

My name is Mark Smith and I'm the Director and Librarian at the Texas State Library Archives Commission and it is Thursday July 31st 2014. I'm in Austin, Texas, with Peter Rogers, the artist of the mural Texas Moves toward Statehood that has been in our lobby of our agency near the Texas Capitol since it was painted in the Summer of 1964.

So, hello and welcome back to Austin, Peter.

[Peter] Well it is a great pleasure to be here.

[Mark] So Peter, if you would, please start by telling us a little bit about the background in the painting of the mural. For instance we're interested, when did you first arrive in Austin, what do you recall about your first meetings first with Governor Price Daniel and then later with Governor Connally.

[Peter] Of course by the time I got working on the mural Governor Connally was the Governor and Price Daniel had gone. When I first came to Austin I didn't meet Governor Price Daniel. I think he was already gone. I did meet him in the course of painting the mural. I think he came to see what was going on and I met him then but really very briefly.

Of course he was the person who got Peter Hurd interested in doing the mural and Peter came to Austin back in 1961 to talk about it. I didn't come to Austin until April the 28th, 1964, when I came to deliver a color sketch which had been asked for which I did in very elaborate fashion, largely with the motive of trying to ensure that I actually got the job to paint the mural.

So I did this approximately ten foot color sketch which is much more than a sketch, more like a small version with the mural as it would look when finished.

We took it to Admiral Nieman's office. I had Carol with me, my wife.

[Mark] And Admiral Nieman was the...

[Peter] The Director of the State Building Commission.

[Mark] Very good.

[Peter] He liked the color sketch but he made clear that if I was going to get the job...

Peter Hurd had already confided in him that he didn't really want to do the job. He felt that he was too old and the painting of the mural would physically be very exacting particularly the areas behind the columns which stand in front of the wall behind which you can't get the scaffolding so you would have to paint them sort of leaning out from scaffolding.

I can't remember it being terribly difficult but it certainly must have been awkward. And I think it is probably for that reason he didn't want to tackle the job himself. And I think by now he'd told Admiral Nieman about all this. And not only that, he wanted to hand the commission over to me but the original drawing which had been sent over to Governor Connally had actually been done by me. And in fact it was worked out on the table in my parent's kitchen in their house in Sussex.

I'd had returned to England for all sorts of reasons and I was gone for six months during which time I actually worked out the design of the mural. So to be perfectly frank Peter Hurd had absolutely nothing whatsoever to do with it.

The fact is that he lent me two books, a book about Texas history, and you can imagine as an Englishman how much I knew about Texas history when the whole thing started.

[Mark] It looks like you've learned a lot.

[Peter] And also a copy of, I can't remember what the book on Texas history, whose history it was, but it was very thorough and there was a lot of reproductions of the main stars of Texas history. And the other book he lent me was Thirteen Days to Glory by Lon Tinkle, which was truly inspiring and it excited the hell out of me. And I thought, my gosh, if I do get this job I do want to try and get some of this drama into the mural.

Anyhow, to go back, there my wife Carol and I were in Admiral Nieman's office and yeah he likes the color sketch but he says you know if you're going to get the job we have to keep Peter Hurd's name in it because you are a complete unknown. Which of course is perfectly true. I wasn't in England, I might say, I was a member of the Royal Society of British Artists. I was showing in one of the top London galleries, had been since 1960, and had a certain reputation in England.

I had to keep Peter Hurd's name in it but the trouble was it really wasn't very honest. We allowed people to think that Peter Hurd had helped with the design of the mural although I don't think we actually had told people that he had, but they were just sort of allowed to think that he had. They certainly wanted to think that he had. Of course I think those people didn't particularly like the fact that this young Englishman was going to paint their mural. So anyhow the contract was made out to Peter Hurd, Peter Rogers associate painter, and in the long run it meant that in the end most people preferred to think that Peter Hurd had actually painted the mural.

[Mark] One of several misconceptions that that we've labored under these many years apparently. So where did you stay when you were in Austin?

