

An Oral History of Marilyn Marston

4th Street | Prater Way History Project

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Interviewer: Laura Wilhelm

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MARILYN MARSTON

Interviewed on April 27, 2012
Laura Wilhelm, Interviewer

In 1958, Marilyn Marston moved from the Bay Area to Reno, where she met her future husband, photographer and artist Art Marston. He founded Art Marston Printing, renting office space until 1974, when the Marstons purchased the old Zellerbach Paper Company building at 420 Valley Road. After Art's passing in 1986, Marilyn sold the business to Valley Print and Mail, where she worked for ten years. Since 2001, she has rented the building to a series of tenants. She also speaks of her involvement with the Reno Sparks Business Corridor Association.

Photo by Patrick Cummings

Wilhelm: Today is April 27, 2012 and this is Laura Wilhelm with Marilyn Marston.

Marston: Is it okay if I refer to some history notes a little bit?

Wilhelm: Of course.

Marston: Because I did bring a little bit of that.

Wilhelm: Excellent. So why don't you tell me a little bit about where you were born.

Marston: I was born in San Francisco, but at the time my parents lived in Burlingame, which is about 17 miles south of San Francisco. They had lived in San Francisco for a while, when my sister was born. She was about four and a half years older than me. They moved to Burlingame because it was where the fog ended. If you look back at the history of that area, that's where all the San Francisco millionaires ended up moving, why they ended up moving down the peninsula to Burlingame, San Mateo, Belmont, and Palo Alto. So that's where I grew up.

Wilhelm: And do you have any childhood memories of Reno or traveling old Highway 40?

Marston: Oh, yes, I do. We had family friends who lived in Twin Falls, Idaho, and owned a cabin on a lake, Petit Lake, which is in the Sawtooth wilderness section a little bit north of Sun Valley, Idaho, and we would drive there. This was in the late thirties. Because we couldn't afford anything else, we drove all the way to Twin Falls from Burlingame, and then spent time at their cabin at this lake. Then the war came along, and after the war, we went back and did it some more.

But we came through Reno, sometimes—usually Carson City because at that time Highway 50 was a little better than Highway 40, so my memories are maybe a little bit more of that area, Carson City. To my sister and I, that was the edge of nothingness once

we went through there, and they were always building, working on the highway across Nevada, so there would be 50-mile detours, with no air conditioning. Finally we got to the point where we would stop overnight in Winnemucca. And there was a little motel there that had a swimming pool, and that was just heaven for my sister and I after driving, hot, in the middle of summer.

Those are my earliest memories of Reno. And of course the gambling. On the way back, sometimes we would stop at Lake Tahoe where the casinos were, and my mother and father would go in for just a short time, mostly my mother, and my sister and I'd sit outside, leaning up against the building, which you could do in those days. Those are my early, earliest memories of this area.

Wilhelm: What brought you to Reno to live, eventually?

Marston: I graduated from UC-Berkeley in 1957, and my sister and brother-in-law were living here then. They had only been here a year or two. They were recruited. My brother-in-law was recruited by Tom Wilson of Wilson Advertising Agency from San Francisco to Reno, and they invited me to come and spend the summer here with them, which I did, in a tiny little duplex on Kirman Avenue.

I went back and stayed for a year with two friends who were doing physical therapy school at UCSF, so I lived in San Francisco for that year. After that was over, I was living at home with my parents. My sister and brother-in-law came down for Thanksgiving, and said, "Why don't you come and live in Reno with us," so I did. That would have been in 1958. I've been here ever since.

Wilhelm: When you moved originally to Reno, did you spend time at all downtown?

Marston: I did, because I worked at Nevada Bell in the Engineering and Building Department, which at that time was housed over the old Riverside Garage on West First Street. When we got paid, friends that I worked with would take our paychecks over to Harrah's and cash our paychecks for a free drink chip. [laughter] So, I was very familiar with the downtown area and the little shops along the way—Joseph Magnin's and a lot of the stores that are gone now.

Wilhelm: What were your impressions of Fourth Street at that time, if you had any?

Marston: At that time? Gosh, I don't really remember. I probably didn't venture over there. I probably just had the stereotypical picture of it. Of course, the freeway was not finished yet then, I don't think, or maybe it was. The motels along Fourth Street were still viable at that point, I believe, as far as I know, because that was just before the '60 Olympics. And I think that's when they finished the freeway, or maybe it was a little bit later, through Reno, anyway.

