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Interviewer: Toni Thomasson

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TONI THOMASSON: This is Toni Thomasson. Today is Friday, October 9, 2015. Today I'm interviewing for the first time architect and sculptor Bob Coffee. This interview is taking place at the home of Bob Coffee located at 804 Wayside Drive in Austin, Texas. This interview is being done for the Austin History Center and is one of a series of interviews with Austin, Travis County architects.

Good morning, Bob.

BOB COFFEE: Good morning.

THOMASSON: Ready to get started?

COFFEE: You bet.

THOMASSON: Could you start by telling me your full name and when and where you were born?

COFFEE: My full name is Robert Franklin Coffee. I was born in Dallas on November 12, 1933.

THOMASSON: And did you grow up in Dallas?

COFFEE: I grew up in University Park, a suburb of North Dallas, and lived there all my years until I went to college.

THOMASSON: Okay.

Tell me about when you first knew you wanted to be an architect and what drew you to architecture.

COFFEE: Well, it's a long story. Shall I tell my story?

THOMASSON: Go ahead. Tell your story.

COFFEE: I had a degree from the University of Texas in 1955 in journalism and advertising. I was working in Dallas. I came out of there and got a job in Dallas in the sales part of advertising. I was fixing to be married, and that wasn't going too good. I got frustrated. I went to the VA for an aptitude test, said I should be a policeman, a fireman, a forest ranger, or a farmer. Well, that didn't help much. (Thomasson laughs) I started going around and interviewing things I thought I might like to try. My family were all lawyers, so I knew about the law. I interviewed artists. Then I went and started—got interested in interviewing architects, and they had beautiful offices with great drawings and models all over the place, and cute secretaries, and I thought, Man, I can do this. So I quit my advertising job and got a job as a carpenter and I went to my dad and said, "Dad, I want to go back to architecture school," and he said, "You want to go to school again?" He'd already put me through college one time. He said, "Well, just go." Well, I had about four hundred dollars saved up, so I came down to the university, enrolled in architecture school in the summer, and three of us kept an old house for a lady, got our rent free. I waited tables at Mrs. Hardin's Boarding House and got my meals free, and worked at Hemphill's Book Store, and took freshman and sophomore design at the same time.

THOMASSON: Wow!

COFFEE: I didn't have—I had so many electives from my previous degree, I could just concentrate on design. So I tried to speed up getting my degree, which went fine for a long time until I hit steel working drawings, and I flunked that twice and I dropped out of school and went to Dallas and went to work for some architects up there.

But anyway, I think who encouraged me in architecture were basically my professors and just acquaintances I knew in town in the architecture world.

THOMASSON: So were you working for architects while you were in school?

COFFEE: I would work for the professors some. I worked for Gene Wukasch—yeah—Gene Wukasch. I worked for him for a little bit and it's down the street. Oh, who else did I work for? I had some kind of little odd jobs while I was in school.

And then when I came out of school, I got—I had—when I went back to school, I dropped and went to Dallas, worked for George and Oliver, and they were Frank Lloyd Wright's representatives for the Dallas Theater Center and a house that Wright had designed in Dallas. And I went to them because David George had taken a full day off and taken me and another student one time around Dallas and showed us all these things, and, boy, he was a great guy. He said, "We can't hire you. We don't have any—" It was just the two of them. I said, "Well, I'll come in and make coffee and open the office, shut it down, and everything. And I have a little project and also I'll work on while I'm here." Well, after a while they put me on, and I was pretty soon working for them. But I did that for the first semester.

Then I came back to school that summer and did pass steel working drawings.

THOMASSON: Yey! (laughs)

COFFEE: But I ended up having the highest grades in the fourth year class in design. I won a design competition that the State Hospital sponsored for a church chapel and offices for the chaplains out there, and my little freeform design that I built a little plaster model of won the competition, and Martin Kermacy was my professor, and I remember one day coming in and Kermacy had taken—I'd built this model—and he had taken cake icing and written, "Happy Birthday Bob," on the top of this big plaster model. (Both laugh) And he was an inspiration to me. He would take me into his office—he was the cultural attaché to Spain, I didn't realize that—but he would take me in his office and show me Antonio Gaudi's freeform work and everything and encouraged me to do that project. But he really, really encouraged me.

THOMASSON: And when you won that competition, did it get built?

COFFEE: Oh, no. It was—they couldn't build it. Well, they probably could've built it, but they didn't build it. But it was a little too far out I think for them. Yeah.

THOMASSON: Yeah. But you did finish at UT? You did finish?

COFFEE: I did, yeah. I finished and was given a job by Page Southerland Page right out of school as a designer. So I worked on hospitals, designed the one in Hondo, hospital down there. Worked on a project in Beaumont, which was, oh, the big arts center down there. And George Page would just bring me a little simple drawing and I'd have to make it into some kind of a building. When I designed the high rise building down here on Willow Street, that big housing authority old folks' home—

THOMASSON: Um hmm.

COFFEE: —my brother and I were trying to find some ranchland out here and get my dad interested in it, and one day George Page called me in and says, "What the hell is going on here? If the phone wasn't ringing in this office and it was for you, I wouldn't know this was my office." I said, "Well, I guess it's these old ranch real estate men calling me." He said, "Well, you head them in or you're out of here." Well, right after that I had to go to a two-week army reserve camp at Fort Hood. When I came back, all my stuff was sitting in the hall. He'd fired me.

