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Lambers, Katherine Oral History Interview: Polio Survivors in Holland

Matthew Nickel

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Oral History Project 2003
Joint Archives of Holland
Polio

Interviewee:
Katherine Lambers
(edited)

Conducted by:
Matthew Nickel
1 July 2003

2003 Oral History Interview: Polio
Interview with Katherine Lambers
Interviewer: Matthew Nickel
1 July 2003
(edited)

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MN: Could I ask you where you grew up? Did you grow up in Holland?

KL: No, Grand Rapids, Michigan. Are you from the Holland area?

MN: I am not, I am originally from the Detroit area, but I went to school at Hope and am now in Holland. You said that you had gone to the orthopedic school instead of the public school...

KL: Yes. I came down with polio in 1938, it was the very beginning part of the polio situation and there had been warnings in the paper the night before and I had gone to spend the night with a girlfriend in Comstock park which was 10 miles away. In the morning I got up and I did not feel well. And I couldn't bend my neck and I was just sick. So the mother called my father to come and get me. So he came and got me and literally carried me to the car, which was the good thing because I could have had paralysis if I had put my weight on my feet and legs. So I got home and I was put to bed right away and my mother called the doctor right away. It was on a Saturday because she had read the symptoms in the paper the night before. They had just started to put those things in the paper. So he came to the house, which is unusual in this day and age, they don't do that anymore. He came and examined me with my legs and my neck and so on. He said, she needs to go to the hospital for tests and for a spinal tap. So my father took me there with my mother and I was there about ten days. It took a while for them to come to a conclusion of course, the spinal tap really proved it. So as a result our house was

quarantined. The man's car was quarantined, all the neighbor kids that I played with, we lived on a corner and so there were two roads into each other and so all the kids on the neighborhood could only go and sit on the curb. They could not play together so they would toss balls back and forth after I got out of the hospital. In those days it was just a scary thing. They figured that I might have gotten it at a lake. It was called Bostwick Lake north of Grand Rapids where my dad took all of us, a truckload of kids every night, whoever could be at our house by five or five-thirty at night could go along. So we all went swimming. It was a nightly thing. They said the lake was definitely the source of where I got it so they shut down the lake for the rest of the summer, and so it was, I was in the hospital two weeks. Then I came home. I was in contact with the orthopedic hospital in Grand Rapids which was Butterworth at the time which is now part of spectrum. I had special shoes made. I was only home a little bit and I came down with this fever from what, who knows, but anyway, I had to go back in the hospital. I was back in there two weeks again to try and find out what it came from or what it was called. It was a very rare thing, it was called a glandular fever. It was very rare at the time. I don't know if it is anymore or not. But anyway, once we found out what it was then, it was after that, I went home of course and then after that I started limping. So my mother called the doctor. I went to see him out at the orthopedic hospital and they measured my legs. It affected my left arm and right leg, but the difference that made me limp was that it was getting smaller above my knee.

MN: So the muscle was...?

KL: It must have been the muscle. So I had to go back home and go to bed. I was only allowed up an hour and a half a day. But not all at one time. I said “Well, I can be up an hour and a half then.” The doctor said no, one half hour three times a day, otherwise I had to stay right in bed. So I could not go to school. This happened in the summer so the next year I could not go to school so I was in the fourth grade at the time, I was going to Catholic school at the time, and so our class would come up at noon and knock on the window, my dad had a big chair there for me that he would carry me out to window where I could wave and talk through the window to all the kids, which was really a treat. So in the winter, I had a very loving father and mother, it is the same old stuffed chair, went out on a little small porch in the sun, in the morning, no matter how cold it was, or whatever, he would bundle me all up and my mother would get snow pants and jacket and mittens and blankets and oh everything. So I would sit out there and I could sit in the sun.

MN: Oh wow.

KL: He wanted me to sit in the sun. So after that winter I could go to school the following year. I am trying to think if it was, yes, it would have been the following year because they had brought a taxi to our house to pick me up for school. A regular taxi.

MN: So you didn't have to walk to school?

