

Subject: Mr. Ed Brolin

Interviewers: Brad Saline and Steve Cochran.

On January 23, 1977, Brad and myself interviewed Ed Brolin. The following is a list of topics that Mr. Brolin spoke of:

- 1) His father's relationship with the Bakers.
- 2) His personal involvement with the Baker family.
- 3) His experiences and accomplishments in tennis.
 - a) With former president Gerald Ford.
 - b) In Great Britian.
- 4) His activities as a painter.
- 5) His schooling in Paris, France.
- 6) His family and friends.

Mr. Brolin is presently living at 669 Columbia, and is still the curator of the Baker Furniture Museum.

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Key:Br-Mr. Brolin
S-Steve Cochran
B-Brad Saline

S-We are here today with Mr. Ed Brolins, founder and curator of the Baker Furniture Museum. And the date today is January 23, 1977.

S-Mr. Brolins, could you give us some of the general background about where you were born, or how long you have been living in Holland.

Br-Sure, be glad to--uh--first, I was born in Rockford, Illinois, which is a furniture town, second only to Grand Rapids, in the old days when the furniture business was a terrific business--it now has moved south and, uh, Rockford, Illinois is no longer way up there like it used to be, there used to be thirty-six factories, furniture factories there, and that's a lot for a community, which at that time was perhaps less than a hundred thousand, and my father happened to be one of the leading manufacturers in Rockford, not only in furniture but other things, but, add he was well known in the industry so I was, I say I was born with sawdust in my hair, so I've always been in furniture and born in 1901, so I'm an old-timer but, uh, uh, still keeping young by playing tennis and watching you guys do things, track, basket-ball.

S-So, uh, how many years have you been living in Holland?

Br-I came in 1939, so that's roughly, well what is that? 30, 35 years? Something like that. And I came over from Chicago, uh, do you really want some historical background? It's personal, but interesting. S/B-Yeah, that'd be great. story about me coming to Holland...

Br-Uh, how shall I start? Well, I came in 1939, but actually, my coming, and this is a kind of interesting story, certainly to me and my family and so forth, but may be to others, because of the way it happened. My coming to Holland dates way back to 1890, now, uh that doesn't make sense, but it does if, uh I may tell you the whole story. Now, my father was in the business, a head of an industry, a furniture factory at the age of 26, 25 actually, in Rockford, Illinois, in 1890, and, uh, ^{apparently} destined to, be a very successful man and, in the industry he was a very smart man, et cetera, well, the Bakers, of the Baker Furniture company, they were up and coming men, there were old Mr. Baker, the first one, he was older than my father, and, uh, he had a planing mill, which makes sash and door frames for windows and doors, and he wanted to get into furniture manufacturing business, he had this idea way back in the '80's, of the last century, and he wanted to gain information and for some reason, I don't know exactly why, that he chose to come out to see my father to interview him, just like you're doing to me, only he took him through his factories on how to run a furniture factory. Now you may remember Mr. Baker, the ^{older} one, was maybe in his, uh, well he was older than my dad, and my dad was 25 and I suppose he was in his 30's, but his son, he brought his son along, the first Mr. Baker, who at that time was about 9 or 10 years old, my father has recalled this incident to me on, uh, several occasions, um, uh, a few occasions, Mr. Baker did too, when I later met him. Well, he was in short pants, knee trousers as we wore in those days, uh, the young fellows, and my dad took them both, father and son, through his plant, furniture manufacturing plant, and explained, and asked, and answered all of their questions, and there was a good friendship developed

