



VIRGINIA ULLMAN
1907-2005

Honored as a Historymaker 2003
Civic Philanthropist and Ardent Preservationist



The following is an oral history interview with Virginia Ullman (**VU**) conducted by Pam Stevenson (**PS**) for Historical League, Inc. and video-graphed by Bill Leverton on March 5, 2002 at Virginia Ullman's home on Camelback Mountain.

*Transcripts for website edited by members of Historical League, Inc.
Original tapes are in the collection of the Arizona Heritage Center Archives, an Historical Society Museum, Tempe, Arizona.*

PS: My first question for you is always the toughest one. I just ask you to give me your full name.

VU: Virginia Melody Ullman.

PS: Okay. And what was your maiden name?

VU: Melody.

PS: Melody was your maiden name. Okay, tell me about when and where you were born.

VU: That's a very silly question to me because I was born in St. Louis, Missouri, but I didn't like it and I only stayed eight days and left. Our family then moved to the South Side of Chicago where I attended grade school. My family loved animals and we had a dog — an Airedale — that walked me to Miss Falkner's school for girls on Woodlawn Avenue. The dog walked with me when I walked to school and then he turned around and came back home. Then we moved to Highland Park, Illinois and it was beautiful.

PS: Tell me about your family.

VU: My family came from Massachusetts where we had a house in Gloucester. Most beautiful country there is. My family started disappearing, but I had a maiden lady aunt, my mother's sister, who was a graduate of Columbia and in those days not very many women had been to Columbia University. She was



what I call an intellectual snob. She was asked by a family in New York called George Ashforth to start a school. The first private school started here in the location where the Jokake Inn is now. She was headmistress of that school.

PS: Well, tell me a little bit more about your family. Did you have brothers and sisters?

VU: I had two brothers but they were born dead. No, I didn't have any brothers and sisters.

PS: So you grew up as an only child then? What about your parents? What did your father do?

VU: Well he was with Columbia Bank Note Company, but I don't know what Dad did.

PS: And what about your mother? Did she work or did she stay home and take care of you or what did — did she volunteer? What kind of things did she do?

VU: She was interested in everything. She was home. She took care of infant welfare. She used to work for that — she loved everything. She was wonderful, that's all.

PS: And what about your father? Did he, was he home a lot? Did he work a lot?

VU: Oh, yes. He worked all the time. I just had a mother and father, that's all.

PS: And both of them continued to live and you grew up with them? Some people I've talked to lost one of their parents early in life.

VU: They were pretty normal except then everybody died. And I don't have a relative in the world.

PS: Well when you were growing up, were you a Daddy's Girl? Or, you know, do you remember things that you liked to do with your parents?

VU: Well, I don't know. Yes, I had a wonderful normal life. My aunt traveled a lot. She presented American girls to the Court of St. James in London and she loved doing that. There were a lot of people. I learned a lot from her.

PS: Was she — which side was she an Aunt?

VU: Why she was my mother's sister.

PS: What are your first memories as a child growing up? Do you have any special memories of that time?

VU: My dog who walked to school with me. I love animals.



PS: What nationality was your family? Did they ever — were they recent here or had they been many generations?

VU: Yes. My mother's ancestor was the first Dean of Westminster Abbey in London. But outside of that, people--

PS: Must have been English then.

VU: Well, that little part was--a long time ago. So it's been a struggle ever since. But everything was wonderful-- animals are wonderful. People are wonderful.

PS: What was your home like as a child? What, kind of a house did you live in?

VU: We lived in a flat at first. Then we had a house in Highland Park. It had a fence around it. We had animals. It was nothing luxurious. Except my mother used to volunteer and all kinds of things.

PS: Did you have chores to do as a girl?

VU: Well, naturally everybody has chores to do.

PS: What sort of things chores did you do?

VU: Well, I couldn't possibly tell you. Average, normal things I suppose. Sometimes they were different; sometimes they were the same. Like everybody in the world that I know.

PS: Life was a lot different back then. Did you have electricity when you were a little girl?

VU: Yes. I think they had it in most parts of the country then.

PS: I know it was a lot harder to take care of a house back then. You know, you didn't have all the modern things that you have today.

VU: How do you know that? Because when you're not used to them, you don't miss them.

PS: What about sewing and things like that? Did you make your own clothes or did your mother make your clothes?

VU: I never sewed; my mother did.

PS: You said your dog walked you to school? Tell me about your school. What was it like?



VU: Well, I've never been to a public school. Always went to a private school. And my aunt at one time was a head of a cathedral school for girls in Orlando, Florida. They decided I should go down there and spend a year. So I did. The St. James Cathedral School for Girls was in Orlando, Florida, right across from Lake Eola. Lovely.

PS: How old were you?

VU: I guess 13 or 14, something like that.

PS: Was that the first time that you'd gone someplace like that?

VU: Well I can't remember.

PS: Did you travel much as a girl?

VU: Yes. I have always been curious. Now in late life, I've become interested in some Asiatic countries. I like to travel for a reason; to do something. I don't like resorts. Uh, trees, flowers, plants, people, birds.

PS: Going back to when you were in school; were you a good student?

VU: Why, I don't, I don't know what you mean by good.

PS: Did you like school?

VU: I liked the people. Yes, I thought it was interesting.

PS: What was your favorite subject?

VU: None. I don't choose favorites, to say this is good and that's not good.

PS: You didn't have any that you liked better than others?

VU: Naturally, the ones that you know the most and are the easiest to learn about. If it's French or Latin, it isn't as easy as some other things. So . . . I don't know.

PS: Do you remember when you got your first job: your first paid job?

VU: I don't know.

PS: Did you baby-sit or do anything like that?



VU: Oh, I did, I've done a lot of things. I can't remember.

PS: Well, tell me a little bit more about school. You say you went down to Florida when you were in your early teens?

VU: Yes.

PS: Was that a girl's school?

VU: Oh, yes. It was probably a girls' boarding school. And I remember the railroad that went from Jacksonville, I guess down to Orlando where the school was. It jumped the track or something, which it often did. And we climbed out the windows: some cars turned over. And it was going to take ten hours or something to back up another train to it on the tracks. And we decided — this is my chaperone — we decided we, we wouldn't sit there and wait nine hours, but we'd start walking down the track. So we did. It was very adventuresome.

