

KENNESAW STATE UNIVERSITY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH DON RUSSELL CLAYTON

CONDUCTED BY STEPHEN WATSON

EDITED BY THOMAS A. SCOTT

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Interview with Don Russell Clayton
Conducted by Stephen Watson
Edited and indexed by Thomas A. Scott
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Location: Mr. Clayton's Cobb County residence

SW: This is June 22, 2011. My name is Stephen Watson. I'm a senior in American History at Kennesaw State University, and today I'm conducting an oral history with Don Russell Clayton who is known to people at Kennesaw State for starting the art gallery in the Bailey Performance Center. Mr. Clayton, I can see you don't like formalities, but we like to start by beginning at the beginning. Where were you born and where did you grow up?

RC: I was actually born in Cobb County, so I'm a local person. My mother's family [Geraldine Barmore] was here before the Glovers! I understand that there's not too many of us, but I was born in Kennestone Hospital, and was raised in East Marietta. I only attended three schools, Sedalia Park Elementary and East Cobb Junior High, and I graduated from Joseph Wheeler High School. Then I went on to Kennesaw, so I stayed in the county the entire time.

SW: I guess there are just a few people like that. I'm kind of the same way. I grew up in Woodstock, and I went to elementary, middle, and high school in that area. Then I went on to Kennesaw. Most people that I know have moved from other places, especially in the Atlanta area. People are transplants and things like that.

RC: My biggest move was to go from East Cobb to West Cobb.

SW: What was Cobb County like back then?

RC: Well, I would consider it quite urban. We still had traffic issues. I came along when we called U.S. 41 the Four Lane because that was the only four-lane highway in the county. Now, almost all the roads have four-lanes. Probably the biggest issue in terms of traffic was Lockheed. I remember my mother always saying, no matter where we were at a certain time; we would have to get home before Lockheed traffic. I've always considered it a great place to live. I think they've kept up with the growth. As more people have moved here, they've been able to keep up with services, and it's still a very nice place to live.

SW: You mentioned the suburbanization aspect of the area. Do you think that had an impact on you or your family growing up?

RC: I'm not sure that it did. I don't even remember going to Atlanta at all until I was maybe in high school, except for Braves games or to visit the zoo. Then we would sneak down there in the car just to drive down Peachtree. There was no real public transportation or anything like that. Marietta did have a streetcar at one time, but that was back during my mother's time and was gone by the time I would have been able to use it. We lived out in East Marietta, off Lower Roswell Road. There was a shopping center called Town and Country Shopping Center, and we would go to J. C. Penny there or Sears on Roswell Street. We never went to the Marietta square to shop. My mother always said it was too expensive.

SW: This is all in Marietta that you're talking about?

RC: Yes. Sometimes we went to a place called Cobb Center, which was on South Cobb Drive. There was a Rich's there. But my mother never put us in the car and took us to Atlanta to shop or do anything else like that.

SW: Did your interest in art start to form in your childhood or in high school or did that come later?

RC: You know, I've thought about that a lot. I can remember when I was in first or second grade one of the first artists I learned about was Georgia O'Keefe. We had a little newspaper called the *Weekly Reader*, and she was highlighted. The next interest really in art came when I was in seventh grade. I had a math teacher who introduced the class to an artist named M.C. Escher. He's European. I was very fascinated by his technique. I'll give two examples: birds turning into fish or vice versa, or angels changing to devils. I was totally amazed about how he could do that.

I can remember another artist. This is a very strange way to get introduced to the arts, but in the early 1970s, our phone book had a very interesting painting of Atlanta on its cover. I've always loved history, and it was a bird's eye view of Atlanta in 1864 before Sherman came. That artist—his name is Wilbur G. Kurtz. I really didn't know anything about him, but over time, when I was a young teenager, I became interested in Coca-Cola memorabilia, and Mr. Kurtz's son, Wilbur G. Kurtz, Jr., was the archivist for The Coca-Cola Company. So I became acquainted with him, and then realized it was his father who did the artwork I liked. I never met the artist. He died in 1967, I believe.

I didn't mind going to an art museum or something like that, but I really didn't know anything about art. But I went into Rich's one day, and I saw a book called *Menaboni's Birds*. I thought, Menaboni, that sounds familiar. I think that's the man who painted for Robert W. Woodruff. Mr. Woodruff and I were pen pals when I was in high school and college. I picked up this book, and I found some paintings that belonged to Mr. Woodruff. I thought, well, because of the connection, I would like to have it. I didn't care anything about birds or the story

that his wife would tell. I just wanted the book because of the connection with Robert Woodruff.

Over time I began to collect autographs. So I would write to people that I admired or was interested in like movie stars, former presidents, and people like that. So I thought, I wonder if Athos Menaboni is still alive? I contacted my friends at The Coca-Cola Company, and they told me that yes, indeed, he is still alive, and his number is in the phone book, so just call him. I looked it up, and was able to get enough courage to call, and he answered. His wife was in the hospital at the time with a broken leg. I was just going to offer to mail the book and [include] an envelope with postage. He said, "My wife's in the hospital, but when she returns home, we would like for you to come down and see us, and then I'll sign your book." That's really how it got started with Mr. Menaboni.

SW: Where was he living at the time?

RC: He lived on Crest Valley Drive, which is off Northside Drive, not too far from Mt. Paran and Powers Ferry Road, that area.

SW: Okay.

RC: We just developed a friendship. Then I began to try to collect more and more of the Woodruff Christmas cards, and people would give me lithographs if they had any: "Oh, I think I have something under the bed that he did." So they began to pull things out. Then there were china dinner plates. Actually, Mr. Kurtz, who I mentioned earlier—his daughter-in-law gave me two Menaboni china plates for my collection. It just began to grow and grow and grow. I developed a very good friendship with Mr. Menaboni. It was probably three to four years before he died that we knew each other.

SW: In 1990?