KL: Or even my folks didn't take me. They supplied they taxi, the school. So I went there for like the first term like from September till December or January. Then they brought me home every night and that went on every day during the school

year. But at school while the weather was good, there was a lot of children that had it a lot worse than I had. It wasn't just for polio patients. It was for heart, lung problems or asthma or whatever. So when we played ball, a lot of the kids could not run, but I could. So they would bat the ball and I would run the bases. It was really neat, I have got some pictures, I meant to get them but I couldn't remember which album they were in.

MN: So you switched from going to the Catholic school to the orthopedic school?

KL: Yes. I could not go back to the Catholic school then. But then the following, like in January then I could go back but they had like grade one, and grade one and a half or whatever. They went by half grades and the Catholic school didn't have that so then I lost that six months plus the year before, so I was 19 when I graduated from high school. But I was very fortunate because after that people were inoculated for polio and then of course our children which has nothing to do with this. But they had the sugar cubes...

MN: Right.

KL: And so our boys, when they were small, they took the sugar cubes in school they were giving them out in school, and then our daughter, she must have had them too. They would have had them, she came along a few years later. But I was fortunate. I knew a lot of children that had it really bad. Terribly paralyzed. I was terribly fortunate. Then when I was in high school I worked in Mary Freebed, which would be the northeast of Grand Rapids. They still have Mary Freebed but now it is a new beautiful facility. Back then it was like a converted old house. So I worked there after school. I could take a bus after I got out of school everyday.

On Saturdays I worked in the kitchen so I had to be there at like six o'clock in the morning. So I had to get up early. When I was in my freshman year I went up there and worked through that summer because I couldn't do it when I went to school. I also helped in the children's ward, actually it was for children, but it was a dormitory. It was like a room with ten beds in it, you know like they used to have in all hospitals. You used to go to the hospital and you could very easily be in a room with ten people. So the children were there and so many children came in that had had polio and then they would put these immensely hot packs on their legs because their legs were paralyzed. It would be so hot that they would just cry. To relieve the muscles. That was quite an experience for me. I saw a lot of children, some children, one little girl had syphilis so bad. She was brought in and as soon as they found out she was affected again she would have to be put into a room by herself because it is very catching. But it is quite an experience when I was in high school. But that one little girl, particularly I can still see her face, she was just the sweetest little thing. I actually saw her able to walk out with braces on her legs. And shoe, the shoes were attached to the braces, and when she came in she could not move at all. She could not move at all, but they put those hot packs on and I don't remember, it had to have been twice a day. Really hot, I mean steaming hot. But it is good for you. It is not good to have people like that, but it was good for people to see other ones like that, then you are fortunate, you realize that it could have been you. But the onset, so to speak, the big onset of polio came after that, because I was in the beginning of it.

MN: What hospital were you treated at?

KL: St. Mary's. In the beginning St. Mary's.

MN: Do you have any recollection what it was like being there? Could you describe the hospital room?

KL: Yes, when I went for the spinal tap, it was just a small room and I was scared to death because I was only in the fourth grade, very kind. Very concerned people, nurses and so on. I had to have a blood transfusion and this post with the blood on it and I didn't know what they were going to do. And I didn't know what they were going to do. When I realized that they were not going to do anything to hurt me, it is just scary when I have never been in the hospital before. It had been very good, and even my other visit there was good, when I had the fever. That eventually went away, I don't know why I had it. I don't know why my leg got smaller up here because I was not a rowdy person. I mean you'd play outside and everything but not do anything to hurt yourself so I don't know why that— actually they said that if my dad had let me walk from the house to the truck to bring me home then I could have been paralyzed in my legs. It was really strange at the time. But they didn't know enough about it. Fortunately he carried me. After that there were a lot of, what I want to say is that once it started there were more and more cases and more and more paralysis. Lot of paralysis. Most people did not come out like I did. A lot of people were in iron lungs. I think it was more women than men in iron lungs but I could be wrong on that. Then they would be affected by a respiratory problem where it was just impossible for them to breathe on their own, and it was polio and they never got out of it. They never got out of the iron lung.

