on time and be there. It's tough training and hard work, and they're on their feet a lot. I admire them greatly.

Glaser: Is there a relationship between the museum and the Chinese and Japanese communities or other oriental communities?

Bissinger: I can say so, absolutely.

Glaser: Would you tell me about that?

Bissinger: First of all, we have a lot of Asians on the boards of the commission and the foundation. There are nineteen Chinese, Japanese, Indian and Korean members. Also, Alice Lowe who is a Chinese American, and has been a commissioner of long standing, has been running a Chinese outreach program very successfully.

[tape interruption]

Bissinger: Chong Moon Lee is one of our commissioners and foundation board members. He's Korean and he's in Silicon Valley and he has given us $15 million for the new building. He is a lovely gentleman and we are very lucky to have him. He's given us other money besides, I mean much more.

Glaser: Would you discuss the successors to [Ivon] d'Argencé?

Bissinger: Clarence Shangraw took over for 1985-86. He had been the chief curator. Rand Castile was next, that was 1986. Rand was a charmer, wonderful personality-wise, and a marvelous P.R. person. He was nice to everybody. I'm afraid I have to say he was not a great administrator, but certainly very adequate as such. He left in 1994 and has now completely retired. He's living in Maine in Sondra's old family home, (he and Sondra, at the N.Y. Metropolitan Museum, get together often, each of them

going back and forth.) He's playing golf, and chatting with the neighbors, and walking the dog. And now Emily is here and she is an excellent director.

Glaser: What is Emily's last name?

Bissinger: Sano. She's Japanese.

Glaser: What is the role of the director of the museum?

Bissinger: That's a big question. Emily is in charge of the whole museum. The foundation board members are sort of like the money people, they take care of that end of it, and more. The commissioners are supposed to run the museum, they're appointed by the mayor. But Emily is in charge, of course.

##

Bissinger: She runs the museum, that's everything. It's the staff, maybe about eighty-five of them. It's all these names--on the back and here [paper turned over]. It's what it takes to run a large institution. It's an big operation to run, and Emily has quite a responsibility which she carries out very well.

Now she's working on the retrofitting of the old Main Library building which will become the New Asian. And right now she is meeting with the mayor, sitting through many hearings, to be sure she's on top of everything, speaking to the Planning Commission and the Board of Supervisors and other groups, and dealing with the politics of it all, because the Architectural Heritage group and others have opposed the removal of the Piazzoni paintings. There are six of these very large and long paintings, on canvas--which they choose to call murals, and which are not appropriate in an Asian art museum, as they depict scenes of the Monterey area--along the walls of the second floor at the top of the grand stairway. {August, 2000: the paintings are going to the de Young Museum.} She meets with the mayor, and she sits through all the hearings to be sure that she's on top of everything. She speaks in front of the planning commission, the board of supervisors and other groups, and deals with the politics of it all.

At first she was the chief curator as well as director until she hired Forrest McGill, a wonderful choice. His job is to oversee the other curators and to run his own department which is Southeast Asia. But before he came, she was responsible for the whole art department, which she shouldn't have to do. Now she is relieved of the detail work.

Glaser: Does the head curator or the director approve of purchases for the collections?

Bissinger: Yes, on the acquisitions committee everything that comes to us is signed by the director and the chief curator, and the curators of each department explain each object which is up for approval. If they've passed on it, then it's up to us pass on it or not. Of course they and the other curators know more about the objects than we do, but they explain each object to us, so we know enough to vote intelligently, and of course those of us on the committee are supposed to be fairly well informed anyway.

Glaser: When you say that Mr. Castile was a lovely man but he was not a good administrator, does that mean that he was more of a P.R. man?

Bissinger: No, but he did run the museum well, he just wasn't as tight a manager as Emily Sano is, for instance.

Glaser: Let's talk about the new building and the steps leading up to it. What is the history of all of this?

Bissinger: You asked me once (I don't remember whether it was you who asked me) if Brundage had wanted a new building to be separate.

Glaser: Yes.

Bissinger: Well, I'm not sure about that. I never have found out the answer to that. In any case, we know we need a new building because our building is too small. We could have enlarged it but it would have been a mess. And Golden Gate Park is not ideal, the transportation there is out of the question. If you come in a taxi, unless they wait an hour or two or three, you won't be able to get home. You can't get a taxi out there. And the public transportation is so poor, it's not a good place to be. So back when Dianne Feinstein was mayor, the Main library built their new building, and there was the old Main Library empty, so she gave it to the Asian Art Museum, which was a historic gesture. Then we put up the bond issue which asked the voters if we could spend the money to renovate the old Main Library into the new Asian Art Museum, and that was, I think, $50 million. (The bond measure failed and we went back the next year and this time it passed.)

Glaser: $42 million.

Bissinger: [laughs] Good for you. Okay. But Jack Bogart just told me that the amount was $42 million plus $10 million from another

bond measure, and it totaled $55 million. {2000: Jack has also just told me that for the capital campaign we now have $136 million.}

Glaser: I got that from a newspaper clipping. It was in 1994 that the voters approved that. I wanted you to go back a bit. How was it that Dianne Feinstein gave you the building? She must have been approached for it; she just didn't come out with this.

Bissinger: She was not asked. This is a quote from the magazine put out for the museum's twenty-fifth anniversary: "Former Mayor Dianne Feinstein too, anticipated the importance and impact of Asia's role in the world economy. 'As mayor, I proposed locating the Asian Art Museum in Civic Center as testimony of San Francisco's lasting connection to the rich artistic heritage of Asia. By locating there, the museum will lock in forever the historic relationship of San Francisco as a gateway to the Pacific Rim,' she said."

Glaser: Really?

Bissinger: She liked Asian art. She had one or two of our objects in her office and she liked our museum.

Glaser: The bond issue was passed in 1994.

Bissinger: Yes, but she gave it to us way before that, in whatever years she was mayor. And she served two terms, didn't she?

Glaser: Yes. She was mayor in the early eighties, I believe.

Bissinger: She served two terms. And she liked the Asian Art Museum.

Glaser: What went into getting the bond measure passed?

Bissinger: [sigh] It was the second time. We tried the time before and it didn't pass. We have a remarkable young lady as a commissioner and foundation board member, Judy Wilbur. Judy is chairman of the New Asian project and can get anything done. She knows all the politicians. She talked to Governor Pete Wilson, she talked to Senator Dianne Feinstein, with whom she is very close. Dianne Feinstein got Bruce Babbitt, the Secretary of the Interior, to write a letter. So Judy was able to get up at the planning commission meeting and read Dianne Feinstein's letter and then read Bruce Babbitt's letter, and that was pretty impressive to the opposition people because Babbitt said we should to go ahead and proceed with our plans.

