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Narrator**

**Betty Bright
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Interviewer**

**September 10, 2015
At Open Book Performance Hall, and in MCBA's studios
Minneapolis, Minnesota**

BB: My name is Betty Bright, and today, September 10, 2015 I am interviewing Bill Myers at Open Book in Minneapolis. This interview is being conducted on behalf of Minnesota Center for Book Arts' 30th Anniversary Oral History Project, which has been financed in part with funds provided by the State of Minnesota, through the Minnesota Historical Society, from the Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund.

Bill, thank you for joining us today. You are a retired Professor of Philosophy at Saint Catherine University in Saint Paul, and presently a full-time book artist at your press, which is named Piano Press. Your involvement at MCBA begins in 1992, and in the intervening twenty-three years has included a number of roles—when we visited yesterday we counted up to ten—but for our purposes here today I will mention your involvement as an exhibiting wood engraving artist and teacher, a winner of a Jerome Fellowship, and service on MCBA's Board of Directors, including a Board Chair during an important transitional period at MCBA. To begin, could you share with us any background or early interests that may have positioned you to respond to the idea of a book arts center?

WM: I discovered MCBA entirely by accident and as a result of that accident my life took a left turn, maybe a right turn, an upturn, and before that I had never heard of the place, didn't know anything about book art per se. My daughter was in fourth grade, when MCBA had a program in the schools where elementary school kids make books. She made a book that got an honorable mention, which meant that it was on display at MCBA. I actually didn't get to that exhibit but it put us on the mailing list, and so as time went on, I happened to see an exhibit of wood engravings by Thomas Bewick, who is the master and basically the founder of modern wood engraving.

BB: Where was that exhibit?

WM: At the Bell Natural History Museum, at the U [University of Minnesota]. They had some bird prints reprinted from Bewick's original blocks. These are famous and the blocks themselves got scattered all over North America and Britain. The Bell owns a half

dozen of them. I saw that and I said I have got to do this. I have got to figure out how to make this work. I had already built my first printing press out of a piano, hence [my press name] Piano Press. There was an old upright piano in our basement when we moved into the house. The house had to have been built around it because there was no Mike Mulligan steam shovel—no way this thing could have gotten down those stairs. Had a piano guy come out and look at it; he said it is a planter. So, I tore it apart and for all those years since, I have been using the wood for all kinds of projects. So I had this very dense old seasoned piano oak, and I built a wooden-framed printing press out of it, with a little car jack as a motivator to provide the power, and started trying to teach myself how to print. I have always been an autodidact and I thought, well, I can figure this out. The results weren't all that great.

So, I saw the Bewick exhibit. Shortly after, I saw wood engraving in the class list that we got from MCBA. So I signed up, great trepidation. Not an artist. Been a photographer all my life, in black and white, think that way, but had never been an artist. Got lost getting there, arrived late, big sweat, and the instructor, Fred Brian, was just a wonderful, wonderful man. And it turned out that he was the person the Bell had hired to do the reprints of the Bewick blocks. And one of the guys in the class was the man who curated that exhibition. So I said, I think I have found my place. Within six months I had my own Vandercook in the basement, and never looked back. And it never felt odd, it just felt like, this is what I' am supposed to be doing.

BB: So you got a Vandercook very quickly.

WM: Yes.

BB: How do you describe your artistic practice today?

WM: I started out doing wood engraving and I do a lot of that still. I am a founding member of the Wood Engravers Network, which I can talk about in a bit. I also do larger scale woodcuts, which I started to do because engraving is so finicky, and I decided it would be fun to use larger muscle groups in making art, so started doing larger carvings. I also do letterpress printing devoted to fine press practice.

BB: I can picture you walking up to MCBA that first night, and you settled in and took that class. If I remember right, Fred Brian volunteered many hours to put together the Alexandra Hand Press that was shipped from Whittington Press in England in crates, and Fred came in and just figured it out. They sent along photographs and detailed instructions, and he did a phenomenal job. If you think back to those early days, who else did you get to know?

WM: Well, after that first class with Fred I took a class from Gaylord Schanilec. He taught me color printing. Jack Malloy was also a teacher who did color work, and so I worked with him for just one class. I took letterpress printing from my continuing good

friend Kent Aldrich. That set me off, gave me the tools and the vision to do a lot of different kinds of work. I still work in color, I still work in plain black, and I began collecting type. I have an enormous type collection, which I now need to divest myself of. I ended up with about five hundred cases of type. We had to build a new garage to hold all of it, as I acquired all of this stuff. And over time I acquired printing presses in addition to the Vandercook. I have a Reliance Iron Hand Press and a Golden Pearl Platen Press, which is a gem. I had a platen jobber that I sold to somebody who had come to MCBA, a young woman who had fallen in love with printing. She took a platen press class and so provided a good home for the press because I wasn't using it. So, I have gathered a lot of equipment and tools, which for me means I can do anything I wish. I have got all of this stuff available, and just need to make the time. I am distracted, like everybody else.

BB: Ok, MCBA is still in its first site in the Warehouse District. Let's imagine that it's one of the days you're walking in to take a class with Gaylord Schanilec, Fred Brian or Jack Malloy. Bring us back to that time as you are walking up to the building. What struck you about the building and the neighborhood as you were approaching the Center?

WM: Alien! [Laughter] I wasn't a city person. I live in Saint Paul in an ordinary neighborhood, but this, the Warehouse District, I found absolutely fascinating and a little intimidating. It helped that Café Brenda was right kitty-corner, because that meant: ok, good food, we can do this. But getting used to things like freight elevators and huge structures—it was just a very interesting, different place. MCBA itself when you walked in, it was quite open, with a few exceptions. You had the binding studio, the papermaking studio, wide open, the print studio—no separations to speak of. That meant when sometime later I became the Open Studio Print Monitor, I could hang out with papermakers—Dana Brumitt was there, and a friend of hers, Gloria, and they were down there every Tuesday night making paper or marbling, and in fact I got to watch while Dana did the marbling design that ended up on the Kleenex box. Every time you look at that Kleenex box that has that marbled design in different colors that came from MCBA.