THOMASSON: Oh, no.

COFFEE: (laughs) So I got fired from my first job. So then I went to work for Don Legge and Paul Coates. Don Legge was the guy I knew, was a brilliant architect, and Paul Coates had kind of a strange personality. He would get us all together to go eat lunch and everything and take us out. Be real expensive and buy us— and then he'd have a couple of drinks and when he'd come back to the office, he'd just come right down on us and just—"We don't cross our t's like that," or we don't do this, that, and finally I just got to where I couldn't get along with him, so I quit him. (laughs) Quit that job, and then I realized I got to do something myself.

So I finally had gotten my license, and so I started with Stuart Lambert. We had kind of organized a little firm, but he was working for PSP, but he wouldn't ever quit, but he got us a job on the drag there to do a men's store. We did that and then got a little plan to do a campout here up above Lago Vista, did a master plan and did the lodge and cabins for that camp. Then that kind of fell through.

Well, anyway, I finally got Jack Crier—hooked up with him. And Jack Crier knew how everything went together.

THOMASSON: Um hmm.

COFFEE: And I can design and render, but I still couldn't do working drawings very good, (laughs) but he knew just how all buildings went together. Jack Crier and I worked in the same office for thirty-five years on the handshake—

THOMASSON: Wow!

COFFEE: —and people say, Well, where do you have to go to work? I said, “I don't have to go to work. I get to go to work every day in this office with Jack Crier and have fun.” And it was wonderful.

THOMASSON: That's great.

COFFEE: Yeah.

THOMASSON: And you added a partner or two later, right?

COFFEE: We added Bill Schenck. He was assigned to us when the Texas Society of Architects Historic Committee was doing a study of courthouse squares. And Bill was a student, and he was assigned—and we did it in our office—worked on it in our office, and we liked him so well that he became a partner.

THOMASSON: Um hmm.

COFFEE: He worked for us and became a partner. Then later George Hammond, who'd worked for us for a long time, we made him a partner. And we found out George Hammond was a great designer. We didn't ever let him design anything, but he built a house that was just incredible out here on the hill. And when I see it to this day, it looks like Le Corbusier designed it. I mean, it's just a fantastic house. But we had a great, great time in that office. You've been over to my office, haven't you?

THOMASSON: Many times.

COFFEE: Yeah, you have. (Both laugh)

THOMASSON: So are you still involved with the office at all?

COFFEE: No, we will go to eat a lunch once in a while or get together. They're doing a lot of work for UT.

THOMASSON: Oh.

COFFEE: They do all this remodeling and that's basically what their work is right now, is working with UT.

THOMASSON: So is Jack—

COFFEE: Jack is retired. He has a little piece of property out here up on, oh, one of the rivers, the Lampasas River or something like that, and he's designed a house and additions and everything, and he's always working on that project it seems like. He's doing well.

THOMASSON: So, let's see what questions I have here. Talk about some of the architects who inspired your work and your career.

COFFEE: Well, I was a big fan of Frank Lloyd Wright's, and I really liked his stuff. Anytime I travel someplace, if there's a Wright project around, I got to go see it. And I've seen a lot of his work, and I've studied his work.

David George, who was a protégé—who worked for Frank Lloyd Wright, and who I worked for in Dallas—he had the greatest style of doing architecture, and I just loved his work.

Then O'Neil Ford. I thought O'Neil Ford was a great, great architect, and whenever I get a chance to see O'Neil Ford's work, I'll go see that.

But those three guys really—I did go and see Le Corbusier's Ronchamp Chapel a couple of years ago in France.

THOMASSON: Um hmm.

COFFEE: And it was incredible. Just like it'd just been built out there, so well maintained.

THOMASSON: Well, during your career, did you serve on any Austin or Travis County boards or commissions?

COFFEE: Well, I was on the Austin Parks Board for about six years I think in the late '70s and early '80s. And, oh, I would be on subcommittees, like the Capitol View Corridor Committee. I remember being on that. And then I was on the Downtown Revitalization Task Force, and I think I was vice chairman of that thing. But those were the main things that I was involved with. Oh, and I was president of the AIA chapter one year.

THOMASSON: What year was that?

COFFEE: That was back in that time about early '80s, late '70s or early '80s. But I had enjoyed that.

THOMASSON: Okay. Can you tell me about some of your projects that you've done in Austin and Travis County? Which ones do you think had the biggest impact on Austin?

COFFEE: Well, probably the Austin Rec Center. When I was on the Parks Board, of course, you get in with the parks director and everything. The next thing you know, well, you get the Austin Rec Center. And we did two rec centers. We did the Dove Springs Rec Center. Austin Rec Center was a great project. We did the United Way Headquarters building, which is really a nice—really liked that building. We did the East Austin Multipurpose Center, which was a city project. We did the Town Lake restrooms. They're little lift slab buildings with the plastic tops all up and down there. We did both the Austin Housing—the first—one of the first jobs we had in Austin was the Headquarters of the Austin Housing Authority. We did that little building, and then later on we did a second building for them.

THOMASSON: Where are they located?

COFFEE: The East Austin Multipurpose Center and the two Housing Authority Center buildings are on the same block. They all occupy that one block over between—off of Second and Comal, right in there.

