

McCue, Lillian Bueno de la Torre, 1902-
Spouse of George McCue, Professor of
English, 1935-1968
Writer of mystery novels and plays
Actress in community theater

SIDE ONE - CASSETTE ONE

FINLEY:

This is tape recording number 57 of the Colorado College Archives Oral History Project. I am Judy Finley, interviewing Lillian Bueno McCue, whose pen name is Lillian de la Torre. We are in her apartment at 16 Valley Place in Colorado Springs, and the date is May 9, 1988.

Lillian McCue was born in New York City on March 15th, 1902, received her BA at New Rochelle College in 1921, an MA from Columbia University in 1927, and another MA from Harvard in 1933. Her field is 18th Century English literature. Her husband George, whom she married in 1932, taught English at Colorado College from 1935 to 1962.

Lillian McCue is a well-known mystery writer, and one-time president of the Mystery Writers of America. She has written several novels, numerous short stories, and 12 plays, most notably Goodbye, Miss Lizzie Borden. She calls herself a histo-detector, researching unsolved mysteries of the past, particularly using the 18th century characters of Dr. Sam Johnson and his friend Boswell as central figures.

She has also played about 39 roles in local dramatic productions, is a member of the Poetry Fellowship and still sings in the Colorado Springs Chorale, for which she writes all the program notes.

I'm delighted to be here in your book-lined apartment this morning, Lillian, and I know you have a treasure trove of memories, both in your mind and in all the things you've written through the years.

I think the best place to start, since we know something about your birthplace, and the fact that you were the oldest of seven children, and your education--all these things you wrote down for us. Perhaps you'd tell us how you

met your husband, and how you came to Colorado Springs from New York, and why. [laughter]

McCUE:

My husband claims that he met me at the Firemen's parade, but I claim that he met me after mass on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception. We had a date that afternoon, and from that time to this, there was never any question about it. It was . . .

FINLEY:

Love at first sight! [chuckle]

McCUE:

It was. It was.

FINLEY:

Now, was he a neighbor of yours in New York?

McCUE:

He was living next door to me in White Plains, New York.

FINLEY:

And you were students together for awhile at Harvard; is that correct?

McCUE:

The first year that we were married we both spent at Harvard. He had been at Harvard the previous year, in the graduate school. He's a graduate of CU.

FINLEY:

Yes.

McCUE:

It was nine years before we married. We had many vicissitudes. He spent a couple of years teaching in the first Ranch School in Arizona.

FINLEY:

Ohhh.

McCUE:

And I wish I could tell you about that, because it was really something extraordinary.

FINLEY:

But it was nine years between the time you met him, and--

McCUE:
Yes, yes.

FINLEY:

--when you married in 1932?

McCUE:

1932, July second, 1932.

FINLEY:

Right in the bottom of the Depression! [chuckle]

McCUE:

That's right! That's right! And we were extremely fortunate, because I was teaching in the New York City school system. I had my tenure, and my emolument was going up, gradually, not very much, but going up every year. And when we married, I took a leave of absence. They paid you half of your salary. My salary in 1932 was \$3600, which was--

FINLEY:

That's a good salary in those days!

McCUE:

It was good pay!

FINLEY:

Yes.

McCUE:

George came to Colorado College at \$1400 for the year.

FINLEY:

That was in 1935?

McCUE:

1935.

FINLEY:

Now, did he come out here knowing he was going to be teaching at Colorado College, or did he--

McCUE:

Oh, no.

FINLEY:

No, he found the job after he was here.

McCUE:

He said to me before we were married, "Now, I'm going to warn you." He said, "I'm not going to stay in the East; I am going where the sun shines." He had already experienced [can't understand--other people are talking in background]

FINLEY:

And in Arizona? Uh-hum.

McCUE:

And I didn't say no.

FINLEY:

Had you ever been West?

McCUE:

I had visited him in the West, when he was teaching out here. And as a matter of fact, I had visited Colorado Springs, and taken a summer course in Colorado College.

FINLEY:

You had?

McCUE:

With Professor Daehler. And we clicked right away; we became very good friends. And that's how it happened that when we came out here, we came out here with no job, but with half my salary from the succeeding year--\$1800, and went in 1934 back to CU, while George took a master's degree in education, with a view to teaching in this state.

And in the fall, we came down here without a job--no, in the summer. We spent the summer here, and he was trying to get a high school job, but jobs were not plentiful in those days.

FINLEY:

No.

McCUE:

And with the greatest good luck, a vacancy happened. I'm sorry to say it was due to the suicide of one of the members of the English department.

FINLEY:

Of the English department?

McCUE:

Yes. And since Professor Daehler knew me, and had met George through me, he immediately thought of George, and offered him the half-year at \$700, and he snapped at it! We lived on it, without any difficulty.

FINLEY:

Now you had been--you had a master's degree, and you had been a teacher in New York City--

McCUE:

Yes.

FINLEY:

Did you look for a job too when you came out here?

McCUE:

I did indeed, and I remember it very vividly, because I sat in the superintendent's office, and mind you, I had met him socially, and cried with rage when he said to me, "I can't hire you--your husband has a job." And it was the same at Colorado College.

FINLEY:

It was because of the Depression, I guess?

McCUE:

Yes, it was because of the Depression; one job to a family was a [can't understand].

FINLEY:

So George was a young English instructor, and you had no job, and where were you living when you first came here?

McCUE:

Well, the first year, of course, we lived in an apartment on North Nevada.

FINLEY:

Uh-hum.

McCUE:

In the attic!

FINLEY:

Yes.

McCUE:

The . . . was it the second year? The second year we moved to another apartment, and by that time it was looking as if the thing was permanent.

FINLEY:

Uh-hum.

McCUE:

And the apartment had bedbugs!

FINLEY:

[laughter]

McCUE:

And we went out--snap! And bought a cottage out toward the edge of town, half a block from Hancock.

FINLEY:

On High Street?

McCUE:

On High Street.

FINLEY:

Yes.

McCUE:

Which was really the edge of town at that time.

FINLEY:

The edge of town!

McCUE:

And from there the road ran to Kansas. And in the fields there were a few dirt roads, and one day when we were out walking the dog in the fields, walking along one of the dirt roads, we found 24 dead chickens beside the road, one after the other, all white. And it was not until later when I was researching voodoo for a story, that I discovered that that is a voodoo charm, to induce your enemy to leave town.

FINLEY:

You think that's what that--

McCUE:

Oh, it had to be!

FINLEY:

Had to be.

McCUE:

Who's going to put dead chickens along a road?

FINLEY:

How interesting. Well, you were in that house for many, many years, weren't you?

McCUE:

Yes, yes.

FINLEY:

It was up on sort of a hill, as I recall, and you had a wonderful view.

McCUE:

Had a beautiful view. And when we realized we were not going to build, and that was in the days when you really couldn't afford it, George built on a large [chuckle] addition, with a fireplace, and plenty of room, and a studio for me. For many years, I was charging off that room as my office for my calling.

FINLEY:

Yes. Well, now, you had always said you wanted to be a writer, but you did not really begin serious writing until after the war, did you? Was it--

McCUE:

It was during the war. It was in 1941. And I remember when my first book came out. I went East, of course, for the autograph session and whatnot, and my oldest brother, next to me among the children, was in publishing. He always was; he was a great advisor to me.