RC: In 1990. I also knew his wife. Sara lived about three years after he died. Then his sister, Tina, lived another ten years. So I became very good friends with her. I'm pretty passionate about what I collect. I just put everything into it. So I didn't really just collect lithographs. At that time I had no originals. I couldn't afford them. But when they would write to me, I would keep their letters. Over time his sister gave me a lot of photographs, books, and some other things that she had extras of. There was another man named John [R.] Ridley who was a very good friend of Sara and Athos. He made several sets of scrapbooks, some of which are at Emory University and some are at the University of Georgia in their special collections, about Mr. Menaboni's life and his artwork. So there were extras in that collection from making the scrapbooks.

For example, *Sports Illustrated*—Mr. Menaboni painted two covers for *Sports Illustrated* the first year that that magazine started [1954]. So I just began to

collect anything associated with Mr. Menaboni. Then eventually some of his art came on the market for whatever reason or I was contacted about it. I didn't have a bird for a long time. The birds—because that's what he's famous for—were really out of my price range. So I was able to collect things like seascapes and landscapes. I inherited a boat painting. I had an Etowah Indian and a mushroom painting. Then a bird was for sale, and it was within my price range. Then, let's say, within the last five years with the poor economy, it's really been more of a buyer's market rather than a seller's market, so I've been able to acquire more birds for my collection.

SW: You mentioned the Etowah Indians. Was that the one on the cover of the *Atlanta Journal Sunday Magazine*?

RC: It was in the *Sunday Magazine*. It was not on the cover, but it was done for the illustration of an article. The State of Georgia had just purchased the property where the Etowah Indian Mounds are located. Mr. Menaboni was asked to illustrate that article. So it was on the inside, but not on the cover. He did do other covers though for the *Sunday Magazine*.

SW: I was wondering if we could back up. You mentioned Robert W. Woodruff and your correspondence. When and how did that begin?

RC: Well, I became interested in Coca-Cola when I was a very young teenager. An aunt, my father's sister, was really like another mother to me. I just absolutely loved her. I stayed with her and spent a lot of time with her. She loved antiques and went to antique auctions. She and my uncle would buy old furniture and refinish it.

SW: What was her name?

RC: Her name is Julia Clayton Gresham.

SW: She lived in Cobb County as well?

RC: Yes, on Bells Ferry Road. There would be a Friday night auction, and we would go. I just loved it—the activity; the excitement. I began to notice Coca-Cola things. Because I loved history—and when you study Coca-Cola advertising, you can really learn a lot about history in what they did in terms of how people dressed, what people enjoyed doing, in terms of sports, and that kind of thing.

SW: Right. I guess attitudes and what people thought about roles, that sort of thing.

RC: Exactly. So I felt that some of the ads for Coca-Cola had just absolutely incredible artwork because of the illustrators. They had independent illustrators like Norman Rockwell to do some of their work. I bought a toy truck. I also bought a serving tray. Well, that led to an entire room of stuff over time. Of

course, Mr. Woodruff played such an important role in the history of the Coca-Cola Company and its success. So when I studied its history, again, he became somebody who I admired. Mr. Woodruff, I would consider him my greatest hero.

I just decided to write him a letter. Really, what prompted the letter is I was getting ready to graduate from high school. Mrs. June Boykin Tindall, another very special mentor and dear friend, who is like a mother to me gave me a share of Coca-Cola stock for graduation. So I wrote to Mr. Woodruff to let him know that I was now an owner, just like him, although we were very different in terms of our wealth. For some reason it got through to him, and he would write me back, and I would correspond with him on his birthday. I remember, at the time it was Kennesaw College, but when I started there in 1977, that was the first year it was Kennesaw College. I think the junior had been dropped. So I never really went to Kennesaw Junior College. It was always Kennesaw College. By the way, I would never have graduated if it had not been for George [H.] Beggs. Have you heard that name?

SW: Yes, he was the first chair of the Social Sciences division.

RC: Yes. Back then I just was so afraid of economics because I'm not very good at math or anything like that. I said, "Dr. Beggs, please let me take economic history because I'm going to be a teacher, and I'm majoring in Social Studies Education. I'm never going to teach economics." He approved that, and I always gave him credit for helping me get through college.

SW: Having mercy on you!

RC: Yes! He did. He was very stern, but very much respected. In that course I was able to write a paper about Mr. Woodruff. So I remember I wrote to him about [it]. I actually made an "A" on that assignment—I didn't make too many "A's" in college, but I made an "A" on that. So I had written to him, and he wrote back that he never even remembers making an "A" on anything—you know, that kind of thing. It was more or less that kind of correspondence. Then I became acquainted with Mr. Jones—[Mr. Woodruff's] right-hand man—[he had] an official title of vice-president of The Coca-Cola Company, but he handled every aspect of Mr. Woodruff's life—he gave my letters to Mr. Woodruff.

SW: What was his name?

RC: His name was Joseph [W.] Jones. He probably gave me a dozen of Mr. Woodruff's Christmas cards. Then when I became acquainted with Mr. Menaboni. He gave me more, and then some were available to purchase. I eventually ended up with forty of the forty-four. We're still missing four in the collection at KSU.

SW: I see in the catalog, I think the one with the thrasher [is] one of the ones that's still missing—the one with the brown thrasher and the Cherokee rose, 1947 or 1948.

RC: Right. The brown thrasher—that's probably Mr. Menaboni's most publicized work. Anyone who grew up in the state and did their little state project in fifth grade, whenever they do that, would write to the State of Georgia, and they would send you a booklet about the state—it always included the state tree and the state song and the state fish and the state bird and the state flower. That was always the painting that they used of Mr. Menaboni's to illustrate the state bird and state flower.

SW: I think when I saw that painting, I thought, I'm pretty sure I've seen this before.

RC: I'm sure you have. A company was commissioned to print lithographs of it. Mr. [Robert W.] Woodruff paid for everything including postage. The Atlanta History Center—at the time it was the Atlanta Historical Society—sent every public school and library in Georgia one of those prints back in 1950.

SW: So you have no idea where the original could possibly be?

RC: Yes, I do. Mr. Woodruff gave the original to Betty Talmadge, the wife of Herman Talmadge, who was governor at the time. I'm not really sure why she thought it was hers personally, but maybe that was an agreement that they had. I don't know. But I would have loved for it to have stayed in the Governor's Mansion and still even hanging in the Governor's Mansion. But whatever the deal was, she felt like it was hers personally. As far as I know, it's still in her family. I have seen it. Callaway Gardens did an exhibition a long time ago now. But within the last ten years, they opened up the Virginia Hand Callaway Nature Center, and there's a wing named after Mr. Menaboni there. They had a Menaboni exhibition for the dedication, and that painting was in that show.

