

**Gail See
Narrator**

**Betty Bright
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Interviewer**

**April 18, 2016
At the See Home
Wayzata, Minnesota**

BB: My name is Betty Bright, and today, April 18, 2016 I am interviewing Gail See at her home in Wayzata, Minnesota. 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 & Cultural Heritage Fund.

Gail, you are a former President of the American Booksellers Association, a board member of the national Center for the Book at the Library of Congress, and you also owned The Bookcase bookstore in Wayzata. Your involvement at MCBA includes serving on the board during two crucial periods in the life of the organization, as well as serving as MCBA's Board Chair during its early years. We have a lot to talk about. Thank you so much for sharing your thoughts with us today.

GS: It is my pleasure.

BB: Let's begin before MCBA opened its doors to its first site. Could you share a bit of your background with us as to what brought you into the sphere of MCBA—through your own love of books?

GS: I was very fortunate to be involved with MCBA at the very beginning, because Jim Sitter, who was of course the guiding light for MCBA, and Elmer Andersen. I think we need to be sure to acknowledge the role that Elmer played in creating MCBA with his enthusiasm and his generosity. But my connection with MCBA [began] when I looked up in my bookstore and there was Jim, standing in front of the counter and telling me about this idea he had. The words hardly made sense because we weren't certain what book arts were; this was all an education. So that became a journey. We were trying to find a location, and I can't tell you the number of derelict buildings that we toured—and one of them was Union [Depot] in Saint Paul. I couldn't believe it when I was there the other night for the [Minnesota] Book Awards, because when we [originally] went through, it was extraordinarily derelict; we were walking over boards and it was just a real mess.

Because of the needs of MCBA for papermaking, we also had to have a location that had very solid floors so you could put in the papermaking floor where you had the ability for

water to drain. That was one of the conditions. We toured a lot of places, and then we came to the McKesson Building. It was just remarkable because it fit all of our needs. It was a wonderful location because it was so central to downtown, and at that point it was also affordable. It was before that part of Minneapolis became more developed, and we had financial restrictions, so that was one of the reasons the property was so appealing to us. Then of course began the remodeling, which was another great effort. But anyway, it was an ideal location and it fit all of our needs as we developed what this center was going to be, and the three parts of it, the papermaking, the printing and the bookbinding.

BB: Do you have any particular memories of that space when you first walked in and when it hadn't yet been renovated?

GS: Yes. It was similar to our experience at Open Book when we walked into the space and my wonderful husband said, this takes a lot of imagination. That's exactly what the McKesson building did, but we realized that it would work, but there were the pillars all around that we had to work around. So it took imagination and creativity, and Jim Sitter had that. He was able to envision it and help us to envision it. And then he put together this remarkable board, which covered all kinds of people who loved and were concerned about books. To go to a board meeting where you had [Former Governor] Elmer [Andersen], who was so wonderfully agreeable and friendly to everybody, and [Walker Art Center Design Curator] Mickey Friedman—all kinds of really interesting people who were intrigued with this idea, because a lot of us didn't really know what book arts were all about.

BB: So how did you know Elmer Andersen before the beginning of MCBA? Did you know him through your involvement with American Booksellers [Association], or did he buy books out at the Bookcase?

GS: I knew him really because of his love of books. And Kay Sexton, who was such a remarkable leader in the whole book business. She was with at that point B. Dalton, and she was another wonderful book person. And she knew Elmer because they were neighbors. We would go up and visit with Elmer. It was just the common love of books and the whole idea, and Elmer had such vision, as well as such wonderful sense of philanthropy, giving back to the community, which I always admired. So it was a privilege to know him, and to know Kay.

BB: What were your earliest impressions of Jim Sitter? Did you know him through his work with Bookslinger?

GS: Yes. I had known Jim because he through Elmer had started Bookslinger, which was an innovative and very creative book distributor. [Bookslinger] handled small presses that were not handled by the major distributors who didn't handle small press books to the same extent. Jim saw a need, and started Bookslinger so that you could get books that weren't available through other wholesalers. I met Jim that way, and then of course through Jim met Elmer, because Elmer was helping Jim with Bookslinger. That is how Jim started. And Jim is one of those wise, creative people because he has these

imaginative ideas and he starts something, but I remember him saying to me, I can start something but then I know we need a different kind of management ahead, because in any organization you have stages of growth [that] need a different kind of leadership, and some people don't understand that. Jim always has. So he starts something and then he knows when it is time to move on and start something else.