THOMASSON: Oh, okay.

COFFEE: And let's see. We renovated the headquarters building at Camp Mabry.

THOMASSON: Um hmm.

COFFEE: We did McKinney Falls State Park.

THOMASSON: Ooh. I bet that was fun.

COFFEE: Oh, it was. Really.

Let's see. Well, that's mostly—well, we did some residences around Austin and a few other things. A few commercial projects but not—most of our work was park work.

When we were in architecture school, Blake Alexander had us on that history course either write a big term paper or go measure a historic building.

Well, my roommate and I and a couple of other guys, we were kind of roaming around in the country out here looking for treasure—

THOMASSON: Something that hadn't been done. (laughs)

COFFEE: —J. Frank Dobie's treasure. We were following up on some of that, and we discovered Fort McKavett, and Fort McKavett was this incredible old rundown fort. One of them was a bar and some of them were hay sheds. But we found the headquarters building where Robert E. Lee had stayed during the Mexican War.

THOMASON: Wow!

COFFEE: So we go down there and we camp at the Boy Scout camp and we measure the headquarters building, a beautiful building. So when Jack and I started our firm, well, Texas started these cultural trails or the Hill County Trail. Well, one of them was the Texas Frontier Forts Trail, and Texas had bought five of these forts. Well, I go down to the Historic Commission and show them my measured drawings of the headquarters of Fort McKavett. They gave us the restoration of Fort McKavett, Fort Richardson, and Fort Griffin, all three of those forts.

THOMASSON: Oh, my gosh! (laughs)

COFFEE: In different stages, I mean, we—

THOMASSON: Yeah.

COFFEE: And eventually Fort Richardson—they gave us a park—to design the Fort Richardson State Park at Jacksboro. Well, this led to McKinney Falls Park, and pretty soon we were in parks business. I go—I see where they're looking for architects for Big Bend, Fort Davis, and Amistad Reservoir, the National Parks Service. I drove up to Albuquerque, show them my work we're doing for the Texas Parks and Wildlife. I'm standing outside in the hall, and I hear through the door, "Well, why are we going to interview any more architects? These guys are doing exactly what we want." We got the job.

THOMASSON: Oh, my gosh!

COFFEE: Big Bend, Fort Davis, and Amistad Reservoir.

THOMASSON: (Inaudible)

COFFEE: We didn't do any work at Fort Davis, but we did work at Big Bend. We did work at Amistad. We did—they designed it and we built it, and everything had to be solar powered and everything.

THOMASSON: Um hmm.

COFFEE: Well, then from that, we got—the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service hired us to do master plans of Brazoria, Anahuac, and Attwater Prairie Chicken National Wildlife Refuge. So we were going down to these places and making master plans.

THOMASSON: Yeah.

COFFEE: But driving back and forth from Big Bend, you get to thinking, I got to get a job between here and there. Have to go out there every so often, every couple of weeks. Well, I stopped in Ozona, picked up the paper, and saw where the Crockett County National Bank was going to build a new bank—thinking about building a new bank, and I saw a guy that I knew in college was on the board. (Thomasson laughs) I went there and got the job—we got the job. We designed this beautiful bank in Ozona and there's a big story about it. But anyway, got that bank job.

Well, anyway, we also got into—my brother was Dolph Briscoe's executive assistant when Dolph Briscoe was governor, and as he said, "Briscoe only wanted to make it where you could turn right on red. He didn't want to spend any money," and that was the thrust of his administration. (Thomasson laughs)

But my brother got a bank whatever you call it—franchise in downtown Dallas and pretty soon he had the Reunion Bank, and they hired me to take this old parking garage and make it into a bank in downtown Dallas, and we did that. Then they did another branch in one of the high rise buildings, and then my friend, Cully Culwell, who had the Culwell and Son Shops across from SMU—I was eating lunch there on the SMU drag and bumped into him and pretty soon I'm doing work for Culwell.

THOMASSON: (laughs) I guess.

COFFEE: But it's really who you know in this business.

THOMASSON: Um hmm.

COFFEE: I go up to the post office, and I see where they're out looking for somebody to do a post office up in Marble Falls. Go up there and there's my old roommate, Gene Brode, working for the post office. We get the Marble Falls post

office. From that we get the regional post office up in Killeen. And it's just kind of is ironic.

THOMASSON: Oh, I think it's more than that though. I think people really like working with you—

COFFEE: Well, we really developed some great relationships with—well, we worked with you on the rec center.

THOMASSON: Um hmm, on the rec center.

COFFEE: And that was a great project. I remember—

THOMASSON: But a hard one.

COFFEE: (laughs) It was.

THOMASSON: (laughs) It was hard.

COFFEE: Yeah, it was. We had to get it up out of the floodplain, you know.

THOMASSON: Yes.

COFFEE: And that's why it's up there.

THOMASSON: And all those people that owned the land, ACC and, oh, the school district.

COFFEE: Yeah. Yeah. But that was a great project I remember we had a slab party over there, and I've got pictures of Carol McClellan and I think she was mayor at that time, and I worked real hard for her. I knew her in college.

THOMASSON: (inaudible)

COFFEE: I put up signs for her all over town, and that helped too. But my partners never got into any of that.

THOMASSON: Oh, the actual going out and getting—

COFFEE: Yeah, they—

THOMASSON: They're just let you do that—

COFFEE: I guess so, but anyway.

