

***Ellis Potter***

Interviewed by Ruth Doyle and an unidentified interviewer on November 12, 1982, at the Potter home in Shorewood Hills.

Oral history tape number: 45

*Mr. Potter, would you tell us where you were born?*

I was born in Morrison, Illinois.

*In what year?*

In 1890.

*Where did you take your architectural training?*

The University of Illinois, in Champaign.

*And what brought you to Madison? I assume you came right after school?*

I graduated in 1916 and jobs were very scarce. There was an architects' agency in Chicago that would try to get you a job for your first two weeks' salary. I contacted them and received five different offers, one of which was with Jim Mau in Madison. I wrote him a letter, telling him that I was interested in working in a small office where there was a good learning opportunity and a chance for advancement, for which I would be glad to do anything he wanted. It was a two-page letter. I got a telegram: "Come at once."

*Do you mind my asking what your first two weeks' salary amounted to?*

Twenty dollars a week.

*So that agency got forty dollars for finding you the job?*

Yes. And I was married, let's see, three months later, at twenty dollars a week.

*How many architectural firms were there in Madison at that time?*

Oh, I would guess six or seven. Maybe eight.

*And they were all busy?*

No. Not too busy. There wasn't a great deal of building in a few years there.

*After the First World War was over, I assume, and the boom times came, that's, of course, when many of the residences in Shorewood Hills were built, weren't they?*

Oh, no. When I built in Shorewood Hills in 1931, only half of the lots were filled up at that time. We did several fine homes in Madison and Maple Bluff, but they came a little later, too, I think.

*Were most of the homes in Shorewood Hills designed by architects?*

A large percentage of them.

*And your firm did residences as well as public buildings?*

Yes. We were glad to get residences in the early days, before we could get into the larger work.

*Do you know the names of some of those residences?*

Here's pictures of some of them [appears to be leafing through a notebook]. The Leo Crowley home near Edgewood.

*Oh, yes! That beautiful place!*

The Harry Manchester home in Maple Bluff. The Johnson Blake home in Madison. The Congregational Church parsonage in Madison.

*Is that on Bascom Place?*

I can't be sure.

*Then you built the Congregational Church in 1929, right? On Bascom Place. Did you work with a particular construction firm?*

No. Competitive bids, always.

*For houses as well as for others?*

Yes. Oh, this was Jim Mau's home which President Birge eventually bought.

*That was on Van Hise. That's right around the corner from our [Ruth Doyle] old house. It's a beautiful house. And then you built on Summit. Your firm I know built the Sloan house.*

Yes.

*Were you involved in that?*

Yes. With an elevator in it. Dr. Nef's home in Maple Bluff and the William Marigold Winterble home.

*The corner of Allen Street and Van Hise.*

That's right.

*Phil La Follette lived there, I remember.*

Phil La Follette bought it.

*I've been there a number of times. Those are beautiful places.*

Oh, yes. Very splendid. Beautifully designed. The Frank Horner residence in Shorewood Hills, and here's Jim Mau's second home.

*I know where that is, too. That's on the corner of Prospect and Van Hise.*

That's right.

*These are some of the famous houses of the Heights that we just had our annual visit to – not these particular houses, but the area. There's a wide diversity in the Heights of different architectural styles.*

Oh, yes.

*Your firm, I think, perhaps built more traditional? Would you say they were traditional?*

Yes.

*Or Eastern? Or English-inspired? I don't know what one calls that kind of architecture. French provincial? But it was mostly, not all, before some of the prairie styles began to come in. There were some of those in the Heights, of course. A nice mixture. We lived for many years in the Marling house at the corner of Prospect and Chadbourne. This is beautiful!*

The Dr. Poley house in Shorewood Hills.

*That's beautiful. That's a marvelous book!*

Oh, yes! This was published in 1937. Some of our early work then.

*That was mid-way in your career then, wasn't it?*

That was not quite mid-way, but rather early in my career.

*Tell us a little about the public buildings that you worked on.*

The Masonic Temple.

*When did you do that?*

Gosh, that was finished in about 1925, I think. The Tenney Building, the Wisconsin Power and Light Building, the Manchester Building.

