

Interview with Charlotte Neron
January 28, 2015
Lemonade Concert and Art Fair Project
St. Cloud State University Archives
Interviewed by Margaret Vos

Vos: We are here this afternoon it's Wednesday January 28th, 2015. Margaret Vos and I am here with Charlotte Neron, a local artist from Sauk Rapids; to discuss and reflect one of Saint Cloud State University's traditions, the Lemonade Concert and Art Fair. So Charlotte I'll have you begin with a real simple task here, could you please say your name and spell your name for me?

Neron: My name is Charlotte Neron, C-h-a-r-l-o-t-t-e. Neron, N-e-r-o-n.

Vos: Wonderful. So, Charlotte, as I talk to others that have been involved with the Lemonade Concert and Art fair. You and your husband David's name come up again, and again, and again. I understand that you were one of the original artist, some say there were thirteen. Some would say there were twelve.

Neron: Yes, twelve or thirteen.

Vos: But you and your husband David were a part of that first Lemonade Concert and Art Fair, and have remained a consistent vendor for forty years.

Neron: That's right.

Vos: Okay, so talk to me a little bit about, what was it like way forty plus years ago on July ninth--it was a Tuesday--1974.

Neron: Well, I don't remember it being a Tuesday, I guess I had it in my mind as always being on a Thursday night in August but, I could be wrong because that is over forty years ago. It was one of our first shows, I had just started potting in 1970, my husband David is a painter and he's been painting all his life--since he was a child. So we started a gallery with our home in Sauk Rapids and then attended the local shows. At that time, there weren't a lot of local shows. I think there was probably one at crossroads and I really don't remember any other one. Of course when the Lemonade Fair started, and Minnesota Orchestra would be the draw, we of course signed up. It used to be an evening performance, the art fair would start around four o' clock in the afternoon I believe.

Vos: So toward really the end of the workday, and really inviting the community to gather their family together and come over to our campus.

Neron: That's right. A picnic on the campus, and wait for the Minnesota Orchestra and, buy a little art while you were over here. It was a nice combination of things--the art and the orchestra. In August there wasn't a lot going on in August, especially on a Thursday night in Saint Cloud, so I thought it was a real good time to have an art fair. Then when the Wheels Wings and Water started--the summer festival--they wanted the art fair moved up to that time. I believe it was started in July, the first ones were in July.

Vos: Yes, so, the Wheels, Wings, and Water the city festival was kind of resurrected in, really the 1970's there began that conversation and I believe that first Wheels, Wings, and Water event with incorporating the Lemonade Concert and Art Fair was in 1981.

Neron: Oh, that late?

Vos: Yes.

Neron: I didn't want to see that happen.

Vos: And why was that? What were your concerns?

Neron: Well, the Wheels, Wings, and Water--the lemonade show was so successful on its own and I felt that the Wheels, Wings, and Water, should have their own traditions. Leave the lemonade alone, but they didn't listen to me (laughs).

Vos: No they didn't, they didn't. But as you saw that relationship develop, and today we are now still a very important part of the city festival--it's now called Granite City Days. Do you feel that it does work?

Neron: I feel it does work, but on the other hand, I hate to see everything piled into one weekend. People can only spend so much money, they only have so much time, and it's hard to do to it all in one weekend of the summer. That's why I wanted it to remain separate.

Vos: So, it would just be more things for this greater Saint Cloud community to participate in.

Neron: Yeah, yeah.

Vos: Let's talk about that relationship with the orchestra. The Minnesota orchestra performed a free outdoor concert--

Neron: Free outdoor concert, and it was before the days of the portable stage, which they have now. So if in the afternoon the weather look threatening, they would say, we're moving it inside. And it be at--

Vos: Well, down in Halenbeck was in those first few years.

