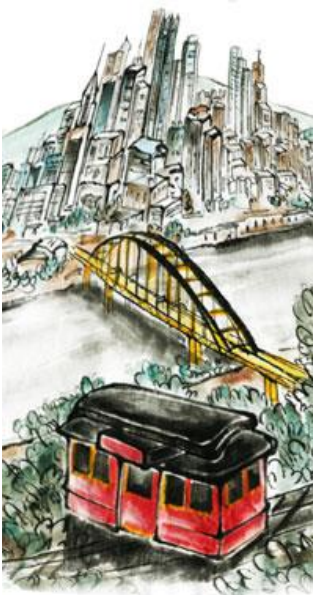


# Pittsburgh Oral Histories

Pennsylvania Department  
Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh



RS

Interviewed by Barry Chad

Interviewed at the Dormont Public Library

03-07-07

Transcribed 06-16-07 – 06-28-07

Reviewed 07-18-07

Revised 07-18-07

## Interviewer's Note

*"When I was in fifth grade, Pittsburgh teachers were asked for the names of 'potential' artists. We were invited to attend Saturday classes in the auditorium, Carnegie Museum, 9:00 a.m. to noon. My father told me that it was a two-streetcar ride both ways. He would go with me the first day, wait, and return with me when class was over. Subsequently I would be on my own...I've been an artist since I was a kid."*

## Interview

RS: Do you want to look at some of my work?

bc: Oh, yes.

RS: I brought some. Ordinarily I paint portraits, but I've been doing some small things for eBay. These are some. My "subjects" are capricious choices: cats, flowers, autumn leaves—anything that interests me. All of these are acrylic (often combined with collage). I have never used oil. I don't like oil! It's messy, has fumes, takes forever to dry. Acrylic dries the minute the brush hits the surface. This is good, because I can't make "adjustments." Paint is most effective when it is left alone, as is, no alterations.

I have many prints of my work—mostly scenes of Pittsburgh, originally painted in the 1970s and '80s. This is of St. John the Baptist Church on Pittsburgh's South Side. I cut the print apart, then re-assembled the pieces. Collage was innovated by Picasso and Braque during World War I—because paint was not available. Of course their names gave it an indelible imprimatur! It's fun to reassemble the parts—and carefully glue them to small pieces of masonite, e.g. 12" x 20". Viable for sale on eBay. Their size makes packaging easy, the masonite is tough, not vulnerable. I like the abrupt changes and the repeats, in a piece like this.

Twenty-five years ago, when corporations were numerous, thriving, the executives were eager to acquire and display LARGE, original, accurate paintings of Pittsburgh's old, hillside communities. At the same time, printing companies (Geyer, Herbick & Held) show-cased their expertise with full-color prints of paintings. I am native to Pittsburgh—and paint-worthy scenes are ubiquitous. This print is of a steel mill, long gone. The hillside homes in the background are meticulously rendered. No omissions. People who lived in the area were quick to

identify their own homes, their neighbors', the school that they attended. My goal was to record the city accurately, no omissions, no additions (with the exception of my cat, "Little," one of the Loves of my life).

After graduating from Dormont High School, I hitch-hiked to California; that September I was a freshman at Santa Monica City College—where I was a classmate of James Dean. [RS shows me the college yearbook, "SPINDRIFT"—with several photographs of James Dean—as well as himself. RS illustrated "SPINDRIFT."]

[We continue to look at newspaper clippings—articles, photographs of the artist, his paintings, all of which RS has brought with him.]

And there's someone you might recognize....

bc: Yes. [Lee Iacocca.] You mentioned on the phone that you had done portraits of Lee Iacocca's daughters.

RS: Here's a photo of my parents in 1914. In Crafton.

bc: What did your father do for a living?

RS: He didn't do anything for a living. He had an eighth-grade education and he died young. He did work—it wasn't manual labor; it was something in an office.... Anyway, with an eighth-grade education, how far can you go? The Depression came and anyone who had a job, lost it; no matter who they were. He never worked again. By the time I was ten, he was dead.

bc: It's a wonderful family picture. Those wicker chairs....

RS: It couldn't be better: it's perfect. Dad was born in 1884, mother, 1890.