BB: I did not know that!

WM: Nobody knows that, except me, and Dana! [Laughter] She said she had to do it in neutral colors because they were going to do stuff to it in their computers. That packaging has had a lot of longevity over time. I hope they paid her a lot of money; it was fun. People would come in with projects. I remember a guy who had blocks that were way too thick, there was no way he was going to be able to print them on a press, and he had been trying to print them with house paint. He knew nothing. So we had to do some educating. My friend Dale Kennedy, who is a noted wood engraver, has a very broad following, including in England. He is a surrealist and he does these tiny, very intricate, very fascinating, out of the subconscious, engravings, which are hell to print because of a lot of fine lines that can fill with ink easily and an expanse of black surface that must be filled with ink. He came in during the Open Studio night and said I want to learn how to

print on a press. I said, ok, I will show you how to do it. I showed him how to print on the Vandercook. The challenge was that he had had a bicycle accident and he was on crutches, so I taught him how to crutch himself along with the cylinder. He now prints in my studio and has fallen in love with the iron hand press because it doesn't hum, doesn't plug in; it's totally retro.

BB: So, was it busy there on Tuesday nights? Were there a handful of people, or was it empty sometimes in the 1990s?

WM: It varied a lot. Some nights could be quite busy. You would have five or six people doing projects. I just had to pay attention; I wasn't there to teach them how to do stuff *per se*, but I had to do things like make sure they didn't break the paper cutter, which was fragile. I would go there with my engraving, and I think that remains the most productive period in my life as an engraver, because I did a lot of cutting while other people were doing their various projects. It was really quite great. Sometimes you would get a class going on in the paper studio. Sometimes people would do stuff in the bindery. I remember getting to listen in on a fascinating lecture series on typography. There was a lot of stuff going on and people came and did interesting projects. It was quite fun.

BB: If you had to characterize the artists' community in the 1990s, before the Artists' Co-operative started in 1997, did you sense a real change in the atmosphere of the artist community when the Co-op started to take place? I know MCBA was in a period of transition.

WM: It was a huge change, in part because of the financial difficulties that MCBA was in. Galvanized the artist community to come together and say we can't lose this, this place is too precious, too important. And there was now a lot of energy around figuring out things like the [Artists'] Co-op, and other ways to engage people on an ongoing basis. One of my early frustrations with MCBA was that I took a letterpress class, and ok, now I am a letterpress printer—nothing follows. I took these engraving classes, and ok, now I can do these things—nothing more to follow. Later, when I was on the board, I pushed for a curriculum, an actual path that people could see a way to go from here to there. Eventually, not while I was around, it gelled into a Certificate program for the various arts. I think that was missing then, and it came about ultimately because we went through the crisis and people stepped up and said, we are not letting go. We are going to have this place in our community.

BB: You mentioned you served on the board. That brings me to my next set of questions. You served on MCBA's Board of Directors from 1997 to 2000, and in addition you served as board Chair from 1998 through 1999. Your board involvement and leadership came during a critical period in the organization. As we mentioned, MCBA was in transition, and Jay Cowles had just completed service as Board Chair. We had Acting Executive Directors including Jay Cowles, who had handed the reins off to staff member Linda Johnson, who served as Acting Executive Director until Peggy Korsmo-Kennon

was hired. It was a fluid period. I think you mentioned to me that you served on the search committee that hired Peggy, is that correct? What was that process like? Was it a national search? What kind of things did the search committee look for in an Executive Director?

WM: Well, as I recall, by that time MCBA had the experience of different leadership styles and different directors. What we knew was, we weren't interested in hiring somebody who necessarily had a background in the arts. We wanted somebody with strong managerial skills, experience with the kind of organization—a non-profit—that MCBA was, and somebody who could bring people together around the various issues that needed to be worked on. That was quite clear to us after quite a number of I will say very enjoyable dinners out at high-end places. [Laughter]

BB: Which MCBA did not pay for, I am sure!

WM: Right. There weren't that many finalists, so there weren't that many meetings. There were a lot of other meetings of the committee as well. A professional search company donated their services, so they did the national search, vetted the set of resumes that came in, and presented to us a list of semi-finalists which the committee winnowed down and said, ok, this is the group we should be looking at. After our dinner with Peggy I think it was real clear that she was it. She just had everything that we wanted. She had come through the Minnesota History Center; she had managed a major remodeling project there; she was very attuned to grant funding and non-profits; and in addition she was a charming and pleasant person—we liked her very much. As my board participation went on, and particularly during the time I was Chair and sort of perpetually in over my head, because I had no relevant experience to do that—I was the artist representative on the board for heaven's sake, what am I doing here! Peggy was a perfect partner to go through the process of making good on an opportunity that wasn't going to come again—the opportunity to co-locate with the Loft and Milkweed Editions in what became Open Book.

BB: We have visited with Peggy and she shared how quickly that came about with her new position—talk about rising to the challenge. Can you share any stories with us about that process: the site search and finding a site? We are actually doing this interview in Open Book, in the Performance Hall. What comes to mind when you think about that period? Was it just, going going going all the time? Was it intense?

WM: It was intense.

BB: Was it an intense time period? I am trying to remember.

WM: Well, I think it took about a year.

BB: That is pretty quick, actually.

WM: We had started out in January, we had hired some consultants who from somewhere in the east, who were to help us to clarify what we wanted, how we wanted to work together as three separate institutions. The issues at that time were that we were out of sync with our leases—in fact, the Loft I think was about to have to leave its premises, and Milkweed had some issues, [and MCBA was] interested in a different kind of space to work with these other institutions, these other folks. And getting things to mesh was going to be a major challenge in the beginning. It also was a challenge that one of the participants didn't really want to own property, wanted to find a place that we could lease. The consultants were frankly a disappointment, and after two or three sessions with them we sent them home and said, frankly, we can do what they are doing ourselves, and so we did. Over that spring it became clear that we really did want these three organizations to get together one way or another. A lot of issues to resolve around what I just mentioned—do we buy or do we lease—then we got into the summer, which for me was a summer of meetings; that is all I did. And issues. There was a remarkable moment when we said, ok, we have some clarity about what we want to do, but the next step is we need to find out whether it is feasible to raise the funds, whether we can do this kind of a campaign successfully, and we need to have somebody in real estate helping us to vet properties. That was going to take some money up front, which we had no way of knowing whether the project was actually going to work.

