

1978

Oral history interview with Opal Fleckenstein

Opal Fleckenstein

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**OPAL FLECKENSTEIN
INTERVIEWED BY UNKNOWN
EWU Women's Oral History Project
EWU 984-0094 #28
1978**

FLECKENSTEIN: I had become acquainted with Nan Wiley while she was teaching at Eastern, and I came to Eastern as a part time instructor to teach art.

INTERVIEWER: So that was in 1938?

FLECKENSTEIN: Was more than that, was 1940 something.

INTERVIEWER: Okay, the 1940's. You were born in 1911? In Maxville, Kansas?

FLECKENSTEIN: Yes. It doesn't even exist now.

INTERVIEWER: Was it a farming community?

FLECKENSTEIN: It was very much a farming community.

INTERVIEWER: Were you a farm girl?

FLECKENSTEIN: Yes, I lived on a farm until I was about fourteen years old, until I started to college in southern Idaho.

INTERVIEWER: Your father's name was Arthur Archibald Young?

FLECKENSTEIN: That's right.

INTERVIEWER : Your mother was Cora May Plowman. Did you have brothers and sisters?

FLECKENSTEIN: I was the youngest of a family of six.

INTERVIEWER: You married Fred A. Fleckenstein. Who are your children?

FLECKENSTEIN: Joyce, who lives in Seattle now, Joyce Pennington, and John who lives in St. Maries.

INTERVIEWER: For what reason did you and your family come to Cheney?

FLECKENSTEIN: I never have lived in Cheney. We have continued to live in Spokane. Fred had a job here at the Crescent Machine shop and I continue to live here and drive back and forth to Cheney.

INTERVIEWER: What was your husband's livelihood? You said he worked at the machine shop...?

FLECKENSTEIN: He was a machinist.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. Did your mother work outside the home?

FLECKENSTEIN: No, she wished that she could and would have liked to have done something like that, but she didn't ever try to do anything professionally outside the home.

INTERVIEWER: Was she a farm wife?

FLECKENSTEIN: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Where did you receive your education and what did you study and when?

FLECKENSTEIN: I keep getting them mixed up with the Idaho Junior College which I have taught there, also. I went to school at Gooding, Idaho, and I had already studied some art there. I'd also studied art somewhere in the '30's at the University of Washington. Gooding was a Methodist college at the time, and I took liberal arts courses.

INTERVIEWER: At that time, did you plan on being an art teacher?

FLECKENSTEIN: I didn't have the slightest idea that I would ever teach in college, not the slightest.

INTERVIEWER: Teaching has been really your only occupation that you've really devoted your life to?

FLECKENSTEIN: That's right. Being a student and being a teacher.

INTERVIEWER: Where did you start teaching?

FLECKENSTEIN: I started teaching at the college in Coeur d'Alene. I had a job there, it was part time. I taught only in the evenings and I worked there for about six years and then I came to Eastern to teach.

INTERVIEWER: How did you arrive at Eastern? How did you come to work at Eastern Washington University?

FLECKENSTEIN: Miss Wiley was a good friend of mine before I started teaching, and she came to the house one day and asked if I would like to teach part time at Eastern, and I jumped at the chance, of course. I loved it. So, I started teaching there then, and kept on getting more and more full time jobs until I was teaching full time at Eastern.

INTERVIEWER: What did you enjoy teaching the most at Eastern?

FLECKENSTEIN: Well, just art (laughs). Capital A-R-T.

INTERVIEWER: Can you tell us about your first years at Eastern? When you first started there, who was the chairman and who were the women? You came to Cheney to teach in about 1941?