and the Bakers were appreciative of what my dad had already learned, at the tender age of 26, but, uh, and, they came back I don't know how many times, maybe only another ^{time} or two more times, but it was on more than one occasion, the Bakers came to see my father on how to run a furniture factory, and so, well, the interesting thing is, that makes this quite a story, is that young Mr. Baker let's say he was 9 years old, uh, came in the mid-thirties, I was in Chicago working, incidentally, my father lost all of his business in the depression, completely wiped out, from a millionaire to zero, actually, and that was more than just furniture, there were many other industries in which he was vitally and financially involved in a big way, but he was wiped out so I had, ~~to~~ when I, when I went to Europe to study furniture for two years, prior to the depression and came back because of the depression, And, incidentally, if you want to interrupt, ask, oh, because I feel funny about doing this, it's an interesting story in that since I had to leave Rockford and I uh, was working in my father's designer's studio, or office, incidentally, my father's designer painted that portrait of me in 1930, when I was working there, and he was a portrait painter by avocation, and I am a portrait painter by avocation after being in furniture all my life; that's what I'm doing now in my retirement. Well, that's just a little local nostalgia, but, uhm the interesting thing is that I had to leave Rockford. Rockford was, in the 20's was, the, not Dunn and Broad Street, there was another--I can't think of the name, but they were people in the financial world, uh, who knew just what was going on, and Rockford was considered the number-one city of the entire nation in its wealth and productiveness, so it was just right on top, and, in the early twenties. And, so we were part of it and, uh, well when the depression came and we were wiped out I had to go look for a job somewhere else over in Chicago, and with my portfolio of things I had done in Paris, and London, and Rome and all over the country, continent, uh, I got a job, eighteen dollars a week, which isn't much, even then, uh, and I worked with very, very high grade, top people, which ~~is~~ is wonderful, but, when you work for top people like that, in the big city, you kind of, sort of pay for the privilege of working for them. You don't gain such prestige maybe, but, you don't get much money, but you're willing to work for less in order to work for these people, so I did that, and, after eight years in Chicago, seven years I guess, uh, that was fine, but, I was getting to an age too, of course, I had to think about earning a little bit more money, I wasn't married and naturally that's what I wanted to do, and have a family and so forth, well, the opportunity came in a funny way, uh, which brought me in contact again with Mr. Baker; again, I mean for the first time for me, but I'd heard about Mr. Baker all my life and his industry in Holland, right here in Holland, well, at that time it was Allegan, in the beginning, uh, there, uh, I was drawn to them by their advertising, there were so such fine, high-grade, I'm a quality man and I only think in terms of high quality in furniture, and that's why now devoted, I'm devoting a lot of time to antiques. And uh, well, I was looking to get out of Chicago which is big and wonderful, especially for someone in the arts, there's so much to see and do and you don't, it doesn't cost you anything and the Arts Institute and the Historical Society and so many things and it's great but there comes a time when you want to, you know, you need a little more Mazooma so, uh, I had lunch with a Mr. McCarthy,