BB: Let's talk a bit then about that founding board. According to my notes you were a board member twice at MCBA. As a member of the founding board, you were there right at the start with MCBA's first board meeting in the Cowles Media boardroom, which happened in October 1983. You served on the board through 1989, including service as MCBA's second Board President from 1987 through 1988, which is just after James Alcott's Board President tenure ended. MCBA's early board meetings, beginning in October 1983, were held in the Cowles Media Company boardroom until MCBA's space in the McKesson Building was built out in January 1985. Jim Sitter in our interview said, you should ask Gail See about that first board meeting. She has got a story to tell...and anything you want to share about those early meetings as well.

GS: Yes. As I said, it was in a way slightly terrifying to be going to this meeting with Elmer Andersen, Kay Sexton and Mickey Friedman, whom I did not know well at the time. They all became very close friends, but I will always remember standing outside the Cowles Media boardroom with Jim. Jim and I were standing there, he with his hat on and his string belt, which he still wears, and he turned to me and he said, Gail, I have never been to a board meeting. And I said, don't worry about it, I am a little nervous about this. I have been to board meetings, but this is a rather impressive group of people. So we went in, and of course, it went very, very well because Jim had his whole vision, and was able to articulate it so well, so everybody around that table became engaged. It was really a great lesson for me too, because people wouldn't have been there if they hadn't been engaged. As I say, as awesome as it was to be in that group, because we had this common passion, so to speak, everybody was just, I don't know, there was a magic about it, there really was.

BB: About that site search that you mentioned. Do you have any memories you can share about that search? Did you mention Chloe Ackman's family?

GS: Yes. This was the interesting thing. After going through many of these derelict and not so derelict buildings [and] after deciding on the McKesson building, there was a good friend of ours, Chloe Ackman. I brought her in, because what we did was bring people into the space as we were fund raising, to explain what this concept of book arts was and what it would mean to the community. It was sometimes hard to explain it. Chloe came in, and her face lighted up and she said, oh my golly, this is where my father's office was, in this corner, which was where Allan Kornblum was going to have his Toothpaste Press, which he moved up from Iowa. And so it was all of those connections that made it really a magical space in many, many ways, and Chloe was so pleased. And Harry Lerner, who owned the building at that point. We were negotiating with him, and I think Harry understood that this was a remarkable effort for the book world, and Harry had his own publishing company, so he was very connected to the book world. But it was interesting

to go in with Chloe and have her say, oh my golly, this was where my father's business was.

BB: Do you have any memories of the design process? I know that Meyer Scherer and Rockcastle designed [the space] and Jeff Scherer was the lead designer. Were there any discussions about the different designs at board meetings?

GS: You know, I don't remember that. I just remember a lot of meetings about the design and how to have the space meet the needs with the three different areas of work, and how they were going to divide the space up and how they were going to make it usable. As I say, the issue was papermaking, because of the physical needs. And that is why the space was so ideal. And of course it worked out in a rather magical way. And then we started something we called Dirty Works. We would have individuals come in in the morning, and start with papermaking. These were people who had had no experience with the book arts. You would do papermaking, and then you would set the type and print, and then you would bind the books. My husband and I did it a couple of times and it was just delightful. And I remember his making books for each of our children, so it was really quite delightful, and there is an ongoing connection with MCBA.

BB: And now there are 30,000 school kids who come through in a year, and you think of those times when it was literally one small group at a time, and the school tours were just getting going.

GS: Well, there is another part of that timing again, maybe I have misused the word, but it was magical. There was a man named Allan Toffler who wrote a book [*Future Shock*, 1970], and he talked about High-Tech-High Touch. This was the beginning of the technology era, and there was so much emphasis on technology. At the same time people recognized a need for high touch, which is where you were doing or creating something yourself, and so MCBA really came into being as—I look back on it as part of that timing, where people recognized that there was a need for creating things [and] not everything done through technology.