And I said to him, "Tell me, what do you hear from So-and-So"--naming one of his college companions who had been the editor of the literary magazine, and a very fine writer, and whom I had admired. "What do you hear from So-and-So?"

"Oh," he said, "it's too awful." He said, "He's not doing anything. He's not writing anything. He touches me for \$5 every so often."

And I said, "What a shame! He showed so much promise."

My brother said to me, "Sis, if you had died at 40, people would have said the same about you." And that was true; my writing life began at 40.

And where was I? So we immediately settled into Colorado College.

FINLEY:

Who were some of the first people that you remember getting acquainted with at Colorado College?

McCUE:

Well, Professor Daehler, of course--I loved Professor Daehler. He was the head of the English department. An old-time printer, and very well-read. In later years he and I--I started to say collaborated--that wasn't true. We worked together in translating [can't understand]. And we never did anything with them; I just still have the manuscript, half of it by him, half of it by me.

FINLEY:

Really? He was very much respected, I know, as a professor.

McCUE:

And loved.

FINLEY:

Yes.

McCUE:

Yes.

FINLEY:

Even people like Lew Worner had him as a professor and recalled his influence.

McCUE:

Yes, yes.

FINLEY:

What about some of the other people? Was Amanda Ellis there when you arrived, and what do you remember about Amanda?

McCUE:

[laughter] Poor Amanda! Well, the English department, as I remember it, consisted of Professor Daehler, George, and a very close friend of George's, who became so immediately, Desmond Powell.

FINLEY:

Desmond Powell.

McCUE:

Went from here and became the head of the English department at the University of Arizona.

FINLEY:

Uh-hum.

McCUE:

And the fourth member of the English department, the fourth wheel, was Amanda Ellis.

FINLEY:

Was Amanda Ellis.

McCUE:

And I was so sorry for Amanda Ellis. She was really the victim of sex discrimination. Those three men would get

into the English office--and mind you, there was only one English office; they didn't have individual offices--and each had a desk, and I don't think Amanda had a desk. Now I don't remember that office very well--they didn't let me in either--I was a victim of sex discrimination too! [chuckle]

FINLEY:

Well, there weren't very many women as professors at all on campus.

McCUE:

That's right.

FINLEY:

Was she respected as a teacher, do you think, by her colleagues and students? I don't know that she really was--I mean, she--I always heard she gave lots of A's. [laughter]

McCUE:

Oh! [laughter] Well, I can tell you an anecdote [can't understand--background noise is loud]--I guess it's not very nice. During the war, we had a lot of candidates for Marine officers, and one of them happened to go East on the same train as I did one time, and he told me [chuckle] this anecdote. He said, "When I first came here, some fellow said to me, 'You're in Amanda Ellis' class.'"

And this boy said yes. And the fellow said, "Well," he said, "I'll tell you what. You sit down in the front row, and the first chance you get, you wink at her, and you will get A's!" And he said, "I did."

FINLEY:

[laughter]

McCUE:

I think he was smart enough, too, however--[laughter]--even so!

Well, where was I? They used to get in there and smoke big black cigars.

FINLEY:

In the classroom?

McCUE:

No, not in the classroom--in the office.

FINLEY:

In the office?

McCUE:
Close up the--

FINLEY:

The men in the office?

McCUE:

The three English professors in the office, and poor Amanda didn't have a chance!

FINLEY:

Hmmmm. That couldn't happen today, that sort of thing! [chuckle]

McCUE:

No, I'm sure it couldn't.

FINLEY:

Well, the college had a new president when you arrived--Prexy Davies, and--

McCUE:

Was he in?

FINLEY:

Well, he came, I think, in 1934, so he was--

McCUE:

Yes! I never realized that.

FINLEY:

Yeah, he was just starting out, I guess, to revivify the college, which had been somewhat, you know--

McCUE:

Yes.

FINLEY:

--affected by the Depression. Did you get to know him well, or do you remember much about him?

McCUE:

Oh, I got to know him pretty well. [pause] He was a college slicker. You can read about him in Scott Fitzgerald. He is the . . . I think he was the alumni agent, something like that, at Princeton.

FINLEY:

Before he came to CC?

McCUE:

Before he came here. And we used to have a connection with Princeton--it's dissolved now; it was very vague in my time, but you know, we're Tigers, and all that. And then he

came here.

FINLEY:

He must have been quite a salesman, in terms of--

McCUE:

Yes!

FINLEY:

--raising money for the college, and--

McCUE:

That's what he was selected for. There wasn't much money, of course. The man who raised the money was Louis Benezet.

FINLEY:

Yes, later on, certainly.

McCUE:

Yes.

FINLEY:

But Lefty Davies, of course, went off to the Marines during the war, and then came back, and had some severe health problems, I guess . . . and left the job under a good deal of pressure, I presume.

McCUE:

Yes. He had a lot of bad luck. His wife made a charming president's wife, but she had a stroke, quite young, and it changed her character completely. She became shrewish and suspicious, and was going to the trustees and complaining that he was having affairs with other women.

FINLEY:

Do you think that was true?

McCUE:

Very possibly. He was extremely attractive.

FINLEY:

Yes, that's what I've heard, that he was a very dashing person.

McCUE:

Yes, dashing, yes! He was a Scott Fitzgerald type.

FINLEY:

Were her complaints to the trustees--was this after the war, or was this still--

McCUE:

This was after the war. This was just before he left, and it really--it was more than he could stand.

FINLEY:

Yes. Yes.

McCUE:

And it was like a nervous breakdown.

FINLEY:

Yes. I understand, yeah. Now, he was quite a good friend of Carol Truax, wasn't he?

McCUE:

A very good friend of Carol Truax.

FINLEY:

Yes. Yes. Do you think there might have been some romance there between them, because . . .

McCUE:

Well, that's the kind of thing I know--

FINLEY:

Uh-hum.

McCUE:

--not think!

FINLEY:

Uh-hum. Well, that was what I--shall we say--surmised--

McCUE:

You'd gotten the impression.

FINLEY:

Yeah, from other people's stories, that they were often seen together. You must have known her very, very well, as a--

McCUE:

Very well! She was my dearest friend!

FINLEY:

Yes. Now, did you--was your first involvement with her through theater--wasn't she very much a theater person?

McCUE:

Yes, she was directing plays, and I met her at a play,

as a matter of fact. I had met her at one of the drama club plays, one of the very first in the Fine Arts Center, because we were here when the Fine Arts Center opened. It opened in the fall of 1936.

FINLEY:

Oh, were you there for the grand opening, when Martha Graham came?

McCUE:

Yes! Yes!

FINLEY:

And danced!

McCUE:

Yes! Yes! I didn't see Martha Graham, and I didn't hear the violinist--what was his name? Because those were for the upper crust. We were sort of the low man on the totem pole, and we got the [can't understand] but they were the best.

FINLEY:

Well, now--

McCUE:

We got the . . . the puppet show, six-foot puppets, with an Alexander Calder--no the other was . . . [pause] Socrates [sounds more like So-crot].

FINLEY:

And these were all part of the opening--

McCUE:

This was all the opening, with an Alexander Calder mobile moving in the background--

FINLEY:

Ohhhhh!

McCUE:

--while this famous soprano, whose name I've forgotten, was singing Socrates.

