

**James Alcott
Narrator**

**Betty Bright
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Interviewer**

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At the Alcott Home
Wayzata, Minnesota**

BB: My name is Betty Bright, and today, August 26, 2015, I am interviewing James Alcott at his 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 and Cultural Heritage Fund.

James, you are a former Vice President at Cowles Media Company, but to MCBA your involvement has been absolutely critical to the organization, beginning in its earliest years. You served as a board member from MCBA's first meeting in the Cowles Media boardroom, in October 1983, through 1988, and served as Board President during that time from the beginning through September 1986, so, for the most part of your tenure. Your involvement at MCBA continues, represented in part most recently by your efforts with others to expand and sustain MCBA's James and Marilynn Alcott Library. Clearly, MCBA has greatly benefited from your many endeavors and support, and I very much look forward to our conversation, so, thank you.

JA: My pleasure.

BB: So, let's set the stage, just before MCBA's beginning. Share with us any aspects of your background or interests that may have positioned you to respond to the idea of a book arts center.

JA: I have always been a big reader and I have had a great interest in graphic design including typography, so that was a small piece of affinity, I suppose.

BB: Had you heard of the book arts before you were introduced to the idea of MCBA?

JA: I really had not thought about the book arts as an entity or a discipline, although all the parts were familiar to me; I just had not thought about them as a discipline.

BB: Now let's look back to the beginning of MCBA. It was incorporated as a non-profit in 1983, but much had to happen leading up to that incorporation and then just following it, to secure a home. Could you tell us when and how you first heard about MCBA? What were the circumstances?

JA: I had been a customer of a bookstore, can't remember the name of it.

BB: Was it Granary?

JA: Granary Books. And Jim Sitter was a partner in that venture as I recall, and Elmer Andersen, a former governor, was a backer of sorts, and greatly interested in books of all kinds. He and his wife gave the library to the Minnesota Arboretum, for example. So that was my beginning of an introduction. Jim Sitter the first director, invited me to lunch over at Cedar Riverside, and to talk to me about MCBA. I remember very clearly because he is quite a salesman and he was most intriguing, and I came out of the restaurant and I thought, now, what was that all about? I knew, but it still wasn't quite gelling for me. He reviewed what he had in mind, and who he wanted on the board and all that, and he asked me to be on the board, and so I said, sure.

BB: How did you go from agreeing to be on the board, to holding the board meetings at Cowles Media and to your serving as the first President of MCBA's board.

JA: Our building was just on the fringe of downtown, and had a very large boardroom, which would accommodate all of the MCBA board, and at least as importantly we had a lot of parking, so that overcame what would have been a big hurdle. My office was close to the board room, and about three minutes before the meeting was to begin, Elmer Andersen and David Speer, who was a local public relations executive, stopped at my office, and Elmer said he had agreed to be Treasurer, and David has agreed to be Secretary, and I was to be the President, well, with three minutes to go, what was I going to say! So, I was clearly selected for my eminent qualifications.

BB: Oh, I'm sure!

JA: Like, being there.

BB: Well, speaking of the founding board, I don't have all the names to share here, but I wanted to list some of them, because it was so unusual for a start-up organization and especially a start up with, as we used to say, with an art form that nobody knew about. We had to introduce the art form, with such people who were placed at critical junctures in the life of Minnesota on the board. That included, as you mentioned, former Governor Elmer L. Andersen, Kay Sexton of B. Dalton Booksellers, Mickey [Mildred] Friedman of the Walker Art Center, Gail see of the Bookcase, Paul Parker, David Speer and Joanne Von Blon, just to name a few of the total board. I wonder if you could share with us, as you think back to those early board meetings with such an amazing group, what were

those interactions like? How did the board members gel around this new idea of an organization?

JA: In the first place, none of us knew each other very well, which was an interesting dynamic, and there was much to do. We were quite preoccupied with finding a space for the Center, and we spent the better part of the year looking at buildings all over the Twin Cities that might have been adapted. A lot of the first year or so gelled around the whole thing about location, and of course in that period of time we had to think a lot about the components of the Center, what it was going to be: we had binding, we had papermaking, we had printing, we had typography, even a desire for a small library. So, it came together almost organically.

