

STEFFEN THOMAS

Video opens in the middle of welcoming remarks by unidentified female member of DeKalb Historical Society: I'll turn the meeting over to MR. THOMAS. Following his remarks we'll go into the old courtroom, where we will have refreshments.

STEFFEN THOMAS: OK. Well, when I first arrived in America, I was supposed to know how to speak English. But the only thing I could say was "ham and eggs." So I ate it for two weeks until I learned some more words [*audience laughter*]. And I had a little book, and I'd put ten words translated out of the dictionary every day. And I practiced them. First I practiced on the dumbbells. You know, you can see—you can notice a dumbbell when you meet one, in the street, usually. And if they didn't laugh, I figured, "Well, that's OK." So then I tested it some more, and I tested it on the smart ones; and if they didn't laugh, I had a word! And that's how I accumulated about five hundred words in the English language in my vocabulary. I've got a very small vocabulary, but some people say I use it well.

And I have to tell you another one. The first speech I made was to the Atlanta Woman's Club. Those days they had all those grand dames, you know, as president, society figures, women of society, you see. Really was something, sure enough. And I had an exhibition there in that Woman's Club—that building [Wimbish House] still standing there on Peachtree Street. It consisted of two pieces—modern pieces, modern sculpture—called Neo Post-Impressionistic, you know, kind of like Cubism, that sort of crazy stuff, fantasy. Well, I had these and some more. I was like Scott Candler; I hid behind the post to listen to what they ladies were going to say. Well, one of them said, "That's the ugliest thing I've ever seen [*audience laughter*]. But I've been here three times to look at it already." So that was a compliment to me. I liked that. So they invited me to make a speech. And they had a banquet in that big banquet hall, and they guided me in there with about seventy-five or a hundred women sitting in there; and I was so nervous that I thought I would die. And here's what I did: The only thing I could say was, "Madame Chairman" real good. And I said, "Madame Chairman, do you mind if I pull two chairs here and brace myself between so I won't fall down, since I'm the only man in this whole audience?" So I did that. In about two minutes I was OK. Very clever, see. Just come clean every time. Don't do like Mr.—Russian immigrant, you know—what's his name? Koppel? Burgel? Koper? [Possibly means Wall Street

financier Ivan Boesky, who was indicted in 1980s financial scandal. The son of a Russian immigrant, Ivan Boesky was actually born in the United States.]

From Audience: Gorbachev?

MR. THOMAS: From the stock market? I've forgotten his name. So you've got to come clean all the time, particularly if you want to be an artist. So that's what I did. So then—yeah, I got to tell you now about my medal. You know, I received a medal as the artist, sculptor, state of Georgia, for 1986. They had a big ceremony; there was about two or three thousand people at the High Museum at Symphony Hall. Well, I had a speech prepared, you know, a speech I had made before, so I could say it real good. They placed the people that had got the medal in front there, and then they had the stage there, and the governor was standing up there, and the fellow who represented the art councils who sponsored the thing. And the guy said my speech! Somebody had told him my speech, and the guy stood there and said my speech. And I stand there, with the governor holding the ribbon there, just like they announced it, trying to crawl up those little steps about that wide they had to go up to that stage, you know, to walk on there—I had no speech!

Well, I had to compute my brain right back to 1931 in about a couple of seconds, namely to the time when the National Editors Convention had their meeting at the University of Georgia. It was in the school of journalism; and it's a big building, you know, with seats going way up to the ceiling in the back. Well, I was sitting in the back seats, way up, hiding. Hiding again, because I couldn't speak English, you see? So Chancellor Snelling—the bust that was going to be unveiled was of Henry Grady. Henry W. Grady, you know, big newspaper fellow, see? And his granddaughter—either his granddaughter or great-granddaughter—was to unveil the bust. Chancellor Snelling was there. He was president of the university at that time. And he started saying my name [inaudible]. It just froze me up, practically froze me up. I kept glued to my seat. And pretty soon the national editors—the newspaper editors—commenced to look around and tried to find me, you know; and I had no choice but to get up. Totteringly I walked to the stage, and I stood there and said this: "As a sculptor I made this bust, of which I am proud. Should I attempt to make a speech, I would make another bust, of which I would not be so proud" [*audience laughter*]. And the newspaper editors just stormed and sieged [sic], and the newspaper fellows took photographs of me and spread it all over America. And on several occasions I had—well, at a party or two or whatever, I met some young people, you know? I had some students at the university

telling the story that this sculptor came up there, and he made this speech [*voice trails off*, inaudible]. And I said, "You'll think that I am a big liar if I tell you that I am the one who made that speech."

So that's what I said. I gave them the speech that I made at the university in 1931. So I [inaudible] at Symphony Hall again, so I was safe again. In other words, you're safe when you're clean, when you come clean, see—you have to do that.