I will never forget this meeting where we said, how are we going to get the money up front to do the feasibility studies. And one of the people at the table said, well, I can put in forty thousand dollars. And another person immediately said, I can match that; we will just sell some stock. And that was the up-front money that made it possible for the project to go forward. I have always been awed by that because of the risk that they took. We could pay a consultant and real estate folks and so on, and end up saying we can't do it. But so much was now coming together that we really had momentum. And I have to mention Gail See, this had been her dream for a very long time, and she kept pushing us, and kept being really a marvelous cheerleader to keep this process going, a great spirit, and it came out, as we know.

The properties we were looking at came down to two. One was a building that I have always admired, I have liked it architecturally, drove past it a lot. The deal there would have been a lease, and we only would have had part of one floor, I think. And the owners of that building were also interested in converting it to mini-storage. And it became fairly clear in our discussions with them that they really didn't care whether that building was mini-storage or a world-class art center. Just tone deaf to the opportunity. The other property was this trio of beat-up old warehouses on Washington [Avenue] that were being used as an electric company's storage area. And I remember when we came here and walked in, there was this low overhang of peeling paint, and crud over the doorway, electrical conduit everywhere, the elevator wasn't really safe, and there were holes in the floor. It was a mess, and you sort of had to see through the mess to figure out what could be done here, and that is when the architects got together and we met with Garth

Rockcastle, and frankly, there is an odd relationship for me here. My aesthetic is pretty conservative. Wood engraving's a nineteenth century technology after all, and I have never been cool or with it, and we are visiting the architect's place and I am looking around, and I said, my god, this is alienating. I could not work here, this is too metal, and odd shapes, and rooms that don't look like rooms, so well, ok. And as the project continued, everybody else was enthusiastic; I said, this will be good for the organization. It took me frankly, a number of years after the place was built before I started to love it.

BB: And yet you liked [MCBA's] other space, which was one large open warehouse space, and actually Jeff Scherer in the same firm, Meyer Scherer and Rockcastle, had done that building, so that is very interesting.

WM: I wouldn't have built it that way. And thank goodness I wasn't in charge!

BB: Well, what was it like sitting there with Garth Rockcastle and his associates talking about it? Did they show you renderings? That is the part that is so fascinating, how they can visualize what you have just described, and yet come up with this multi-use building like this.

WM: I don't remember renderings. I remember all of us, doing the process of here are the spaces we need, here's how much space we need. We were worried about things like, will the floors hold the weight of the printing presses. Is it going to handle the stress loads. And the visual wasn't really that big in that part of the process. There were things like the giant safe; well, [we have to] keep that. And there was some argument about that, but we kept it.

Walking around the building, and in some of the back rooms you can still see this, there is ancient wallpaper still on the walls, and the windows on this floor out here had all been bricked up, so you really had to visualize opening this up, and doing things—and this is the part where my visual imagination isn't trained that way—to think of things like keeping pillars that are rough, and having a staircase that ends because it was there and it is interesting. And later in the process when the thing is being built, some of the builders saw these windows and said we should have those along the mezzanine, where the staff offices are. The staff offices for MCBA were originally designed to be open to the sky, basically of the rest of the building. The workmen were so into the project that they volunteered time to basically come in on the weekends to make those windows.

BB: So those windows are from the original building.

WM: Yes.

BB: Oh, that is great.

WM: There was a lot of salvaged material used. There were problems, there still are problems, spalting in the lower level that was a weird word I learned in the process.

BB: I don't know what that means. Spalting?

WM: Spalting. It means, a stone wall that continually sheds grit.

BB: And what is that from?

WM: It is limestone and it chemically changes over time.

BB: Oh, how interesting, ok.

WM: But there were so many fascinating features of the building that you could spend a lot of time walking around and, whoa, look at that. Which is what Garth and his gang had done, they'd said, whoa, look at that possibility. And, a wall like this [Gestures] could be saved. Floors needed work but a lot of it could be kept, so there was a preservationist ethic that went into the design that I quite appreciated. Down in the basement where MCBA has its lower print studio there is the entrance to the elevator for the sidewalk. So there would have been a big dumbwaiter, used to see them a lot; no longer, they are probably against code now to have the sidewalk opened up and goods transported that way, but that thing has this beautiful little brick arch, and after we had moved in, one of the printers put up a sign on that that said, Amontillado.

BB: Leave it to printers to deliver the allusion.

WM: At some point it disappeared. I thought it was quite clever. But as we learned the building, and figured things out, we realized that this is really close to an ideal space. I can think of things that I wish had happened—it would be nice to have all the presses on the same floor, for instance—but maybe not. Being separated means you can do multiple things and not be in anybody else's space. You are not talking over somebody else's class. So over time it became the right thing all the way around. And as you know the design won awards and we are well known all over the country now as a wonderful destination. So we had solved some of the differences, we decided we wanted to create a fourth entity that would be the property management of the group for Open Book, and even to, remembering now, the naming process. We had a company called Nametag that met with a small group of us, and they had done a small study and tried to think about ways of characterizing what we were, which was hard to do, I mean, all related to the book in various ways, but how do you express this in the name of a building or a center? So, we met with them and they presented their results, and they had a bunch of fairly lame beginning points to help us focus, actually. I now realize that they were they had, in a way, cooked the books, because they came up with this one name that I quite liked. They had found this architectural detail out on the building that apparently there is a bas-relief of a dog; I have never actually seen it myself. But they proposed as a name, Stone

Dog. I thought, well that is funky, that is interesting. It doesn't really say anything about what the place is, and so we were about to say, ok, back to the drawing board, when they pulled out, Open Book.

BB: Oh, really. Set-up!