PS: That must have been kind of scary to be in a train accident like that?

VU: It wasn't a bad accident; the cars just gently rolled over. Wasn't what I'd call a bad accident. Nobody was hurt.

PS: How long did you stay in Florida?

VU: At school? I went a whole year. It was before Florida was booming anyway.

PS: Do you remember what year that was?

VU: No

PS: What did you do after that?

VU: Went home.

PS: Then, did you go to High School after that?

VU: Oh, yes. Then I went to a boarding school in the East.

PS: Where was that?

VU: Massachusetts someplace. I don't remember all these things.



PS: Do you remember what year you graduated from High School?

VU: Heavens no.

PS: No.

VU: No idea.

PS: Some people go to their class reunions for their high school.

VU: I know. I don't.

PS: What did you do after high school?

VU: I don't—I think I went someplace for a year of college. I don't remember all these things.

PS: You don't remember where you went to college?

VU: No, I don't.

PS: What about holidays? Did your family celebrate any special holidays or any special times that you remember?

VU: Yeah, but not the way some families do. I didn't have much of a family

PS: Okay. What about church? Did they belong to church?

VU: Yes, I don't want to go into this.

PS: Okay. Well, we don't have to. Let's see what about the Depression? Do you remember anything special about those years?

VU: Well naturally everybody in the whole United States remembers the Depression; in some way or other.

PS: What do you remember?

VU: I don't remember those things.

PS: Where were you living then?



VU: I don't know.

PS: Were you married yet at that time?

VU: I don't know. I can't remember what I was.

PS: Okay. Well, what about World War II? Did —

VU: Well, I--silly questions.

PS: Okay. Well, tell me about your husband then. Tell me how you met.

VU: What?

PS: Tell me how you met your husband?

VU: Oh, I don't want to go into all that. I was married once when I was quite young. My husband was killed and then later on, I married somebody else in New York.

PS: Uh-huh.

VU: Period.

PS: Okay. Well, tell me about when you came to Arizona.

VU: What?

PS: When did you come to Arizona?

VU: Oh, I think these are uninteresting questions.

PS: Well, that's kind of what — in an oral history we want to know a little bit about you. And especially about your connections to Arizona.

VU: I don't know what year it was. It was before there was a Scottsdale Road. We used to ride out to Taliesin on a horse. And the Pink Pony existed and it had a place where you could tie up your horse. I loved everything.

PS: What brought you to Arizona? What made you come out here?



VU: Because my aunt who had graduated from Columbia, came out here to start a girls' school-- Jokake School for Girls. And my mother and I were all that were left by then. She did something for the school. And I've lived here ever since.

PS: So you came out here with your mother? Was that in the 30s?

VU: I don't know what year.

PS: To stay with your aunt?

VU: My aunt was the headmistress of the school. Then the school stopped. I don't know how many years it kept going.

PS: Well, tell me, what did you think — the first time you came to Arizona, what did you think of Arizona?

VU: Thought it was wonderful, beautiful.

PS: Did you come just to visit or did you come to live?

VU: No, I came because my Aunt was the head of headmistress of the Jokake School for Girls.

PS: So you came out here to stay then. Some people come to visit a couple times before they decide to move here.

VU: Well, I don't know what I came for. But I didn't have anybody but my mother and my aunt in life by then. This isn't the regular thing with the family-- mother and the father and children in the house.

PS: Uh-huh.

VU: I built a house at one time, for my mother and me to live in across from the — it isn't there anymore near Mummy Mountain.

PS: Well Phoenix must have been a smaller town when you came here then.

VU: Don't ask me--I lived out in what was called Scottsdale.

PS: Oh. So you never actually lived in Phoenix, in the Central Phoenix?

VU: No.



PS: Okay. So when you came out here then you weren't married at that time?

VU: Uh-uh.

PS: Did you meet your husband out here?

VU: Did I what?

PS: Your husband, did you, did you meet your husband out here?

VU: No.

PS: Somebody mentioned your husband was named George. Was that right?

VU: Met him in New York. We married in New York.

PS: Did you live in New York with him, or--

VU: Yes. At the house where he lived. He lived in it in the summer. I didn't know he came here in the winter.

PS: Why don't you tell me a little bit about your cat?

VU: She is an aristocrat, as is every cat that comes on the map. Blue is 15. How old's yours?

PS: Twenty.

VU: Twenty. Well, Blue has lost all of her weight, she's just bones now. We take her to a doctor, and he's so nice. His name is Dr. Serbin. And when Blue goes to him, he calls two or three times a day and says, "Well, Blue ate two bites." "Well, Blue's fine, she's sitting down; she's standing up." I've never heard a medical doctor care that much about telling the owner of the cat--he's the nicest man I've met. And I think there are so many nice, wonderful people.

PS: I can tell that Blue means a lot to you.

VU: Wonderful, wonderful people in this world. Do you have a garden or anything?

PS: Uh-huh.

VU: Do you want a poinsettia?



PS: (laughs)

VU: No, because I hear that you plant it and they'll bloom.

PS: Yeah, I've heard that. Yeah, I've never had much luck with them though. The summer usually does them in.

VU: Well, anyway, I'm going to give it away.

PS: Well this is a beautiful home you have here.

VU: This room.

PS: The whole house, yes.

VU: Oh, the whole house. It was built in 1914. And full of wonderful cupboards and things they don't do nowadays.

PS: Uh-huh.

VU: And George Ullman was a wonderful member of the human race and he--this was an outdoor porch sitting room and two ladies lived here. It was always either too cold or too hot for them to sit here. And George Ullman was so wonderful, he said, "Well, just extend it out and make it a glass wall." So there it is. Now nobody ever sits anyplace else. It is a most wonderful room. And Fridays are Fez Day in this house. And there's a boy who lives upstairs--a man-- and he declared Fridays to be Fez Days. I don't know exactly what he means.

PS: I don't either.