Now, let's see; the olden days. Old Scott Candler's office was right down there [*Points to floor below*], right down in that basement. Right there was the entrance, with steps down, down there. And he was quite a guy. He couldn't understand me. Because at that time I was art supervisor for the National Youth Administration under Roosevelt, you know; and I had just moved to Stone Mountain. And when it rained out there, the road I lived on we named Tobacco Road. Later we renamed it Juliette Drive after one of our children that died. I had to go to work every day, and I had to have hip boots to walk through Tobacco Road down to [inaudible—sounds like "Claxton"; could be "Clarkston"?] Road, which was paved. And there was a house there--Mrs. Annie Britt [spelling?], and Annie Britt lived in there. And she claimed for the longest time that she owned—her father owned my fifty acres of land in there. She kept all her deeds from her father and grandfather [inaudible phrase]. It probably was hers at one time. But she was a nice lady. So under her porch steps I had these hip boots, rubber boots. I dressed right there and drove my car down to Atlanta to the office way down town. Now, in those days I could drive it in fifteen minutes--you can't do that today, you know—because there was just one highway straight in, see, no traffic. Practically nothing going on. So the days at the Stone Mountain house were very interesting. The National Youth Administration was stopped in 1942; they closed it out. I had six hundred dollars' annual leave coming—vacation that I didn't take, you know, because I was busy all the time. So I said, "Well, I'm going to build me a house at Stone Mountain." I knew the Venable people who owned that side of Stone Mountain, you know, the quarry side. And he said, "I'll give you the rock in that. You can come beat it out yourself to build your house with." Well, Mrs. Britt's brother, Otha, he hauled a truck around, you know, for hire; and I hired him. And I broke the rock out of that Stone Mountain. It comes in [inaudible—sounds like "shifts"], you know—it comes in [inaudible—sounds like "shifts"]. I put [inaudible—could be "wrenches" or "wedges"?] under, and I broke the [inaudible—sounds like "rubles"; possibly means "rubble"?] up. I did that in July, in the summer, that year. I mean I wore just swimming trunks. Any

proper person would just keel over. And all of a sudden—and this [inaudible—sounds like “cat”?], he wouldn’t dare even go out in the sunshine. I had to load the thing, I had to unload it, and Otha wanted two dollars—he wanted his two dollars for hauling it. I paid him two dollars. Cost me two dollars [inaudible]. So I laid something like one thousand tons of rock. That house was 110 feet long, twenty-five feet wide. My living room was forty feet long, twenty-five foot wide. Had a ceiling of about thirty-one feet high—my studio had a ceiling thirty-one feet high. And I had to dig a foundation for it. The walls were that thick [*indicates by holding up his hands several inches apart*]. A thousand tons of rocks I put in there. I must have put in the output of a cement factory in a month. Those days I bought one barrel of cement or mortar mix—how much do you think? Two dollars and seventy cents. That’s—one barrel is four batches, you see? Today you go to a store, how much do you think it costs now? Six or seven dollars for one sack. You call that inflation. So time went on; and, of course, we had a wonderful time. I built this house, and the children grew.

Now I want to read you a poem, if I can find it, about that house that I built out there. [*Holds up book.*] This is a book of twenty poems that I printed myself, because I used to send my poems off, and they promptly sent them back. They said they can’t, you know, they haven’t got room in their—so I said, “To hell with you.” And I just printed them myself and formed a printing press. And this very book here was cut with a saw. The paper was cut with a saw. And I made the thick cuts, you know [inaudible]. This is the way people have to do again. This is the way—I’m telling you these things so you can tell your children and your grandchildren that they have to sit up and take notice and [inaudible]. The easy times have passed. We’re Democratic again, and you know how they are. They just talk about the poor people and spend the money. Now, let’s see. [*Opens book and shows picture to audience.*] This is the house here, and the family, see? Those are woodcuts that I made.

My American Home

The idea is old, but the effort is new
To work all day and in the evening, too.
Day [inaudible] time;
The evening time is mine
To build a home of solid rocks
For Sara, me, and four little tots.
Building, doing, making,
Mixing, mortaring, and laying,
Growing with children tall and strong,
[Inaudible—could be “shaving”?] the home of Stone Mountain stone,
Our American home.

To strain and work while others play,
The satisfaction is it won't decay
Nor crumble into dust.
Our American home.

With love and freedom of the mind
It grows week by week,
Slow but steady, stone by stone,
Each one according to his measure
With willingness and pleasure.
Little ones do little things,
And so on till the day is done,
And then we sit and play
In our American home.

When bedtime comes, the tired limbs
Are not too tired to go to sleep
Because we think of blessed times to come someday.
More work, of course, but also rambling children in their play
In our American home.