FINLEY:

Very avant garde.

McCUE:

Very avant garde, and we appreciated it.

FINLEY:

Yes. Well, now, was the drama club--was that born with the Fine Arts Center, or an outgrowth of earlier--

McCUE:

No, that was--that started in Mrs. Brigham's barn, and I was not here for it.

FINLEY:

So it was much earlier?

McCUE:

It was--oh, at least ten years earlier, yes.

FINLEY:

But it was called the Drama Club?

McCUE:

It was called the Drama Club, and it became a member of the Fine Arts Center. We contributed--I wasn't a member at the time--they contributed the money they had been saving to build a theater. Think of that! Thinking you could build a theater just by saving money!

FINLEY:

Yes. So they then were using the Fine Arts Center stage?

McCUE:

They became members of the Fine Arts Center a right [?] and, oh, some ten years later, I headed up a bitter fight against the Fine Arts Center to keep them from throwing us out, because we had an agreement that entitled us to play on that stage.

FINLEY:

How many plays did they do a year, several?

McCUE:

Five.

FINLEY:

Five?

McCUE:

Yes, and they were done by different amateur directors, of whom Carol was one. And very soon, as soon as she got to know me, as a matter of fact, I became involved with the Drama Club. I did at first by trying out for Murder in the Cathedral, which was directed by Alexander Campbell, a teacher at Fountain Valley.

FINLEY:

Uh-hum.

McCUE:

And they heard me at that time, and Carol began immediately using me in the shows she put on. The first show I did for her, I had one of the leads, in Night Must Fall.

FINLEY:

Night Must Fall.

McCUE:

I played the old lady in a wheelchair that gets murdered.

FINLEY:

Uh-hum. Well, you had something like 39 performances over the years; is that about right?

McCUE:

That is correct. I gave you the list.

FINLEY:

Yes. It's very impressive.

McCUE:

Many of them were just walk-ons.

FINLEY:

But many very, very major roles.

McCUE:

But a good number were leads.

FINLEY:

And now some of the music theater things--did you sing also in your roles, when you were, say, Emma in The Wizard of Oz?

McCUE:

I sang the Duchess of Plazatoro in The Gondoliers by the symphony chorus, which preceded the chorale.

FINLEY:

Uh-hum.

McCUE:

But I can't really sing, if I have to do it alone.

FINLEY:

Yes, I know the feeling! [laughter] I know the feeling!

McCUE:

[laughter] And the only other musical I was in was The Student Prince, but I had a non-singing role.

FINLEY:

Uh-hum, I see. Carol Truax must have altered [alternated?] direction of these things with Orvis Grout. Did he come before the war, Orvis Grout, or was he around then?

McCUE:

No, he came after the war.

FINLEY:

Okay. Now at that time, was it still the Drama Club, or--

McCUE:

It was still the Drama Club, and we had had a very interesting director that the college made available to us-- Lefty Davies met this well-known German director, who had been assistant to Reinhardt.

FINLEY:

Hans Lothar, yeah.

McCUE:

Hans Lothar.

FINLEY:

Ah, yes.

McCUE:

And made him available to us. He couldn't use him himself, on the faculty.

FINLEY:

Why not?

McCUE:

Because of Arthur Sharp. Arthur Sharp was the director of the college . . .

FINLEY:

The Koshare Theatre.

McCUE:

Koshare, and Arthur Sharp had buckets of money, and could not be superseded or offended.

FINLEY:

I see.

McCUE:

So Lothar was allowed to give lectures on drama, but

the plays he put on were for the Drama Club. And Carol and I really backed him up.

FINLEY:

He was here for at least two years, wasn't he, in about '42, '43--it was early in the war, wasn't it?

McCUE:

I've forgot. I gave my memories to Horst Richardson.

FINLEY:

Yes, he wrote a very nice article about Hans Lothar.

McCUE:

Yes, well, all I know about Lothar is in there.

FINLEY:

Yes.

McCUE:

And--except that I didn't go into this, I don't think. And he could not understand--he was a professional director, and I remember we were doing--I think it was The Wild Duck, and one of our alumnae, Agnes Brown, who is now Mrs. Wally Boyce--

FINLEY:

Oh, yes, uh-hum.

McCUE:

--was playing the little girl in The Wild Duck and one day she didn't appear for a rehearsal. She then had two children; she was married; and one of them was sick. And when she came for the next rehearsal, he dressed her down publically. And Carol and I took him aside later and explained that she was not being paid, she was hired.

FINLEY:

This wasn't Broadway, New York! [chuckle]

McCUE:

This wasn't Salzburg; this wasn't Vienna!

FINLEY:

Right!

McCUE:

And he caught on, he learned how to do it.

FINLEY:

Did he work well with people? What was his manner as a director?

McCUE:

Imperious!

FINLEY:
Yes.

McCUE:
He was the Herr Professor Geheimrat, and made no attempt to establish personal communication. He got it from us! But the [sounds like yell-mar] that we had in The Wild Duck was a pretty green--he spoke lines very well, but he was green to the stage, and he took an awful mauling, but he took it. He was grateful to learn, and did a very good job.

FINLEY:
Did the Colorado Springs public appreciate Lothar? Did they find him extraordinary as somebody famous coming in, or were they kind of oblivious?

McCUE:
They were oblivious, that's the word, oblivious.

FINLEY:
Yes, uh-hum.

McCUE:
And the next thing that he did was The Women.

FINLEY:
Oh, yes, I've read about that.

McCUE:
And he explained to me that in Vienna, he had done The Women in a good-natured way. [chuckle] I said to myself, "How can you do that?" But anyway, he did The Women in a good-natured way, and he said to me, "And you will play the cook."

And I said, "I will not play the cook. I am tired of playing the cook. I will play the countess!"

And he said, "Very well, you will play the countess."
So . . . [laughter] I got myself up, irregardless, as they say, and was very pleased with my appearance. I'm sorry I can't reach my play pictures; I could show you. Especially with the two-inch-long false eyelashes I put on, until that Aggie Brown said to me, "In those false eyelashes, you look like the Borden cow!" [laughter] That was Aggie! She was one of George's students--

FINLEY:
She was?

McCUE:

--and we were always in touch.

FINLEY:

[laughter] Now you mentioned Arthur Sharp sort of in passing. We have just received at the library some of the photographs of his productions from his estate, and I've been reading about the Koshare Theatre. What do you recall about the college drama? He was in the English department; it wasn't really a separate department.

McCUE:

It wasn't separate, but he wasn't interested, and they weren't interested. They rather looked down on active drama.

FINLEY:

Uh-hum. That wasn't considered part of the regular--

McCUE:

That wasn't learned.

FINLEY:

--curriculum?

McCUE:

That wasn't learned. The play of the college that I remember most vividly--I don't remember the name of it--it was a comedy of youth. It was--the principal players were three boys and a girl, and the girl was Mrs. Wally Boyce.

FINLEY:

Oh, really? She did quite a bit of acting, huh?

McCUE:

And she was delightful; she was an excellent actress. And as a matter of fact, in Lothar's autobiography, when he mentioned his time here, and putting on plays and all, there were just two people he mentioned. One was me--

FINLEY:

And one was--

McCUE:

Aggie.

FINLEY:

That's interesting.

McCUE:

Yes.