[Peter] There was a little house now long gone, right behind the Capitol to the north of the Capitol, there were several little houses and they belonged to the Building Commission and I was able to rent this tiny apartment for fifty-five dollars a month. It was cooled by a water fan, a swamp cooler which of course made the already hot and humid climate...

[Mark] Even more humid!

[Peter] More humid and not much cooler! [Laughter]

[Mark] Those work better in a dryer climate. So you mentioned that this misconception that's kind of dogged this project all these years that Peter Hurd was much more involved in the creation of that so I'm glad we're able to straighten that out. So we want to ask, do you remember Mrs. Gray Golden?

[Peter] I certainly do!

[Mark] She worked at the lobby desk at the time and Mrs. Golden's recollections about the mural form the basis of kind of a guide that we had to the mural that we used for many years for tours and that type of thing and she had she.... I guess promulgated some premises about it that you, for example, were the model for the figure of the fallen soldier and that possibly your wife was the model for the young woman with a child. Is there any truth to any of that?

[Peter] Mrs. Golden had a very fertile imagination. And I think she was just trying to sort of spice up her commentary she would provide for the tourists and no there's absolutely no truth in that, no truth in either of those things.

[Mark] Well how about that! Then we have to change our material in the lobby because they all reflect those observations. So that's why it's good to do this interview with you. Were there any living persons that were used as models?

[Peter] No, not at all.

[Mark] Another story that we have from Mrs. Golden was that because you'd never seen bluebonnets before and they wanted to have blue bonnets in the painting, someone, perhaps somebody from UT, brought over dried or preserved specimens as models for you to use. Can you tell us anything about that?

[Peter] There is truth in this. In fact it was Admiral Nieman who packed up a lot of bluebonnets in dry ice and air mailed me this parcel in New Mexico where I was at the time working on the color sketch. He also at that time told me that Governor Connally wanted the Texas University Tower to be included. I did include it in the color sketch although when I came to paint the mural I decided it didn't work.

[Mark] And it was replaced by the schoolhouse.

[Peter] This and the oil wells. Well the oil wells were always there but yes I put in the first Texas schoolhouse.

[Mark] Which was where?

[Peter] I can't remember now.

[Mark] I'm sure we know. One of the large controversies was the portrait of Lamar and the inclusion, the initial exclusion of Lamar and then the eventual inclusion of Lamar so tell us about how that happened, how did he come to be excluded and how did he come to be included?

[Peter] Oh dear, oh dear. When I was doing my research... I decided I didn't really like Lamar at all largely because of his really ruthless treatment of the Indians. And I thought I'll be darned if I'm going to put this guy in I really don't like him. Which was really, what right was I to say this, this Englishman working with my parent's kitchen table. I mean I had no right to make this decision. [Laughter] But nevertheless I did.

It was in the course of painting the mural, I must have been two-thirds finished, when the Daughters of the Republic of Texas became very aware of the fact Lamar wasn't in the mural and they really wanted him in. And they would come to the archives building and stand at the foot of my scaffold and plead with me.

[Mark] They literally came into the lobby and stood there and begged you to put in Lamar's portrait?

[Peter] I mean in a gang! I mean their leader was a lady called Jesse McElroy Smith, and she was very eloquent and quite intimidating but I didn't feel I could put Lamar in at this point. But by golly Governor Connally and Admiral Nieman stood by me and I'd accessed all their letters that they had written to the Daughters saying that he's 2/3 through and you can't be expected to alter his mural design at this point and anyway you can't be expected to put everybody into the mural.

However in the end I did put him in and it was really for two reasons. I became aware of the fact that there was much more going on the left of the mural than on the right and I needed something more on the right and what I needed was another big portrait head and of course the candidate was Lamar. What it meant was rather awful, because I'd completely finished painting Anson Jones head which was five foot high fully painted and in order to get Lamar in I had to shunt Anson Jones up six inches to the right. Which meant re-priming the wall and starting again from scratch with Anson Jones to make room for Lamar when I did put him in.

