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## Dykema, Nelson Oral History Interview: Parents of Baby Boomer Generation

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2001 Oral History Project  
Parents of the Baby Boomers, 1941-2001  
Interviewee: Nelson Dykema  
Interviewer: Geoffrey Reynolds  
July 2, 2001

GR: First, tell me how you got into the war.

ND: Well, I graduated from high school in 1943.

GR: And where was that at?

ND: Holland Christian. My birthday was in [date removed]. In September I was sent to Detroit to have a physical, it was about the first of September, and on the twenty-seventh of September I was sworn in and sent to Fort Custer. Then sent to Fort McClellan, Alabama.

GR: How long were you at Fort Custer?

ND: Just enough to get equipment.

GR: And how much at Fort McClellan, Alabama?

ND: From September to March.

GR: And where from there?

ND: From there I went overseas, on March 13, on a Friday. An unlucky day, I guess. I was sent overseas to Italy.

GR: Was there a particular boat you rode over?

ND: It was a liberty ship. We were attacked going to the Mediterranean, by both air and subs. That was before I was 19.

GR: Do you remember the name of the liberty ship?

ND: No I don't.

GR: You said you were attacked. How did that all happen?

ND: The submarines were trying to torpedo our ship. We were in a convoy and the airplanes were strafing it, so it was scary, especially for an 18-year-old.

GR: What military branch was attacking you?

ND: We don't know, it was probably the Air Force.

GR: Where was the liberty ship heading?

ND: To Naples, from there I was sent to replacement depot, then sent from there to the 88<sup>th</sup> division.

GR: Where was that stationed at the time?

ND: That was in Italy, it was at a monastery that they held up, where the Germans were holed up in and they were trying to get that. Then they pushed off from there, and I was sent as a replacement.

GR: What was your position in the military at that time?

ND: I was just a private in the infantry.

GR: Was there anything particular that you remember about the day you walked off the liberty ship and throughout the war? What was it like?

ND: After I got sent to the 88<sup>th</sup>, we had several skirmishes, several fights that I was involved in. One was on the way to Rome, just outside of Rome, and we were shelled at near the Vatican. Another one was we were headed toward the Arno and that was when we were attacked, surrounded, our platoon was trying to enter a house because the Germans were around. Our squad leader had some Germans with their rifles above their heads; one of them hit him over the head and killed him. Our BAR men started shooting at them. We finally got into the house. We called artillery and they boxed in the house, and I guess I

was the last one to get into the house. That was a long stretch in that house, almost 24 hours.

GR: What types of things did you encounter when you were fighting battles like that? Were there a lot of emotions in the men?

ND: Yes. Some just did their business, some were afraid. In fact, at that time one ran back past me and I couldn't stop him, so I don't know what happened to him. New recruit, I guess. I went toward the back there, because I figured somebody had to be back there watching in case they came in from the rear. Then we were down to the last grenade, and we were surrounded by nearly a battalion of Germans. So we were very much outnumbered.

GR: How did that all turn out well then for you?

ND: It was even written in this little booklet here—"We were There"—one of roughest small unit battles. Forty enlisted men and one officer. We were attacked by near battalion strength, in a house at Kelensano, I don't even remember the name, but that was it says it was. We were in the house, and the artillery from the T37 field artillery did about 3,500 rounds around the house. We were trying to cover the windows and see if anyone was coming. One time some of the Germans...they were up to the door and the last grenade we threw and killed them. Another company came and surrounded them, and chased them away.

GR: What company were you with?

ND: Company G, 349<sup>th</sup> infantry.

GR: Was there anybody else killed besides your leader?

ND: I don't believe so. That was amazing that there wasn't. But it's scary because you're surrounded, you know they're coming at you and you can't do anything much about it but stay in there. You couldn't go out. And if they broke a door down, we'd be done.

GR: So after that were you a changed private?