MN: What impression did the iron lung give you when you saw it?

KL: Scary. I thought that was what I was going to have to get in, but I never had to have that. But for any young person, it also affected older people. In all the years that I had to work in a hardware store, I just quit about year and a half ago, but there was a neighbor lady who had been in an iron lung ever since she was a young girl and she died not too long ago. Probably a couple of years ago. Three years ago maybe. But that whole time couldn't—she had a mirror that she could see behind her and she could see herself and she could not move anything, so she had to be fed and taken care of completely. It was really bad, and awful lot of paralysis with children with their legs.

MN: Your first stay in the hospital, were you put in a bed in a ward where there were other children?

KL: No. Isolation.

MN: Isolation?

KL: Right away.

MN: So individuals were isolated in the hospital?

KL: Yes. As far as I know, I only saw my room, because I was too young to realize what a hospital was actually. No, I was in isolation until it was confirmed, even then till I went home, then I was isolated to my house.

MN: What was the quarantine about? Could you tell me about the quarantine?

KL: The quarantine was that you could not be around anyone but family members. Fortunately it was in the summer where my sisters and my brother weren't in school. Of course by the time school started it was okay for them to go. I think

that for the majority of that summer the whole neighborhood was quarantined. The man's car was quarantined that took us to the hospital. It was strange, you couldn't be around other people. You just had to stay away. It was just like quarantine for measles or chicken pox years ago or whooping cough, or any of that, scarlet fever. My sister had scarlet fever. My sister had scarlet fever and we were all quarantined. My father and my brother and my old sister all had to leave the house and live somewhere else until it was over. My younger sister had it, so until she was completely better we were all quarantined. We couldn't go out and my dad would bring us groceries by the back yard. My friends at school would bring me my homework and leave it on the step. When I went back to school they were giving out, the principle was giving out the report cards when we went back. It was probably for about six weeks. And he said your marks were better staying at home than staying in school. I was not a bad student, but still, what else can you do but homework when you are stuck in the house.

MN: What did you do around the house when you were quarantined?

KL: Nothing. I couldn't do anything, I have to be in bed for long periods of time. For at least, oh, thought the summer, I got the polio in summer, in August. And for the rest of the summer and all of that school year, until I was able to go to school later I could not do anything. I had to either be in bed, especially after my leg showed that it was getting shorter, then that was when I had to stay in bed all the time except for an hour and a half a day. So no I didn't, I could not do anything. My dad would pick me up and carry me in the kitchen and show me the soup he was making for supper. And he made everything sound wonderful. He'd just put some

boiling beef and put it in water with a little, but he always had the sound effects. “Hmmm, oh that is good!” “It takes a little of this.” I don’t think he would even shook the salt in the pan. He was holding me and by the time the soup was ready, I was hungry for it, I could have ate everything. But he had a real knack of, a real loving, kind person.

MN: Did your dad help out a lot while you were...?

KL: Yes, he did. He was always a big help at home with my mother. He just, at the time because it was so new, to have polio was a tragedy. People didn’t know enough about it, everyone was afraid of it, but they did shut down the lake for the rest of the summer. But they told me at the time that August through all that period of the polio epidemic and everything, they told me never to go swimming during the month of August. That was the worst time when you could possible catch polio from a lake. It was in August. Even to this day, I have not been in water in August.

MN: So you still have a hard time going swimming in August?

KL: I have not been swimming for years, but when I was younger when the kids were growing up.

MN: Did you ever have a difficult time letting your children swim in August. I always warned them. I know you can’t always control them, but up until they were probably 10 years old, 12 years old, because my husband used to take me swimming at White Birch Park which is north of town, and then we would take all the neighbor kids out. It was like someone dug a pit and it turned into a lake and it wasn’t very deep. In fact a boy jumped off of the diving board one time and went

head first in and broke his neck. We are very careful because it got deep fast, so I usually went with my girlfriend when we had boys, our boys age at the time, and Ian was really small. Boy we watched those kids. You kind of get over the fear of it and then polio kind of faded away. It was more my mental feeling about all of this than the danger of a probably, whether they were right or wrong, who knows. Who is to say that it came from the lake but that is where I had been. That is where they figured that it came from.

