

UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Dennis Vannerson

INTERVIEWER: _____
PROJECT: El Paso Area Artists

DATE OF INTERVIEW: _____
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BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Artist.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Letter.

March 6, 1973

Dear Dr. McNeely,

Your letter came as a pleasant surprise, and I'll try to comply with your request for material for a biographical sketch. It will be made fairly extensive, at risk of unbearable tedium, in order that you may find it possible to pick out bits here and there that can serve your purpose. If your title were to be, "Studies in Trivia, a Recounting of Some of the World's Least Significant Events" you very likely could use all of it.

Artwise the situation is far different here from what it was in El Paso. It seems to be true, as a writer on art subjects for the Arizona Republic recently remarked, that competent painters are a dime a dozen in this valley. Gold Key Gallery was enthusiastic about my pictures, but so far they have had little luck in trying to sell them. Mrs. Boyd admitted not long ago that her approval of a picture was its kiss of death in the marketplace, and in the next breath went on to lavish praise of mine. So what conclusion should I draw?

We watch Sunrise Semester on TV, and found it interesting last semester when Ruth Bowman, lecturer on art at New York University, presented a series of twentieth century American art and failed to mention Russell, Remington, or even Norman Rockwell with his wide popular appeal. After dealing briefly with the Peales, Winslow Homer, Sargent and others predating the current fads, she passed to the New York avant-garde imitators of Picasso, people who draw their inspiration not from nature or the world in general but from one another in a sort of artistic inbreeding that should be expected to result in deformity and lack of viability in the offspring. If it did not fall in the categories of cubism, impressionism, surrealism or dadaism, and was not produced before the advent of these isms it could not qualify as art in her book. Here, the local university and college art faculty members fully share her ideas, as products of academic inbreeding, and they have largely succeeded in molding the taste of the community to conform with theirs. This had not happened in El Paso. Leonard Sipiora was working on it, but most people were not paying attention to him.

Best wishes for you and your family, and it is hoped that the enclosed rambling account may have something you may find useful.

Dennis Vannerson
Dennis Vannerson

Dennis Vannerson
Sketch

Less than five years after coming into the world on September 25, 1900 in a southwestern Oklahoma frontier community, I became subject to my most effective formative influence--a stepmother who hated the other woman's three kids, and responded by developing a stutter that became permanent and greatly restricted the scope of subsequent activities. (Eight years of speech therapy undertaken in the twenties proved futile because of being started too late.)

Although our hilly little stock farm had had only 1200 acres, there was ample elbow room, and I grew up close to nature. I was plowing with a four-horse team at age 12. The nearest small town was 10 miles away, and the one-room school to which we walked was two miles. It was there in 1913 that Thelma and I met on the occasion of her first day in school. (We were married in 1930.) Her family was more poverty stricken than mine, and could not send her to high school. She got through by picking cotton and working as domestic help to pay school expenses. Graduating at age 22, she became a teacher.

In the little school not much attention was paid to my stuttering, and it was only after entering high school in the small town that I saw myself an object of derision, was miserable, and dropped out. Later, as an adult at Southwestern State Normal School and the University of Oklahoma I found myself again in an atmosphere where little attention was paid to my defect, and the high school deficiency was partially made up and 1½ years of college work (as an unclassified student) completed at the latter institution. I could have gone on to a degree, but it was becoming increasingly clear that I would never be other than a speech cripple to whom a degree could have little economic value. Anyway, I decided to enter the school of the Art Institute of Chicago.

From the late 1840's to the outbreak of the civil war, Julian Vannerson, with his brothers Adrian and Lucian (my grandfather), was operating daguerreotype portrait galleries in Washington, Baltimore and Richmond. (Examples of his work may be seen in the Smithsonian Institute). In about the middle of the 1850's Lucian decided to leave the east and try for fame and fortune as a photographer in faraway Texas. So, loading trunks with supplies for the daguerreotype process at a time when its day already was done, he landed at Jefferson. But the dream soon faded. People in Texas were shooting at one another with guns, not cameras, and they mostly didn't need any of his pictures. He abandoned all of his equipment at Gilmer, and became a poor farmer, never writing home to tell of the failure. I interject this apparently extraneous material as a possible explanation of how I got my fondness of pictures and pictorial representation. Of the numerous children and grandchildren only two showed the taint, the other being my cousin Lucien of Mesa, Arizona. He is a well established artist here whose work is not similar to mine, consisting of what are sometimes called "quickies". He used to do pictures nearly like the sort I do, but found that the quickies sold much better.