BB: Interesting. Could you think back to walking up to the building. You spent a lot of time in that building. What was it like to approach the McKesson from the outside, as far as the neighborhood or just general impressions?

GS: Well, you didn't have Brenda's and those businesses that were attracted as the neighborhood became more, if you would, gentrified. At that point it was really warehouses, and it was not a neighborhood that had much street traffic—that was one of the things that we thought about. But on the other hand, MCBA was a destination, so there was not too much concern about not having street traffic. It was a slightly forbidding building as you came up to it, so one of our goals was to make it inviting and have people be interested enough to come in and see it. But it was a very different neighborhood in those days.

BB: And when you walked into the space, what would strike you? Let's say you are bringing someone into the space. What would their impressions be?

GS: Well, I think most of them were mystified, because book arts were not something like [Minneapolis Institute of Arts], a traditional kind of art, if you will. So it was an education both in terms of what the purpose of MCBA was, what the mission was, as well as what the physical needs for a book arts building. So we all learned a lot about how to explain what the need was for book arts, and this was an amazing community as you know, and people were receptive to this idea. And it was kind of a propitious time to do it.

BB: It was the mid- to later 1980s.

GS: And my experience in this community is that, if you know what you are doing, if you have a reason for what you are doing, people will listen. And this was a whole language in talking to people for fund raising. So you had to start at A, and say, this is what the book arts are about, and then, B, this is why it is important. So you had a very strong feeling of a definition of what book arts was. And now it is much more a part of the language.

BB: Do you have any memories in particular...didn't you and Joanne Von Blon and Jim [Sitter] make some fund raising calls, the three of you?

GS: Yes. We would have what we called brown bag lunches. We would bring people into the space, because that was critical, to get them beyond the, what are you even talking about, phase. So we would have brown bags and bring them in they would get a sandwich and a glass of milk or something, and then we would explain what it was all about. But it was very important that we get them into the space. Because you didn't have to go into quite so much description about what it was about.

BB: So as far as founding board members, as well as those individuals we have mentioned, there was Paul Parker, David Speer....

GS: Greg Campbell...

BB: Greg Campbell, and I think Irv Kreidberg was there as well.

GS: Yes, yes.

BB: Any memories come up?

GS: Was John Taylor on the original board?

BB: No, but he came on very soon.

GS: It was a very eclectic group of people.

BB: John Parker.

GS: John Parker, yes. Gentle John Parker. No, it was an interesting group of people, and there were different ideas about MCBA, so there was a certain amount of time spent bringing everybody together so that we were all understanding the mission and all ready to move ahead on it. You know, everybody has an idea of what is important, so we had to work that out, particularly in the early years.

BB: Do you have any memories about the early artists-in residence, Allan Kornblum and Amanda Degener?

GS: Amanda Degener and Allan. When I think about Allan coming up [from Iowa], it was very courageous of him to come, with his family, and he just made a new life. He was such an important part of the community, and when I think about how Toothpaste Press started and then evolved into Coffee House, you see in a way that MCBA was a nurturing organization that gave not only space, but it gave purpose to so many people. And Amanda of course, who has become a renowned paper artist. I remember seeing things she was doing and thinking, my goodness, this is a whole world—it was just amazing. And she had such presence. She was able to bring those of us who had no idea about papermaking and see that it was more than just having paper to write on, that it was an art form. Those creations that she made were remarkable. I think that was part of our education, because many of us came to this from so many different points of view that it was an educational process for all the board members and people involved, and particularly for fund raising, to bring people in and have them see the workings of a book arts organization.

BB: When you just said that, one of the memories I have of all of those receptions [is that] I can hear the voices of Allan and Amanda, because they were constantly teaching.

GS: And explaining, not in a simplistic but in a very clear way, what they were doing, for people. And then the Dirty Works, those programs were remarkable, because people who had never had experience with the book arts could come and participate, and then they would understand what it was about.

BB: That early artist community had a number of people in it, but what personally comes to mind, was Gaylord Schanilec and Kent Aldrich.