[We continue to look through the materials that RS has brought with him.]

I had a big exhibit at the U.S. Steel Building about two years ago.

[RS provides me with a bio of himself.]

bc: Where did you go to art school? or didn't you?

RS: I had a Fulbright scholarship and I studied in Paris.

Do you have any more conjectures? [We both laugh.]

bc: Who influenced you...in terms of your art?

RS: My instructor. [We both laugh again!]

bc: When were you in Paris?

RS: I sailed on the Isle d'France, one of the most gorgeous ships that ever floated. In 1958, I was there for about a year-and-a-half.

bc: How did you get the Fulbright?

RS: Somebody who I was with in the Service...a very unobtrusive guy. When you're in the Service, you're either naked or in uniform. You don't know where the other guys are from or what their background is. They're just "Joe Blow" who happens to be in the Service with you. Joe and I sailed to Japan together—"guests" of Uncle Sam. Joe was always quiet, but it quickly became apparent to me that he was well-to-do [but] he didn't talk about that. After we were out of the Service—we're good friends to this day—he wrote to me. He was working for the International Institute of Education in New York—why didn't I send him some of my artwork. He couldn't guarantee what would happen, but he would put it on the right desk. [RS laughs.] I got the scholarship. So, it's who you know....

bc: Paris in the late '50s. What was it like?

RS: Lovely....

bc: Dumb question perhaps, but “my” Paris is the Paris of the late Nineteenth Century and through the end of World War II, Gertrude Stein’s Paris. I just bought a collection of essays by Janet Flanner, who, I believe, was still reporting from Paris for *The New Yorker* in the 1950s.

RS: When I was living in Paris and talking to others with Fulbright scholarships, I mentioned that I’d come over on the Isle d’France and that it was part of my scholarship. They said, “What’s this!?! Transportation is not part of your scholarship; you get here if you have to swim.” I said, “I’m certain it is. I got here on the Isle d’France.” They said, “Well, it didn’t come from the Fulbright people. Then, I realized it had come from my Army friend, Joe Hyde.

Paris was/is, always, all ways wonderful! I was the perfect age: 28! The Cite Universitaire, a dorm for students, was my “home.” Artists were “housed” on the fifth floor in airy, light, spacious rooms, floor to ceiling windows! Two artists each room. A generous “balcony” with bed and private sink, toilet.

From the “dorm,” it was an easy walk to the Sorbonne—as well as to Andre Lhote’s “loft” above a bakery shop. The “loft” was spacious, cluttered, dirty, lotsa windows (unwashed for decades). A pot-bellied stove was the only heat. In the middle of the room was a generous platform—with a nude model, still as a statue. My careful, life-like sketches were daily demolished by M. Lhote. With a heavy black crayon, he obliterated details. A straight line was followed by a curved line, no details, no exceptions. Eventually I got the message.

bc: How far back does your interest in art go?

RS: When I was in fifth grade, Pittsburgh teachers were asked for the names of “potential” artists. We were invited to attend Saturday classes in the auditorium, Carnegie Museum, 9:00 a.m. to noon. My father told me that it was a two-streetcar ride both ways. He would go with me the first day, wait, and return with me when class was over. Subsequently I would be on my own.

Big auditorium, big class: 500 kids!

Elmer Stephan was the teacher. Tall, handsome, charismatic and articulate, he did not have to ask for attention and silence. It was spontaneous! On a blackboard, he would make a quick sketch of the day’s subject. The students had a BIG sheet of paper, a “board” to support it, and a box of crayons. Stephan’s instructions were always the same: “Leave NO white space. The entire paper must be filled with color!”

I got the message, and I have retained it. Twelve of the best “submissions” were on display the following Saturday for all of the students to see. My work was frequently chosen. Mr. Stephan praised my work, and loved me. Instead of waiting for him in the auditorium, I would wait outside by the front door. He would pick me up and swing me about, like adults do with kids they love.