WM: It was a set-up, and we all went, ah, yes! They even had a version of the logo that ended up being the logo. And of course we had those big doors downstairs that had been designed to be an open book. It was a fun meeting, and we walked away saying, yes, good, got it. So, that was Open Book.

BB: Well, I am thinking neighborhoods. So the Warehouse District neighborhood, you gave us a good feeling of that neighborhood. And today as I was parking in the lot next door, of course, we are looking at the Vikings Stadium, looming, who would have thought? But if you think back to the time when they were working on the building, can you describe any memories of, what was the area like if you were to find your way to Open Book around 2000 or 1999?

WM: It was parking, and parking, and more parking, and Liquor Depot across the street. I looked at—there were some aerial photographs of the neighborhood, ok, get oriented, here is the dome, here are the warehouses that we were rebuilding, and there is Frank's Plumbing, and then Liquor Depot across the street. And from the sky, the roof of Liquor Depot tapered to a point. It was an arrow pointing directly at Open Book. Is this a sign? And we knew when we selected the site, one of the exciting things about the place. We knew things were going to be building out from downtown on Washington. There were plans to rebuild the old train station, do various things with that, and lots of potential all along the way, and now if you look out there you see it, huge.

BB: Potential realized. And interesting now how whoever when you guys were making this decision to position it between the University of Minnesota West Bank and downtown, Washington was pretty much a forgotten stretch at that time, and it was brilliant, you got those two entities anchoring this street, it is like a quarter now, it is brilliant.

WM: And the owners of the building were so excited.

BB: Oh, what were the owners like, Bill?

WM: Oh, they were so happy, in contrast to the mini storage folks, let them have it. They were excited enough that they were very flexible with contracts, and letting us figure out the organizational stuff along the way, and as I mentioned, the workmen got into it and were very excited about what they were doing. So, there was a lot of wonderful energy from the beginning of selecting this building. So yes, they were very, very helpful in the process.

BB: Were you around during the physical move, itself? I know that Peggy Korsmo-Kennon was Executive Director and Mary Jo Pauly was Artistic Director. Were you involved during that day when presses were moved? Or days. It must have taken days to make that shift.

WM: It did. I was not involved, and I am not sure why. There was no need for me to be there, and so I wasn't there. I had watched things being packed up, and because of my love of printing presses, I think maybe I stayed away because I was scared to death of seeing a press fall down or something like that, there are so many stories in the printing communities about presses falling off of pickup trucks and people dropping—I once heard a story of a linotype in somebody's pickup truck, and it ended up in an intersection because the guy thought, well, it is heavy, it will stay put.

BB: Oh, wow.

WM: Yes, it's top-heavy. So, thousands of scrap metal parts. So, maybe there was some subliminal thing that said, don't be there, don't watch.

BB: Do you have any memories of, I know you were there, do you have any memories of the opening night, the celebration when Open Book opened up? Was Sharon Sayles Benton the mayor at that time? I think I saw her there. Are there any other memories of that night?

WM: No, not really. There was an earlier party that celebrated getting to a certain point in the building process, and I remember, because at that time I was still board chair, so I made words, and a nice bunch of people showed up, and drank some champagne, to celebrate a milestone along the way. The actual opening was for me kind of anticlimactic, because it had been this long process, and then you get to this stage, and if you are clever you figure out, this is a milestone, but then the work starts.

Now we have to make this place work, we have to make it inviting, we have to bring in the public. And that turned out to be a lot less of a scare than we thought it could possibly be. I think Peggy told me that over that first year they counted fifty thousand people coming through the door, and for all kinds of things. For Loft writing classes, for Milkweed, for readings, for this space in the hall has been used for various kinds of events and readings.

BB: Ruminator Books was there at that time.

WM: Ruminator Books had their space, and you had all the kids programs that MCBA is noted for, adult programs, all kinds of wonderful stuff going on, and they came, and they are still coming.

BB: It is amazing how no one remembers the details, but everyone had a good time.

WM: I am sure I had a glass of champagne. Beyond that, let's go to work

BB: So you mentioned that it took you, personally, a little while to settle into working in this space. But I just want to follow up, because I don't know if I remember your saying. Did you work here? You had your own studio at home, so you could work at home. So when did you actually teach here for the first time or use the studios, and what was that experience like after the McKesson Building experience?

WM: It was early on, the first year, when I taught a wood engraving class. And there are the usual things, with wood engraving you need little desk lamps, which means you need outlet strips, and ways to plug them all in, so sorting all that out took some time. But basically it was a very happy experience and then later on I started teaching workshops, printing on the iron hand press, which was a totally different left turn in my life. But teaching engraving; one of the nice things was having a lot of open space to proof stuff, spread out on tables, there was a lot more room than there was in the print studio in the old place, and that was a help. You could work cramped, but nice if you have a little room and lots of tables to spread out on.

BB: Was there a discernible vibe, a different kind of vibe or atmosphere from the old space? Did people act differently?

WM: No, I didn't observe anything like that. I did think that once again, when I was teaching the engraving class, people focused, and it was a space in which there wasn't much distraction, you could focus. I am a particular enemy of ambient music in any form, and I love silence. And so it was quiet and people did their work. I had hosted a couple of wood engraving workshops here. The wood engravers network was then national; now it is international. And I had hosted two workshops at the old place, and then one here; don't ask the dates because I don't have a date memory. But both spaces worked quite well. I think we had a little more room to spread out in the old place, just because of the layout of the place. That was also my first experience of the security alarm.

BB: The old space?

WM: Yes. I came in one Saturday morning, punched in my code, went to work setting up breakfast stuff, and all that for the group that were coming, suddenly the alarm went off, and went off, and went off.

BB: Why did it go off?

WM: Went off?

BB: I remember running back there to punch in the code. I didn't like that part.

WM: Right. What had happened was that the person the night before had not punched in the code. So when I came in I punched in the code, and when you were leaving and put in the Goodnight Everybody code, you had forty-five seconds to get out the door. Well, that is what I was doing. I was punching in the Goodnight Everybody code, as far as the system was concerned.

BB: Bummer.

WM: It was loud.