Of course, it was all helped by the fact that Gov. Andersen and Jim Sitter had talked about this for some time and quite in depth, and so they were clearly calling the shots, not in a dictatorial way, but they had the history and they had the real vision for the whole thing, and for different reasons, we all just signed on. Mickey Friedman would be a very good example, because she knew as much about design as almost anybody in the country, and design by definition is a significant part of book arts.

BB: I remember by the time I was involved, which was 1984, MCBA was narrowing it down. There were still quite a few [sites], but it ended up being The Depot in downtown Saint Paul and the McKesson Building in Minneapolis, on the corner of First Avenue North and Third Street. Do you have a memory of what tipped the scales to end up at the McKesson Building?

JA: I think we felt it was more manageable in terms of both its location and the space. The space in Saint Paul was a little bit out of the way—that was not a significant problem, but there would have been no foot traffic. And my other recollection is that the space in Saint Paul was really much too much—we wouldn't have used it all, by any stretch. So you would have felt like you were nowhere when you were there.

BB: Because it was so enormous?

JA: Yes.

BB: Let's step into the design phase. Can you share with us any thoughts or memories about working with Jeff Scherer? The firm was Meyer Scherer and Rockcastle, and Garth Rockcastle ends up working with MCBA at Open Book, but Jeff Scherer was our first....

JA: Yes, Jeff was the one. Several of us knew the firm, and that helped. He was a delight to work with, so, very quickly he and Jim Sitter figured out the scheme for using the space, which made great sense, because it had to have an apparent logic to it, which they supplied. I don't recall any problems dealing with Jeff. We had some problems with the landlord, and the usual problems in the course of construction because we didn't have

much money, and we were quite preoccupied after we found the building with getting money to move ahead. In those early days it was almost a nickel at a time, but it came together.

BB: When [you and I] were at a lunch with Jim Sitter last year, he mentioned that he relied on you quite a bit for giving counseling or support as he moved through this process. Do you have any memories of that process? He seemed to think it was pretty constant, that the two of you were really a team, walking through this incorporation and pulling this idea together.

JA: Well, we had to be, because at that point he was the only staff, and it just made sense for me to be the contact point with the board. He used to come over to my house on Saturday mornings and we would review what was going on and what was coming up, and it worked well, just completely informal. A lot of people would have been horrified at how informal it was. But it worked and I didn't see any point in dressing it up

BB: And you had confidence; Jim had run a few businesses at that point. He had never started an organization, but you had confidence that he could pull it off?

JA: Well, he pulled it off until that point, which is pretty impressive. I mean just pulling that board together was impressive enough. He had thought that through very, very clearly.

BB: So here we are back at the McKesson Building and it has been renovated and outfitted. It is around the Grand Opening in October 1985. Can you give us a sense of what the neighborhood was like as you approached the building back then? What was the feel or the vibe in the Warehouse District?

JA: It was just beginning to emerge as something visible. There were a couple of hot restaurants nearby, one was across the street—Faegre's—I don't remember the other one, and that helped in terms of visibility, because you didn't have to explain to people where it was. I think there was a parking lot across the street, a typical downtown fringe area [and] long since developed now, of course. But we were kind of on the edge of civilization.

BB: As you entered the Center, what was the space like for the visitor, if you can picture yourself walking into that space?

JA: Initially it was just one large space, nearly square, with six to eight steps up from the street to the first floor, and so there was a lot of light, and the layout was just perfect. As you came in, binding was on the left and printing was on the right. As it went back, papermaking was behind the bindery and there was a small library space near the printing. The printing presses took up the largest part of the space, so when you came in,

you had a nice simple picture of the whole enterprise; it didn't require a lot of explanation. And there were no walls, no interior walls, which was genius.

BB: I remember having people comment on the columns. It was full of columns, and yet when Jeff Scherer created that design, somehow you didn't notice them; it was unbelievable.

JA: It worked so well, and Jeff was the perfect architect for it.

BB: And he has designed many libraries since, so he has stayed in that world of the book. Do you have any memories of the founding artists in residence, Amanda Degener or Allan Kornblum?

JA: Well, the two of them I remember very, very well, [and] also Greg Campbell, who helped with the bindery, although he already had an established business nearby.