ND: I guess I more or less figured that each day alive was worth it. Several other small skirmishes...one time—one of my buddies, we slept together in a pup tent—went under machine gun three times, and he was killed. And that sticks out in my memory, he had a little boy, a little baby about a few months old.

GR: And you knew that when he was killed?

ND: Yes.

GR: Did you have to send anything to his wife?

ND: No, because we kept on moving. We were moving at a fast rate chasing those Germans. They were moving rapidly, and we were trying to keep up with them, keep pushing them.

GR: Do you remember what his name was?

ND: John White.

GR: Was he from Michigan?

ND: No, I think he was from Illinois. I don't know, it seems that you don't get indifferent, but you calm your nerves and keep at your job the best you can.

GR: So you changed from the moment you got on the boat, until you left the Army?

ND: Yes, I was more or less sheltered back home, entirely different in the Army.

GR: Were you an only child before you went in?

ND: No. It's kind of a long story. I was number nine of ten children. I was born a triplet. And my mother died, shortly after, maybe seven months after we were born. My one

triplet brother, Ivan, died shortly after that. Then my father had so many children. So my one aunt took us—she was a widow, she had three children—and she took John and I, my other triplet really, but twin. She had three children, she met a man who had three children and they got married. He said that's too many, so I went to my other uncle and aunt, and was raised there the rest of the time.

GR: This was in Zeeland?

ND: In Holland.

GR: So you were always in contact with your dad?

ND: My brother just above me, he was also in service.

GR: So just two of the Dykema kids went in. And what was his name?

ND: Ed. He was at the medical Air Force in England.

GR: Why did you go to the Army and why did he go to...?

ND: We were drafted, both of us, but they just shipped him there and they needed people in Italy, so they sent me there.

GR: So did you ever make any contact with your brother Edward during the war?

ND: We tried to write occasionally, but that was kind of difficult.

GR: How did the war end up for you? Where did you end up finishing your tour?

ND: I ended up being reclassified. I got sick; they didn't really know what I had. So they sent me back, and I was reclassified and worked at a replacement depot in Naples.

GR: So you became sick?

ND: Yes, I was in the hospital for awhile, and then they sent me back. So I worked there until I got my discharge. I helped send people home, I was sitting there sending people home and wanting to get home myself.

GR: I imagine. Where was that taking place?

ND: Naples.

GR: When did you finally get home?

ND: I got home in January of '46.

GR: Had you met your wife before that?

ND: No, I met her at... I started Hope College—I went right out of the Army, got the GI Bill. I never intended to go to college because I never had the finances to do it. So when I got home I applied for the GI Bill and started Hope College. I got home in January, I must have started the following semester. And took summer school. We got married between the sophomore and junior year.

GR: How did you meet your wife?

ND: On a blind date.

GR: At Hope College?

ND: Well, one of my friends was going to Hope, too. He asked me if I wanted to go on a blind date, and I said sure. And that was, I guess, it. I guess we started going together about the summer of '47.

GR: How was your experience at Hope College under the GI Bill?

ND: It was kind of rough at first because I hadn't taken any college prep courses, so I had to really work hard. In fact, I took a German course at Hope that I shouldn't have ever taken. They talked me into it. I had two years of high school German and I went in service. Well, you don't remember it then. So they started me in second year college German. That was a challenge.

GR: Yeah, I imagine. Was there anything that you remember about the other GIs at Hope College that really stick out in your mind?

ND: Most of them didn't talk about it. Like myself, I didn't start opening up about it until about a year ago. It's always in the back of my mind, and you don't want to bring those unpleasant memories forward.

GR: Did you live on campus?

ND: No, I lived with my uncle and aunt. They lived on east 17<sup>th</sup> Street.

GR: What were their names?

ND: Simon and Susie Van Dyke. They sort of raised me.

GR: Was that your uncle and aunt that you lived with after your other aunt got married?

ND: That was my aunt, yes.

GR: That was the family that raised you when you were...

ND: Yes, my triplet brother died at ten years. That was difficult for me.

GR: So of the triplets, you are the only survivor?

