

## **John G. Coe**

*Executive Director of New Hampshire from 1971 to December 1982/Wyoming 1992-2003.*

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*1. Think back on those early days of SAA's, when you were new in your job and the whole "field" was in formation.*

*A. What was the "big idea" behind the formation of the NEA and SAA's?*

I think it was to preserve and probably develop quality arts in our states and in the nation. There was great fear or concern that a lot of things were dying because there wasn't the support for various arts activities, pretty large groups, I think, like symphonies and dance companies and things like that so there had to be some source of support to help beef these groups up. They realized that in individual states which also had arts organizations they, too, were in need of financial support and then from that came the idea of, "Let's do more than that; let's help develop some groups," and historically that's what's happened. We have many, many, many more arts organizations than we've ever had; ever dreamed of having, I suppose, back in the 60's.

*B. What was your "big idea" when you took your job – what was the situation in your state, and where were you hoping to go?*

I was 31 years old so I already had a jaundiced view of the arts council because there were four people ahead of me and the thing just had a tiny budget from the state. As I recall more money came from the feds than it did from the state. I, at that point, was running another federal program, a children's theatre, that had a bigger budget than the state arts council. I thought, you know, "Who are they?" But it was Jim Bravar who said, "John, I'm going to Alaska and why don't you apply for the job?" and I thought "Well, why not?" and I did. I guess my idea was similar to what the big idea was in the creation of the National Endowment and the state arts councils although I really didn't know too much at that point. But I think what I wanted to see happen was to create awareness of the need for arts activity and support of that activity in our state. And from that I think I wanted to see things develop. Boy, that's a hard question to ask me now. At that time there was no support from the state; our entire budget was miniscule. I

didn't know anything about state operations. I think when I accepted the job, I assumed it was a good idea to have state government supportive of the arts and it wasn't until I began to understand what the National Endowment was capable of doing at that point that I began to see possibilities in our state which was considered a rural state and was also a very conservative state so I think what I basically hoped to do was create an awareness of the need for art and the need to support art in our state. From that it grew into helping to help others meet their dreams, realize their dreams, and that there was support out there and that more things could be happening. I guess my big idea was that New Hampshire could be a real leader in the arts just like Athens was. I forgot about that; that just came to me now. You know, we had the same population as Athens. That didn't go anywhere, but I do remember that now. My previous project in children's theatre had been statewide so I had a sense of the state and the things that were needed out there and wanted to see more of that kind of stuff happen. We developed children's theatre and gave basically young people an exposure to theatre that they had never had before using existing resources; community theatre, and college theatre and one professional theatre at the time. So I wanted to see all that happen and more in other art forms, I think. That's a long answer.

*C. When you left your job, do you think you had made progress in achieving your "big idea"? Or did you change your mind about what was needed?*

Absolutely. A lot of things were different. I was there, as I said, eleven years and a lot of things happened. I think one of the things that you could do back then and is much harder now is to be really bold in things you were trying to do and I was. We had a Poets in the Schools program and I was aware that you could have all kinds of other disciplines but you had to have matching funds so boldly I wrote an application and said, "I want six different art forms," and it (NEA grant) went from like a \$10,000 grant to a \$70,000 grant. It was just "This is what I want to do," and I got the grant. And we did it and we kept the thing going with a much, much bigger program so arts in education, for example, really began happening through our grant program. I think today it would be much harder to do such a thing; there'd be all kinds of nay-Sayers and so forth. There's a program called City Spirit and the maximum amount you could apply for, as I recall, was \$25,000 and so I wrote a request for \$75,000 and got it. As I recall, that was the same time as the bicentennial so I got bicentennial money and City Spirit. My argument was that New Hampshire is a state...I think we divided the state into six parts and there were a lot of parks in between these different community or urban settings or something like that and it became a statewide project not in the initial thinking of the NEA and so we did it. I don't know if any the remnants of that are left but we got everybody talking to each other across the state and thinking a lot bigger than just their own little thing. NEA was really very helpful and the same was true with the City Spirit thing. The guy...he passed on...who was in charge of City Spirit, came out of Minnesota but it was a crazy enough of an idea that he got behind it. I got things happening in the state that probably I had no business attempting to do and I think it's much more difficult to do today even though there's more money available at both the state and national levels. There's so much inertia; of this, "Oh, no we can't do that," or "we tried that once; it didn't work." But I also have to say when I left my job, I was exhausted and I didn't want to see anything to do with state government ever again.