MN: Were there any kinds of precautions your mother and father took?

KL: Cleanliness, extra cleanliness. Washing your hands all the time and I had my own dishes. In those days you scalded everything. Bedding washed separately, and all that kind of thing. My mother was meticulous housekeeper. It wasn't that she had any harder work to do than what she normally did, except more precaution with the family as far as washing your hands and some things like that. I could associate, I could sit at the table to eat, I just could not get on my feet. So, it was a time, unfortunately for my siblings, I was treated special, and I think they, my brother especially, he was 13 months older than I was, I think he resented it. But it was not that I was treated so much, it was just, like dad carrying me around and my mother and dad gave up their bedroom because we only had one bedroom downstairs so I would not have to be upstairs by myself all the time. So I could have it till later that year when I could change and go upstairs with them and the kids. There was a period of maybe two or three months or four months and all of a sudden you just kind of go back to the same old routine which is okay.

MN: Were your brothers and sisters allowed to be near you or talk to you?

KL: Yes. The contagion part was over, and I think that would not have been much more than two or three weeks. When was the house quarantined then. I would have had to have been more than that, it would have had to been more than that, it would have had to been six weeks I think. Everybody was quarantined for six weeks. It would have been at least that long. Once that was over, then in the winter, the fall when everybody else was back at school, that is when dad would carry me out to the front porch. It was kind of an experience. A few years ago, probably ten, I don't know what it was that I got, I thought maybe it was, because they talked about some of the polio symptoms coming back as you get older, you know, well I have been a senior citizen for a while, but it was before that. That is when I was working and in fact my daughter was, was she in high school or out of it? I think she was out of school, she is 38 now. She graduated when she was 18. So it was 15 years ago or more. But anyway, I had this funny thing come over me, it was something that had gotten a hold of me, which I didn't know what it was and it seemed like it started in my head and started to move through my body, and I could not bend over to put my stockings on to go to work. My daughter had to do that, and my husband would comb my hair and I could not raise my arms up or down, I would hurt everywhere. I went to doctors. And I had gone into emergency and the first doctor said it was rheumatoid arthritis. The different times after it went over, my head hurt. I had a headache for at least three or four months. Because I was having allergy problems and asthma problems and I had to be taken into emergency for that and then I would tell them about it and I asked what they thought it was, because then they put me on shots and everything and I was

not happy with the treatment, but where else to you go if you don't know. Then when I would have to go into the hospital for the asthma and allergy thing they would say, didn't he recommend this or didn't he suggest that? He says it could have easily have been at least, and he named about five things it could have been. But no, he never did. He says that wasn't, now I have a lot of arthritis but I never had rheumatoid arthritis, but I don't know what it was, I never knew what it was. I thought later, and my family did too, wondered if all those symptoms of polio were coming back to me. I didn't last forever, but it sure was awful. I didn't know what it was, I just hurt everywhere. It started in my head and I could feel it. It was strange, it was just like I was being washed with what ever this was. I could not put arms up, move them or my back or my legs. I could hardly walk. I did go to work every day. I worked in an office. I never knew what it was, but I often wondered, because they were talking at the time, they were talking about people whose symptoms were coming back to them and being affected in almost in the same way as they were when they got polio. And I have also suspected it, I have always expected it, but the doctors said no, that was not it. So I guess I was more afraid that it was, it was hard to accept their reasons because no one could come up with, having not gone to different doctors when it was happening, they could not really tell either, and I had no tests. I just had a bunch of cortisone shots, but it never helped. It was something that had to wear out. Once it gradually got through I mean from head to toe. I had to have help getting dressed. I just could not do anything. It was really strange. So I never really knew, but I still think that it might have been, but I am not a doctor, and of course the progress of everything

just zooms so at that time, they could pinpoint things easier. When you are going through that, you still have your doubts. So whether it was or not, I don't know. But a few years ago they had quite a thing on TV and on radio, articles who were getting back into their system, their situation that they had when the first came down with it. Because a lot of people, I remember reading where people were put back in wheelchairs because they could not move their legs. I suspected and it might have been something although I didn't have it then, so I actually felt worse then when this happened to me than I did when I actually got polio. So that is kind of my story.

