

TRANSCRIPT

SCRC Series: Lewis Clarke Oral Histories Project – MC 00191

Field Notes: Gilbert Barnes Wheless, Jr. (compiled November 12, 2008)

Interviewee: GILBERT BARNES (“GIL”) WHELESS, JR.

Interviewer: Yona R. Owens

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Location: Durham, North Carolina

Length: Approximately 74 minutes

A native of Durham, N.C., Wheless graduated in landscape architecture in 1967 from the North Carolina State University School (now College) of Design. He worked for Lewis Clarke while still in school. Shortly after graduation, he moved to Connecticut to work with A.E. Bye. Eventually, he organized Environmental Design Associates in which he was a principal for over forty years before retiring back to Durham. A project of personal note is the first bio-field application in a design for Vanfer Properties in Connecticut.

YO: This is an oral history interview with Gil Wheless on November the fifth, 2008 at his home in Durham, North Carolina. I'd like to start off with our first standard question, tell me a little bit about where you're from and how you got interested in landscape architecture.

GW: It's very interesting that I grew up in Durham, North Carolina and I lived on Trinity Avenue, which was a block and a half from Duke University. So, I played on the campus as a small child and really enjoyed taking the bus over and going through the gothic architecture and the different spaces. One of our church members was the director of the facilities planning at Duke, and I used to go through his office. He would show me all the interesting things and all the drawings that they had done back in 1935 and '36 when they were actually building the campus.

The way I really got involved in landscape architecture was that the School of Design was always something that I wanted to get involved in and my parents really pushed me in doing house plans and different plans and mother was very strong in the garden clubs. And so, I had sort of that intuitive rearing I would say, of knowing what plants looked like and what you were supposed to do as far as good taste and quality of products and all of that.

So, mother and daddy took me over to NC State to meet Henry Kamphoefner and I had all sorts of drawings with me. We went into Henry's office and the first thing that Henry said, was young man did you wipe your feet when you walked into my office? And I said, I certainly did because there was a mat out there. He said, well, I'd like for you to come in and just introduce yourself and I want you to turn around and go back and sit in the reception room and I will speak to your parents.

Years later my mother told me exactly what had happened. Henry was looking at some of the drawings that I had prepared and mother was very, very—well, you have to know mother to understand her strength, but the dean says, well, I see great enthusiasm here, but I don't think that I recognize a genius and with that my mother says to the dean, Dean Kamphoefner, I have a question for you. Have you ever been able to recognize a genius?

So, that was the beginning of my career and I did get into State. I hate to admit that I probably was one of the dean's pets. And I entered architecture first and I won the Brick and Tile

competition, which was the designing of a pottery. And I had no idea that I would win, but I did. It was only a hundred dollars or a hundred and fifty dollars and I was the proudest thing in the world that I had won out of a hundred and thirty five students at the school. So, what happened shortly after that Dick Moore, and with the influence of Lewis Clarke, came to me and he said, you know we think that you should be a landscape architect and I said, why should I be a landscape architect? And he said, well, I didn't think that your architecture was really that great, but the reason that you won was because you know how to put things together. And with that I started my career as a landscape architect.

YO: No kidding.

GW: So that's how it all happened.

YO: Well, what year were you in school then?

GW: I think that was either the beginning of my second year because my first year, I had a horrible accident. I lost a kidney playing soccer and that sort of knocked me out of a whole semester and a year. So, I really started that second semester in architecture and then I switched over to landscape architecture after winning the competition.

YO: So that was about 1966, '67?

GW: '62.

YO: '62.

GW: Yes, about 1962 or that particular timeframe.

YO: So, we're talking to an early student of the school?

GW: Yes, you are. I graduated from Durham High School in 1960 and it was wonderful because in 1961, I entered NC State and then in '62, I probably got into landscape architecture.

YO: And you mentioned Dick Moore, that's Richard Moore who was the head of the department at the time, right?

GW: That is correct, yes.

YO: And did you have him as a professor?

GW: Oh, it was like one big happy family. We had everybody for professors. It's very interesting when you speak to Dick and when you speak to Lewis. They both admit that we really didn't know that much about what we were doing and we sort of relied on our students to help us in teaching because through your questions that you asked we all grew and that gave us an opportunity of seeing what direction you were heading. And then we would go back and do our

work and come back and push it onto you and that way we created and we developed each individual person.

And it was interesting because, as I think I had told you before, in the field of design you really have it or you don't. And there's certain people that find this out later on in life and they'll switch into engineering or they'll go into another phase of design or something else, but it's an intuitive sense and with the nurturing of the professors that guides you into basically what you're going to do for the rest of your life. I remember upon graduating from the School of Design, Henry Kamphoefner stood up and he said, you're not graduating as an architect, a product designer or a landscape architect. He said, you are graduating as a designer. This was the period that design was stressed in the school and some of the greatest, I think some of the greatest years of the school were actually when we were in school.

YO: And who were some of the designers that you had as professors?

GW: Well, we had a lot of visiting professors and they tried to bring interesting people from all over the country. Of course, Burle Marks came several times from Rio. And interesting, I was in Rio about oh, I would say about six years ago, and I saw a lot of the work that he did there. In fact, the girl that I was visiting, her grandfather built a lot of the facilities along the whole beach of Ipanema and all the way down the entire Gold Coast there. And these were changing rooms and whatever. And it was interesting that you could see the walk patterns and you could see the planting patterns of how he had worked with Burle Marks. I also met the parks director in Rio at that time.

YO: Wow.

GW: I did not speak the language. He didn't speak my language, but we connected and we admired similar things at the residence that we were visiting. But that was very, very interesting. And then later on I saw Burle Marks again at the Brooklyn Botanical Garden when I was in Connecticut and they had a special presentation. It was probably one of the last ones that he did in this country before he passed away.