BB: And he was on the founding board as well.

JA: Allan was running a small private press in Iowa City, and he was attracted to the idea of being able to come to the Twin Cities. It was wonderful; we needed a printer and he needed a place to go. You have or will interview Amanda, but it was a similarly fortuitous thing. She had just graduated from Yale with her M.F.A. [degree], and she had a paper beater, and we needed a papermaker, and having the beater made her an all the more attractive acquisition. But the two of them are just, well, we could not have gotten off the ground without them.

BB: What were their personalities like? When you think about it, they would have such a big impact, because a lot of people who would walk in there, that is who they would interact with, either at an opening where there would be demonstrations going on, or as visitors. What do you think it was about their personalities that was helpful for visitors?

JA: Amanda is very outgoing, and the process of making paper is mysterious to people, and so she had a way of making that very simple. She had Saturday classes sometimes on marbling, and people were fascinated with that. Allan was a quieter fellow, and of course the printing process, no matter whether it is old or new, people think they understand that, so that was an easier thing for people to get into.

BB: Do you have any other memories or impressions of a few other folks who were there early on? [I'm thinking of] Kent Aldrich, who was working with Allan, Gaylord Schanilec, who was in printing [with] his first two books. Any thoughts about either of those printers?

JA: For some reason I knew Gaylord better than I knew Kent, and they were both indispensable, both for their talents and they had other contacts in the community and in the book arts world. That was an important part of a larger and growing network.

BB: You mentioned Greg Campbell, and he was critical for us in the binding community, and also for the Ampersand Club. That whole related community of folks became involved as well. If you think about the Warehouse District, you called it the fringe of downtown, which was perfect. Then picturing MCBA anchoring the end of First Avenue North, what role do you think MC BA played within that Warehouse District?

JA: In the first place, it filled a space that was just a big old space with nothing in it. The landlord used the upper floors for storage—he was a printer, and [MCBA] made it a place, and therefore it occupied a legitimate space in that area. And it gave some life to the area. We didn't have a lot of walk-in traffic at that point but we had some, but just the fact that people could drive by and see activity was a big plus for that area.

BB: You served as MCBA's Board President until September 1986 and left the board in 1988. You left the board shortly before Founding Executive Director Jim Sitter moved on, in spring 1989. Start-ups as you know are fragile by their very nature, and yet MCBA has survived despite inevitable challenges over the years, as it had to grow and develop and move forward. One critical challenge for a start-up arises when a founding executive director moves on, but we did have Hollis Stauber come in after that. So, from your experience as being on the founding board and working with Jim, what critical factors do you feel contributed to MCBA's early survival [and] getting through that transition, either factors of Jim's personality or the facts of the organization itself? What helped MCBA through that critical first step?

JA: Jim's personality was the most critical element, clearly. The board was a very important part of that, and the board reflected his judgment and that of Elmer Andersen. Each of the board members were well known in different parts of the community, and that provided stability, which was critical to the whole enterprise. And then as we begin to get programs, and people from other parts of the book arts world began participating, that gave us a professional legitimacy. Well, ultimately we had to have that or we would have been dead in the water.

BB: At some point you and your wife Marilyn relocated to New York. When was that?

JA: When I retired, in 1997.

BB: You would visit MCBA periodically before you moved back here in 2013. Do you have any impressions or memories from those brief visits when you would be back at the Center?

JA: Well, the Open Book was being developed at the time we left, so we enjoyed coming back and seeing the entire Open Book operation and particularly, of course, MCBA. And I don't remember exactly when they named the library for us [this was in 1991], but we came back for that, and periodically I would come back on business or we would come back to see friends, so that was a natural stop. Marilyn had been very active in Graywolf Press. She was the first chair of the board there. So we had complimentary interests in the book field.

BB: Yes, you mentioned that the other day. She served in a critical period for Graywolf, right?

JA: Yes, their transition of executive directors was a little more critical than ours, because in effect they had to ask the founding director to leave. In the meantime Marilyn persuaded Page Cowles to take over in the interim, and Page did a marvelous job. Without her, I am not sure if Graywolf would have made it, but she did a good job and it has prospered ever since.

