

Oral History Interview with C. Anthony Law and Jane Shaw Law
Conducted by Angela Baker June 22 1993

Transcription By: Armin Shujaatullah March 10 2000

AL When did I become artist in residence, I retired in six-

JL Sixty-eight, wasn't it?

AL Sixty eight that's it.

JL Yeah.

AL Told them I couldn't do it. In sixty-seven because I was organizing the Centennial Art Gallery [the potter magazine and the Citadel]. That now has become the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia.

AB Well let start at the very beginning. Could you state your full name, first of all, then your date and place of birth?

AL Well in 1966 in April I retired from the Royal Canadian Navy as commander Charles Anthony Law.

AB Where were you born?

AL I was born London England.

AB Oh yeah.

AL In world war one, as my father and mother both Canadians, and what happened was my mother met my father here in Halifax in 1912 when he was in the RCR, the Royal Canadian Regiment. And they fell in love and got married, and war broke up 1914 I've forgotten the date, and in order to alleviate the British army in Bermuda, the Royal Canadian Regiment was sent there, and my father mother went there to Bermuda and then they were sent over to England and I arrived in 1916, on 15th of October during a zeppelin raid.

AB Oh my, that's an exciting birth!

AL So that's the beginning.

AB Okay, so tell me about your your artistic career and your education.

AL My, my... well I started I studied with Varley, member of the Group of Seven and also before that, was Brownell, and I came to Quebec after, in 1937, I think it was and I had my first exhibition in Quebec city in 1938, which went very well. Prior to that I was designing neon signs in Quebec, going down at eight o'clock in the

morning and leaving at six including Saturday for 40 dollars a month. Well I did so well with my exhibition I promptly resigned. And from there I got this painting here. It was the first painting in 1938 accepted in the Royal Canadian Academy and it was selected among sixty paintings to tour Canada and I, before I went overseas the painting came back. A little French Canadian made the frame in Quebec City and well its it's of of-of Riviere-du-Loup, and low tide and I also had a little sail boat in those days I used to sail up the St. Lawrence painting, and then war broke out and I had to [attack]. So I went over seas and that's another story. So and then in during that time I'm on the Jessie Dow award in Montreal, at the Montreal arts association and I have most of the information in there for you.

AB Oh, thank you.

AL That's a that's a copy for you so that you can refer. And there's the painting.

JL There's the painting, yes.

AL That's a sketch but it, it's badly photographed.

JL Oh, wait a minute, Saint Mary's University has the original-

AL Has the original sketch.

AL This one.

JL In their, their um... You know their acquisitions, its about so, so.

AB Oh I see.

JL So that's nice.

AL So, then I went-well in went in the Peter boats. And they were high speed boats, we used to go after the German convoys at night off the Dutch and French coast and I spent five and a half years there and then when I came back to Canada, the Admiral and also the Minister of the Navy who happened to be a good old Nova Scotian, Hank-is it-Macdonald?

JL Yeah.

AL And he said you're not going over to the Asian war or the Pacific, you're going to become official naval war artist. So I painted and became official war artist and then I joined the permanent force after that. And I retired in 1966, plus throughout my whole career I've always painted and had exhibitions in various places, Jane and I've had exhibitions in Victoria, BC in 1946-47, and where I've gone in Ottawa... So when I retired in '66] accept really, think very seriously, and from there - 1968 - I became artist in resident and also curator of the art gallery.

I started the art gallery it was in the old library and it was a great success because all the student had to come in to the art gallery up the stairs, in to the library and I had a built in audience. We ran the whole thing on a shoestring and I met Father Stewart and he, the head of the drama society, and he asked me I if I'd be interested and I said sure so from then on I used to design the sets, he would build them and phone me up and say they're ready and I'd come down and paint them. And so from there we had some great successes together. Father Stewart had, I remember one time we had produced....

JL Ghost train.