But he was quite a flamboyant, interesting person and you have to understand that the professors that they brought to us really took the student and just put him right up on a pedestal. We had some of the, I hate to say, "God's" of the profession, but we had the best and it just pushed us doing the best work possible.

Another one was Eugene Martini who was a landscape architect out of Atlanta. He came by my desk and he stood at my desk and he said, I want you to work for me. I was only a sophomore. I said, I still have years to go before I'm going to graduate. He said, you missed what I said. I want you to work for me. The year that I was graduating, he died that December.

YO: Oh.

GW: He was at an ASLA convention and I don't know why I thought it was in New Orleans, but maybe it was in Houston or someplace, but he wasn't feeling well and I think it was leukemia that he died of a couple of weeks after that. He didn't realize that he was sick. So, here I had been hot dog on campus because I had a job and no one else did. Of course, Fred did because his father was a landscape architect.

YO: And that's Fred Stresau?

GW: That was Fred Stresau. But the thing was that here I was sporting my stuff around campus and Lewis was giving me all this support. He was glowing and the whole thing because I actually had a job. So, shortly after the year started, my last year, after the January, A.E. Bye from Greenwich, Connecticut came down. And I was president or I was in charge of the hospitality committee for the ASLA Chapter at NC State. It was my responsibility to make sure that Ed got to all of the lectures on time. I took him out to dinner. I took him to—we'd go to a movie if we didn't have something and I kept him entertained. And at the end of the two weeks that he was there he said, you know Gil, I cannot go back to Connecticut without you.

YO: Oh, my goodness.

GW: He said, you have got to come to Connecticut and he said, it is the finest place that you could ever practice in your life. There are a lot of people up there that have lots of money. My interest at that time was in residential design and that's exactly what happened. I went up there to visit with him and I never left.

And I worked for him for a year and a half and then I met two other gentlemen that had graduated from Syracuse. And it was really funny because we were known as Prima, Donna, and Draino. I was Prima because I couldn't do anything wrong and I had an ego that just could not be stopped. Donna was the one that was a little older than we were, and he had his license and the other two of us didn't at that particular time. But he was wonderful and he was more into some contacts, but he was basically more environmentally oriented.

So, I was the designer, we had the environmentalist, and then John Sallori was Draino. He could drain anything. He could grade anything. So, with the background and influence that I had gotten from NC State, meeting these other two guys it well rounded a firm. And at one time we had about thirty-two to thirty-five people in our firm. We were the largest landscape architectural firm in New England outside of Boston.

YO: Wow.

GW: And we practiced and ended up doing a lot of work for J. Robert Hilliard architect out of Princeton. The Grant Partnership out of Newark, Perkins Eastman—Mary Jean Eastman, her husband was a classmate of ours at NC State. And so, it was interesting how it all sort of evolved. We were in and out of New York. We were in and out of the Boston area. We did the Bryant College outside of Boston or it actually was outside of Providence. It was in Rhode Island and that sort of started a career of commercial projects.

I had created a design for Dow Corning Corporate Headquarters which was three hundred acres with A.E. Bye. Ed was a teacher in New York and Ed did not have a presentation ready for the next day. I knew that Dow Corning was coming from Michigan to our office and I stayed up all night and I did this drawing. The drawing itself was over nine feet long and I did this drawing and Ed—I'm not mocking Ed, but Ed spoke very softly but sort of different. And so, the next morning when the guys came in at eight-thirty, Ed said, [with accent] oh, gee I forgot that you were coming today. He says, I really don't have anything for you. I said yes, except we did this drawing just for you guys and I rolled it out.

YO: Oh, that's spectacular.

GW: And that's what they bought. And it was a marvelous project that lasted in our office through all the things that happened with breast implants and all of that with Dow Corning, but finally we stopped work on it I would say fifteen, twenty years ago.

YO: Right.

GW: But there for twenty years we were working on Dow Corning with an architect by the name of Frank George who is also very, very, very wonderful. Frank had escaped from the prisons in Poland and came over here. He had some degree I think from Poland, but then he went to Columbia or whatever and, and got his architectural degree. But Frank was really the founding reason that we all became partners in business or in a corporation. He was the one that really made it work because he told Don who was his neighbor he said, if you get Gil who can do the creative work, you can get John to do the drainage work, and you can do the environmental work, he said, I cannot think of a better package.

At the time that we were at State the key word or the new buzz word was *environmental design*. So when we were looking for the name of a firm we called ourselves Environmental Design Associates.

YO: No kidding.

GW: Because we had everything together. And you know it was sort of fun I know that Nigel came up one time, Lewis wanted him to interview with our firm and I wished we had been able to have him at the office because I like Nigel a lot and, and bringing Lewis back into my life again was sort of fun at that particular stage, but my partners felt that we didn't have room for him. So, we didn't do that. So anyway, it was it's been a great, a great time and you asked me how I got involved in I've gone off in other things, but that's what happened.

YO: Okay. I'd like to go back to when you were in school and think about that just a little bit. And since you brought up environmental design, what was State's edge on teaching at the time?

GW: I think what happened was we had an opportunity of looking at regional planning in the state of North Carolina. We had a lot of problems with flooding at that time. We didn't have any flood control in the state so we had to go out and take a river basin. Mine was the Cape Fear River Basin. I had to study all of the little towns around there. Where would the dam best be suited? Where could you put a dam where your demographics would allow it so you're not displacing a lot of people? And how did you work out your plant materials in all these areas? I mean, are you looking at species of plants that might be lost or whatever?

And we actually went out and visited these communities and we looked at the overall picture and then we came back and put it together and then we had maybe a recreation area. We had maybe a housing area and where would you have businesses. It was really the beginning of the Research Triangle that was about the time that was all happening. And so, we were really right at the beginning of all of this. Talk about environmental studies. If you do an environmental impact, it's not just plant material and drainage. It does have something to do with people and

traffic patterns and where are your airports? Where are your arteries? It's very important to know where all these things are and that's what we were studying.