Before that first year was over, Mr. Stephan took sick, was hospitalized. His “replacement,” a pleasant woman, was pleasant but uninspiring. Older ladies routinely monitored students during classes. I told one that I wanted to visit Mr. Stephan in the hospital. She told me firmly, that this was not possible. Unfortunately, I was accustomed to accepting adults’ decisions. Elmer Stephan died, in the hospital, a few weeks later. I know he would have been overjoyed to see me. And I would have been overjoyed to see him! For sure, I know he loved me, and I loved him. This memory and loss precipitates tears.

I attended Saturday morning classes, Carnegie Museum, fifth through eighth grade.

(The principal of Dormont High School, C. E. Glass, was an old fogey. I had a quarrel with one of the teachers—whom I didn’t have. This teacher was an idiot. He said to me, “Wait, ‘til I get you in physics; I’m going to fix your ass.” I thought to myself, “You’re never going to get me in physics to ‘fix my ass.’” Physics was a required course for a senior. I am one of nine children. My oldest brother, Bill, was brilliant and a saint. Everybody loved him, including the principal. Bill was a classmate of the principal’s son. So, I said to the principal, I want to take two periods of Art instead of one. He said—he had a funny way of talking—[RS mimics the sententious voice of the principal]:

“No one has ever taken two periods of Art in the history of this school; you’re not going to be the first one. You’re going to take physics.

I thought, “No way.”

I went to my brother Bill and I said,

“You’ve got to tell the principal that I want two periods of Art.”

Bill is always very accommodating. He said,

“Okay, I’ll try. I don’t know whether I’ll succeed, but I’ll talk to him.”

Bill got his way.

The principal said to me,

“I couldn’t say no to your brother. I just couldn’t say no to Bill. This is the only time in the history of this school that someone has taken two periods of Art.

Thanks to your brother.”

I said, “Yes. Fine.”

He did say, at the conclusion of our conversation,

“But mark my words: You’ll never use it!”

[RS laughs heartily.]

So much for prescience. [RS continues to laugh.]

I’ve been an artist since I was a kid.

bc: What branch of the Service were you in?

RS: I was drafted, and I’ve always been lucky! I wasn’t the least bit interested in going into the Service, of course. Fortunately, it was peacetime. Because I was in Santa Monica when I registered for the draft years before, I was sent to Fort Ord, which is right beside Carmel. It’s a very very beautiful place: that’s where I took

basic training. I was dreading it, but I fell in love with everything: I loved Fort Ord. The guys in charge of us they were slightly older. They were supposed to be mean and they acted mean, but it was clearly apparent they were sweet as pie.

I was at Fort Ord in September 1954. We were in a big barracks. Most of the guys would ran around in briefs. I am always cold; so, I wore pajamas. I'm the only person in the whole United States Army who ever wore pajamas; that tickled everybody. ("I'm cold! I'm cold! I'm freezing to death in this place! I need the pajamas!") So they said, "Fine." We would get up very early in the morning for reveille. The sergeants acted very gruff. Every morning they raised the flag which we all saluted. One morning, what went up were my pajamas.... [RS laughs.] And Sergeant Barbier—he was real tough but a kitten underneath—said, "Okay! Okay! Who is the wiseguy who put [RS's] pajamas on top of the flag?" Of course, nobody said a word. So he said, "Okay, let's put it this way: all of you know who put Schmalzried's pajamas up on the flag. So, all of you are going to do 50 pushups unless that guy comes forward, and then he will do 50 pushups and the rest of you are exonerated." Someone stepped forward and he did 50 pushups. We were all hysterical. Also, in the mornings, when we got ready (as I said, I'm always cold) I would have everything on but the kitchen sink. Sergeant Barbier would say, "Schmalzried, will you step forward?" I'd step forward. "We are in the desert! The desert! Do you understand what a desert is? In an hour you're going to be sweating and you're going to wish you didn't have anything on—let alone all those clothes! Now, we will wait patiently for a few minutes for you to go upstairs and take all of those clothes off except your regular fatigues. Nothing more! Do you hear?!"

I would come down and we'd go off into the desert. I was always clumsy. One day we had to do target practice; I loathe guns, but, nevertheless.... We were given instructions; lie down and do A, B, and C. I listened very carefully. Everyone was hysterical, including the sergeant, 'cause they thought, Schmalzried is going to hit the moon but not go anywhere near those targets. Surprise! I hit a bullseye on my first try.