*The main store, do you mean?*

Yes. The Congregational Church, West High School. And then at the University we did the Social Studies Building, the Commerce Building, a nine-story addition on the Biology Building, the Dairy Cattle Building, the Poultry Building.

*What's involved in designing a building like a poultry building? Do you have to understand a lot about poultry?*

Dr. Berg was the professor of poultry. He knew just exactly what he wanted, so there was no problem. It was easy to get him what he wanted. He was marvelous to work with.

*Does that building still stand?*

Oh, yes. Very busy.

*That's on the ag campus?*

Yes, the ag campus. And the Dairy Building is on the ag campus, too.

*What about building a school, like West High? Is there a certain kind of politics involved in getting those?*

Well, you have to work with committees, which different from working with an individual. Different people have different ideas and you have to try to work things out to satisfy them in the best manner.

*Did you have any kind of relationship with Frank Lloyd Wright and the Wright Taliesin [Fellowship] on anything?*

No.

*You were competitors, in a way.*

Hardly. We had only one contact with him and that was the fraternity house. He had a contract to design that. We designed fifteen fraternities and sororities on the Wisconsin campus [appears to be shuffling through notebook].

*Of course, Frank Lloyd Wright wasn't doing much business in Madison ever, was he?*

No.

*Sullivan and Elmslie had done the big fraternity house up in the Heights. I forget what year that was done.*

Are you thinking of the Louis Sullivan house?

Yes.

Elmslie did the house here in Shorewood Hills.

*I thought, too, or reports have it that he was greatly involved in the Louis Sullivan fraternity house. But you're not sure that that's so?*

I don't think so. I don't think so. I can't think of the name of the man that Elmslie did the home for here in Shorewood Hills.

*Claude and Starck, were they contemporaries of yours?*

Oh, yes, they were.

*They did many houses, too, didn't they?*

Yes. They had quite a practice.

*And Alvin Small, was he of your generation, too?*

Yes, yes. I knew them well.

*I don't think we asked you when you retired? Or did you just gradually retire?*

Let's see. In 1967, Nystrom and I were the only two left in the firm and Nystrom's health wasn't good. He came to me one day and he said he felt he'd like to retire. I had never thought of retiring. But I was seventy-seven years old and my son had been working with us for several years and I thought, why don't I retire, too, and let him have it? So I did. He formed a new firm that's now Potter, Lawson, and Polasky. They're running wild. They have all the work they can handle.

*They do a lot of school building, don't they?*

Yes. And some university buildings, and hospitals, and the CUNA.

*Heavens! Four or five new big buildings.*

Thirty-one million dollar contract. And they have a contract for the new forty-one million dollar jail at Portage. They're doing big work.

*What is the name of that firm?*

Potter, Lawson, and Polasky. They built a new million-dollar office building out on the west side.

*Was your son educated at the University of Illinois as well?*

He's a Minnesota graduate.

*Was your father an architect?*

My father was a carpenter.

*Well, that's a good beginning. He probably designed many houses.*

No. He was not a contractor. He worked for somebody else.

*Well, with Minnesota and Illinois both having good schools of architecture, did it not seem necessary for Wisconsin to have one? Did you feel that? Or otherwise?*

Well, it took a long time to get one started in Wisconsin, but they have a nice school in

Milwaukee now. Of course, there are a lot of good architectural schools. Michigan has a very good one, and Iowa City, Ames, has a good one.

*So Madison didn't really need one.*

No. We used to get ample quality of draftsmen, but it's nice to have one in Milwaukee.

*Are the licensing requirements and the apprenticeship the same as they were when you were starting? Or have they changed?*

Quite similar, but there is a difference. There's a good story there. The fall that I was a senior, they had an architectural exam. There were forty-two old, gray-haired men taking it and two seniors in the University were allowed to take it.

*You weren't the only two graduating?*

We were in the fall of our senior year. Forty-one took it and nine passed, and two seniors in the University. Nowadays you have to have, I believe, three years' office practice after passing the exam before you can get registered.