We had so many projects that completely engulfed the whole area. And I was always the showy one. I would always do this beautiful presentation that was the biggest presentation. There wasn't a lot of verbiage, but a lot of visual that I would do. Then, of course, with my explaining I would get up and explain what we were doing. Later on in life maybe it was from critiques that we would give in the Rotunda or whatever, but they always said that my voice and my technique of just my everyday life changed when I was in front of people. It did and it does. They have nicknamed me in the profession the "silver tongued lizard" because I usually can get things passed because I like to get down and educate the people as to what we are doing and why we're designing and, and how it's not going to hurt you. We have done environmental impact report and all of that.

I had one interesting thing happen not too long ago in Connecticut. I had an engineer that had never been to this site and he was against whatever this client was going to do because he was working for the water company. Everything that we were doing we had used all of the conservation means. We had spent thousands of dollars in diverting water, pumping it into different locations so it would never go into the reservoir improperly. So, we did all these things and this guy never had gone to the site. He wouldn't even look at the drawings that I had done for him. And we worked on this project twenty years ago and everything was natural. Everything was out of natural stone, no concrete footings, no stone walls or anything. It was all big slabs of stone that we had leaned against the scars of the landscape and then we put in all the indigenous plants so that you didn't have mud going down into the area. And then we had holding areas in case during construction there was some seepage that sort of thing.

But this guy wouldn't look at the drawing so as I was leaving the podium, I took the drawings and I went over to him and his head was down and I put them under his face. I said, I would appreciate it if you would look at the drawing and he went berserk. He said, I feel that I have been attacked and he said, leave me alone or else I will call the cops. I've never been so insulted in my life, but here was an engineer that I could not believe could come out against a project when he had not even been to the site.

And that is what I always wanted my opposition to do. You cannot work with people unless they know what you're talking about and you have to be good enough that you're going to be able to get them to listen to you and that was the only person in my entire career that I've ever had that just wouldn't even budge.

YO: Well, that was quite an experience, but at least it was only just that one then.

GW: Well, it was interesting that after the project was completed and we did it with the planning board itself and with the town planner. We found ways of completing the project without getting permission from the reservoir, but they still had a lawsuit against the client and they actually signed off on it and said it was one of the nicest projects that they had ever seen.

So, I think that it's knowing that you're working with the environment and as long as you do not violate the environment no one can tell you that it's wrong. And that's our secret, has always been our secret. We do things the right way. And without the instilment from the School of our professors in telling us these are the right things to do, it gave us a backbone. We were all very strong when we came out of school. We knew what we were doing. We had confidence and I think that's the greatest thing that anybody can give you.

YO: Well, that's a wonderful thought. Do you recall any of the projects you worked on when you were a student?

GW: Oh, yes. One of my favorite projects was a water garden and how you would view it from above looking down into it. And how you actually went down into the garden and with the walls around that I had created, and the waterfalls and the whole feeling, because it was depressed you would lose the sound of the area that you were in. If it was in a town, you would lose the street noises. And then you would have the noises of the water itself. We had different areas within the water garden where we had trees and where you sit, tables you could dine. You had lily gardens without the trees so that the sunlight came in and then you could have carp in there or whatever. But that was a wonderful project that I remember explicitly.

And then of course we had the golf courses and at that time Croasdaile—well, Croasdaile Country Club in Durham was just beginning, but Willowhaven had already been completed and my father belonged to Willowhaven and used to take me out on the golf cart to play golf. Well, I wasn't interested in playing golf. I was more interested in what they were doing on the rough of the golf course or the grass in the hills, and looking to see how it was rolling and draining and they were getting the water off. And my father couldn't understand why I wasn't interested in the game and I said, I'm way ahead of you. I cannot see. My mind works too fast. I cannot stand to watch a ball being hit. I want to know where it's going to go definitely, but I want to know where the water is going to go. Here's a club called, Willowhaven, and I said, there wasn't even one willow tree planted in the entire project.

YO: Oh, for heaven's sake.

GW: I do know that there were some willow trees planted after I made a comment at the nineteenth hole one time about willow trees at Willowhaven. But those were two great projects and I'd already mentioned the Cape Fear project.

We had some residential projects that I would get involved in and it was great training with the residences because what I would do, I actually had a private room that was just across—it was actually in the alumni building, which was very close to the campus—because of my physical condition. Sometimes I'd lock myself in my room and what I would do is just forget all of the courses and sit there and just act as though I had just stepped foot on the property. I knew what the house was, where it was, I had formed the rooms inside, I formed the rooms outside, and the way that the circulation worked.

And then the colors of the materials and through all of the plant courses we had and all of the creative courses it all came together. I would sit there and when I'd hang my project up on the wall, no one had seen it basically. So, mine was the one that looked different than everybody else's because if you're in a room with a whole bunch of people, they're going to take bits and pieces from everybody. But mine very seldom looked like anybody else's. Mine really had my touch to it. And that's what I've always done. I never went out and publicized my work because I didn't necessarily want other people to copy it. I took a lot from school, a lot from Lewis, and a lot from the other professors, but when you take the background and apply it to what A.E. Bye teaches you, which is the natural residential, and then you actually are in Connecticut where you have all of the means at your fingertips, all the mountain laurel, the leucothoe axillaris, the rhododendron, the stone.

I was working stone that came out of the same quarry as the quarry they used when they were doing the Brooklyn Bridge and Grand Central Station. And these big pieces of stone were lying on the sides of the paths. They were rejects because they had a crack that a fern had grown in or the lichen or the moss and these were the ones we were literally wrapping up with these soft belts and pulling them out or lifting them with these big cranes and moving them down to the sites and then marrying the stones together. It's a good word. It's called, "marrying stones together."