who was the secretary of theuh, Merit, uh, the National Furniture Association that had headquarters in the furniture mart in Chicago. It was a friendly lunch because we were from Rockford, he came from Rockford. He was older than I but he had, he had, uh he was one of the top men in the furniture industry as far as, not as head of the factory but in the Association of, of, of dealing between all of the industries. He was a very important man and we were real good friends and he had just been up to Holland to visit Mr. Baker, you see they were obviously very good friends, the second Mr. Baker now I'm talking about, the first one died early in the century, uh, and it seems that Mist-, the second Mr. Baker, who, there are three, the second one, Hollis S., is the great one, he is, ^{he} was a great man, he's dead now too, so there's only one generation left; that's the son of the second one. Well, Mr. McCarthy, my good friend, from home, uh, told me, uh, he asked me how I was doing and so forth and I told him I was fine, I liked where I was and all, but I was kind of anxious to get out of, uh, Chicago, just to, yeah, get into a smaller community where you make more, perhaps there's a little more the usual thing, and uh. I said there was only one place that interests me, and that was purely from their advertising; that was Baker Furniture and that had nothing to do with my father being their friends, uh, forty years prior, or fifty, but I simply liked what they made, uh, which as you can see from that magazine there that, uh, that there is a, that those are fine antiques, that Baker copies, and that's been the gist of Baker's business all these years, copying fine antiques, of which we have the original, and of course to copy antiques takes a lot of skill, and Mr. Baker had high ideals and, anyway, ~~well~~ he was looking for someone to replace a man, whom, from New York, a very good man, very knowledgeable in furniture and Mr. Baker and this gentleman had a falling-out and, Mr. Baker dismissed him, and those things happen and you know, and he was looking for someone who had had a European background and who knew furniture and so forth, and that day at lunch with Mr. McCarthy who told me about his just having gone through a Baker plant with Mr. Baker, and Mr. Baker had mentioned to him that they were looking for someone and "Mac" immediately thought of me and on the strength of that he wrote Mr. Baker that he thought he had, uh, a young fellow that he thought he could fit into his organization and so, uh, Mr. Baker wrote me immediately to meet him in the Palmer House in Chicago, now I don't know if you two fellows know the Palmer House, but, perhaps not so much now, it's still a big, fine Hotel, but in the twenties, and thirties, for many years, forties too, it was the Hotel where both, uh, much, well, businessmen met there, in the lobby, it was the place to meet people for business and lunch and social activities also, a great place. Well, yeah, the lobby was huge, and there would be hundreds of people there and I didn't know, I had no idea what Mr. Baker looked like. I was working in Chicago, and we had a date for a certain time, let's say 2:00, and I went down there with misgivings and not knowing who to look for, and he not knowing me, but we met almost immediately, when I walked in he spotted me, and he knew I was because he said I looked just like my dad. And that's why I think it's kind of a fun story, and that's, imagine, that was fifty years later, that he saw me...
B-Then it was his father who had talked with your father?
Br-Yeah, the important, second Mr. Baker, was just a kid, he just went along for the ride, my, in those days the fathers, executive fathers took their sons along on trips, I took

several trips when mine even came to market, which, the furniture market shows twice a year, in January and July, and my father showed his wares in the showroom in Grand Rapids, and I remember when I was a kid... and my dad took me over on the boat from Chicago and we landed in Holland and took the inter-urban to Grand Rapids and I went to the ball game and he took care of his business, but. Fathers did that with their kids and it was pretty nice, I don't, maybe they, I'm sure they still do, but. Well now, where was I, let me see.

B- You mentioned you went to school for this in Europe...?

Br- Oh yes, I was enrolled in a school in Paris, yeah, um-huh.

Very, very, very fine school and it was housed in a, it was a very large school and it was housed in a seventeenth-century, uh, palace, a royal palace, and one of the show-places, it was called Place des Vosges, you might say a forerunner of one of our, what do we call them---shopping centers? Well, this here was a whole, not just one block, I would say it would be three square blocks all around, for, it was all arcaded and, of course, it was done by, obviously, one of their great architects, of Paris, in the seventeenth century. It was just a beautiful building, uh, one of the great ones. Well, it was kind of fun to go to school in a place like that. All the interiors were panelled in a french, in a french manner, carved, and Louis fifteenth style, Louis sixteenth. Each room was different. Well, it was a great place to study, and, and the school itself was great and then, as, being a member of this school I got to go, or we got to go, the students, to numerous, uh, uh, palaces, yeah, palaces and villas and townhouses and uh, the best. So I studied antique furniture cause we were there to, the emphasis was on at that time, was traditional furniture, which means the periods and all, that may not be all that familiar to you but, as against modern or contemporary furniture, this is all traditional, in other words, these were Baker, all Baker pieces, except the piano, but copies of traditional furniture of the seventeenth to eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. And, if you're uh, a guy can be a nut on anything, well I was a nut on antique furniture so it was just great and a wonderful opportunity.

S-Is that one of the reasons why you started this Baker furniture museum?

