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Steensma, John Oral History Interview: Parents of Baby Boomer Generation

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2001 Oral History Project
Parents of the Baby Boomers, 1941-2001
Interviewee: John Steensma
Interviewer: Geoffrey Reynolds
July 6, 2001

GR: John, tell me a little bit about what was going on in your life as the news from Pearl Harbor in '41 arrived.

JS: What was going on in my life? Well, I had lost my arms in an electrical accident in 1939, October. And that was still kind of the end of the Depression. But my folks weren't suffering from that because in about 1935 or '36 they borrowed money and my dad bought a truck. He started selling cordwood because there were no gas furnaces at the time, so this was always used for heating the house. And also for the rich people, the birch for their fireplaces. This business just took hold. Every summer to prepare for the fall again, they just wiped out their whole garden and just put cords of wood in it. And when that was full, they'd just pile the wood on top of that. Finally they had two trucks going. When cord selling started going downhill, then he converted to selling sawdust, which he picked up in the furniture factories around town.

GR: Where was the sawdust used?

JS: Maybe you were too young to remember this, but they used to put it on the floors in meat markets to soak up the blood. That was the soft wood, the pine wood, shaving. The hard wood we had to grind and put into burlap sacks, and that was brought into steel mills, like Keeler Brass, to put on the floors to soak up the oil. During the war, we sold just loads of it. You couldn't bring it fast enough to a company that put a solution into it to use in the barracks for sweeping. So the business was booming. After I lost my arms, for a while I went out and served as kind of a salesman for my mother. Then my dad died five months

after my accident. So then I went out and did that. But then I was picked up by the state office of vocational rehabilitation. They sent me to an NYA program, which was in a furniture making little shop with a bunch of other NYAs. Then the wars came, and this vocational counselor got me a job in the Hayes Manufacturing Company, which were producing wings for the Air Force.

GR: Can you tell me what the acronym NYA...?

JS: National Youth Administration. That was alongside of CCC. Civilian core, you know. Her brother was in that. But it was while working in the defense plant that I met Juliana.

GR: At Keeler Brass, what were you able to do?

JS: I wasn't at Keeler Brass.

GR: Okay...

JS: What was I able to do? They anodized these parts, which meant that you dropped them into a solution. But I had to sit and keep track of the current that was going into it. So I just had to sit there and I could just control it with my foot. Then when it was done, I could get up and lift it out of the solution. It was a boring job. I worked from eleven at night until seven in the morning, which gave me a chance to do things during the day. But, as I say, my folks had some money and I had a car to go to high school with, an old model T. And after I got out of that, and after I lost my arms, I got a model A. That's what I courted Juliana with, and that's what I went to Calvin with the whole time. It was convenient with her because she had to do practice teaching down the street a ways at the Christian High School, and she'd just go out, take the model A and go down, and bring it back. In those days, at Calvin anyway, there were no afternoon classes—all the classes were in the morning. So I could go home and study. I didn't have a problem with that

because three weeks before we left Percy Jones Hospital and I went back to Calvin, the state director of the Crippled Children's Commission came through, and he saw me working with these amputees and he said, "If you leave here, come and see me because I got an idea for a program." So as soon as I got back in Grand Rapids I went to visit him. He wanted to start the first program in the United States, almost in the world, to train children, because they always waited until they were teenagers and grown to put prostheses on them. That first year, which was my last year of college then, he said, "You set your time, put as many hours as you want in. There's an office for you in Grand Rapids," because he wanted to set it up with Mary Free Bed in Grand Rapids. He said, "You've got to get acquainted with the doctors and see if they want to back this up, and we'll be sending our state nurses all over the state to find the kids." So that whole era I just sat in the office and studied.

GR: You said you left Battle Creek. What was it like for you working with these young, returning GIs?