They said, "Oh my God!"

They said, "That was a fluke."

They said, "Try it again."

Okay.

I did exactly as directed and I consistently got bullseyes.

They exclaimed: "You are impossible! One never knows what to expect from you."

I said, "There's nothing difficult about it: hold still and look at the target. Don't look at the rifle. Very carefully pull the trigger while looking at the bullseye. It'll go in there. I did what I was told, and it worked!" (I have very good eyesight to this day. I'm very steady with my hands.)

A bunch of us were sent to Seattle to await shipment to the Orient. Fort Ord was gorgeous; Seattle was the pits. Coal-burning stoves. It was cold and damp. There were Quonset huts. To use the toilet or to take a shower one had to cross something like a pond with planks spread here and there to run over to the next

Quonset hut to take a shower. Cold and wet, I was miserable. We thought we'd be there for a short time, but we were there for a long time while awaiting our assignments. They would load us boys onto a bus—like four or five o'clock in the morning and we would be dragged over to the officers' quarters and do housework—wash windows, run the sweeper, &tc. One day I told my buddy, "When they load us up in the morning, it's dark; they don't know who we are. I'm going to go out the back door and go up to the PX [Post Exchange] and play. They don't know my name. They don't know who I am. They don't know anything. I won't ever be missed. My buddy said, "You'd better not." I said, "I'm going to try it." "In that case, I'll go with you." We did that. No one noticed. We walked up to the PX and played all day. When the other guys got the drift...soon a whole bunch of us were at the PX playing. The sergeants who were loading up the buses were saying, "Honest to God! It takes longer every morning to load up this bus!" We went out the back door in the dark. We walked to the PX and played. In the meantime, we were supposed to be getting orders. One day, several weeks later, someone came rushing up and says, "They are giving out orders today! You have to be in alphabetical sequence—so you better get back! Some of the boys are going to go to Korea, others are going to go to Japan. We all went dashing back! Of course, I was out of sequence in the line. You went up to the guy and you put your papers down. The guy in front of me got a "K," the guy in back of me got a "K" but I got a "J" for Japan! "Cakes and ale"! My buddy and I landed in Yokohama in February 1955 on Valentine's Day. We were loaded with our duffle bags into a truck that looked like something from a dumpster and taken to—God knows where. We were taken to an old hotel, but nice; and I thought it was for the night, then we would go elsewhere. ('Cause they never tell you anything.) It turned out that was my assignment—to live at that hotel. It was a records center. It was very nice. I shared a room. The tasks were easy. As a matter of fact, they had Japanese girls who looked through the records and did all the work. (All we had to do was show up, be sociable and so forth. A piece of cake!) There was a nice cafeteria; you could order what you wanted. A lot of time off. I always went out into the country and saw the Japanese. Of course, when you went into the country, in those days, in Japan, in 1955, the Japanese had never seen a Caucasian—let alone one who was 6 foot 5. Japan, in the country, looked like a print from a thousand years ago: the people, the rice paddies, the whole thing; nothing had changed. When we would go into the country, you would see people, then they would all disappear. There was no one, they vanished. (The "terrorists" had arrived.) They had fences around their properties, but their fences were four feet high—which was high enough for them, but not for me. (I'd just look over the fence.) I would go sit somewhere like I'm sitting now. Eventually, somebody would appear and look. I always bowed; and said [in Japanese], "Hi, Hi!" Eventually one would come over. One of the things that Orientals don't have is hair, body hair—so that person would come over and say in Japanese, "Lots of hair"—then somebody else would come over and say in Japanese, "Lots of hair." They realized that I was harmless and then we became friends and talked as best we could. (I only spoke English; they only spoke Japanese.) Frequently they would take us to their homes. It was a wonderful experience. I had a great time. bc: Did this experience with the Orient influence your art?