VU: I don't think it matters. And he comes down at 8 o'clock and I'm in my bed and he comes wearing a red felt hat on his head with a long black tassel and he can do this-- I can't do it. You know how they do and he does that. And then he makes a few remarks. I'm in my bed and sometimes, somebody else is here sitting on my bed and looking (Lucky?). And everybody wears something.

PS: (laughing)

VU: I have all kinds of wonderful things--all for Fez Day.

PS: What fun.

VU: So someday if you're on the loose, you should come. Really see something.



PS: I will have to do that. Tell me how did you find this house? Did George Ullman find this house for you?

VU: No, we--there wasn't even a Scottsdale Road when we bought it. Camelback wasn't paved either. And the Benton's lived in the house below. Bill Benton was — oh, he'd been ambassador to places and he started an advertising company called Benton and Bowles. And they were just wonderful. They had one natural son and three adopted; two girls and a boy. And they lived right down there. Some people are different--very different than others. And these were just great. They both died and one of their sons lives in outside of Chicago and we're still great friends. He's married to somebody who volunteers in a sad country in Europe. Now, excuse me but that bird is drinking the hummingbird's water — he wants to.

PS: Yeah, look at that. There's an oriole.

VU: Excuse me. That's for hummingbirds only. Excuse me.

PS: I've never seen a gold oriole right in the city like this. You really have a beautiful little garden that attracts those birds.

VU: Well, the birds flock — oh, my goodness — by the dozens and they drink that water. We feed them most every day. And they drink the water and then they take a bath. And, as you know, all around Phoenix there are hundreds of pigeons too. And they come here all the way from Venice. And, they drink and bathe. We have a whole covey of quail who live down below and they come and visit and — they're all so wonderful. And there isn't any place for anybody to drink around here. We don't have any rivers and they can't drink out of the canal. Anyway, just love to see them.

PS: That's quite a little nature preserve you have here.

VU: Oh, it's just wonderful. And you can't see a house or a road which is a miracle.

PS: When you moved in here, this must have been way outside of town. Was this considered a long way from Phoenix when you moved here?

VU: Oh, yeah. And there wasn't any Scottsdale Road. We used to go out to Taliesin and just cut across the desert on a horse.

PS: Did you have horses here?

VU: Well, then I wasn't here then. I was over in a little house that I built next to the Judson School and I had a hitching post and some horses. Not some horses-- a horse. And I love Taliesin. I used to just ride across the desert.



PS: Well, that sounds like a nice, nice place then.

VU: Oh, it's wonderful.

PS: Did you know Frank Lloyd Wright? Tell me about--

VU: Knew them all very well, and Mrs. Wright also. I went out there often. All those people out there were so nice. They used to have usually a concert that — they were all very musical — they had a chorus that sang on Saturday nights. And they had plays. And they were all so nice I thought. And Frank Lloyd Wright thought a shell was the most beautiful creation there was — the natural things in this world. Do you like shells?

PS: Sure.

VU: Did I take – did you go to the shell room?

PS: Right. You showed us that last time when we were here.

VU: Well, some have already gone not very many — to the Biosphere.
I'm gathering boxes of cartons and —

PS: Tell me what is it about the shells that's special to you? What —?

VU: Everything. Shells used to have animals. But I think every animal in the world has beautiful eyes.

PS: Well, in fact, you helped start the Phoenix Zoo, didn't you? Tell me about that.

VU: Well, there was a group of people; I think there were about six, who met at a man called Robert Maytag. He was part of the Maytags. And he had come out here and saw Papago Park and he said to himself, "It would be the most wonderful place to have a zoo." And he'd love to have a zoo because he spent time apparently in Africa, not shooting animals, but looking at them. He thought, "Oh, that Papago Park would be perfect;" and he went to the City Council or whatever you go to and asked if it would be possible because they didn't allow anything there. Anyway, they said yes. So Bob Maytag got about five people, five gentlemen from Phoenix, who he felt would be interested in helping to start a zoo. And I can't remember whose house, but everybody went to his house and I was invited to go because they knew I loved animals. And anyway, they sat there and decided that Bob Maytag should be the president and there should be a board and that — and everything. They hadn't invited any vice presidents, they forgot the vice president, and they turned to me and said, "you be the vice president." That was 1960. And they knew I loved zoos, loved animals so that happened. And I was on the board for about 30 years. And it was wonderful. They loved everything; to do everything. And at that time I had been to Oman and Kuwait and



Oman had . . . oh, I've forgotten what they were called. They had horns like a . . .

PS: Oryx? Was it the Oryx?

VU: Yeah. And they were being chased away over there. There were so many of them. And I went to Oman all by myself . . .

PS: That must have been kind of scary.

VU: Oh, it was wonderful. Not, scary. Oh, no, they're just wonderful. They're . . . just wonderful. And anyway, I introduced the first Oryx out of Oman into the United States. I think we got four at the Phoenix Zoo. They started breeding and now, we have the biggest lot of Oryx. And the Zoo's been wonderful ever since. I think the director now is just wonderful, Jeff Williamson. Nice as he can be. He rides his bicycle to work every day. And he's a wonderful sort of member of the human race, I think.

And then the Botanical Gardens could get in — squish in another few acres and that's all that can ever be built there. So it's wonderful. And they're both perfectly situated in my estimation. Because they're in a whole open space and I think people enjoy going to both of them; for that reason and for the reason of what they can do. Oh, it's great, just great. The new director of the Desert Botanical Garden now is as nice as he can be.

PS: You knew Carolyn O'Malley was the director. You know Carolyn O'Malley?

VU: Oh, sure. And I think she was great. But I prefer a gentleman being a director and this man Hans Schultz his name is — funny name — had a little dinner party the other night. Eight people and . . . he lives there, right in the Zoo. He's a bachelor and he loves it. I mean at the Botanical Garden.

PS: In the Desert House there.

VU: There's a house there; they just built a lot of things, but a real house: a living room, a bedroom, a bathroom, a kitchen. And, I think he's not married. And he lives there.

PS: Well, that makes it convenient. He doesn't have to go far to work.

VU: And he cooked the dinner the other night. And Cesar is a wonderful Mexican who's been there for years and years, he was there. That was nice.