When you have a project, it's just like a crossword puzzle or a jigsaw puzzle. Everything goes together and when its finished you sort of sit back and you say, you know, I couldn't move a thing because it all went together naturally. One of the greatest compliments that I ever had in my life was from a partner of mine, Don Ferlow. Don saw a project that I did and he said, I cannot believe what you did with this natural rock outcropping. It is absolutely beautiful. I said, Don, I didn't do anything with the natural rock outcropping, I did the rock outcropping. I placed every stone.

It's interesting. It's all in your hands. Ed Bye told me that. He said, I saw the talent that the professors were pulling out of you in class. I observed you for two weeks. I observed your character and everything and that's why I wanted to come to Connecticut and work for me. He said, but it's in your hands. When you touch a plant and you want to put that plant in the ground, it's the way you do it and you do all of your supervision. Don't let anybody else do it. That's the secret. It's just like moving furniture around or pieces of anything. It's the way you move them. How they are put together. The structure of the plant and how this limb fits into this limb—it all goes together and you want it to look so natural that no one knows that anything has been done. The worst thing you can do is to drive into a project and it looks manmade. I want everything to look as natural and as quite as it possibly can.

YO: The image there is just remarkable. I can see where it goes back to your background back at State with the ecology and the environment. I know that Lewis says sometimes that he wants landscapes to look like nobody's ever been there before. So, it sounds like it goes right back to that.

GW: It really is and you know we have always these larger projects that you oh, we used tree stamps and whatever and that was really just for the count of the material that you were going to use on the site. You had your vocabulary, but when you actually were there with the plant material, it was only numbers you were working with. The actual location of them, you may move this and move that because this plant had this character and you didn't need three of them and you only needed one in that place and then you could move those over to the other. So it would have pretty much the same character that you're trying to create, but it's so much better because it's you. Every plant has a different personality as every person you're working with.

One time I was in Florida, a client—I probably did over two million spec office buildings with this client and probably did two million spec office buildings that we actually developed. We did the first bio-filtration system and this was in New Jersey. The Corp of Engineers out of Philadelphia would come up and visit our bio-filtration system at Vanfer Properties because we developed it, but we had no idea what it was going to look like four years later when the birds came in and dropped the seeds. They were moving things and it became this absolutely magnificent arboretum. It was just beautiful and it was all a wetland, all just an old swamp as they called it. But it worked.

It was so successful and Mr. Ferber who was Vanfer Properties, Mr. Ferber had houses all over the country. I did houses in the Hamptons for him where I met Bernie Mendik, where I did Bernie Mendik's house out in South Hampton. But Paul's [Ferber] house done in Florida was really the greatest education of where I took everything that I had learned from the very beginning. When I told you that I used to close myself in my room at State, I did this with this project in Florida. I didn't know the plant material in Florida, but he had a big townhouse with beautiful courtyards. There were like four courtyards I had to develop including the golf course and location of some palms to look natural, but also to protect his house from the golf balls.

So, I'm down there and I thought gee, I'll just do exactly what I had learned, use a few different plant materials, and do the whole thing. I got to Florida and I was like a kid in a candy jar. I wanted one of these and one of those and one of these and one of those and I went to the nursery and I said, oh, I've got to use that, I've got to use this.

When I got home back to his house and I was looking at the list, I had sort of a concept of what I was going to do, I had photographs, I was there for two days looking at everything, looking at the spaces. I had already met the contractor that was going to be doing the work. I knew what the pavers were going to look like and I came back to Connecticut and I sat down and literally in ten hours I had the whole thing designed. When I walked out of that room after ten hours with the drawing that I did by hand, I could not believe it. It was one of the most beautiful things I had ever done.

Then I went back down to Florida and I already had tagged the plants. I knew what I was going to use and I put everything back. Well, unfortunately I didn't realize that things grow quite as well as they do in Florida and the maintenance was quite terrific, but it was a wonderful experience. It came out to be a wonderful jungle. All they needed was a couple of monkeys and a few parrots and it would have been paradise for any jungle scene.

But it was interesting because that's where maintenance comes into the whole program. You do have to know how the plants are going to grow and how they have to be trimmed. If you can trim a plant, you can pretty much keep the original character because there's a character to that plant. But you have to be able to top it, you thin it and work with it and maintenance in different parts of the country you will learn, are completely different. But it was fun.

YO: Who were some of the people you were in school with?

GW: Well, it's hard to say. I stuck with my class. I mean, LaMarr Bunn and Fred Stresau were probably my closest. And Jeff McLean, I think is now an engineer, but Jeff was pretty close also. Jeff got involved in landscape architecture because Gil Thurlow, one of the other professors I had, worked on his father's place down, I think it was, in Rocky Mount or someplace, and I went down to visit it. I saw the whole thing together and the quality—what he did was wonderful.

His father was a banker and he in fact he even backed McLean Trucking Company. So, he had funds that he could do something with, but that was really the beginning of seeing a project that was done by one of our professors and that was sort of fun. But because I was in my room most of the time, I didn't have a lot of contact with a lot of people. I know that Edd Evans, who was a roommate of mine one year, and Edd passed away a couple of years ago from MDS, myoplasic dysplasia—but he was a big influence in North Carolina in landscape architecture. And he was sort of a couple of years behind me, but he was very, very good also.

YO: I think he did a calendar some years ago where he asked everybody to contribute a photograph and that was the first time that they'd had kind of a retrospective on people's work, the people that are in North Carolina ASLA.

GW: Well, I think that's a wonderful thing to do. Unfortunately, in the State of Connecticut there was, everyone was so busy—what do I want to say—trying to just meet payroll and chasing the jobs and we were being chased by our jobs. It was so many years before I really had a true vacation. If it hadn't for the American Society of Landscape Architects annual meetings in different parts of the country, we never would have traveled.