Neron: Halenbeck Hall, yes, and I think we only went in twice? Yep, and the first time I think we had already set up outside and then they decided to move it. So do we stay outside or do we go in with the orchestra? Well, we decided to go in with the orchestra and the customers who had come to attend the art fair, helped us move in (Vos laughs)--

Vos: I love it (Vos laughs).

Neron: So we didn't have to reload the van and then move over there. Then the second time, I think they made the decision a little bit earlier.

Vos: Charlotte when you and David started going to art fair--this art fair. What was your setup like? I mean today the art fairs, every artist has their canopy--

Neron: It's big business now.

Vos: --It's big business. But back in 1974--

Neron: We were one of the lucky ones that got in on the ground floor I think. Just when you know, people were tired of mass produced things. They loved something homemade, handmade. What our setup was--we had two mats, beach mats. We came in laid them on the ground, the pottery was all on the ground so everybody had to bend over, get on their knees (Vos laughs) look at the things. Then I think we had a board for paintings that we hung the paintings on, but that was it!

Vos: That was it. No coverage from the sun?

Neron: No coverage--actually we didn't have a coverage for many, many years. But it's nice, it's nice having a canopy (laughs).

Vos: Because it not only protects you, as a vendor, being out there for, really almost ten hours.

Neron: Ten hours yes, yes.

Vos: A long day. As well as the customers.

Neron: Right and--

Vos: And you're at work.

Neron: Yes, and its good in the sun. Protects from the sun and the rain. Then our canopy also has sides on it--so we can zip it up really tight and feel quite secure in it.

Vos: As you reflect back forty some years ago, are there other artists that you remember that were there from the very beginning that kind of developed through the years?

Neron: Well the names that come to mind right away are: Raleigh Kenny, Jim Lowso, and Bob Trisko.

Vos: Those three. Were they all here members of the greater Saint Cloud community and the Saint Cloud area?

Neron: Yes, actually Raleigh Kenny and Bob Trisko were both teachers.

Vos: Oh for Saint Cloud?

Neron: Yeah, I don't know what school, Apollo?

Vos: Mm-hm, the district 742, the Saint Cloud school district.

Neron: Yes, and then Jim Lowso taught too, but he was in Elk River I think most of his teaching career. I know when Raleigh Kenny moved now to Arizona many years ago, but he would still

come back for the summer show circuit. He would do the Lemonade, he'd do Brainerd Art in the Park and we'd run into him different places like that.

Vos: When you think about your art work over the years, did you end up seeing some of the same people coming back?

Neron: Oh, always.

Vos: Always (Vos laughs).

Neron: Always, especially at the Lemonade Concert. That was fun of coming back--a lot of them you wouldn't see, except at the Lemonade Concert. You know, we all did different shows at different times and things like that, and some didn't do shows at that time. But now, when we come back I look forward to seeing everybody every year.

Vos: So connecting with the artist?

Neron: Yes connecting with the artist, mm-hm.

Vos: How about your clientele?

Neron: Well that too!

Vos: Do you see that consistent clientele coming back Charlotte?

Neron: Oh yes, yes, yes, very much so. And that's why when we send in our application, we get it in the mail and I turn it right around and send it back in the same day so I can get the same spot I had the year before. You get familiar with the space and you know how you're going to set it up, how you're gonna arrange it, and your customers coming looking for you in that same spot.

Vos: So we cut down on the confusion?

Neron: Right!

Vos: No confusion. Where are the Neron's? They're right here.

Neron: And I think I've the same spot for forty years (Vos laughs). It's at the north end of the old library, and there was a big elm tree there. That's one of the reasons I chose that. I didn't want to be right down in the crowd with the orchestra because that gets very congested, but, this spot was--it was perfect. I had shade during the day because I did not have a canopy in those early days, and it can be mighty hot in August.

Vos: Well, and even in June, when it now is that last full weekend of June.

Neron: Yes, on a Thursday night.

Vos: On a Thursday, And it can still--be up there.