THOMASSON: Well, how big did your office get when you had all that work?

COFFEE: Well, we had some good architects working for us. We had Hans Turley, who used to be Kuehne and Turley. He was retirement age, but he was very good. We had Doug Johnson, who used to work with Coates and Legge, he was a great draftsman. We had—oh, gosh, we had a lot of good draftsmen off-and-on and good—Judy Cook worked for us. Do you remember her?

THOMASSON: I don't. No.

COFFEE: She's now a professor over at UT I think teaching.

THOMASSON: Oh, okay.

COFFEE: She was great. But we had—oh, Steve Files, and then later on Bill Bowder came with us.

THOMASSON: Um hmm.

COFFEE: And Ann Smith and Bill Bowder. Ken Arther had a room in the house across the street and he would work on some projects for us. But we had a lot of good people come and go through the office there.

THOMASSON: And was your office always down there—

COFFEE: Always in that little—no, no. It started off in my house.

THOMASSON: Oh, okay.

COFFEE: Back of my house. My wife was teaching school and we were taking care of—the kids were there after school and we were working out of my house for a while. Then we moved over there and worked on—we bought that house for ten thousand dollars.

THOMASSON: Wow!

COFFEE: We ended up playing Monopoly around there. We'd buy houses and sell them and stuff around there. Finally, we got three blues together. That house and the two to the south of us. (Recording stopped) We liked that house, yeah. We liked that neighborhood. It's real convenient to us. We could get anywhere we needed to go.

THOMASSON: And they're still there?

COFFEE: That house is still there. We sold those properties and a lady's tore down two of the houses but kept our old office, and they have a little office in there too.

THOMASSON: Oh, good.

COFFEE: It was a great place.

THOMASSON: And what was the address of your office—

COFFEE: Oh, that 509 Oakland.

THOMASSON: Okay.

COFFEE: Five oh nine Oakland.

THOMASSON: Let's see. Did you have a favorite client? Sometimes people don't want to say who their favorite client was, but I see you've written down, "Texas Parks and Wildlife."

COFFEE: Yeah. Texas Parks and Wildlife was really our favorite client. We got so involved with them on McKinney Falls and these restoration projects, but they went for a long time, you know, employing architects. Well, then they built up a big staff there, and pretty soon they weren't hiring architects. They were doing everything in-house. So we kind of got some of the last projects that they did.

But you could write the City in there too. We sure enjoyed working with them.

THOMASSON: Okay.

COFFEE: Put the City of Austin in there too.

THOMASSON: (laughs) We'll put City of Austin in there too.

COFFEE: Yeah, put that in there.

THOMASSON: So you started your firm in '64, is that right?

COFFEE: Yeah, I think so.

THOMASSON: Okay.

COFFEE: That's when I ran through all the firms I was working for.

THOMASSON: Well, it sounds like you preferred the design side of the business, but you were kind of forced into—and by personalities took over the business side as well.

COFFEE: Right. Well, you have to—you got to get the clients in. You've got to work for politicians, you've got to get to know people in the hierarchy that they're hiring these things, the people that run the State Building Commission and the Parks and Wildlife, and the City. Austin is full of agencies that do work. We've done work for, like, the MHMR over at Corsicana State School, and Gainesville—we did a beautiful entrance building up at Gainesville for the Highway Department, and then the Highway Department gave us work in San Antonio.

THOMASSON: How did you stay plugged into all that?

COFFEE: Well, you kind of finish—projects kind of flow through there, and then you got to bring another one in, and you just have to keep work coming—you got to keep Jack figuring out how to do it. (Both laugh) That's what you've got to do. You've got to keep work on his board. But I don't know.

And sometimes we would get more than we could—you know, when we'd have to hire people to do it. We never had to farm anything out to anybody, but there were drafting services and things like that that you could hire if you wanted to.

THOMASSON: Sure.

COFFEE: But you have to design the clients as well as the projects.

THOMASSON: That's right.

What would you say were some of the highlights of your career?

COFFEE: Well, I'd say, really, just working with Jack Crier—

THOMASSON: Really?

COFFEE: —and so many years in this wonderful practice was just—was a highlight of my career.

And getting some great projects, we really got the kind that we were interested in—

THOMASSON: Yeah—

COFFEE: —with some design to them, that's what we wanted to do, and winning some awards. We won a bunch of awards from time to time.

THOMASSON: Design awards.

COFFEE: Let's see. Being president of the AIA chapter was kind of a highlight.

THOMASSON: Um hmm.

COFFEE: And then I was elected an AIA fellow in the mid-'90s, I think. Then having some great clients was just—you know, these relationships with those people. I still see some of them. Not a lot of them are here in Austin. (laughs)

THOMASSON: Do you still go back and visit some of your projects?

COFFEE: I tell you, I have been—I go to the rec center sometimes. I go—yeah, I have been back to the multipurpose center and the United Way headquarters. I tell you, I went out to McKinney Falls the other day to go see the Visitors Center that won an award, an award-winning project. People said—thought it was O'Neil Ford's project. (laughs) They asked me one time, "Did O'Neil Ford design that building?" "No, we did." Anyway, it was flooded out by the floods. It was closed, and I couldn't get in it. It was locked up.

But the ones in Dallas, the banks and the Culwell and Son stuff, I still see those from time to time. You know, they're holding up very well.