RS: It might have subconsciously; I don't know that it did. I've always been interested in art. Once I got "my feet wet," I went to the museums. I love Oriental art. I don't think my work in any way resembles Oriental art. The person who was the biggest influence on me was my Cubist teacher in Paris. We would have a nude model every day, a girl; there were maybe 20 students. It was a typical—like in a movie set—studio. It had a coal-burning stove. It was filthy dirty. It was upstairs above a bakery shop. The studio was a mess: the windows were dirty, everything was dirty. On a raised platform sat a naked lady. She would rest every once-in-a-while; they would mark the spots where she sat so she would resume the same pose. I very carefully did as best I could with the naked lady; Andre would come by. Every detail that I had put in, he—(he had no patience)—he would take a big black crayon and eliminate it. He would say in French—he didn't try to speak English—"A straight line follows a curved line. That's it. A straight line follows a curved line. We don't want any details." You might as well have had a bear sitting there, or a dog, or a table: there was no semblance of anything that looked like the naked lady. Anyhow, I did that and eventually got to the point where, yes, you do simplify and a straight line does follow a curved line.

bc: What does that mean?

RS: Ultimately, it means Cubism. It's literal. You want a straight line. You don't want two straight lines together. You want a straight line accompanied by a curved line. And then, once you have the curved line, you want another straight line.

bc: That's it....

RS: That's it.

At any rate my work is Cubist.

bc: Yes. This city invites it. My favorite Cubist view is going across the Bloomfield Bridge.

What were you doing in Santa Monica?

RS: I hitchhiked to California when I was out of high school because my sister, who had been in the War, an army nurse, was there working at a VA hospital. She wanted company. So, I hitchhiked to California and I stayed there. Then my sister and I came home for the summer. Then she went back out. She said, "Come and see me next year." I did. "Why don't you go to college here?" I said, "Okay." It was a very wonderful college. (Now it's grand, but then it was just army barracks that they had hastily erected.) It was 19 blocks from her home; I had a bicycle. The entire cost for everything (except books) for the first year was seven dollars. It was a wonderful school. I loved it: everything about it. It was on the beach. The instructors were excellent! They were into a hands-on approach. I wasn't there very long when I was called in by each of the instructors. (In high school I didn't have to think about working: everything was easy and I got an "A.")

So they said, "You are working way below your level; you got a 'C' for this first report card; you're not a 'C student,' you're an 'A student,' but you have to work to get your 'A.' We're not going to give it to you." I said, "Okay." I did work and I quickly moved up to an "A." They were pleased, and said so.

My English teacher was a man named Beverly Fisher. (All the teachers were

top-notch; they were very hands-on. They were friendly, but no nonsense.) Most of the students at that time were returning GIs, older than I—not by much, but by a few years. They were married with a kid or two. I was intimidated by them—not that they were intimidating—but I felt young and dumb. They were sophisticated men. They liked me a lot. One of the reasons was that most people can't write; they can't make a composition. (I write as easily as I paint. It's always been easy.) They were having trouble with writing; after I got to know them, I would say: Write down your thoughts, whatever they are. Don't think about what you're writing; write it down without stopping, whether it's correct, wrong, in the right sequence. Put it down—then give it to me. I'll shape it up for you. (Which I did easily.) They went from "C" students to "A" students—because they suddenly wrote beautifully. [RS laughs.]

Beverly Fisher's class was at nine o'clock in the morning. He didn't come until nine o'clock so the door was locked and the class would assemble outside. (I like to talk to people and still do. I talk to everybody.) I was talking to whoever was there. Beverly would come; he'd unlock the door.

One day he called me aside and he said, "Bob, you have a gift for public speaking."

"I have a gift for public speaking? Are you crazy?!"

He said, "No, I'm not crazy."

I said, "I have no interest in public speaking. Besides, I would be very intimidated by talking in public."

He said, "Let's get real: I unlock the door at nine o'clock. The class is assembled outside in the hall waiting to get in. Who's doing all the talking? You're doing all the talking! Now we're going to formalize that: you're going to talk to the class as a lecturer."

I said, "Oh, I couldn't do that! These people are all older than I. I would stutter and stumble."

He said, "You'll get over it."

He announced what I was going to do. Everyone said, "Fine." I did it; I wasn't any good.

He called me aside and said, "You're not being you when you're up there. Just relax and talk like you do out in the corridor and it's going to be wonderful and you'll be great. Trust me."

Today I do public speaking.

[RS travels on cruise ships on which he is a host and lecturer.]

bc: How did you become an expert on talking about the Panama Canal?

