

## The Old Man and the Arts

**BJ Barsness** [00:00:10] I have to go first because I'm the oldest...

**Eric Barsness** [00:00:13] (Laughter)

**BJ Barsness** [00:00:15] By quite a bit. I was there when the Virginia City Players started, I was little, but I was there. Gary, I would like to thank you for this chance to think about our father, Larry Barsness. As a man of the arts instead of just the parent. Because, you know, I was realizing when you're a kid, your parents just do what they do. Mine did theater and I didn't think that was odd, you know, because you're just a little kid. So when they tell you you're going to sing a song on stage when you're six. You just do it and you're probably not very good. But, anyways, Larry was born and raised outside of Lewistown. Yeah. And he didn't initially start out as an artist. He was going to college in forestry and what he said and he had worked in the woods a couple of summers, I think, out of high school. And for his first two years in forestry. And then his story is he took a class in Shakespeare and it completely changed his trajectory. So after two years at the University of Montana, he went to Iowa, Iowa State. Yeah, Iowa City, Iowa State, where he met my mother and they got married. They were both speech and drama makers there. So that's where he started, all that nonsense. He also, as you might know, in his later years, he became quite a skilled water colorist. We all have pieces of his. During the war, he was 4F because he wore glasses. So he worked he went to Seattle and worked as a draftsman for Boeing. So that was kind of one of his hidden talents that later emerged, drawing. He was originally after he graduated, he was teaching high school English and directing the plays in Sweet Home, Oregon, a small lumber town at the time, until the summer of 1948. He knew that Charlie Bovey had been active in town doing some kind of restoration. So he his brother Jack, my mother, Dori and I, and maybe a grandmother or I don't remember. I was five. Came to Virginia City to see what was going on. And that night, this is the legend of the beginning, that night. He and my mom and probably Uncle Jack were at the Brewery and somebody was playing the piano, and they started to play some songs from Gilbert and Sullivan and my dad started to sing. He had a naturally beautiful baritone voice. And he started to sing. And it turned out Charlie Bobby was a big fan of Gilbert and Sullivan. So they started talking. And as it would happen, Charlie eventually said, "What I'd like to have in town is a summer theatre." So, you know, my folks, they were like 27 years old. They were like, "Oh, yeah, we could do that." So Charlie agreed that he would give them a trial. And they had, I think, two weeks. Yeah. Yeah. To prepare a show for the miners convention in Great Falls. Where Charlie had Old Town, where he had a lot of buildings from Old Town. So my mother and my Uncle Jack, Larry's brother. She had said they stayed up all night writing a five act melodrama for three actors. That was my Dad, my Mom, and my Uncle Jack. So they wrote Clem And The Miner's Daughter, which has been done ever since. And somehow they found the piano player. And then I know there was at least one other actor, because I do remember my mother and someone else dancing the Can-Can. So I do know how they made costumes?. But like I say, they were 27. So, you know, the energy was there. So Charlie was impressed and said, sure, come on. I've got an old stone barn that you can use next year to do, to do shows. So. That first year I have, I have a picture somewhere. You now have the theater now has that long extension. It was just back to the stone wall. So he built like a little platform and we had folding chairs and there were folding chairs. And then after the show, everybody would fold up the folding chairs and there was a square dance. That was the first year. The second year, I think the extension was built with dressing rooms and, you know, more, more and rigging for the roll drops. And from then, I think the theater and the town both were just thriving during the

50s. There was such a cultural interest in the Old West. You know, it was the time of "Davey, Davey Crockett".

**Eric Barsness** [00:07:34] Yes.

**BJ Barsness** [00:07:35] And Westerns were very popular. And oh, man, the city was just crowded. In fact, by the early 60s we were doing two shows a night on Saturdays, one at seven, one at nine. But we were young. We could do it, Larry, in all that time, he was the director. He also adapted scripts and cut them because the format has always been about an hour for the play and 45 minutes for the variety show. So he adapted original scripts given his writing skills. He designed the sets. Apparently Eric still has some sketches and watercolors of the sets that he designed. He also helped build the sets, and he was in the plays. He acted and he directed. So, I mean, that's kind of amazing. The other thing that was interesting about the Virginia City Players in the beginning was that it was at that time in the early 50s, late 40s, it was the fashion to make fun of the parents, the grandparents, whatever of melodrama. There were a lot of like spoofs of melodrama written. But it was also a time when there were some people really looking at melodrama as a serious theater event. But they're generally pretty thrilling stories. Good, evil, good always wins. Yeah. So, after, I'll just get to touring. After two years of doing the summer, it was decided they would tour. Maybe all winter. So my Dad and Dick Pace, some of you know that name, went out on the road as front men. And they would go to a town and go to like an Elks Club or a school principal and say, Hey, what about a show? Would you like that show?