JS: It was no problem because I was put into the occupational therapy department. I could go up on the floors and train these men, particularly the ones with arms missing. That's all I dealt with because the physical therapy department dealt with the leg amputees. The fact that I was an amputee affected them also. But before I could start training them, the captain, who was an orthopedic surgeon at the time, said, "You've got to get a pair of arms similar to what they're putting on these people." I had a leather arm and a wood arm on the other side, and it didn't even have an elbow in it. So he sent me down and I was fitted with a pair of army style limbs, which basically were almost put together in Minneapolis and a company shipped them in. So after I had to train myself because these

cables that control these arms now were developed as the war started or right after the war. Before that I just had a leather thing there, and to open it here, I had to open down here, and then hold it till I get it here. But this reduced it considerably. I also had a hand on the right side because this arm was off above the elbow, just a mechanical hand which did nothing. And so they put a hook on that side too, which made it much more convenient. I remember a few cases. I remember one young man of about seventeen or eighteen that lost both hands in Europe. He was from Kentucky. But I think I did more for that young man just by being with him, but he became an excellent user. And then there was another guy—he was in his twenties I think—he lost both legs and both arms, and he got out. He was from the south too. He wound up buying a farm and having that run for him. I don't know if you know the movie *Best Years of Our Lives*?

GR: No.

JS: That was made during the war, and it featured a fellow who lost both arms. That had a great impact on what we were doing too.

GR: Was that made in response or anticipation to the..?

JS: I don't know where it was made.

GR: I just wondered if it was something that the government thought was a positive thing to be doing as men were returning home.

JS: I think in those times, you know, the films they made had a purpose. Today they don't have a purpose as far as I'm concerned.

GR: But you did use that as a positive...

JS: Yeah, I thought that it was a very positive thing. I think we watched it several times. When my wife got pregnant, she had to quit work after a while. I mean, she didn't have

to, but she did. And then we were just living on my salary, and the salaries in those days, working for the government, were \$2,200 a year. But we only paid thirty-five dollars a month for rent too. Then when I left and got this job with the state, when I was in his office, he says, "What do you think you're worth an hour?" "Well," I said, "how would two fifty an hour be?" Well that was fine. That was enough for us to live on, forty dollars a week. That started me on the road to rehabilitation, not only the hospital, but also work with the children. Juliana has told you where we lived and how we lived. We finally wound up moving to the east side of town and building a four bedroom place on the east side of town, and then we had the money then. If you want to consider eighty-five hundred a big salary, but that's what we were getting.

GR: Did you like becoming the bread winner? Were you comfortable with that?

JS: Oh, I was comfortable with that. I mean, that was the norm in marriage in those days.

GR: Did it ever bother you that you felt that Juliana probably had more to offer than just being a mother? While that's a full-time job, did you see her doing more?

JS: If it hadn't been for Juliana, I wouldn't be sitting here today talking to you. We wouldn't have traveled to thirty-five countries, we wouldn't have worked in Korea.

GR: Tell me a little bit about why Korea?

JS: Why Korea?

GR: Why did you decide to leave the States?

JS: Even during our first years of marriage, we talked about doing foreign mission service. We went to the Foreign Board not only the Christian Reformed, but Reformed and Presbyterian, and there was nothing because I hadn't graduated from the seminary. This was going to be relief work, and in those days they didn't do relief work yet. But, it so

happened that about the eleventh year of working for the state, our director of world missions went to Korea, and he was supposed to have been met by some of the representatives that he had arranged with and they weren't there. He got in the airport, and a man from a Presbyterian Church who had a Christian Reformed connection happened to be there, and he says, "What are you looking for?" He told him, "Come with me, I'll take care of you." But during that visit they talked about the fact that there was a Presbyterian missionary down in Taejon who had lost his arm while working in China. He was now reaching seventy years old and they were looking for a replacement. And this world mission director said, "I know just the person." So when he got back he came and contacted us. That was in April, my wife was in the hospital with surgery, and he said, "They want you in Korea. They want you to meet the man who is in charge of Church World Service, overall in Korea. Meet you in Chicago," and he set up this appointment. I went to Juliana and said, "They want us now." And she says, "That's the last place in the world that I want to go." But we agreed to it. Then our daughter was twelve years old, the oldest one, and she says, "You take me to Korea, I'll hate you the rest of my life."

GR: The daughter said that?

JS: Yeah. And after she was there about three, four months she says, "I don't want to go back to Grand Rapids."

GR: What was it about the environment that your kids liked?

JS: They liked the fact of all the missionary kids. They didn't have any aunts or uncles or grandparents there, so these kids were the attraction. Plus, the mission had a building with a swimming pool in it and a bowling alley, and this is where the kids could go. In

the summer, all of them had cottages out on the China Sea, and we built one finally. All during the year they planned which musical they were going to present at the beach. And they'd pick key characters, and when we got to the beach, for a couple weeks before they put it on, they recruited all the kids. That was a great show, I mean these were great musicals, *The King and I*, and *My Fair Lady*, and... There was no power there, it was all done with lanterns. The only instrument they had was the piano—but what talent, you wouldn't believe.