Glaser: Why would ex-Governor Babbitt come into the picture?

Bissinger: Because he's the Secretary of the Interior. And we have to abide by what the Secretary of the Interior says. It's not only local, it's bigger than that.

Glaser: Well, I think of him in terms of the national parks and mines and things like that. But museums, evidently, also.

Bissinger: Only if you're doing anything that changes the environmental standards for a building. It's called the Environmental Impact Report [EIR].

Glaser: Interesting.

Bissinger: Oh, it's tough. I mean, you really have to get past an awful lot of people. The landmarks board didn't pass it. And then when we got to the planning commission we thought, "Well, this is it." You know, "If they don't let us do it, what are we going to do?" So it was nip and tuck. [sighs] And they passed it six to one! We were flabbergasted!

But Judy has been remarkable. She just got $2 million from the state by calling Pete Wilson, (she knows him), and others in the State Capitol and phoning them. She was largely responsible for getting the second bond measure passed. She's bright and focused and a hard worker. She's a very nice person too. I'm very admiring of Judy.

Glaser: The bond measure was for $42 million, and it's estimated that it's going to cost $120 million to renovate the building and bring it up to code. Where is the remainder going to come from?

Bissinger: We have raised $136 million, (I don't know why I say "we"! I haven't done anything) that's including the bond issue money. And we are expecting more because Jack Bogart, who was our chief fundraiser, has done an incredible job of getting money, and he's always got something on the horizon, like another two million here and a million there. So we're doing very well. $136 million is not enough, but anyhow, we're on the way.

Glaser: That's very good.

Bissinger: It's amazing, really, to raise that kind of money, in this fairly small city where so many arts institutions are vying for the same money.

Glaser: Now we have to talk about the murals, the Piazzoni murals.

Bissinger: Yes. Well, the Piazzoni murals--there's been a large group of dedicated and determined people who insist that the murals stay. Now, there are several reasons not to. First of all, if they stay on the walls during the time that we're doing the seismic work and construction work around there--the paintings are going to be destroyed if we leave them on the walls while we're doing the seismic and construction work there. They're not murals, they're painted on canvas. They were not made for the library. They came several years later, so it is not as if this is a historical situation to think about. And they're very boring. Have you ever seen them? Have you ever been in the library?

Glaser: Yes, but I don't remember the murals.

Bissinger: Of course, nobody does. They're eight panels, I think. They're scenes of the Monterey Bay area. There are hills and it's very pale and serene, but you don't notice them; they're boring.

Glaser: But people are passionate about preserving these panels.

Bissinger: I know. There are always people out there who are out to get somebody, and that's what these people have been doing.

Glaser: You mean they need a cause, is that what you're saying?

Bissinger: Yes, yes. And I don't care if I say this publicly, but Nancy Boas has been the ring leader, and she has quite a big following.

Glaser: Is that Roger's wife?

Bissinger: Yes, and she has been hell-bent on trying to get us to keep the murals. So it's been difficult, and she's been impossible in her determination. Besides which it's cost us a whole lot of money, and time. We can't start until February or March now, and we should have started ages ago, a year ago or more. So it's just too bad.

I've been to these hearings. I was there last week from one-thirty to six-thirty and everybody gets up to speak, pro and con. You listen to these speeches, and those that are against us go on and on and on. "We have to save those murals, they're of historical value and they're masterpieces." Well, they're none of that.

Glaser: So, how did you win the battle?

Bissinger: Because six planning commissioners out of seven voted for us. It was absolutely amazing. We were thunderstruck. But they listened to the good side and they voted accordingly, so we were pleased.

Glaser: Did they make a trip over to the old main library to look at them?

Bissinger: I would think so, but anyway they couldn't have been nicer. After the hearing, several of them came up to us and congratulated us and seemed pleased with their decision. Just one commissioner voted against us and we could hardly believe it. And then the next day (it was perfect timing) was the staff luncheon which we were all at of course, and everybody was celebrating. It was exciting. Everybody was feeling good. It's been a long pull, and regrettable that we had to go through all that time and expense, but we did win.

Glaser: I came across a clipping and unfortunately it wasn't dated, but I want to ask you about this. There's a statement in a *New York Times* article by Judith H. Dobrinsky about the effort of the Asian Art Museum to move to larger quarters, stating that this had been going on since the 1970s. She wrote, "Focusing on that, they have spent little energy on building the collection or organizing major exhibitions."

Bissinger: Yes, I read that.

Glaser: "With other museums vying for Asian art, the Asian Art Museum would have to run pretty hard just to stay in place and it isn't even doing that, critics say."

Bissinger: Yes, we know about that. We've read it. And the other person who added to it was Clarence Shangraw, who was our chief curator for years and our first curator and it's hard to forgive him. That's really being a snake in the grass. As our very first curator, he seemed to feel no loyalty to the museum at that point. He was a student in my class at UC Berkeley from where d'Argencé asked him to work at the Museum. Clarence later had many good years as chief curator until he retired, and he has had no loyalty to us at all. He as well as she, (Dobrinski) wrote the *New York Times* article. It's totally untrue because we've been acquiring. I just told you about the collections we've added, besides all the incidental objects that we keep adding. We've certainly mounted many exhibitions. We had the Philippine exhibit a while ago and right now we have the Hokasai/Hiroshigi, a Japanese print exhibit from the James Michener Collection in Honolulu, which has drawn an enormous audience. And we had the Mongolian exhibit. We've had several

big blockbuster exhibits. So, you know, she was talking through her hat, she knew nothing, and it was regrettable. One of our commissioners wrote a great letter refuting the *New York Times* article, but of course they didn't print it.

Glaser: Has she ever come out here and talked to anybody?

Bissinger: Not that I know of, but she certainly didn't talk to Emily Sano (the director) or to anyone with any authority. Clarence Shangraw should know better. He lives here. But you know, there are mean people. And they, for some reason, were out to get us. We just have to live with that. I guess this is the way the world works.

Glaser: Especially having that in the *New York Times* spreads it all over the country.

Bissinger: Yes, of course. One of our commissioners wrote a wonderful letter back and told them the truth and I have that. But you know, of course it wasn't published and nobody saw that letter. I sent it around to a few people.

Glaser: When did the article appear? Is it recent?

Bissinger: It was late 1997. I think why some people are against us is because we have the finest collection of Asian art in the western world and certainly much finer than any other collection here in San Francisco.

Glaser: Is that common in the art world, to have this jealousy and taking pot-shots?

Bissinger: I'm sure it's true of any large institution. I don't know of any cases like this, but I'm sure it exists.

[tape interruption]

Bissinger: [Referring to a document?] "Museum gathered--"

Glaser: It was the official opening?