SW: Do you still have any of those letters when you corresponded with Mr. Woodruff?

RC: I do.

SW: What sort of things would he say in those letters?

RC: Well, he would always thank me for writing or thank me for remembering his birthday. He welcomed me as a shareholder. The earlier comment I made about my grade for the report—when he was in school, he never made those kinds of grades. It was that type of correspondence. After Mr. Woodruff died, I was invited down to see his office. I actually met one of the secretaries who had been with him a long time. Mr. Jones introduced me to her. When she heard my name—and I don't mean this in a boastful way—but when she heard my name, she remembered, and she said, "You're one of the few people that Mr. Woodruff wrote back to." He had a huge correspondence of course, but somebody writing

to him out of the blue—a lot of those letters would go to other people to answer. She said for some reason we connected. Her comments made me feel very special.

SW: Definitely, wow. So you were at Kennesaw starting in '77, and it was Kennesaw College back then. What do you remember of campus life and the student life and all that stuff back then?

RC: I remember it being a very fine school. I remember very, very good professors. I was fortunate enough at the time to be a student when the school was on a quarter system rather than a semester system. Sometimes it's a little bit harder to understand for people who are not familiar with the quarter system.

SW: We were still on a quarter system the first time I went around. It was '97 when we were still on quarters, but in '98 we went to semesters.

RC: All right. For example, science, there were two required biology courses. So at that time I was able to keep the same professor who was absolutely a phenomenal teacher. His name was Dr. Ben Golden. Then, the history and social science [education] and political science [faculties] were fairly small, so I had several of those professors over and over again—all very good, all very interesting. What I think is sort of an oddity is my very favorite professor was my English professor. We had three required courses—we had writing courses with composition, and then literature—but, anyway, there were three courses. I was fortunate enough to have this professor for all three.

SW: Do you remember his name?

RC: Yes. His name was Don Russ. It's interesting since I'm Don Russell. His name is Don Russ. As a student, you know what it's like when you get used to the professor. You know what kind of tests to expect, you know how to study, you know what his expectations are, and so I knew it would benefit me to have this teacher again. But we really did like him and admire him. He would read to us, and we would just be sitting there all enthralled with what we were studying. He had a great gift for teaching. Of course, the campus is not anything like it is today. On one side there were two buildings. One housed the president, and I know it's still there, but I don't know what's in there.

SW: It's the police station.

RC: Okay, then something that we called the Annex, which was behind that building. Then we had Science behind the Annex, and the other side of campus was English [Humanities] and Social Science, and the library was in the middle. When I was there, the [Sturgis] library, the taller library building that's there today, was under construction and completed when I was a student there. I don't remember exactly when.

SW: I think it was '81.

RC: Okay, that's the year I graduated. One thing I'm not quite sure about, I think the [Carmichael] Student Center was finished at the time [1975] because I remember eating lunch in there. So that was another way to expand. On the other end of the campus was the gym and the fields, and then the other end, I think, there was a Music building which is still there.

SW: Yes. It was Plant Operations before that.

RC: Okay. I remember when they built the newer Humanities building which is now called English—English is written on the side of the main building. I know they added another wing to that. Very small, our classes were small. When I was in education classes there may have been fifteen students. I was in Athens yesterday at the University of Georgia, and I asked one of my former students, “What’s the largest class you’ve had?” And I think he said 280 people, you know, in a lecture hall, and he explained to me how that worked. We never had anything like that. I felt like I was very prepared at the time. The nursing school was graduating the highest quality nurses. I think they still do. I’m basing that on the tests that they would take [to be licensed]. They outscored Emory, outscored all these other nursing schools.

I’m very proud that the teachers who graduate from KSU [do very well] on the certification tests. When we would go out and get a job and we were evaluated, we outscored all the other colleges and universities on the certification tests. We were very prepared. Now, of course, sometimes we thought, do we really have to do this assignment, or why do we have to write one more objective or one more unit plan, that kind of thing? But I didn’t have any trouble getting a job. Like I said, I worked for a long time for the Cobb County public schools. I left Kennesaw knowing that my teachers cared about me and I felt like I was prepared.

SW: What were your impressions of the student body? Was everybody as focused and career driven back then?

RC: I think so. That’s not something I can really talk about because I know we had a certain circle of friends that, as we were going through the program, we were in most of the same classes together.

SW: Right, sort of cohorts, I guess?

RC: And then I knew a few students who I went to high school with, but there wasn’t a whole lot of outside activity. There were no students who lived on campus. We were all commuters. We all came to school at different times, so it wasn’t like

- what they have now with dorms and fraternities and sororities and a whole lot of intramural things that they do.
- SW: Right. They're trying to get a football team started.
- RC: Right, very limited and not anything like it is now in terms of opportunities for students outside of the classroom.
- SW: It's funny though, when you talk to people, it seems like parking has always been a problem. In the history of the school finding a parking space has always been a problem. Was it like that then too?
- RC: I remember, regarding the parking, that if my routine was changed, then I had a problem. Let's say, if I had an eight o'clock class, I always knew where to go to find a parking space, but if my eight o'clock class was cancelled and I just had to go to my eleven o'clock, then that threw everything out of whack. So then you might have to drive around and look or wait for people to leave. But for the most part I don't remember that being the headache that it is today.
- SW: Were you part of the first four-year class or was '81 the second year?
- RC: I haven't thought about that in a long time, but I think that it may have been us [that we were the first to go all the way through after the name changed to Kennesaw College]. Not one year as Kennesaw Junior College. But that I'm not sure about. [Ed.: The first students received baccalaureate degrees in the Spring 1980 commencement exercises.]
- SW: I guess this is a question that's going to back up a little bit, but when did you decide to become an educator?
- RC: Very early in elementary school. I think I wanted to do what every little boy does. You know, you want to be a fireman or you want to be—I actually wanted to drive a school bus at one time because I was totally fascinated by those stop signs on the side of the buses that come in and out. [laughter]
- SW: This looks like fun, right?
- RC: Yes. So I just thought that would be so cool to put that stop sign in and out and make cars stop on both sides of the bus. But I specifically remember wanting to be a teacher when I was in fourth grade. I told my fourth grade teacher, Mrs. Geneva Baird that I wanted to be a teacher, and she brought me some old school books. I remember taking them home and making my sister and my neighbors play school and work out of those books and that kind of thing. At one time, probably in seventh grade through high school, well, really until I got my job, I thought I wanted to be a principal. When I was in seventh grade, I interviewed my principal, Mr. Henry S. Nettles, about being a principal, but after I became a