I remember eating at a couple of restaurants along East Fourth Street. There was a Siri's restaurant. But mostly I think we just stayed downtown or went up to Lake Tahoe. My brother-in-law for one summer had the use of a little car that was called a Singer. It was a little British sports car. Since I was single, and they didn't have any children, we had a wonderful summer just driving to Pyramid Lake, Lake Tahoe, just going all over in

that little car.

It was fun. I remember swimming at the old Lawton's Hot Springs pool out on West Fourth Street. I remember that vividly. Let's see what else. I remember eating at what at that point in time was the Mesa restaurant up the Mt. Rose Road, before it became the Lancer. Wow. I haven't thought about those things in a long time. [laughter] What else? Well, there are many different restaurants. I remember a Moana Supper Club on Moana. Where else did we go? We went to see shows.

Actually, my first job when I came for that summer was at the Mapes Hotel. Because my brother-in-law worked for the Wilson Advertising Agency, he got me this job. I worked for the assistant manager, Gordon Hooley, right by the front desk, and in those days, not having computers, they had a little card file of people's reservations. And it was my job to keep that up to date and pull cards out for whoever was supposed to show up that day and give it to the front-desk people.

When they would take a break, sometimes I would actually man the desk or answer the phone or whatever, which was very interesting. I don't remember any really big movie stars, but I remember the name Moffatt, who was a rancher from northern Nevada. I don't remember exactly where he lived, but he was very wealthy and he would come in and stay there. So I remember that. And I remember being in the casino with the casino manager there, Mr. Pechart, and just getting to know the people there. And the little elevator man. [laughter] In those days they had those.

That was a fun job, and because of that, I was able to go up to the top of the Mapes' Sky Room and stand in the back and watch the shows. I remember seeing Lili St. Cyr, the stripper, and Rowan and Martin. A lot of different people came there. That was kind of cool.

Wilhelm: I know eventually you and your husband bought a building and operated a business on Fourth Street, but a little bit before that, how did you meet your husband?

Marston: I met him when I worked at the telephone company. I worked with a gentleman who was an engineer there, Bill Curtis, and he was very nice to me and the other gal who worked in the office. They had a summer picnic every year, the telephone company did, Nevada Bell, and that particular year—that was in 1960—it was at Donner Lake, the west end of Donner Lake.

So I went to this picnic with them. My future husband was there. They knew him because he had been dating one of their relatives, so they introduced me to him. He was a photographer, an artist, so he was there in his little boat. He was taking pictures and whatever. Then the next day he took me out to Pyramid Lake with this little boat. That's how we met.

Wilhelm: What led you eventually buying your building on Fourth Street?

Marston: Well, he started the printing business, Art Marston Printing. He worked for the Catholic Church, actually, when I met him. They had a printing business out off of what is now McCarran, which was then the old Manogue High School location, in their big gymnasium there. They had set up a printing plant there to do their own printing for the Catholic Church, for brochures, sending out mailings for whatever they needed locally

and so forth. They decided to do some printing for some of the church members, doctors and whatever, and they did that for a while, but then they were told that they couldn't do that because they were nonprofit. [laughter]

So Art decided that he would start his own printing business and was able to use those people as his customers, and the church donated, I think, a printing press and I can't remember just what he needed to start up. He rented a little space at 3400 Mill Street, which was kind of a Quonset hut, a metal building right at the end of the airport runway. I think we were there for about a year. It would get so cold that the ink would get hard and he'd heat it over a bucket of warm water. [laughter] It was really pretty primitive.

Then from there we moved to 132 West Street, right next to where the West Street Market is, actually where the bar is. That was like a little mall. There were four different businesses in there. There was a hallway and then there were four little businesses there. And the back room was the biggest room, and that was the one that we rented. Gradually, as each one of the other tenants moved out, we took over each room, until we made it to the front. [laughter] We had a front door, finally. This building was owned by Dorothy Benson, who also started and owned Arlington Gardens on Plumb Lane.

So we were there for quite a while because we bought the building over on Valley Road in 1974, so we were there probably seven or eight years on West Street. And we just needed a lot more space. Our neighbor, who found this building on Valley Road, was one of the McKenzie Construction people, and they were thinking of buying it, but then they decided they didn't want it. They were our next-door neighbors and told us about it. We immediately liked it when we saw it. It was in an estate. The owner had passed away and his wife wanted to sell it. So that's how we acquired it.

Wilhelm: Do you know any of the history of the building?