GR: Did you feel a little bit more fulfilled in that position in Korea?

JS: That was the most successful eight years of my life.

GR: Why do you say that?

JS: Because it was totally supported by Christians around the world. There was no government intervention, no bureaucracy to deal with—I could do my own thing.

GR: And your job exactly was what?

JS: I took over the direction of that program that this missionary had started. But what he had was just sort of a handicapped community—they all lived right in the area. I said, "That's not rehabilitation." That's why we moved to Seoul. While in Taejon they had a workshop in metal, a workshop in wood, a workshop in weaving baskets, but all these people stayed right there. So when we got Seoul, we did away with all the workshops, built in connection with the Presbyterian hospital, and hired as many professional people as we could get. We had a couple of social workers, had one gal with both legs missing who had graduated from college, and made her recreation therapist. And one of the clients down in Taejon had the same amputations as I did, and he became the instructor in training of people.

GR: How were these people becoming disability cases for you? What had happened?

JS: A number of them got it during the war, through the mines, others were born with it like they were here. This girl with both legs off, one of the things she had, she got bit by a snake. It was all mud when we got there, all their houses were mud, they slept on the floor, and they lived in the same room. At one end there was a kitchen, which had a fire to cook with, and some of them got burned. And eventually we found leprosy colonies, and these people lose limbs because they have no sensations. I don't know how all these kids—we had a lot of kids—lost limbs. One, he was ten years old when we got there and that was the age of our son, and he just inherited our son's clothing. Through this mission for the churches we got money from all over the world. I turned down three hundred thousand dollars just from Germany alone because we couldn't use it. We didn't know what to do with it anymore. Well, through that money we were able to pay the tuition for a lot of kids in a Christian school, and then into college we paid their way, and several of them graduated as preachers. The ten-year-old boy graduated from England and Germany with a doctorate, and he became a professor in Australia for twenty years. He's now back in Korea teaching. He has started raising funds because he's been to Vietnam and seeing they needed an amputee program too. We've been back five or six times. Each time we have dinner with a bunch of these former clients. All of them are married, have kids in college—the success of that program is unreal.

GR: Did your wife take part in that program?

JS: Oh yeah.

GR: What was her role in that?

JS: The first couple of years in Taejon she worked in these vocational shops because there was a tailor shop in there and she helped with that. Then one of the boys, who now is about sixty years old, was an artist. She worked with him, and he became a leading man in designing artwork on cloth and eventually built himself a six-story apartment building and within the basement he had fifteen people working for him. So she did a lot of that. Then she taught in the local college there. She taught one man English who became my assistant, a very capable man. We still communicate with him by e-mail.

GR: Was that a good thing for Juliana, that new occupation in life?

JS: Well, when we got into Seoul she became acquainted with the women in the U.S. embassy because of her writing. Then she was an editor in the Korean-English newspaper in Seoul and established the column on her own called Thoughts of the Times, which is still running. When it started, she got different missionaries to react and put articles in it. It was the most popular thing in the newspaper because people loved the English of it. So she spent a lot of her time doing that on the outside when we got into Seoul. But that's the thing she enjoys.

GR: So you were happy that that sort of opportunity, not only for you, but also for Juliana, was there?

JS: The whole thing was great. Our kids going to that school...our son took up karate from a Korean, got his black belt—it's hanging on the picture up there. That was in the wintertime, then they were allowed to put some shoes on, otherwise they were always barefooted and no heat. That was a rough course, but he enjoyed it. And he was a good basketball player and a good swimmer. Going to the beach was just great for these kids

because they could learn tennis there, they had a swimming program, how to learn to swim, and that was a ball.

GR: Do you think the children ever missed anything about America?

JS: No.

GR: Why is that?

JS: It's just a different life altogether and they develop friendships that are still existing. Our daughter sponsored a reunion at Camp Geneva here and 125 kids came there on a weekend. And I don't think they slept. She still has correspondence with a number of these kids.

GR: Are you in some ways thankful that the children didn't have to go through some of the stresses of the 60s and 70s that other American kids were dealing with?