ND: I'm the only one. In fact, right now I'm the only one of the whole family.

GR: Oh my. Ivan passed away early in life. Was there any reason why he passed away so early?

ND: No, I don't know.

GR: Were you living with your uncle and aunt when your other brother died?

ND: Yes.

GR: At Hope College there were a lot of other military personnel enjoying the GI Bill. Did they all have any particular goals that were talked about, once they got out?



ND: Well, it was a little difficult for me, because I stayed at home—I didn't stay at the college—so I didn't have the camaraderie that you have if you stay at the college. I did know some of them, some of them had goals like I did, be a teacher or do something else. Most of them I think accomplished that because they were determined to do that like I was.

GR: With the GI Bill, were you given any special preference on local colleges, or was Hope your choice because it was nearby?

ND: It was my choice because I wanted to stay home. I had been away since I was eighteen—I didn't want to go out—so I decided to go to Hope. It was nearby, and I felt that they gave a good education.

GR: Did you have any particular professors that stood out, that really kept you emotionally in gear?

ND: I can't think of any particular ones.

GR: Did you ever have any moments at Hope where you thought, "I could go to work somewhere else right now?"

ND: I think you always have those, especially after I got married and I knew that it was a struggle because I wasn't working and my wife was working then. But we were getting I think \$100 a month from the GI Bill.

GR: So you were doing college full-time?

ND: Yes.

GR: Your wife was working, where was that?

ND: She was working as a secretary at a hatchery in Zeeland.

GR: Do you remember the name of that hatchery?

ND: I know Plasman was the man who owned it. Silverward. In the summertime I used to drive their truck and deliver chicks.

GR: So you were working during college then?

ND: Yes, and since I took a semester off after we got married, I had to take more summer courses and evening courses.

GR: When did you take the semester off?

ND: Summer of '48.

GR: You got married in the summer of '48?

ND: Got married in the fall of '48 and took that semester off.

GR: Why did you do that?

ND: Well, I figured we needed some money.

GR: So you went to work?

ND: I went to work for a semester. And then I got back and went back to school.

GR: Was that hard to do that, to go back into the collegiate world?

ND: Yes, it was sort of, but I had a lot of friends there by that time and we got along well. We went to some of the sports events and things like that.

GR: Did you do anything extra-curricular other than just study?

ND: No, I didn't really.

GR: Was that typical of some of the GIs there?

ND: Yes.

GR: Were a lot of them married?

ND: Some were married, and lot of them weren't.

GR: As you were going to school and your wife was working, how did that all work out? Did you ever feel that you wished you could get out in the work force a little earlier? Did she wish she could go to college?

ND: She had gone to business college for a couple of years before I met her. I don't know, we never gave it too much thought. I just thought I'm going to get my education, get what I can do, and she was always willing to go along with that.

GR: Once you graduated from Hope, was there any switch in the occupations there?

ND: I was going to teach business, and then I went to elementary. So I had to take more courses in order to meet their requirements.

GR: So when did you graduate from Hope College?

ND: I graduated in 1950.

GR: Did you have a job right after that?

ND: I worked at a two-room school at Harlem; I taught there two years. Then I worked at Townline just outside of Zeeland, that was a one-room school, for a year. And then I worked at Waverly and that was a three-room school, and then I got into West Ottawa and taught there.

GR: How long did you teach at West Ottawa?

ND: Oh, I don't know. I can't think of all the years.

GR: Did you retire from there?

ND: No, I retired from Wyoming Schools.

GR: You ended up moving to Grand Rapids eventually?

ND: We lived right here. It was Wyoming Park actually rather than Grand Rapids. I retired from there and went to work at Herman Miller for ten years.

GR: So you didn't give up working?

ND: No, I didn't give up working right away, but I was sort of stretched out from teaching.  
So I just decided to change completely.

GR: So when did you retire from teaching?

ND: 1977.

GR: Was it a long time, twenty years?

ND: I taught twenty-six years.