**BJ Barsness** [00:10:23] And sometimes when people said, yes, my Mom was at that time touring with the company and so she would get a phone call, you know, before cell phones and say, Livingston, you're going to Livingston next. And so they would and that occurred for, I think, a couple of years. And then after that, there was, he had a sort of a routine. He had many cities that went back to year after year after year after year. And I think the years that I got to tour when I was 11 and 12 and then later. But, it was long before television was everywhere in Montana. So I think when the Virginia City Players came to town, it was kind of like the circus. Because there wasn't that much entertainment available. So it was it was actually a very special and I'm very proud of him. So he ran the theater here until 1969. And then that's my story of the early days I'll pass it over to Eric. Who was around for the writing of books and other things and stuff.

**BJ Barsness** [00:12:21] I meant to say at the beginning that our sister Kristin was supposed to be here to contribute. And the day they were leaving, she fell and broke her arm. So you know how it's up to us and she's on Zoom. If everybody wants to stay Hi. And later I will be reading her notes that she wrote about Larry.

**Eric Barsness** [00:13:03] So they toured a lot of the 50s and and there was an after season thing that they did, so I guess September, October, November, maybe.

**BJ Barsness** [00:13:15] Yeah, usually it came to be just two months... September, October. Yeah.

**Eric Barsness** [00:13:22] And so I think I think they were done by the time by the time I was 2 or 3 years old. I vaguely remember. You know, some of them touring. And I think by 1960, he figured that his best option for employment was to, he needed a PHD or he needed to write a book, he'd published so that he could get a position at the university and Dick Pace and Norman Fox, they both really encouraged him to read. And so he spent the

next four years working on Gold Camp, researching. And we spent probably about four months of the year in Mexico in those days.

**BJ Barsness** [00:14:05] Yeah. Before you guys were old enough to go to school.

**Eric Barsness** [00:14:11] Right. Pre-grade school. And so he'd use he would get up every morning in the campground we stayed in and take the Rambler station wagon someplace quiet and sit down on the tailgate and type on it. And for, you know, every day for 2 or 3 hours. And that was a. We spent let's see...

**BJ Barsness** [00:14:35] I just have to ask that when they were in Mazatlan years ago, before there was one big hotel it was and it was out of town in that trailer park. And they live in over a 12 foot trailer with two toddlers and the standard poodle.

**Eric Barsness** [00:14:58] But like any, he didn't spend much time in the trailer.

**Eric Barsness** [00:15:03] He always said writing was a job and you had to work at it every day and have a schedule and get out there and do it. He also said write about what you know. And he did. And Gold Camp was published in 1964 and he started at the University in Missoula that Fall and his next writing project was the Buffalo book possibly having something to do with the lone buffalo bull they found grazing up on top of the Ennis hill in 1966. They figured he wandered out of the park and everybody in town went up to have a look.

**Eric Barsness** [00:15:47] In the late 60s and 70s, were devoted to the Buffalo book and several other projects that he had. He taught writing classes and wrote a manual on technical writing for the Forest Service, for the Forestry Department. He also taught some classes at the penitentiary in Deer Lodge; which he really enjoyed and had a good time doing it. In addition, you wrote a script for Winter In the Blood, which is the book by James Welch and added to Frank Bird Linderman's unfinished manuscript Quartzville, which was about Marysville and just a bunch of stories of some old guys sitting around reminiscing. Which seems like a familiar thing anymore. In addition, they somehow found time to start another summer theater in Polson in 1975 and they ran it in Polson until 1982. And he was a he was 63 by then. He was ready to retire and the Pat and Larry were ready to continue their traveling and he began drawing and painting. And something he'd preserved over the years, like BJ said, renderings for the scenery he designed as he had done a lot of landscape painting. And he said he found painting and drawing more spontaneous than writing. He still really enjoyed it. But it was it like you said, it got him outside and got him involved with people and it was a good icebreaker and people loved it. He loved to talk, he loved a good conversation, so it was great for that. And he'd sit out someplace a lot painting here or any place they were living in Mexico or anywhere else. And, you know, he said it was. Writing was really isolating and you're either working on a project or in the depths of a museum or a library doing research. And in those days, art was certainly more portable than the typewriter. And they were and they were traveling a lot in Europe and Mexico then, where they eventually settled and bought a house and he continued drawing and taking art classes. There was a really good art school in San Miguel, and he continued with those. So his retirement was busy between traveling, art, and some projects on their Mexico house. He said more than once he said, I don't know how I ever had time to work. And so he did his work, right to the end. He, passed in Mexico in the Spring of 1966. So, that's what I got.