So, you see, I wrote poems at that time. I used to take a siesta in the middle of the day for one hour. But I was so tired by that time that I just literally [inaudible]. I got up at four o'clock every morning and mixed my half batch of mortar. I laid the half batch of mortar, you know, and sat in front of it—I smoked Camels then—and smoked my Camel and said, "You must have made at least fifty cents this morning," see? Then Sara here was pregnant with a new baby or something like that, or she just came home from the hospital with one. And I remember one time Sara's mother said, "Steffen, come in here and fix breakfast!" Well, I didn't like it so much. I thought there would be somebody that would appreciate all that work that I'm doing. Well, she just could think of Sara, you know, so I cooked breakfast. But those were very interesting days, you know. You could play with children. Robin claims that I spanked her in the bathtub one time. I have no such recollection of any of that, because I don't do that, see. I'm nice. So these were the days at Stone Mountain.

But I was trying to use my education. For instance, when I had to dig the foundation for that heavy rock wall, you know, you know how I did it? That Stone Mountain red clay, it's just like rock, you know. You know, you can't budge it--you need a pick. And the foundation'd be that deep. So I had a spade, and I lined up my foundation ditch, and I started that spade—I could only spade one inch, because then it was solid like a rock after that, see. But I spaded that one inch, and I turned the water hose on, and added a little water. See? And waited till I soaked it in. And then soaked

it in, and I could dig another inch. You get it? And when the weather looked like rain, I had several things prepared, several ditches, to let it rain on it, see? Because I could dig about two inches after a two-day rain. That's the way I did it. I had to do it that way, because I didn't have the strength to just dig through stuff like that, and I wasn't equipped as an artist, because I had to do my artwork, you know, during the daytimes [sic].

So these were really wonderful days because that's what Americans need to learn all over again. And our schools: I think—and, of course, this is only my personal opinion—that our learning institutions are bankrupting themselves. [*Makes a comical face with a shocked expression and speaks as though he is an outraged audience member*]: "It's a shame for him to say that! With all those great scientists and everything, you know?" Many of our most brilliant teachers praying—what do you think, for what? For their first retirement check. And yet teachers are supposed to be devoted people, and they are. The majority of them are devoted peoples [sic]. But the whole system is wrong. People got to work; they got to study. All this confound background music when they show something on television. They have this horrible background music where nobody can hear what they're saying. Is that not true?

Audience responds with various comments, such as "Right" and "Praise the Lord!" the latter of which elicits laughter from the audience.

STEFFEN THOMAS *continues*: Why don't you write a letter to them?

AUDIENCE MEMBER, *off-camera*: We do—

STEFFEN THOMAS, *interrupting*: Write a letter to them! Say—tell them I [inaudible]. In other words I'm saying this thing not because I'm pretty old, and young kids say, "That old fogey! That old fogey [inaudible]!" I'm not that old. My mind is pretty young, you know. So—but they don't know what hard times are. They don't know how to have a banquet out of turnip greens and cornbread. That's what I had to do. I mean we just literally didn't have the money to buy the things. I remember one steak I bought one time when we first married; and Sara burned it up. She isn't here [*audience laughter*]. Burned it to a crisp! It was just one piece of charcoal. So—but that's the way people learns [sic].

So let's talk about people that I have met. I've met lots of them. I was going to build a amphitheater at Stone Mountain. I lived on fifty acres of land, and there was bottom land there that I was going to build an amphitheater with seats in the grass. And I was going to have a stage there where *Tannhauser* could be—or Wagner's

Nibelungen Ring [sic] could be played, where horses could have been on the stage.

Well, [sic] politicians wouldn't let me. [Inaudible] was outspoken, and I didn't agree.

Why?

When I first came to America, I came to West Palm Beach [Florida]. I had known a sculptor in Germany. I was a young apprentice, and he was a sculptor—you know, big statues and things like that. He moved to America, and he lived in West Palm Beach. So, those days you had to know somebody in America. That somebody had to sign an affidavit, a guarantee that you won't become a ward of the state. It's not like today, where shiploads of Haitians or Castros or Kaddafis can come in; and the first thing you know, they have [inaudible]. This is fantastic stuff, you know. It wasn't that way; I had to wait five years. Not only that, but I had no English; because I just sat there, and he talked to you. They didn't have five thousand at one time, you know. But they evidently wanted to come to America; and after five or ten years, no matter where he comes from, he becomes an American. And if someone really attacks America, he goes with them and knock the hell out of them anyway. It takes that long for one to become an American. What I am concerned with is the old Americans. They must speak up and tell the young ones, you know. Our black population evidently has done better than the white population in that respect, see. So these are things that need to be done.