MN: Could you tell me more about, like how long were you at the orthopedic school. I am trying to think.

KL: I did not go to school that year, starting in September I didn't go, so it would have been the next year because I know I did not start in the winter because I was out of school for quite a while. Then I started in September which would have been a year and a half after that. That was where my schooling was, it was at the orthopedic school. But it was not there for a whole year. I was there like for a term, like September to January.

MN: So only one term?

KL: And the school is still there in Grand Rapids. My husband and I looked it up one time just to see, just to bring back memories. It was still open, and I don't know if they still use it for that, probably not. But I had to limit my activities for a while, but once I got into school then I could run bases for all the kids. That was fun, I was a fast runner, and they were good hitters, which I was not.

MN: How were the schools different, the orthopedic school and the catholic one?

KL: I think they were different as in the subjects maybe were slowed down, the periods of classes were slowed down, you had rest times, rest periods in the morning and the afternoon. Just being more careful and slowed down. It just was not that steady pace of one class after another. I am sure they were one thing after another, but to tell you how extensive they were. But when I went back to the catholic school, then I couldn't go back in till say like 5-1 or 5-2, they didn't grade that way. So then I lost that year that I had been to the orthopedic school and I had to take that grade over. So that would have been the fifth grade.

MN: Were there any extra kinds of treatments at the orthopedic school?

KL: No, more of, I imagine that there would have been for children that were worse off than I was. There may have been, but for me I never even had it, because I was not effected as bad. I remember in one particular case, there was a boy my age. He was there because of his heart. He was the one particularly that I ran bases for, because he could not do that. I think it is just an intermediate period in their live and our lives when we went to a specialized school. I don't ever remember, I barely remember teachers, I don't remember any kind of a doctor being there. We must have had some kind of medical staff. Or at least a Registered Nurse or something in case of a problem. It was just to take a timeout. Kind of go to school, but take time out. I might be slower because I was still resting at home. I could not just start doing everything, things slowed down, and then when my leg, when I started limping. [End Side 1]

MN: What were the special shoes like?

KL: They were like, you have the regular heel, but then part of it about half way would come out like this, it was like this, and then square here, but you always had that one spot that was longer. And then whenever, I had to have regular checkups to make sure that they were right and I remember walking up and down the hall and having the doctor, he wanted to see how I was walking. I had to wear those until I was not limping anymore, and for sure that part of it was over, so I do remember the shoes. But the Infantile Paralysis Organization paid for them. And they also offered to pay for all of my college if I were to go, which was dumb of me never to take them up on it. They would have paid for everything. I could go to school for as long as I wanted to and everything, but my parents, neither of them had been to college, and I never got encouragement to go. All I could think of was getting out of school and getting a job so I could buy myself some clothes. You know how that is. [Laughter] But I should of, I should have. And they inquired every year for several years if I didn't want to go, and unfortunately I said no. I should have said yes. But there were a lot of things out there to help. People who had polio, or parents helped for finances. They paid for my hospital stays when I went. The office calls at Butterworth Hospital out there. They took care of everything, didn't cost my folks anything.

MN: Do you remember there being any kind of fundraiser activities or charitable events about polio?

KL: No. All I remember is that they had articles in the paper. And to watch out for this or that. I think they probably did as polio really took a hold on people. But fundraisers, I never remembered the fundraisers. Even later on I don't remember

any. It was more giving help to the patient or the families, and then financially. It was a different situation.

MN: When you were at home, how often did the doctor come to see you, come to check up on you? Did he continue or was it just initially?