And when you're first starting out I know there were twenty-six weeks that I didn't pay myself when I first started. Thank goodness at that time I was married and my wife was able to bring in a paycheck so we lived on something. But it was fun to really work from the bottom up and that was the most exciting thing about Lewis because Lewis wanted us to know what an office was all about. So, he would ask some of us to come over and help him in his office and not too many weeks ago we were talking about the frat house that he bought on Hillsborough Road [Street] and how we all used to go over there and scrape the wallpaper off of these awful walls and patch the walls, paint them white or paint them purple or whatever, and then a job would come in. Everybody would have to stop and get the job out and, and then we'd work on weekends and it was the general pattern of what we had to look forward to in our profession. If we thought that you worked strictly six, five days a week from eight till five that is not the profession.

Most of my work through my career has been on the weekends, but I knew how to work on the weekends because we had to do it at Lewis'. After working on classes and going back, you still had your class stuff that you had to do, but then if you could work over at Lewis' office. They were working on projects up in Washington and Baltimore and those areas and I was telling Lewis I said, there for a long time I thought you owned the bus company because when they would call and they would ask well, where are the drawings? The contractor wanted the drawings and of course the phone would go down and he would say, alright everybody we've got to get these drawings out on the bus. Find out what time the bus is leaving. We've got to get these drawings there so they'll be there first thing tomorrow morning.

So, I said, it was really interesting because you learned how an office worked, the pressures that you're under. I one time mentioned that landscape architecture is demanding as the medical profession. It really is. Someone said, oh, no it's not. Oh, yes it is. When you are holding up so many people when you're working on these larger projects and they're waiting for your drawings, if you don't have those drawings there they can't—they don't have anything to do. And that means that you have to work until three or four o'clock in the morning and take two hours sleep and get back up at six. Then work until seven that night and over the entire weekend so that you will be able to have those on that bus or however they're getting there first thing on Monday morning.

YO: Do you remember who was working with you in the frat house?

GW: Oh, oh, yes. It was LaMarr [Bunn] and, and Fred [Stresau] and, and actually Jeff, I think, was over there a little bit, too.

YO: Jeff?

GW: McLean.

YO: How about Charlie Burkhead? Was he in there?

GW: Charlie was a little bit before me. I knew Charlie Burkhead, but he was before me.

YO: So you were starting to do some work on Columbia then? Some of the Rouse Company's work?

GW: Yes, I did, yes, right. And it was hilarious. I mean here we were doing these little gardens and little fence details and all these other things and Lewis would fly in the office. The next thing I knew the drawings were going out and it was really the momentum. You have to be there. If you had not had that part of the education of actual practice in his studio, I don't know where we would have been today because that really screwed everything down.

I said something to my parents one time and I could also say this to Lewis and everybody else. I said, thank you for not putting a silver spoon in my mouth. Thank you for giving me the initiative that I wanted to go out and do something with my life. And that's what this whole thing is about. You know, a lot of people either you're a rain maker or you're not and what happened was with his influence and watching him we were all rain makers. That's what made us, made this class so great. We all got out there.

I thought Roy Pender, talking about somebody else, Roy was a great guy and it may be that I will get Roy Pender involved in a project that I might be involved in North Carolina. If the economy hadn't gone completely upside down, we would be looking at a very large project here in the state and we still may. A landscape architect from Connecticut, his son is an architect out of New Bern, and he is involved in this project and he told his dad that while the economy needed to come back for two or three years, he was going to go to Germany and do some work over there, but he would be back. In fact, I'm trying to get his father to move down here with his lovely bride and maybe we'll start a little something ourselves in the mean time just to get established. But I'd already contacted Roy Pender because he has great contacts with the environmental people here in the state. And we will need, need that contact. So, we have never forgotten any people. If you call names I can probably tell you, yes. But I was really with the alumni building and my roommate Edd Evans and then with my immediate class.

YO: Changing direction just a little bit, when you worked in the office at the frat house what kind of boss was Lewis Clarke?

GW: Well, you know when you say what kind of a boss I think that he was probably more of a buddy. He was probably more of a friend than you would say, a boss. He could be very strong because he needed something to go out. If you asked him a question, he would always have an answer for you. He did let you have enough rope to hang yourself, but he would recover you at the last moment. It was not all working for somebody. We were all working together because we were all there depending on each other get something out. And what was your portion of this? Were you strictly a draftsman or were you actually designing? He let you do a lot of this and then he would come in and rescue you at the last moment because back then you needed hands and you needed talented hands, and we were all pretty, pretty good at that. So we could work out very, very well.

YO: What made that group's designs different from other people's designs?

GW: I think what happened, with the influence of Fred Stresau, his father, Fred's father and Fred growing up in the business, with Jeff McLean who designed just way off the wall projects because he had all the money supposedly to work with in the world. I don't know if anything he ever designed was practical, but it was stimulus and we always wanted to know what he was doing. Mine was very practical because I wanted mine built, and LaMarr was sort of—LaMarr was working with everybody else and taking a little here and a little there and pulling it all together. So, when we hung everything up on the wall, it looked we had four or five different offices there. I mean they were really, it was really great. So, it was fun.

YO: So, it was pretty talented bunch of people?

GW: We were very talented. I hate to say that. I mean I know the Coulter brothers were going through that period also. There were several of them and I know that one of, two were ahead of me, but they were always coming up with some beautiful work. They liked to draw and very artistic, but we all are artistic. I could show you things that I've done—paintings and things like that and it's fun being creative.

I think that what Lewis was able to do was to spark your maximum creativity and a lot of people can't do that. It's just like Frank George that I had mentioned before up in Connecticut. Frank recognized the potential or what had been developed and said, I can't do this Dow Corning project without you, but then he was able to put the team together. But I want you and you and that was the same thing that Lewis was doing. He was sort of organizing and getting us to think outside just the box.