- teacher, it just no longer appealed to me. I had a great opportunity to teach phenomenal children for a very long time, very special, supportive parents at four different schools, all in Cobb County, and, just over time the headaches that a principal has didn't seem like fun. Especially, I would never be a high school principal because of the extra activities and now really a lot of garbage that goes on.
- SW: Yes. My mom has worked [in a school] since 1986, and, I don't know, listening to her....
- RC: Is she a teacher?
- SW: She's not a teacher. She started out there as a paraprofessional and now is administrative support in the front office. It's funny to me the stories she tells. It sounds like old people complaining about how disrespectful kids are how they just get away with it, with parents not supporting any sort of discipline in the system. There's actually one thing. When I came back to go to Kennesaw, I was going to study history education, and it didn't take long for me to put two and two together. My wife is a teacher also, but she still loves it. She's a couple years younger than I am, and she's always had the passion that I think you're talking about. She always knew she wanted to teach, and she decided at some point she didn't want to be a principal either. But this thing of just knowing so many people in public schools, and it just doesn't seem like anybody's happy out there.
- RC: No, it's not fun anymore.
- SW: Especially in high school.
- RC: When I started teaching, principals were real leaders, and principals would go to the county office and say, "My teachers aren't going to do that; they don't have time to do this." Or, come back, "How can we make this better?" They tried hard and did lead and were very respected. Now, a new principal walks into a school, and he says, "How long am I going to be here; where am I going next?" Then they certainly don't want to say anything or issue some type of a challenge or rock the boat [because they are] worried about losing their job. It's just totally the opposite of what it should be.
- SW: All right, you graduated from Kennesaw College in '81, and then you went down to Georgia State University and you got your master's in '84 and your specialist's in '88, I guess it was?
- RC: In '84 and '88, I think.
- SW: So what did you get your master's and specialist's in?

- RC: They were from the College of Education, and were in Curriculum and Instruction with a concentration in Social Studies Education.
- SW: Okay. Just to back up a bit, was your degree from Kennesaw in Social Science Education?
- RC: Yes, it was a double major in Social Science and also secondary education. I also, in 1980, got an associate degree in pre-law because the college was doing away with most two year degrees. I looked in the catalog, and realized I had the credits to get it, and did so.
- SW: Okay. You started teaching in Cobb County. Was it almost straight out of Kennesaw?
- RC: Yes, straight out of school. I graduated in the spring and then started that fall, the next school year.
- SW: So your first school was Lindley?
- RC: Lindley Middle School.
- SW: What kind of school was that like?
- RC: At the time it was, it was a pretty average, fairly diverse, school in terms of the students who were there.
- SW: Is this the one that you said was down by the perimeter?
- RC: Yes. [Ed.: Mableton area in South Cobb County]. Very, very good students for the most part. When I say diverse, I remember having students from India, from several countries in Asia, so not just majority African-American or majority white.
- SW: So that area was already diversifying.
- RC: Fairly diverse. Then I went to Pine Mountain, which was more white. It is up near Kennesaw. Then I decided to go to John McEachern High School, and that was a great experience just because of the history of the school and its unique campus. They also have an endowed foundation with lots of money.
- SW: I still have never been there, but as a kid going to a place close by, we used to hear the great stories of how it looks like a college campus and it's a trust fund school. Was it exactly like that?

- RC: Yes, it was. I felt really challenged there by our principal. Even though he had done a lot of work in athletics as a coach, he was still very academic and the greatest among leaders. He was a man with a real and true vision.
- SW: What was his name?
- RC: Ralph D. Williams. He taught science, but was also a very well respected football coach in Lafayette.
- SW: Up north?
- RC: Yes, up towards Chattanooga. What I mean by challenging, I was fortunate enough to be department chair. He would come into our meetings and hand out books and say, "Okay, Russ and Suzanne, you need to read Chapters 1 and 2. And to the math, English, and the other chairs, you're going to read this and this and this. Then on such-and-such a day, you're going to present your chapters to the group." It was really a nice experience. Then Mr. Williams retired, and I had an opportunity to go to Joseph Wheeler High School thanks to the principal, Mr. Joseph Boland. And Wheeler was where I graduated from, so that was sort of strange going back to my high school, but I stayed there nine years before I retired in 2009.
- SW: If you go back, you went from teaching middle to high school, just about smack dab in the middle of your career.
- RC: It was.
- SW: How would you say that your experience of teaching and the type of curriculum that you taught changed over your whole career?
- RC: High school I felt was more academic. When I taught seventh grade, mainly seventh grade—I did teach eighth grade a couple of years—but it was much more dealing with behavior issues. Not anything serious, but you know seventh graders are real active and hormonal and all these other things that are going on. High school, I felt like I was more of an academic teacher. I didn't feel like I wasn't teaching when I was in middle school because I did and I loved it. But I would always get something that you would call a seven year itch. I would be at a school six or seven years, and then, okay, it's time to change and start over again, and be motivated and challenged and go on to another school. I think I stayed six years at Lindley and then seven years at the next one [Pine Mountain], seven years at McEachern, and then I stayed nine at Wheeler.
- SW: When you moved was it because you had a master's and a specialist's that you were able to go from middle school to high school like that?

RC: Well, I was certified in grades seven through twelve. At that time that was what they did. It was social studies, but now it's history or it's political science, etc. I think it may even be called middle school, which would be sixth, seventh and eighth grade, so it's very different now.

SW: Right. Back then they probably just broke it out K through sixth and then seven through twelve?

RC: Yes.

SW: You retired in '09 from Wheeler, but you became the Distinguished Docent at KSU in May of '08. How did that come about?