FINLEY:

Were the plays that the college put on were of high quality, do you think--of course, they were using students, but Sharp must--

McCUE:

No. Arthur Sharp was not learned. I don't think he'd ever studied anything; he just did it off the back of his hand.

FINLEY:

He just did it, uh-hum.

McCUE:

He did a good job with--what I saw was just light comedies, like the one I mentioned; it was a Broadway comedy. And he put on good shows; you could enjoy them.

FINLEY:

Now he was--I'm trying to remember if he stayed through the war. I think he went off at some point during the war, and then did not come back after the war. I think maybe that was when Chief Tyree began to take over the drama department at the college.

McCUE:

Yeah. I remember when Chief Tyree came. [chuckle] He was the person least likely to make an impression on Carol, and at that time Carol was running the music department, and for some reason, the drama department was included. And Tyree was recommended by a very good young actress who had been with him in Oklahoma--

FINLEY:

Yes.

McCUE:

--where he was teaching. So Carol had him here for the summer, to put on a show. And he put on "El Cristo."

FINLEY:

"El Cristo."

McCUE:

Which was a drama of the Penitentes, in--

FINLEY:

New Mexico.

McCUE:

--New Mexico, and it was excellent.

FINLEY:

So did he impress Carol at that point?

McCUE:

So that--he arrived, and we soon became friends with him, and he used to come to our parties, with Carol, of course--Carol was always at our parties.

And I remember the first one he came to. He was eating a turnip, in the character of a hillbilly--the last thing that could have impressed Carol--she was a city girl; she was from New York. And didn't know what to make of an Oklahoma hillbilly, and that was his pose, always--it is to this minute.

But when she saw the play, she thought it was great, and she hired him. And it was he, of course, who founded KRCC.

FINLEY:

Yes, indeed. He believed that radio and speech should be a part of the curriculum, very strongly. I don't know if it was ever fully accepted as part of the curriculum.

McCUE:

Well, he was so right. But he was not learned, either.

FINLEY:

No?

McCUE:

He was not . . . he was not into the actual science of speech. His way was to bring out the students' potentials.

FINLEY:

He must have been quite popular.

McCUE:

Oh, he was very popular.

FINLEY:

Yes. Yes. I remember the variety shows he used to put on. I was in a couple of those. You know, we were all rank amateurs, but he made it all seem fun, and anybody's efforts were appreciated.

McCUE:

Were appreciated and encouraged. And he had everybody out to his chicken smokes.

FINLEY:

Yes, yes.

McCUE:

I've been to many of those.

[Break in interview as tape is turned off and back on.]

McCUE:

Well, that was the greatest privilege! When Carol became executive secretary of the--Carol was hired, of course--well, I'll go back to the beginning. Right after the war, we acquired a quartet in residence, called the LaSalle Quartet, who were funded by El Pomar. They got \$10,000 among them.

FINLEY:

That was good, in those days. Was this a year-round thing, or did they come only in the summer?

McCUE:

Oh, no, it was year-round.

FINLEY:

They were here year-round?

McCUE:

And Lefty Davies realized, being a promoter, that to satisfy Julie Penrose, they had to have audiences. And Carol had already put on--well, she was a born impresario--she had already put on what was called the "Coronado Entrada" which was a WPA performance. The WPA had created it: gotten somebody to write the pageant; had made the costumes; trained the horses--

FINLEY:

Horses, no less! [laughter]

McCUE:

--provided radio actors to read the parts. And it was the story of Coronado's expedition into the Southwest, when he got all the way into Colorado and Kansas.

FINLEY:

And where was this performed?

McCUE:

All over--everywhere where Coronado had touched.

FINLEY:

I see, and she was kind of--

McCUE:

Was invited to make use of the horses and the script,

and the readers, and to cast the pantomime, and to publicize it, and to sell tickets and whatnot. And Carol did a tremendous job. We did it in the--I was in it, of course--we did it in the Will Rogers stadium, and packed the place.

FINLEY:

Hmmmm.

McCUE:

And a former governor of Colorado played--Governor Shoup--played Coronado, and . . . ummmm, can't remember his name, a Spanish professor was in it, and oh, I don't know who all.

FINLEY:

Do you recall what year that would have been?

McCUE:

Yes, it would have been 1935. That was the Centennial, but I think it was 1936. I think it was still going around, so to speak. So that Lefty knew what Carol could do, and he hired her to publicize the LaSalle Quartet.

FINLEY:

Uh-hum. Tell me something about the members of the LaSalle Quartet, the people involved.

McCUE:

Well, I knew them quite well, but I can't remember their names. I just remember them as musicians.

FINLEY:

Ferris Molnar, was he one--no--Molnar?

McCUE:

No, Molnar was in the Hungarian.

FINLEY:

That was a different group.

McCUE:

And they came occasionally, and he came for many summers. I was devoted to him, they were very good friends of mine.

FINLEY:

How long was the LaSalle Quartet in residence then?

McCUE:

Oh, that I couldn't tell you, but it must have been about five years.

FINLEY:

That long? Right after the war?

McCUE:

Yeah.

FINLEY:

Right.

McCUE:

The gossip was that some snake-in-the-grass, whom I could name, but I won't, told Julie Penrose that they were all Jewish, which they were, and that the money just stopped coming.

FINLEY:

That's interesting.

McCUE:

That's the scuttlebutt.

FINLEY:

[laughter] That's interesting.

McCUE:

And I don't doubt it of that snake-in-the-grass.

FINLEY:

[laughter]

McCUE:

And then, let me see. Then they brought Roy Harris here.

FINLEY:

And Joanna, his wife, right?

McCUE:

And Joanna, his beautiful wife.

FINLEY:

Yes.

McCUE:

And . . . in no time at all--Roy was a conniver. Roy was working to get himself made head of the music department.

FINLEY:

At CC?

McCUE:

At CC.

FINLEY:

Really?

McCUE:

That's what he had in mind. And George worked with Roy. George and Roy put on a radio program on music. They went to Denver one day every week, and George interviewed Roy--that's what it came to, and of course he wrote the script, and all that. And he was so glad George--when he came out of it alive--he said Roy was the wildest driver he'd ever driven with. He'd be driving along at 75 in "Golden Boy," his beautiful--oh, I don't remember what it was--a Lincoln, I think.

FINLEY:

[chuckle] Golden Boy!

McCUE:

Golden Boy. And he'd be saying, "And then the conductor will bring in the violins on this side, and the tympani on this side," and he's waving both hands in the air, and they're rushing along, and [laughter] George was in fear of his life! It never happened while George was in the car, but it happened eventually.

FINLEY:

He was in an accident?

McCUE:

He was in a terrible accident, and got all smashed up.

FINLEY:

Oh, dear! I didn't know that.

McCUE:

That was while he was in California.

FINLEY:

Yes. Well, now, why didn't he become the head of the music department at CC?

McCUE:

Well--

FINLEY:

Were the--

McCUE:

One of my mottoes always has been, "Never resign." But Jimmy Sykes, the head of the music department, stood all he could stand from Roy. And finally, he went to Lefty Davies, and he said, "Either Harris goes, or I do." And Lefty said, "We're sorry to lose you."

FINLEY:

Uh-hum.

McCUE:

And he left, and became the head of the music department at Princeton. Happy ending!

FINLEY:

But Roy did not become the head of the music department at CC?