GR: Did your wife work before you got married?

ND: Yes, she was working before we got married.

GR: At the hatchery?

ND: At the bank, FMB, and then at the hatchery, and then back to the bank again. She worked part-time at the bank after we were married. She worked nights, "posting" I guess at that time they used to call it.

GR: Now once you graduated from Hope and got a job, did you wife continue to work?

ND: She continued until we had children.

GR: So you had children, how many did you have?

ND: We had four, in fact our oldest has a birthday today, she'll be fifty today.

GR: How long after you were married did you have your first child?

ND: We were married in '48, and she was born in '51.

GR: You waited a little bit then—probably because of school?

ND: Then we had three sons after that, and one died at the age of eighteen—found him dead on the floor. I was working at Herman Miller then—I was working night shift—and

came home. I was going into his room to see if he had turned his TV off, and I found him on the floor.

GR: Just natural causes?

ND: Yes, they don't know what exactly what caused it, they never found out. They said his heart didn't get the message from the brain to keep going. Because he had no enlarged heart, no heart problems. Nothing, no drugs or anything like that.

GR: So what order was he in the family?

ND: He was the youngest.

GR: While having children, did your wife work at all?

ND: She worked part-time. After the children, after Larry got to be five or six, then she worked at nights at Zeeland Bank.

GR: Why did your wife decide to work part-time?

ND: Just to help us along and to get out of the house.

GR: So emotionally she thought it would be nice to get out once in awhile? So, in a way, after you would get home from school, there would be kind of a transition and childcare for the rest of the evening?

ND: Quite often.

GR: Was that hard having your wife work, even part-time, in the afternoons?

ND: It became difficult at times, because we always had it covered that one of us would be home. All the children were in sports, so we started all our sports traveling then.

GR: Is that when your wife decided not to work anymore?

ND: Yes.

GR: Did that change your relationship in any way, or was that a conscious decision by both of you to take that route?

ND: More a conscious decision—we usually discussed things before we did a lot of that. It was difficult getting my masters when we had four children. In fact, sometimes I'd barely get my papers done by the day it was due.

GR: So when did you do your studying?

ND: In the evening and after the children went to bed.

GR: Did your children ever comment about that fact that you were getting more education even though you had a full-time job?

ND: No, not really.

GR: Was it kind of expected for teachers to do that?

ND: I guess I expected it of myself. A lot of teachers had to get their ten hours, and I just continued until I got my master's from Michigan State.

GR: From what you've told me before, your family life was obviously different with your family versus your father and mother. Did you take anything from your relationship with your aunt and uncle as parents into your own raising of kids?

ND: Well, I think I took their attitudes.

GR: And what was that?

ND: About raising children and about taking care of family and church, that type of thing.

GR: So the Christian life was still pretty set in your mind?

ND: Definitely.

GR: I guess that brings me back to the war—how did you deal with your religious upbringing in a war-torn country? How did you do that on Sundays or any other day?

ND: Sunday was just like every other day; you fought on Sundays. When we were in rest areas for reason, they would have chapel, go to chapel and that type of thing.

GR: So not every Sunday you'd have a chapel?

ND: Oh no.

GR: Of course, there wasn't a Reformed pastor nearby. How did you deal with that?

ND: We had a Lutheran chaplain.

GR: Which was helpful?

ND: It was helpful, yes.

GR: Were there other clergy members there other than Protestant?

ND: There would be a Catholic one too, usually.

GR: Were there any Jewish soldiers that had to deal with...

ND: I really didn't contact too many Jewish, I contacted them, but wasn't with them long enough because every time I got back to the lines, I would hardly know anyone that was left in the company.

GR: Lots of replacements?

ND: Lot of replacements.

GR: That brings up another question, did you see any ethnic diversity in your company throughout the war? Any different nationalities?

ND: There were Italians, but I didn't remember too many Negroes.

GR: Hispanic or Japanese?

ND: Some Hispanic, but no Japanese.