Bissinger: Yes, the official opening of the Asian Art Museum in June, 1966 and number one, we had a party. Everybody came to our house. That was our old house up there [2500 Divisadero]; it was a big house. We had a cocktail reception for everybody: for all the symposium speakers and all the scholars and all of us--commissioners, curators, everybody. There were about 250 people that were our guests.

It was wonderful because these scholars came from all over the world. Some hadn't seen each other in a long time, and it was fun to watch their pleasure in greeting each other. It was a great party. And the symposium took place the following week.

Glaser: In the museum itself?

Bissinger: In the new auditorium of the museum, yes. I think there must have been 200 people. We also entertained at dinner parties for them. I was responsible for parceling out the homes. Each of us must have had twenty people (more or less) for dinner, with the scholars and ourselves. It was a great start for the symposium.

Glaser: Was the symposium more than one evening?

Bissinger: Oh, the symposium lasted a week. We had that many speakers, that many lecturers, so it lasted a week. We were out there every day.

Glaser: Were you entertaining every night for a week?

Bissinger: No, just Tuesday and Wednesday. There were 224 dinner guests and twenty-six dinners of all sizes. Two evenings of entertaining all these people.

Glaser: Did these scholars come with their wives?

Bissinger: Yes, some did. Well, for instance, Jim Cahill from Berkeley and Michael Sullivan (from London but he was teaching at Stanford at the time) they had wives. Yes, some of them had wives.

Glaser: Did they pick up their own tab for traveling and hotels?

Bissinger: No, we paid for everything.

Glaser: Oh, that must have been very expensive.

Bissinger: Well, in those days it wasn't as much as it would be now.

Glaser: It's still pretty costly.

Bissinger: It was a lot, yes. I don't think they would have come, otherwise. They're not about to pay their way for this sort of thing. They were also paid to lecture.

Glaser: So they all were from different fields.

Bissinger: Yes, different fields, they were all represented, and different places: Harvard, New York, Indiana, St. Louis, Kansas City, Seattle; Taiwan; Kyushu, Japan; Tokyo; Singapore; Princeton; London; Smith College; Germany--all over.

Let's see if there's anything else here. [laughs] I have even a list of how much everything cost. And how much the liquor cost--Scotch was $55 a case.

Glaser: That's cheap.

Bissinger: Bourbon was $30 and $38 a case. Vodka was $30, gin was $38--they were all in the thirties. Yes, this is all the liquor. And I had hostesses everyplace. There were 250 people at the reception. And here it says that cost $1.75 a person. Can you imagine nowadays?

Glaser: Wine must have been a dollar a bottle.

Bissinger: The overtime $3.50 an hour. Liquor, canopy--I guess I had the garden covered over, I'd done that before. Two tables for the garden. Coat racks.

Glaser: Of course, you're going back almost forty years.

Bissinger: Yes, oh now, wait a minute. This comes from--no, we were in the de Young Museum then; we didn't have a building yet. We did though, because I remember the symposium was held in the new museum auditorium. But this comes from the de Young. This is from Midge Kern, she was one of us. Anyway, she says she's submitting the final financial report, and the total amount came to $30,000. It would be more today. Much more. "This is for scholarships, books and photographs and paintings, at the direction of the symposium committee in the following manner."

Glaser: So that doesn't cover the cost of travel and hotel.

Bissinger: I guess not. It said, "The cost was less than expected, and there were three recipients of the scholarships. The books and photographs were chosen by the Brundage staff as gifts to the Oriental Art Research Library, which has now become part of the Center of Asian Art and Culture," which the museum was called at first, and then became the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco.

Transcribed by Amelia Archer
Final Typed by Shannon Page

TAPE GUIDE--Marjorie Bissinger

APPENDICES

Nathan Walter

Rosalie HESSBERG

Herman GREENBAUM

Isaac Walter

Birth	1844 Reckendorf, Germany	
Death	1925 San Francisco, CA	Age: 81
Occ	D N &E WALTER & CO	
Educ		
Reli	Jewish	
Note	Sixth born	

ID: 5 9 Feb 2001 Mark✓

Caroline GREENBAUM

Birth	1858 Philadelphia	
Death	1935 San Francisco, CA	Age: 77
Occ		
Educ		
Reli		
Note		

ID: 14 15 Jan 2001 Mark✓

Edgar

Marion

John Isador

3

Isaac Walter
1844 - 1925

Caroline GREENBAUM
1858 - 1935

Isador SCHWARTZ

Nettie COHEN

Edgar WALTER

Birth	23 Nov 1878 San Francico	
Death	2 Mar 1938 San Francico	Age: 59
Occ	Artist	
Educ		
Reli		
Note		

ID: 32 9 Mar 2001 Mark✓

Pearl SCHWARTZ

Birth	14 Nov 1887 San Francisco, CA	
Death	25 Jul 1913 San Francisco, CA	Age: 25
Occ		
Educ		
Reli		
Note		

ID: 56 9 Mar 2001 Mark✓

24

Isaac Walter
1844 - 1925

Caroline GREENBAUM
1858 - 1935

Isidor SCHWARTZ
1859 - 1903

Nettie COHEN
1863 - 1906

John Isador WALTER

Birth	1880 San Francisco	
Death	5 Mar 1930 San Francisco	Age: 50
Occ	Pres. Of D.N. & E. Walter Co.	
Educ		
Reli		
Note		

ID: 33 9 Mar 2001 Mark:

Florence SCHWARTZ

Birth	4 Apr 1882 San Francisco, CA	
Death	6 May 1972 San Francisco, CA	Age: 90
Occ	Book Binder	
Educ		
Reli		
Note	Uncle Jonas BLOOM	

ID: 58 13 Feb 2001 Mark:

John I. JR.

Marjorie Pearl

Elinor (Nell)

Carol

25

John Isador WALTER
1880 - 1930

Florence SCHWARTZ
1882 - 1972

John I. JR. Walter

Birth	1908	
Death	1919	Age: 11
Occ		
Educ		
Reli		
Note		

ID: 59 23 Jan 2001 Mark:

UNNAMED

Birth	
Death	
Occ	
Educ	
Reli	
Note	

ID: 104 7 Feb 2001 Mark:

42

John Isador WALTER
1880 - 1930

Florence SCHWARTZ
1882 - 1972

HENRY SINTON

Birth	1 Feb 1917 Boston	Age: 84
Death		
Occ		
Educ		
Reli		
Note		

ID: 161 | 10 Feb 2001 | Mark: ✓

Carol Walter

Birth	9 May 1917 San Francisco, CA	Age: 83
Death		
Occ		
Educ		
Reli		
Note		

ID: 62 | 23 Jan 2001 | Mark:

PATRICIA

PETER

45

Stanley SINTON

Edna SINTON

John Isador WALTER
1880 - 1930

Florence SCHWARTZ
1882 - 1972

30 Jun , San Francisco, CA

Stanley SINTON JR.