JS: We got back here in '66 and it was still bad. Plus the fact...I don't know if you've ever read these things, but the Army has done studies on these kids that go overseas with their parents, and if they spend two years in a different country they come back and it's a difficult adjustment. Well, our kids were there for eight years, and it's rough getting back. Totally different.

GR: What sorts of things did the family have to deal with?

JS: They have to establish friendships in the schools. If they say something about Korea then they get ribbed on this, harassed about it—"this is the way we lived over there," and "why don't you just shut up." It's a lot of this sort of thing, you know. But, after a while, there are certain ones that accept this, like it does in any school today whether you've been overseas or not. It's like in town here, there is a Center for Independent Living which is sponsored by the government to help people. Well, they're going to the

churches now saying, “We want to know how you feel about disabled people.” I met with one of the pastors in the United Methodist Church on that committee, and I said, “Who’s not disabled in that congregation? They’ve all got hang-ups, so what’s the difference? Maybe I should have stayed out of church until they called me.” (laughs) But I know that there are prejudices against people with obvious disabilities, I know that. That’s their problem, not mine. Do they want to shake hands with me? If they don’t, well that’s their business.

GR: Do you offer some sort of assistance to a lot of people that maybe are faced with that situation?

JS: Oh sure, in church, you know. At first they just say good morning. Now I come in and I reach out and shake hands.

GR: So your community involvement, even with your disability, it’s more you seeing yourself as a kind of an ambassador to help ease those...?

JS: No. I do all the shopping for this house. My wife goes into the supermarket maybe once a year. She doesn’t go to the post office, I get her art stuff for her. I’ve no problem with that. With all these checkout people...the one gal, if I put out my wallet and put it on the counter here, she just reaches in and takes the money out. (laughs)

GR: So you have an established relationship with people in Holland where you like to go?

JS: In Korea too, we established the Christian Reformed Servicemen’s home there. A young Calvinist organization would send us the kids that were in here and then we would go out and get them, which we considered it our tithe really. We’d have ten, fifteen guys sometimes on weekends. We had a male cook who was just unbelievable. You could call him up and say, “We got about six more kids.” “Okay.” That way we got a lot of

food too, so you didn't bring it in from the PXs. I'd drive him around, you know, show him the city. All these people, you know, when I'd come back to the car, here they'd all be standing waiting for me to get in and take off again. (laughs)

GR: Since retirement, where you've kind of slowed down a little bit with your occupational desires, have you and Juliana become closer? Or are you just still just like you always have been?

JS: Since we've been retired we've been asked to go back to Korea for a year on a volunteer basis. We spent a year helping China get some idea of how to organize a handicapped program through an agency in California. And we've been into Mississippi where the Christian Reformed World Relief Committee was for a while. There's a workshop down there for mentally and physically disabled persons. Spent time down there.

GR: So you haven't slowed down at all?

JS: We have in the last several years because we joined HASP. And that's one of the great programs too.

GR: Are you still actively involved locally with people?

JS: No, with the CIL person now, I don't agree with their philosophy of rehabilitation. I stop and see the woman who's the executive secretary for the human relations of the city of Holland.

[End of side one]

GR: New building, you mean the library at Hope College?

JS: Yeah, they had to put it into Haworth. That's the law now. You've got to put these handles in that. Evergreen Commons just had round doorknobs too. I got them to switch them in the old building, but when they built the new they had to put them in that

building. So they changed the doorknobs. And this is convenient for me, but it's convenient for anybody. Secretaries, they can just carry anything—just bump those things. Europe has had them all the time. I can't get the Post Office to change anything. For three years we've been fussing. Those doors don't work easily. You got to hit that button there and half the time they aren't working. I've complained about them, I've had human relations go over there. And here you've got a government building and they don't change it. Juliana has written stories about our relationship because she publishes through the Hope Academy publication. While we were in Korea she did a lot of articles for the Banner and for other papers, and then the newspapers in Korea. So we've had a good life. Good productive life.

GR: Is there anything you wanted to add about your life with Juliana and raising children and helping the war veterans?