Well, at any rate, coming back to West Palm Beach. When I arrived in New York, you know, Grand Central Station—I don't know if it's still there; I imagine it's still there. It's a station with something like five hundred ticket booths around, all around the outside. There are all these dadgum ticket booths, you know. And I, like I say, I could say no more than, "Ham and eggs." And I walked around and looked for a German, you know. [Inaudible] I looked in there through everyone [inaudible] till I found someone who I thought looked like a German, you know. [Inaudible] I found an old man with a moustache and a beard, you know. And I hollered in there and said, "Sprechen sie Deutsch?" Sure enough! You know what he did? There was a stream of people standing there [in front of the booth], and he—right in front of them, he put up a sign, "Closed." [To me, in German] he said, "Son, meet me at the side door." He showed me exactly where I needed to be. I met him, I told him where I'd come from and where I'm heading to. He got my ticket for me, told me the number of the stage [sic] to get on, everything. And, look, I had my suitcase, and I also had a briefcase. I had just graduated from the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Munich—I was somebody, you know. I walked the two hundred steps that the great artists of Europe have walked, so I had to

have a briefcase, you know, some identification, etc., etc., etc. Well, I bought a newspaper, carried it like a businessman, under the arm of my briefcase side, see. The other side, I had my big trunk.

And I sat there [on the train], the train moved out, I opened up the newspaper, right? [Inaudible phrase] The headline that day—I read it, something about Palm Beach. I thought they must have a big party or something there that day. But that word “hurricane,” I couldn’t understand; and so I looked it up. And I found out very quickly what it was: hurricane in Palm Beach. That was in 1928. I arrived on September 17, 1928, in New York. That was the day of that hurricane. It took three days to get to Palm Beach. The bridges were washed out all the way down in the Carolinas, you know. Came to Palm Beach—to West Palm Beach—no station there, no railroad station there. Pools everywhere on the street, on the streets, you know. And a boat longer than this room here was standing right in the middle of town, high and dry. I saw a board about that high [*holds hands about ten inches apart*] plum through the middle of a palm tree about that big around [*makes a circle with his fingers, about eight inches across*], like somebody sawed a hole there and shoved it through. The storm did that. Three days later I hired a taxi to find my friend. It took us three days to find him. I stayed with my taxi man. Cost me fifteen dollars for three days. We worked ourselves half to death to move those palm trees out of the road so his taxi could go back. [Inaudible sentence—sounds like “That’s who/what we were going to see”?]. Well, then we arrived at my friend’s house, and where do you think we found him? Under the staircase—cowed under the staircase, still scared to death, in shock from that storm. But they were safe.

As a matter of fact they had a season that time—that [inaudible—could be “winter” or “window”?], you know, so fast that [inaudible]. But three days after that they brought the dead ones in from Lake Okeechobee, three thousand dead ones. They brought them up in state trucks, just loaded up, loaded up like timber. And then I saw that story—it really taught me something. Those were very interesting days.

My first studio was in the new [New?] Palm Beach Hotel in Palm Beach. I traded it out. All those rich people came to me, said, “When are we going to see your models?” I was teaching their children, giving their children drawing lessons, you know. But the parents came and wanted to see nude models. I said, “Well, I haven’t got any.” So things were very interesting. I had two thousand dollars with me, and The Breakers hotel was then there. It hadn’t burned down. It was the largest wooden structure in the world. I still had my [inaudible] with me, and the whole family were charming. I didn’t

speak English, you know. That's all. We had a great time spending my two thousand dollars. I had [inaudible—could be “buddies” or “burdens”?], you know. My two thousand dollars was gone, I still couldn't speak any more English, and I got homesick, and my friends I couldn't find, see. But I made it. I made it teaching these children, see. So this is the thing. I remember the time when I walked to the ocean and saw the moon come up, and I cried like a baby for homesickness. Boy, I'm telling you—you don't know. This was terrible, you know. I had a very, very good youth in Germany, see. Here I'd come to a forsaken place--the storm blew it down, you know—and homesick as can be.

Well, here was an architect by the name of Aristide Meisner. They called him the “dream architect.” He built all the rich people's residences. And at that time the [E. F.] Hutton residence was built—you know, “When Hutton speaks, people listen”? [Reference to television commercial for E. F. Hutton & Co.] I hope they aren't going to get him arrested for the mess that's going on with the stock market. But at any rate they were going to have a Fountain of Seville courtyard—about ten or twelve [inaudible—sounds like “Amoretz”?] baby figures, you know, about so high. They couldn't find a sculptor, and the human figure is my forte—at least, that's what I studied. So I went to the—I hired me a Jewish fellow, and his name was Jacobs. And I said, “How much are you going to charge me if I get that job?” Well, he arranged something very reasonable. So we went to visit Aristide Meisner, big statue of a man, most impressive—at least as impressive as this [inaudible—sounds like “Spassky”; probably means Ivan Boesky, as mentioned in third paragraph of this transcription] fellow—you know, that Russian immigrant who was fined a hundred million dollars, you know, just the other day. You read that in the paper?