PS: I know some of those people. I did some gardening shows there. Cesar showed us how to prune plants. You've seen it grow a lot though, haven't you?

VU: From the beginning both of those places. And I think Phoenix is so lucky to have these places here;



instead of having a Zoo on Fifth Avenue, or someplace in the middle of the city. And some day, there may be an Aquarium here.

PS: The Zoo and the Botanical Garden at Papago Park is kind of a little oasis in the city, isn't it?

VU: Yes. Oh, Phoenix is so fortunate . . . in my estimation. And . . . what's that thing called? I went yesterday to it.

PS: The Historical Society.

VU: Historical Society. . . .

PS: Their building is new, you know--compared to the other places.

VU: Oh, yes. . . . I'm, I'm not exactly sure about how they're going at it and so forth. I thought the director was nice as he can be, Mr. Hiller? But I didn't feel a hundred percent sure that I agreed with everything. However, they're trying to do something. And then that other museum, that's bigger. I . . . somebody took me out there. It was built quite a long time ago. It was in the wrong place. What in the heck is it?

PS: No, I think that's the same one that you went to before. They just got lost when they took you there so it seemed further. It's not that far really from here, just over the hill from the Garden — the Botanical Garden and the Zoo. Somebody told me about the story about the Oryx, that the Sultan there gave a dinner for you. Can you tell me about the Sultan of Oman?

VU: Oh, I spent a lot of time there. And you know, it was a country . . . they'd never allowed anyone in it. The never allowed anyone in it.

PS: How did you get in?

VU: Because I went . . . with three or four people. I'm sort of adventuresome in traveling and everything and they have a hotel — wonderful, wonderful hotel call the Al Bustan; it's right on the water. And there's a ruling family. They never allowed anyone in the country. The Portuguese tried to get in from the shore, but they couldn't. And it's apparently a rich country. And the Zahwari family was sort of the overwhelming rulers of the country. And there is a sultan. . . . Anyway it's a fantastic country.

PS: Tell me about the Sultan?

VU: Sultan Qaboos his name is. And, oh, I have a lot of photographs — I'd love to show you sometime if you're interested, because I think it's fascinating.

PS: Did he have a dinner for you?



VU: Oh, now, they're all just great friends. And . . .

PS: What are the photographs ____?

VU: Their name is Zahwari, the Zahwari Family. There are several branches. And uh, do you think you can tell anything without photographs? Will you guard Blue?

PS: Tell me a little more about this special dinner that you had? Were you surprised?

VU: What dinner?

PS: The dinner in Oman.

VU: Oh, heavens yes because I had to borrow a dress. She called me the day before I was leaving, said, "By the way, we're having a dinner party for you; bring an evening dress."

PS: Did you know you were the guest of honor?

VU: Oh, sure. It takes 36 hours at that time to get there from here. Phoenix to London then you had to change and then go through Saudi Arabia. I've forgotten all the places. And then you have to enter the country-- you had to be interrogated. . . . They've changed all that now.

PS: You were showing me in the pictures about the Oryx? Tell me about that?

VU: Well, the Oryx, I think, were dying out. The Arabian Oryx, which was thought to be the unicorn, one-horn, they don't exist in every Asiatic country. But they were slowly — and people were killing them and shooting them and getting used to doing that to animals. And anyway, I thought it was terrible. And since I was mixed up with the Zoo, I thought I'd make something of it and try and save the race of Arabian Oryx. And it worked. And, I knew the routes to go through there to get to the Oryx because of this family. And I think they sent four to the Phoenix Zoo. So it was a great thing to save the Oryx and now they're in a couple of other zoos, too. So the Oryx are saved.

PS: Thanks to you.

VU: Well, it just happened. Just lucky, that's all.

PS: At the, dinner, you showed me the photographs that there was a painting of an Oryx?

VU: Oh, yes and it wasn't a painting. The chef made it. It was made out of sugar.



PS: Pretty, amazing.

VU: I forgot to tell you. Well, believe in miracles . . .

PS: Was that the biggest miracle at the Zoo that you know about?

VU: Well, I don't know. I don't think there's a biggest or best or anything. But I just believe in miracles. Don't you?

PS: Yes.

VU: Kuwait turned out to be wonderful. I went to these places all by myself.

PS: You were always very adventurous; weren't you?

VU: Well, yes, because, I don't like Hilton Hotels and Mar—whatever they're called. I don't like resort hotels. I like to stay in a native place. And it's easy to find. When I got to Haiti for the first time and I got off the plane, I didn't know where I was going. I wanted to stay near the --they had a new cathedral that just had built. I wanted to see that and I wanted to go to the Haitian Art Center. And I didn't want to stay in a deluxe hotel. I wanted to stay in a native one, and I didn't know where to go. When I got off the plane, a big, black man came and asked if he could take me to my destination. And I said, "No, thank you. I'm going to take a taxi." And he said, "Well, I'm sorry ma'am, there are no taxis." Duvalier was the ruler of Haiti at that time-- Francois Duvalier. And he . . . it's a poverty-stricken country as well as a brilliant artistic country, in my estimation. Voodoo and so forth. And, ever been there?

PS: No.

VU: Well, I said, "In that case, I accept your kind invitation," because they had a soldier with a gun on his shoulder about every three or four blocks along the way, searching cars. And, I didn't want to go in a taxi — I mean I didn't want to go with him because I didn't know where I was going. And I didn't want anybody to know that I didn't know where I was going. But anyway, he was a nice man and I said I wanted to stay in a very simple, simple place that was clean, and near the Haitian Art Center and near the Cathedral. And he was wonderful; a great big, black man. We went to a little place that looked like a New England house – New England farmhouse. And he stopped there and went in and came out in a minute and he said, "Yes, they could take me." They had four bedrooms and four bathrooms and it was clean and it was near the Haitian Art Center and near the Cathedral. So, oh, it was wonderful.