**BJ Barsness** [00:18:53] So, I read Kirsten's notes, which are of a different aspect of Larry, his work as a researcher. And, you know, when I remember him, we've all talked about Chris and Eric and I, the fact that he was doing research in the days when you went to the library and he had this long box of three by five cards that he had typed, you know, I mean, now, of course, it's a lot simpler. But she says, this is from Kristen, Larry. "Some of my fondest memories of my Dad are in his roles as writer, teacher and researcher every morning except on weekends and vacation. He rose at 5:00 and wrote for an hour in the quiet before the rest of the household was up. By the time the rest of us stumbled out of bed, he was coffee-ed up, feeling great about his day and enormously cheerful. (Laughter)

**BJ Barsness** [00:20:09] Very annoying as a teenager, for the first hour. His daily writing continued whether we were in Mexico, Missoula, or Virginia City, and to my knowledge he only gave up this schedule after fully retiring and then he transferred that focus and work ethic to his painting. One of my tasks was to sit with him to edit chapters and then proof manuscripts. I loved this time together. He always listened carefully to my editing suggestions and usually incorporated them. Then together we would cut pages, rearrange chunks of copy and tape everything back together so that our typist could create a clean copy. When the manuscript was near final, we always conducted a classic proof. One of us would read aloud not just the words, but the punctuation marks, headers, quotes and call outs, while the other listened and proofed the typed copy. This experience has been invaluable to me in my professional life. A fact, I'm sorry to say I never shared with him. His teaching was as embedded in our lives as his writing. As kids, he would often read aloud to us the books he would later teach to his college students. His preparation for classes was more opaque, but we loved going to his campus office and seeing him in his professor role. Though I never attended a class of his at the University of Montana, I did have the unique opportunity to sit in on one of the classes he taught at Deer Lodge Penitentiary. I was 9 or 10 at the time and I doubt that today a person would allow kids to participate. But Larry was committed to this work, spoke of often spoke, often of how important it was and how much he enjoyed it. The added bonus was that it provided him with a prison ID which the mischievous side of him loved to pull out and flash. When asked for photo identification. (Laughter)

**BJ Barsness** [00:22:38] His research and scholarship, like most research and scholarship, was something we did not participate in directly. But many of our family trips included both visits bison herds as well as archives and museums. We did not accompany him while he did this research, and I really did not understand it until my own career plunked me square in the middle of it."

**BJ Barsness** [00:23:05] She has a doctorate in anthropology and did her field work in Alaska. So yeah. She's our doctor sister.

**BJ Barsness** [00:23:19] "I can only imagine the joy he felt the day he stumbled across a photo of his own Father in one archive, showing him in a butcher shop with a buffalo on the floor ready to be cut into parcels. My own graduate research required a lot of time in the archives searching historic documents and photos. And as I was finishing work on my dissertation, I asked Larry to come with me to the National Archives in Anchorage and spend a week searching this for information. He absolutely loved the thrill of that hunt, and with his help, we were able to get through all the records I needed to check. And to help me move chapters forward, Larry took my field and archive notes, read them, categorize them by topic, then pasted them onto index cards so that I could readily find the details and citations that I needed. He died before I had a draft ready for him to read, and I've

always regretted that we didn't have one last opportunity to edit and work on the manuscript together.".

**BJ Barsness** [00:24:35] Yeah, so that's from Kristin. So yeah, I guess questions or observations or there are some people here that knew him and both Sandy and Jeannie were apprentices at the theatre. That's when I first knew Jeannie. I was writing the costume shop.

**Audience Member** [00:25:04] She scared the daylights out of me.

**BJ Barsness** [00:25:09] You had a question back there.

**Audience Member** [00:25:10] What was the connection to Mexico?

**BJ Barsness** [00:25:13] Oh, I don't know. They just enjoyed Mexico.

**Eric Barsness** [00:25:19] It was cheap

**BJ Barsness** [00:25:21] And warm.

**BJ Barsness** [00:25:22] Well, also, the main reason many people move now, it's so much cheaper. You can afford to retire there. They could afford to buy a house there. Yeah. Yeah. And he never did learn Spanish. Pat did, she was better at Spanish. Anyway...