Well, at any rate, that Meisner was an attractive figure, see. He built all these big residence [sic]. And he told the Jewish fellow, he said, “I'm looking for a sculptor, not a kid!” Well, I always look two or three years younger than I really am, see. Like now—I probably look younger than I really am, you know. I'm pretty old. So the Jewish fellow told me what he said, you know. I told him [Jacobs] to tell him [Meisner] that I will model one figure for nothing; and if it's accepted, I get the whole job. He shook hands with me. In those days a handshake was a contract. You didn't have to sign it in triplicate at all, see. A handshake was [inaudible]. Well, at any rate I modeled one week on the figure—on the baby figure--and I got the job. I did all of them. They cast them in some kind of very [inaudible—sounds like “novice”] artificial stone, you know, for that

fountain. I made something like two hundred fifty dollars a week—that in 1928. That's probably the equivalent of about three or four thousand dollars today.

Well, I saved my money. I stayed there one year—not quite one year. Then I made my way to Chicago. I wanted to see America first, with all that money, you know, in my pocket. But being conservative by nature I stopped at the YMCA; cost me a dollar and a half a night in Chicago. And there was just one thing I didn't like: I had to walk half a mile to go to the bathroom down the hall, you know. And at the end was a window, and out the window I could see the LaSalle Hotel. Well, this is pretty idiotic—you staying at this dump here for a dollar and a half and you got all that money, you could move over to the LaSalle Hotel. I did. Cost me six dollars, seven dollars a night. But at any rate that's where I met the professors of the Chicago Art Institute and so forth and so on.

Then I made my way south. I came to Alabama. I thought, "Well, I better model the governor first, in case I get into trouble, so he can get me out. So I modeled Bibb Graves. Bibb Graves. His wife was a UDC [United Daughters of the Confederacy] lady and a very refined, educated lady. He wasn't any dumbbell, either. I modeled him in the governor's mansion—in the governor's office at the state capitol. I worked two weeks on it; he posed for me.

One morning I came in, and you know what he said? He said, "I got to kill two people today."

I said, "Don't you dare do it!"

He just signed, signed the paper; that's what he was waiting for. [*Wipes forehead to imitate governor's action.*] He [inaudible—sounds like "broke his head"?], you know, to sign some kind of commutation for some criminals, no doubt, see. And when he told me, "I've got to kill two people today," see, I said, "Don't you do it," see, he signed the papers so they wouldn't be killed.

So, you see, I met these people. And then later I did think, "How about a Confederate memorial?" which is in a national military park in Mississippi—Vicksburg, Mississippi. It's about forty-two or three or four feet long and fifteen feet high and consists of seven huge bronze figures. And they had an unveiling there in 1951. I worked three years on it. They had a special train come from Alabama. They had about three thousand people there—absolutely fantastic. I hired the steamboat [to] spray in the Mississippi River, and they gave a party, a big party. That was absolutely fantastic.

And the heat was one hundred seven degrees. One hundred seven degrees—it was the fourth of July. [*Pointing to someone off-camera*] She was there.

So those are very interesting memories of all of these things. But in New York, every time I came to New York, these guys more and more money. It was the war [World War II], during the war, you know. I bought the bronze—I sent a check for fifteen thousand dollars to New York to the foundry. They were subcontractors, you know, my subcontractors. I had a written contract with them [inaudible]. So I set up Italians in a studio called [inaudible—sounds something like “Pa-zeen”]. They had a big studio and—well, I had fifteen sculptors there to enlarge, to make the enlargement of my small model. My small model was about that long [*indicates a distance from opposite wall*] from that wall to here, which is now in the museum archives in Montgomery, Alabama. A beautiful model base, which I donated that to the state of Alabama. Well, I come up there to that Italian’s office—I have just sent him some fifteen thousand dollars to buy the bronze, you know, something like eight tons or something like that. And I sat there, and he had—he sat at his desk, you know, he was sitting down [at] his executive desk, a real—acting Italian, you know. You know how they are, quite vivacious. And every now and then he walks to the window and opens it and says, “Keep your damned hands off of that!” hollering down on 23rd Street to a bunch of kids, you know, see. He did that about three or four times, and [inaudible], “Who the heck is he hollering at?” So I looked over there and looked down, and I saw a brand-new Cadillac standing down there! And these 23rd Street kids imitating filling-station fellows, you know—the attendant with the rag hanging out of the back pocket, just shining that Cadillac and all; and he hollered down for them to keep their hands off. I said, “Archie, whose car is it?”

He said, “Isn’t it nice to have a wife who just had an inheritance?”

I said, “An inheritance of about something like fifteen thousand dollars, maybe?”

I said, “Archie, where’s the bronze?”