I went in there and then they took me over to the Haitian Art Center and said I could walk back to the little place I was going to stay. I said it was wonderful but when I went in the Haitian Art Center, there wasn't anybody in there. All alone, all alone I was. And you know, you can tell when you're alone in a great big empty place. And I had a wonderful time looking at the murals; the frescos in the Cathedral. It was the



birth of Christ, the Flight into Egypt and the Resurrection. And it all took place in Haiti though. And while I was in this great, barren building, a little black man came up, asked if he could help me and I said, “No thank you. I’m just admiring this, enjoying it so much.” And he said, “Oh, you have to meet the Bishop. He’s right upstairs.” And I said, “Well, I really didn’t come to see the Bishop.” And he said, “Yes, he’s up there and the head of the United Nations to Haiti is up with him. You have to come meet him.” I went up and we became friends right away. And because of them, I saw them every night, went to dinner with them or they came with me, we became great friends and because of that, I could get all the Haitian paintings. That one in the middle is Haitian and is the Blessing of the Christ Child. They’re pouring love down on the Christ Child and the donkey’s kneeling. Isn’t it wonderful? Oh, I just love it. And then next — they gave it to me. And then next door to that is a boat with not only a mermaid, but a merman. I never heard of a merman before. And that one, they gave them to me. I saw them every night and we had dinner. And, you know, it was just a miracle. They were so nice, so nice.

PS: You’ve been a great lover of art, haven’t you?

VU: Oh, yes. Well, I love most everything but parsnips. This is so beautiful.

PS: Did you ever think about becoming an artist yourself?

VU: Well, I like to get things in second hand shops, something with good lines and then paint it. I have a lot of things.

PS: You showed us some of those; the chest of drawers and things like that. What kind of things do you like to paint on them?

VU: Depends on what it is. I painted that table there, dropped a piece of paint. I paint a lot of thing such as that-- it’s a type drawer from a newspaper office. Did I tell you about it?

PS: Yes, tell us about it.

VU: Now they all have a home. I did that gazebo on the patio out there-- chips of sea glass. ..

PS: And your screens that you showed us too. Tell us about how you did those.

VU: Well, I’m going to give them to the Biosphere. One is on black by mistake. But it has the first balloon that the United States sent to Europe in 1979. Almost — and then the shell-- every shell’s so beautiful to me. And the one in the dining room is Hopi. I went down to the Walpi Mesa one time with an Indian friend, a Hopi friend. We climbed up the top of the Walpi Mesa and got up there. Now they don’t allow anybody up there anymore. And there’s a Kiva in the middle of this mesa which is flat on top, in where all the religious people stay — not all — three or four. The rattlesnakes live underground at the bottom and the Hopis go down and get all the rattlesnakes they can, and bring them up here to stay in the Kiva; and are



nice to them because the Gods live underground. And then that's what causes the snake dances on the Hopi Mesa. And, after a certain length of time, they release the rattlesnakes to go back underground until the Gods of Rain, make rain for the Hopis. And the dust — I had walked up there with my Indian friend when the snake dances start. They come out of this Kiva two by two around the edge. And the snakes, the rattlesnakes have already been turned loose and go back underground and the Hopis dance around and around two by two . . . And it's wonderful. After they've finished, they go two by two like this: I have my arm across your shoulders and I have a rattlesnake in my mouth. And you have a stick with feathers in the end of it. And you keep it from striking me. That's the way they dance around the Mesa. And then at the end of that, the snake dancers they're called . . . go to the edge of the Mesa and release the rattlesnakes. They go back down and the Gods of Rain, they're such nice people, make it rain. And that's why it rains. And it did. I made a screen about it with just a rattlesnake on each panel.

PS: All made out of shells, though; right? Have you always loved shells?

VU: What do you call it — a compunction?

PS: Compulsion.

VU: Compassion?

PS: Okay, yeah.

VU: What — there's another word.

PS: Obsession.

VU: Obsession. I have an obsession about shells and cranberries. Well, I don't know. I just born with it and it got worse and worse. And then I didn't collect them all. People give them to you. I mean they know you love them and then they give them to you and bring them to you and . . . then you get more and more. Anyway, now they're all going to the Biosphere.

PS: You've used them very creatively, some of the shells; to make art out of them.

VU: Well, they're still all over just the room there. Somebody came — I've been collecting cardboard boxes to pack them in. Have to pack very carefully. And you can't use newspaper because it's too slippery. It doesn't work. I have egg cartons and plastic boxes. People who have dinner — order dinner in a plastic container—or whatever they order . . . they save them for me.

PS: Talking about the Hopi people, you — have you always been interested in the Native American people?



VU: Of course. They are animals just like we are. We're all animals in my estimation, and the Bible says so. I don't know whether you believe the Bible. I don't, I think it's mostly myth. But I do think if Adam and Eve started this whole world, we all are related. And I don't think people should say, he's Black, he's White. He's Jewish, he's Gentile. He's from Saudi Arabia, he's from Timbuktu. . . . If we all come from Adam and Eve, maybe we do — what do you think?

PS: Sounds like you're probably right. How we're all related.

VU: I really don't know.

PS: When did you first go down — when did you first visit the Heard Museum. Did you know Maie Heard?

VU: Did I know what?

PS: The Heards.

VU: Oh, the Sullivans—Marty Sullivan was the director. And then the one before him was Mike Fox.

PS: Right.

VU: I knew them all. I loved the Heard Museum and I loved Native Americans. And I thought they needed help and Frank Goodyear is wonderful —they've all been wonderful. But he's a unique type. He came over here one day and brought his wife Betsey, who's as nice as she can be, and she starts saying — just the three of us were sitting here, she said she was going to Rome in a little while. And we started talking about Italy, how wonderful this was and that was and the other thing. We had a wonderful time. They went to the door and I didn't go to the door with them. I was sitting there because I can't get up and run. And, when they got to the front door, she called back to me and she said, "Can I bring you anything?" I said, "How sweet of you." And the only thing that flashed through my head was Nero Fiddled While Rome Burned an old saying. So I said, "Yes, I'd like a fiddle. " "And I'll bring it."

PS: Tell me what was the Heard Museum the first time that you saw it?

VU: Well, the entrance was on Monte Vista. You entered through that lovely courtyard. It had lots of wonderful things inside, I thought. Everybody else thought it was so beautiful going into that courtyard. I was furious when they built those white buildings. And Frank Goodyear was very alert — he's completely different than Marty Sullivan was in my estimation. But he is very nice and very bright in a completely different way.