Marston: Here's a funny story. I recently looked this up so I got the date right, if I can find it. I think it was in 1984 that we knew they were going to repave Valley Road, and we received a letter from the City of Reno, from the city engineer, and they had done all the surveying and had drawn up all their plans for the new road and everything, and they sent us this letter. Mind you, this building is a brick building. It's 8,000 square feet on the bottom and it goes right to the sidewalk. You've seen it.

So we get this letter and it says "To facilitate proposed improvements to Valley Road scheduled to commence by July 1984 and to clear the public right-of-way and private structures, the City of Reno requests that you remove your building from the Valley Road right-of-way as soon as possible." So somebody didn't go out and look to see what was there, but they essentially were telling us to move our building back about twelve inches.

Wilhelm: [laughs] What did you guys do about that?

Marston: Well, what happened was I spent a lot of time up at the Historical Society because I knew that at one point before we bought the building—and I had never seen it—there was another building next door. So my idea was to prove that all the buildings on that street had that same line, and we couldn't find the benchmark or anything. Surveyors couldn't find it, so it turned out that neither one of us could prove where the

line was, so I got my title insurance company involved in it and we finally ended up writing an agreement with the city, which is attached to the property description, that says as long as the building is there, we don't have to give back the twelve inches, but if the building is ever destroyed, then they get it back. [laughter] And of course they had to redraw all their plans. [laughter] But I kept this letter because I just thought it was just so funny.

I did know that this other building, Nevada Transfer and Warehouse, had been there before my building and that they had actually built my building at 420 Valley Road to provide a warehouse for Zellerbach Paper Company. They were the first tenants. Just recently because I was thinking of getting a city historic designation for my building, just to see if that was possible, I did a little more research and came up with the fact that the original owner was Harry Stewart, who at one point or two different times was the mayor of Reno.

And this article is about their celebration in 1957 of their fiftieth year in business, Nevada Transfer and Warehouse. They started the business in 1907 and they were considered the first and one of the very largest delivery and trucking firms in the state. They had another location on Lake Street, but it says, however, their main place of business was in the same location that the company is today, 440 Valley Road. That's the location next door.

I don't know when that building was built, but it was torn down before we got there. By going through the city directories—we went through the city directories from 1939 on, because that's the year my building was built, and looked at the address 440—we determined that there were businesses there up until 1965, and then it said 440 was vacant. So I'm assuming that's about the time that it was torn down.

I did find a map that showed that my building and that building were considered all one building. That leads me to believe that I can claim that that ex-mayor owned my building at one point in time. But it became several different businesses after that, as different businesses moved in and out. It was mainly used, I think, for warehousing and that kind of thing.

It's built to be very sturdy. It's not on ground level because there were railroads that came in behind it. The two buildings were there. The railroads went in between the two of them in the back. I'm guessing that Zellerbach Paper Company unloaded paper off of those freight cars. So the building floor is railroad-car height. So it's not street level. I guess that's typical of a warehouse, that it would be up like that. And a loading dock in the back. When we bought it, it had been a building material supply company. So that's basically the history that I know.

Like I say, Harry Stewart was mayor—let's see, it says in here he was an alumnus of UNR, class of 1894. He was elected mayor of Reno from 1919 to 1923, and he was again elected for the 1943-'47 term. He was married to the former Annie Quinn in 1921. He built his home at 502 Island Avenue. Then the next year or a year or two later, Harry died and she ran the business. She tried to keep it going. This is in '58, so this is just a year later. It's an article saying that the company had been sold, was sold to Ellery Sabin, a moving and warehouse man from Michigan. I guess he continued to run it, and then Mayflower Moving was in there for a while. Then I don't know what happened after that until '65. So that's about all I know.

Wilhelm: And you rent the building out now?

Marston: I'm trying to. [laughs] My husband died in 1986 and my son, Ron Marston, was working there with us at the time in the camera department. He was doing all the plates and negatives. We had probably about fourteen or fifteen employees at the time. My husband died fairly quickly after he was diagnosed with esophageal cancer, and I kept running the business for two years, mainly because I was able to count on my son to be there.

But I knew that computerized printing was coming into play and I didn't know anything about it, so I knew I was going to have to sell it. I started working on that probably about a year after he died. I had to gear down to a smaller operation because it wasn't really profitable at the time, but then I turned it around a little bit and it was worth selling.

I sold it in 1988 to Valley Print and Mail, and I stayed there working. I was going to leave, but I stayed for about a year, as kind of a transitional thing. Then I was going to leave and the owner said, "Oh, we were going to have you learn computer stuff." They actually did direct mailing also, so they had databases they had to keep up and manage, so I said, "Gee, I think I'll stay." [laughter] And I did. I worked with a couple of other people and I learned. For ten years I sat at a computer and did data entry for them. So I was the landlord and the employee.