He said he hadn’t bought it yet. I was sitting behind the executive desk then. He wanted me to sit there, see. I picked up the desk and shoved it over there, over that room. It made several turns, I was so mad. And the sculptors downstairs in the big studio thought I was killing the guy. And Archie right away took on the position of St. Francis in prayer, you know. “Anything you say, Steffen. Anything you say.”

I said, “All right, Archie. I’m going to lunch now.” It was about ten o’clock in the morning. When I get back this afternoon at three and go around back, I want to see the bronze stacked up right down in the studio.” And I said, “Be sure and stack the ingots

right, you know? Overlap them—don't put them all in one row so that they'll collapse. Crisscross, you know, like they do brick." I gave him complete instructions, and I left. Well, about three o'clock I noticed some fellows here. Every now and then, every hundred feet, I noticed a young kid there; see, as I was walking down 23rd Street to the studio. And they started running. I couldn't figure it out. He had the guys—he had the guys there watching for when I come, see, to run back to the studio and tell him that I'm on the way, see. But I came there, and the bronze was there.

And he said, "I'll have you to know that I had to mortgage my house and everything I have."

And I said, "I don't give a damn what you had to do, because I sent the money, see." So I said, "I will [inaudible] bronze, transport it to the foundry this afternoon." It was transported.

Everything went all right. You have no idea what I had to go through. And then the dear ladies—one of the dear ladies of the UDC was kind of crooked, too. She wanted me to hire everybody in her relationship [sic], right. An insurance fellow—they wanted to take out an insurance policy on me. I had already made a bond for a hundred fifty thousand dollars. I had to mortgage everything I had to get that bond, see. I had no choice; I had to perform. So that [inaudible]. They were all right. They were all right after that. They were my friends, see. We successfully unveiled the memorial scene. But had I not been that tough, we would not have unveiled the memorial scene.

So these are the interesting things. Now comes Stone Mountain. Let's go to Stone Mountain. I came to Atlanta to build that memorial, that Confederate memorial. In something like 1936, thereabouts, I met Gutzon Borglum. They had a big trouble with it, you know. Every three years it broke out, you know. And in the first place, the politicians in the beginning absconded [with] some of the money [inaudible]. Issued dollars and five dollars or one dollar—I don't even know what they issued. [Possibly refers to Stone Mountain commemorative half-dollar issued in 1925?] And Gutzon Borglum told me that he would like for me to be his assistant if he comes back. He said, "If you can raise twenty-five thousand dollars to work on it again, you'll be my assistant." Well, in those days, who could raise twenty-five thousand dollars? It would be impossible.

But at any rate every two years this darn thing came up. Politicians brought it up and brought it up, and I made them a proposal. I made them a proposal, but they

turned me down. Turned me down. You know what I proposed? That I—see, being a teacher of a sort, through NYA [National Youth Administration, part of Roosevelt’s New Deal] and teaching art and things like that, you know, I have always thought of the young people. I’ve always wanted our youth to have a chance; and those who would want to be artists—I wanted to give them a chance, you see. That’s the reason I brought up this proposal, see; and the proposal was that I will build a model—full-size, a full-size model on the ground, because all that acreage out there, you know. And I would have selected a place where the people, tourists, could come, see, [and] watch the sculptors model this full-size memorial, you know, where they could pay admission; and it would have paid for everything about that Stone Mountain Park. And after the model was completed, I was going to let each sculptor, each young sculptor, carve on a ten-foot-square piece. You have to figure, you know, if you, say, if you take a—if you take a piece of a coat like that, ten feet, that would just about look like a straight surface, you see. Any stonecutter could do that, see. I had it all worked out. Same old tricks. One or two of them came to me and said, “I’ll get it for you if”—you know what the “if” was supposed to be. You know. You know what that’s supposed to be. “Hand me money under the table.”

I told them, I said, “That money is holy money. These Confederate people had the right to defend their homes. They had the right to fight,” see, to protect their homes.

They said, “Well, we’ll fight you as long as you live.”

I said, [Inaudible—could be “Good” or “Do it.”]

That’s how I had to do it. That’s how I have my freedom, you know. So—and this is what I did—work. Just work and pay taxes. The only thing is, when things picked up, the taxes became so unbearing [sic] at Stone Mountain, you know, that I couldn’t handle it; so I had to sell the place. So this is part of the—do you want to ask me questions about any particular things? [*Acknowledging audience member*], You got any questions? Anything you want to know?

FEMALE AUDIENCE MEMBER, *off-camera*: Tell them about your pet lion.

MR. THOMAS: What’d they say?

FEMALE AUDIENCE MEMBER, *off-camera*: About the lion

MR. THOMAS: Yeah. OK.

FEMALE AUDIENCE MEMBER, *off-camera*: We used to go out to Steffen’s house, and they—it’s always interesting.