Oh, there's a little bowl there — that if you shake it up it's snow, I think Marty Sullivan and his wife were inside.



PS: Oh. Uh-huh. So you're still great friends with —do you get to the Heard Museum very often?

VU: Yeah. Anyway, Frank Goodyear has a different kind of vision; and he brought that fiddle then one day, after he had only been here a short while. He called one day and said he was going fishing. And I thought well, he's been working hard and he wants to go fishing. And the next day he called said, "I caught a hundred and fifty-three fish; I'm going to bring you some." And he came over and brought some fish and they're all up on the door. They're painted cardboard fish. They're hanging on the door.

PS: (laughs)

VU: And, then he and his wife and I had lunch together one day....just alone, just the three of us. We had a wonderful time. It was just before Christmas, two or three years ago and I said, "I didn't like Christmas," — and I don't. I said "I think families should stay together. Have each other; they're wonderful. I don't have any family." And I said I thought families shouldn't have to have a whole lot of people for Christmas dinner just because they want a lot of people. They should have their families. And I don't know, I went on and on and on about it and Frank Goodyear said, "Well, do you want to go to Timbuktu?" And I said, "Well yes, of course." Then he wrote a big poem about going to Timbuktu for Christmas.

PS: So how have you seen the Heard Museum change since you first saw it?

VU: What —everything changes, dear. I don't think anything stays the same, in my estimation. I think that its entrance has changed but I don't think Frank Goodyear did that. Those white buildings on Central Avenue, I don't like the address, whatever it is, Central Avenue. I loved it as Monte Vista Road. But anyway, that's that. And I don't, know whether he did it; I don't know what happened.

PS: They do have a lot more space now. It used to be almost like visiting someone's home, when you'd go there.

VU: Yeah, well, it was. But maybe it's outgrown it and they know best what they're doing. I don't so I'm on the board of it.

PS: What about the Phoenix Art Museum? You helped start some of the things at the Art Museum; didn't you? Tell me about that.

VU: Well, Hankhouse (?) was the first director. And he lived in a tiny apartment on Monte Vista. He came from Iowa and his name was Forrest Millek Hankhouse (?). And he got off to a fine start. He knew a lot about museums all over the country. And he made it his business to know about museums and directors and what they had all over the world; he was bright as a button. And then, he was there for a long time, I don't know how long, I've forgotten. Then, he went to San Francisco. And then he had some, I call it a disease. I don't really know, but it was a thing to do with the top of his head. I think he went off his noodle



a little. And, anyway, instead of saying the way of lot would, oh, look what happened to me. I didn't do anything to deserve this. Not at all. He lives in a flat in San Francisco, has a Korean lady who takes care of him; he can't go out. He's just this way. But he's made something out of it. He has a computer in his bedroom and he writes letters all the time. He'll write you a long letter about some artists, perhaps.

And then he'll send me a copy of it. And then send —another copy to the cousin of the artist. I mean, he's just wacky. I get great big long letters from him all the time. And then he'll write to a museum in New York or in Paris and make suggestions of what they should do and what they should buy; or what they shouldn't buy. And he's just wacky. I've saved all the wacky letters, because they're worth saving.

And someday I think they'll all be published. But instead of complaining and saying, "ahhh, oh, look what life did to me," he's having fun. But he can't go out. He stays in his apartment all the time and every year in, I think it's July, he has what he calls his 15th forty-ninth birthday. An Indian friend of his, puts that on. And then the next year they'll have his 50th forty-ninth birthday party. But he keeps life going without depressing anybody and making him laugh.

PS: Well, tell me about why did you think it was important for Phoenix to have an Art Museum?

VU: Well, what a silly question.

PS I ask silly questions.

VU: The world it loves art — all over the world as far as I know. Phoenix didn't have an art museum. . . . Now it does.

PS: You helped do that, too. Tell me about some of the artists that you've helped in the early days.

VU: Well, art. . . since the beginning of time, you've seen paintings of saints and . . .

PS: Wasn't Philip Curtis a friend of yours? Tell me about him.

VU: There he is. Oh, I have a wonderful photograph in my bedroom of Phil and a balloon waving.

PS: How did you meet him?

VU: I didn't meet him; I've just always known him. He had a red car with the top down, no garage, with four sticks in the ground on a great big piece of bright blue tarpaulin over the car. He lived in a little tiny, tiny house owned by Jenny Ellis, and he had a very small room where he did all his painting. He was a wonderful member of the human race, I think.

PS: What about his paintings? Tell me did you have a favorite one of his paintings?



VU: No, I don't like favorites. I think there're many, many, many great ones.

PS: Somebody told me that you helped start the textile, the costume institute at the Art Museum —

VU: Yeah, I was one of the ones who started it.

PS: How'd you get that idea?

VU: Nothing is as simple as saying, how you got it. To me, I don't know, what did people used to wear? Now every woman wears pants which I think is disgusting. I don't like it. Woman weren't made for pants. And I go to the grocery store with Lucky — she goes in the store and I sit in the car and I count the women in skirts. When she comes out — well, you know how people go in and out of the grocery store at four o'clock in the afternoon at certain times. Sometimes I see only two or three women who wore a dress.

PS: So you certainly have seen fashion change in your lifetime.

VU: Well, dear — everybody's lifetime. Depends upon, you know, everything changes I think all the time anyway: For example, what a car looks like. If you rode a horse or if you walked, or if you ate certain things. Pumpkin pie: wasn't there a lot more pumpkin pie a long time ago?

PS: I don't know. So, the fashions that you started, the costume institute — is that what it's called at the art museum?

VU: Yeah.

PS: Tell me about how you got it started? Was it hard to get people interested in that?

VU: No. Yes. In my ideas, that was when the age of great designers — Chanel . . . can't remember them all. But there were great designers. . . . Very expensive. Now there aren't any designers at all to speak of. The costume institute went into collecting Chanel and I can't even remember the other names—Scaperelli?

PS: Uh-huh.

VU: Who else?

PS: Valentino?