AL The Ghost Train. and after the show this man wanted to buy the stove and we said, Brother Stewart said I'm sorry, it's all made of masonite, it's all painted, looks like a real stove! And then Dr. Robertson thought I had a Japanese screen in one of the sets and he wanted to buy that and I said sorry, it's masonite. So anyway those were the fun things we, we had a lot of fun doing it and again we ran it on a shoe lace and we won an award for our design of the sets, when they, when we used to have the festivals, and—well it was fun. We traveled up to Antigonish with all these props and sets and put the whole thing together and hope we'd win an award for best acting and the, and face forward with the director, and she had a wonderful way of even giving these young Canadian students English accents for certain plays, Ernest-

JL The Importance of Being Ernest.

AL. So anyway it was lots of fun.

AB Were there a lot of students involved in drama at that time?

AL M-hm.

JL Yes.

AB Lot of students?

JL It was a very good group of students, there were a lot of them.

AL Oh yes.

JL I'm not sure now we haven't been associated with it so were not, but I don't think there was. I don't there is the interest now because they had less other things going on at Saint Mary's at the time so it was, it was one of the important off campus, shall we say, no-

AB Extracurricular?

JL Yeah extracurricular, yeah.

AL You see in the old days it be the basketball area and it had a stage and I we had all the workshops so we could build our sets there.

JL Yeah.

AL And when we we would then set up all the seats and everything and have it for a week, and put on our show. But it was wonderful cause they could rehearse and also get used to the set and everything else and--

JL Get to hear the basket ball going bang bang bang as they practiced!

AL Brothers did all the designs for the, all the costume designs, so it was quite a quite a—I think a lot of the young actors and actresses they went off, some went to CBC and some of them did very well.

JL Yeah.

AL So that is and then of course I was running the art gallery and I had a show every month including the show at the Royal Canadian Academy - big show, that was a huge show - and I didn't have I didn't have any staff I had a student he was always busy for exams so I always had to uncrate, hang the show get the other show crated and sent it off and we work on a circuit all the universities and art galleries in the Maritimes, have a circuit, and the national art gallery also gave us exhibitions so we built it up and then Edmund Morris my, we decided were gonna build a permanent gallery. So we designed it and that's the gallery that is there now. And the, and Bob Tates became the first curator, because I said, look this is you know they practically gave me, what was I getting two thousand four hundred dollars in a year.

JL Ha ha yes.

AL And I said look this is a big job I can't... And most of the artists in resident in those days I would be lecturing to the students of Canadian art and different things and industrial design, and so on and I so I then just became artist in residence after that. So the-

AB What year was the new library built? New, the permanent one.

AL Oh that was built after after-

JL After the high rise, yes.

AL After the high rise—new library I can't-

JL Now I don't mean, what's the high rise a date I'm not sure, it-

AL Yeah, somewhere in the early seventies. Think it was started in '78, and so that was quite something. And then the library came after that. Also the students union building, they put on a whole lot of stories on that too so , it [took] quite a big campus.

AB The University was quite a different place in 1968.

AL Oh yeah there was just I've forgotten the... I think,

JL It was the main building

AL Three thousand students, they and also evening students, and it blew up and of course I remember at the beginning there were all boys, so we had to borrow girls for our productions.

AB Oh really

AL Yeah

JL Go out to the Mount!

AL Go up the Mount and get—so and I remember this one we did, it was a murder thing in New York. I had to paint the portrait of this, the young girl, because that was an important...

JL Laura, it was the play, Laura.

AL Yeah, so I had to paint Laura. Nothing came after the end of it. I gave the portrait to her. Was a big one you know, nice big one. Well anything like that on a stage cause it, was an important factor in the play. So we had a lot of fun, and Father Stewart and planned[a vanguard] with very modern music and I mean it was perfect. Very very modern and very modern set. In New York with a big, oh, what would you call it, the door going out on to a nice verandah with the sky light of New York.

AB M-hmm.

AL I made the sky line of New York. So that was fun. We did all kinds of things like that, and so in 1980 I stepped down and Lisa Davis took over from me, and of course by then we became a more sophisticated gallery and everything was going quite well then, and he, Bob Deets, was eased out. I used to tell him you can't send a memorandum like that, he'll fire you! you know being fairly so, so I got..., Anyway Nathan took it over and from then on things went quite well, and in 1981

they, they gave an honorary Doctor of Letters. Both Jane and I have honorary doctoral letters and both can't spell.