Br-Well, I didn't start it, and I'm not sure, in your very introductory remarks I think you made a remark that I was curator and founder, well that, please correct that, I'm not the founder, but I was curator. Oh, no, no, no, no, Mr. Baker was founder. Actually he, see Mr. Baker was fifteen to twenty years older than I, and uh, and got into the business actively. Well, it was in the early twenties and that's when he started collecting antiques, in Europe, and brought them back to, well, first to Grand Rapids, no, to Holland their factories. No, I'm sorry, the factories, the business didn't start in Holland until 1933. And so the factories were in Allegan, the furniture factories, and he bought these antiques. But when he came to Holland, in '33, then the antiques were shipped to Grand Rapids first, and then down to Holland. And the Museum was first set up in Grand Rapids, by Mr. Baker, and then when I came in, in '39, the museum was shortly thereafter moved to Holland because he thought that it would be nice for him to have someone who knew and loved antiques to be curator and so I fit right in there, although, that, that was just a side job, that was just an incidental job. I set it up in other words, we had all of these fine antiques, uh, and after we'd make drawings of them, as we always do, sketches and full

sized details, then the furniture would be shunted(?) to the fifth floor of the factory, down here on the corner, that's our main plant, it would be piled up, and I say to the cieling, uh, under a locked wire cage. Well, that wasn't a very good way to store antiques he didn't think, and so one of my first jobs was to sketch every single antique he owned and they ran into the thousands and see, although my painting has only come in retirement, why, I've always drawn with facility, with ease. All of my life so it was easy to sketch these things and get the feeling of them and it looked like what they are, so I had there were quite a collection of drawings. Well, then he decided to take them all out of this cage and establish a museum in Holland. Not as a museum, per se, for the public, but as a museum to house the collection which he was copying, but to keep them in good shape. So a museum was the answer, and cleaning ladies were hired and they kept the thing in order and, and kept it clean and orderly and waxed the furniture. Well, of course, then he thought, and this was for our designers, for their convenience, and he thought, well, here's a chance, he lived in Grand Rapids, but here's a chance for him to do something civic-wise for Holland. So he thought we'll open it to the public and charge a small fee, cause he thought there'd be enough people, especially with Holland being a resort center and drawing people of wealth, at the castle, and the beaches, and Macatawa and all, who would be interested in Baker furniture and antiques. So he did, and the museum was opened, not in '39 'though, several years later, it took a while to get everything organized and when it really opened up, which I think was 1950, then, uh, an admission charge was, and we got out a very attractive brochure telling about the museum and so forth, and then one of my big jobs was, too, then, and it was a big job, after I completed all my sketches, I had to make out a history of each piece, or not a history but we had cards to identify each piece of furniture and there were several thousand of them, and I was the only one, other than, besides Mr. Baker who knew, just from looking at a piece, what style it was, what wood it was, and all the characteristics of the period, and so I would write a, uh, and then the gals in the office typed them, so that's our means of identification at the museum. A little card, in the little slot, the little folder, typed up, but all the, and whatever it says on those cards was, came from my, yah, one goes to school to gain knowledge, yeah, and experience, hangs with you and you like it so it's all been great for me and the museum is still going. It doesn't change radically because new pieces, new old pieces are added and, sometimes old pieces are taken out, but I only know of once in my entire career with Baker where there was a sale of antiques, where Mr. Baker, he loved them so much it was hard to let them go but he had to sell some, I guess, from a standpoint of, a standpoint of room only. Of course, we added on the museum but, anyway it was advantageous I guess, at a certain period to have a big sale. Well, you just don't with a thing like that you just don't have a sale here in Holland. He brought it to New York and they had a, uh, one of those, uh, where they make, uh, I forget what they call them. It's a sale, they don't call it that though, it's a...

S-auction?

Br-Auction, of course! But people of wealth come and people of standing in the industry and it was handled by, I should know, I did, one of the famous Auction Houses. It was quite an affair. I didn't go down but I made a sketch of everything that went down. So we had a separate record of just what went and he sold

the whole business. Of course he made many, many, many, many, many, thousands, maybe hundreds of thousands of dollars. I don't know. I have know idea to this day what the value of the collection is, but it's tremendous. He never told me, but knowing antiques bring good prices...

B-It sounds like You put a lot of work into that.