And the other reason was quite simply the fact that on one of the occasions when the Daughters came, one of them wept, literally! Standing there at the foot of my scaffold. She felt so strongly about it. I mean, how could I not put him in? [Laughter]

[Mark] So you yielded.

[Peter] I yielded yes for two reasons and it made everybody very happy. It hit the front page of the Austin-American Statesman, the photograph of me putting Lamar in and the headline "Lamar gains place on the wall of the library after all!" Very quite amusing article too. But I think it certainly, it has something to do with the fact that in the end Governor Connally made me an honorary citizen of Texas.

[Mark] Very good.

[Peter] This would be on January the 5th, 1965. I went back to Austin and was made an honorary citizen.

[Mark] Is that when you presented him with the color sketch?

[Peter] I never did.

[Mark] Oh you didn't?

[Peter] I mean it didn't belong to me and I imagine Admiral Nieman said why don't you keep this. I have no idea what happened to my original pen and ink drawing, whilst the original designs were done in pen and ink. Which is why they needed a color sketch, for obvious reasons. Do you have the pen and ink here?

[Mark] You know I thought we did. We have it pictured in the case down in the lobby so I thought we did but will have to check and see if we do. We'll ask John Anderson, our preservation officer that question.

So let's shift gears a little bit. Let's talk about artistic style. We've covered the historical aspects. So the style of your mural is very, very different and the style of your public works and commissioned public works are very different than your lifelong series known as The Quest. So what comments can you make regarding these two different, very different, styles of work that you work in.

[Peter] Well they really have nothing to do with each other. It's almost like having two different careers. These commissioned works, which included painting oil wells in Alaska, I did almost 50 paintings and drawings at Richfield, back in 1969, 1970, and they had just discovered the oil. And they, needless to say, were highly realistic.

And then I painted a copper mine, the Berkeley pit in Butte Montana for the Anaconda mining company and then I painted another copper mine in Mexico for a company called Arcomex. Arco had gone into partnership with a Mexican copper company and I painted a mural in their offices in Mexico City. And theirs is a project that is completely realistic too. I mean obviously your mural, I mean, I can't say it's realistic. I wasn't painting anything from life. But it's not abstract, it's figurative and it was simply style appropriate to tackle that particular commission.

It has very little to do with my later work and of course the mural I did in the Texas Tech museum in Lubbock was totally different again because what it really was was a forty foot pen and wash drawing. It was forty foot long, seventeen feet high, and they wanted the subject to be water because the University Center for the study of arid land and water problems and so on. And after sending me on a journey all around America and Mexico looking at deserts, in fact the only places where you wouldn't find any water. [Laughter]

I eventually decided to use a little crib dam down in the valley from where we live. Which had an awful lot of debris caught on the top that had been left over from floods. And I found it abstractly very interesting with the water tumbling over and all these weeds growing out of this and all this debris stuck on the top. And the shape of this crib dam was just about forty feet long by seventeen feet high so did it fit the space very nicely indeed. Although there is always a stink of some kind when I do these jobs. Initially there was a terrible stink because I was just doing the thing in black and white. It's what I felt was needed considering the color scheme in the lobby was something in black and white. But it was an incredibly detailed pen and wash drawing which in the end they were absolutely crazy about, and are to this day.

[Mark] Your mural style, for those of us familiar with public murals and see public murals in post offices and so forth often see the style of mural that was done in the nineteen thirties and and so forth, the kind of public WPA era , depression-era murals. Your mural is a very different style than that and the

Texas Tech mural of course is very different again as you said. So who were your influences? Clearly they weren't, they didn't go to those types of muralists.

[Peter] Well people have often wondered towards what extent I was influenced by Peter Hurd and Andrew Wyeth and the whole Brandywine tradition, and they presume that I'd been a pupil of Peter Hurd and it was like starting all over again. Of course, I had already some success in England. None of these people influenced me in the least. The Hurds, Henriette was a wonderful painter too, Peter Hurd's wife, Andrew Wyeth's sister.