JS: No. I think during the war for my mother it was a problem because her husband died in '40 and the war started in '41. I had four brothers, two just about my age, and then I had one younger who wasn't old enough for it. They were allowed to continue the business up to a point, and then they were both called in. The oldest brother who was working for a banana company in Grand Rapids came and took over. But my mother ran it very well. Three weeks after my accident, an older brother got hit by a car and he was in a cast. Had a girlfriend in Wisconsin, because we came out of Wisconsin when we were younger, had uncles and aunts there. My dad drove him, and on the way home my brother said he drove like a madman. He got home, and he was dead three o'clock the next morning. Then about four months later, this brother had a motorcycle and the break rod snapped on it and he flew up in the air and landed his head on the cement. He was in

a coma for eight weeks. He was never the same again, but he did get married and have several kids. But all this happened in six months. And my mother adjusted to it all.

GR: Did you ever feel a little disappointed that, for instance two brothers had gone in which is typically what's expected of a family, two brothers. You never had any wants to be there or to help out or?

JS: Who, me? You mean in the war?

GR: Yeah. Did you ever feel that somehow had things been different you would have gone?

JS: Would have gone? I'd had to go. I had to go get examined, I had to apply and register— same way with that brother. But neither of us had to go. When I figure what that sawdust business did for the war too, you know, and the compounds...but that business was a blessing to me for going to college because we could get all the gas we needed for the trucks. The tickets, you had to have tickets. You get three gallons if you had a car ticket, and only five if you had a truck ticket. So my mother just gave us tickets. So I always had gas to go...

GR: You were in the hospitals and the GIs were coming back. Did any of them assume that you were like them, had inherited it from the war?

JS: Well, there was one guy that knew in college. I don't know if you know Henry VanderLinde?

GR: Oh yeah.

JS: His brother. Walking in the hall one day and we saw Len. He's got an arm missing. He says, "John, when I saw that arm missing I thought of you, and if he can do it I can do it too." He became a psychologist. And that guy could type sixty words a minute. By his hook and his hand. But he became an alcoholic later in life, his wife divorced him. He

died, I don't know, some years ago. But I can remember him coming into the hallway saying that. I'm sure that was true of a lot of them in there. I think one of the things that is the most impressive on people, is you behave normally in society, that you accept the situation. And that I can give credit to Juliana and to my mother because there was never a problem with it. And that's a real blessing. I wouldn't have gone to college either. I'm glad too that we went to Percy Jones Hospital because that sent me off on a different course altogether, rather than going to seminary. I was accepted for the seminary. Some of the professors had a hard time with that, you know. How can you serve communion when you can't break the bread? (laughs) It's the same way in the church I belonged to all my life up until we moved to the east side. They never put me up for deacon. Why? Because they didn't think I could handle the plates. That's the job of the deacons, so I was put up for elder. (laughs)

GR: Since then have you served communion?

JS: No, I wasn't put up for elder either. Which didn't bother me. I taught Young Men's Society. I was the chairman of the Young Calvinist Federation of Grand Rapids for a couple years. In Korea there was no problem among the missionaries either. We were in a position, working for Church World Service. It meant that we had to change house every year because we didn't live on a compound then with the rest of them. But we got acquainted with all of them because I served some of their people, even the Army too—there was a lot of Army work. And not only Protestant but Catholics as well. We've got a couple of good Catholic friends. Couple priests. In March we went into Georgia and Tennessee and North Carolina and Virginia and visited a whole bunch of the southern Presbyterian missionaries who are retired now. Every three years there's a reunion, and

it's always down south because all the missionaries came from the south. At the last one, two years ago, there was three hundred retired missionaries there. All different faiths.

GR: One common purpose.

JS: Right. A Methodist will take it for one year and a Presbyterian the next time, Canadians the next time. But we have a good time together. And I think it was just great for our kids because they've got friends in different parts of the country.

GR: And the world.

JS: Well not so the much the world. They didn't mix much with the Koreans because they didn't go to that school. There were only fifty kids in high school when we were there. Now that school has a thousand students, and I would say eighty to ninety percent are Asians. There's another one run by another missionary that has eight hundred. And then there's another one set up by Great Britain and they have a big flock. A lot of foreigners over there. But we wouldn't care to live in Korea now. We've been back a number of times. Just imagine, the city of Seoul is about the size of Grand Rapids and it has fifteen million people. You walk down the street and you just bump each other.

GR: So you re-acclimated to America, later on, and liked it?

JS: We have a number of friends there, and they are the most generous people in the world. Last time we were there in '97, went for a wedding of one of the daughters of one of our patients. We went with two thousand dollars and came home with four. And all expenses paid. One of our social workers lives in California, and she sends Juliana clothes all the time. We can go there and they entertain us in royal fashion.

[End of interview]