Neron: Oh yes, it can be both ways. We've had sweatshirt days, and long pants days and we've had just, very, very hot days too. On the cold days the lemonade doesn't sell as well I don't think (laughs).

Vos: No, coffee does.

Neron: Yes (laughs).

Vos: And hot chocolate.

Neron: Yes (laughs).

Vos: Well, Charlotte I'm sure you know this, that the Lemonade Concert and Art Fair has been noted as one of the largest one day art fairs, in the region. Because most art fairs are two day, some are even three day, you know Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and some are four day. Why do you think the Lemonade Art Fair has continued with so many other art fairs have failed or no longer exist? Maybe sometimes it's not failure, people just decided, we don't want to do that anymore but--what would be your observation of that?

Neron: Well, I think one day shows are nice shows, are good shows. We look for one day shows. We don't care how long the day is we'll get up at three in the morning and probably won't get home till midnight. But it's one day you're to the art fair, you're back, you're home, it's over. Although, two day shows have some advantages. If it were to rain on the day of the art fair, you don't have a second chance at setting up and selling your wares. Whereas, I think that's why Little Falls went to two days because they had a couple of occasions where it rained on the first day, well you could recoup your losses then on the second day. Well, Ginny Tennant has been part of the art fair since the very beginning, and she's been so accommodating. Every year the application would come in the mail and there'd be a little smiley face on the application, with a little note from Ginny, "Oh it's that time of the year again, hope to see ya there." Then I would turn it right around and send it back and say, "Can I have my same space I had last year?" "Oh sure, no problem." And she would be so accommodating, she would be so accommodating and she would try to accommodate everybody and their wishes. It's kind of hard to set up on the Saint Cloud campus, I mean there's hills and structures and statues and things like that. But she does a good job, and she's been consistent.

Vos: Yes she has and Ginny Tennant has been involved with, the very first.

Neron: Since the beginning.

Vos: And has remained that constant community connection for the university, for the artist. So she sends out her letters, around January huh?

Neron: Well, I don't know if it's always been that way but we always get them with plenty of time, and it's been, an inexpensive art fair. Most shows, charge too much (laughs). I think the important thing is to start a show low fee, to get the artist interested. Then once you get the artist interested, the crowd is interested, then you can raise your prices. But the Saint Cloud Lemonade show has already been reasonably priced.

Vos: That's a good word, isn't it?

Neron: Mm-hm.

Vos: Reasonably priced. I believe in those early years when it was the artist portion of the Lemonade Art Fair was part of the Saint Cloud arts council, it was part of their work, their initiative. People like Arlene Helgeson, really felt that we had a very rich artistic environment in the greater Saint Cloud area, central Minnesota area. And really wanted to, help promote, and highlight local artist and local work.

Neron: Yeah I don't know who was responsible for starting the Lemonade, I suppose it was a combination of people and the college. But yeah the campus has changed since the very first one and, the artist have changed.

Vos: Yes they have. You know Charlotte if you had to think about advice for new artist, that would be out there trying to figure out how do I make it? How do I make this my life, my career? What would you say about getting involved with the Lemonade Art Fair?

Neron: Oh I think it's one of the best around and it's reasonably priced as we talked about and, the crowd is there.

Vos: People come to shop.

Neron: Oh, yes! And that's the other thing, when it was at night, it was a combination of music and art. Now it starts at 11am, and the art show is the big part of the day, and then the music is the big part of the night. So by the time six o'clock rolls around it's slowing down art wise, but then people are coming to see the music.

Vos: So then it kind of comes back up again.

Neron: Yeah it comes back to life again.

Vos: How about for someone organizing a new art venture and I hear already advice would be, look at what is the fee, because each artist rents space right?

Neron: Right.

Vos: They pay a booth fee and some artist their artwork is not that expensive, so they have to sell a lot of pieces just to take care of the fee.