VU: Yes. All of them were known all over the world, oh, my goodness. We couldn't possibly afford that. And they had very definite designs. Now everybody dresses alike — similar. Not tight waists and puff



sleeves or whatever they were — full skirts. They all change. Now the world has become — to me — more homogenized. Everybody has a, what do you call them? — I hate those things. . . . What in the heck do you call them?

PS: I don't know. What are you thinking of?

VU: I think we're talked into something and it goes all over the world —

PS: Oh, like a computer — or??

VU: Computers.

PS: Yeah,

VU: Computers and television and in South Africa they hear and see that and want to do the same as America. The same people in Paris, Germany, Oman . . . we're all homogenized.

PS: It's a good term for it — homogenized. I like that.

VU: I do too.

PS: You know when you started the costume institute, they said they couldn't afford those fashion designers. So how did you do that? Did you and your friends donate your old clothes?

VU: Naturally. How do you think? It was not necessary to look at magazines. . . .and they'd write an article about some designer. They were very, very expensive and the shoes changed and

PS: So are any of your clothes in the costume institute?

VU: I had some, yes, I had a great friend who used to give me things — designer clothes. And, I put those down there. Jean Hildreth I think was the first; director. She was wonderful.

PS: Do you remember any special dresses or anything that you donated?

VU: Certainly.

PS: Describe them for me.

VU: I couldn't tell you about them, because I don't remember — I couldn't tell you

PS: You don't have one that stands out in your mind?



VU: Now, it isn't as big as it used to be. I don't think there were as many-- you dress lovely, but this would never go — it's a different thing. Today it isn't the same at all as women who used to wear what was in style. And here there's a J.C. Penny's and all kinds of things to go and get a dress. But life is different. Cars are different.

PS: You've certainly seen a lot of changes in your life.

VU: Well, of course, people live quite differently I think now. Cars are different; they have leather seats that you don't stick to when you get in.

PS: Do you have advice for young people today that are just starting in their lives?

VU: Heavens no. I wouldn't give advice to anyone.

PS: Why not?

VU: Dear, I don't think it's anybody's business in the first place.

PS: But we could learn a lot from you —

VU: I'm not a mother or a father or a cousin.

PS: We could learn a lot from you though. You've lived a very adventurous and —

VU: Yes. But they don't tell you what to do and you don't tell them what to do.

PS: Well advice doesn't mean they have to take it.

VU: Well, dear, some people are Jews and some are Gentile, some are Black, some are White. And I, to me it doesn't make any difference. And I think it's wonderful that there's going to be a new Black museum. There was a man called Rip Woods (?) who was a Black painter and he died. He was very, very nice member of the human race. And Lucky and I went to his funeral. First time I've ever been to a Black funeral. It was in a big black Baptist church on Jefferson, around 12th Street and we went in a big square building; it looked very church-like. Not like cathedrals in the old days. In the old days a cathedral looked like something. And, I had a wonderful time because I've never had a time like it. It was ten o'clock in the morning and the big, black man took me down in a walker until I got to a seat; and he sat me down then he took it away very politely. And Lucky and I sat there. Ten o'clock it started and there wasn't a so-called altar — what kind of a religion are you?

PS: Presbyterian I guess.



VU: Well it doesn't matter. This was so unusual and different because there wasn't any altar per se. There was one lady on a sort of raised place and when the service started, she called for a man over there who stood up — he just stood up and he was in the audience or in the whatever you call it. He started commenting upon Rip Woods who had died; and then the audience clapped with joy. And then he asked, "You get up." And somebody else got up and said what a wonderful man he was and what he had done all kind of wonderful things. Everybody clapped — first I've ever heard clapping in church. And it was really . . . And I guess, we clapped too. It was just wonderful, because it was so revealing of another group of people. This went on from ten until twelve o'clock — two hours clapping every time and people just kept getting up with love for Rip Woods. And it was wonderful. At twelve o'clock somebody else got up and said, "Now, we're going to have lunch." The whole church full of people went downstairs and they had a buffet, a long buffet and little tables for four set up all over the place. And people went and helped themselves and sat down. It was the happiest funeral I've ever seen. But I'm not an authority.

PS: How would you like people to remember you?

VU: Mine is different. It's going to be very simple. Bamboo—you know bamboo?—

Well, it's going to be seven-foot long pieces of bamboo laced together. . . about this wide, and in Gloucester, Massachusetts. I have a friend who lives right on the harbor. And it's going to be simple. I'm going to have the Boston Symphony Orchestra on the shore and this bamboo thing, I will be laying on and it'll be covered with straw and blue lobelias will surround the straw. And at the change of the tide — just as the tide starts going out, they will light the straw under me and shove me out to sea. And the Boston Symphony Orchestra will be playing Sibelius. That'll be the end.

PS: Sounds like you've got it all planned. What would you like people to say about you?

VU: Oh, I don't care what they say.

PS: You heard, you thought it was wonderful the things they said about Rip Woods. What would you like people to say about you?

VU: I don't want them to say anything. They say what they want to say. I don't know, that's their business, not mine.

PS: I think they'll say some nice things about you.

VU: I'll be going right out to sea.

PS: And what was it they're going to play? You say they're going to play a special song for you?

VU: Sibelius' Second Symphony.



PS: A couple things I didn't ask you about, too. You've been involved with ASU with the Institute of Human Origin, with Donald Johansson.

VU: I'm on the board of it now.

PS: Yeah, how did you get involved with that?

VU: Well because I knew Don.

PS: How'd you know him?

VU: Well, how do you know anybody?

PS: (Laughs)

VU: I honestly don't know. He's coming over here — what time is it?

PS: It's three thirty.

VU: He'll be over at four, so you can say hello.

PS: Okay.

VU: If you're still here. And, I don't know how we met. I haven't any idea. You know, you don't remember how you meet everybody.

PS: Sometimes you do, sometimes you don't.

VU: Depends if you met them in an airplane or —Timbuktu.

PS: You want to tell me a little bit more about your husband? We didn't talk too much about him. You said that George Ullman was a wonderful man.