Birth	22 Oct 1908 Boston	
Death	24 Feb 1981 San Francisco, CA	Age: 72
Occ		
Educ		
Reli		
Note		

ID: 65 | 8 Feb 2001 | Mark: ✓

Elinor (Nell) Walter

Birth	4 Jun 1910 San Francisco, CA	
Death	23 Oct 1997 San Francisco, CA	Age: 87
Occ		
Educ		
Reli		
Note		

ID: 60 | 11 Feb 2001 | Mark:

Margot

Joan

John

Divorce: 1969, San Francisco, CA

43

Newton BISSINGER

Mildred HEILNER

John Isador WALTER
1880 - 1930

Florence SCHWARTZ
1882 - 1972

15 Jan 1932, San Francisco, CA

Paul Adolph BISSINGER

Birth	10 Jun 1905 Portland	
Death	15 Oct 1969 London, England	Age: 64
Occ	Bissinger & Company (Hides & Wool)	
Educ		
Reli		
Note		
ID: 66	12 Feb 2001	Mark✓

Marjorie Pearl Walter

Birth	3 Nov 1912	Age: 88
Death		
Occ		
Educ		
Reli		
Note		
ID: 61	28 Jan 2001	Mark✓

Peggy

Paul A. Jr.

Thomas Newton

44

Julius PRESSMAN

Guss PRESSMAN

Paul Adolph BISSINGER
1905 - 1969

Marjorie Pearl Walter
1912 -

Peter I. PRESSMAN

Birth	20 Jun 1935 New York City	Age: 65
Death		
Occ	Doctor (Surgeon)	
Educ		
Reli		
Note		
ID: 74	9 Feb 2001	Mark✓

Peggy BISSINGER

Birth	12 Mar 1933 San Francisco, CA	Age: 67
Death		
Occ		
Educ		
Reli		
Note		
ID: 71	9 Feb 2001	Mark✓

Michael

Jeffrey

51

Paul Adolph BISSINGER
1905 - 1969

Marjorie Pearl Walter
1912 -

Edward BELL

Sabina

Paul A. Jr. BISSINGER

Birth	3 Apr 1934	Age: 66
Death		
Occ		
Educ		
Reli		
Note		

ID: 72 — 23 Jan 2001 — Mark:

Kathleen BELL

Birth	1 Nov 1935 Boston, MA	Age: 65
Death		
Occ		
Educ		
Reli		
Note		

ID: 77 — 11 Mar 2001 — Mark:

Stephen

Matthew

52

Paul Adolph BISSINGER
1905 - 1969

Marjorie Pearl Walter
1912 -

CUTLER

Thomas Newton BISSINGER

Birth	10 Jun 1939 San Francisco, CA	Age: 61
Death		
Occ	Playwright	
Educ		
Reli		
Note		

ID: 73 — 9 Feb 2001 — Mark:

Kristen CUTLER

Birth	16 Sep 1949 Champagne/Urbana, Illinois	Age: 51
Death		
Occ	Dancer	
Educ		
Reli		
Note		

ID: 80 — 9 Feb 2001 — Mark:

Zachary

Esther

53

A Tribute to John I. Walter, September 1930, Date of His Death

Privately printed by the Grabhorn Press in May 1931

"Now that he's gone, I find myself looking over the years since we met. They cover most of the time I've been in San Francisco, starting with his early manhood. It's hard for me to believe that he was just fifty at the time of his passing. Thinking of him brings to mind the French saying about having, "the air young." He had the "air young" always. There was something about him that even in the years of his long sickness suggested youth.

Yet there was nothing particularly lively about his manner. As a matter of fact, he was rather deliberate. I used to enjoy his slow, good-humored way of speaking, that deep voice of his I can hear now. I believe I shall be able to hear it always. And every time I hear it, every time I think of the man it expressed, I feel better.

There were long intervals when we didn't happen to meet, but they made no difference whatsoever. If decades had passed, we should have exchanged greetings on the old familiar basis.

It seems absurd that I should actually have seen him so seldom. From the way we met, a stranger might have imagined we were on terms of intimacy. As a matter of fact, he was on such terms with virtually all the people that he knew. He offered them something many another would have kept for special ones, the favorites.

That supreme gift of the gods he had: the faculty of opening his treasures of good will to anyone who came along and manifested a desire to be friendly. Jew that he was, member of the family that maintained the best traditions of culture, he had a multitude of close affiliations outside his group. Not for him the narrow groove most of us found ourselves walking in. Wherever human beings were, no matter what kind they might be, there he would display that glow of social instinct of his. Always it created an atmosphere of tranquility and friendliness and humor.

The first time I saw him I said to myself, "Here's someone made for adventure." It wouldn't have surprised me if I had been told he'd been around the world a dozen times. You didn't have to be one of those acute readers of character or one of the uncanny new psychologists to see that an adventurous destiny was in his temperament. But there was something else about him that must have kept it more or less in check--a marvelous capacity for becoming a part of his surroundings, for taking deep root.

He had an extraordinary capacity for loyalty. Much as he liked excitement and diversion, as the years passed I gradually perceived that he had adapted himself to his routine. He'd made himself in the business inherited from his father. There he seemed to function happily, exactly as he

did wherever he went. And a happier man at home than he was I shouldn't have been able to think of.

I like to recall a perfect evening at his house long before his health began to fail. He was at his best, fairly bubbling over with that deep-throated banter of his. He apparently had a genius for putting all kinds of people at ease. It might have been attributed to his quiet confident approach.

He was so used to having people like him that he never had to resort to the reserves and the other protections so common among the victims of self-consciousness. And as for superiority of any kind, he was so free from it that if he had been told he differed in any regard from the everyday people he would have laughed.

For all his considerateness, however, he could be stern when he thought sternness was required. In plain terms, he could tell you exactly what he thought. He and truth were pretty intimately related. That character of his was too well-poised for indulgence in pretense.

Absorbed as he became by his business tasks, he nevertheless found time for many public activities. Since his death I have recently had occasion to look over a list of organizations he was associated with in a conspicuous capacity. They showed his amazing range of interests. Incidentally, they reflected his genuine love of the arts and of all fine things in life. He was an exceptionally useful citizen, but he cared very little about anything like public recognition; that kind of thing he left to the brother whose gifts as a sculptor and as a decorator and as an amateur actor were widely acclaimed.