JL Now don't tell family secrets!

AL So anyway that's the story and now-

AB Okay, uh, what changes did you notice from the time you were there in 1968 to 1980 in the students?

AL Oh tremendous amount of change because then as I said there were all boys and then there were about a group of 300 Chinese.

JL Yes.

AL And they were great if you ever wanted anything done you got the Chinese to do it for you. Wham, it was done! And I used to pull a leg a lot of the students I said look, if you don't smarten up those people will be running this country. So there it was and those were the changes then the, the girls arrived that was exciting and....

AB What effect did that have?

AL That bought the, made the university in to a very interesting campus from then on. Things really perked up, that's about it and the Jesuits phased out, but Father Stewart was always there when I as long as I was there. But Father Labelle retired and so did-

JL Father Fogarty.

AL Yes he was um,

JL Excuse me.

AL Father Fogarty was vice president.

AB I'll just put this on pause—

TAPE PAUSED

AL When the Jesuits were running the university Father Labelle was the president and Father Fogarty was the vice president and when we would have an opening and we'd always they would have a nice dinner party for the artist and probably a few members of the family or something like that and it was oh it was very nice and then we'd go over to the art gallery that was the library in those days old library. That was a, and we'd have a lovely opening, and the most pleasant, lots of people would come and so this to say a way of introducing the artist to the community and

to the university. And our main aim was to expose the students, give them a uh, a-a-a more liberal education, by seeing the various types of art from the impressionists, like myself and the high realists and the abstract painters and the conceptual art of any avant-garde work. And so they'd be able to have a good look at all the things including pottery and things like that and some sculpture. And so sculpture was always a big, this was just very expensive to crate and ship, so we didn't have too many shows of that. but it was a lot of shows and it was very it-we got lovely shows from different parts of Canada. In those days you see it wasn't too expensive to ship all the paintings and insure them. And on the syndicate, so we were, all members of Newfoundland, PEI, Nova Scotia, and New Brunswick... the Atlantic art circuit. And we would produce one show a year of ourselves - each university and an art gallery would produce one show a year and we would go on bid for it. And we so put it on our calendar, so that's the reason we had a show every month.

And so it was very exciting—but in those days things weren't too expensive. And then all of a sudden everything took off, and now Nathan can't have the shows like we did because it takes a lot of money. Everything is so expensive now to ship, insure. So um, so but in those days we took advantage. And I remember all the students would, going in to the library would stop, and a new show arriving I'd be taking them out of the crates they wanted to see them, discuss them and what kind of, who's this where are they from, the artist.... Oh it was fun anyway, so yes but those were the early primitive days.

JL We did some crafts too. We had nice-

AL Oh yes we had craft shows.

JL And a nice a glass case between-

AL And weaving show of the famous weaver—what's her name?

JL The doors and—oh oh, Betsy Murray and,

AL Oh yes.

JL Yeah, and and that was cute too because, uh, it was Bishop Hayes, and he had ordered ahead, so she did... it was for—in red for the special services. I think its for All Saints - you know he always wears red and there were about four or five different times during the year, and Tony had this on exhibit. It was a borrowed for the exhibit.

AL It was Betsy Murray..

JL Betsy Murray had, had done it all the beautiful embroidery and so forth—and Tony arrived one morning, it was gone. And he was in a panic.

AL I found the-

JL Bishop Hayes had to have it for the service that morning, so someone nipped out and got it off the form, and Tony wasn't there for that to say it's alright, it's gonna come back, so he had a few hours of worry!

AL So once you found out I was happy. And anyway Bishop Hayes bought the thing from Betsy Murray.

JL Yes that was it—it was you know made special.

AL And there were stoles and all kinds of things, beautifully done. So we have variety of things.

JL That was great.

AL That is to say, in those days it was easy. And then in the summer I would get all the local artists and have about three or four of their works, and just leave it up there for the whole summer. So they could and, I guess some of the artist sold their works, that kind of helped, but it exposed them to all the local artists as well.