Wilhelm: Interesting combination.

Marston: Very interesting. [laughs] So that was from '89 to '99, and I turned sixty-five in 2000. At that point they were going downhill and they owed me a lot of rent money, so I left when I turned sixty-five. A couple of months later I started [laughter] an eviction process on them, so they were out by January of 2001.

Then I rented it to somebody who was just warehousing some audio equipment and so forth, and they were a branch from the Bay Area, of Macro, and that's what it still says on the building, Macro, and then when 9/11 happened and the economy went downhill, they were not doing well and they pulled out.

A little bit after that, a leasing management company found these two older guys who had sold old used office cubicle walls and file cabinets. I guess they had done pretty well before they moved in there, but they didn't get along very well. One of them left and the other one kind of got too old, so he left. [laughs] And left me with lots of panels. So that was my first disaster. [laughs] Then it was vacant for a little while, and then Mike Steedman, who owned the bar across the street, was also in the house painting business, Truckee River Painting, rented it and he was there until about a year ago.

Now I have two young guys who are trying to set up a business in there. I just decided I wanted to see something different in there, not just warehousing, so I'm giving them a chance. I do have a lease with them. It's for nothing, basically, but it binds them to the conditions of the lease. I'm giving them some time to try to start this up. Not forever. They know that. I have spent more than half my life dealing with that building, so it's kind of attached to me sometimes, I think.

Wilhelm: Are you involved or you were involved in the Reno Sparks Corridor Business

Association as well?

Marston: Yes, from almost the beginning. They had actually started it before I knew about it, for various reasons. Originally it started because of the Wells overpass situation. They were going to replace that and they were going to close off the underpass, so some of the other businesses further down on Fourth Street, Landa Muffler and Levrett Transmission, Commercial Hardware, and some other people were in that, too. They started a business group to go to the City Council meetings and find out what was going on and make the report to them and so forth.

Twice, that happened. The first time they were successful in keeping the underpass open, and then the second time, I can't remember why—whether they were doing repair on it or what the reason was—we couldn't stop them from closing the underpass, but we did have an engineer who was part of our organization. He reminded the city that they still had the option to provide one more crossing at the railroad tracks, and I believe there was a crossing—it would have been the next one down at Sutro—Street. I think that's how that came about. There was nowhere between Lake Street, I guess, and Coney Island drive which is now Galletti Way, to cross the tracks. So they were able to provide an extra crossing. It was a long stretch.

So they were able to do that. It was just kind of a loose organization. Whenever we needed to get together, we did.

Then, of course, the homeless situation came up and there were various places along Fourth Street where the city wanted to place the homeless shelters, and then more people got involved in it.

But we did some other things too. We always tried to address the people living in the motels along Fourth Street, especially the children. We started the "Christmas on the Corridor" parades, where we went up to Bavarian World—they were helpful in letting us use their kitchen to bake cookies—and one of our members' ex-husband could get the boxes of unbaked cookies, so we did that and bagged them, and then we collected toys. We went out on flatbed trucks on snowy cold days. [laughter] We'd send out flyers ahead of time that we were coming, went to all the motels along Fourth Street, and the kids came out. It was fun. We started that and are still doing it, actually, but the sheriff's department has kind of taken it over now. But we did that for many years.

The manager of what was then Holiday Inn was a member, and he was able to let us use the pool area for a Father's Day get-together for the dads and kids on Fourth Street, with hot dogs, so we did that. We also did a Mother's Day event where the girls could bring their moms or the kids could bring their moms, and we gave them a carnation and brunch there. So that was nice to do.

We tend to do things like that along with complaining to the city. [laughter] But when the trench came along and they realized that the city could take over R Supply building on Record Street, that pretty much ended all that. That was pretty much a done deal. I'm still the treasurer, have been for, I don't know, twenty years, to perpetuity. [laughs] Gaye Canepa, up at Fred's Auto, is still the president. It's still kind of a loose organization.

A lot of times we've talked about what we could do on Fourth Street to revitalize it, and realized that we could not do it alone. It takes the city to give us some help, and, of course, the city now has no money. They did put up the lights, if you've ever been down

there at night, five or six years ago, something like that. They put all the streetlights down there, so now it looks like an airport runway. [laughter] It really does. And that's very helpful, because, you know, you don't want to have the dark area there.