What a pleasant memory he left behind. Every time I think of him I shall renew my appreciation of all he meant as a human being. Along his path he carried a steady glow never to be forgotten by those who basked in its brightness and its warmth. How free he was from the qualities that put so many people at odds with life, that made it hard for them to establish harmonious relations. He must have been lucky and he shared his luck with everyone who came his way.

John D. Barry.

Paul Bissinger, 1941, Lieutenant Junior grade.

PAUL A. BISSINGER

President, San Francisco Chamber of Commerce

Civic and Business Leader

By WILLIAM FLYNN
Special Writer — The Record

PAUL A. BISSINGER, now concluding his year's term as president of the San Francisco Chamber of Commerce, is an individual who has achieved a special niche in San Francisco's all-time unofficial Hall of Fame.

He has won friends and influenced people as president of the San Francisco Chamber of Commerce.

While it is seldom admitted for the record, a chamber of commerce does not always "win friends and influence people" to the extent that the San Francisco Chamber has, during the past year under Bissinger.

While a decade is a considerable period of time when it measures the number of unpaid installments on the mortgage financing the family home, historically it is but a moment. And, while considering the magnitude of Bissinger's achievement as president of the San Francisco Chamber of Commerce during the current year, it might be well to turn back ten years in the city's history and consider but one incident . . .

RURAL DISFAVOR

Then, mention of San Francisco aroused the ire of the State's agricultural industry. Farmers were bitter about the imposition of certain labor regulations on their truckers entering the city, the regulations being established by the powerful AFL Teamsters Union.

With the farmers denouncing San Francisco for tolerating not only the teamsters but the labor activity of Harry Bridges on the waterfront, business went elsewhere. Finally, action became necessary.

The San Francisco Chamber of Commerce decided that something should be done not only to win friends and influence among the state farmers but also to try and make labor a member of the team. The theory was both sides should be convinced that mutual interests were at stake.

MEETING ARRANGED

So a great big meeting was arranged at the Civic Auditorium. A very prominent speaker was invited to make the pitch. The only flaw in the plan was the speaker. He was a so-called public relations expert for one of the nation's greatest automobile manufacturing concerns. He had a little habit of beating labor over the head with a verbal club even when he didn't have an excuse.

The Chamber of Commerce brains of that day could see nothing unusual about having such an individual give the word at the clam bake. He spoke their language in almost every detail, anyway. They seemed blind to the fact that the speaker's appearance automatically would deprive them of half their audience—labor.

It was not until the late Harold Boyd, the politically-wise Controller of San Francisco, dealt himself a hand that things looked a bit better. He could call his shots because he was the individual who signed the city's checks for the Chamber for certain services performed in behalf of the city. At Boyd's "suggestion," another speaker was substituted and the meeting was something of a success.

OFFICIALS AIDED

Boyd and the late Alfred J. Cleary, the city's Chief Administrative Officer, the late Mayor Angelo J. Rossi, and later Chief Administrator Thomas A. Brooks followed through on the gains of the meeting by organizing the Municipal Regional Service Committee.

The activity, ably directed and conducted by William J. Losh, and financed with city funds, finally made a dent in the antagonism of the farmer toward the city—and then the Chamber of Commerce caught hold with an active agriculture committee.

Now, Bissinger, something of a San Francisco aristocrat but also blessed with the ability to be at home almost anywhere without patronizing or losing his dignity; would not have made such a mistake had he been president of the Chamber of Commerce a decade ago.

He would not have included the factor that aroused the ire of labor. Nor would he have permitted the city to make a spectacular pass interception and run with the ball by taking over the mission of winning friends among the farmers.

For Bissinger, it appears from his record as a business man and a civic minded individual who is willing to devote at least half his time to civic service—is an individual who not only understands that two and two makes four but that sometimes such precision is good sense.

CONTINUED WORK

When he undertook to continue the work—started by last year's Chamber President Henry E. North—of speeding up port business in San Francisco by diagnosing the illness of the waterfront, he did not overlook labor. In fact, he relied considerably on labor's advice and knowledge to whittle out a program of action for the common good.

The retiring president of the San Francisco Chamber of Commerce makes his living as vice president

PAUL A. BISSINGER, Pr
S. F. Chamber of Comm

and director of Bissinger a
pany, the West's largest h
tallow firm.

He was born in Portlar
gon, June 12, 1905, the son
ton and Mildred Heilner Bi
At the time of his birth, hi
was manager of the firm'
land office. Now he is pres
the firm.

When the boy was sever
old, the family moved to Sa
cisco and he followed the
ary pattern of growth tow
turity that was custom
those who did not live thro
Fire and Earthquake of
become civic leaders bec
ability and hard work agai
rific odds.

(Continued on next pa

(Continued from page 5)

He was graduated from the Pacific Heights Grammar School and Lowell High School and Stanford University, a member of the Class of '26. He went into the family firm and when World War II came along, he was commissioned a junior grade lieutenant in the Navy.

When he was placed on the inactive list after V-J Day, he wore the three stripes of a commander. While being promoted he served two years in the Mediteranean and participated in the invasion of Sicily, Salerno, Anzio, and Southern France. For his work at Salerno and Anzio he was awarded the Legion of Merit.

Before he went into service he was active in civic affairs through the medium of the Junior Chamber of Commeros and served as president of that organization. He had married his wife, Marjorie, and established the family home at 2500 Divisadero Street, where the couple live with their three children: Peggy, 17; Paul, Jr., 16; and Thomas, 11.

RETURNED TO FIRM

When he returned to the firm and San Francisco after the war, Bissinger resumed his participation in the affairs of the Chamber of Commerce. He moved through the chairs and was elected president a year ago, one of the youngest men in the century old history of the organization to hold the office.

When he took over the job, the Chamber of Commerce seemed to go into overdrive and to surpass all former records of getting things done for the benefit of the entire city.

Bissinger, as president, seemed to be the major reason why. And as for the individual, an official sketch of his personality and abilities says:

"Paul Bissinger can play all the bases—and often does—and he can pitch a good fast ball to the best of them.

"With the ease of the seasoned 'pro' he is, he can slide from the gates of a manufacturing plant to Pier 45-A at the waterfront, across town to a freeway meeting and back to the Chamber to lead a domestic trade development conference—leaving his mark, and an intelligent one, at each stop.

FULL PROGRAM

"In a single morning he may spark an idea for city representatives in Washington, plan a luncheon for a hundred year old San Francisco firm, discuss means of eliminating nuisance charges at the port, and attend a city meeting on parking, transit, traffic, or housing.

"Dynamic, explosive, cheerful and personable, Paul Bissinger is one of the youngest presidents the San Francisco Chamber of Commerce has had in its 100 years of service.