*D. What were you proudest of having achieved during your time in office?*

I guess seeing initially the idea of much more awareness of the arts; much more involvement with the arts on the part of the people; even more state support which oddly enough, jumped...even though our budget was small...from I'm going to say it was like \$25,000 when I started to the largest amount was \$139,000. Staff went from basically one person to ten people; I was one and when I left there were ten of us. Most of the staff was in charge of different programs, things from arts in education to...earlier than that we had a literature coordinator who became, interestingly enough, poet laureate a couple years ago. Interesting, also, when I first encountered Poets in the Schools, I didn't know poetry was an art. That's where I was and I said, "How do you find a poet?" Through the first pre-NASAA conference, this wonderful woman walked into my door and I hired her. She was a poet and she got things going and she was a live wire. Same was true with dance and things like that. I guess seeing the arts really mushroom in our state and awareness of their value and their importance; people taking advantage of them; and increased support; new things that weren't even on the radar that had nothing much to do with us other than sort of our seal of approval...things like Apple Hill Chamber Music; a whole new second professional theatre that since has collapsed; and Theatre by the Sea, which existed before the arts council began probably, really grew but now that's gone, too. Prescott Park was another whole thing that got started. It's still going. A lot of us working together in collaboration with the NEA and the state and other sources got this festival going which happens every summer; I think they just had their 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary or something. White Mountain Art Music Festival was a huge undertaking. It even crossed the border into Canada. I was involved in all of that and today I don't think that could happen. It was so difficult to have all this happen.

*E. What was most frustrating to you?*

Working with the government. Particularly there was a six year period working with one governor Meldrim Thompson. Governor's terms in New Hampshire are two-year terms. He came in with the motto "Ax the tax." There's no sales or there's no income tax still in New Hampshire but that was his motto and people elected him. He was also secretary of the John Birch Society and he was categorically opposed to art supported by government and most art anyway was probably communistic. It was a constant battle with him which also became maybe a help in another odd way because a lot of people ganged up against him who had power and authority in the legislature. One of the major events that occurred that still makes me angry is he denied a grant. By the way all grants had to go through him and his council. The council was five elected people independent of the governor and it was a vestige of colonial days so that the governor wouldn't have too much power, I guess. Any financial agreement with anybody like a grant had to be approved by governor and council. The council would say "yea" or "nay" then, if they said "yes," and the governor wanted to veto, that could happen. The governor vetoed just all kinds of things and usually summoned me to defend the grant that we were trying to award. In one case, it was a \$750 grant to a poetry magazine and he wouldn't approve it and he wouldn't approve it and he wouldn't approve it and finally he did after all kinds of maneuvering. We gave an example of a previous booklet and there was a four letter word in that booklet and he vetoed the whole thing. This got the ACA up in arms and, to

make a long story short, it became a case that went all the way to the United States Supreme Court and the Court wouldn't listen to it. At the Court of Appeals in Boston they said, as governor, constitutionally he has the right to veto anything. We would hope that he didn't do this because he had some problem with somebody who had a problem with Vietnam. I tell you all this because I couldn't go anywhere in state without someone asking if I had any dirty poetry. But we also saw a rise in the appropriations to us because I think the legislature saw this as ridiculous and also wanted to help support the arts council. It's not like I'm proud of that and it really hurt the poet whom I finally met. He was this meek, quiet little person. He was a professor; he almost lost his job at Colby Junior College because of this outrageous thing he had done as a young man. It went on and on and on. Then finally this guy was defeated by another man, Hugh Gowan, who was very pro arts but didn't give us any money but at least he didn't give us any grief. He had two terms and then he was defeated by John Sununu. He actually did increase substantially the funding to the arts, but I guess he was tough. I had left by then. I was there for his inauguration and then left and went to Omaha. I guess the long answer is a lot of things happened and developed and a lot of things are still going and maybe variations but I think I had a role in a lot of that and I'm proud of that. Another thing we got going was the Governor's Arts Award.

*F. What was most surprising to you?*

Most surprising to me was the resistance by government to what we were doing. Having grown up in the arts and all that stuff, I just recognized how very important they were. Like with Governor Thompson, it was just lots of resistance and he could make political hay out of that. The comptroller and I were at each other right from the word "go" and then we ended up being friends but it took awhile. There was another good friend of the governor, Robert Munyer, who was president of the senate and he just made things so difficult. At one point he successfully reduced the whole budget down to, I think, \$35,000 when it was up over \$100,000 and then we were able to get it up to \$50,000 and then again in another term, up to \$100,000 or something. That was really hard. The other part of it was very interesting. I was a little frustrated with the NEA on occasion because they seemed to kind of dictate what we could do. At one point I expressed that in my annual report or my annual evaluation, whatever they called it, and they called me on it. They said, "What do you mean by this?" One of the great things about being on the East coast, you can fly in one day down to Washington and back home which you cannot do from Wyoming. It's absolutely impossible to do that. It takes you an entire day to get to Washington so then you can start doing something the next day and maybe go back home. But I was able to just go; I was down there all the time and very cheaply, too. Fares were nothing. This one program that I was complaining about suddenly became very interested in what we were doing. It was that kind of resistance. I think on the part of the people, they were open to anything. They wanted the arts. It was their government...and it's still true in some cases...that provided resistance. That was frustrating and I suppose all the red tape; that really didn't bother me but it was the people part.

*G. What was your agency's relationship with the NEA like? With other SAA's? With ACA? With local arts agencies?*

NEA – It was really very good, I have to say that. I'm somewhat of an impatient person, and, if something didn't go as I thought it should, I would get irritated but they really supported what we were doing in New Hampshire in many, many ways and not just us but other organizations. I think one of the things we were able to do was encourage other organizations to go to some of the different programs that NEA supported like White Mountains Art Music Festival or Apple Hill or I guess one or two of our theatres. I think New Hampshire fared very well while I was there and probably still does with the NEA. So I would say it was very good.