GR: No Japanese soldiers at all? Japanese-American soldiers, I'm sorry. Did you receive any advice on child rearing as your children started to be born? Did you ask, or did anyone offer assistance in that area?

ND: Not really. They didn't talk about it back at home, raise children, what to do or what not to do, and they sort of kept the hands off.

GR: So did your wife and yourself have to deal with some situations that were a little different than what you remember as a child?

ND: Not too much, except as our boys got older, they were more active than what I was.

GR: So as America was changing, did you see any attitude changes that were really a surprise to you?

ND: I think the freedom that they gave children. We didn't give our children quite as much freedom as some of the other parents did.

GR: Did your children react to that?

ND: No, not that I can recall. Probably if you talked to them they might say yes. (laughs)

GR: Do they talk to you now about how they were raised? Do they make comments about that to you?

ND: They make comments that they'd like to be the type of grandparents that we are and things like that.

GR: Good, so you obviously made an impact on them.

ND: Hopefully so.

GR: Do they ask you questions about things that come up and how you would deal with it that maybe they haven't run into yet? The way their kids are acting up or where they're headed in life?



ND: No, they really haven't. They're very independent people. But they do an excellent job in raising their children.

GR: So you haven't been in any situations where you've noticed something and made an offer of advice?

ND: Well, we've tried not too. I don't know if we're successful, but we try not too. (laughs) Because I feel that they've had as much education as I've had, and they've lived through a lot themselves. They're very active in their church, active with youth groups and things like that. So they have had a lot more experiences than I had by the time I was married.

GR: When you look at their choices in professions, does it surprise you? Are you happy where they have gone?

ND: I'm happy where they've gone. I've a daughter who teaches, a son who teaches, a daughter-in-law who teaches, and the other son went into business and works in Indiana. He is vice president in charge of a division of Kimball Corporation. I feel they've all been successful in what they've done.

GR: So, by your wife working at night, and you getting your master's hasn't jaded them in any way?

ND: I don't think so, because we kept giving them attention as much as we could.

GR: You must have found that hard at some point to do a master's class, or working afternoons—your wife, that is—and giving them the attention they need. It must have been a struggle.

ND: It had been at times because they're all like all the youngsters. You've got to watch them. You've got to tell them "no" once in awhile. And they didn't always like that.

GR: Your job as a teacher, did either one of you spend more than forty hours a week from your family on the job?

ND: You're never finished when you're a teacher. There are always evening meetings, things to go to. My daughter's found that out—she's taught twenty-eight years now too.

GR: Did it bother you or your wife on some of those long days or those long weeks?

ND: Sometimes I think I was a burden on my wife.

GR: Did she ever mention that to you?

ND: No, not really.

GR: Obviously, you had still a pretty close relationship with your family, even on the long days.

ND: Yes. And I worked in the summer time as a park ranger at South Higgins State Park. So I would teach one day, go up there and start working there, come back on Labor Day and start teaching the next day. But the kids grew up a lot over there while we were there.

GR: So the whole family would go over there?

ND: Yes, the whole family. The youngest was five when I started. So that kept us busy. They didn't always know what to do, and they all ended up working in the park store or around there somewhere in the summers. Plus they'd be back over here—Grandma lived a little ways away—and they'd be here for football. They were football players.

GR: Leisure time—obviously both of you were busy—were you able to carve out substantial amounts of leisure time?

ND: We always went vacationing in travel trailers and types like that.

GR: How were weekends set up, pretty open?

ND: Most weekends we'd be home, but in the summers we'd be gone quite a bit. And when I worked at the State Park, we'd be gone all summer.

GR: I guess with your master's that was your hobby. Did you have any other hobbies that you, personally as an individual, wanted to go out and do that once in a while to unwind?

ND: I usually like to read to unwind. I read quite a bit, I still try to. But now I see we're just as busy with the children grown up as we were before.

GR: Did your wife have moments where she wished she could have gotten away to garden or sew?