GS: Oh, Kent. I remember, I think this is a correct story. Kent came in and said, can I sweep your floors! And he became so engaged, and of course Gaylord was one of the rocks of the organization. It was a wonderful time.

BB: Do you have any memories of the Grand Opening? It was October 1985, a long night!

GS: I was trying to think about it.

BB: It was a six-hour opening.

GS: I can't resurrect those memories, but I do remember that it was long and celebratory. What memories do you have about it?

BB: Basically, it was a lot of fun. It was a long night, but it wasn't long in the sense of how you would feel about it. It was just amazing how people kept coming in. Everyone was amazed at how many people were there.

GS: Yes. And I don't know how we got the people there.

BB: I don't remember but I think Jim said we had a thousand.

GS: I think it was because it was something that not many people knew a lot about. And that was a reflection of the community. I have been involved in various organizations in this community, and it is just a stunning and remarkable [quality] of Minneapolis - St. Paul, that something like MCBA is created, and you get 900 to 1,000 people who come and appreciate it.

BB: Do you have any sense of, when MCBA opened, what role it played in the Warehouse District or in Minneapolis?

GS: I wondered about that, whether we were in a way a groundbreaker for that area. As I said earlier, when we started going down there, I have no memory of foot traffic or of much vitality about it, because it was all warehouse. And then, as I said, Brenda's opened up across the street, which became a destination, and other services, and of course now it is totally changed. In those days it was not a place that people would have thought of as a destination, so I think MCBA had a great deal to do with revitalizing it. And I know when [MCBA] moved there was a concern, but by then it had enough energy of its own.

BB: I also want to touch on the [Minnesota chapter of the] Center for the Book from the Library of Congress. We were both of us at the Minnesota Book Awards the other night, and they talked about the Center for the Book, and I don't know if people realize that it actually [was originally affiliated with] MCBA. It was a designation that MCBA received for the state of Minnesota in 1984. And John Y. Cole visited MCBA. I don't know if you have any memories of that?

GS: Oh, yes, I remember John well, because he was head of the Center for the Book in Washington D.C., and I had gone to a number of meetings down there, which were remarkable experiences. I remember that Barbara Tuchman was at one of the meetings, and it was very interesting because they were showing again a High Tech-High Touch experience. At this luncheon of the Center for the Book, the idea of electronic books was shown on a screen, and [for example] this is what would be possible because you would be able to have the graphics and all the bells and whistles that would come with electronic books. I remember Barbara Tuchman standing up and saying, what are we

doing at the Library of Congress with electronic books. This is not what books are about! She was so positive about it. And I thought, she was a wonderful historian and a wonderful writer, but the world was changing, and it was interesting to see that from the point of view of book people, of how people were adjusting to the changes that were going to come. Nowadays most people have tablets to read, but there still is that tactile quality of reading a book. Anyway, the Center for the Book was an effort to have a connection with the Center for the Book in Washington, and John came a couple of times, and then tragically he died quite suddenly, I believe, of a heart attack.* So then there was a period when Washington Center for the Book went through a transition, and I honestly don't know what happened. In the meantime we were able to get a Center for the Book here, which was wonderful. We need all of those support groups that we can have.

BB: And now it has morphed through the Saint Paul Friends of the Saint Paul Library, with the Minnesota Book Awards, which we should probably mention honored Jim Sitter with the Kay Sexton Award a few nights ago. That is so amazing, how it is so circular.

GS: It is. This whole community of the book world is just amazing. I was so delighted that Jim was honored, at last, as I said. He should have been honored a thousand years ago for all that he has done.

BB: I also mentioned as we started that you served as MCBA's Board President from 1987 through 1988, and remained on the board until 1989, which was actually shortly before Executive Director Jim Sitter moved on from MCBA. Do you have any particular memories from your tenure as Board President? That was also, just before Jim moving on, a time of transition for MCBA and also for you moving off the board.

GS: It was as I said, I studied enough about organizations to know that this is a common and traditional way for organizations to grow, to go through that innovative and creative beginning. And then they go through that second stage, which is a time when different leadership is necessary, because you are taking it to a different level with different needs. The innovative part is what Jim is so well versed in, and he was wise enough to know that the second and third stages were not his thing, so to speak, so we were able to transition to different kinds of needed leadership at that point. And there were bumps in the road, as there always are, but look where it is now.