"Forty-five years old, he looks 35 and acts with the youthful enthusiasm and vigor of a 25-year-old. His recent interests are as diversified as his business activities; he is vice president of the San Francisco Musical Association; a YMCA director, member of the Board of Trustees, World Affairs Council of Northern California; a director of the National Conference of Christians and Jews.

"And in addition to all of this, he owns and operates his own private 'amateur' printing shop in the attic of his beautiful Pacific Heights home."

MANY ACCOMPLISHMENTS

While that is quite a package to buy, it is more objective, in view of the facts, than most official biographies. He is a man of many accomplishments, a pleasing personality, has considerable controlled energy. In addition, and what is more important, he has that strange and rare human ability—he thinks—and then tries to do something about the conclusions.

He has done considerable thinking about the future of San Francisco—and at the same time done something about the immediate problems that need correction.

Bissinger believes and continually expounds the theory which has long guided the San Francisco Chamber of Commerce—that San Francisco is the heartland of a vast economic empire. It may extend from border to border and as far east as Denver and west to the shores of the Pacific. That, he believes, is San Francisco's trade area. He further believes that it is the duty and responsibility of the Chamber to aid in development of the trade potential of that area.

CHAMBER ACTIVE

Thus the San Francisco Chamber of Commerce has been particularly active during the past year in winning friends and influencing people outside the immediate geographical area of the city.

The Chamber has sponsored good will trips to numerous communities, as far away as Portland; often to cities in the rich agricultural empire that is the Central Valley of California.

Bissinger has stepped up the activity of the Chamber on the question of the future of San Francisco's water front. Under his guidance, one of the most extensive, detailed, and sensible reports on what alls the harbor has been completed (it was started by Henry North) and presented to those who have the authority to correct the deficiencies.

The result is that the next session of the legislature may come

(Continued on page 22)

PAUL A. BISSINGER

(Continued from page 6)

up with a sane, sensible and equitable plan for operation of San Francisco Harbor that seems to have declined a bit during the years under the administration of the State Board of Harbor Commissioners.

He has gone out of his way to encourage the elimination of certain charges that have driven trade from the docks. As an example of his interest in this problem, he personally signed more than a thousand letters to shippers explaining the advantages of the new rate schedules. The signing of a thousand letters is no mere fete of endurance no matter what the reason.

So far, the port drive has been successful. But Bissinger is sincerely careful not to claim sole and exclusive credit for the achievement.

He praises those who ordinarily win praise for participation in such an undertaking. But his voice takes on a bit more enthusiasm when he commends labor for its contribution to the investigation.

The way he gives the commendation leaves the impression that the President of the San Francisco Chamber of Commerce knows labor is a fully-accredited member of San Francisco's Board of Directors. This attitude is distinctive and strikingly indicative of the community's growth toward maturity during the last ten years.

His long-range concern is divided into two subjects, distinctive yet similar and mutually beneficial.

He believes the years will prove the Chamber's conclusion that the nine-county San Francisco Bay Area is one economic unit and eventually will be given that single identity through governmental consolidation. He knows that the achievement will not be recorded for a number of years, perhaps for generations, but he is convinced that it is inevitable.

To speed this consolidation, he has continued and strengthened a Chamber policy of using the resources of the organization for the good of the entire area. He has done this because he knows that what is beneficial to the residents and cities and towns of the Bay Area, ultimately has a beneficial effect on the lives and fortunes of the citizens of San Francisco.

As an example of how this policy works, he has explained:

"When there is a chance for establishment of a new factory or industry in the West or on the Pacific Coast, the Chamber tries to win it for San Francisco.

"Now, it is obvious that San Francisco cannot have all the new industry that is coming to the West. There is the matter of land limitation, for example, which is something of a handicap.

"So, when we know that we cannot supply the needs of the potential buyer, we use our energy to win these payrolls and markets for the Bay Region and Northern California.

"That way, other communities are benefited and San Francisco benefits, for San Francisco is the trading headquarters of the entire area."

The policy seems to pay dividends.

Investment in new factories and expansions in San Francisco during the first nine months of the

(Continued on next page)

PAUL A. BISSINGER

(Continued from page 22)

year totaled $79,000,000; the same type expenditure in the Metropolitan Los Angeles area totaled but $62,000,000.

He is enthusiastic about the far distant future of San Francisco—if the world ever settles down to peace so trade and commerce may flourish. In the Pacific, he believes, are the great markets of the future—China, the Philippines, the Commonwealth nations of Australia and New Zealand. He is convinced that through the Golden Gate will move the greatest portion of this trade—with San Francisco benefiting.

SPECIAL EFFORT

To be ready to meet this challenge of the future, the Chamber has made a special effort to become acquainted with the leaders of the future, the 1,800 foreign students who are now studying in the Bay Region. It also is possible that the Chamber will send a good will trade expedition on a 15,000-mile jaunt within a few months, to Australia and New Zealand.

These are but the highlights of Bissinger's Chamber work. When he becomes a past president of the organization, he intends to take time out for a while from his civic duties.

For one thing, he wants to become re-acquainted with his family. He is determined on this subject and is just as determined about another facet of his future:

"I have no intention of entering politics," he says.

SOFT SPOKEN

A soft-spoken individual, who probably fired a .45 automatic into the ground behind him when he wasn't expecting the detonation, Bissinger talks easily of his work and what he has tried to do for the community during his year as president of the Chamber of Commerce. On that subject he seldom is at a loss for a word.

But when he is asked why he devotes so much of his time and energy to a task that establishes him as a target for not too discriminating sharp-shooters, he becomes a bit tongue-tied in an essentially modest sort of way.

He says he does it because he believes it is his duty.

As he explains, he almost tangles his discourse in a skein of cliches that have been used to describe positive motives for generations. But the essentials of the philosophy that inspire him to give his time and money may be found in these words:

"I love San Francisco and feel I have a high stake here and I enjoy doing a tough job, I like people and I like to meet people."

If more men of ability were inspired by the same philosophy, San Francisco could be even greater.