McCUE:

But Lefty was too smart to take such a guy, and created Carol the executive secretary of the music department, because he knew Carol could control Roy, and she could. She was wiler than he was! And in Carol's administration, we had wonderful summers!

FINLEY:

Yes, Hanya Holm was coming then--

McCUE:

Well, Honya was brought here by Martha Wilcox, who was the dance teacher here, and her father was a famous voice teacher, and he was on the faculty. And I remember singing "Four Saints in Three Acts" with Virgil Thompson, which was a great treat--he was very good. And Roy was very good leading singers. Roy had a broad conception of what voices could do, and it was a pleasure to sing his music. And he was a good conductor; he knew what he was doing.

FINLEY:

Joanna was briefly listed as a member of the faculty.

McCUE:

Yes, she taught piano.

FINLEY:

She taught piano, uh-hum. I vaguely remember the Harrises; there was always all sorts of gossip about the social scene in Colorado Springs, but I know none of the details. Is there anything you would care to divulge about the Harrises?

McCUE:

[laughter]

FINLEY:

[laughter]

McCUE:

I'm glad you put it that way! Well, I'm not sure. Roy's dead, but Joanna's alive.

FINLEY:

Yes.

McCUE:

I'd better not tell you some of the juicer anecdotes.

FINLEY:

[laughter] They lived in a house that was supposed to have all sorts of mysterious passageways.

McCUE:

It did! I've been in them. Carol owned the house, and she lived in an apartment that had been created in one end of it. But they lived in the crazy part. It had a staircase going up zig-zag to the second floor, that George said reminded him of the cascade in "Steeplechase, the Funny Place." [?] And a beautifully paneled library, and around every room went a molding which was for the cats, because that house was built by a character, whom I never knew.

FINLEY:

Captain Somebody-or-Other.

McCUE:

Catty Clark.

FINLEY:

Catty Clark! That's it.

McCUE:

They called him Catty because he had the place full of cats.

FINLEY:

Yes.

McCUE:

And he had these avenues for the cats, around the top of the rooms.

FINLEY:

And wasn't it true you pushed the panel in the library and it would swing open, and there was a passageway down into the park?

McCUE:

Yes, yes. And they had the wine cellar down there.

I've been through that passageway once, when Carol sold the place. She had a free auction. You could come and take away what she was not keeping for herself. She had beautiful, old-fashioned furniture, and she shipped that to the East, but there was a great deal of stuff that she didn't want to take. I remember that we got an Army cot out of it. And it was very funny--it was like a community of ants on the move. You know how the ants run out, carrying the food, and carrying the little ants and so on.

FINLEY:
[chuckle]

McCUE:
Well, here's people running out here and there, carrying away these prizes. And on that day, we were all permitted to go through the secret passages.

FINLEY:
Well, that house is still standing, I believe.

McCUE:
Yes, it is.

FINLEY:
I don't know who lives there, but it's a unique house in Colorado Springs.

McCUE:
I don't know, I think they're about to take it down and put up a condominium.

FINLEY:
I hope not!

McCUE:
It's a beautiful site.

FINLEY:
Yes. Well, there were many parties there, I guess, when the Harrises lived there.

McCUE:
Yes, and when Carol lived there.

FINLEY:
Yes, yes. Well, that was quite a time. Colorado College was very arty in those days. I mean, these summer programs, and the people were just really spectacular coming in. I remember the Gingold family, George Gingold.

McCUE:

Yes, I do too.

FINLEY:

I'd like to change the subject, and get into more of your memories of your husband's career at Colorado College. I remember him quite well in the early fifties. I always remember him as a very . . . I guess you'd call him a devoted pacifist, and a member of the Civil Liberties Union, and a very . . . very concerned about large philosophical issues. Wasn't he one of the founders of the Freedom and Authority program at CC?

McCUE:

Yes, he was one of three. Lew Worner, Glenn Gray, and George were the three who started this.

FINLEY:

Well, just tell us about him so that people who never knew him--how would you characterize him, you know, and his career at CC?

McCUE:

[chuckle] George was a unique character. He was the funniest man I ever met, continually--it was a continual laugh being married to him, and never the same laugh twice. It was Professor Daehler who remarked, "It's a wonderful thing to see McCue grab an idea and run with it," and that was what he was able to do.

And this is why I've set this out [noises] because this little collection of his essays can give you a better sense . . . [noises] [can't understand] shows you what his scholarly work was like. George's papers, by his wish, went to the University of Colorado. He was an alumnus, and that's where they went and that's where they are.

FINLEY:

This little pamphlet is called "Notes Washed up in a Bottle."

McCUE:

It is a selection, small collection of about 150 columns which he wrote for Colorado Springs newspapers. They began appearing in the Colorado Springs Sun, and when the then-editor left the Sun, George went with him to a weekly paper called Weekend.

FINLEY:

Oh, yes, and wrote the--

McCUE:

And that turned into Gadd's Weekly and in those three periodicals, there were 150 essays of his ideas and

impressions. And this shows him at his serious--there's one article there about Freedom and Authority. And some of his very funniest articles.

FINLEY:

Sometimes he commented on the local political scene, too, didn't he? Some of these articles--

McCUE:

I don't remember that he commented on the political scene. He commented a great deal on the artists, the artistic scene. He was very interested in architecture, and I've got one architecture piece in there.

FINLEY:

Oh, yes, that's one of the ones I read, about architecture, the changing form of the city, yeah.

McCUE:

Yeah.

FINLEY:

Well, he also was interested in astronomy, wasn't he?

McCUE:

Yes, he was. He taught me a great deal about the stars. I have many happy memories of looking at the stars through his telescope. Professor Simmons has George's telescope now.

FINLEY:

Oh, does he! How nice! Well, now, didn't he get kind of mixed up in the whole mess of the McCarthy period [McCue laughs] after the war, when everyone who even had a liberal thought in his mind was branded as pink?

McCUE:

Well, we had a local McCarthy [Finley laughs] who, of course, made the college his target. And that is a period that I remember with great pleasure. I got in his black books before I had been a year in this town.

FINLEY:

Was that Nerntzow [or Nenoff?] or Robert Donner Sr. you're talking about?

McCUE:

Robert Donner Sr.

FINLEY:

Yes.

McCUE:

And I gave a talk on the cooperatives. We had joined--we discovered cooperatives when we came West, and we had joined a cooperative in Boulder, and were very enthusiastic about it. So I gave a talk here--I don't remember to whom, it may have been the League of Women Voters, or it may have been the University Women. And it was publicized in the paper, and I had this letter from a totally unknown person, informing me that this was Socialism, signed Robert Donner. But I'd never heard of him, so I thought, "Oh, well, this is some dumb-bell, so I'll educate him a little." So I wrote him a very nice letter [laughter from both] explaining that it's democracy in merchandising! [laughter]

FINLEY:

You couldn't change his mind, I don't think, on anything! [laughter]

McCUE:

But from that time on, I suppose, I was on his black books. And the main target of Donner on the faculty was--oh, can't remember his name--economics prof--naturally, he would be.

FINLEY:

Lewis Abbott?

McCUE:

Lewis Abbott.

FINLEY:

Yes.

McCUE:

But there were others, and . . .

FINLEY:

And how did his attacks affect George? How did George get on the bad list--what was the specific situation?