BB: Yes. I experienced it.

WM: Huge! And I couldn't do anything.

BB: You just didn't punch it in again?

WM: I didn't know how to turn the thing off.

BB: By punching it in again. Sorry! I hadn't heard this story. [Laughter]

WM: This is technology, Betty! I am a nineteenth century guy, right? So then the cops showed up because there was nothing I could do, and eventually the thing went off, stopped, and so here come the cops. And so, oh god. So I showed them: I am supposed to be here, I have the key, I don't know how to reach the system, and I couldn't reach anybody when I tried to call, so they assured themselves that....

BB: The wood engravers weren't going to take over the Center! [Laughter]

WM: Not a coup, not a burglary, nobody was going to walk off with a Vandercook. Eventually we got that all sorted out, but it was a very uncomfortable forty-five minutes.

BB: Part of the thrill of a shared space and I don't, was the Co-op going then? Because the great thing about the co-op is that you have 24/7 access, and there is always that give and take between responsibility of setting alarms and stuff. Did you have the Co-op?

WM: Not yet. I think that workshop was in 1996, and I couldn't get anybody. And while we are talking about that building I did want to give you the Peggy story.

BB: Yes, give me the Peggy story.

WM: When Peggy Korsmo-Kennon came to work on her first day in her new job at MCBA, she was approaching the front doors on the sidewalk, when a big plate glass window from the second or third floor above, came down and shattered on the sidewalk

in front of her. So you can think, am I supposed to be here? In a way emblematic of Peggy's personality, she scavenged some fragments of the glass and kept them, and later had two of them made into earrings.

BB: There you go.

WM: Move forward.

BB: There you go. That is a great story. That is a metaphor for MCBA as well, especially under her leadership, but for those who followed her too. That's a great story.

WM: Yes. You pick up the pieces and make art.

BB: At least the ones you want to use!

WM: Right.

BB: Well, so, the Co-op had started up in the old space, but then we moved to this space, and you have been around, teaching and involved in different ways since then. Do you sense that there was a change in MCBA's community, in moving from our own entity to a shared space? How did that affect whatever MCBA is or how people perceived it? It seems like it would be a dramatic change for an organization.

WM: Well, the Co-op made a difference. But I have to admit [that] I will disappoint you. I am really not aware of any of the kinds of crossovers, that overworked word, synergy, you know. Maybe it was there; I just didn't see it. I do know that people loved being in this space, and having the café there was wonderful, that is a great asset. My sense of the Co-op and the people who do a lot of work at MCBA is that they are focused on doing a specific project and that is what they do, and so, there may be a lot going on between these organizations that I don't know about, there probably is, but it didn't change the vibe all that much.

BB: It really sounds like from what you are saying, correct me if I am wrong, that what you see as that key change or transition was the Co-op forming, and it almost seems like the Co-op set the organization on this artist-involved, high-energy direction that then flourished in this larger, happens to be shared space. We get people walking in the door and going elsewhere and discovering us, but it seems like the Co-op is your sense of what was a crucial step for the organization.

WM: The Co-op came out of the artists getting together, because the organization had what I think of as a near-death experience, and when they got together, when we were all talking about a future, how would we stay involved, how would we get away from that sense that I described earlier, that you take a couple of classes and then it is over; what do you do? Well, what you do is commit to spending time, and I think it was brilliant to set

it up in such a way that Co-op members could pay a monthly fee, but they could work that down, volunteering, and there is always stuff: oh my goodness distributing type, endless process, and so people could be involved that way, that gave people a real commitment to the good of the whole, and a commitment to take care of things, because working in a public space, there is access by lots of people at different skill levels, things can be damaged.

BB: I actually remember that there was a lot of concern about that when MCBA was first starting up the concern was expressed by people who had taught papermaking in an academic setting to undergrads. It seems as though MCBA for the most part has avoided that, perhaps partly through the Co-op and maybe also through the leadership of the founding artists in residence, Amanda Degener for papermaking, and Allan Kornblum for printing, but it does seem like we didn't go down that road and I remember that being a real concern. So, the Co-op really institutionalized it in a way, made it a community, a recognized community of people who wanted to give back and can.

WM: And, to appeal to people that otherwise would take a class and go away. Here is this space that you can use, we have this wonderful board shear, look at these presses, you can use these. Now one of my roles at MCBA has been as mechanic, that was part of my history, my youth, so I spent a lot of time trying to maintain and repair things as problems arose. We had a paper cutter, with a handle, nineteenth century things and it was loose on its shaft. Ok, nineteenth century cast iron, so I take it apart and I am working on this thing with hand files, and putting a new key way in and then putting it on more solidly so it wouldn't wobble. But it was pretty fragile, and this paper cutter sat just around the corner from the library, so we had this enclosed space of the library and here is this paper cutter. Well, one afternoon we were having a board committee meeting in the library and I hear this vibrating slam, and I look up and my goodness, and it comes again and again. I said, excuse me, I interrupt the meeting, went running around the corner, and here was a young woman who had not been trained on the cutter, and because—I would erase this word from the world if I could—it is called a guillotine cutter—she was slamming the bar down, and I told her, I said, look, we are not beheading aristocrats here, and if this breaks I am the guy who has to fix it, and I just did fix it, and please get training on this.

BB: Which is really what you always do. You always get training. Somehow something slipped.

WM: Well, look obvious. I have seen some other examples of extraordinary damage by people who thought they knew what they were doing. So, I think that that is a risk and I don't think that there have been very many instances of that kind of problem, here in the new space. I don't know if it has anything to do with the new space, or that the organizational set up is such that it is clear that, there are signs around that say, don't use this if you have had instruction on it, and particularly the paper cutters because they can be damaged. So, I had to interrupt a board committee meeting to save a paper cutter.

BB: Well, MCBA boards, they would understand.

WM: Oh they did. They did.

BB: Well, speaking of the studios, I know that we want to talk about one or two of the presses here, and also we have a couple Winter Books that you were involved with Bill, and a book of yours that I wanted you to share with us, so if you have got a little time before we finish up with some general questions, do you want to go and hang out in the studios for a bit.