**Audience Member** [00:25:47] The Arts have never been a very lucrative profession, you know.

**BJ Barsness** [00:25:53] No, no and San Miguel has since become full of rich Americans. But at that time, it was full of retired teachers. I remember they had a big party. There was a teacher. There was a retired opera singer. There was a book maker, who made literal books. Yeah, it was. And a lot of teachers, a lot of people who could not afford to live well in the US. So they were there in Mexico. Ah, there's more family.

**Audience Member** [00:26:40] BJ, tell us about what you felt about living, working in Virginia City back in the early days.

**BJ Barsness** [00:26:48] As I said initially. It was just what I did. You know I, later... I remember not liking that first time on stage when I was six and had to sing a song but later, of course. As I grew up, I certainly enjoyed it. and I feel these days that I was enormously lucky to get to work with my Father in his business. Not many people get to do it. Ranchers, rancher's kids get to do it. But and theatre is a great deal of work. You know, people see the finished project and it just looks like fun and so easy. But the sets have to be built, the costumes have to be and things have to be rehearsed endlessly. So, yeah. So I feel very lucky. I later became not an actress, but a director, so I'd say I say a baker's daughter learns to make bread. I learned to make theatre. So that's what I do or have done. I'm retired now... almost.

**Audience Member** [00:28:18] BJ, I just want to comment how you enriched everyone's lives when you were a director of the theater. And my daughter just said to me the other day, she and the kids got to grow up. They could go any time there was a seat open, they could go to the theater. And they would always go through the years. And she just was

saying how it enriched their lives and how it just felt like they just grew up in a magical place. And the theater and you were a big part of that, so, thank you.

**BJ Barsness** [00:28:55] Thank you so much, that totally warms my heart. Thank you. Yeah. Yeah.. Sandy?

**Audience Member** [00:29:03] Did Larry direct a show or two at U of M? I thought he did.

**BJ Barsness** [00:29:08] Yes, he did. And I think he was in a show....

**Eric Barsness** [00:29:14] One...Our first year there in 60. Yeah. The Winter of 63. He taught two semesters in the Drama Department. The Winter and Spring of 63 and then. And he was, I can remember it was Shakespeare now that I recall. That he did....

**Audience Member** [00:29:36] Much Ado About Nothing.

**Eric Barsness** [00:29:39] I don't remember. Were you there? (Laughter)

**Audience Member** [00:29:46] Yeah. I tried out for that and got the part of [unintelligible] I did a very good pratfall. Especially with the. No, I got to go, Larry, then and I did a lot of tech work there in theatre. And as a result, he asked me to come player's call in the summer.

**BJ Barsness** [00:30:07] All right.

**Audience Member** [00:30:10] And I was an apprentice, one of the lesser paid people

**BJ Barsness** [00:30:13] We all love apprentices.... You don't have them pay much and you're young and they work hard.

**Audience Member** [00:30:25] That's how I got to know Larry. And then I subsequently took an English course from him.

**BJ Barsness** [00:30:29] Oh, you did?

**Audience Member** [00:30:33] And we were best of friends up until he died.

**Audience Member** [00:30:36] I know. I know.

**Audience Member** [00:30:39] Pat and Larry, They kind of took us under their wing, as a young married couple and we were kind of isolated. Horse Prairie is a really isolated area. And they would call us up and let us know that something really exciting was going to happen in Missoula. So, I got to see Marcel Marceau. And yeah, because they called. Things like this that are but in reference to I don't know if Larry directed. I know he wrote the adaptation for Winter in the Blood. That was a phenomenal production.

**Audience Member** [00:31:23] What was it like the line between director and son and daughter? I mean, you guys were all in his plays, as I remember. Right?

**Eric Barsness** [00:31:35] We had no choice. Isn't that right?

**BJ Barsness** [00:31:40] When we were in Polson, I got him on stage when he was 16, in tights. He has never forgiven me.

**Eric Barsness** [00:31:48] There are pictures somewhere

**Audience Member** [00:31:49] Are those pictures available?

**Eric Barsness** [00:31:58] I don't know where they are.

**Eric Barsness** [00:32:06] I think it was just like I said, Baker's daughter learns to bake bread. And so there wasn't. Yeah. I mean, it was not mysterious what our father did because we were part of it. I mean, I was doing I was on stage when I was ten, 11, 12, playing boys at that age and doing props. I was on the payroll at age 12, which is pretty cool. That's how I pay for college. That's yeah. Yeah. So it's odd, but it didn't seem odd. I guess. Yeah. And we were very close. Yeah. Yeah.