FLECKENSTEIN: Somewhere along that time, I don't remember when, except that my children were very small. I went out to teach part time and I was also teaching part time at North Idaho College in Coeur d'Alene. I was teaching part time there and part time at Eastern. That made a trip out to Eastern which was fourteen miles and thirty-some to the college in Coeur d'Alene. That must not be the junior college, because that's an altogether different thing, isn't it? So, I struggled along trying to do both of them at the same time, but my mother was very upset that I should have to go that far to teach, so she asked me with tears in her voice, and in her eyes to please not go so far to teach. I finally was able to restrict it, but when I first started at Eastern, Miss Ware, who was head of the department then, and Miss Wiley, who was helping her. Miss Ware was very discouraging to me. She said, "Well, you could order some books, except you probably won't be here next quarter." Which was terribly discouraging because I loved teaching and I loved the students, and I loved painting, and it was a terrible, terrible time to try to be starting teaching? Because of those difficulties, because of the War.

INTERVIEWER: Was it very difficult to get supplies during World War II?

FLECKENSTEIN: Mostly we didn't have any supplies except for newsprint and charcoal and things like that. It was almost unheard of to get any kind of supplies at all. A few things didn't get through in the trickle down economy at that time.

INTERVIEWER: Did you make posters for the War effort, did your students take part in any way?

FLECKENSTEIN: Well, I suppose there are always a good many things that the students are asked to do, I remember that they were asked to do a great many things, but as I remember them now, I don't remember any posters or anything like that. I'm really glad, because I don't think that's really teaching art.

INTERVIEWER: Opal, did you have a philosophy of what art should be when you first started teaching or has your philosophy just kind of developed over the years of working with young people?

FLECKENSTEIN: Well, certainly, it has done both. I always allowed the students a lot of leeway to express their opinions and ideas, and some of it was what they had expressed to me. One of my very earliest students was Ed Keinholtz who is internationally known now. *[Editor's Note: Ed Kienholz, a sculptor, attended EWCE in the late 1940' to the early 1950's but did not graduate. Kienholz was born in Fairfield, Washington in 1927, and died in Hope, Idaho in 1994.]* I remember that he came and started asking me questions about what would I do about such and such and what would I do about something else. They were always very thoughtful and penetrating kinds of questions or ideas. I think that my philosophy has been partly shaped by the University of Washington where I went to school in the late '30's, and partly by the reading I did. I read everything available on art. Even before I went to Eastern, I had read a great many books, and so when they asked me at the college if I could teach a humanities class, at first I was kind of overwhelmed with the idea of having to teach a humanities class. I had never had one. So, they asked me, "Would you?" and I said, "Oh, I'd be delighted". So, I studied every night before I gave a lecture. I studied and studied. Not that I needed to study so much for the lecture, but because I wanted to be sure of everything. So, I got the books that were necessary for art and I read them and read them, and read them over again until I felt really sure of myself. Of course part of it was from the University of Washington.

INTERVIEWER: What women artists do you feel influenced you or that you appreciated the most?

FLECKENSTEIN: At the Cheney Cowles right now, is a series of paintings, at one artist's show, by Margaret Thompkins who has paintings in the Whitburn and in various other places, internationally known. She was helpful in the '42 and '44. She and her husband were at the art center in Spokane. I have also admired Georgia O'Keefe a great deal, and have seen some of the originals of her painting. I think that she is a very original artist, but of course, I was always very nondiscriminatory. I liked everyone from Picasso on to a whole variety of other people, as well as women painters.

INTERVIEWER: Opal, do you feel that you had any advantage or disadvantage being a woman artist?

FLECKENSTEIN: Well, I suppose that if you counted over the long period of time, there has to be a disadvantage because, many times, the people who had something to do with selecting art were men, and they naturally selected men artists, and I think that there has been some slight disadvantage. I never let that get to me though. I never stopped just because I felt a disadvantage.

INTERVIEWER: Who were some other women on the faculty of Eastern that you admired their work, or who were friends of yours?

FLECKENSTEIN: Nan Wiley was a really good friend. She went in for sculpture and ceramics, as well. She didn't do much painting, but she was very appreciative of all my efforts. Outside of that, I can't remember anyone that was particularly outstanding, except of course, as I was there for a little while, I began feeling like my students were having a great influence.