And I designed a house over here on Parkway Street, the first house I built.

THOMASSON: Um hmm.

COFFEE: And this is the second. This is kind of a hodge-podge of a thing. But it was quite a nice house. I lived—I was driving—lived out in South Austin and I was driving up Lamar going to Dallas. One time I saw a little sign that said, "House for sale across park." I went around there and bought the house for twenty-five thousand dollars. (Thomasson laughs) Lived there for about twelve years and tore it down and built that new house, built a new house, and it won the Texas Wood Design Award in the residential category. And it's a beautiful house to this day.

But, yeah, I've enjoyed going and seeing some of my projects.

THOMASSON: Tell me about how you start the design process when you have a project.

COFFEE: Well, you've got to start by sketching.

THOMASSON: You're a sketcher. (laughs)

COFFEE: Yeah, sketching and doodling around and trying to lay it out. I know the professors always said, don't use graph paper. Well, I like to use graph paper because it gives me some scale, you know, for everything.

THOMASSON: Um hmm.

COFFEE: But I'll sketch everything out pretty much freehand before we—or Jack'll do the same. We had a good time sketching things out and seeing who—(laughs) which one of us would inspire the other one to take it another step, you know.

THOMASSON: Yeah. That's great.

Did you have—or even now because I know you're still creative—do you have, like, a daily kind of ritual of how you would approach the day to get yourself going? I mean, some people have said, Oh, I go for a walk, or I—what do you do?

COFFEE: I tell you, I just—I keep a notepad over here—a legal pad—and I just keep writing down everything I got to do every day.

THOMASSON: Oh, okay. A to-do list.

COFFEE: Kind of remind myself what's my to-do list, (laughs) and I keep going through that and I think, God, I got to get back and work on that thing. But I got a little studio out here in the back. If I get back there and turn on classical music, I'm stuck for two or three hours working on some piece of sculpture or something.

THOMASSON: When you were doing architectural projects, was there something that you worried the most about, that would always—

COFFEE: Well, you're always worrying about meeting deadlines, and you're worried about bringing it in, in the budget. You know, that things kind of bid right come in the budget. And everybody should do some supervision. That's a difficult part of the work, to make sure they're doing things right, and make sure all the

paperwork—you know, in the project and recording everything and making everything work right.

THOMASSON: Sure.

COFFEE: But we've had some great contractors too.

THOMASSON: What do you think was the first project you worked on that indicated to you that your career was taking off? That you had made the right decision to go into architecture?

COFFEE: Well, I think it was when we were working on old Fort Richardson and the Parks and Wildlife gave us the state park. You know, that was the first real big job. The other—these restoration jobs they're finicky, you know, you've got to—

THOMASSON: Have them to code.

COFFEE: —and the archeologist there studying things, and you're trying to figure out what was there and everything and try to get the old plans and everything, but anyway, we got a new project at that state park and that kind of inspired us.

THOMASSON: That was the jumping off—yeah.

What do you think was the most challenging time in your career?

COFFEE: Most challenging time, let me see. Where is that?

THOMASSON: The part that you wrote, "I quit architecture school when I flunked steel drawings.

COFFEE: Okay. (Thomasson laughs) That's right. I flunked steel working drawings for a second time, and so I quit school.

THOMASSON: That was pretty distressing.

COFFEE: It was, and I went to Dallas and went to work and learned to draw (laughs) in that architect's office and came back and did well finishing up.

THOMASSON: Yeah. What do you think it was that caused you to flunk? That just doesn't sound like you.

COFFEE: Steel working drawings, I still can't do the working drawings. (Thomasson laughs) I'm still not very good at it. But I don't know. Me and the professor had a little bit of a conflict there too, I think. But I still can't do working drawings well.

THOMASSON: How about traveling? Have you traveled and has it influenced your work?

COFFEE: Oh, yeah. When you travel, you want to go see—if you go to California and go to Los Angeles, go see Frank Lloyd Wright's stuff out there. Go see Neutra's work, you know. Try to see the rec—if you go to Arizona, boy, go to Paolo Soleri's whatever they are. I've been to Wisconsin and seen the great things up there, the Taliesin, both West and North. You go to New York, go to the Guggenheim. Go see the great buildings up there. But I've tried to—we had a great trip to France here.

THOMASSON: Recently?

COFFEE: Yeah. And we went to the Normandy celebration, and then went to Paris and went down south of Paris over to the east side to Le Corbusier's great chapel. And that was incredible. But we were trying to find the Lion of Belfort, and the French had a fort on this plateau over on their eastern border and the Germans failed to take this fort three times in the Franco-Prussian War. And so they had this sculptor who did the Statue of Liberty carve this huge lion in the face of the bluff.

THOMASSON: Oh.

COFFEE: And we were driving around trying to find this place and these five story buildings and streets lined with trees, we couldn't find the bluff. Stopped at a convenience store and baffled the people with my pidgin French, and teenagers came up and said, "We know what you're looking for. Follow us." So they took us around there, showed us this great lion in this cliff.

THOMASSON: Were you close when you driving around?

COFFEE: (laughs) Well, we weren't too far away. (Both laugh) We just couldn't see it. But we had a great trip there — .

THOMASSON: That's interesting.