BB: That is exactly my next question. If we think about those transitions that can be so challenging, what elements were in play that may have helped MCBA to weather those transitions?

GS: I think it was a combination of the dedication of the board, because the people on the board were well aware of what an innovative organization this was, and any new organization has growing pains, and so I think that was part of it, but it was a

*In truth, in April 2016 John Y. Cole was appointed the Library of Congress Historian, a new position dedicated to serving as the top technical expert and adviser on the history of the Library of Congress, documenting institutional history and conducting historical research.

commitment on the part of people on the board, and understanding that you do have bumps in the road, and you don't get sidelined. You just keep on working, and a lot of conversations, a lot of early morning meetings, bringing people together, letting people air their—not their grievances, but their questions, and it is just a process.

BB: And then you returned to MCBA's board, which was so wonderful and fortunate. You served from 1995 to 2000 in a very transitional period, as MCBA went through changes and then prepared to move into Open Book. In that period my notes say that Jay Cowles had stepped in as Acting Executive Director, Amanda Degener served as Artistic Director for a time, and then after one more Acting Executive Director, Linda Johnson, Peggy Korsmo-Kennon was hired as Executive Director, so in short order, MCBA had moved from a necessary transition and some chaos, I guess, into preparing for this exceptional move, so just a period of tremendous change.

GS: It was a period of tremendous change, and Peggy stepped into this—there were a lot of unexpected events for Peggy when she came in. She certainly didn't realize when she came in, that suddenly they would be moving physically, which was an enormous task. I was involved with the whole Open Book project at the same time, and I had the good fortune of seeing this transition for MCBA and for Open Book, and I have to say that Open Book was such a wonderfully innovative and magical addition to our whole book community, and that is another story. I think I told you about the woman from the National Endowment for the Arts who came up. She was an Interim Director, and they asked me to take her around and show her some of the book-connected organizations here. And so we walked into Open Book, and it was during the early years of Open Book. And she said to me, why don't we have something like this in New York or San Francisco? And I said, this is Minneapolis. I told her that this was a creation of the generous philanthropic community here, and that Open Book reflected the kind of vision that people here have, the generous people. At that point MCBA was well settled at Open Book, but it was a long, arduous transition, because of all the necessities of moving, again, the papermaking is just an enormous challenge, and now of course recently it has gone through another new design, and the way it has opened up to the building.

BB: Yes. So, as far as that effort leading to Open Book, we have another phase of looking at sites. Were you involved with that as well?

GS: Oh yes. That was when we were looking at a lot of different sites, and we finally found this building that is now Open Book. The Tankinoff family owned it, and they were truly wonderful. We went in, and it had been an electrical warehouse where they stored electrical things. So people would come and pick up things from this warehouse, so it was a rather derelict building. And that is when my husband walked in one night before we had done anything. We had had some people come, and the idea was, this is the Before, and this is what the After will be. And it was very much the Before, and it really took imagination! And one of the magic [elements] of the design is that they kept so many of those original parts of the building, like the stairs that don't go anywhere, and the old wallpaper. I mean, it was a recreation of a space for the needs of the three organizations, MCBA and all, and yet it kept something of the feeling of the original

building. And again, this was a time when Washington Avenue was not what it was now. There was nothing down there. Across the street was the wonderful yellow building of the Liquor Depot, and we would say, when you see the Liquor Depot, you know you've hit Open Book. Now when you drive down Washington Avenue, people probably don't remember.

BB: No, now it is the Downtown East neighborhood, and it is up and coming, condos and the river a few blocks away.

GS: And of course the Guthrie moved in. And again, we were really on a cutting edge when we went down there. And again, the Tankinoffs were wonderfully generous and they understood. They owned a lot of property down there and they understood that this was probably the beginning of it.

BB: Do you have any memories of those three organizations? Were you involved in meetings at the Loft Writer's Center? MCBA, [the Loft] and Milkweed Editions all had to cooperate to come up with a shared space concept.