AB So you say that you gave some classes at some point?

AL Oh yes we ran, oh yes I ran life classes and now-

JL In the gallery.

AL In the gallery, and then Jane and I ran a workshop for.. what was—four weeks what it was?

JL No, no, the first one was two weeks.

AL Two weeks.

JL The next one was ten days.

AL Yes.

JL And the last one was a week.

AB It's shorter.

JL We ran out of steam! Well two weeks of intensive-

AL We were exhausted!

JL Painting... we, the students would meet at the gallery and then we would explain the subjects we were going to do and then everyone would get in their cars and we too we'd take some of them and we drive around and we'd parked all over the city and we came out here and did the Armdale yacht club using the the the Greek churches parking lot and we could look across. We we went to some amazing places.

AL Point Pleasant Park.

JL Point Pleasant Park. And it was it was a we were lucky, not much rain and they did some very interesting work so, yeah it was good.

AB Um, around what time was that?

JL Uh, I think that would have been-

AL It'd been the summer.

JL Summer and it would have probably been '80, 1980, '82...

AL Yeah .

JL '82. We did it three successions.

AL Or in the seventies.

JL Maybe we started '79. But it was it was getting towards the-

AL I retired in 1980, so you gotta back up [] earlier.

JL Back up alright, then it was the three years before you retired that we we did it.

AL And then the life classes in the evening I used to get live models. Which was very exciting for the university. Because Halifax was fairly prim and proper in those days.

AB Oh yes.

AL So I broke all the records in that.

JL Well at least it carried on with that tradition though.

AL Oh yes, they'd have to but after all I broke the ice!

JL He did, but you had broken the ice!

AL Yes. With the Jesuits.

JL Oh no of course, with the Jesuits.

AL Yes so you see you have to go back to '75.

JL Yup in life classes yes.

AL So anyway there we are. And so that was the aspect of Saint Mary's, and Jane was involved in the-

JL The faculty women.

AB Yeah what did you, tell us about that a little bit?

JL Well, uh, and it's a faculty women it was changes happened and that, that were external exchanges, changes. Most of the members of that were either faculty or the wives of faculty members. And the wives of faculty members basically were not going out and having careers in those days, so we were quite a large group. And we used to do some very interesting things, for instance we had international cooking, and of course there were many many of the professors who are from different countries, different everything, and their wives are very generous and they would invite us to their homes and they would cook a meal. We went to Krishna Murty and she did wonderful Indian dishes, and Dr. Rojo, did Spanish cooking and then we had a professor a Dr. Sun who was Chinese and she gave several cooking classes, and it was interesting because she said she was teaching courses involving the study of China, at the time and she said I think that you can understand a culture much better if you eat the food. And she said now in China we don't use milk.

AB Oh really?

JL So there are no dishes with milk in them and there were various other things that that she brought up in in the cooking and how they cook things very quickly, because it's expensive fuel—for them is expensive. So they have evolved this form of cooking which they have a very high heat and they cook things quickly, and it all of—and another thing most of their things are cut up very fine. That's because you, you can't cut with chop sticks. And we learned how to use our chop sticks and all these little things, and I thought this—a wonderful thing and she did this in her classes. She would take the students, the Jesuits had a a very nice um, dining area and uh the the kitchen facilities were right off that.

AL That's right.

JL And well you know up on the what was it third fourth floor, when they were in residence there. So she would borrow that and take all her classes there and they would learn about the Chinese cooking. And we had, we did we even produced a a

few uh recipe little booklets, because the dishes that we had were so nice and we wanted to..

AB What other events that the faculty women's association?

JL Uh, they raised a lot of money, which now is the where some of the scholarships come from for the... They had raffles, they held raffles. They made quilts, they did lot of knitted things, they they produced a great number of things that they sold and this raised the money that they were able to—now they've named them, several of the members of the faculty died, and they they have them, as a a memorial to to them, so that's why the the names are, I'm trying to think of the names and I cant, but anyway there were two that uh... It was it was a good way to for new people coming in, new families, for the wives to meet the other professors' wives.

AL And also talk about the, the watercolour classes you gave them.