MR. THOMAS: I had a friend—still have, and she collects my art—they collect my art, the family. When the lion at Grant Park Zoo had a litter of little lions, about four; and she killed three of them while we were out there visiting Grant Park Zoo. [Story is at variance with other accounts. See, e.g., *Augusta Chronicle* April 1938 story, chronicle.augusta.com/stories/2002/04/13/met_338245.shtml, reporting that the female, Scarlett, died, and three of four cubs (also named for *Gone with the Wind* characters), survived and were sold to relieve overcrowding in the zoo.] I told the fellow, “I want to buy that one so the lioness can’t kill it.” So we bought it for fifty dollars. It wasn’t but about that big. [*Holds hands apart to demonstrate size.*]

We brought it home to Stone Mountain, and we raised it, and we nurtured him, you know. And he grew up, and he grew up, and [*Points to off-camera audience member*] Michelle [spelling? last name unknown] and her daughter—who, by the way, has a new baby, a great-grandchild—and the lion grew up, and all the kids came on Sunday, you know. The lion grew up around free, and he walked around them. He always came behind Michelle [spelling?] and made a big jump and tore her diaper off of her and walked around with her diaper [*audience laughter*].

Well, that lion got bigger and bigger, you know; and people heard about it, and they came. So things became quite an ordeal. Besides the lion wouldn’t eat anything but hamburger meat, unground hamburger meat, you know. I had to buy it by the case. He nearly ate me out of house and home. And for a while it was absolutely a wonderful experience. The people came; and then as he got bigger, I had a big line outside with a wire on it where he could run, you know, outdoors. And we kept him in the house. [*Addressing off-camera member of the audience, possibly his daughter*] Was it you or Lisa whose room he took over?

AUDIENCE MEMBER, *off-camera*: [Response inaudible]

MR. THOMAS: He took over Lisa’s room. We had a studio couch there, and he just lay on there; and when he had to go out, he just carefully took his feet down, one foot down and then the other. And so it really was quite something. Well, at any rate, I filled the lake at that time, and there was a half-Indian fellow out there, a contractor. [*To off-camera audience member*] What was his name?

AUDIENCE MEMBER, *off-camera*: [Response, if any, inaudible]

MR. THOMAS: He ran bulldozers. He built my lakes. He came to talk to me, and I had a big table—we still have it. A huge table [inaudible]. And this fellow came in there with his engineering boots all strapped up, and the lion had heard somebody in

the living room, you know. There was a big, long hallway down--up to the living room; and the lion was just sitting right down in the dark hall to the living room, his eyes shining like two gold coins, bright, brilliant, you know. And that Indian looked down there, and [he said], "What's that?"

I said, "That's the lion."

And he jumped up in the middle of that big table, just like a girl having a mouse thrown on her [*audience laughter*]. And he said, "Now I want you to go there carefully and close the door. Then I want you to go in and put the lion in the other room and close that door. Then you come out and close that door again." [Inaudible comments by Mr. Thomas to audience.]

And another thing, at that time a lot of foreign people came [to Stone Mountain]—a Japanese group; one time a group of Russians came. The Washington [U.S.] State Department engineered that—they were supposed to go to Stone Mountain Park, you know. And we gave them a party—about ten of them, I think. They were craftsmen and teachers and so forth and so on, see. And they had heard about the lion, too. I let the lion in, and I showed it to them. They had one fellow there among them, and I think the lion wanted to kill him. He had him by the leg. And the guy was standing at the fireplace like that, "Help! Help! Help!" [*audience laughter*]. The lion had him by his pants, you know, and—of course, the lion was only about that big, [*holds hands apart about two feet*], you know—couldn't have done anything to him. He wasn't scared; he just made a joke out of it.

But the funny thing about that Russian party was that this friend of mine, this collector, told me, he said, "You know, the Russians take their whiskey straight, their drinks straight." So I wanted to make toasts, you know, trying to tell the Russian people to educate their kids and all that sort of stuff, see. And then I [inaudible] making the toast. So I made my toast; I had my glass in my hand. They all stood up, just like tin soldiers. Whatever I said in English, that one guy [the translator] repeated. Then they drank. They drank about two drinks. They—I'm not a drinker, by the way. Occasionally I take a highball, like old people are supposed to. Well, at any rate, one guy could feel a little tremor. After about two drinks he came to me and said, "Couldn't we have a chaser for the next one?"

I said, "Heck, I thought you only drink whiskey straight in Russia."

The Russian said, "No, we take highballs, we take chasers, we drink it with chasers."

So I told my friend he must be crazy the where he got the information, telling me that they drink their whiskey straight, see. So we had some marvelous times out there, see. This is the way we grew big, [inaudible—could be “standing”?].

FEMALE AUDIENCE MEMBER, *off-camera*: You had beautiful mosaics—

MR. THOMAS: We had mosaics everywhere—

FEMALE AUDIENCE MEMBER, *off-camera*: --around fireplaces. I wanted to ask you—

MR. THOMAS: Speak louder where I can hear you.