GS: Yes, I was very involved, and got very tired of going to 7am meetings.

BB: You were on the Loft's board too, weren't you?

GS: Yes, I was on the Loft's board.

BB: Milkweed?

GS: No, not Milkweed, but I was very close to Milkweed, having been a bookseller. But having had the experience of putting MCBA together was very helpful in understanding organizational patterns, and the Open Book board was remarkable. We had very skilled volunteers on that board who understood how you do this kind of a joint venture. It is remarkable and unique in the country, I think there is just one collaborative in San Francisco. It was an educational project because each of the three organizations had their own needs. They had boards that had responsibility for each organization, so they had their own agendas, so there was a lot of conversation about the greater good for the greater good. It was a wonderfully interesting project, and look at what we created. It all came together, but it took a lot of conversation.

BB: Dynamic exchanges I imagine, among artists and writers!

GS: Right, and organizations, everybody has a turf idea, and so how do you honor everyone's individuality but also come together as a group. That was what was really important. It was hard for MCBA, here is Peggy, who comes into this new job, and all of a sudden we say, we are going to move. She says, I am not going to move! And so just the physicality of a move for MCBA was almost more major. It is one thing to move file cabinets, but it is another thing to move papermaking.

BB: And all those presses!

GS: The presses. That was the other thing. It gave us the chance to have the lower level, so the printers could have their own spaces. That was wonderful for them.

BB: it really was. What we all loved about the first space was that it was so open and inviting, but it probably was hard to concentrate.

GS: Exactly, that is what we loved about Open Book, that they had their own space. That was a great gift to the organization.

BB: Right. You can still get down there, but at least it isn't right at the door.

GS: Right, and you can have these thousands of school kids upstairs being introduced to book arts, so it has worked out very well.

BB: You know, we had a conversation with Karen Wirth, and she showed us some of the sketchbooks for the staircase, which was named the Gail See Staircase in honor of your commitment to so many aspects of the organizations there, but I wonder, were you involved with that process of design?

GS: Yes, and Karen's vision and imagination and creativity, with the idea of the design of the staircase being like a book with leaves of the book and then the writing. She is a genius, of course, but it was such a tribute to the whole idea and the design itself, they did such a wonderful job, because how do you bring those spaces together? It was a barn like space, very uninviting, and so they made it so inviting, and so I think the new MCBA is wonderful too, because it is much more open.

BB: Glass walls. People who have that gift can visualize [redesigning space] can see it, and it is so obvious once they've done it. Yes, Karen talked about that whole [staircase] structure being put into place. We should also mention that the Open Book space was designed by Garth Rockcastle, a different partner of MS&R [Meyer Scherer & Rockcastle] so we were fortunate to have their involvement twice.

GS: Oh yes, and they were so dedicated and so excited about making something out of that space, because it was really very derelict.

BB: I can't imagine all those conversations at the board level. Now there is a café in there [and] originally there was Ruminator Books, [just] creating all these facets of this community. Do you have any memories of the opening of Open Book in the year 2000?

GS: Oh yes. I do remember it well. There was so much going on, the energy in that building was just incredible. Rip Rapson, who had been at McKnight [Foundation], spoke, and he was just incredible. He read a piece from a Robertson Davies book about a man who has a project and goes to a board and presents a project to the board, and the board says, are you crazy? That was exactly what he went through with McKnight, when

he brought the Open Book idea: [they said,] what are you talking about? Rip understood it, and the foundations understood it and were so generous. And then there is the wonderful story about Charlie Baxter, who spoke at the opening night and said, when I was a young boy, my mother said to me, if you don't do your homework you are going to end up on Washington Avenue, and he said, here I am! It was because at that point Washington Avenue was the derelict part of town, and in fact—I think this is true—the eastern part of the Open Book space, where the Auditorium is, if you look up on the walls, you will see the holes in the walls where there was kind of like a flophouse with individual rooms, and they had individual heaters with chimneys going up and being vented out. There is a lot of history in that building. We were told that down in the basement there is a tunnel, and I have seen this, that goes from the basement over to the river that was used during Prohibition days. Did you know that?

BB: That is fascinating. I don't think I knew that.