RC: Well, that was just because of the director [of galleries] at the time, Will Higgs. It wasn't like an honor or anything like that. It just happened because I would go up there, and they would call me to give special tours or give special talks about Mr. Menaboni. I still do that. I do not work too much now during the summer, plus the gallery is closed for the summer. But when the new exhibit opens in January, I hope to work at least two days a week in the gallery as a docent and then maybe another day that week in museum support. In museum support I work with Matthew Harper, and I work on very specific projects. For example, one project was the archiving all the exhibitions for the last forty-five years at the university. All the material was in boxes, no order. Someone did a magnificent job of keeping things, of keeping the information, but it was not organized. So I developed a data base and a filing system to organize all that.

Right now I'm dealing with a new reference library for the art museum. The books were given by Mr. Bentley. Fred Bentley, of Marietta, has been very generous to Kennesaw. He gave us probably fifty or so boxes of books. Matthew has gone through all the boxes and decided what we need to keep and which books are appropriate for the art museum. Now I'm going to process and catalog and all that. Then we're going to make labels and shelve the books. I do very specific things, and then when that's over with, he'll give me another project.

SW: It's interesting that Kennesaw has been putting on art exhibits for that long.

RC: Yes, and really astonishing shows for a school that size and for a school that young. It was very progressive and very well planned. The exhibitions were nicely installed by curators and [included] magnificent catalogs with outstanding works. Thanks to Mr. Bentley and another man named Alan Sellars—they donated the first works of art to the permanent collection, so that's how the collection got started.

SW: When was that?

RC: I'm not sure of the exact date. I should know that, but I don't.

SW: In the late '60's or early '70's?

RC: I think '71, but I don't know if that's correct.

SW: Okay. But just some time around then.

RC: Yes.

SW: When you were a student were you involved in the arts?

RC: No. The only thing I took was music appreciation. I do remember several art shows in the [old] library. There was a gallery there. It was actually called the seminar room at the time. We would go in there for various things. They also used it to hang exhibits there. I remember I went to see an exhibition because my doctor had his paintings in a show. My doctor in Marietta was an art collector, and he had his paintings on loan to the college. One of them was a Wilbur G. Kurtz painting from the artist that I mentioned earlier, so I was very excited.

SW: Do you remember the doctor's name?

RC: Yes. Robert P. Coggins.

SW: A lot of the people who I've talked to have talked about how Dr. Sturgis recognized how important the arts are to a liberal arts college. Were you aware of how important the arts were at Kennesaw while you were a student there?

RC: I don't think I could put it that way, no. Not as a student—if you're a history major, then you still may know that the College of the Arts and the School of Music is an all-Steinway school and it's a very recognized program. Is that what you're referring to?

SW: Yes, so were you attuned to the fact that Kennesaw wanted to be a place where the arts would be welcomed?

RC: Well, I do remember something that was very exciting, and that was the Atlanta Symphony came to play when I was a student there, in the gym, and the conductor was Robert Shaw who was very, very famous.

SW: Is he still the conductor?

RC: No, he's dead now. He started and led the Atlanta Symphony Chorus for years, so that was fascinating that they would come to the school. When the concert was over, we went up and talked to him, so I would say that we had some neat events there. Like I said, I remember art exhibitions, but I don't remember going to a

play or anything like that. I don't even know if they had theater. They may have had drama.

SW: Performing arts came along later?

RC: Yes. The music program was very small. I do remember seeing Dr. [Wayne] Gibson on campus as well as Joseph Meeks as a student when I was there. They were music teachers. We had a choice; we could either take art appreciation, or music appreciation. I don't remember why I took music. I remember thoroughly enjoying the class and had a great professor, but I don't know if I did it on purpose or if it was just the way that was best for my schedule. I have no idea why I did that at this point in my life. Now, I wish I had taken an art history class too.

SW: I guess you were already collecting art. Were you collecting art even as a college student or did that come later?

RC: Sometimes I would try to get something that was real. I did have an appreciation for it, but I guess I started collecting after I started teaching.

SW: When you started collecting with like a Menaboni collection, at what point did you say this would be a nice thing to exhibit at Kennesaw State? Was that a consideration for you or when did that happen?

RC: Well, actually what happened to me—I don't have a family in terms of children. So I remember thinking—and you may have even heard somebody say this—collectors spend half their life collecting, and then the other half is spent trying to figure out what to do with what they collected the first half. This sounds a little bit morbid, but I don't mean it that way—I'm sort of obsessed with death [laughter]. I don't mean I'm afraid I am going to drop dead, but I just mean if I do, because I have a lot of collections, and if you look at my books, they're autographed—they've got a little card in each one. So if you see a book on a shelf, whether it's autographed or not, I've got very detailed notes about what I've done. So I thought, well, what about my Menaboni collection? I would love for a painting to hang in the White House or the Governor's Mansion. So I began to contact some people, "Are you interested?"

The University of Georgia was interested, Emory was interested, Callaway Gardens was interested, but what those three organizations did—and they sent the directors over, so I was very happy they came to visit—but they would look around my house and say, "Well, we'd like to have this and maybe that over there and the one in the hall." I thought, well, that's fine, this can go here and that can go there. But when I contacted KSU, they were very excited and said, well, we'd like to have your Menaboni collection. KSU did something that was very different from the others. They proposed taking the entire collection and keeping it all together, so I thought, wow, that's really awesome for everything to stay

together. I thought it was really something that I would do when I died. Well, that's fine.

SW: Take care of it in a will or something?

RC: Right. But it didn't work out that way because KSU began to have ideas about building a museum, and the first gallery was going to be for Mr. Menaboni. All of a sudden the Robert W. Woodruff Foundation is giving the first million dollar gift to the College of the Arts for this project, which was very special because when you think of Woodruff money, it's always for Emory or Georgia Tech for mathematics, science, medicine, that kind of thing. It was their first gift to a non-research institution. They do not build art museums for colleges. They've given a lot to the High Museum, but the only reason they were interested in the KSU museum was because of the relationship between Mr. Woodruff and Mr. Menaboni.