SAA's – I think pretty well. I think we were viewed kind of as the country cousin and I think NEA viewed us that way, too, at times. We were the last ones to form a regional organization. "What do we need that for?" And we formed it and we worked together and a lot of credit goes to Tom Wolfe who's no longer with the region, NEFA, but we were able to do some projects like an economic impact study, for example. So with the six states, we worked well. Massachusetts was the big rich state and often they would put in more money than some of the others could possibly put in to make something happen. Those are the states I probably worked most closely with. There were great people back then: Mary Regan from North Carolina. My mentor in many ways was Jim Edgy who was, when I met him, director of Kentucky and I will never ever forget, I was ready to quit. "This was the most insane job anybody could have created." I went to a conference...it was before NASAA was formerly created...in Minneapolis and I walked in and here were all these veterans; they'd been around four or five or six years. In comes this green kid and looking back I was a kid; I was 31, 32 years old. And I learned so much from that one conference; I was so inspired and Jim was really one of those people that just said, "Now here's what you do and here's how you do it," in his soft southern accent. He was really very, very helpful and I really literally went back ready to turn New Hampshire on its ear and I had the energy to do so because of that conference. And for a long time the state arts agencies were just terrific; not so much to states, I think, but us individuals and I think some of my staff probably had the same kind of feelings about their counterparts.

ACA – I was on the board of ACA. That was very inspiring and, of course, they took on this whole nasty poetry thing to the tune, I think, of around \$200,000 which was a big chunk of money back then. I don't know if they should have done it or not; but they did. Michael Newton was a great leader of that organization. In fact I think there's a Michael Newton award that people can get; I can't remember if it's through NASAA or the locals...but he was quite a leader and helped set a real professional tone to what we were all about. I have very good feelings about ACA.

LAA's - We didn't have any in New Hampshire really. We must have had a couple. I know we did because part of how we got that City Spirit thing was through a couple of locals but nothing big like some of the other states.

*H. (this can be a probe question from g above) What was the single biggest issue or challenge the SAA field had vis a vis the federal government, the regionals, other states, the local arts agencies?*

I'm not sure I can be quite sure what I'm saying. What I was going to say, I think there was a friction between the program that supported the state arts agencies and probably local arts agencies and then all of the special disciplines that existed back then. There was probably frustration over the amount that got appropriated to us versus them. What evolved over time, I think we ended up getting like 40%, but I don't believe it was there when we started. I think that was an issue. The other issue might have been a lot of the money went to great big metropolitan areas and it was harder to get it for small time things. I'll give you an example: the second theatre that started, the American Stage Festival in Milford, New Hampshire. At that time we had a group of people out there called regional representatives and they took different sections of the country that they were kind of ambassadors for the NEA and they also were somewhat consultants in a way to states and other arts organizations. In our case our person was Rudy Nash and he attended a panel meeting that this theatre applied for some funds. The panelists' question was, "Where is Milford, New Hampshire? Never heard of it. Next." And they weren't allowed to speak up and advocate but apparently what he did do was say, "Milford, they have this professional theatre there. It's been going for five years and maybe they're LORT." I don't remember what he may have said but whatever it was he said, it got them a grant and from then on they were able to get grants from the Theatre Program. But we were, even in its hay-day, the American Theatre Festival was not Arena Stage or something and there was no way it could be, so I think that was maybe a frustration, too. I know with the White Mountains Art Music Festival, I got very irritated at one point. We basically had music and sculpture for our festival and wanted to encourage some of our own sculptors in our state to be part of this and the NEA said, "Who are they? Never heard of them. You have to get somebody that's cutting edge like from Soho." So we got the grant and the person who came up probably because they recommended this person was absolutely like a fish out of water; didn't know what to do up there in that environment and was trying to make something out of local wood or something. I don't know it as a fact but I suspect some of that was true in other states. I know it was even true when I became director here in Wyoming. The NEA was telling us some things we had to do. You can talk to Wayne Lawson about the site visit to hell. He and a couple of other people were representing the NEA and I said, "Okay, I'll give them a site visit," and we did a 17 hour drive through the lower quarter of our state. Nobody out there had any sense of how huge the state of Wyoming is and I think he'll laugh and joke about it but it was a lack of knowledge on the NEA side that could be frustrating. I think there were three consultants. I wonder if Ed Dickey was one of those people. I don't remember now. That was when I first got here but I know Wayne and somebody from South Dakota; it was a woman. In any event, I think the tendency is to know things better in Washington than we know back in the states and that was true in that one example I gave in New Hampshire. We had to get somebody really of note. Well, he was lost.