[Mark] And daughter of N.C. Wyeth, American illustrator.

[Peter] Yes! They knew perfectly well I could work realistically if I had to, in fact the first thing I did when I came to America was a series of a dozen landscape pen and wash drawings for Robert O. Anderson who was our neighbor living down the valley and was the chairman of Arco.

And I could paint portraits. And so they were sympathetic when it came to my other sort of work. They certainly didn't put it down. And they were happy simply letting it go my own way.

[Mark] Very good, a very original style. What about the Mexican muralists, any influences from that camp?

[Peter] There was a huge exhibition of their work just after the war in the Tate Gallery in London. I was very excited by them. They did have at the time, particularly Diego Rivera, he did influence my work back in London in those days. I [???] photos of paintings which are very much like Rivera but by the time I came to America I wasn't painting like that anymore and it was only a brief influence.

[Mark] You developed a unique style and approach.

[Peter] Well, just according to each particular job it required a completely different approach. So I never became known for a particular style and in fact Robert O. Anderson apparently said to my mother-in-law, and she told me this, which I think is rather naughty of her, she said that Robert Anderson had said "Peter Rogers might get somewhere if only he'd make up his mind what sort of a painter he is." [Laughter] And I think there is a lot of truth in that. People could never label me, course I did this and I did that and they were totally different, who the hell was I?

[Mark] Well, it seems that you've had a remarkable career and we feel very fortunate that your mural was part of the early phase your career. Did you feel that the mural that you painted in our building in any way helped you establish your reputation in this country?

[Peter] No, I am afraid to say it didn't. Largely because everyone thought Peter Hurd had painted it! [Laughter]

[Mark] Well there is that, right. If you had to paint the mural over again today, would you have included any other different subject matter or approached in a different style, or would there have been differences?

[Peter] I think I... the content would have to have been somewhat different. I think the whole Alamo thing would certainly have remained the centerpiece, but nowadays, what I've actually put into the mural you might say is politically very incorrect. I mean there are no Mexicans. There might be a negro sitting on the cotton bale on the right, I'm not sure. But there certainly should have been more emphasis on the Mexican population. And the name of this museum...

[Mark] Lorenzo de Zavala. So there were no descendents of Lorenzo de Zavala crying at the foot of your scaffolding.

[Peter] No. And no Mexicans saying how about us? No. That's the only way where I think that it might have differed if I had to do it again.

[Mark] Final question. Are there other observations or memories or anything else that you'd like to for us to know about the mural or your experience here or any other aspect of that experience that you had.

[Peter] I really didn't do any socializing to speak of there was a nice man whose last name was Lofton who befriended me and had me for lunch on Sunday with his family. And we became really quite friendly and when he and his wife went to England by golly they went and looked up my parents, who they had already met because they came out to the States. I drove them here to see the mural and also to say hello to Governor Connally who made them honorary citizens too! [Laughter]

[Mark] How did you feel about that?

[Peter] It really devalued my own gift of citizenship. [Laughter] No, of course I was delighted, it was awfully nice of him to do that. He couldn't have been nicer, Governor Connally, he impressed me greatly. I'm just awfully sorry he fell on hard times and had to sell the color sketch.

[Mark] And the color sketch is now in Kingsville at the Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Center, but is owned by a private collector.

[Peter] That is right, yes. But is owned by private quarter It is, yes, it's on loan.

[Mark] Very good. Well, Peter Rogers thank you very much for your time in doing this oral interview. It is a great pleasure for us to have you in the agency again these many years later and to get the real story on some of these aspects. We don't mind giving up our cherished myths on the mural, so it's wonderful. Thank you very much.

[Peter] It's been my pleasure entirely. It's been great to be back in Austin.

[Mark] We are looking forward to your talk tonight.

[Peter] Thank you.