McCUE:

Oh, well, he--I don't know, as a matter of fact. [pause] But every year, Donner would present--by this time, it was General Gill, and the hero of this story is General Gill--would present General Gill a list, headed by Lewis Abbott, of those who ought to be fired! [laughter]

And one year, George wasn't on it! [laughter] And he was chagrined! He said to me, "They're going to think that I'm the stool pigeon!" But he soon got back on it.

FINLEY:

Didn't make the list, yes. And what did Gill do to make him the hero of this whole period?

McCUE:

Well, it was a great object to General Gill to put in ROTC, and George, and Clyde Holbrook and several others were very much against it--naturally--militarism.

FINLEY:

Yes.

McCUE:

And it was brought before the faculty, and passed with very few dissenting. And Gill said to the faculty, "Now this is a great object to me. It would gratify me greatly if those of you who have voted against it, if we could take another vote, and if you would all vote for it. I would like to tell the government it was unanimous."

And they took another vote, and the only nay was George. And Gill said to George, "Now, Mr. McCue, I know how you feel, but this is a great object to me, and I would be most grateful if you will cast your vote and make it unanimous."

And George stood up and he said, "President Gill, I'm sorry. I cannot do it. This would be against my principles, and I will not vote against my principles."

So it went as not unanimous. And the very next Monday--the meeting was on Friday--George had a summons to report to General Gill. And he said to me, "Uh-oh, this is it."

And naturally, I wasn't there, but I have the story from George. George went in, and President Gill said, "Mr. McCue, I want you to know that I respect your attitude in sticking to your principles, and I do not hold it against you in any way."

FINLEY:

Well, that's very much to his credit, isn't it?

McCUE:

And from that moment, they were fast friends, and after Gill was retired, and after his wife died, George spent a good deal of time just talking with General Gill. He was a real Southern gentleman.

FINLEY:

He was, indeed.

McCUE:

He was a great fellow, yeah.

FINLEY:

Uh-hum.

McCUE:

Well, that's the story there. George retired in 1962, so that he is practically forgotten except by a few students, but he was a legend in his day. He has been heard to say, "I have never yet danced the can-can on top of my desk in order to hold the attention of a class, but if it should become necessary, I would!"

FINLEY:

Uh-hum. What do you think students remember him most for? What subjects were his favorites, and what impressions did he make?

McCUE:

Well, his favorite subject was language, and his best students were taking language. George always asked for the 8:00 classes, which used to annoy me! [chuckle] But he said to me, "You weed out the lazy ones and the bums." He said, "I get only good students at 8:00 in the morning."

I taught one of his classes once when he went East when his mother died, and it was a fantastically good class. Max Morath was in it [pause] . . . oh! The names escape me; I can see their faces. And Shirley Windward was in it--her name was not Windward then; she married one of Daddy Wilcox's students, a very good tenor.

But they were phenomenal! And it fell to me to give them the midterm examination. Five turned in perfect papers, including the sight translation of Beowulf. And one of the five translated the Beowulf at sight into Anglo-Saxon verse. That was Shirley Windward. And I'll never forget that class.

And George is remembered for his wit. The only example I think of offhand, which I thought was very worthwhile, was when a student would ask him, as they often did just to bait him, "Prof, did Bacon write Shakespeare?"

And his answer was, "Well, I don't know whether Bacon wrote Shakespeare or not, but if he wrote Shakespeare, he sure as hell did not write Bacon!" [laughter] Which goes to the heart of the matter.

FINLEY:

What were some of George's most esteemed colleagues? Who were your favorite people that he worked best with on the campus?

McCUE:

Lew Worner--he was very fond of Lew Worner; Glenn Gray--naturally those two.

FINLEY:

Yes.

McCUE:

Desmond Powell in the early days, of course. Clyde Holbrook--well, I'm naming over the young Turks whose picture was on the . . .

FINLEY:

The college magazine, yes.

McCUE:

The Bulletin not long ago.

FINLEY:

Yes. And how did the Freedom and Authority class get generated? Did he talk about that to you?

McCUE:

Well, I heard about it while it was in the planning. It was simply that they thought there ought to be an intercultural, and intersubject class, and he and Lew in history, and Glenn Gray in philosophy, and George in English agreed that they would create this class for upperclassmen, of more like a seminar, really, because it was always give and take with the students and the different professors.

FINLEY:

And that was an unusual format in those days, it really was.

McCUE:

Yes, that was something that they never had. And that was what George was most proud of. That, he felt, was his greatest contribution to Colorado College.

FINLEY:

Well, it certainly had an influence on many, many students, I know that. I never took it from George, but I took the course from Bill Hochmann, and it was a wonderful course, wonderful!

McCUE:

Yeah. Bill joined it the next year, I think.

FINLEY:

I think that was when Lew became the dean, and they had to hire Bill rather rapidly as a replacement.

McCUE:

Yes.

FINLEY:

Now, did George retire before he was 65?

McCUE:

Yes.

FINLEY:

Yeah. He was on leave--

McCUE:

He retired as soon as he could.

FINLEY:

Was he just eager to leave at that point?

McCUE:

Well, he told me he'd shot his bolt. He'd done it. George became quite friendly with President Benezet, and he told me of lunching with Benezet, when Benezet said to him, "I've been here seven years, and I think that if somebody can't put over--can't establish--what he has to contribute in seven years, he might just as well move on." And that next year, after eight years, he moved on.

FINLEY:

Benezet did. And that was about the same time that George retired also, wasn't it--'62, '63? I think Lew came in as president in the fall of '63.

McCUE:

Maybe so.

FINLEY:

So did George still teach under Lew? I don't think he did.

McCUE:

Maybe so. No, I don't think George ever taught under Lew.

FINLEY:

Just describe for people who didn't know him what he looked like. I've seen pictures of him, but you, of course, being married to him for over 50 years--[laughter]--how would you describe his manner, and his general personality and looks?

McCUE:

Well, he was very well-dressed. He'd never subscribe to the learned slob picture. He was always--

FINLEY:

Very dapper.

McCUE:

Always very dapper. For years, he wore bow ties. Finally, some friend of his gave him a bow tie which lighted up--you had a control in your pocket, and when you pressed the button, it lighted up, which I've known him to wear to a party! [laughter]

He was wonderful at parties. He invented an institution called Ur University, spelled U-r. UU. And the cheer was, "UU--woo, woo!" Ur University was one for the benefit of the faculty, and the classes were run for the benefit of the faculty.

FINLEY:

Was this just an informal thing at parties?

McCUE:

It was a club.

FINLEY:

Club, uh-hum.

McCUE:

And our friends all got--[tape runs out and is turned over].

FINLEY:

This is Judy Finley, continuing my interview with Lillian Bueno McCue. On this side 2 of the tape, we focus on her writings and her philosophy as a writer.

We were talking about Ur University when the tape ran out. What else do you recall?

McCUE:

That was the university that George invented for the benefit of the faculty. And every year, we used to [chuckle]

• • •

We also had "Spitback" parties, and I'm coming back to Ur University.

FINLEY:
Spitback?

McCUE:
Spitback. If somebody passes you a box of chocolates, and you take a bite out of one of them, and you don't like it, and put it back, that's a spitback.