*A licensed architect. Not quite an apprenticeship, but a little bit like an apprenticeship.*

Yes, that's right.

*Does this make sense to you? Did it seem to you that was a good idea?*

It's a good idea. The graduate has a lot of things to learn yet and three years training won't do him any harm.

*Mr. Potter, do you remember which was your favorite project that you ever did? The most enjoyable experience?*

Oh, that would be hard to say. I am proud of them all. One thing, in enumerating those other jobs, I didn't think to mention the Coliseum here in Madison. That's one that I'm very proud of.

*And you were involved in the designing of it?*

I was the senior architect.

*How long did it take you to design that to the satisfaction of everyone? (I was on the county board in those days. I can remember that).*

We must have worked nearly a year on that one. That was a tough one.

*Had a terrible problem with the roof, I remember, designing a roof.*

No, no. The trouble that you're thinking of was there was a plastic weatherproofing on the roof and it just came loose. There was no structural problem at all. It was just a membrane that came loose in a place or two. But no problem.

*Well, it's certainly been a marvelously useful building, hasn't it?*

Oh, yes. I think the city loves it. And it has gotten to the place where it's earning money on it.

*I'm sure it is. They seem to have it filled up most every night with something.*

Yes. All different kinds of events that they can have in it: rodeos and hockey and basketball and horse shows. It's a marvelous thing for the city. And it draws widely. People come from forty or fifty miles away.

*The Tenney Building was quite a thing when it was built, wasn't it?*

It's a beautiful building. Beautiful!

*And it was taller than anything else around.*

Yes, I guess it was. And the Masonic Temple is awfully nice. We did work all over the state of Wisconsin. The largest building we ever did was the fifteen-story office building in Springfield, Illinois, for the Central Illinois Public Service Company. That was by far the largest building in Springfield at the time. May still be. And we had an office building in St. Joseph, Missouri, and did a lot of work for Carr, Adams and Kyer in Dubuque.

*Did you do not only the original West High but the junior high school addition to West High?*

Yes.

*Did you do schools in other parts of the country?*

Lots of schools. We did the P. J. Jacobson High School in Stevens Point, and several other high schools, and lots of grade schools. We did well over a hundred schools.

*What's involved for you at the time they hire you to do a building? You've first got to spend months in consultation, I suppose?*

Well, maybe not months but a month or two, to find out what they want and then study the site and prepare preliminary studies for their approval.

*How big did your firm become when you were still active in it? You had draftsmen and other architects?*

Well, on two occasions we got up to over forty. An unusual project that we had was the housing at the Badger Ordnance: 1,200 pre-fabs.

*We still hear a lot about these things, where Governor Dreyfus lived.*

It was 1,200 pre-fabs, and a couple blocks of building stores and post office and barbershops and so on, and a recreation building. And we had to do it overnight. That was done in 1942, when they were building the Badger Ordnance and we were preparing places for the working people to live.

*Who pre-fabbed houses in those days?*

Oh, there were bids from several different firms.

*They were building a lot of temporary buildings for the War Department, I suppose.*

Yes. I suppose people who would build mobile homes were in about the same kind of work.

*There were lots of famous people eventually lived there, like Governor Dreyfus.*

Did Dreyfus live there?

Yes.

I didn't know that!

*Yes. Took the bus to Madison.*

I didn't know that!

*Yes, there were lots of people. Justice Heffernan and his family lived there, John Reynolds and his family lived there. Oh, any number of famous people lived in those houses.*

And then some time after the war people gave them up, there were married students out there, before they built the married students' place here in Shorewood Hills.

*That was a long ride and a miserable place. I can remember going out there several times to visit friends who were in graduate school or law school or medical school.*

It's about thirty miles out there, if I remember right.

*And a hilly road and a rickety old bus they had. How many houses in Shorewood Hills would you say that you designed?*

Oh, maybe six or eight.

*Were you involved at all in the Shorewood Hills Association? I'm not sure that's what it's called, but the group that bought the land and got the plans going.*

No.

*There was a Mendota Heights Association, wasn't there?*

Yes, at first.