GS: At the bottom of the stairs. So you know, there is a lot of history about that. And that makes the building have a personality and a life of its own. Oh yes, we had a grand time in the early days, and the opening was so celebratory because people recognized it was a remarkable achievement.

BB: How about the naming of Open Book?

GS: We had a wonderful group, with many different ideas. Should we name it something to do with Native Americans, because this was where the Native American community was at the very beginning, where they came for their summer gatherings? There were a lot of different ideas about how to honor the space and the location. And then, Open Book just came to be and we all said, oh, of course, that is what it has to be. And the image was so great, with the open book.

BB: Do you have any memories of Minnesota's arts and literary communities around that time of 2000? The arts in general? It seems so amazing that this was pulled off.

GS: I don't have any specific memories. But I think it was a combination of the people. I think I told you, I remember sitting around at one of the preliminary meetings trying to decide what to do, how to do it, and whether to do it, and there were people around that table, and Chris Mahai, who is a remarkable person. And I remember her saying, oh, this is a piece of cake. We can raise this money, no problem at all. And I thought, if Chris thinks that, that is wonderful. It was that kind of thing. I don't remember the specifics but it was a time economically that it was feasible. A lot of stars came into alignment.

BB: And the neighborhood has changed so dramatically in fifteen, sixteen years.

GS: And we often say that we were one of the catalysts of making that change. Because we were there so early on. And it was the people from whom we bought the building, who had a sense that this was going to make a difference, and then after we bought the building from them, they gave us a major contribution, which was, I remember having

tears in my eyes when this young man said, well, we are going to do this, and we all said, wonderful. But it was that kind of response that kept happening that made us feel that we could do this.

BB: Well, absolutely. I just have a few questions left, but I wonder if you would be willing to share a favorite book or books with us?

BB: This is *Winter Prairie Woman* [1990]. I would love to hear about this book, Gail. Please do tell us about it.

GS: Well, this is one of these wonderful Winter Book productions that MCBA has done all these years. They get artists and writers to collaborate, and this is of course Meridel LeSueur's *Winter Prairie Woman*, and I have always been charmed by these gorgeous books and the way that they are put together. And this one, as you can see, I think it is—what number is it, they are all numbered—this one is signed, of course, and this was the third, so it was 1990, early on. Gaylord Schanilec did all of the [design and printing], and it is really so beautifully done, and one of the things I appreciate so much about the Winter Books, and they come in different editions, but when you get the deluxe, you also get these prints, which are wonderful. They are [by Sandy Spieler,] the individual images from the book—aren't they special? Look at that. Not being an artist myself I have such a great appreciation for what people do and how it enhances the book. The story itself is one of Meridel LeSueur's short stories, and every year they do a Winter Book, and as I say they have different editions, so you can get an edition with the prints that go with it, or you can get a trade edition, which is a little less expensive.

There is another one I have enjoyed very much: *West Pole* [1994]. You can see how this one is put together. Each one is so beautifully put together, and they are obviously works of art. This is what Minnesota Center for Book Arts is all about. So you ... can see the graphics, as well as the story.

BB: So this is a Diane Glancy.

GS: Yes, Diane Glancy. And all through the book you have these graphics. I'm trying to think what the process is.

BB: I think they are wood engravings.

GS: I think they are wood engravings, and in the back, each of the books, they are signed. This is copy number 168, with the thanks to everybody who has done it. And this was the seventh annual work, and they are still doing it all these thirty years later. Bill Myers was involved with this book. They are quite special.

BB: Thank you so much Gail, those are lovely.

GS: They are a joy in my life!

BB: Thank you Gail, for sharing those books with us. It is great to see the kind of work that was done early on and continues to be made on site at MCBA. I have a few more questions. MCBA has not only survived the challenges of the late 1990s, it has gone on to flourish in the last fifteen years; we are so fortunate. Looking back, I think you mentioned this when we were talking about the transition when Jim [Sitter] left MCBA. Looking back over the last thirty years, can you identify any other actions or characteristics that have supported MCBA's longevity when many organizations don't make it to this point?