KL: This is the way I think was, it was an awful long time ago. Once it was diagnosed from then on I would see a doctor out at Butterworth, I had regular check-ups scheduled checkups and then the doctor would say "Okay let me see you walk around." And then they would move your arms and the usual physicals, to make sure that I was not going backwards, or that I would have anything more severe. But they did, I had to go there but I can't remember for how long I did that. I think once I was back to my regular school. I would have had those shoes for quite a while. I remember those shoes, those special shoes and they had to be ordered and made special. It isn't that you would just go out there and say "Well here is a pair of shoes for you." They had to measure your feet and see how you were walking. Probably it would, it made a difference then, to offset to where they would have them, you know, it did, the change in my legs didn't stop in time, it didn't quit. Then by being off of it, I was able to walk without limping. So it was just a time thing as I think back. But nobody else in the family got it. And no one that I knew from any of the kids in the neighborhood, they were just so mad that they had to sit on the curb. Couldn't play ball, but they would play catch back and forth.

MN: What about in the community, do you remember people talking? Was polio a big topic of discussion?

KL: Yes it was. There were more articles in the paper and so on. The doctor that I had, his name was Dr. Tscean (sp). It was probably three or four years ago that he passed away but he ended up being the physical physician for some school's sport teams. I remember how nice he was. My folks liked him, for diagnosing it so quickly and I was his first polio patient.

MN: Really?

KL: Yes, he was a young doctor. I think he was fresh out of school, when I think about it. But he hit it right on the nail, right on the head.

MN: Could you describe him? What was he like?

KL: Very concerned, very definite. I think he had an idea right away. Of course my mother told him what symptoms I had and he checked me all over, trying to bend my legs I remember laying on my back and I had to touch my chin to my chest and I could not do that. That was one of the sure signs. There was something else with my legs too but I don't remember what that could have been. He was at the house for a while and then he talked to my mother and dad out in the kitchen. I remember them walking out of there. He wanted to do a spinal tap, and that had to be done in the hospital. My dad could not take me, I had to lay down, not sit up, and our neighbor had a car. My father only had a truck because he was, that was his business, it had to do with the truck, so I could not lay down in it.

MN: Do you remember people talking, neighbors ever talking about polio?

KL: I am sure they did, all the kids were quarantined. So they would have had to. We lived on a corner, there was a shorter street here and a longer street this way. As far as where the kids lived, the long street was probably a good half of it or more

then. There were kids on both side the streets all of the way down, because nobody could play with each other. They had to stay put because I had played with all of them. Our front yard and the street corner was the focal point of all the kids because it was big enough to play ball in the street and boys would pop out the street lights with green grapes and [laughter] play hide and seek, kick the can, and just fun kids stuff. It was real important part of my life. It was a real happy time in life because I had good parents.

MN: How did the nature of your activities change, did it at all from before to after polio polio?

KL: I think you were more aware of what you were doing and more careful about what you were doing. I don't know how with that type of illness, but you were just more aware of it. My folks and even my two sisters and my brother forgot that I had it. I think my brother at his age now can probably forgive me. We were very close in age. He always made me aware of the fact that he was the older one, so I had to do what he said. Brother sister thing you know? I had an older sister and then my younger sister, she is seven years younger than I am. For all of us, I think all of our childhood memories came from that house. It seemed like that was the most impressive time of our lives. It was different.

MN: What about chores, did your chores, how did your role in the family change?

KL: It didn't really, of course during that period if couldn't do anything, I couldn't do anything. With my mother, we all had to help with stuff we had our rooms to clean, being that there were six of us in the family, and then later on my grandfather lived with us, my uncle lived with us, my mother took in a border. I

don't know how we all slept in that house. I absolutely don't know. So there was a lot of cooking. During the summertime all of us four kids plus all the neighbor kids and about another, at least four or five of them, we'd sit around the kitchen table in the summer. My dad would come home with a bushel of peaches, a bushel of pears, a bushel of tomatoes, a bushel of corn, whatever, and we could not go out until all this fruit, a bushel at a time of course, was all skinned, and cleaned and ready for my mother and dad to go to the next step. If we didn't have enough pairing knives, he would send one of the kids to the dime store to pick up a pairing knife for a nickel so we all had a knife. So that was our summer thing, that was one thing we had to do. And when that was done, why then when swimming time came everybody could go swimming. I learned to, my mother taught me to iron at a very young age. We all took part in preparing meals after a certain age. Doing dishes, whoever helped picking up the dishes also had to sweep the floor after we ate, and the other two of us would help in doing the dishes. That is the way it was.