Neron: Yes, and that comes right off the top of your profits of course and I know some art fairs first year, charge an exurbanite amount. They don't know if they're gonna get a crowd or you as an artist don't know if they're gonna get a crowd and I mean you can sit there all day and not have a sale. The Lemonade has been proven to be a good show and draws a good crowd. And there's such a variety of things, lots of crafts, lots of art.

Vos: And I think you have to give Ginny Tennant that credit for, the right balance because I think what I hear from artist is, if we're all selling the exact same kind of thing, there isn't enough sales to be made. How do we get a balance so that maybe there's some glass blowers, and there's some jewelers.

Neron: But the tough job now for the organizers is to determine, what's original art and what's buy-sell. There is a lot of buy-sell out there. Some art fairs don't care, but the artist do, and if there's too much buy-sell you're not going to go back.

Vos: You use that term buy-sell. Can you explain that a little bit?

Neron: Buy-sell is when the artist goes to the beach all day, all week--not the artist, the participant in the art show--and then goes to a market and buys their good to sell at the art fair the next weekend. Well I as an artist have to go home and reproduce what I just sold. So yes, there's a lot of buy-sell these days. It is hard--there not supposed to be allowed in the show.

Vos: It would not be, because there aren't really hard written rules, but it really is implied. It's an art fair meaning, artist.

Neron: Produced by the artist. I know we've been next to people I know have been by sell but, you have to prove it, and how do you prove it. It says in the application that they will be asked to leave if determined that they are by sell. But you know they threaten with lawyers and--

Vos: It complicates things.

Neron: Mm-hm.

Vos: I didn't think artist were political? We get into politics (both laugh).

Neron: Well I don't know if I want to call them politics.

Vos: Okay political in that, I will sue you if you send me out the door. Oh-oh, well, then I won't invite you next year.

Neron: Well, that's right.

Vos: And that might be the easiest solution.

Neron: But they may have a picture of something they had produced at one time. Most art fairs you have to send in pictures of slides--photos or slides. They may have a photo that maybe their aunt produced or something so they'll send that in, they'll get into the show but they'll bring totally different things. Unless you have a catalog there that shows the same identical thing that they're trying to sell, you can't prove it. We had somebody next to us at the Lemonade one year that their aunt made it but.

Vos: And when you have two hundred artist, two hundred and fifty artist, again that organizational part of that of that art fair happens literally for months ahead of time--

Neron: And it's a lot of work.

Vos: And it's a lot of work.

Neron: And like you say, it takes a village.

Vos: It takes a village, and Ginny makes it look so easy.

Neron: Yes, and she enjoys it.

Vos: She loves it.

Neron: I know she's out there marking the spots the day before, hopefully it doesn't rain and the tape is all gone the next day but yeah, she puts in a lot of hard work.

Vos: A lot of energy.

Neron: Mm-hm.

Vos: When you think back over forty years, are there any highlights? Is there any particular one where you'd go, "Oh that really was the best art fair ever?" Or do they all--because of that consistency and your space really remaining the same except for the elm tree leaving (both laugh).

Neron: I think that's what made us get a canopy (laughs). Are you talking about just the Lemonade show, what's the best?

Vos: Just the whole day.

Neron: Well, gee, I don't know there's so many good things about it. It's a lot of work because we have to truck our things in a couple of blocks because you're not allowed to drive on the campus.

Vos: So just the setup alone, it takes how long, how long does it take you to set up? An hour?

Neron: We take three hours. It takes us three hours to setup.

Vos: Wow.

Neron: So we always arrive early, early. You want a good place to park, you want to be as close as possible so that's the first thing you have to figure out is where's a good place to park.

Although you are assigned spaces at the Lemonade. So we have to truck our things in about two, three blocks from the parking lot.

Vos: For an art fair day--for Lemonade Day, what time do you start your day?

Neron: Well we meet over here at seven because that's the time the people get here to help us.

Vos: We have volunteers that are helping, they help direct.