Br-Yeah, it was a sideline. I was actually manager of quality control whereas Mr. Baker wanted a man who knew antique~~w~~ and knew design and I did some designing too. The two chairs you happen to be sitting in happen to be my designs.

S&B-Oh, really?

Br- Yeah, just upholstered things. And of course, these (gesturing to the other pieces of furniture in the room) are all copies of antiques, these wooden pieces.

B-Has the Baker Furniture Company copied all of the pieces that are in the museum?

Br-Oh my, oh no. I'd almost, I'd guess less than half.

S-How many are there in all?

Br-I'd guess we have , we have a museum in Grand Rapids, too, and it's just identical to this one which I also set up but it's smaller. Not identical, actually it's, it's got a little more interesting color in it, in that it shows um, kind of a replica , maybe not exact, of their original factory in Hol, in Allegan. Which Mr. Baker set up because he had access to machinery and equipment, et cetera.

S-Mr. Baker Jr., that would be the third generation?

Br-That's right. He's retired. Very, very wealthy. A multi-millionaire and lives right uh, I shouldn't speak for him, but he's been devoted to, since retirement, he has a terrific sailboat. It's a copy and he had a little of his dad in him in that he liked things uh, uh, when he made a replica of a piece of furniture, it had to be right, exact, exactly right. And when he bought this boat uh, I could show you a picture of it, if you wish, but it's an old three-masted, seventeenth-century Briganteen a copy of, an authentic copy of an old boat. So his interest is sailing, and then he bought a railroad, or two, from Great Britain, and then he had a railroad up in Northern Michigan, for a tourist attraction.

S-I think I've seen that. It goes back to the wilderness, or something?

Br- That's right, yeah. And I did a lot of , golly, you'd get a kick out of it, but I don't know just where to find it, I did some artwork for him showing the country side, it was humorous.

S-Yeah, I was wondering if I could ask you about your painting.

Br-Yeah, that's come recent, I mean in my retirement. I prepared for retirement, because I always could draw, I knew that, it was, and I like to draw people, not landscapes or seascapes, or even houses, but I have one, I'll take you down in the basement if you want to see my studio.

S&B- That'd be great/good.

Br-I'm painting a , portraits are my speciality, I just completed a portrait, yeah. I think I can quickly put my fingers on it, if you want to see it.

S-Maybe we could take a break later on and see it.

Br- O.k.-- continue on with furniture? You go ahead and ask... I guess we're up to date. So Baker became, and admittedly so by the people who knew the game, and the decorators are the people who really know furniture. They placed Baker Furniture as the number

one position in the entire United States, perhaps the world, as a factory, who made fine, correct, traditional furniture. That's quite a reputation, too.

S- and I bet a lot of people here in Holland don't even know about it.

Br- Oh, no. They don't. And most people don't know whether a piece is good or not. From a correct reproduction standpoint. See, you can uh, lots, in fact, most factories will make Chippendale furniture, Sheridan, just like I have, but they'll take so many shortcuts in their machining processes, there's nothing like hand-made... It's just not the same quality. It might not look like it to a (?) one who knows, because it's the same subject. B-Mr. Brolin, what do you think of modern furniture, like the very geometric types?

Br- Well, you're talking to the wrong man, but sure, there's a great place for, I call it 'contemporary' furniture. Especially in public buildings and offices and so forth. Like Herman Miller, I would say they're number one in modern, in contemporary work, and Baker's number one in traditional. But it's harder and harder every year to keep that reputation because for, the main reason being that skilled craftsmen are impossible to get. Baker was made up of men who were trained in Europe, and in New York, who Mr. Baker induced to come out here and yeah, they were experts so we had the best when it came to craftsmen. They're all gone. There isn't one left. But they in turn trained our, excuse the term, our 'local yokels', many of whom have loved furniture and have stayed with it. And they're carrying it on, but they cannot, they don't, it's not the same. Uh, but to get back to your question uh, uh, I thought I'd be asked that but I haven't thought of an answer either, other than I just have to speak out. A lot of it, uh, a lot of it doesn't show, yeah, maybe there's ingenuity but, fine design design is uh, in my mind you cannot get away from the classics, that means the fine antiques that were made in the golden age of furniture making, the eighteenth century. Nothing has ever been made that fine, and I don't believe ever will be, uh, and unless your contemporary work is in some manner based on classics, I don't mean using their motifs, but there is something in their composition and balance and uh, having the feeling, the feel. And a lot of modern designers, just design modern things, just to be different, really. That doesn't make it great, in fact, in any line of life, really, just to be different...