Borrowing \$425 from my sister, \$167 of which went to pay the tuition, I entered the Chicago art institute in September, 1925, and finished the work of the lower school. Returning for the second year in '26, I resolved to obtain part-time employment to defray most of the expenses and avoid getting so deeply in debt, since I was beginning to wonder & doubt the value of the art school training to someone unable to talk. I answered several ads for part-time help and got nowhere because all of the jobs required talking, and I was instantly rejected when I tried to tell them my qualifications. My reasons for leaving the school were not all economic, however. I saw I had little taste for commercial art with its liquor and tobacco ads, and, still worse, my philosophy as developed then provided no protection from the embrangement suffered while sitting ringside to the battle of the egos in the school library reading books on art. I had thought that there were absolute values in art, and was appalled when I found one apparently competent authority sneering at a certain picture while another with a seeming of equal competence was praising it in extravagant terms. And finally, I recoiled from the deliberate ugliness (as I saw it) of dadaism, and of faces with both eyes on the same side of the nose, things found praiseworthy by most of the supposedly competent authorities. If this was art I wanted none of it.

In 1927 I worked as oilfield map draftsman in San Angelo, paid back my sister, and later returned to Chicago where I was able to find a full time drafting job (charts and forms) for Business Research Corporation where I worked full and part time for 14 years (with a gap in the early thirties).

All during this time I was still struggling with efforts to correct the speech defect. After several weeks of silence to others during which I practised my exercises I would find that I could talk nearly as well as other people for a few days. But the time and effort required to achieve this relief increased each time, while the interval during which intelligible utterance was possible grew shorter. So I finally saw I'd never make it.

Seeing how people doing architectural rendering frequently made their results worthless by employing flimsy devices to make them look artistic, when what was needed was plain uncluttered exposition, I decided to enter this occupation where I supposed no talking would be needed. So I designed and built a machine which removed most of the tedium from making perspective projections from plans and elevations prepared by the architect, and the month of February, 1931, saw me making the rounds of architectural firms with my samples. But here again I didn't have a chance. At all of them there were long lines of recently fudoughed draftsmen still vaguely hoping to find work. Some told me to come back and see them, and this was more encouragement than any of the draftsmen got. Two years earlier or fifteen years later I could have been employed.

In 1933, while Thelma was teaching and I was fooling with block printing and other art-related activities, I became interested in photography and decided to try portraiture. This, I soon found to be the last thing a speech cripple should try. But I didn't entirely give it up until 1936 when Thelma and I went to Chicago; she found work in Ward's mail order house, and I went to work at a commercial photoprinting place.

In a way we were more prosperous there in the middle of the great depression than at any other time or place. The rent on our 4-room flat was \$10 per month (later raised to \$12), and other costs were in proportion; while I was making 85¢ per hour drafting, and 50¢ in my photo plant job. Thelma was making 40¢ at Wards but they drove her too hard and she had to leave after 3 years.

In 1941 we succumbed to lure of California, buying a 3-acre plot near Riverside for \$500, a small fraction of what it would cost now. FDR was then in the process of getting his war, and the color photo plant that was getting ready to employ me was put out of business by war priorities, so I entered a machine shop.

One of our reasons for leaving Chicago had been to escape the gloomy northern winters, but we found the dismal fogs of California still less bearable. I never got used to it, and one of the most pleasing sights I ever saw was the sun shining through the windblown fog clouds in Beaumont Pass as we left California with our three small children in July of 1950.

In Texas I quickly rose from turret lathe specialist to machinist and then to tool and die maker, an advancement most unlikely in California, and retirement age found me with 10 years of seniority in Cessna Aircraft's Prospect tool and die plant near Wichita, Kansas.

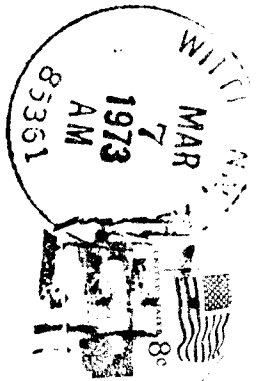
No painting or art work of any kind was done during these years, but to retire brought the chance to go back into it full time. I had by then developed a more nearly adequate philosophy that took account of the factor of relativity in determining aesthetic response, and the spectacle and the sound and fury of critics clashing in a welter of conflicting dogmas no longer filled me with dismay. And with our children grown I was free to do the pictures that I found pleasing, and not just those that might have sales potential. I at first had no plans to even try to sell, but only to adorn our own walls.