YO: So my question is a rather useless question at this point, did Clarke affect your own practice and it sounds like that he did.

GW: Oh, he absolutely did. I mean without having that strength and I mean you've got to be a gutsy person to go out and do what we do. You've got to have a hard back because when somebody tells you that they don't like something, you've got to be able to come back with six other alternatives and that's what we did. We learned the flexibility. We learned how to take it and that's really hard to learn.

You know particularly when you are an eighteen year old kid going into a design profession and there's so many other people out there that have ideas, you've got to be able to know how to work with those people to get the best out of them without killing their spirit. I had a young man that worked for me for the last two or three years of my practice, and he was a wimp. I mean he knew the computer, and I could talk to him over the phone, and I could give him anything, but anytime he tried to any design himself he couldn't do it. I tried to let him do it. I tried to guide him and he just couldn't do it. And when he finally, when I closed down my portion of the firm, his parents said, thank you for being such a great mentor for my son. And I look back on it and yes, he was better than he was when he came there, but he's got ten years before he's going to be where I was two years out of school.

YO: Well, they say landscape architecture is an old man's profession.

GW: I don't think so. I think either you have it or you don't. If it's an old man's profession—there's so many—I'm not going to, say, other things that I want to do in my life. As someone said, are you retiring? And I said, yes, for two years I don't want to have anything to do with too much because I want to be able to enjoy all the things that I didn't do. It was just like when I said something to Lewis he said, do all the things that you didn't do and you may find something that you like even more than the landscape architecture. You'll always be a landscape architect. You'll always have an opinion about something. He says, but use that talent and go and do something else with it.

Design is the key. I hate to be so sold on my abilities, but my interior work I got involved in by accident. I had created an outdoor space. It was a deck. It was twenty feet off the ground that I had to get from twenty feet down to the ground. I did three different levels of decking and I had to have a fireplace on one area and it made the whole house. As far as I was concerned, when I finished, the deck was worth more than the house. And it sold the house and these people were Stauffer Chemical out of Westport, Connecticut and they moved to San Francisco. They said that they were living in Lafayette Park. I'd never been to San Francisco. I didn't realize that Lafayette Park was a city owned park. They had the only apartment building in the park and they had a subterranean floor. Half of their floor had windows in it and the rest of it you had an alley way that was about four feet wide so they could walk around and pick the garbage in the back and they'd have to take the garbage by their windows to get out.

YO: Good heavens.

GW: So, when I arrived there they said, well, we want you to do our apartment and I said, well the only thing that we can do is just to put some big heavy, big leafed ivy coming down over the walls to soften those. We could do some lighting to give the greenery effect and they said, well, that would be wonderful. And they said, but the reason you're here is because we want your interior ability. And I said, what are you talking about? They said, we love your house in Connecticut. We want the same thing here.

YO: Oh, how nice.

GW: So what happened was with the design background, with being exposed to some very expensive clients that I had in Connecticut, I acquired a totally different taste, not necessary what I grew up with, but it was—my mother had excellent taste qualities, but I enhanced on that. Then I started doing some interiors for pet clients. I'm doing one at the present where I've finished the outside and we're now working on the inside.

And it was interesting, she said, I love what you did to the outside of our home. We have this beautiful house. Nothing has ever worked on the outside. You came in and in a year and a half you've turned this into an absolute paradise, exactly what we wanted. She said, do you ever do anything on the inside and I said, yes. And I said, come with me. I want you to stand at the front door. I will meet you back here in ten minutes. So, I came back in ten minutes and I said, this is what we're going to do. You're going to do this, this, this, this, this, went through everything. Didn't have anything written down, but I did sketch it on a piece of paper. I said, you're going to do this here, this here, this here and she worked with me and I designed it as we walked around the entire house. She said when do we get started?

I'll show you some of the photographs of that so you'll see what I'm talking about. But if you have it you've got it. And the most important thing is give me the initiative that I want to do something with myself. Don't sit there and scold me. Enhance it and that's what Lewis did. Lewis and the rest of the professors said, everyone was different. Everyone needed a little different kick in the—at the right time and so that's what we did. We were able to do that and we knew that you needed this and that somebody else needed this and that's how we as teachers were able to work with you and that's the secret. If you don't have that willingness to do it, forget it.

There are teachers that go out there and we had a, a teacher from Duke that taught us art history. Well, first of all, it was at the wrong time of the day. It was right after lunch and everybody would go to sleep and she was just as boring as she could possibly be. She didn't make it exciting. That's why I think that they changed the curriculum and that's why the students would go and spend a semester in Italy or spend a semester someplace. Seeing is believing. A photograph you don't get the same thing. And that's one of the most important things that we did miss. We should have maybe it was the affluence at that time. We were just back in the early '60s a lot of people didn't have that type of money to send their kids off to school someplace else particularly abroad, but I think that's a very important thing in education.

YO: I was going to ask you about what you think about some of the training that you've heard about these days with the landscape architect field itself?

GW: I think it's wonderful. I don't know that much about NC State. I was very sorry to see that they took the undergraduate course away because I do not think that you can become a landscape architect in three years. I think it takes a good five years to do that. You can have all of the understanding and all the background and everything in other courses and then come in, but you're missing the great thing of being able to express yourself by doing quick hand sketches. By going out and having ten semesters of plant material. These are things that people are missing. The computer is wonderful, but you don't know how to draw. It's the way you pick a pen up. I'm left handed. And after a while you can do it with the right hand also. Fred Stresau used to tell us that his father would render with both hands because he had to get something out of the office. I learned how to do that. Maybe that's why they say it's an old man's profession [Laughs] because after a while you can train both hands to do what you're doing.