*And a College Hills Association. And then it all came together, didn't it?*

Yes. But I'm trying to think... John McKenna took over and had the thing surveyed and divided into lots. John McKenna did all of that. Yes, that was after that first group that you mentioned. Yes, I bought my lot from McKenna in 1922.

*When we were coming out here, we drove up Lake Mendota Drive. I'd be interested to know what you think about some of the modern houses that have gone in around here.*

Well, some of them are quite interesting.

*Would you design houses like that?*

Well, I'll tell you. When we got in the larger work, we quit designing dwellings. There was no profit in it. It was just a living, and the bigger jobs were profitable. I can't say when the firm built its last dwelling. It would be a long, long time ago.

*I suppose with the houses, even though they're terribly expensive now to build, there probably still isn't a great profit in it for the architect, is there?*

No. You see, you have to make a good set of drawings for every project and a good set of specifications for every project, and you have to supervise it. Well, you can do a fraction of the amount of work for a large job that might cost the same as a dozen dwellings. It's obvious. A million dollar job doesn't involve as much time as a flock of little jobs.

*Because you have to do the same work for each little job.*

Yes. You have to go through the whole rigmarole for every one of them.

*And they still do that?*

Well, that's the only way it will work.

*What about condominiums, Mr. Potter? Have you done any of those?*



I don't know a thing about it.

*They came along after you retired?*

Yes, we never had them. I suppose maybe the new firm may run into one before long.

*There are just so many of them being built everywhere. And it does seem to me that despite the so-called slow-down in the construction business, that the west side of Madison, out toward West Towne and beyond, that buildings are going up every day!*

This town is just growing out of its clothes, pretty near to Verona and pretty near to Sun Prairie and pretty near to Stoughton. Holy smokes! You go to the outskirts, it's just appalling what you see.

*An enormous number of office buildings, and they seemed to be occupied.*

Yes.

*How do you account for that?*

Well, people have to have a place to live and I suppose they get the most convenient place they have: not too far from the city. We were lucky as the deuce that we got this lot. I'm only four miles from the Capitol.

*But you're in the suburbs, too.*

Sure. And a blessing. So much better than being in the city.

*We think the city is very nice.*

Yes, but we have our own organization and we get the things we want.

*What about your relationships with the building trades? I'd be interested to know: Did you have particular carpenters and masons and tile setters that you worked with?*

I can only think of one lousy firm, two lousy firms, that we got involved in, including Phil Parcells. They were terrible. They didn't want to do a good job. We had to fight them all the time. They were despicable. We knew they were bad, but we had to take them. They were the low bidders, on public work. But we knew that the contractors and the rest of them were competent and good.

I'll tell you a little incident. We had a high school and a contractor by the name of Johnson came down from Winona, Minnesota. We got along together just like [unclear]. Everything was perfect. On-the-job was pretty well run. I said "How did you ever happen to bid this job? Don't you know that lots of architects have bad reputations?" He laughed. "Before I bid that job, I went down to Madison and stayed two days and inquired about your firm." I've been more amused about that. He was a smart guy and a good one.

*Somebody told me one time that for many years, maybe even now, that you couldn't be a bricklayer in Madison unless you belonged to one of four Italian families. They were all related to each other.*

I don't know about that. Contractors who started as bricklayers became good contractors, I believe. I have a heck of a time with names.

*Tony Boniano?*

I think Tony Boniano, who was a contractor on the Coliseum, started as a workman. His

daughter is running the firm now.

*I heard about that.*

Jiminy!

*Did Tony Boniano go to jail or prison for something at one time?*

My gosh, no. No! I wouldn't think that! No. Tony was a swell guy.

*He's still around, I guess, isn't he?*

Oh, yes.

*When you were working, particularly on the big public work, you provided supervision of the contractor, I suppose?*

Always.

*And you could get into some disagreements with contractors?*

No. Rarely. We worked along with them and they worked along with us. Things usually worked out. I can only think of one difficulty in a lot of stone work that wasn't according to detail. I had to reject it when I was superintending it for the state. That sub-contractor said one time, "I could kill you." But he didn't. Peabody was the state architect at that time. He found out what was going on and he set that guy right in a hurry.