FEMALE AUDIENCE MEMBER, *off-camera*: I wanted to ask you about the windows in your house.

MR. THOMAS: The windows?

FEMALE AUDIENCE MEMBER, *off-camera*: I saw your house. The windows—the panes—they were gone. Now, this was before it was torn down. Between the time you left and the time it was torn down.

MR. THOMAS: Yeah.

FEMALE AUDIENCE MEMBER, *off-camera*: And I want you to talk about what kind of windows—[inaudible] but what was there.

MR. THOMAS: Well, I had some mosaic windows—I’ve still got them in Midtown. But one interesting thing was this. I had a big studio door that I carved myself out of wood, and I made the hinges out of scrap metal, you know—[*Holds hands several feet apart to demonstrate size*] great, big hinges so big. And at that time—who was the lady who was teaching art class in DeKalb County school[s]?

FEMALE AUDIENCE MEMBER, *off-camera*: [Response inaudible]

MR. THOMAS: Well, at any rate, I was talked into making a speech to that art class, you know. And I walk in there. and what do I see displayed on a table there? Half of my studio door! And I saw one of the students sitting on a table, just real [inaudible], you know. That’s the way they did. They thought free artists should own everything, see. Of course, I don’t approve of things like that, see. I told him to come down and tell me about it. He was trying to tell me something about that door. So he finally came down, consented to come down and sit down in a chair. He told me that he rescued that door so it wouldn’t be stolen by thieves [*laughs; audience laughter*]. Have you ever heard of anything like that? I had never heard of anything like that, see; but that’s what he did.

Then I was supposed to give a speech in the auditorium, and it was standing room only; and, boy, I made a speech! I told them in no uncertain terms—and this is what needs to be done in our schools, I'm telling you! See, they don't know how—you can't blame the kids. We've got more talent now than there ever was. And our youth, they are talented. They don't understand that you have to really work hard for things. Only certain ones, see. And they want to run away with things, see. And if things come easy to them just because they've got brains and they [inaudible] become crooks. And don't think that they are the only crooks today. They always had them. Always will. Even in the olden days. So this thing is pretty critical now, because we are at the place where we—America—the American who wants to travel to Europe or to [inaudible—sounds like “Kaddafi”?]—somebody ought to tell them that they're on their own, that the taxpayers of America cannot bail them out anymore. See, we used to be strong enough to where they [inaudible]. See? They're not scared anymore. They're using us as a bunch of—I don't know what. And the thing got to be taught, see. Those who know the olden days must just—it's their duty to. To tell them how it was.

The old mammies—the old Negro mammies—I did [sculpted] this Negro mammy, you know. I got two—a life-size Negro mammy. She [the model] was the servant of a family by the name of Donnelly. She lived in the Palace Apartments there in Atlanta somewhere. I gave her lessons, and she liked her—well, we used the mammy as the model. So we didn't have to go on and get a model. She thought she was talented in sculpture. And that was in 1932; that was the Depression. And I had this student, and I had an arrangement with her where I could get four hundred dollars that year for her lessons, two lessons a week.

The mammy, the Negro mammy—she was over ninety years old—she wore a starched apron. She couldn't sit down; but when she sat down, the apron stood straight out like that. I think, “She can't possibly do any work,” you know, walking around with an apron like that, because they had to serve, and they had to serve [inaudible] in those days. Well, in any rate, she was our model; and she sat there just like a wax figure. And we made a model [inaudible] armature about that high [*Raises hands about eighteen inches apart to show approximate height*] of her sitting, sitting down.

So I helped start her up. After the lesson was over, I said, “Now, don't touch it until the next lesson,” see. The next lesson I come, I look at her statue, and it looked like hell, to tell you the truth. I said, “What did you do to it?”

She said, "Well, I had my bourbon on the rocks, and I thought I'd work a little." And she got so inspired after two or three of the bourbons, you know, with branch water and stuff like that, that she just--she noticed that she messed it up, and then she just worked all night, she says, and never could get it together. She did this about three or four or five times. Finally I just had to finish it for her, and we cast it in brass. I give her a lesson in plaster casting, and she had it cast in bronze, and you know where it is? In the Smithsonian. She donated it to the Smithsonian museum [sic], the statue that I made, see. I have mine, too, and that one is in the collection of Agnes Scott College.

So, you see, we could go on and on now, but I think we better quit.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE MEMBER OF DEKALB HISTORICAL SOCIETY, *off-camera*: Well, our time is up. But this is so interesting that I think we'll have to ask Mr. Thomas to come back another time, because I think we've really just gotten started. But it is time now to go in for refreshments, and we'll all have a chance to talk to Mr. Thomas individually.

MR. THOMAS: Good!

END OF RECORDING

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