COFFEE: —in looking at some great—you know, the Louvre, and, oh, all the things in Paris was so fantastic.

THOMASSON: Overwhelming?

COFFEE: Oh, yeah. You can't spend enough time in Paris.

THOMASSON: Well, I know you have a lot of artistic pursuits. Tell me about some of those, some of the other things you do outside of architecture.

COFFEE: Well, when we were working on these forts, we had these great big box locks. I mean, they're about a foot long and about eight inches tall and had big chicken egg knobs on them. We had to figure out how to cast those because they were cast in England in the 1840s and we couldn't find them anywhere. So I took a course at Laguna Gloria on wax sculpture, and it hooked me. By the end of that course myself and two other talented ladies were doing dogs and horses and everybody else was still rolling cigars with their wax. (Thomasson laughs) And they've done very well, but anyway, that really got me interested, and we started doing things like push plates on these visitors' centers at these fort projects, where they have—well, there's one of them up there.

THOMASSON: Oh, yeah.

COFFEE: That's the Comanche push plate, that black one up there. And on the other one, we'd have the cavalry symbols. We'd put those on the doors. Then on my house over here on Parkway, I've got the zodiac signs of my first wife and my scorpion and her crab playing on a big push plate. So I started integrating that into architecture.

Then we got a job, the Texas Sheriff's Memorial, over here at the Texas Sheriffs' Association. We cut back into the hill and we've got a black granite or marble wall with all the names of the lawmen and jailers that have been killed over the history of Texas, and there's about four hundred of them.

THOMASSON: Wow!.

COFFEE: I call it the Vietnam Wall of Dead Texas Lawmen. Well, in the center of that is a platform and my friend who ran the Sheriffs Association, showed me a catalog, and he had a Confederate soldier and a Union soldier and they had the policemen holding a little boy's hand and he said, "That's what I'm going to put on this stand here." I said, "Gordon, let me do you a model. That looks like New York City. That doesn't look like Texas," and so I did a model of this old ranger standing with his hat off holding his hand down and his arm around this horse's head, and the horse's head is down, and he's looking into the circ. The sheriffs loved it. So I got my first big commission, and a three-quarter life size called *Partners*, and it stands there.

THOMASSON: Wow!

COFFEE: And anyway, when I quit my practice, I was—you can look around and you can see all that stuff that I do.

THOMASSON: Um hmm. I do.

COFFEE: But I started getting serious about this, and I saw where the zoo in Kabul, Afghanistan was being vandalized so badly, and I had done my thesis on a zoo for Austin. And in that half-year I took off, I went to about forty zoos around the country—I mean, I'd travel up through the Midwest and went all the way to Milwaukee Zoo. Went to California, saw the San Diego Zoo. Anyway, the Taliban had decimated that zoo. It used to have four hundred animals. It was down to about ten. They'd killed one of the zookeepers and blown an elephant up with a rocket grenade just to see him blow up. I was reading about that, and I thought, God, that's terrible. And just reading about the lion, a Taliban crawled into the lion's den and the lion mauled him. His brother came back and threw a hand grenade in there and blew the lion's eyes out and broke his jaw.

Well, I wrote them a letter saying, "I will do you a piece of bronze not to exceed so many pounds of any animal." They came back and said, "Do Marjan, the lion".

THOMASSON: That was the lion's name?

COFFEE: So I did a three-quarter of a six foot lion, built it right out here, and had it cast at my expense and took it over to North Carolina Zoo, which was the headquarters for people gathering money for that—to restore that zoo, which they have. They've done a lot of work.

Anyway, I've got pictures of it all back here being delivered and set in place and all the people standing around it, school kids climbing all over it and everything. But anyway, that started—and that got in U.S.A, *Christian Science Monitor*, San Francisco, New York, Dallas, and local papers. Got on the cover of the Zoo and Aquarium Magazine, so it did win an award for them.

THOMASSON: Brought attention to zoos.

COFFEE: Yeah. But anyway, sculpture's been a lot of reward to me, and I'll show you some things out here in a minute.

THOMASSON: Okay.

COFFEE: I'm working on "Leslie".

THOMASSON: And where's that going to go?

COFFEE: We're trying to get it on Sixth and Congress on a bench there with him sitting on the bench, hair in one hand, cigarette in the other on the back of the bench, people can sit next to him and put cigarettes in his fingers. He's got his legs crossed, put a shoe on his foot, and put a tiara on his head or something around his neck. I'll show you in a minute.

THOMASSON: Sounds like an interactive sculpture.

COFFEE: Yeah.

THOMASSON: That sounds good.

COFFEE: Anyway, had a lot of fun with that.

THOMASSON: Let's see. What do you think was the most interesting development in architecture during your career? You mentioned computerized drawings.

COFFEE: Yeah, I think architecture being computerized, which I don't know anything about really, has really changed it a lot.

THOMASSON: Um hmm.

COFFEE: It's certainly changed the way people—architects work.

THOMASSON: I know.

COFFEE: And you have to be a computer whiz to be an architect now. (laughs)

THOMASSON: Yeah.

Are there any projects that never happened in your career, or even within the city—not necessarily what you were working on?