ND: I did some gardening. I always had a garden, for years now. I'm cutting down to where I only have a few plants.

GR: Was there some times when you both looked at each other and said, "I could use a few hours at the grocery store" when maybe the level of children was getting a little high that day?

ND: She never complained about that, that I can remember.

[End of side one]

GR: After the children became a lot more independent or even went off to college, were you aware, as a couple, that you needed to reconnect?

ND: I don't think we had too much of a problem with that because we've always started off making decisions together—we've done that all fifty-two years now, so that's a habit that we developed.

GR: After you both retired did you really find yourself at loose ends with things to do to keep busy?

ND: No, it seems that we are busier than ever.

GR: You left Herman Miller and your wife was probably retired at that point too?

ND: She worked at the bank, and then she had a heart attack. She had open-heart surgery, and she didn't go back to work after that.

GR: So you must have found different things to do after retirement. What were those activities?

ND: I think my wife usually...we found some time with friends. And a group of girls that used to go together, they go out together and things like that.

GR: So your wife has a group of friends, and you have a group of friends that you are still in pretty good contact with?

ND: Yes, well, the group is getting smaller.

GR: Is that important that you do that once in a while, to male bond, or for her to bond with her friends?

ND: I think it gets you out of the house, and you need to do that once in a while.

GR: You said you both play golf?

ND: No, I play golf, she doesn't. I'm trying to get her interested, but she said she's too much of a perfectionist and she'd get angry with herself.

GR: That could be it too. So you started spending more time together, obviously. Where there activities that you did because you didn't have children along for the ride?

ND: On our anniversary we go out together and go to different places.

GR: You said before that you travel a lot to different sports events as grandparents.

ND: Yes, we have our grandkids, not great-grandkids yet, but our grandkids.

GR: How many grandchildren do you have?

ND: We have six grandchildren, three step-grandchildren, and four step-great-grandchildren.

GR: Are they getting to the point in their lives where they are old enough to ask questions about getting married and dating?

ND: Some of them are in Indiana, so we don't get to see them. The girls, the twins, they're twenty—one goes to Michigan State, one goes to San Diego State University—and they're pretty well on their own. The one from San Diego State, she wanted to come over and spend some time, hang out with grandpa and grandma for a few days. So we had her at Silver Lake, over there at the campground, and I went golfing with her twice and she enjoyed that. She just wanted to hang out with us. I guess that says something about our relationship too.

GR: Do they ask you questions about your life and some of the things you've run into?

ND: Very rarely, I guess they're still so busy.

GR: Do you wish they would ask you questions once in a while?

ND: I imagine they will eventually, when they have time.

GR: Has your experience with parenting your own children changed your attitudes toward your own grandchildren? Do you shower them more with gifts than your own children?

ND: I think we do.

GR: Why is that, do you think?

ND: I don't know, grandparents do that more often, I guess. After you're so busy making money and taking care of your kids—we gave them what they needed, and that was all that we could afford. Because we had Mary, John, and Bill all went to Hope College. And we had someone at Hope College for ten straight years. So that takes care of your finances.

GR: So you're pretty close to Hope College as a grad yourself and then your children. Had anyone in your family gone to college before that?

ND: Not in my family, no.

GR: Or your wife's?

ND: My wife's brother.

GR: Was he a Hope grad too?

ND: He went to Hope for awhile; he was a Michigan State grad. And he is also deceased.

GR: To wrap up, do you have any community involvement that you enjoy?

ND: We're involved with the church.

GR: Never really saw a need or wanted to get involved in the politics or anything else?

ND: No, I've been a Sunday school teacher, a Catechism teacher, and we helped start this church. We were historians for the church for twenty-five years.

GR: Where did you attend church before this one was established?

ND: Second Reformed in Zeeland. When I was a youngster, I'd go to Ninth Street Christian Reformed Church, Pillar Church, in Holland.

GR: Because it was so close to your aunt and uncle?

ND: Yes.

GR: Well, I think that's it.