WM: Yes.

BB: So, Bill, this is great. What is the first book we will be looking at here? It looks like a Winter Book.

WM: It is a Winter Book. This is built on a poem by Bill Holm called, *Playing Haydn for the Angel of Death*. And right away you see, this is a piano shape, that is the lid of a piano, and there is a piano theme in the page I did; here is, sitting in the chair. When Bill came to the presentation of this book, when we had the grand opening, he played Haydn for us. We brought a piano in and he did that. So, here is another piano shape. A pop-up, and different artists were asked to do a single page, and I guess it was [Artistic Director] Mary Jo Pauly who organized it, and she distributed the stanzas for each of us to illustrate and print, do whatever we wanted, so, here again for my page is a piano theme. This is the harp and strings of an upright piano, a wood engraving.

The page itself is pink instead of that color because I did something experimental, which is what I am always doing. I did a mono-print. So I covered a block of blank Formica and took solvent on a brush and drew this shape, which is supposedly an ear, because that is the theme of the stanza, talking about whoever loves G Major loves God. And he says, [Reading] G Major is one of God's eyes through which he watched hair go gray. Or an ear that hears the cracks in your own singing. Remember, God and you have two of each that watch and listen in two directions. [Gesturing] Here is the ear, and by the way this is a surpassingly wonderful poem. It was a treat to be able to work with that text, and it was a treat to be part of a collaborative, in a way, project, even though we didn't collaborate per se, yet when it came together, when you see the pages laid out, it is quite fun to see people's very different approaches to putting ink on a page. And isn't this an interesting structure.

BB: Oh, it is gorgeous. Just beautiful.

WM: So the next book I will show is one I got to illustrate, and it is a Winter Book written by Diane Glancy, and it is called *The West Pole*, 1994.

BB: So that is pretty early on.

WM: Yes, I was excited to get to do this project. It has different sections, we blind-embossed titles, and there were a lot of nice features that the printer thought up. So here is again, totally always experimenting. Can I make a bird feeder that looks translucent. And it was around that time that we had a monster snowstorm that made it impossible to open doors to get out.

BB: How convenient for you.

WM: How convenient, yes, and yet, more, I have a thing with my engravings. I do a lot of different things but one thing I quite like to do is focus on a small part of the world because I have a notion that each part of the world connotes the whole, the universe. It could not be what it is if the universe were not as it is. So here is a little piece of tire tread in the snow. I also have a passion for bones, and I have a remarkable number of them lying around here and there. So this was actually a drawing I did of some leg bone of a deer I collected up at Grand Marais. Again, trying to mute the color. I think this is the last one. This is the view from the second floor of the Minneapolis Art Institute looking across the park to downtown. And for years my family referred to that as my tree. I think it is been pruned down or maybe doesn't even exist any more but that is my tree in the snow. Trying to do a cityscape was interesting. So this was early in my engraving career. So, that is the two Winter Books I was interested to show you. And now I can show you something much bigger.

BB: Yes, let's set that up.

BB: So Bill, what is this? I would love to hear about this.

WM: Well, this is the prototype copy that I did for my Jerome Book Arts fellowship through MCBA. I started off with an easy, simple project, which never works for me, and it turned into twenty years and still counting, [an] ongoing project. It is called *Alpha to Omega*. The subtitle is *On the Universe*, which picks up [on] my area of philosophy [which was] was ancient Greek, a whole bunch of early Greek scientific texts on the universe. I wanted a book that would be big enough in scope as well as size that I could put anything I wanted into it, anything I was thinking about

BB: Can we open it up?

WM: We can open this up. What we will do is snap the spine out first. This comes down to there, so, that is the back that holds up the box once it is in place. And so the structure of the text and material is that it is twenty-four diptychs following the twenty-four letters of the Greek alphabet, Alpha to Omega, with an introduction. This is an example of a section page; there are eight sections. We can just do it like that, and move this over—this is where the diptych idea comes through. So, the text has a major piece of writing. I was inspired by medieval books that have a text and commentary and then more

commentary. And just because I think of this as my anti-efficiency project, all these initial letters are engravings. I modified an old alphabet.

The book started with a literal dream, which was that image. I went down to MCBA and said I have got to figure out how to print this. I took quite a while to get the dense black I wanted. Then, I realized THAT having the creation meant I had to keep going. So on the project goes. I will show some other pages. Here is Beta. The arc of the imagery goes from abstract through somewhat more literal, figurative, and then back to abstract. And part of my process and what I wanted to do with the book was to experiment with any kind of thing I could print on, in the press. So there is linoleum, this is plywood that has been wire-brushed, things like that. Even in one case which I will show you, a found object. I have always loved the Apollo image but I always thought it was oriented wrong, because there is a kind of horizontal bias as to how we see landscapes. So, I thought earthrise ought to be. This represents about ten runs through the press. Now we get into more landscape-y kinds of things. This is an image of Seagull Lake. And skip some text pages because I don't have images to go with them yet.

BB: So, you have got the text pages done and you are working on the images?

WM: Well, I have more text to print. I have got all the black printed for each page but I still have more to do. It takes about eight hours to set the blue for type. As I say, anti-efficiency. This is for the section on technology. There is a section on civilization, on war, on technology, and ultimate unity in the end. This bit [Gesturing] is a zinc plate that was mounted on a board that kicked around MCBA for years, and one day I said, I wonder if I could print that? And it turned out to be perfectly flat, easy to print, and I said, ok, now what? I found an old printed circuit board that didn't have any components on it. So, this is technology.

BB: Perfect.

WM: The three final prints in the book, quite by surprise turned into a kind of a spirally meditation. I dream a lot of images, I daydream a lot of images. This one came to me while I was sitting in an art gallery. I thought what would it be like to look at the night sky through the glass ceiling of a cathedral? So, once I got cutting I realized I wanted to bring the sky closer, so I decided to do the Andromeda galaxy through the glass ceiling and because it is a spiral galaxy, spiral became a theme. This one is just dried, finished printing it the day before yesterday, the blue. And then the final one is this: this is the end of the universe. A person who was in an audience where I was presenting this work once said, you know astronomers have figured out what the overall color of the universe is. Oh, that is interesting. So she followed through and sent me an article, and a complicated process of deciding that when you convert a certain amount of data into a visual color, it turns out that it is about like this, that is the whole thing.