JL Oh yes.

AL And also which you still do, is out to lunch.

JL Oh yes!

AL Once a month. [] for every month.

JL Yes that's sort of ... but we were very active then, and we are not as active now, but as I say, it's the change of of the way people live now. and many of the wives have other professions so they haven't the time to give to us as they used to have. So that's one of, we I give a little watercolour class every workshop every now and then for them, and there's a little nucleus that's enjoys painting and if you remember at the exhibition the faculty exhibition there were a number of pieces were done by some of the faculty members.

AB Oh m-hmm.

JL So, each year they they put something in the show.

AB M-hmm, that's great.

JL Um, now were trying to – We're doing it very slowly but we're raising money for book scholarship. We we felt that that would be a a good thing. Knowing how expensive your, your books are.

AB Yes [really].

JL Oh—only now with, tell me what's gonna happen with the computers and with all this you are not gonna need books any more are you?

AB I hope that never happens!

AL The writers won't like that.

JL No, no.

AB So you, out to lunch, what were you talking about?

JL Out to lunch well, we've done that for twelve years. Uh, we pick six restaurants in town and every the first Friday of every month we go to one of these and it involves, we have to phone everyone saying you gonna come out to lunch, and it's been great fun. A number of the restaurants don't exist any more that we went! But, there new ones always coming along so we've been able to we repeat a few of the very special ones, but usually we have more than half are brand new. So that's, every time I say it though I get a little chill, out to lunch! They think we're all a little light up here! so..

AL So it was an interesting group because they're all-so international .

JL Oh yes.

AL Poles, Chinese, [solons] Spanish, quite an interesting group of professors.

JL Yes. I would say about a third of them are professors who come, so that, and they-

AL That's the women of course.

JL And then the women yes. And then what we've done too is twice during the year we have either a brunch or a dinner. And we invite the husbands, so they can enjoy it too.

AB Oh that's nice.

AL Yes, when everybody comes a—a pot luck.

JL Pot luck yeah.

AL And the husbands bring a bottle of wine, and all the-

JL And then we had these fascinating dishes that are... it's international cooking all over again! Because everyone brings something that they particularly enjoy doing and we've had all sorts of marvelous dishes.

AB So uh, are there any other changes you can think of either one of you that you noticed over the time that you were there?

JL No.

AB Besides the Jesuits leaving and the women coming in.

JL Oh that's another thing we always had done too, we've always had children's party, the faculty.

AL Father Stewart has also been Santa Claus.

JL And he's always been Santa Claus, and this, these last three, four times we've had it had the um, the new center, the sports center and that's been a great improvement. We used to have it in, in the student union building and it was sort of their cafeteria are and so forth, but this, this was so lovely, it's big and it's , and been great and very light. We used to be sort of a dark room I don't know why it was so dark except I think it was in the in the lower level anyway. So that's one of the things.

AL Yes and, and now Jane and I over the years have been building up our scholarship fund with, for Saint Mary's.

JL Well that that's something we can I can I can I can say about the scholarships. I was president of the faculty women's association, and the first scholarship presentation I went to representing the faculty women, the group was so small that we had it in the art gallery and we just stood around in a little circle and well it took a very short time because we didn't have a great number of scholarships. We had, I think we had two to give, but we've increased ours, and there were, there just weren't the number of scholarships, and the—now we have to have it where they do, and the line up of students, oh! There may have been uh, twenty maybe, and that's making a good big figure that got scholarships at the time, so that change has been I think remarkable I was.

AL Especially nowadays.

JL Yeah.

AL Because of the world wide depression.

JL Yeah.

AL You know were all in the boat, don't think its just Canada, I know we've slipped from fourth in trading to eleventh now, but it's very serious all over in Europe and [everywhere] and on the Western world. So uh, been a great for a student it's a pretty tough going financially, but you all about it.

JL Yes.

AB Well that's about all I wanted to talk about. Can you think of anything else?

AL Now Jane-

JL Oh yes I have something-

AL Yes.

JL I'm so glad you phoned and you came out because I'm not sure I would have been able to find you.

END OF TAPE