All of a sudden I'm invited to a ground breaking, and I'm given a hard hat. I'm thinking, hmm, I'm going to have to give up some of these soon. In 2007 the Bailey Center was built, and they opened the gallery. They had the dedication for the concert hall, and they had an exhibition in the museum, but the dedication for the museum gallery [Don Russell Clayton Art Gallery] was in May 2008. That summer [2007] I had some work done inside my house and had my bathrooms redone along with some other things. What I did personally was take everything down because all the walls were to be painted. I decided, well, I'd like to give this one, but I'll still keep that one, and these two can go. Everything that I thought I could do without I put in closets, and so I really didn't see the art for maybe four months. I was used to the new look. Do you see what I'm saying? I knew that I could part with them until I started pulling them out of the closet. "Oh, I forgot about this one!" But that's how I approached it. Then when I walked into the new gallery, I actually felt guilty about not giving everything. But I'm not a wealthy man, and I couldn't take all my art down and then have empty walls and then spend more money trying to put something back up. It just didn't make sense.

Over time, since 2007, I've said, okay, I'm ready for this one to go. So the big gift was 2007, but every year since I've given more. I would like to back up about one thing if you don't mind. In 2004—three and a half years before the Bailey Center was actually built—and we started talking sometime in 2003, which I'm almost sure that's probably the year—I don't know the exact month, but that's when I heard from KSU, yes, we're interested, when can we come out and see what you have, we'd like to take you to dinner, that kind of thing. I remember another meeting on my birthday in February in 2004, and was very honored to have Dr. Siegel and Dean Meeks and Dr. Wicker—he's in development and Vice President for University Advancement—all come to my home to visit. Then we went to dinner. So it was really cool because it was my birthday, and special to have the president of the university visit you at your home.

What we began to plan were these things about the gallery. At that time, no money, they didn't have the gift from the Woodruff Foundation, but by December of 2004 we exhibited in the Sturgis [Library] Gallery the forty Woodruff Christmas cards along with my White House Christmas card collection. I collect White House Christmas cards and the gift prints. They also exhibited these [wood block and steel engravings of the White House] that I also collected. It was a very nice and popular, but brief exhibit. Then in April 2005 they did something called the Collector's—I'll have to look it up—the Collector's Vision I think. It was something done every year that would focus on a certain collector and what he collects. So my collection was Menaboni. [The exhibit consisted of] all of my originals and then a few originals that were loaned by some other people who were friends of mine, along with many lithographs. The exhibition was in the Fine Arts Gallery in the Wilson Building. They had an exhibit which was very nice. A wonderful crowd came for the opening to hear me talk and that kind of thing. The school printed a beautiful multi-foldout—I don't know the terminology—for the exhibition. So by Spring 2005, I think by that time we knew that the Woodruff Foundation had pledged a million dollars. I don't really know the details or the stipulations, but we knew it was coming. Then the Bailey Center was dedicated in 2007.

SW: How does the word come down that the Woodruff Foundation is going to donate this kind of money?

RC: Well, as I understand the story, Mr. Bentley, Fred Bentley, knew [Charles H.] Pete McTier, who at the time, was the president of the Robert W. Woodruff Foundation. So they just had an idea—I think first Wes Wicker went down and asked the Woodruff Foundation for a lot of money for various projects. I don't know how many times they've been awarded, but Wes went down there mentioning, "We're thinking about doing a museum." "Well, we don't build art museums, especially at some place like Kennesaw State University." But all of a sudden Wes said, "It's for Athos Menaboni." And Mr. McTier said, "Well, let's get together and talk about this." Wes Wicker is the person who initiated it with the Foundation. They wrote the proposal, and then Dr. Wicker went down with Mr. Bentley to see Mr. McTier, and then over time the board approved the gift. I'm really happy to say, and I don't think it's private, no one really told me not to say this, but they have pledged another \$300,000 for the museum expansion fund drive that's going on now.

SW: Where is that going to be going?

RC: When you come up to the Bailey Center, you can enter the building on either side, but there's a hill on one side leading down to lower parking lot. It's going to be built into that hill side and is really beautifully designed to fit the land.

SW: Wow. Will the gallery still be in the Bailey Center?

RC: Well, we've talked about that. I've given my ideas, and I was told they were very good ideas, but it's out of my hands. I don't have any....

SW: Pull?

RC: Right. I can scream and holler and yell, and sometimes it works, but I try not to do that unless I have to! [laughter] I've offered a suggestion, but we'll see how it goes. The Clayton Gallery will remain where it is now, but a Sara and Athos Menaboni Gallery will be in the new building for Menaboni art I hope!

SW: Is there a time table on the museum there?

RC: I think I've read where the deadline for raising a million dollars is June 29, and I don't know if it'll be extended or how close we are or, if let's say we're \$200,000 off, will the KSU Foundation pick up the rest? I'm not sure how all the politics of that works. We all feel pretty confident that it will be built. Sometime in 2012, early, we hope to have a ground breaking, and then it might take a year, something like that to build.

SW: That would be great. We've certainly gone through all the questions I have, but is there anything that you can think of that we've left out of your story?

RC: No, I would just like to say that I'm very grateful to the university and what they have done. I know it's sort of humbling to see your name on the wall, but I think it all worked out, and it all turned out the way that it did because I really only had one motive, and that wasn't to get my name on the wall. As a matter of fact, I'm a shy person. I know I taught school, and my friends think I'm a lot of fun, but in a crowd I'm back in the corner, and just can't wait to get out [laughter]!

SW: A lot of people are like that. They seem like extroverts but it turns out....

RC: Oh, it's brutal for me. My only motive was to honor Mr. Menaboni, and I felt like he is a great artist, one of the greatest artists, my favorite artist. I was fortunate enough to know him, and I never felt like he was honored in the Atlanta community like he should have been.

SW: Sure. As an almost lifelong Georgian I didn't even know who he was until I started doing this. So I think you're right about that, especially when you talk about the print with the brown thrasher and the Cherokee rose. Again, that's an iconic symbol here in this area, and we don't know who painted that. So, yes, I think you're right.