FINLEY:
[laughter]

McCUE:
And spitback presents are presents that you've received for Christmas that you don't like, so you put them in the drawer and give them to somebody next year--that's spitback presents.

And one year, we conceived the idea of giving a spitback party. Everybody was to bring the worst Christmas present they received, and exchange them--you know, put them in a grab-bag.

FINLEY:
Uh-hum.

McCUE:
And . . . oh, we had spitback refreshments made out of the leftover turkey--

FINLEY:
[laughter]

McCUE:
--and wore spitback clothes, sometimes. And very often, our spitback party was a meeting of Ur University, because all our friends were on the faculty. Martha Tilley was the dean of men, I remember. And it went on like that.

FINLEY:
Sort of a satire on--

McCUE:
It was entirely [chuckle] a satire on faculties.

FINLEY:
Uh-hum.

McCUE:

And we'd hold meetings, and make speeches.

FINLEY:

[laughter]

McCUE:

We held a graduation one time, gave somebody an honorary degree. George had the wildest imagination. He could invent things. When I was actively publishing, I used to go back to New York every year, when my book came out, and when I came back, he would give me a reception that you wouldn't believe!

One year he met me with a lifesize effigy of Dr. Sam Johnson--lifesize, standing right next to him!

FINLEY:

[laughter]

McCUE:

One year he met me with a brass band! One year, [chuckle] he got a friend of his, and they set up a little hobo's jungle right at the station. At that time, there were trees there, and whatnot, and they were under one of the trees, cooking up some slumgullion in a tin can, to show how miserably he'd lived--

FINLEY:

While you were gone!

McCUE:

--while I was away! [laughter] And every year, he made a Christmas card, which was really famous. One year, quite early, I modeled a head of George. It was practically the only thing I ever modeled, but I was pleased with it. Lawrence Barrett at the Fine Arts Center helped me to do it, and it was almost lifesize. And we cast it, and I thought it was just noble-looking. It was just the head on a pedestal.

And do you know what George did? He went down to the taxidermist's, and rented a large stuffed raven and stood it on the head--

FINLEY:

Ohhhhh!

McCUE:

--of this [laughter] I thought, quite good portrait head! And photographed it, and used it for a Christmas card! And that was the end--I gave it away!

FINLEY:

[laughter]

McCUE:

It was entirely debunked, and he was awfully good at debunking. One year he got on the line at a department store and sat on Santa Claus's knee in place of the previous child, and made me take a picture of it--and it was a very good picture--

FINLEY:

Was that your Christmas card?

McCUE:

And that was the Christmas card that year. And one year, he [chuckle] one year, he put on his cap and gown and went over to Manitou and sat on a bucking horse--they had these stuffed animals of steer and a bucking horse--and had his picture taken in his cap and gown, riding a bucking horse!

And another year, he had his picture taken dressed up as Santa Claus, reading the Police Gazette to a couple of kids! [laughter]

FINLEY:

[laughter] Did he involve himself in your writing efforts, giving you ideas, ever?

McCUE:

Yes, yes!

FINLEY:

For dialogue, or whatever?

McCUE:

Yes! Well, not dialogue, but ingenious ideas. I'd ask him. And as a matter of fact, it was he who solved the mystery of Belle Gunness, which is one of my books.

Belle Gunness was a Norwegian farm woman in Indiana, who got up a very profitable scheme. She would--now I'm telling you about my book, but you'll see why. She got up a very profitable scheme, to advertise in the Norwegian language papers that a wealthy Norwegian widow would like to correspond with a Norwegian gentleman--object, matrimony, to share in the management of her prosperous farm.

And they came from all over--from the east and from the west. And as they came, she took their money and killed them, and buried them in the hog lot. And it wouldn't--well, it did occur to me to think about Belle Gunness, because the mystery about Belle Gunness was that she disappeared. She made a mistake--she got a victim who had a brother who was in

touch with him. And when the brother was writing letters inquiring, and announced that he was coming East--he was in North Dakota--he was coming East to see what became of his brother.

And immediately the house burned down.

FINLEY:

Ahhhhh, yes.

McCUE:

And Belle disappeared. And they concluded, of course, that she had burned up in the house, and started working over the ashes, because the coroner would not say that Belle was dead until they found her head. But three weeks later, they found her false teeth in the ashes, and that satisfied the coroner, and from that point, they found a victim to try.

But the curious thing about that trial was, he was tried for murdering Belle Gunness by burning her up, but the jury found that he was guilty of arson--he had burned the house, but not of murder.

And so the great mystery in the book, The Truth About Belle Gunness is what became of Belle. Did she burn up? Did she get away? Where did she go? What became of her?

And I went to LaPorte to research the case, and the very first day--the hotel I stayed in was right around the corner from the public library--and I left the hotel and turned the corner, and right there was a photography shop. Proprietor Cook, Photographer. And Cook, I knew, was the official photographer, who had taken the 48 official pictures--

FINLEY:

For the trial.

McCUE:

--of the whole gruesome business.

FINLEY:

Uh-hum.

McCUE:

So I turned in, and I was lucky--he was there. The same photographer, an old gentleman. His son-in-law, I think, was running it now. So I said to him, "I want you to tell me about this picture, how the false teeth of Belle Gunness that were found in the fire."

And I said, "I have read the inquest, and I have read the testimony of the dentist who made that plate, and he testified that he made four false teeth for Belle Guinness's upper jaw." I said, "But there are six teeth here."

"Oh," he said, "those teeth on the end--those are the real teeth."

FINLEY:

Oh, they hold the bridge.

McCUE:

Where the bridge was fixed to.

FINLEY:

Uh-hum.

McCUE:

And I wrote to George that night, and I said, "I don't know what to make of it," and he wrote back and told me what became of Belle Gunness.

FINLEY:

So he solved the mystery?

McCUE:

He solved the mystery.

FINLEY:

And that's the way you put it into your book?

McCUE:

That's the way I put it into my book, because I'm convinced that's right.

FINLEY:

Uh-hum. I was reading some of your description of the pleasures of being a histo-detector, and it appears that at times, you were almost psychic, solving these mysteries in a fictional way that later appeared to be the most plausible--

McCUE:

That was the case with my first book. That's why I wrote my first book. I got up this theory just because it made a good scene at the end of the story. But when I researched it, when I checked on it, it was clear to me that that absolutely was the solution, which nobody else had thought of.

FINLEY:

Well, now, in reading about your writings, and all your books that you've done this wonderful research on, sort of recreating Johnson, Sam Johnson and his sidekick, Boswell--it almost--I had the impression that perhaps you should have been a detective, instead of a writer! [laughter] Because you seem to have a great fascination with the intricate

details that a detective has to have. Of course, you must put a lot of this into your books?

McCUE:

Yes, well, I have to know them, of course.

FINLEY:

Well, you are, I guess, a detective--a histo-detector!
[laughter]

McCUE:

[laughter] Well, don't be so confident! I was just telling the cast of Goodbye, Miss Lizzie Borden yesterday that one of the very first performances of the play was in Fall River, Massachusetts, where the thing happened.

FINLEY:

Yes.

McCUE:

And that same spring, there was an article in the paper--you may have read this someplace--that, well, in my play, the action really starts when it's found that Lizzie has the ax hidden in the chimney.

FINLEY:

Hidden in the chimney, yes, I've read the play.