*I. Can you think of an anecdote that tells us something about the arts in the political climate of your state at that time? Can you tell us who – if anyone – was a special political ally to you in those days (the governor? A legislator?)*

You know, it's such a long period of time; it's eleven years. I suppose the system that we had to go through where you had governor and council might be an example of a process that we had. What I ended up doing, and I don't know if the governor ever knew it, I told you there were five councilors and one of those councilors, Bernie Streeter, was a good friend of the governor and would go along with what the governor wanted. The other four were not; they were both Democrats and Republicans. One of the councilors was from Concord, New Hampshire, the capital city, and we used to meet in that guy's house over lunch to talk about strategies to get grants approved through the governor and council. What a waste of time in some ways and they were able to do a little bargaining or whatever they did to make sure that perfectly legitimate grants would be approved by governor and council. That's one anecdote. Another one was back then there was a program from the NEA where they gave out film grants through the states and there was one woman, Alegra May, I think her name was, who got a huge grant of like \$21,000; a massive grant that could feed thousands of people in Ethiopia. It basically was a pass through but my board had to approve it and then the governor summoned me yet again to the governor and council chambers and wanted me to justify this grant and by then I was fed up. I said, "Governor, my board approves it. The National Endowment for the Arts awarded it; it approves it. If you've got trouble with it, it's on your back and you can do with it what you want," and I walked out and he didn't call me back for a year; and the thing got approved and, of course, the press followed me out of the room. That was maybe the solution to dealing with him. He wanted to make a big to-do. He said the price of the film was too high and wasteful of tax money and so forth. That was one thing that happened. That's one anecdote anyway.

*When you talk about the governor and the council, did you have a separate board? Yes, I think there were ten and they were appointed by the governor and sometimes they were good appointments and sometimes they were not. We had one appointment where the guy said, "I don't care what you decide. I've got an entrance to the back door of the governor and I'll tell him what I think and he'll do what I want." That really makes it a cheerful situation and I remember in that case the chair who was also a friend of the governor really called this guy down and stood up for the arts and I think the guy never showed up again.*

*J. How did you use your time?*

*1. Can you describe a prototypical day?*

Of course, it evolved. As I said, when I first started, there was only person there and I didn't know anything and there were things like you had to do things in triplicate or quadruplicate and I didn't know what they were talking about. Invoices. "What's an invoice?" Gradually I was able to hire a secretary and then another person for PR and then I got a grants person and so forth. I ended up finally with ten total staff. I had a fiscal person. It depends which year you're talking in a way. I think trying to structure the agency and get it on its feet as it was growing; I spent a lot of time doing that and dreaming and thinking big; bigger than maybe we should have but we did it and we

succeeded. Then I think in the first couple of years I just drove all over the state all of the time to introduce people to the idea of an arts council. I remember one of the places I went was a summer theatre and they were so impressed that I showed up. Mind you it was like a hundred miles which, in this state, you go a hundred miles just to have something to eat literally. One of my staff used to commute 76 miles each way; unheard of back East. But they were so impressed that somebody from Concord, the capital, came all that way to see their program and that was a very good lesson for me that, even if we can't really help them financially, just to show official support of what they're trying to do was good. So I spent a lot of my time doing that. I can't remember how much any more. I know one year I drove 40,000 miles. That was before the oil crisis so I had to cut back a little bit but by then we kind of had established a presence in a lot of communities. I mean the arts council was something that cared about what was going on. I did a lot of traveling and then I did a lot of traveling to Washington. I don't know how much but conceivably once a month. I don't know if that's true now. I went usually on behalf of some more arts organizations to get them and maybe I'd bring their president or executive director or whatever down and we would talk face to face with NEA people and that quite frequently reaped good returns so there was a lot of time doing that. I think as I recall I generally wrote the grant applications for our state arts agency funds and did the evaluations but I think I must have evolved those to other people, too. Yes, Debbie Collins, I think, did some of that for me. I spent a lot of time with governor and council, far more than should have been the case, but I did that. We had an interesting situation. There are 20 or 24 members of the Senate and 400 members in the House and so I know I spent as much time as I could with legislators. You're not supposed to spend time with them but I would do it anyway. And I'd find ways to do it. Thanks to the New England Foundation for the Arts which did this economic impact study and they broke it down by state, I was able to take that information and apply it to our grants. And I remember I had...I don't even know what his name was anymore...a senator let me put the report on each senator's table and I organized each report so that their constituency or their district was on top. And they'd look at here's how many grants we gave and here was the match and here's the economic impact; and then, of course, they'd look down into the pile to see what some other place was doing. That had a positive effect actually so I spent some time doing that. With the House it was amazing, with so many people, people just despaired doing anything with them. In fact, if you got to a few and even some unknowns, they really appreciated that contact. We also started something that was good. We got a legislative liaison who was able to speak on our behalf and their being a peer had more validity than any of us who had vested interests. I guess toward the end I was spending more and more time doing administrative work and being an administrator rather than an innovator where at first I didn't know anything so I just did it.

2. *In a typical year at the beginning, can you give a general idea of how your time divided (in percents, roughly):*

I did. I don't know if they're accurate. And, again, it depends "when" but I guess sort of on an average:

10%\_\_\_ *Grant administration* - But I also had other people

10%\_\_\_ *advocacy/lobbying with public officials*

20%\_\_\_ *field /constituency communication*

10%\_\_\_\_ *agency strategic planning* - Mind you, when we started, that wasn't even a concept.

25%\_\_\_\_ *program development* - But I'm hesitating there now. Initially it was much higher and then later got less maybe and more on administration. You don't have just the word "administration" here.