RC: He has birds in *World Book Encyclopedia* and some other things. The main thing about Mr. Menaboni—it's my theory that if I wanted a cardinal painting, let's say in the 1950s into the mid-1960s, maybe a little bit later, I might wait three years to

get it. That's how busy he was. All of his work was commissioned. When families purchased these paintings, they kept them, and they're still very rare. They come out on the market from time to time, but not like you would think. The families—they really are passed down. His work was never really commercialized where it's out there in the stores and you can buy lithographs or there's a big art show down at such-and-such a gallery, and they're all for sale. He really did not have time to do too much of that. His work was commissioned, so that's one reason why I think his name may not be as famous, let's say, as Audubon or someone like that. But when you look into what he's done, he had a very prolific career.

SW: I found a painting of his online at a gallery in New York City—Arader; they described him as the twentieth-century Audubon.

RC: Right. They actually got this quote from *Time* magazine. In the early 1950s, they wrote an article about Mr. Menaboni because he and his wife had just published their book which won several awards. Menaboni won the Georgia Governor's Award in the 1983. He illustrated many magazine covers and encyclopedias, and did things for corporations like Coca-Cola, Lockheed, Delta Airlines, and Prudential Insurance. He then did other private commissions and birds—did Mr. Woodruff's Christmas cards and large murals for the Citizens and Southern National Bank.

SW: What sort of things did he do for Lockheed?

RC: He did a large silk screen, an Oriental looking paneled screen that's probably the length of my hall for their board room at the Marietta location. Now it belongs to Marietta-Cobb Museum of Art. Then for Delta he painted—and I've never seen one—but he did a Christmas card, I think 1953. He illustrated a poetry book in the 1950s, so he had a really nice career. When he died, he had a fairly substantial estate. He wasn't rich like Mr. Woodruff, but his bills were paid, his property was paid for, his home was paid for, and he had money in the bank, so they lived very comfortably. I remember Sara telling me that she and Athos had only one credit card, for Rich's. "We pay cash for everything else."

SW: Did he have kids?

RC: No, he and Sara never had any children. He only had one niece, and she lives in Italy. His brother had a daughter, and I think she is still living. Menaboni had two sisters who never married.

SW: You said his sister lived in this area.

RC: Yes, he had two sisters who lived here. Their home was destroyed during World War II by the Americans. They lived in Livorno, Italy, which is on the west coast not too far from Pisa. During the war, Athos was already living in Atlanta and

- was married to Sara. He married her in 1928. He sent for his mother and two sisters to come and live with him, which they did. They had a little trouble in the beginning, just because of visas and that kind of thing. They had to live in Cuba for a time until all the paperwork could be done so they could move permanently to the United States and become American citizens. I'm not sure if his mother became an American citizen, but I know the two sisters did.
- SW: When you mentioned they had troubles early on, do you think that stemmed from some sort of anti-Italian thing?
- RC: No, I do not think so; I believe it was just strictly the law. They came here, and the visa was good for so long, and then the visa ran out, and it could not be extended. Rather than go back to Italy they went to Cuba.
- SW: When did they settle in Georgia?
- RC: I would say by 1950. I don't know the exact date; maybe the late 1940s. Tina, the sister that lived until 2001, was a very prominent piano teacher in the Brookhaven area of Atlanta. She had a lot of students. A few of her students went on to be professionals and played for the Atlanta Symphony and other musical institutions. Then Margherita, his oldest sister and the oldest child in the family, taught Italian in Atlanta. She was very creative, and made dolls, for example, of characters from children's classics like Tom Sawyer and Robinson Crusoe. She made dolls for Holt Rinehart, and then they were exhibited in New York City and across the country at book shows. There was a TV show in Atlanta. I can't think of the sponsor now—it may have been called the Atlanta Dairy—but they had this cow that was sort of a mascot, like the cow for the Chick-Fil-A now. She made the puppet that was in the commercials and on the television show, so she was very talented. Their mother died in the late 1950s. Menaboni's father died right before World War II started, so he never experienced any of that tragedy of being in Italy at that time.
- SW: So he just moved over here and, I guess, liked the area?
- RC: Well, he was very disillusioned by World War I. He was a soldier in the Italian army. He was a pilot, and that's the first time airplanes were used [in combat]. I remember seeing some of his artwork after he died that was very negative from this time period. You can see and feel the pain of the people in his drawings.
- SW: That's interesting. He had something in common with Ernest Hemmingway, I guess, being disillusioned by World War I.
- RC: Yes, he was very disillusioned. His father was a ship's—I think it's called chandler, and owned a company that was started by his grand or great grandfather. A boat would come into the harbor, and he would restock it with food or fix a sail or whatever it needed before it continued on its journey. He

knew an American freighter captain, and so he arranged for Athos to come to America on his friend's boat. They sailed to North Africa first. I've got some water colors that were done in Tunisia. Athos then landed in New York City, and his first job was painting religious candles for the churches. He really hated New York; he despised the area.

SW: Any reason why?

RC: I think the crowd. I think it was just the mass of people. I don't know how he found out about it, but he moved to Tampa during this time period around 1924. There was a land boom at Davis Island, and he got a job designing some of the buildings. That went bankrupt. Somehow he had met Philip Schutze, the world famous architect in Atlanta, who did the Swan House and other very prominent homes and buildings in the Atlanta area. Mr. Schutze brought him to Atlanta in 1928 to help him build the Swan House, which is now part of the Atlanta History Center. What Menaboni did there was paint swans on the ceiling of the powder room in Mrs. Inman's bathroom, and he marbleized the baseboards in the living and dining rooms, faux painting, to make wood look like marble. The most interesting thing is she ordered the very finest, most expensive Italian marble she could find. Mr. Menaboni just thought it was phenomenal, but she didn't like it. She had Mr. Menaboni paint the pink marble green. He thought she was the biggest nut!

SW: I guess work is work!

RC: What kind of idiot wants an artist to paint pink marble green?! But then he got some other mural jobs. Just by chance he got into painting birds. He loved birds as a child and had a lot of animals growing up. He painted a cardinal for his own living room. One of their good friends, Molly Aeck, walked in—she was a decorator—and said, “Oh, I've got to have that! That's perfect for a house I'm working on. Will you sell it?” Richard and Molly Aeck were the Menabonis' dearest friends. That's how he got into painting birds.