McCUE:

And this piece came out in the papers, that somebody working on the Borden house had opened up the chimney and found an ax.

FINLEY:

I'm sure you--

McCUE:

In the chimney!

FINLEY:

Yes!

McCUE:

And I said to George, "I'm psychic!"

But George had a way of deflating me. He said, "You're not psychic--you're an influence! That fellow saw your play, and it gave him an idea."

And sure enough, the followup story was that they had taken the ax to the Harvard crime laboratory and there wasn't

a spot of blood on it! So it could not possibly have been the murder ax.

FINLEY:

But was it--

McCUE:

It had to be a plant.

FINLEY:

It was a hoax, in other words?

McCUE:

It was a hoax.

FINLEY:

Oh, dear! Well, you are an influence, I guess! Did you invent the term histo-detector?

McCUE:

Yes.

FINLEY:

Uh-hum.

McCUE:

Well, no, as a matter of fact. It was in the funny papers. Freckles and His Friends had a histo-detector, which they called a histo-detector, which was a radio--that was in the days of radio--which was, I don't know, giving speeches from long ago or something.

FINLEY:

Yes.

McCUE:

I don't remember. But finally, it was discovered that there was a parrot inside the machine. So the histo-detector was not real. Of course, it was never real. But I adopted the phrase for what I did. And it is exciting--it is very.

George has solved, to my way of thinking, the Tichborn case, too. The Tichborn case is a case of a lost heir, who went to sea, and was thought drowned, and came back, and claimed his inheritance.

FINLEY:

[chuckle]

McCUE:

And again, George just looked at it, and he said, "I'll tell you who that claimant was," and he did, and I believe

it.

FINLEY:

[chuckle]

McCUE:

And that answer you can find in, I think it's in The Return of Dr. Sam Johnson, the paperback volume, under the title of "The Lost Heir."

FINLEY:

"The Lost Heir," yeah.

McCUE:

I moved it to the eighteenth century, which meant, of course, that I couldn't have the lost heir come back from Australia, because there was no colony in Australia in the eighteenth century. I had to make it Haiti. But character for character, event for event, it was the Tichborn case, with George's solution.

FINLEY:

Ah, well, I must read it, to find out what the solution was.

McCUE:

It's one of my best; I like it. I think my all-time favorite is Milady Bigamy.

FINLEY:

Milady Bigamy.

McCUE:

Which again is--

FINLEY:

Was that part of these short story collections?

McCUE:

That's also in The Return of Dr. Sam Johnson. And it's based on the trial of the Duchess of Kingston before the House of Lords for bigamy. She was married to two peers at once, an earl and a duke.

FINLEY:

[chuckle]

McCUE:

At least, that's what she was accused of, and I changed that story quite a bit. But I always liked it.

FINLEY:

Well, now, tell me, when you are writing--I'm always

curious about this, because I like to write--how do you go about it? Are you very orderly and regular? I know you have to do a lot of research, but--or do you just wait 'til you're inspired and it all comes at once? Or do you spend laboring hours getting it out? How does your style--

McCUE:

I do the research first. I select a subject. I do the research. I'm in the middle of doing a story right now about the murder of the Earl of Sandwich's mistress.

FINLEY:

Ummmmmmmm.

McCUE:

And I have finished the research. I have researched Sandwich, and of course, I've got plenty of material on the shelf about the actual crime itself, because it's in all the collections.

FINLEY:

Uh-hum.

McCUE:

But I've been so busy with so many other things that I haven't had time to let it cook.

FINLEY:

You let it sort of ferment in your brain before you write it down? Is that how it works?

McCUE:

Yes, yes. I always remember what Bob Heinlein said to me--the science fiction writer--he lived here in the fifties, and we were very good friends, we shared parties and literary advice. I remember asking him when Nelson asked me to write a girls' book, "How do you write for young people?" Because he'd written many boys' books.

"Oh," he said, "it's very easy. You write it to please yourself, and then translate it."

Which I did. But what he said to me was apropos of something else. I was giving a party, and I was coaxing him to come, and he was saying, "I can't do it. I'm writing."

"Oh," I said, "you can take one evening off."

He said, "No, I can't. The characters are talking in my head, and I have to write just as fast as I can write to get it all down." And that's the way it happens.

FINLEY:

For you, also?

McCUE:

Yes. And even if I sit down and try to write an outline, I can't, because the characters start talking in my head, and I have to write just as fast as I can write to get it all down. And when they stop talking, I have to stop writing. But I know what they have to talk about next. I put down in what my mother used to call her "fireless cooker." She used to say, "Put it down in your fireless cooker; you'll know the answer in the morning."

FINLEY:

So you have your nucleus for the next day's work in--

McCUE:

So that I'd put down into my fireless cooker the part of the research that goes with the next scene, because I think of my stories as dramatic scenes.

FINLEY:

I think that's probably been the strength of your stories, because you were so involved in drama that you see them that way.

McCUE:

Oh, yes! There's nothing like being in a play, and there's nothing like being in your own play to teach you to write. You learn what is simple and what is not. You learn not to write complicated sentences. You learn not to put in three subordinate clauses before you come to the main course. You learn to unweave things, and explain them step by step, when you have to speak it, when you have to say it.

FINLEY:

Hmmm. Well, that's very interesting. I also was pleased to peek at your poetry, Lillian, and I know you've given this nice, big, thick volume of mostly unpublished poetry to the library.

McCUE:

Yes. This is the only--

FINLEY:

And you also have this little book, which is a lovely little book, called Stars and Other Poems, and I detected you've been writing since you were maybe 10 or 15 years old-- poetry.

McCUE:

Seventeen. The first poems in the collection.

FINLEY:

How and when do you write your poetry? Is it just when you feel--

McCUE:

When they come to me.

FINLEY:

When they come to you?

McCUE:

They sing in my head.

FINLEY:

Uh-hum. Well, I think it's a lovely record of a very sunny life. Reading them, I--

McCUE:

Oh, you couldn't be more right!

FINLEY:

I think your life has been very sunny.

McCUE:

My life has been sunny from end to end.

FINLEY:

And your poetry definitely reflects that. You talked about singing--the fact that you still sing in the chorale, at your age, is also a tribute to your dedication to a sunny and singing life.

McCUE:

[chuckle] I think that Don letting me is a tribute to Don!

FINLEY:

This is very nice. I don't know if we have this little book at the library, either. I'll have to check.

McCUE:

I think you do not.

FINLEY:

I'll have to check. Are these at all available in any--I'm sure they're not in print, but are there extra copies of these around?

McCUE:

I think they're in print.

FINLEY:

Oh, are they?

McCUE:

Chinook is supposed to have them.

FINLEY:

Well, I'll have to look for that one, this one here.

McCUE:

Well, you may take that one.

FINLEY:

I would like to give this to the library if we don't have it.

McCUE:

Yes, do that.

FINLEY:

Very nice. Well, you know, we could go on for several more hours, I think, talking about your life and career.

McCUE:

No, but how lovely to end up with reminding people what a sunny and beautiful life I've had.

FINLEY:

Yes, yes.

McCUE:

I've had so many friends, so many exciting friends, so many creative friends. I've been involved in so much creation. The sun that shines upon a childhood can light a whole life, and that is true of me right now! I still live in the sun!

FINLEY:

That's wonderful! That's all, I think, you need to say!

THE END