15%\_\_\_\_ *fundraising* - In that sense meaning getting NEA funds and I guess I got some bicentennial funds and a couple of foundations. I was able to get some money that way.

10%\_\_\_\_ *partnership building (with other government agencies, with other types of nonprofits, with private sector, with arts/cultural agencies at other levels of government)* Maybe it was more than that for partnership because a lot of what we did was like White Mountains Art Music Festival. The amount of money we could put into it was not very big and yet it was a program that started with nothing and ended up being in New Hampshire a major \$200,000 to \$300,000 summer program. We were part of that team and the same with the Prescott Park Arts Festival and the bicentennial project and the City Spirit project and probably others I can't think of right now so maybe program development and partnership are kind of linked with each other.

3. *Did your time use change in any noticeable way from the beginning to the end of your time at the SAA?*

I was doing everything to later on I just signed the papers that were given to me by different staff people. The same things had to happen all the time but we jumped from a handful of grants to many, many more. I don't remember how many any more so I was doing a lot more of the non-glamorous stuff.

K. *What else - information, stories - can you tell us that you think people in the future ought to know about your agency, or the SAA world in general?*

I think in New Hampshire you're dealing with a state that's as old as the country or even older so there's been a lot of history there but since '67 I think when the arts council started, there are so many factors. There's better communications; we have the internet now all that stuff. Transportation is better; better roads. I think the role the state arts agency helped get started and continues to do is to encourage those people out there to do their thing and a lot more is happening now than was happening back in '67. Some of the things have gone by the wayside; other things have grown stronger and changed. You have different leadership and all that kind of stuff but I think if you were to go to New Hampshire today the average Joe would be more conversant about the arts than would have been the case back in the 60's and the reasons could be all kinds of things. They experienced something in school. They went to an event in their town or they know somebody who did. One of the changes is that when you talk about the arts, it's not just a painting on the wall. I remember that was a huge issue way back. Every time you talked about the arts, you had to explain music, theatre, dance, art, visual arts, and now I think people generally understand that art is a variety of things, disciplines. And I think if you were to go to New Hampshire today there is certainly more support both from the private sector and from government, the NEA and the state. That has changed; and people want the arts. They see the value in their communities. In Portsmouth, New Hampshire, here's an example. When I moved there, there was this little theatre, Theatre by the Sea, in a basement warehouse along one of the wharfs. It was also the alley where a lot of

drunks were and things like that and there were a couple of restaurants in town and then things started changing. It's not just the arts council because one thing leads to another. Actually the guy I worked with in the children's theatre program started a restaurant next door or two doors down from Theatre by the Sea which became one of the classiest restaurants in the whole region and that inspired yet another restaurant and then another and another so suddenly you had like twelve restaurants all serving really good food, not just your McDonald-like stuff. And the Theatre by the Sea grew better and better; it had a full-time professional manager and it had an artistic director. Then they moved with a huge fundraising effort into a former brewery. They turned this empty building into really quite a theatre. It became a LORT theatre and all that kind of stuff happened. Prescott Park started. There's another organization in the state called the New Hampshire Art Association and it struggled along and it partnered with Theatre by the Sea and then NEA provided funds and the state provided funds and others, city and foundation provided funds. This thing, I think, last summer was its 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary. A group started a chamber group called Strawberry Van Chamber Music. It was free and these were professional musicians and it just grew and grew and grew; I don't think it exists now but now in that same building is a children's museum. So, if you look at Portsmouth today compared to 35 years ago, it's a whole different place. There's now a couple of, I don't know if it's a Hilton or whatever, hotels there. They talk about the arts in Portsmouth and beyond Portsmouth. Can you imagine? Liz Lerman did a whole residency at Portsmouth Naval Shipyard which is actually across the river from Portsmouth in Maine but it's called Portsmouth. The place is closing down. She did a whole residency with people affected by that, through dance. I mean, unbelievable. That's just one little town in New Hampshire. Concord where we were, great things have happened there and in other parts of the state as well and it's not just the arts council that did it or the NEA that did it but get this sort of climate that one thing helps another. And I think that's true nationally. Even here in Wyoming which is an entirely different situation from what I knew in New Hampshire. I mean the distances are immense. All of New England could fit inside of Wyoming. We're the ninth largest state but we only have 500,000 people in our whole population. The challenges are very different but we have got some really outstanding things happening here, too. The state arts council played a bigger role than the NEA in terms of direct funding because here they don't seem to go after that funding. We've got things like the Buffalo Bill Historical Center. It's a world class museum; I mean world class. It's actually 5 or 6 different museums one of which deals with Buffalo Bill but also the Plains Indians and the contemporary Western Art and now they just put in a new wing for a natural history museum and there's a research area and so forth. Twenty-five years ago it was just a little Buffalo Bill Museum with some artifacts about Buffalo Bill. The board of directors comes from all over the United States. The Teton Music Festival has grown into this huge thing and you can hear it on NPR now for music. This guy wanted to have a museum dealing with art and our natural resources or animal life. It's called the Museum of American Wildlife Art. It's also in Teton, Jackson. It's an amazing place but on a much smaller scale we've got this Nickolason Art Museum in Casper, the center of the state, that was a converted electric power plant and they added space to it and it has struggled and struggled and now is working in the black; is beginning to bring in shows from the outside...the last one, I think, was Andy Warhol...for Wyoming. That's quite something. They've got a