COFFEE: Well, one project we got involved with—the Austin Natural Science Center wanted to do a zoo, a regional habitat zoo in the western part of Zilker Park, and they have a little center now. And there was a quarry there. And we did a master plan for a regional habitat zoo there, and it was all native Texas animals and plants, and I've got a lot of the drawings around in the back shop back here. Well, we did this incredible project for them. We took it—the first presentation we

made, the Rollingwood people got a hold of the plan, and it's a big thick plan, you know.

THOMASSON: Um hmm.

COFFEE: They came to that meeting and they had taken our drawings and they had said, Lions, tigers, bears! And they killed the project right there at that meeting.

THOMASSON: Oh.

COFFEE: And it never got off the ground, but it would've been a great project for Austin had we gone on and done that. But that was real disappointing.

THOMASSON: Let's see. Well, we've kind of talked about all the cities and states you've worked in. Oh, here's a good question for you. Just personally, what are you most fascinated by outside of architecture?

COFFEE: Well, I have a ranch out here in the western end of the county, and my dad and brother got into this, and finally that's all in that—now it belongs to my kids. But we've had this ranch property for years, and we've been raising Texas longhorns out there for a long time, and I really love the longhorns. Ranching is a good foil for working in an architect's office all week. (laughs) I'm a weekend rancher.

Sculpture, I love that.

Taos, New Mexico, we go out there in the summer and rent a house for the month of August to stay in Taos. And it's just wonderful out there.

THOMASSON: And cool.

COFFEE: Yeah.

Let's see. What else? I love to be with my wife and friends and we go to Quest, which is an educational lecture series over here at UT Continuing Education.

THOMASSON: Yeah.

COFFEE: We're involved with that, and we really love that. We got twice a week in seasons, you know. In fact, we just had a cocktail party last night at the happy hour at the Whole Foods.

THOMASSON: Those are good. I've done those before.

COFFEE: Yeah. They're really good.

THOMASSON: What advice would you give students of architecture or maybe young architects today?

COFFEE: Okay.

THOMASSON: I think it's right here.

COFFEE: Is this it right here?

THOMASSON: I'm not sure. (inaudible)

COFFEE: Well, study the work of great architects. Learn to draw by hand and by computer now, but learn to sketch and realize your ideas, and then I guess now you have to begin to convert them to computers. It's a good idea to work a little construction. I worked one time while I was going to school over here, I worked on the bowling alley over there at the—

THOMASSON: Yeah, at the Union?

COFFEE: Yeah, I was in school, but I changed clothes and go over there and we'd build this bowling alley. But you get the—you need to work a little construction and see how things go together. And you know, figure out how things go together, or get you a partner that knows how everything works and put that together.

THOMASSON: Get yourself a Jack Crier—

COFFEE: And then figure out how to design a client. Figure out where the jobs are going to come from and concentrate on that.

THOMASSON: Okay.

What do you think are the most important factors influencing the future of architecture?

COFFEE: In Austin?

THOMASSON: In Austin.

COFFEE: Well, I think Austin is being overbuilt and overpopulated. We're losing lots of good old buildings. You know, in Dallas the business center is kind of around Dallas.

THOMASSON: Um hmm.

COFFEE: And you see high rise buildings and complexes around. I don't know. Austin, of course, has Cedar Park and Hutto or Manor. These areas outside the city need to be developed where people are driving to those places instead of trying to get into town.

THOMASSON: All come to downtown.

COFFEE: And we're just—downtown is just—the city is just being overwhelmed by traffic and construction and road construction. (laughs)

THOMASSON: That's right, trying to accommodate it.

COFFEE: It's terrible.

THOMASSON: Tell me some of your favorite buildings in Austin.

COFFEE: Well, the UT Tower, Battle Hall, UT Stadium, the Bolm House. You know that Bolm house?

THOMASSON: Yeah.

COFFEE: Great international style house. Our Austin Rec Center and our United Way. The City Hall, the new city hall is something. Of course, the Capitol building. I like my old house (laughs) on Parkway and my new house on Wayside Drive.

THOMASSON: Good.

COFFEE: I like this one.

Oh, more advice I'd give students and young architects. Get a good partner. Work for good firms and be persistent and patient. Earn a construction project. Learn how to write short business letters, one-page business letters. That's one thing I learned in journalism is how to write, and architects can't write. I found that out.

THOMASSON: That's right. That's was a good background for you.

COFFEE: Learn how to promote your work.

I'll tell you a story about an interesting project. We would go to the Corps of Engineers in Fort Worth. Many times I would go up there and not get a job. Then I saw where they wanted architects for six flight line latrines at Kelly Air Force Base. Well, I got to thinking about all the restrooms we'd done out here at McKinney Falls and Fort Richardson and different places and the Town Lake restrooms we did. And so I wrote this colonel a letter. I said, "Dear Colonel," So-and-so. We are the outhouse kings of Texas. (Thomasson laughs) We have done twenty-six freestanding restrooms, shower rooms, so and so in so many state parks, national parks, and this, that, and the other. We know how to move that shit. (Thomasson laughs) I sent him this letter, and we got the job. We did the—

THOMASSON: That was great!

COFFEE: —Jack Crier did the job. It came in a hundred thousand under the budget for some reason, and the Corps of Engineers sent us a letter wanting us to explain why it was a hundred thousand off the estimate. (Thomasson laughs) God, I couldn't believe it.

Well, then, of course, Jack gets in with the guys there at Kelly Air Force Base and they come out with a NCO club, a big four-million-dollar project. We get the job. They just give it to us.