After some initially unpromising experiments with acrylics I decided that they offered the best compromise as a medium, as Thelma was distressed by the fumes of turpentine then used with oils, and I had found I could no longer manage transparent watercolors, the favorite medium in art school days.

By early 1967 there were few bare spots on our walls, and I decided to take some to a handcrafts bazaar being sponsored by the merchants of Sunrise Shopping Center. There were sales, and I was encouraged to the point of seeking membership in the El Paso Art Association and planning future sales attempts. At one of the association meetings I met Mr. López-Alemán and was invited by him to show in his gallery. There were numerous sales there, as you know. You bought more than anyone, but Mr. Ashley Classen, of 3023 Copper, Professional Engineer, alderman, and at one time mayor pro tem was also a good patron. Shows arranged for me by the association also brought sales. Here the associations or leagues have long waiting lists and I have been excluded.

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ittmann, Az.
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Dr. John H. McNeely
The University of Texas at El Paso
Institute of Oral History
El Paso, Texas 79968



... work in painting
... family of time goes
... part of my up & place
to live. Recognize the old
... time? Mrs. Boyd and
her husband paid \$300.
for it last summer. They
bought 8 to bring in
their Phoenix home and
have 30 others being
offered at the gallery.

Best wishes for the good
health and happiness
of you and your family.

P.S. Dennis Vannerson
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Whittman, Va.
85361

Box
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know the
address
might call
85361

Lester M. Bonar

Dennis Vannerson

You are invited

to meet the artists

and preview their work

Sunday - February 18, 1973

2 to 6 pm

Cocktails

Patricia J. Boyd
Director



GOLD KEY GALLERY

(602) 945-2118

7086 Fifth Avenue

Scottsdale, Arizona 85251

Lester M. Bonar

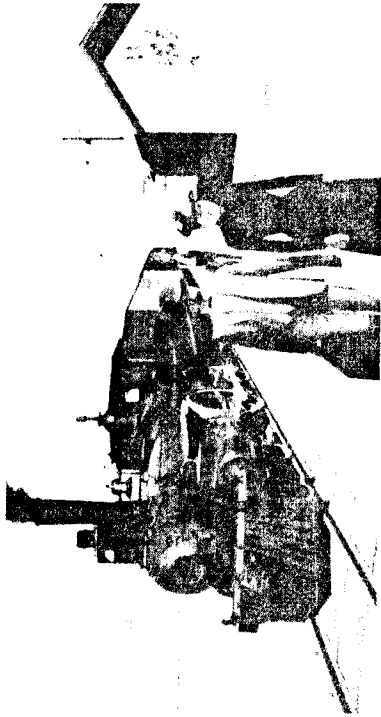


"Mission Arches"

20 x 26

Les Bonar is one of the Southwest's best known watercolorists. Born in Phoenix, he graduated from Phoenix Union High School in 1915, going on to the University of California for his degree in art. For thirty years he was art instructor at Alhambra High School in California, with many of his students, such as Brownell McGrew, attaining national acclaim. Artist and beloved teacher, recognized in California as one of the top watercolorists, he has received countless awards and honors for his outstanding work. We are truly honored to have sent the man and his art.

Dennis Vannerson



"Gone Tomorrow"

24 x 48

Oklahoma native Dennis Vannerson studied at the Chicago Art Institute in 1925. In the few short years since 1965, when he returned to the fine arts field, he has become a collector's artist; his paintings are now in many fine collections in Texas, New Mexico and Arizona. Working with oils and acrylics, his restrained technique of stylized realism is so unique it has won the admiration of connoisseurs, and his work is among the most sought after in America. We have great pride in bringing this

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Patricia J. Boyd
Director



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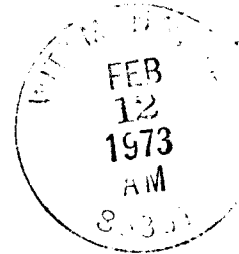
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*Dr. John McNeely
1828 E. Cliff St.
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