symphony up there; they've got really fine theatre; more community and college theatre. I think the college theatre is the best theatre in the entire state but we only have seven community theatres and one university. That's what we have for education. What's happening at the university is amazing in terms of its growth; dance program and symphonic program. People come from overseas now particularly Brazil to study music. Whether the arts council has put a nickel in that, I don't know. Not while I've been around but we have helped support the dance. Here in Cheyenne, the same kind of story. I find it about 15 years behind where New Hampshire is but it's happening. You go to Denver, Colorado, and the arts took a huge hit recently but nevertheless I remember going to Denver in 1973 and there wasn't anything there that I was aware of, then they built this performing arts center, etc., etc. This is just happening all over the country. So I think it's pretty exciting and I think NEA deserves a lot of that credit and also the state arts councils because one thing helps another; one hand helps pull another.

*II. Have you stayed in touch with the state arts agency field since you left your position as Executive Director?*

Yes, much less than now; the last year and a half. And even while I was with the Wyoming Arts Council, all new players came on board in different states and I found myself not involved as much as I had been in my earlier life. I suppose part of it is just energy. My energy level is not what it used to be. And just to get around is much harder out here than it is back there. We do have the Western States Arts Federation so I've been fairly involved in that group but every one of those states are huge and some of them have real problems like California which has always had problems. My involvement with them is greatly diminished now and part of the reason I suppose I think is politics. I was suddenly just called in the office and told. "You're no longer to be here. You're going to be in charge of special projects." And no explanation or anything and I think I know what the problem was and that was a member of our board didn't like me a bit because I would not jump when he said jump and he got to the new governor and the new head of our department here and I guess persuaded them that I shouldn't be there. So I'm here and they've now moved me into the museum and I'm just a regular employee; kind of a jack-of-all-trades at this point but my passion is still with the arts. That hasn't changed.

*A. If so,*

*1. From your experience how has the role and the activities of SAAs changed since you began your career?*

*2. From your experience, what skills/competencies do you think are most important to incoming SAA staff? To SAA leadership?*

I think this and I'll think you'll probably find with a lot of the people who started when I started and even before, I think one thing I never got was business training. I know you can go to places now and get arts administration training; in fact, I've even given a couple of talks in places but I think that's probably important. But I also think, I still think that knowledge of at least one art form is very important, too. There are people who disagree with me about it but I think if you have knowledge of one art form you can somehow have an appreciation in other areas even if you're not at all an expert in those

other areas. I would recommend that state arts people have some of that knowledge and, if they can get some training. It doesn't have to be in arts administration per se but in some kind of business school or something like that, I think that would be helpful although I have to say I hired a woman for my arts in education person who didn't have any of that other than she's a book binder or type person and she's running the arts in education program. She is dynamite; she's fantastic. It was really a good hire so there are probably exceptions to that but I think it doesn't hurt to have some of that knowledge and, if you can speak some of that language with non-arts people. I don't want to see the arts become a business like other businesses. It kills innovation and creativity when you start doing that. But part of it is practical and you still have to fill out those reports and that kind of stuff. Then even some experience knowing how to manage people but that shouldn't be the weight; 30%, but the other side, you've got to know something about the arts and how they affect people and be passionate. I think that's the other part of it. I'd say you have to have a passion for what you're doing.

*3. Would you pursue a career in SAAs/public arts management today if you were starting out?*

At my age? *No, if you were 31 again.* Yes, but again it's got to be almost like a mission for you. One thing you don't know about me, I was a Peace Corps volunteer and I spent four years really trying to serve the people. I was with in Ethiopia. I also was director of an orchestra over there for two of those years. You want to help them help themselves be better than they are, I guess. Earning a lot of money should not be the drive. Some, I know, state arts people do very, very well financially and they do very well in terms of their passion and interest. Some I think are more interested in the dollar than really what I think what we're put on this planet for. You have to be adequately compensated but that shouldn't be the drive, I don't think.

*4. Has the field lived up to its promise? Why or why not?*

In many ways, yes. I think it may be getting a little bit...I mean all that stuff I've just been saying that's been happening is a tiny bit of what's been happening in the whole country, but I think there's a tendency to... Let me tell you just a quick story. When I got hired at age 31, boy, did my head get big. I also happened to be the youngest director in the entire nation at that point. That lasted three weeks but I think there are some out there that really think they're pretty special. I think that's a danger and I'd say that's the minority but we've got to be here to serve our constituents; that's why we're here, not to build ourselves up little kingdoms or something. We may end up with a kingdom but we still need to be out there serving and I'm a little bit worried about some of that not happening. Part of it is maybe just the nature of the beast, you know, you get more and more money appropriated and all that. This current thing that's happened to a lot of state, it will be interesting to see how it shakes out because I've heard a lot of people say, "This is how you should run an arts agency and this is how you should do this program and that program," and they're no longer there. Whether that would have made any difference or not, I don't know but I think if you continue to build a good foundation of support and a sincere interest in what's going on and helping people do their thing, this movement can continue to thrive.