RS: Research!

bc: You researched it?

RS: Yes. I loved it. The first cruise I took with Donald Ferguson, it was a real big deal about the Panama Canal: he said, "I want you to know the whole thing. I said, "Okay." (I didn't know anything about the Panama Canal, but I thoroughly researched it and found it very interesting. Loved it! Wonderful! That helped.) In addition to that, when I lecture, I don't want to have to look at notes. I want to have it all up here. [RS taps his temple.] I had all the information in my head. [On the cruise] we stopped everywhere--including at the [canal] locks, and talked

about how the [canal] gates worked. If people asked questions, I had the answers. I took to the Canal like a duck to water.

I talk to everybody. Working cruise ships one talks to everybody: that's your responsibility.

bc: What was your role on board ship?

RS: I gave lectures on art.

However, my "job" was not just to give lectures on art, but to engage guests in conversations.

RS: I was a host. On one of the world cruises, the captain immediately invited me to host his dinner party that first night, 50 people in a private dining room. The captain didn't talk to me, his aide did. The aide said, "Be there punctually or 15 minutes early. There'll be 50 people. You will sit at one end of this oval table, the captain will sit at the other. You are responsible for the contentment, the conversation, the well-being of the 25 people at your end of the table. Is that clear?"

I said, "Yes, that's clear. That's fine. I'll be responsible."

I was. I got names, made introductions, and kept the conversation going, ordered wine. That was my assignment for the next 90 days. (The captain never told me in advance. His aide called me in my cabin and gave me the captain's orders.)

Before the cruise was over, I knew everybody very well.

bc: Did you take the Grand Tour of Europe?

RS: I toured on my own; I didn't take a "Grand Tour." I've been to Europe on cruise ships many times. I do my own thing.

bc: Italy?

RS: Sure Italy.

bc: I'd like to go to Florence and Venice....

RS: Have you not been to Venice?

bc: Before it sinks?

RS: It's always been sinking. Not too long ago one of the [cruise] lines called and asked, "Do you have three months?"

I said, "What for?"

"We're doing a series of cruises from Venice to Barcelona. Each one is ten days: back and forth, back and forth. We would like you to be available for three months."

I said, "I'd love it. I'm on!"

I had been there many times before, but Venice is something you never get tired of.

bc: They hire people to do what you do on cruise ships?

RS: I'm listed in the daily program as one of the ship's personnel.

bc: How has the city, how has the region changed in your lifetime?

RS: Substantially. First of all, there were corporations and department stores. Downtown was vibrant! When I was a kid and went Downtown, if I went with my mother or my aunt, they wore hats and gloves and it was an occasion. Now Downtown is a slum. The department stores in their heyday were beautiful: Horne's, Kaufmann's, and Gimbel's. They were all wonderful stores—each in their

own way—unique, separate. If you went to one, you didn't see the same things you did at the other. The atmosphere [in each] was different. Everybody loved those three stores. I did too. It was so nice Downtown. Once you got there, everything was in walking distance. You didn't have to take transportation, you could walk everywhere. Everybody that you saw was proud of the city. They were proud of working in Kaufmann's. People on the street were wearing suits and ties. The ladies were wearing nice dresses. It was really a classy place. Now it's a slum. The stores are closed; they're gone. All those little stores along the side streets that used to be interesting, they're all boarded up.

bc: Isn't what you've described—about the fading of Downtown—isn't that universal across America?

RS: I don't think so...but I'm not across America. I know that Santa Monica is thriving because I visit there.

bc: We have photos in the Pennsylvania Department collections of Pittsburgh in the 1950s: the ladies with their gloves, the guys with their hats....

RS: That's gone.

bc: When was the last time you were back in Santa Monica?

RS: About a year ago. I have friends who live there, and relatives.

bc: Aside from the difference in climate and the fact that they're on the ocean, what's the discrepancy between what they're doing in Santa Monica and what we might not be doing right here?

RS: Everybody's moving to California because it's light and lively! There's the beach. Everybody's young and relatively handsome. Here everybody's a hundred-years-old like myself. And they look it. I go to McDonald's in the morning and honest-to-God, it looks like assisted living.