THE SOCIETY FOR ASIAN ART

55 RAYCLIFF TERRACE SAN FRANCISCO, 15

Officers

Co-Chairmen: Mrs. Roger Kent, Paul A. Bissinger

Vice-Chairmen: Edwin Grabhorn, Dr. Wallace B. Smith

Treasurer: Charles Page

Secretary: Mrs. Carl W. Stern

Directors & Sponsors

Mrs. Harriet Holbrook Belcher
Mr. and Mrs. Paul A. Bissinger
Katherine Field Caldwell
Mr. and Mrs. Richard Y. Dakin
John Dwyer
Mr. and Mrs. Morse Erskine
Dr. and Mrs. Frank Gerbode
Mr. and Mrs. Oscar Gerson
Mr. and Mrs. Edwin Grabhorn
Mr. and Mrs. Walter A. Haas
Mr. and Mrs. Charles Kendrick
Mr. and Mrs. Roger Kent
John D. La Plante
Roy Leventritt
Mr. and Mrs. Philip N. Lilienthal
Mr. and Mrs. Otto J. Maenchen
Mr. and Mrs. George Moncharsh
Mr. and Mrs. Charles Page
William S. Picher
Mrs. Dickson Reck
Mrs. Henry Potter Russell
Mr. and Mrs. Leon B. Russell
Sir George and Lady Sansom
Mr. and Mrs. Donald H. Shively
Mrs. Ferdinand C. Smith
Dr. and Mrs. Wallace B. Smith
Mr. and Mrs. Robert L. Smyth
Mr. and Mrs. Carl W. Stern
Mr. and Mrs. Brayton Wilbur

THE COLLECTION

With more than 10,000 art objects, spanning more than 6,000 years of history from neolithic times to the present, the Asian Art Museum collection is one of the most magnificent in the world today. It includes one of the most comprehensive, diversified collections of Chinese jades, lacquers, ceramics and ancient bronzes; the oldest known dated Chinese Buddha; the largest collection of Gandharan sculpture in North America; the largest museum collection of Japanese netsuke and inro in this country; and a wide variety of other objects such as paintings, sculptures, architectural elements and decorative objects illustrating all major periods and stylistic developments of the arts of Asia.

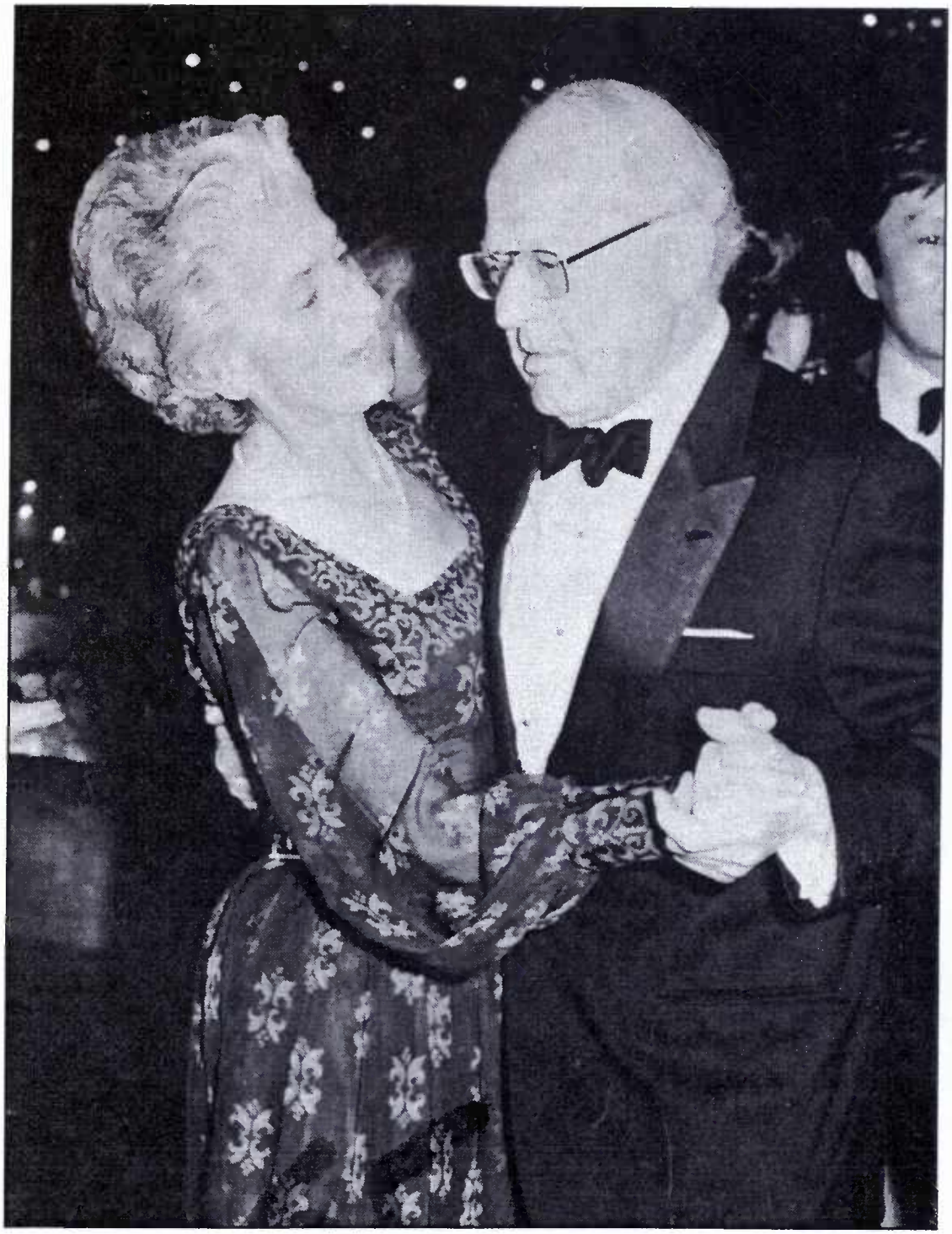
Ninety-five percent of the holdings of the Museum came through the generosity of Avery Brundage who collected over a period of 40 years. Known as the Avery Brundage Collection, it is noted for the diversity of material as well as for the remarkably high quality of the individual pieces. Nearly half of the Avery Brundage Collection consists of objects of Chinese origin, and this is reflected in the general permanent layout of the displays. The first floor is devoted to the arts of China. The second floor is divided among the arts of India, Tibet, Nepal, Pakistan, Korea, Japan and Southeast Asia.