GS: That is a fascinating question, just in terms of organizational growth and survival. I think again it is a reflection of our community. I think it is a reflection of wise leadership—different Executive Directors, each of whom has brought different skills and talents and has understood MCBA. And you know, I think that each of them has addressed the needs in different ways. And that is what creates survival, because things change, and you have to change with the times. MCBA today is very different from what it was when we all began, but that is healthy growth, and I think that is why it has survived. And again, you have a whole new generation coming along, and to involve the next generation in these kinds of organizations is a skill and a necessity. So I have a lot of hope for MCBA. It has survived, it is part of the community; I don't think it is at risk.

BB: If we look at that a bit more, if you think about the early MCBA and today's MCBA, how has it changed?

GS: Well, I am not that close to it, I am not currently on the board, and so I am not certain how it has changed. I think that it has expanded, the whole educational part of it has expanded, which is important, but at the same time it is meeting the needs of the artists. That has always been the balance, how your public persona and your artistic persona—those two things have to have a balance. MCBA is a non-profit, and it needs the financial support of the community, and then the artists need their space and their ability to create. So those are the tensions that have always been there, and the leadership has been able to do that.

BB: If we step back and look statewide, what kind of impact has MCBA had on the state of Minnesota?

GS: I don't know because, as I said, I am not on the board, as far as outreach. I know they are doing a lot with schools, that to me is so important. At one point I remember, when I had my bookstore, bringing out a small press to help people understand what it is like to print something, that kind of outreach. I don't know outstate, that is always the tension. You have this wonderful organization, but unless you are within a certain distance in Minneapolis how does it affect your life? I know that other organizations, certainly the Loft has been working very hard at outreach, and having classes at various places, but you can't quite do that with MCBA.

BB: Right. Well, actually they are funded through the State of Minnesota [via the Minnesota Arts Board] for, MCBA on the Road, which goes out to different communities

around the state, two or three a year. But it is a challenge [that] MCBA really tries to address, and it is always a challenge to find facilities that can address the demand for printmaking....

GS: Well, there is physicality to it. It isn't as if you can take a notebook and start writing. You have got to have this equipment in order for it to have an impact.

BB: Yes. Well then, we have been talking about MCBA and we have been talking about Minnesota, are there any characteristics that you would identify as Minnesotan that characterize why MCBA started here?

GS: I think just the fact that it came into being is Minnesotan. The fact that you can take this disparate group of people around a table and start talking about book arts, and you would have a response: oh yes, of course we can do this. It is like the Open Book idea: of course we can do it. It is that understanding of possibility that I think is very Minnesotan. Having come here from a different part of the country, I have always felt that—that there is a Minnesotan quality, and maybe it is that—I don't like the term, but a can-do idea. You have an idea and people have a willingness, if you will, to entertain the idea, and then say how can we make it work? Maybe that is Minnesotan. As I say again, it is the possibility. And I think part of it is, although I think this is changing, that life is little less frenetic here than on the coasts, and so maybe people have more of a chance to think about possibilities. I don't know, but I think there is a very different ethos in Minnesota.

BB: If there is one final question that would wrap this up, it deals with legacy. Hopefully MCBA has many years to come, but at this point in its lifespan, what might be MCBA's legacy to the arts and Minnesota? What have we accomplished to this point in time?

GS: We have accomplished creating a unique organization [which has] survived thirty years, a remarkable lifetime for a non-profit. It obviously has grown and adapted. The adaptability I think is critical for any organization, without losing your sense of mission and what you are doing. MCBA has never lost that, but it has had outreach, it has had change, it has adapted to change, it has had bumps in the road, it has had tensions, but it has worked through those tensions, and so I think its history, its story is such that it gives a lot of promise for the future, because it has survived through all these economic changes [and] personality changes, which are often the most difficult to handle. So I do think that there is great hope for the future. Maybe people will understand this whole High Tech-High Touch necessity, and the idea that doing something, that creating something is very important in your everyday life.

BB: That sounds like a perfect note to end on. Let me just thank you, Gail, on behalf of MCBA, the board, all those thousands of young people, as well as the artists who have gained so much. We really appreciate your time today.

GS: Well, it has been a pleasure. Thank you.