THOMASSON: Based on your restroom performance? (laughs)

COFFEE: Yeah. Right. We get the job. Jack designs this beautiful building. Everything there on that base was kind of Spanish Colonial, and he does this incredible building. It wins a local construction award there in San Antonio. It wins a regional Department of Defense Award. It wins one of five Department of Defense awards for design. Jack's got these awards over on his side, but I got the little letter up in front of me, and I said, "Jack, this is why. You may have won those awards, but (laughs) here's why we got it. "

THOMASSON: (laughs) That's great.

So what do you value most about your life and all the things you've done?

COFFEE: Oh, my goodness. Let me see what I said. I've had a great architect career, and now I'm up and coming in the sculpture world. And I had a great time as a weekend rancher.

THOMASSON: Um hmm.

COFFEE: I've got a great wife and family and some great friends.

THOMASSON: It's been all good.

COFFEE: Yeah, that's about all anybody can say about anything really. Right?

THOMASSON: (laughs) I don't know what else is there.

COFFEE: Yeah, what else do you want? Yeah.

THOMASSON: Well, other than your Leslie sculpture, are you working on any others right now?

COFFEE: Well, I'll show you around. I just recently did one—Gail, when she was in Graham in high school, she would run the barrels with her horse. I've got a barrel out here and a girl on a horse coming around that barrel, it's called *Running the Barrels*. And I just finished that. I stayed up until 4:30 the other night working on that.

This piece right here, Rick Perry gave that to the Aga Khan—a version of that. Really.

THOMASSON: Um hmm.

COFFEE: I was commissioned to do this Stephen F. Austin statue, which is in my backyard (laughs) by the South Austin Civic Club, and I don't know. That thing was killed—Austin Art in Public Places came to the Parks Board meeting that we made a presentation. We wanted to put it on Butler Park right there by that mountain down there in front of that.

THOMASSON: Um hmm.

COFFEE: He's standing—there's a model of him over there pointing.

THOMASSON: Oh, okay.

COFFEE: You always see him standing next to a tree with a rifle in his hand looking real serious. Well, I figured he'd be out here on this big grant with his maps on his knee with his spyglass pointing at Mount Bonnell there. So anyway, that sent me back here. They killed it when we went to the Arts Commission. They didn't want it on the Butler Shores, and so it's just kind of died.

And this Leslie project, hey, we'll see where it goes. But I've got two pieces in a Dallas park. I've got one up here at Georgetown. I won a competition to put a piece on the Georgetown Square, and it's in front of the city hall now. It's called *Waterin' the Work Mules*. It's my dad at age fourteen in 1910 on his dad's old cotton farm up in North Texas. And I've got one at Big Bend. I've got a falcon at Big Bend, in front of the Chisos. I've got a *Billy Goat's Gruff* statue at the Dallas Cripple Children's Center courtyard. And I've also got that at the North Carolina Zoo. It was in the National Sculpture Sight and Show in Brook Green Gardens and they saw it, and they knew me from the *Marjan* deal. But they bought that for their zoo. I've got the *Partners* statue out here at the Sheriff's Memorial. I've got the *Eeyore* statue in Eastwood Park.

And what else have we got?

THOMASSON: That's a lot of work.

COFFEE: Got a lot of stuff. Got the *Raccoons*. Did you see them coming in?

THOMASSON: I did.

COFFEE: Okay. The *Raccoons*. I ate lunch with a guy yesterday that has bought one of my statues of the guy's arm wrestling. I've got these arm wrestlers around there trying to pull each other's feet, used to try to pull each other off balance in junior high school. He bought a big—made a big one of those, and he bought a *Raccoon* yesterday. So, and I sent that *Raccoon* in to a Dallas park here not too long ago.

But anyway—oh, a guy approached me about doing a statue of an All American football player for Colorado School of Mines. And in 1939 a man named Lloyd Madden broke Whizzer White's scoring record and it stood for sixty years until Ricky Williams broke it over here at the University of Texas.

THOMASSON: Wow!

COFFEE: Well, this guy must've been an incredible football player or they had an incredible team then. I said, "Send me some pictures of Madden." Well, they sent me pictures, and everybody had no teeth or broken noses, so I built this—little model of it up here—I call it *Leather Helmets and Broken Noses*, and he's running with the ball. He's pushing this guy that's laying on the ground—pushing him down. Well, I built the thing three-quarter life size, and I drove it to Golden, Colorado to the Colorado School of Mines. Well, I get up to Post, Texas or one of the little football crazy Panhandle towns.

THOMASSON: Um hmm.

COFFEE: So it's sticking up out of the back of my pickup, and he's running. I go in a filling station convenience store, and I come out and there's a great big guy standing there by my truck, and he says, "We got to have one of these here in Post." I said, "Really?" (Both laugh) So I give him my card, and he says, "Yeah. We have a varsity alumni football game and I play in it every year." And I thought, You idiot. Some big old farm boy is going to knock your head off one of these days.

But I took it up there and we set it there on the campus.

THOMASSON: It's there?.

COFFEE: But anyway, that was a lot of fun.

THOMASSON: Well, is there anything else you want to talk about?

COFFEE: You know I want to show you around.

THOMASSON: Okay. Okay. Well, that'll be good. Let me turn this off then. Thank you very much.

END OF INTERVIEW