S-That could be a problem, because some people produce the furniture just for change, and people are maybe a little tired, so they get this new stuff that maybe looks more appealing but I feel like a classic, a classic you can enjoy for many, many years.

Br-For a lifetime.

S-The others are just a fad, you only like them for just a little while.

Br- Well, I suppose that modern furniture isn't just a fad, because I mean, it's a period now, actually it started in 1925, in Paris and I saw the original exhibit, I wasn't there in '25, I went in 1928, '28 and '29, and uh, they still had the exhibit which was the first of the, they called it 'moderne', in that era, and I saw it. Well, a lot of it was, uh, uh, really very well done and very well conceived but quite a bit of it was made by hand, too, so, it was classic, but now everything is machine-made, and you simply cannot do in furniture with a machine what you can do by hand. Obviously, we can't do things by hand in this day and age.

S-So technology has kind of taken something out of the quality of furniture.

B-Has it changed, then, from quality to quantity?

Br-Right. Not that I, I assure you guys, that's the way of life. We have to produce, we're in that too, but we still did a lot of things by hand, which the other factories don't do so we were able to keep our good reputation, the which I don't know if it's still intact or not. Uh...

(Side one ends. Mr. Brolins, Steve and Brad proceed to the basement where Mr. Brolins has his studio.)

(After they come up)

Br- ... Yeah, I was hoping maybe a couple of gals'd come up and for the interview, and hopefully one of them could play the piano.

S-Brad plays the piano.

Br-Who? oh, do you? Here I have this piano and I never hear it. Haven't heard it in all of these years since my kids have been gone.

S-Are these paintings up here (pointing to wall over where Mr. Broling is sitting) yours?

Br-No, no, un-uh, no, no, that's what they call a seragraph, it just fit into my scheme of things. My furniture was once all beautiful, but it's all faded now. But, I still like it. And that portrait was, as I said, by my father's designer, painted in 1930, when I was working in his office. And the other prints of Renoir, and Monet, French Impressionists, uh...

S-I was just wondering, do you know how many tennis tournaments you have one? (Referring to several large trophies we had seen in the basement)

Br- Oh, golly, I never thought of that, well I, yeah I, I guess I have over twenty-two trophies.

S-That one is just humongous.

Br- Yeah, I had to, and the one in the breakfast nook, I had to win three times, too.

B-Those were very heavy trophies.

Br-Yes, they were. Fine trophies. We used to um, give trophies substantial in those days. Here they give a wooden shoe, usually. And I won a pair of wooden shoes in my first, not my first year in Holland, but my first year playing tennis in Holland, that was after a long, long absence.

B-How often do you play tennis now?

Br-Oh, just in the summertime, maybe a couple of times a week. Not competitively.

B-Just for relaxation and fun?

Br-Exercise. And practise strokes, because once you've had the basic strokes you don't like to lose them and I can still do them but the feet don't work. Or they just won't. So they, so your reflexes are quite different. But I like to, I've been playing the last couple of summers with one of your Hope boys. He's a freshman, Jim Voogd.

B-Yes, I know him.

Br-He's a, He was a High School player and Jim was good enough to go out and rally with me, that's all we do just rally. It was fun for me, I don't know about Jim. He's a nice player, a good player. I don't know if he's Hore calibre, or not, do you have any idea?

B-I don't think he'll be playing on the team, but I really don't know.

Br- Of course, he just entered this fall. Do they work out in the winter?

B-I don't think so, we're both freshmen.