YO: Amazing. What's landscape architecture going to be like in the future?

GW: I think landscape architecture in the future is going to be more involved in government. I really think that and the reason I'm saying that is we have had three or four different people working for us in the last forty years that have ended up as town planner, have ended up in the environmental department. We have people that are on the planning board, architectural review boards. This is where we are finding that they're able to really have an influence. Some of them are employed by the towns only in those individual departments. They don't practice, but they're doing a bigger asset management I think because they have an overview of a particular town, of a particular water shed, of a particular feeling of character, setting a character in a community. I am not familiar with the Durham boards yet. I know that—oh, one of the guys that used to work for us oh, what was his name? Neil Heinberg. Neil Heinberg worked for us back in the early seventies, late seventies, and he became one of the town planners here in Durham. Unfortunately,

he passed away, but it was interesting because we gave him something that he became, that was his niche. His niche was not in an office. His niche was at that planning board level.

So, I think that's what's going to happen and I think you're going to find that there are going to be more construction companies, more real estate companies, more people are beginning to realize that landscape architecture is a necessity and not just a glamour profession. Sure I've done all the glamour in the world, and I've spent all the money for clients, but we are a real serious, serious key to a lot of projects.

There are two projects in Durham right now that I have reviewed. I don't know how they ever got through the planning board. They are the most disgusting housing projects. They do not offer the amenities. You have come into my home and you have seen a courtyard, you have seen a garden in the back, and you're hard to believe that this is a townhouse. If you were to see other townhouses in this town, you don't even know where you're going to park and if you park you have to walk up some thirty feet to get to the front door. I don't know too many people at any age that are going to be able to walk up sixty steps or thirty steps or whatever to get to a front door. It's just they need to be tighter here.

By going up to Connecticut, I had an opportunity to see broader denser projects and talk about preservation of environment. You had to because if you did something further downstream they would be affected. So, you had to make sure that all the retention basins were there, all the trees were saved for buffer purposes, for noise purposes, for all of these things, and they had enough money that they could afford to do it.

That's why I'm enthralled with where I live, also, because we have this beautiful serpentine wall that goes around our project. Not only does it look wonderful but it keeps the noise out. And so, these are things. This is—I think landscape architecture has a big future and it's not just saving the whales. It's the whole thing. You're saving everything. When you consider that we may be involved, I may be involved in a project that's going to be five thousand acres, maybe it is an old man's profession because I don't know how many people have—you have to have, forty years of actual experience to know how to tackle a project like that.

YO: Just the pure size of the project.

GW: Just the size of it and how it's going to affect what you are doing and you're looking at housing, you're looking at hotels, you're looking at venues, you're looking at food. How in the world are you going to get everything in an out? The service of something like of that magnitude. That's about the size of Disney World. That's a big project. And to think that something like that could be happening here in North Carolina, you've got to have the right people. That's why I said that I wanted to get Roy Pender involved in it even though he's sort of retired and I had spoken to LaMarr about maybe helping us out if this thing goes. So, I'm beginning to get some of these things back together.

YO: Right. And you're playing the roll as the landscape architect of collecting the people together. That's kind of like old school, isn't it?

GW: It is the old school but see, I have an architect that I haven't met and the way I got involved in this was through an architect that I've known in Connecticut for all these years. So, his wife is a real estate broker that I know, and so, that's how I've sort of worked with him. It's amazing how networking is very important, but the most important thing is you've got to know how to

work with other people. You cannot sit there and say, I am it. And if you don't like my way, there's the highway. You've got to be somewhat diplomatic because everybody's got an ego. You just have to find out where the egos are.

I worked with Vanfer Properties as I had mentioned, and we had Vantage. That was years ago, Vantage was a big developer out of Houston and we had a roundtable that was set up in their office in New Jersey. The table had eighteen professionals around that table. Can you imagine how much the payroll was just for one hour?

And we would sit there for eight hours, three times a week. They had food brought in. We were doing all this designing of two million square feet of spec office buildings. We got them approved. I don't know that all of them have been built, but it was a great exercise and a great thing. Mr. Ferber had me sitting directly next to him on one side and his architect was on the other.

YO: This says a lot.

GW: And it was really interesting because he would say, what do you think of the color of the glass? I would say the color of the glass needs to be this. He was talking out of both sides of his face and listening in one and talking out of the other. And it was fun because for twenty-five years I worked directly with this developer. The most eloquent human being I've ever worked with and I did three or four houses for him and all the office space.

YO: So evidently we still have the big developers around don't we?

GW: There are some big developers around. I think that after we get over this next little problem with the economy you're going to see a lot of the bigger things coming back because now these big buildings are needing revamping and parking is such a horrible situation. We're going to have to do something about our transportation systems.

I mean when I heard they're might putting trolleys in Durham I said, isn't that exciting? Wouldn't that be wonderful to have trolleys back in Durham, North Carolina? I might as well have rolled over when somebody told me that. You know, it's interesting coming back to an area after forty years. I always visited down here because my parents were here, but when I came down to live just in the four months that I've been back, I cannot believe what they've done to this area. It's absolutely wonderful. I always thought driving through Durham and parts of Raleigh, look at these old, decrepit houses. Look at these old, decrepit people living in these houses. It's awful. I have to get out of here.

Now I don't mind it as much because I know why it's there and I see what they're doing to make it better and striving. There's a little more pride I'm seeing than when I left. Maybe it's because I have grown up to a point, too, that I'm not looking at the little things that I used to, but it's wonderful to see what's happening. And if I could just for the rest of my life be a consultant and people could say, tell me why this project isn't selling or tell me, is this the right direction to go and the best use of this piece of property. Or this region or whatever or could you help us in a fund raiser so that we could do the project or how much money do we really need to do a project?

YO: And these are all things that landscape architects do.