*B. If you have NOT stayed in touch with the field, why not?*

*III. Think about the time when you were starting your work with SAAs. What have you changed your mind about, if anything, from then to now?*

I think it's harder to do it now because there are more obstacles in the way. We're better known; we have a higher profile; people can object to us. That's such a hard question. I mean right now the times are, forget the arts. What matters is freedom of expression and freedom of speech are being challenged as they were back then but the climate has changed. I have no idea of your political persuasion but I'm very concerned that our country is just cut down the middle in terms of politics and more than the politics, its attitudes towards things. Some of us feel holier than thou and others of us are saying, "No, that's not the attitude we should have at all." Things seemed more possible 30 years ago. I don't know if that's a factor of age of the individuals involved but I think you had people like Leonard Randolph in the Literature department. He had a huge vision for literature and Clark Mitze. I don't know how they all got found and hired but they did some things that really moved things forward and now it's much more, "you've got to do this, you've got to do that; you've got to fill out this..." We've got to be careful about that; otherwise, there will be no passion there. I'm not answering it well but....

*IV. Do you have a single piece of advice for a young person entering the field of public sector arts administration today?*

Just get involved in as much as you can from all aspects and learn about it. Do some internships if you can; do art if you can in some way; get some formal study in administration if you can; and then just go into it like a missionary, I think. It's not a career in state arts stuff the way it might be a career in some other arts activity. You are there to serve the people. I had an interesting discussion in Washington State once. Are you there to serve the artists or the people? I think the answer is both; the people are paying your bill and the medium is sort of the artist and the artist has to be respected and encouraged and supported as well. I know some people think the only reason for the arts council is to support the artist; well, give them all the money in the world and if you don't have an audience and continued support in the future then you don't have your artist either. It's kind of a garbled answer. You've got to really believe in about you're about to get involved with and then that's got to have a high priority in whatever you do. I also believe that when you get involved in this business, probably any business, you need to get involved in your community or at the state or the national level so that you help dignify the arts. So if you can get on the school board and you are a professional person in a state arts council, you can maybe help influence decisions at the school board level. If you can get on the dogcatcher's board, you can maybe help influence the construction of a more aesthetic building, things like that. I've always encouraged my staff to do that, some do, some don't, and it's basically what you're interested in.

*V. Information about you:*

SEE RESUME

*A. Education*

- 1. Educational level (has, ba, some grad, ma, Phd)*
- 2. Major/field*

*B. What skills/competencies did you have/did you bring to your leadership position at an SAA? How had you acquired these skills? (experience, professional development training, formal degree education)*

By experience. When I was in the Peace Corps, I think I told you I was director of an orchestra. I was its manager and I was given the responsibility of trying to make this orchestra of 13 people self supporting. They had been supported by the university, the Haille Salasi University and so it was by chance. I would make mistakes and learn. I also then...and that's what really started my career...was made at the ripe old age of 24, 23, assistant director of the arts center where orchestra was based so I got involved in a lot of the programming and I got involved in some of the administration and budgeting and so forth. That gave me an introduction to this world of arts administration. When I came home in '66 this wonderful lady hired me to be executive director of this program that she started in children's theatre, a statewide program called Children's Resources for Youth, and I quickly learned how much I didn't know. She really was a mentor to me and I ended up taking over the whole program because she had a divorce and wanted to get out of the state. That really was good training and I started working with other people like superintendents of schools and working with the university administration, things like that. When I left it because our federal money ran out, the university took the thing over and to my knowledge, this thing is still going. It took a different form but it basically introduced people to children's theatre and has activities, performances out in the state. I then became a dean of liberal arts, assistant to the dean so I got another exposure to administration; and then Jim Bravar said, "Why don't you apply for this job?" and so I did and then went in and, boy, I knew nothing but you learn through trial and error. I talked about the comptroller. He didn't think we should exist but he did help me a lot and he's a good man; he's probably retired by now. And the NEA had programs and there were other things you could take, workshops and so forth. When I was in Peace Corps, the guy across the street from us at the Creative Arts Center ran the business college and he said, "John, when you go home, I know you'll want to get a job. First get some business school training," which, of course, I didn't do. I wish I had. There was nothing called arts administration back then. I still would have gained from that experience. So mostly it's been living with my peers and learning from them; that's been my background. Today I think there are some formal things you can do that just didn't exist when I started. Another thing you have to have is a love of people; you've really got to enjoy people.

*C. Work Experience*

SEE RESUME

- 1. Specific arts management experience vs. non-arts management experience*
- 2. Did you work for a SAA either before or after your time as Executive Director?*
- 3. Did you work for a public sector agency – not an SAA – either before or after your time as Executive Director?*

The Museum I'm with right now is part of state government and if they would let me, I could give them some advice. We've gone through an enormous reorganization here and I'm part of the reorganization. But I'm now not in any position of authority and frankly one of these days I'm just going to retire because I'm 65 and can. I certainly could give

them some advice. I've already tried to give the director of the whole department some advice and he didn't want it.