**Audience Member** [00:33:00] How did that early experience prepare you for leading the players yourself?

**BJ Barsness** [00:33:07] Actually, it didn't. It was when I was in Seattle and I started directing and I realized I really enjoy directing much more. But I suppose, yes, I did have an innate understanding of the variety show and yeah, and melodrama. And I was. Yeah. So, you know, having grown up with that. Yeah.

**Audience Member** [00:33:39] To say nothing about being an extraordinary costumer.

**BJ Barsness** [00:33:45] Oh, yes, Thank you.

**Audience Member** [00:33:46] Yeah. I mean, she was. Your sewing just left me blinking, and I never went around....

[00:33:55] I started at age 12 in the costume shop, sewing on endless hooks and eyes,

**Audience Member** [00:34:02] Oh, yeah.

**BJ Barsness** [00:34:04] And then when I was 18, my father decided I could be the costumer. So I was in the plays, and, you know, I was 18 so I could stay up all night sewing... and go to rehearsal and do a show. Yeah.

**Audience Member** [00:34:28] I had another question. I've had an opportunity to meet a couple of the original early players and was curious. How you went about recruiting like Ben Tone...

**BJ Barsness** [00:34:43] Oh yeah. Ben was in the very first summer, my Mom knew him from Portland. They both grew up in Portland, Oregon and had been in plays together. So. That's how he came out. And then after my folks divorced. Ben and Larry and Harry Smith spent winters in New York. So, yeah, they spent two winters in New York City auditioning and...

**Eric Barsness** [00:35:22] Well, I think they were doing a lot of research to find a lot of the old melodramas and music.

**Audience Member** [00:35:28] And then how did they get to New York?

**Audience Member** [00:35:30] They drove up, the three of them together.

**Eric Barsness** [00:35:35] Three of 'em in a 49 Ford pickup. And I tell you what, you've got two guys in it, it's pretty tight.

**BJ Barsness** [00:35:43] When they went to get out, they were all really skinny...

**Eric Barsness** [00:35:45] They were young.

**BJ Barsness** [00:35:48] And so so, yeah. And so a couple of actors came from there. Um.

**Audience Member** [00:36:01] Did Vicky come... where did Vicky come from?

**BJ Barsness** [00:36:02] Vicky came from New York. Yeah, I remember.

**Audience Member** [00:36:08] Where were they? Where did they audition? I mean, did they all have to audition?

**BJ Barsness** [00:36:15] I don't think it was that formal. I think it was just. Oh, I know this person. She's really good. We should hire her. Yeah.

**Audience Member** [00:36:29] They never had a problem then getting enough actors to...

**BJ Barsness** [00:36:35] No well, you know. Summer theatre was highly unusual then. You know, we always were told that it was the first summer theater west of the Mississippi. Some woman showed up in the 60s from Wyoming or Colorado who claimed her theatre was the first. But, yes, we dismissed it. Because there just weren't many places for people to work, for actors to work. You know, it was before all the all the major cities. well, San Francisco has theater, but Seattle and all the major theaters now have big, big theatres where people can work. But at that time, I think it probably was... and Montana was so exotic. I think that people, you know,.

**Audience Member** [00:37:38] You hired them and they had room and board too, right?. That's not not a bad gig.

**Eric Barsness** [00:37:43] Great housing too.. (Laughter)

**BJ Barsness** [00:37:50] And we all ate at the Wells Fargo. Yeah.

**Eric Barsness** [00:37:57] Yeah.

**BJ Barsness** [00:37:58] So anything else?

**Audience Member** [00:38:00] Now, you said that they wanted to be very true to the 19th century melodrama. So for the play did they have a specific philosophy for the variety act? It's got that very 1940s feel of the Yankee Doodle Dandy theme in there.

**BJ Barsness** [00:38:15] Yes, and that. You know, there wasn't much written. Having looked for music myself. It was the 20s before little fun tunes were written. It was the 20s before we got that rhythm going, because most everything in the Victorian age was kind of

lovely and gentle and flowery like the speech. So yes, I think we always cheated quite a bit with the variety show.

**VCPA Host** [00:38:58] Thanks again. This concludes our Linderman Cabin programs for summer 23. But, we hope you'll be back next year.