BB: It is just amazing to think about that, since we just visited with Jay Cowles recently, and Jay Cowles stepped in and helped MCBA through a similar transition later on in its lifespan.

JA: It is. Thank goodness for both of them.

BB: Yes, absolutely, and thank goodness for Marilyn, for stepping up, as well. When you would come back and visit with Marilyn or later as well, MCBA was in a very different kind of space [at Open Book]; it was in a shared space. And having been so intimately involved in that first independent space, what changes might you have seen in MCBA itself, once it was located now in the shared space of Open Book? How did the organization perhaps change from being in that different kind of set up?

JA: I was not aware that the organization itself changed, beyond the location, of course. I did not see how we could move the Center anyplace just because, unlike the other occupants of Open Book, we were very capital-intensive. But it worked extremely well, and I don't really know how much interaction there is between the three organizations, but it is one of those things where one plus one plus one is more than three, and the Commons space upstairs, and the auditorium, and the lounge I think it is called, work extremely well as a shared space because everybody needs one but we don't need three, so and again, Meyer Scherer did the work on it and it was just seamless.

BB: We have been so fortunate with them. I also want to say a little bit about MCBA's library, which as you mentioned is named in honor of you and your wife Marilyn. It expanded just in the last year or so, to offer the same resources as before, but those resources are expanding, with wider access to MCBA's collections of artists' books, reference materials, the full run of our Winter Books, in addition to process materials. I

think it has moved more into a role that was envisioned early on by Jim Sitter and Elmer Andersen, in a sense of being one of the central parts of MCBA's vision.

JA: And it has turned out of course because now the Center itself, and particularly the library, constitute the biggest resource of that sort in the country, and the model to some extent was St. Bride's Printing Library in London.

BB: Yes. Jeff Rathermel, the current Executive Director, really carried that forward. It is almost a circular process in a way that was so fortunate that we ended up with Jeff who has finished and re-visioned it, in a sense.

JA: Yes, Jeff has just done a marvelous job as far as I can tell. And it is interesting; the budget is not all that great. It is about at what we hoped it would max out at and like all non-profits it has to have contributions to keep it going, but the portion of earned income is really quite impressive.

BB: Do you have a particular sense, or how do you imagine that the library is going to be used in the future at MCBA, with visitors, artists, even young people? Do you have a sense of how it will serve MCBA's audience, which is so broad?

JA: My sense is that it will be predominantly digital, and obviously it will have some local value, but I think the big value will be people across the world who will be able to tap into the resources which we have here, and that will be an increasing element of strength for MCBA.

BB: I have maybe five or six more questions, but I was wondering if you would like to take a little break here and share with us a favorite book of yours, perhaps a book that has some connection to MCBA?

JA: Yes, I have two or three books which I am very fond of, and that have a direct relationship to MCBA. They were books by Gaylord Schanilec, who was one of our very first visiting artists, and who has now gone on to great renown, appropriately.

BB: So, what is this first book you want to show us, James?

JA: Every year we had a Winter Book, so called. A prominent writer and a designer who collaborated to produce a book. This is the third one, written by Meridel LeSueur, who at the time was a very well known Minnesota writer. We try to focus on Minnesotans, of course. This is a limited edition in a box, and there were also more widely available unlimited editions, which were not in quite the deluxe form.

BB: This was *Winter Prairie Woman*, I believe.

JA: *Winter Prairie Woman*, number three.

BB: The third one. Ok, wonderful.

JA: This is a book by Gaylord Schanilec, *High Bridge*, referring to a bridge in Saint Paul. And they are beautifully done, and again, this is a special edition, it is lettered. I suppose twenty-six of this version were produced, and others were available for lesser amounts of money. But this is a very good one.

BB: And I think Gaylord would take photographs and then work from the photos, right? Just beautiful, crisp wood engravings.

JA: Yes, he was and is marvelous at that.

BB: This was his first book, I believe.

JA: And one for which he was very well known, called *Farmers*, which is appropriate, and harks back to an earlier era.

BB: That is when he moved to Stockholm Wisconsin, I think.

JA: He also made some prints of these, which could be purchased separately, and they are beautiful when they are framed. They complement the book.