GW: We do. I can do it. I've done it and it's wonderful. You know, I looked at a house in Hope Valley Country Club that's two million dollars. It is one of the finest pieces of put together architecture I have ever seen. It evolved over a period of forty years. The quality of the work is excellent. I don't know who did it, but it is excellent. If this house were in Greenwich, Connecticut, it would be on the market for eight million dollars

YO: Wow.

GW: That is a difference. When you are working in an area that is so affluent and people are so demanding of quality that's what I expect here and if somebody is going to be building a housing project and doesn't put those appointments in the project, if he doesn't see traffic flow, if he's trying to max out the site so he can get all that greedy money, he's not going to sell the units. It's what is up front.

My mother always said to me, she said, I'm so sorry that you are going to go north. She said, but remember one thing wherever you go in life quality is hard to hide.

YO: Good saying.

GW: The saying is so good and you can direct into our education, everything that we see. It's not that we're critical. It's just that we have a trained eye. We know how things should go together and we know why they're not going together and we know why things are not selling. It's very interesting what do they do with houses? Inside a house as well as outside of house, if you have a house that has been on the market for two years, why hasn't that house sold? Improper staging. If it's just taking out some bushes, cutting a tree down, moving some furniture, putting another little terrace or something here, hiding the garbage bins, freshening up some of the mulch or do something different with the traffic pattern or whatever. That's what it is. A person, by the time they reach the front door of a house, already knows whether they want to buy the house or not.

YO: Really.

GW: It's that curb appeal that they all talk about. Curb appeal. Whether if the house has angels on the ceiling they can always be painted out or maybe—maybe you like them. You can always change something, but if you don't like it from the very beginning from the time you step out of your car to the time you get to that front door, if you don't like that house I don't care how good the house is on the inside you're not going to like it.

YO: These are things that like I said, it's an old man's profession because you have to learn the stuff as you go along.

GW: Well, I suppose so. I don't know at what time of my life I became an old man, but I certainly have been opinionated. [Laughs]

YO: I think you've done quite well. Let me ask you this, what's the one important thing to know about Lewis Clarke?

GW: That he is a friend.

YO: Oh, that's nice.

GW: He is the greatest friend in the world. I was having a hard time with ecology. I needed to get out of the area. He was able to get me a job in Seattle, Washington with one of his cohorts. Unfortunately, I didn't go, and the reason I didn't go was because of my father. My father said, if you ever go to Seattle, you will never come back home and that would break my heart. Please don't go. So, I didn't go. But Lewis did everything in his power to get me what I wanted.

And the whole thing about Lewis was, if you ask a question, he will find the answer if he doesn't know it. But what a friend to have. Everybody is Lewis' friend. You know, who was it Will Rogers said, I never met a man I didn't like? Well, that's sort of Lewis, too. I've never heard him say anything bad about anybody.

YO: Well, what's the one important thing to know about Gil Wheless?

GW: [Laughs] He's honest. He tells it as it is, and I only have the best admiration for everybody, and I want to bring out the best in everybody. You cannot have a disgruntled client. You have to be flexible. Unfortunately, with an attitude like that sometimes you can be taken advantage of, but I always want the other person to feel better about themselves after I have left their company.

YO: That's a wonderful thought. Do you have anything else you'd like to add?

GW: I think it's a great profession. I would like to see more in the profession of hands-on and I think that we need to get back to learning how to touch nature with our hands, how we need to be able to sketch what we're thinking. It's interesting, we talked about computers. When I went through this woman's home that time, I did the sketches on—I did everything she could see it. She could see everything because I knew how to sketch quick enough. I knew the perspectives and I can do this. I can draw upside down. You need to be able to be talented and show your clients that you're talented and then they have the respect for you. In other words, I'm not a BS artist.

YO: Well, the computer, if you use that that doesn't necessarily show off your talents does it?

GW: It shows off your computer talents, but how do you know—for instance, I had a gentleman that worked for me for ten years. I wanted him to stay on forever and he was still with me I would still be in practice, but literally I could be six hundred miles away, we could be on the telephone. I could speak to him. I knew exactly what he was doing and when I got back, it was exactly what we had talked about. It's communication.

I built a house on Figure Eight Island in the late eighties, early nineties. I designed the house. I designed the property, everything. It was one acre of land. I made seven trips to the site. The rest of it was done on the telephone every night. I went ten thousand dollars over the budget. It's knowing how to work with people. The carpenter or the contractor said, I have never worked with anyone that understood what you understand. He said, every nail, every door knob, every threshold, everything that went on in that house you knew what was going on. He said, it was the easiest project I've had and it almost killed me because I was carrying on a practice at the same time I was building the house. But you've got to be able to have that ability. I had fifty seven jobs going at one time.

YO: Good heavens.

GW: Now that is unbelievable. A lot of them were residential and a lot of them were commercial. But that is really something because when you have only three people that are or four people or five people that are working for you in those really hard times that's really a lot, but I would wake up in the middle of the night with answers to projects that I couldn't come up with. Very seldom can I not come up with a project because my secret is *concept*. If I walk in and see something I usually have a concept that quick. You need a statement, a concept, and then you can develop it.

Some people sit there for days oh, what am I going to do? How can I do this? What am I going to do? And I can walk by these kids' desks and I can look at them and I can say that's the best direction. Let's do that, but do this, this, this, this. When I come back it's done and I said, doesn't that look good? I said, why don't you do a little something different down here? So, they'll come back and they've done something different and I said, it's almost there just do this, this, its fine. I don't try to belabor somebody. I will never put anybody else down. I always try to build them up.

YO: That's what says some more about who Gil Wheless is, doesn't it? Well, that's all the questions I have for today.

GW: Great, enjoyed it.

YO: I enjoyed it, too.

Transcriber: Jennifer Curasi

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