But it's always amazed me, I guess because I'm so familiar with the area, that so many people in Reno just think of it as this horrible, terrible, dirty, crime-ridden area, and I don't see it that way. I've never had a problem being down there. I know there are some fights that go on probably in the bars and so forth, but especially where I am on Valley Road, it's not that far from downtown.

And with the city bus station moving over a block and then the Events Center and now the baseball stadium, there are more people walking around there. So it's not as bad as people think it is. [laughter]

Wilhelm: What kind of suggestions would you have for improving the area?

Marston: The best thing I think that could happen, because I've seen this done in other places, is for a developer to come in. By coincidence, there happens to be an East Fourth Street in Berkeley, which is right near the railroad there, and a developer did that, came over, bought a block-full of buildings and revitalized it, put little shops in there and so forth. It took a while. On the second block he did the same thing; it didn't take quite as long. So gradually, he established a very nice little shopping area there that's a fun place to go to.

But I think because of what I've seen when we've had our meetings with the group, everybody has a different idea, and they don't like so-and-so's idea. So it's impossible. Nobody down there has that kind of money to do anything. Some of those buildings are still owned by other people who rent them out, and that's their source of income, but they don't have the energy or time to do any major project like that.

I think that would be the best thing that could happen, for some developer to come in. I don't see it like Cal Avenue or even Midtown. They are smaller businesses that are more people-friendly. Fourth Street tends to be more the mechanics and the Martin Iron Works and businesses like that, that just don't adapt to walk-in traffic like that.

It would be a little different kind of thing. It's very hard for small businesses to come into the area to start a business because it was all so industrial, and I know this firsthand because my neighbor came in from out of state and wanted to open a little model train store, and he had to go through all kinds of hoops to get the permits and change the zoning and all that kind of thing. Meanwhile, the RSCBA was working with the city to rezone that whole area to commercial from industrial, and they made a deal with us that if we hired the engineer and drew all the plans and everything, they would waive all the fees to do it. So they did, and it worked well. That was probably fifteen years ago.

Martin Iron Works was a special zone area, and the hotel had to be separate because it had gaming in it, but it made it much easier for businesses to come in there and get their zoning requirements. It also put restrictions on the kind of businesses, like no more mobile-home parks—we did put some restrictions in there. We also suggested that they try to keep the original architecture theme, the brick buildings, because in so many of those buildings the brick came from Reno Press Brick. If you look down there, you'll see a lot of them that have the same kind of design on them, on the roofs and so forth. So

that was another thing our Reno-Sparks Corridor Business Association did accomplish.

Even though the city said they would never change it, the city has now changed it, and divided that area. I think from Wells Avenue over, it's a separate area, and from Wells to the west, we're considered part of downtown now, I believe. They have changed it somewhat.

Wilhelm: And is there anything else you'd like to add? Your experiences or memories?

Marston: I have a lot of memories of the street. Of course I remember some of the old businesses. Commercial Hardware was our favorite place because whenever we needed anything for maintenance or repair on our building, we just walked across the street, and it was there. I remember when we moved in there, across the street from us, which is now where the temporary fire station is, was the old Albers Feed and Seed building, which was just like a huge barn, a big wooden barn. I think they had moved out, but the building was still there and it was a huge fire hazard, and I believe it was condemned. At first I thought it burned down, but I think maybe it was just destroyed on purpose, to get it out of there. Then that property became part of R Supply. They used it for their parking lot.

They let us use it, too, a little bit, for our truck. A lot of those businesses have been there for a long time, on those two blocks, actually, most of the way to Sutro.

We talked about trying to get little signs that say "Lincoln Highway" on them in Reno, but we never were successful. Up until fairly recently, Fourth Street was still part of the Federal Highway System. I don't remember exactly when that changed, but I think around the time that the Silver Legacy was built, because they built that overpass over the street. I think they somehow got around that.

I don't think it's still part of the Federal Highway System anymore, but there's no reason why we shouldn't have it marked. I think Lincoln Highway wound around a lot in Reno. I've seen many different descriptions of where it went. I know it went down Fourth Street and then at some point it came south, I think maybe on Sierra, and over First Street, down past Riverside Drive and then through Idlewild Park. It made a sort of roundabout route and then eventually came out on Old Highway 40, out on West Fourth Street.

If you've ever been out on your way to Verdi, there's an overlook—it's a scenic viewpoint coming east into Reno, and it overlooks that little valley there. There are two cement pillars on either side, and they have the letters carved, "Lincoln Highway." That is part of the original highway.