SW: I guess from what I read, the difference between what he did and Audubon did was he tried to do his from live birds.

RC: Right. And I know you would not be surprised at what I'm getting ready to say. Audubon's work does not appeal to me at all. I just think his birds look really stiff. They show no life. Mr. Menaboni's birds—now you can tell in the early bird paintings, like from the late 1930s, before he fully developed his technique—they looked a little bit stiff, a little—is Audubonish a word?—I don't know; we just created one! But when you see, like the cardinals in the other room—to me the birds just show a lot of life and look so natural and real in the foliage he would choose to put the birds in.

SW: Right, interesting.

RC: He's my favorite.

SW: That's great. Do you feel that your exhibits have honored his work in the right way?

RC: Oh I do. I don't have any issue with anything that the school has done. I think they've been very creative. I've been very, very happy and excited about the next exhibition because—he wasn't as great as Mr. Woodruff in terms of being a patron, but was really close. His name was Mills B. Lane, and he was the president of C&S Bank and had Mr. Menaboni do a lot of murals. Back then, the banks were real fancy. There's a downtown bank, it could have been the home office because it's very large, at Mitchell Street and Forsyth Street. The new owner of that building, after the bank closed, realized something special about the Menaboni mural. It's thirty feet long by I think twelve or thirteen feet high. He was very kind to give this mural to the university, and so that is a big deal.

SW: When was that?

RC: He gave it as a promised gift right now. It's at KSU, and is all finished. It's been conserved and put on stretchers. So it's going to be the highlight of the next show. I'm happy of course because it's Menaboni, but also because Mr. Menaboni, when he was young studied to be a mural painter and did several murals in Atlanta homes and buildings, and even worked on the Cyclorama in the late 1920s when it was conserved. He did a lot of the sky work that had been damaged by a leaking roof. He was a trained muralist. To have a Menaboni mural in the collection at KUS is very exceptional. So we're very grateful to this man who wants to give it and to the KSU Foundation who paid to have it removed from the wall and conserved.

The collection continues to grow, and there are more and more donors. At first, I was the only Menaboni donor, but since the collection has been given, there have been, I would say, half a dozen, maybe more, donors of originals, including this mural. We even have a panel that Mr. Menaboni did for Robert Woodruff's airplane. The Coca-Cola Company had—I guess the last one that Mr. Woodruff would have flown on was a G-3. Now they're up to a G-6 I think, but when he would walk toward the back of the plane, you had Menaboni art on the walls, and then the galley would be on the other side. When the planes were sold, the panels were taken out, and the mechanics or whoever wanted the art took them. The widow of one of the mechanics gave us a very large panel that includes Menaboni's signature as well, so it couldn't be a better piece.

SW: Is it just a situation where they are getting ready to give up the plane and say, "Who wants this?"

- RC: Well, they were going to sell the plane, so what The Coca-Cola Company would do with their planes, because it had the original art or maybe some other things that had been customized for them—they removed it. Then whoever bought the plane, whether it was another company or a person, would fix the plane up like they wanted it, so, that's how they were able to do it.
- SW: When you're putting on these exhibitions, when the university does, do you have input or how much do you have into these?
- RC: Well, my main input—it has to be a Menaboni exhibition because that's the reason the gallery was built, in terms of why I gave my collection and why the money was given to the university to build the gallery. We have a new director, and she has not really started planning the next exhibition, but in the past the director would give me his ideas and ask for my input, but I'm not really on the creative side. I don't understand the philosophy behind the exhibitions, you know, they have these very academic ideas. For me, you walk into a gallery, oh, this would look good on that wall, that looks good on this wall, these needs to be so far above the floor....
- SW: So it doesn't look high.
- RC: Right, exactly. But they have these other [ideas], way beyond my mind in what I comprehend. Ideas about what they want to do and what they want to present. So I don't really get involved in that. As long as it's Menaboni, I'm happy.
- SW: When it's being put together, do you check in and say, hey guys, looks great, kind of thing?
- RC: Well, I will now because I'm up there several days each week. At the time I didn't really see the show until it opened that night.
- SW: Was that a conscious decision, like I want to be surprised or I want to stay out of the way?
- RC: Well, probably I wanted to stay out of the way. I don't think they ever said, "Why don't you come up here and see what we've done so far." It could be they didn't want me up there. They never said that, but for the wall text that goes beside each work, they've asked me to read those. I've been very involved with the catalogs. Before a publication goes out, it has a check list including the dean and maybe a half a dozen, maybe eight people. It goes to all these people to sign off on. So we look for mistakes or this isn't the right person or date, or this isn't exactly how the title is, or maybe [we need to] correct some type of essay. A person from Callaway Gardens wrote an essay, and they were talking about Sara, and when she died, well, they were off by a year, so I would correct that, that kind of thing.

- SW: I noticed in that catalog there were works cited. Has there been a biography of Menaboni or do you have a lot of contact with scholars who work on him?
- RC: I have over time. There's a website called ASKART, and so on the site I've have some postings. If you're interested in Mr. Menaboni or if you have information to share, please contact me. Also, the university gets calls for collectors or people who knew Menaboni. The callers want more information or to get in touch with me. I've been very amazed by the people who I've heard from. The lady who wrote the biography is Barbara Taylor. It was published in 1999, and I helped her a lot. [Barbara Cable Taylor, *The Life and Art of Athos Menaboni* (Mercer University Press)]. Almost all the photographs in her book are mine.
- SW: Where is she from?
- RC: She's from this area.
- SW: Does she teach?
- RC: No. She studied art, but they are art collectors. Her husband came home with a beautiful painting by Menaboni of a magnolia bloom with butterflies around it. Somehow we got connected. Then she planned a major exhibition in Marietta at the Marietta/Cobb Museum of Art. There were over 100—I don't know how many—original works. A phenomenal show! She was also the curator for a Menaboni exhibition at the Albany Museum of Art. Then she decided to write a book, so I helped her with the appendix and did some editing. I thoroughly enjoyed that. I should have written a book, but I was too busy teaching school. I didn't have time.
- SW: Well, I think we've just about covered everything, but I want to thank you for taking the time.
- RC: Thanks you! Make sure you see the next exhibition!

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