VU: Oh, he was wonderful. He was Jewish and he was married 30 years to an Episcopalian lady in New York and he turned Episcopalian. His family came from some place in Europe — I've forgotten where. And he was just wonderful. He had wit and he was kind, thoughtful and bright. Oh, he was a wonderful, gentle man in my opinion.

PS: Do you remember how you met him?



VU: Yes, I met him in New York. Elizabeth Arden came here and had a place for awhile. She didn't know anybody here. And I met her, knew quite a few people and introduced her to them. We became friends and one day she said to me, "Ginny, why don't you come work for me in New York?" I said, "Elizabeth I don't know anything about cosmetics." She said, "You don't have to. I don't want you for that." - she always called them little horses - "I have some little horses and just won the Triple Crown. I have lots of thank you letters from all over the world." At that time there weren't a lot of cosmeticians like Elizabeth Arden — like names to remember. And I said "Well, Elizabeth, I don't have any place to stay." "Oh, yes you do. You can stay in my flat and you shouldn't overstay with your boss."

So anyway, I went. She lived at 62nd and 5th. We walked down together to 54th and 5th where the Arden Salon was. She gave me a desk and she said, "Sit there." And I sat there. She said, "Now all you have to do is answer these letters." She had them from all over the world — those were different days than today. And I'd sit there doing that. And then she'd come and tap me on the shoulder, she said, "Ginny, I forgot to tell you, the Astors and the Vanderbilts are coming to dinner tonight and we don't have any cook. Will you please go get a, go get a caterer? I can't be home until about 7:30. So you go be the hostess when they come for dinner, and I'll be home about 7:30 or 8." And then she'd stop talking. That was what I used to do all the time. And it was always somebody like the Astors and the Vanderbilts. We had a wonderful time. We giggled a lot. And those people thought I was funny. And then she always called them 'her little horses.' Oh, she loved them so much and sometimes she'd say, "Oh, Ginny, get two tickets to Pasadena. I want to go out there tomorrow to see the little horses." And she kept a suite of rooms at some hotel, I can't remember the name of it; in Pasadena and we'd go there. We would get there around six in the evening and Elizabeth said, "Now we'll have a wonderful rest. We'll have a wonderful rest for a few days." And then before we'd go to bed, she'd say, "Ginny, I'll get you up about 6:30 because we have to be out at the track to see the little horses at 7:30." And we'd go out where she kept her -- she always called them her little horses--and there was an oval place. We'd stand in the middle of it to watch the little horses, who trained going around this oval. And I was terrified for fear if I sneezed, it would frighten the horses. Or if I put my hand up quickly, it would frighten one of the little horses. Oh, it was so funny. And that was our rest.

PS: And you were a young, young girl at that time?

VU: Well, I can't remember how old.

PS: Not too old.

VU: Oh, I can't remember. I never remember ages. I . . . anyway that's the way it was.

PS: So did she introduce you to George Ullman then? Was he romantic? Did he sweep you off your feet?

VU: Oh, heavens, no. And I'd been married before when we lived in Boston. We were married just a few months and he was killed--somebody from Tuxedo Park--in an accident. And then years and years later I married George Ullman, which I explained to him would be in name only.



PS: Did you have a big wedding or a small wedding?

VU: George said one day, “Let’s be married. We’ll go down the street to St. James.” (which was 62nd and 5th). “We’ll just go in and be married.” And we went in and since all religions change all the time, little things in my opinion, they would not marry me because I’d been married before; but they would marry George the Jew, who had become an Episcopalian. So we walked on down to the Presbyterian Church and were married there.

PS: It was just a small wedding, just the two of you or was there — did you have family with you?

VU: No, I think a friend by then, and we had a reception at the Colony Club. We lived in New York and then came out here and lived. George had never been out here. He lived in Paris—a very sophisticated gentleman.

PS: What did he do for a living?

VU: I’ve forgotten what it was called. Anyway he was the president of it. He had a car and a chauffeur, who drove him to his office. I’ve forgotten what the name of it was-- in Long Island City

PS: You brought him to Arizona? Did you bring George with you back to Arizona then?

VU: No, but I had a house out here which I had built, next to the Judson School. It was a beautiful, wonderful house.

PS: Was it adobe?

VU: Oh, yes, adobe. Naturally, I wouldn’t do anything else.

PS: And you built it yourself?

VU: Well, I didn’t do this, but I hired some people who laid the adobes on top of each other. It had a huge living room and I had a wonderful bookcase that had been first I think in a hardware store. It was a nail bin, 12 feet long, about this high with tilted things down here where you cut two-penny nails, and out of beautiful wood--it’s out in the garage. And then it was sold to a grocery store and they kept potatoes and beets, corn and all in it. I took all the paint off. It was painted some bright color. I took all the paint off and it was a good wood. And I oiled it and then I built bookshelves above it. So it was all books — oh, it’s beautiful. I still have it in the garage.

PS: You were always very resourceful and creative. So what did George think when you brought him to Arizona?



VU: Oh, he'd never been west of the Hudson River. He had a house in France. Oh, he loved it. And people thought he was wonderful. They'd never seen anyone like him. He wore glasses with black grosgrain ribbon over his ear. And he always wore a waistcoat that went this way. Always wore that. And he never put on a hat. He held it up here and dropped it. But he was 30 years older than me and it wasn't a real wedding— marriage. There's a portrait of him in the dining room. I'll show you.

PS: So when did you — you decided to come back to Arizona and make this your home?

VU: No, we came out here in the winter and went back East in the summer.

PS: Was your mother still living out here?

VU: She came along some of the time. By then we bought a house in New York — a brownstone with an elevator. All my friends thought it was the most exciting thing. They'd come and ride up and down in the elevator. My mother lived there some of the time.

PS: When did you come back and why did you decide to come back and make Arizona your full-time home?

VU: I had a house in New York and a house here. And then I lived in the little house that I had built out of adobe--that's what it was. I built it myself. George died out here, and so did my mother. And like an idiot, I sold that little house. But we'd already bought this.

PS: Well, we're almost out of tape — is there anything else you wanted to tell us? Anything important I didn't ask you about?

VU: Deary, nine million things — you can't say is there anything else? There's always more, there's always less.

PS: Okay. Well, I think we got enough for today. We've worn you out enough.