BB: Wow. Green.

WM: It is a blue green. It has something to do with the spectrum of the thousands and thousands of galaxies that the Hubble had access to. And, so, then, more experimenting. This is a pressure print technique and then, again, the spiral, which didn't start out to be a spiral, it just sort of showed up, so now I have the spiral motif. And that is the end of the world.

BB: Well, that is beautiful, Bill. So, when do you think it is going to be done?

WM: Don't ask! But my answer to that is, I hope I outlive it!

BB: No pressure!

WM: No pressure. [Laughter] I just want to live a long time so that I can keep printing on this. There is a long way to go with it.

BB: Fabulous. Thank you so much, and now I also want to spend some time in the printing studio too.

BB: Here we are, Bill, at the Washington Press [in MCBA's first floor printing studio]. I am interested in hearing what you would like to tell us about this.

WM: This press has a lot of stories around it. First, how it got to MCBA is a story involving Larry Taylor and his printing company. His crew had purchased a company, back east, I think in New Jersey, and they had found this object, which the guys who were taking the equipment out, didn't know anything about. So, they called Larry and said, we have this weird thing and described it, and, do we scrap it or bring it? And he said, no, put it on a pallet and bring it. So they took it apart, and it was on pallets. It had been spray-painted silver, and was sitting in a lobby peeling paint. Larry Taylor went to school with an engraver that I know quite well from Saint Peter, named Joel Moline. And Larry called Joel and said do you want this thing? What are you going to do with it? And Joel said, no, see if MCBA wants it. So they agreed to take it, and we already had one hand press, why not another?

Since I am the mechanic who fixes things here, they said Bill, would you come down and put this together for us. I came down here and I see, basically a pile of scrap metal on pallets. So, we get some heavy lifters together and we start assembling and putting it together, and thought, well, ok, this is pretty easy and pretty straightforward, and that is when I discovered that it was entirely and completely worn out. Things like this pin, [Gesturing] the hole was oblong, this was worn out, the screw the threads that these bolts go into were stripped; it was pretty much a mess. So, over the next two years I, one by one, remade a lot of these parts. I bought a lathe so that I could cut screw threads, and one thing leads to another, and so we got it together and one of the things that was problematic was that these finials had been smashed because this platen piece had been

laid on its top and they were split and they were brass and not in good condition—they wouldn't go back on. Joel, living in Saint Peter, his wife worked at Gustavus Adolphus College, knew Paul Granlund. Paul Granlund is a Minnesota sculptor of considerable renown. He was retired but still doing work at his forge, and so Joel took the best of the finials and said, I will see if his assistant can do something with this. Well, it turned out that Paul got interested and he said, I can take that and make a casting of it, and we need four of them, so I will just make them out of bronze. And so he did that and threaded them, so they would fit on the studs. So these are little Paul Granlund-produced sculptures, and that was toward the end of his life, so we are honored, and I am nervous about these.

BB: You want them to work after he has worked on them.

WM: Well, and I want them to stay on the press! It turned out, once we got it together, that the action of the press is so smooth that we had the opening and Larry Taylor and his family and others were here to celebrate getting it together, [with] a six year old girl pulling the bar to print a sheet. This is the action, [Demonstrating] in case you don't know how a hand press works. It goes in, under the—this is the platen, this is the bed. On the bed you would have whatever material you were going to print: type, an engraving, woodcut, linocut, and you ink it, you put the sheet of paper on it, with a little backing pressure, and when you pull this, pressure, it doesn't have to move very far, but it can exert a tremendous amount of force, so that that is it, you pull it back, and then, imagine there is a piece of paper here, pull the sheet off and you have your handmade print.

The next question we had was how old was this press? We could not find anywhere, and I went over it literally with a magnifying glass, we could not find a serial number anywhere. Crawling around underneath, nothing. There happens to be a fellow who is maintaining a census of all of the hand presses in North America, and I said, what does this tell you that we can't find a serial number, and he says, well, that means it was made in the 1840s. So, when I teach workshops on this press and I am introducing the students to this new tool. I say bear in mind this press was in use before Abraham Lincoln went to Congress. And I like to imagine this press as publishing political posters, advertising, come to the circus, and newspapers. And we don't know much about its early years. We know it was made in New York, Hoe and Company made a lot of these presses.

BB: Found its way to Minnesota.

WM: Right. And I recently saw the oldest one known to exist, which is in Cleveland, and is dated 1838. But this one is right in that time period, and frankly, for an engraver or any other printer, it is a joy to use. It is really fun. And my friend Dale Kennedy, who loves hand presses because they don't hum and you don't have to plug them in.

BB: And if the electricity goes out: you're good! [Laughter]

WM: We are good, end of civilization! Our printers like to say, freedom of the press belongs to those who can operate one, and here we are, ready for the Renaissance after, out of the ashes. Post-Apocalyptic printing, I don't want to think in detail about that!

BB: Well, what a great story, it is great to have that on record.

WM: Yes, so that is the story of our Hoe.

BB: So, did it ever end up on the list even if it doesn't have a number, can it be recorded on his census of presses somehow?

WM: I will have to ask him. I will have to see. I have been in contact with him recently, because he wants information on my hand press. I will look into that.

BB: You would want it to be somewhere. Thanks so much, Bill.

So Bill, I know that you also had a story or two to tell us about the Alexandra Hand Press. I would love to hear it.