BB: Thank you so much, James, for showing us those books. They are a great representation of the potential that MCBA hoped to have when it opened with the artist community. I just have a few more questions to ask, and I thought that these could be from a more broad sense of perspective, since we are at a thirty-year mark. From that perspective of three decades, I am wondering, when you think back to MCBA when it was up and running, and then if you think of MCBA today, how would you characterize those two organizations? Are they at the heart the same organization, or do you see measurable changes in the entity called MCBA today?

JA: One measurable change is that initially there was a lot of focus on the historical aspects of the book arts, printing and so forth. Since the 1980s, a lot more attention has gone into contemporary aspects of book arts, not at the expense of the traditional, but it has been something that we had not contemplated in the early days. And that is a good thing because it makes it much more comprehensive. The other thing that is extremely noticeable is the large number of students who use the book center—not just children, but people of all ages, and while we anticipated that, I at any rate never had any idea that it would be as extensive as it is. And that is wonderful, because it tells you [that] among other things, there is and probably has always been a broad interest in the book arts, which needed an entity around which to coalesce.

BB: Yes, and I think that we have witnessed something nationally, maybe with young people as a reaction against screen culture. MCBA was perfectly positioned to respond to that growing interest or need.

JA: And the fact that all the interrelated pieces are there; it is not just printing, it is not just binding or paper or whatever. It helps people understand the whole genre.

BB: Another question that comes to mind has to do with longevity. Those of us who have been in the Twin Cities or back east, we know of vital organizations that didn't quite last that long, that didn't make it for one reason or another. So I am thinking that people who listen to this conversation might be curious if there are any aspects that come to mind [about] MCBA that contributed to its lifespan, not just in Jim Sitter's presence which was so key at the start, but characteristics [that] would have played in MCBA's favor over time.

JA: Well, Elmer Andersen was always very emphatic that it needed to be focused on Minnesota, and I think that has helped give us the roots for greater longevity. It is not a helicopter operation. I remember going to see the Center for Book Arts in New York, way, way back, and I think it still exists, but it is nothing like MCBA. Of course it is very hard to have roots in Manhattan, or any place in New York City. So, I think that has been an important part of it. And because of our location and our cultural traditions, people have rallied around it in ways that they might not have in another area.

BB: That leads to another question, which is [that] I am curious if you sense something that is characteristically Minnesotan about this organization and its lifespan—the fact that it has become integral, at least we think it is, to the culture of Minnesota?

JA: At the outset there was concern on the part of what passed for the book arts community, that MCBA would absorb all the available funding and everybody else would go under, and we would be the only survivors. Ironically and happily, the reverse has occurred, and by our visibility we have helped all these other related literary organizations, and the total budgets of all of them together now are quite substantial. And among funders it has given the whole area legitimacy, which it didn't really have before. So that has been a very pleasant and a very needed side benefit of MCBA.

BB: If there is one last question, looking at a thirtieth anniversary, it has to do with legacy. We all hope that MCBA will be here in another thirty years, but if we look back from the perspective of today, what do you feel might be MCBA's legacy to the state of Minnesota, or broader? What kind of legacy has MCBA produced to this point of its lifespan?

JA: Part of it is simply a central role of book arts in primarily the Twin Cities but to some extent in the Upper Midwest. The other part of the legacy is its example of, I guess I would call it, cultural coordination. It is an example of how one organization can help

many others and vice versa, because so often, both here and in other cities, there is much too much competition in funding for different organizations, because they don't see themselves as part of a larger whole. That is I think a very valuable legacy and it is typically Minnesotan, and goes way back to the people who founded the state and the Cities in the first place.

BB: It seems like those values are values that celebrate the larger community.

JA: That certainly is my sense.

BB: That is a good note to end on. I want to thank you, most sincerely, James. You have been a tremendous friend to MCBA and will continue to be involved, I know. I want to thank you on behalf of all of the boards of directors, faculty and artists, and the thousands of children, thank you for everything you have done to help us.

JA: I have enjoyed it, and I have to add that you give me too much credit. I just happened to be there at the right time and the right place, and all that. And wonderful people to work with. It could not have been easier.

BB: Well, thank you very much.