Neron: Mm-hm, and they remain consistent too, the check in gals. I think they're tennis buddies of Ginny's or something like that is what I think I heard.

Vos: I think you are correct.

Neron: The truck is loaded from the day before. We use a van--we used to use the station wagon and (laughs) it was like putting a puzzle together to get everything to fit into that van because I have six crates of pottery and my husband has lots of paintings, plus the equipment needed. Racks, your cart--you want to cart it in you can't carry everything in especially potter, it's very heavy. But anyway we get it carted in and our family--our two daughters, help us. They arrive here at seven o'clock and they help us truck it in because it is--a lot of shows you can drive up to your spot, unload, and then take your vehicle away. Which is very nice but they don't want any cars on the campus so that's their regulation and their rules.

Vos: So when you say it takes three hours, you're talking four people, it takes three hours?

Neron: Well they go first unload and get it to the spot and then set up the racks and the canopy, and then I just say, "Go." I'm in place, I can take my time now and set it up the way I want it now. So then they go and David and would set up. And we'd be through maybe an hour before it open but, it gives you a chance to get organized and get everything straight.

Vos: It's a lot of work.

Neron: It is a lot of work, but then you have all day to enjoy the day and the customers and, sell your wares. There's nothing more exhilarating then selling something you've produced.

Vos: Exactly, and to meet the person buying it.

Neron: Right. That's important.

Vos: That connectedness, Charlotte. Whereas a purchaser to meet the artist, you made this and I now know you.

Neron: Mm-hm and that has a memory for you and for me.

Vos: That's powerful stuff.

Neron: Mm-hm.

Vos: And then when the day is over, the orchestra is usually done performing by 9 pm and the artist can start packing up a little bit before that, but most of the folks are maybe still gonna stop buy and shop or they're time.

Neron: By that time they're done (both laugh).

Vos: Okay, the sun has set, it's time to go home.

Neron: In the early days before spraying of mosquitos happened. We'd be swatting mosquitos like crazy trying to pack our wares, but I do think they spray now and it's gotten a lot better.

Vos: Manage it.

Neron: Yeah, then our girls come back and help us load. So, I don't get home till ten o'clock at night.

Vos: And then you soak your feet for the next day?

Neron: No, because you're not really on your feet that much. You're doing a lot of sitting during the day and talking to people up and down, up and down. So, no, but you're ready to crawl into bed. Take a shower and crawl into bed. But it's very rewarding.

Vos: And it must be, because Charlotte for you and your husband to have this on your calendar year after year, things come up! Things come up but it's been a priority for the two of you.

Neron: Oh, yes, yes.

Vos: And what a benefit for the Lemonade Art Fair, to have people like you because consistency certainly with Ginny, consistency certainly with the university, but it's also that consistency with artist who support the event.

Neron: And art has been our life--David and my life. And we've enjoyed it, it's our recreation, our entertainment, our social life and it's been a good time for just David and I to connect on the way to shows. We're both in the car, there's really no place else to go and, you have to talk to your spouse so, it was good, it was good that we had that time together.

Vos: So as we look to the future because we're already busy planning the next art fair for 2015, have you looked ahead to 2024 for the fiftieth?

Neron: 2024?

Vos: Yeah.

Neron: I'm not going to be at that one (laughs).

Vos: You're not going to be at that one? Come on, Charlotte! What would you hope, what would be your wish, what would you say if I could have one thing happen for the fiftieth, what would it be?

Neron: Well, I just don't know what I'd say about that. That you have lots of sunshine (laughs), and lots of new artist, new things happening on campus.

Vos: Because that's what it really is all about isn't it?

Neron: Mm-hm, mm-hm.

Vos: As well as the consistency it's the evolution of new artist, new ideas.

Neron: The evolution yes, mm-hm, mm-hm.

Vos: Well Charlotte this has just been a real treat to visit with you. Thank you so much for taking the time.

Neron: Well thank you, I enjoyed it.