WM: This press was at MCBA when I first came, and nobody had used it. I knew nothing about it because I hadn't been exposed to hand press printing. It is a copy of a very popular hand press, if a hand press can be thought of as popular, in England, called an Albion, and all the wood engravers I know there use the Albion Press. This press was at Whittington Press, which is a wonderful fine press publisher; they do quite a few books with wood engravings. And I was there not too long ago and met John Randle and we had had some email correspondence about something else and knew I had a connection with MCBA. He said, well, we donated a press to MCBA when they were just getting started. I said really! Which one was it? He said, I don't know, maybe the Albion? I said, no, the Alexandra? He said, yes! Now Whittington press is in this funky building that was, I guess, the machine shed for the estate; you can touch the ceiling easily. So John said, yes, the Alexandra sat right over there, and he pointed: do you see the hole in the ceiling we had to cut for the top of it to fit? And I am thinking that given the work that they do that the press was just too big for what they wanted. So it was shipped, and that would have cost quite a bit, because it is a lot of cast iron. John Randle I understand came over and helped set it up. There were some other people involved...

BB: Fred Brian.

WM: Fred Brian did a lot to figure it out. It is not as easy to use as the Hoe. It is a much stiffer action, much heavier platen. But with this size of a bed you can do some wonderful things with wood type, and I have had students do poster-sized pieces of work, and it just does take sometimes two people to pull that bar; it is an extremely heavy action. I have tried to figure out an adjustment that would lighten it up and no dice; it is just going to be

that stiff. So that is the story of the Alexandra, which does, from time to time now, get used.

BB: Well, thank you so much, Bill, for spending so much time at the presses and also with these great books, I really appreciate that.

WM: You are welcome.

BB: I just have a few more questions to finish up. Let's see. We have talked about the Downtown East neighborhood, which is what this area is called now, and how it has changed dramatically in the last fifteen years. Just to touch one more time on this, then, from your perspective if we look at MCBA in its original site to here, do you sense any change in the organization in its mission or its vision, any sense of movement over time in what MCBA means to you?

WM: I think that the major things are that it has the possibility of continuing to grow and grow and grow. We were pretty limited in what we could do in the old space, and parking was terrible, very expensive and hard to find. And I think one ongoing thing that I very much appreciate here is that gallery space, and the space in the Open Book foyer. I think there are opportunities here that weren't available in the old space, and I think it is easier to get to from a lot of places. We had an ongoing issue at the old place with people from the suburbs who would express their reluctance to sign up for a class because they were afraid of the neighborhood. They didn't get that as far as I know it was a fairly safe neighborhood.

BB: It was!

WM: But people were apprehensive. Big city, [but] we live in Richfield, that sort of thing. And so that deterrence is gone, it is a very welcoming place. I think that being here allows us to think of the next thirty years without seeming to be hubristic. I think we have a really nice beginning and lots of things we can still do. And I will tell you we are the envy of a lot of artist communities in other places. And I have seen a number of other book arts centers here and there; this is it.

BB: We are very fortunate.

WM: We really are.

BB: When you think about MCBA's history as someone who has been involved for a couple decades here, is there something characteristically Minnesotan about that history, about how this Center got started and grew, or is it just one more art story, as far as a longtime resident. I don't know if you were born in Minnesota.

WM: No, but I have lived here thirty-five years. It is a hard question for me because I am not sure what characteristic Minnesotan means unless you talk about Garrison Keillor and Lake Wobegon, which is what the rest of the country thinks. I think that that are artists everywhere. This center early on opened up possibilities to bring them out of their houses and give them tools and experience and that has grown. I don't know if that is characteristically Minnesotan, but I have a hard time imagining it happening in too many other places. I can say that there is a vibrant artist community in Cleveland, San Francisco of course, and many other cities, but we seem to have an enormous number of people who are interested in doing this specific kind of work, book art, in its various forms. So, I think, and again I don't know if this is Minnesotan or not, it provides the context for people to be able to express themselves, to find themselves—it changed my life—and maybe that could happen elsewhere, but the fact is, it is happening here.

BB: Another way to look at this is longevity. MCBA got a start, it went through a crisis period, it kind of picked itself up and through a lot of hard work and a bit of luck we continued to do well, through a lot of hard work, but, do you think that there are any factors that may have contributed to its longevity that other start ups could keep in mind? What do you think helped us? It seemed like there were a few key moments when individuals stepped up. Any other factors that come to mind as far as longevity?

WM: Bottom up. You need good leadership, but that leadership has nowhere to go unless that artist community has engaged, excited, willing to invest. The story I told earlier about the process of making Open Book happen, you need some donors who have the funds, who have the ability to be a strong financial resource, but you could build the Taj Mahal and if you don't have the artist community engaged and wanting to be there and loving to be there because the atmosphere is so cool, you have a mausoleum. So I think it is the artist community, the Co-op of course, but all the people who take classes, and there are hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of school kids out there who know how to make a book now and that is going to stick, that is going to come back.

BB: Over thirty thousand a year come through.

WM: Yes.

BB: Well, then I guess if there is one last question to ask, again, we are at our thirtieth anniversary. From today's perspective, what do you feel MBCA's legacy could be for the state of Minnesota, or to the book arts? What have we managed to contribute to this point?

WM: Well, Minnesota and the Twin Cities are very literate culture. We love books; there must be thousands of book groups, people reading together. As a book center devoted to the crafts of creating books, we provide this experience or the potential for an experience that brings people into the book in a really different way. It is not just reading and sharing, it is also paying attention to how the book is made, and people collect,

people find different artists. I am thinking of Gaylord Schanilec of course, who has a large following for his wonderful pieces. We have that kind of experience and potential that is going to be going on as long as we are continuing to work in our various areas of the book arts. So, I think a lot of people have access that would not have access. The book would be something different to them than something that ordinary hands could make, and it is too easy for the book to be thought of as a consumable, as something that is made by a machine and the text might be wonderful, if it is a children's book the illustrations and text might be wonderful, but to think in terms of limited edition, small press runs, and hand crafting, that provides a dimension to the book that I think is extremely important, and Minnesota Center for Book Arts provides that context in which people can experience that.

BB: Wonderful. That is a perfect place to end. Bill, I want to thank you on behalf of all of MCBA's boards and staff, the faculty, the students, the kids, thank you so much for what you have given to the Center over the years, and thank you for taking the time to visit with us today.

WM: It has been fun. Thanks, Betty.