*4. It may be necessary for us to just ask them to make a list of their work experience in chronological order – no need for years – including the SAA, and then for us to categorize – jotting one of these categories after they have named the job:*

- private sector management*
- government agency management*
- gallery/performance group*
- fundraising/grant administration*
- performer/critic/writer*
- lobbyist/advocate*
- nonprofit sector experience*
- elected office holder*
- arts education/teacher*
- academic*
- service organization experience: national or other*

#### *Work Chronology*

SEE RESUME

After New Hampshire, went to United Arts Omaha in Nebraska  
1992 went to Wyoming Arts Council until June 2003

#### *D. Do you pursue any art form? Which?*

I'm a composer; and what I'm doing right now is trying to finish the job; written a lot of music in sketch form and want to get it out so that if anyone every wanted to play it or sing it, it'd be there; I'm finding it a real challenge because the energy level is not what it used to be; sing in a chorus; I founded a chorus in Omaha which just had it's 21<sup>st</sup> anniversary and I was on the ground floor of chorus in Fort Collins, Colorado, and singing with that almost every concert; those are two things in the arts; amateur photographer but I don't call that for me an art; just love to take pictures.

It's interesting that you've done this interview. I told you I was director of this thing called Orchestra Ethiopia. I went into it really blind. I didn't know anything. It was Ethiopian music on Ethiopian instruments and even though I taught music for two years prior to that in a school in Ethiopia, I really hadn't learned much about Ethiopian music. My predecessor was a man you may know, Halim Al-Dahb. He's now 82 or 83 years old. He's at Kent State and he's probably an emeritus and widely known as an avante garde composer. I'm sure he's taught a lot of people. In fact, I became aware of him again because one of his students is getting his doctorate on Halim's work, David Patagliana or something. Another person who was in my life 40 years ago was this woman Cynthia Tse-Kintham. We were in the Peace Corps together. She was in the northern part of the empire and I was in the southern part. I think we saw each other once in the country. She has since become a musicologist and lives in Oakland and she's been doing all kinds of research into ethnic music including she got in touch with me about Halim and his music and what did I do with this orchestra. That got me interested again;

I forgot about it. Then my successor who was a high school student when I left but a composer and a lyricist got permission from my boss back in Ethiopia to take over the orchestra. I'd seen him; I saw a photo of him back then but neither of us have any recollection of how we may have interacted; we just don't know. When he took over another Peace Corps guy by the name of Charles Sutton discovered the orchestra and he's a jazz musician and he wanted to learn how to play one of the instruments. It's called a masinko; it's a one-string violin. He became a member of the orchestra and also its fiscal agent and fundraiser and thanks to him he brought the orchestra to United States and its first gig was on Ed Sullivan. I saw it on black and white TV. Charles continues to play the masinko in Ethiopian restaurants along the East coast and jazz piano; that's how he makes his living. He kind of forgot about the orchestra, too, until I think Cynthia made contact and now he and Tess Vy, my successor, jumped ship. I guess he brought the orchestra over again and because of the coup d'etat that occurred in Ethiopia, he became in exile here and now he's an American citizen and now he's in a nursing home needing a kidney transplant. He's like 60 years old. At any rate the three of us, Charles, Tess Vy and I got together a few weeks ago in Washington because Charles is now working with a Frenchman who's going to create a CD of Orchestra Ethiopia. Then we got on the phone with Halim and spent about two hours with him. I learned a great deal about the orchestra that I had no idea about. He left just before I got there and he worked with it from 1963 to 1964 and here's a real professional musician then I took over and I brought it to another level and then Tess Vy did with the help of Charles. In 1974 the orchestra died because of the coup d'tat. Now all of us are involved with each other again 40 years later so that's something else I'm doing in the arts is participating in a retrospective of this orchestra in part thanks to this Frenchman that none of us have met. So it's really interesting. I found some old tapes that I'd done; I turned them into CD's that Charles is working with now. It's been great. I haven't begun to tap everything. I got to go into my photographs. I don't even know where they are. So that's the third thing I'm doing now in the arts. That's probably about all I can handle.

*E. Demographic information:*

1. *Gender* Male

2. *Age range now* 65 and 5 months

3. *Geographic region he or she lives now* Cheyenne, Wyoming (30 miles west of Cheyenne at a retreat center and I'm its caretaker working on my music and watching the deer and coyotes and so forth)

4. *political/partisan identification* - Democrat

One other major interest that I have is international relations; inspired by Peace Corps; we've got to stop thinking we are the king; we've got to start listening to other people; went to conference dealing with the arts on an international level; the morning before I went to the Peace Corps headquarters, this guard from Ethiopia stopped me and I explained what I was doing and the information I was looking for and that I used to be teacher in Jima and he looked at me and he said he was from Jima and he blurted out "Jingle Bells"; through the arts, taught folk music; they were learning English through music but they had fun learning it through the arts; learned enormous vocabulary; one of Reagan's appointees of the Peace Corps; I was really down; I said what the heck did we do anyway; it was useless; she said you did not go over there to change

governments; you went there to change people; if you affected one person, that's what it's about