Given the increasing dearth of museum-quality art objects, and the ever-rising costs of collecting such pieces, it would be

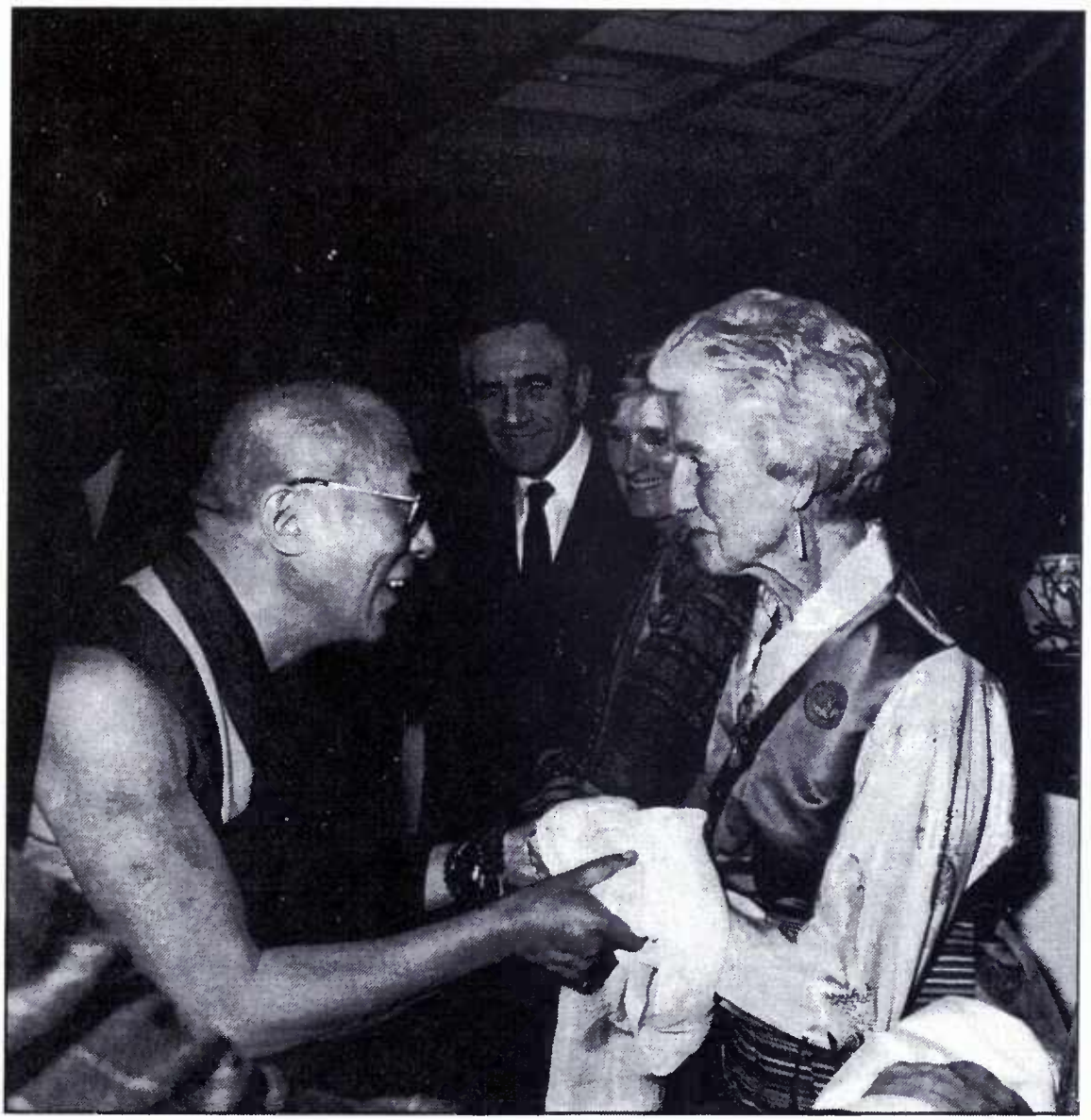
impossible to assemble such a collection today. It is quite literally a priceless collection which may well be San Francisco's greatest single cultural asset.

In addition, the Asian Art Museum Foundation, the Society for Asian Art, The Museum Society, The Museum Society Auxiliary, the Connoisseurs Council, and other devoted individuals have substantially augmented Brundage's benefactions with fine objects of quality and rarity in furtherance of the objectives of the Museum's major donor. Such contributions are of vital importance since the growth of the collection depends on gifts and financial support from private individuals and groups. Due to space limitations, only about 15% of the Museum's collections can be displayed at any one time. Periodic gallery rotations serve to solve part of this serious problem, since they aim at showing the majority of our holdings within a reasonable amount of time. The exhibits are arranged chronologically and grouped in a manner which emphasizes stylistic evolution as well as sociopolitical characteristics. Maps and charts supplement individual labels, and numerous books and brochures dealing with various aspects of the Avery Brundage Collection are available in the Fine Arts Museums Stores.

Alfred Lim, a member of the Asian Art Committee, Mrs. James M. Gerstley, Alexander D. Calhoun, Jr., and Mrs. Paul Bissinger at the preview reception of "Chang Dai-chien, A Retrospective". Mrs. Bissinger's fan held the secret of the seating arrangement for the dinner at Trader Vic's, following the preview.



Marjorie Seller, then Mrs. Paul Bissinger, dancing with Avery Brundage, 1971.



Marjorie Seller and the Dalai Lama at the Tibet Exhibit opening, 1991.

CONFERRING royal honors on Mrs. Paul Bissinger, former president of the Society for Asian Art, was Swedish Consul General Carl-Henrik Petersen, above; others at the party, left, were John H. Thacher and Mrs.

Royal Honors

FOUR NOTED San Franciscans received royal recognition recently at a reception at the Swedish consul general's residence.

Consul General Carl-Henrik Petersen, acting on behalf of His Majesty King Gustav VI Adolf of Sweden, bestowed the Ladies Membership Insignia of the Royal Order of Vasa upon Mrs. Paul Bissinger and Mrs. Jaquelin Hume.

Jack McGregor and Rene-Yvon Lefebvre d'Argence received the Knight Insignia of the Royal Order of the North Star, and Lowell Groves was presented with the Knight Insignia of the Royal Order of Vasa.

The decorations were conferred for the recipients' services in promoting cultural relations between Sweden and the United States. All were active in presenting King Adolf's private collection of Chinese art in the Brundage wing of the M. H. de Young Memorial Museum last year.

INDEX--Marjorie W. Bissinger

Eleanor K. Glaser

Raised and educated in the Middle West. During World War II, spent two years in U.S. Marine Corps Women's Reserve.

Senior year of college was taken in New Zealand, consequently A.B. degree in sociology from University of Michigan was granted in absentia. Study in New Zealand was followed by a year in Sydney, Australia, working for Caltex Oil Company.

Work experience includes such nonprofit organizations as Community Service Society, New York City; National Society for Crippled Children and Adults, and National Congress of Parents and Teachers in Chicago.

After moving to California in 1966, joined the staff of a local weekly newspaper, did volunteer publicity for the Judah Magnes Museum and the Moraga Historical Society, and was the Bay Area correspondent for a national weekly newspaper. Also served as a history docent for the Oakland Museum.

Joined the staff of the Regional Oral History Office in 1976 as interviewer/editor. Currently director of the Jewish Community Federation Leadership Oral History Project.

13 53 90

BANC
MSS
2003/250 c

U. C. BERKELEY LIBRARIES
C083168815