INTERVIEWER: How many years did you teach at Eastern?

FLECKENSTEIN: Twenty-eight.

INTERVIEWER: Did the college change very much? Were you aware of a change in the atmosphere of the college from the War years up into through the '70's?

FLECKENSTEIN: When I went there in the first years that I was at the college, I remember that a directive came out from the President of the College, at that time it was President Freeman. He said that if you want to keep this college going, see if you can take some courses. Enroll in all the courses you possibly can to keep the college going.

INTERVIEWER: What year was that? During World War II?

FLECKENSTEIN: Yes. Just when I first started working there. I'd have to look it up to see exactly. I started in 1949, by the way. Now I remember. That's the first year that I taught there.

INTERVIEWER: Who were the different women in the art department? Do you remember some of the names of the women who taught in the art department or at the college?

FLECKENSTEIN: Well, I only remember Miss War. She didn't feel that she was particularly an artist, or it seemed to me that she didn't feel that she was strongly an artist. She felt that she was an educator. She said that a person who is educated who is really an educator can teach anything.

INTERVIEWER: Do you believe that?

FLECKENSTEIN: Not quite.

INTERVIEWER: What is your feeling on that matter?

FLECKENSTEIN: I feel that if you want to teach anything and teach it well that you must be equally involved in it. You can't take a superficial interest in something and then put it across to students who are always skeptical, anyhow. They just don't want to believe anything unless they have to .

INTERVIEWER: What do you feel was your contribution or one of your major contributions to Cheney?

FLECKENSTEIN: Well, I suppose it was just the teaching every year. I did something different. I taught a different course, it seemed, every year. I was one of the first ones to teach a humanities course. One of the first ones, Robert Hanrahand who has been gone now for several years. But he was very instrumental, and I know that we communicated back and forth with our ideas about the humanities courses.

INTERVIEWER: What was the meat of a humanities course?

FLECKENSTEIN: The meat of a humanities course was to try to get across the idea of the philosophy of art, but to also to examine, in as much detail as possible, all of the history of modern art. I felt that modern art began a long, long time ago. It wasn't just a phase, something that you could forget about. Art, when it's deeply art wouldn't make any difference whether it was modern or anything else. I tried to tell the students and express to the students my love of art, regardless of whether it was modern, or traditional, or otherwise.

INTERVIEWER: I remember in your class, you had us copy different paintings and different things kind of get the feeling of them.

FLECKENSTEIN: Try to get the feeling of them, and look at them for the first time.

INTERVIEWER: That's right, and really get involved with it.

FLECKENSTEIN: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: I remember especially one that we did a painting of a wall, a cave painting.

FLECKENSTEIN: Oh yes. The Cro Magnon paintings that were put on the walls of the caves in France. I just felt that the copy itself wasn't important, but that the students really look at this painting that prehistoric man had done and done so beautifully. I didn't care whether they made a copy that was recognizable or not. That would have been against my principles.

INTERVIEWER: Opal, I know that there have been, over the years, much controversy in the art department and Cheney and so forth. What were some of the really strong feelings that you had in different areas?

FLECKENSTEIN: I always felt that if an artist was truly an original kind of an artist, it wouldn't make any difference what kind of feeling or thing they felt was most important about art, it would come through because originality was the most important thing. Being able to express themselves and do things without inhibitions, that's what I always told- tried to express to my students. What you get, come out with, that the finish is not important, but that you are able to express it freely and that you have a love for what you are doing. I've pressed the thing into a very few minutes and it seems like an impossible task because it was so big and so complex, and I worked so terribly hard at it. I worked hard, but I always went into my classes feeling you got to give them the joy of art. Doesn't make any difference what else you do, just make sure that you tell them that you express joy, and the feeling that you have the enthusiasm for art. That's what I felt was most important.