

T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History Collection

ABSTRACT

INTERVIEWEE NAME: Steele Burden

COLLECTION: 4700.0004

IDENTIFICATION: Prominent Baton Rouge landscape architect, gardener and arborist

INTERVIEWER: Robert Ray Cox

PROJECT Robert Ray Cox Series

INTERVIEW DATE: February 22, 1978

FOCUS DATES: 1930s– 1950s

ABSTRACT:

Tape 514

Introduction to interview by Cox; Cox is interested in the gardens of the Shadows-on-the-Teche during the Weeks Hall period; Burden and Hall both purchased shrubberies from E. A. McIlhenny on Avery Island; Burden's relatives knew Hall as an art student in Paris in the early 1920s; Burden first met Hall in the mid-1930s; Burden would visit Hall on his way to Avery Island; garden at the Shadows was well developed, surrounded with bamboo; likely that there was an original plan for the gardens; description of outdoor terrace and two-story brick warehouse; Hall was eccentric, treated people well if he liked them, ignored them if he didn't; Hall had many visitors including celebrities; statues in garden came from another plantation; Hall's hobby was restoring the gardens; Hall left \$350,000-400,000 to maintain the house and gardens; Hall's servant Clement; description of area behind house, terrace, pool, banks of Bayou Teche; unclear if Hall planted certain trees and plants; Cox says there has been much research on the house but not as much on the gardens; Hall died in 1958; garden was at its peak in the early 1940s; Hall's goal was to turn the house over to the National Trust; the Shadows was a point of interest for wealthy travelers going between New Orleans and Houston; Hall's eccentricities – phoning random locations late at night, setting trash on fire; extremely nice person; oak trees in front yard probably planted around the time the house was constructed (1831-34/35); graveyard on property; abundance of bamboo; other plants on the grounds; Hall probably got most plants from Avery Island; camellias were a fad in the 30s and 40s; trying to trace origin of a particular camellia called Lady Hume's Blush, could have been planted between 1830 and 1860; azaleas on grounds and a particular azalea Hall liked in Baton Rouge; Hall sometimes photographed and painted; Hall kept meticulous notes and notebooks, extremely detailed descriptions and instructions for Clement; Hall didn't travel much; Hall's notions on gardening; Cox and Burden discuss Cox's interest in this subject and discuss other interviewees; Hall was primarily interested in native plants; after the early 40s, Hall started removing things from the garden to simplify; terrace, fountain, community garden on site; summer home on banks of Bayou Teche, Hall would converse with steamboat captains as they passed; "static" between Hall and distant

relatives relating to the Shadows; uniqueness of the Shadows because is stayed in one family for so long and all records were kept; two days before Hall died, National Trust told him they would take the home; Hall's funeral, final wishes and burial site and conversation with architect Samuel Wilson about his epitaph; description of grounds on either side of the home; one source Cox found says oaks were planted from the Shadows all the way to Weeks Island; Cox is striving to understand what Hall was thinking and why he made certain choices; Clement's care for Mr. Hall and his legacy; description of interior of house; restoration of house and decision to leave the gardens as they were rather than trying to restore them; more about plants on property; Cox chose to research Weeks Hall period because of the abundance of records from that time; Burden's recollection of the formal garden and terrace; Hall was primarily concerned with maintenance of the gardens; Burden plans to visit the Shadows again; Hall would "starve himself" to ensure enough money was left to maintain the house; tape runs out, end of interview.

TAPES: 1 (T514)

TOTAL PLAYING TIME: 1 hour, 4 minutes

PAGES TRANSCRIPT: 39 pages

OTHER MATERIALS: Newspaper articles (2)

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