MN: Did polio affect your education, other than what you told me?

KL: No. Because once you get back in the regular school system you are picked up really quick and you pick up what you might have lost. I don't remember losing anything, because when I was home I still had to do my homework. You don't get out of those things. I really don't think it did. I just regret not having gone to college when I had the opportunity. But it was not pushed in my family. I think if I had had a little encouragement, then, I think you get more encouragement if your parents had gone to college. But there was no money in those days. It was

during the depression that was going on, and everybody was poor. Everybody was that way, nobody had any money. So, it was always a struggle but nobody when hungry. I had a good life, I had parents.

MN: So what brought you to Holland?

KL: I met my husband. I had a group of girls I went with, and he had a bunch of fellas. He lived in Holland, but there was a meeting place out between here and Grand Haven where everyone could go out and go dancing and stuff. So all of my girlfriends, there were probably five of us. We would go to this place and then, Jim and his buddies would go there and that is where we met. One of the fellas and one of my girlfriends actually ended up getting married a year before we did. It was really something, two out of that bunch ended up getting married. We will be happily married 50 years in August.

MN: Oh, wow, congratulations!

KL: I was 29. You wonder where did that time go? Time goes fast, so, it just kind of hit us with a lead balloon when we realized that this year would be fifty.

MN: Oh my gosh! That's great!

KL: It is cool. It is very cool. I think it is. I moved to Holland when we got married, lived out on Graafscaap road, in an old farm house. It was so cold, in the floors you could see through to the basement and I was freezing to death, and so we got an apartment on 21st street. And upstairs apartment. Actually we lived downstairs first, but then we moved upstairs because he wanted to rent the downstairs unit. It wasn't the owner but I can't remember who that was. By then of course we had Jim. He's 49, or will be, he will be 49 in August. And two months after we got

married I got pregnant. So that's fine, then Steve was born two and a half years later, and then our oldest son and my daughter are ten years apart. I had my girl. So I've had a good life. [Discussion of current family life removed from transcript but remains on tape]

MN: I have another question about polio. You mentioned earlier about the lake, that you couldn't swim. Do you remember other precautions in the community like that? Other than lakes being closed down?

KL: I don't, I was only nine. I am positive that they must have, at that point, put an alert out as far as one more patient or a patient. I was my doctor's first patient, so it was a beginning. I am positive they were on the look out, and there must have been more articles in the paper about it warning people that there was a case and maybe there were more by then. I don't know, I am just talking from one doctor's experience. But anyway, he recognized it right away. What it was. And the few tests that he did at home were enough to persuade him that I needed a spinal tap.

MN: Did polio affect you socially at all?

KL: No, because it happened in the summer. I think if I would have had it in the school year, that might have made a difference, and as a result I was still behind all the kids that I had gone to school and that was all through high school. I was 19 when I graduated. My birthday is in December so I would have been held back to begin with. They did that way back then too. And then losing the amount of school that it was, losing a full grade of school because I couldn't pick up on that half year. They would not allow it in the catholic school.

MN: You didn't ever have any, you weren't ever made fun of or anything like that for polio?

KL: No. I always got along good with all my schoolmates, and they were all glad to see me come back. Even though their next grade, and we still did things together. No, never made fun of. I don't think it was hard on my two sisters, but it was more hard on my brother.

MN: What effect do you think polio had on the family dynamic?

KL: I think, just the fact that no other people had polio, and they were aware of it. You get over those feelings and your life gets back to normal. I know my sisters never forgot about it. I don't think it really, I think it was just a period of time when things changed in the house. I know it shouldn't have been, but it happened. It wasn't anybody's fault but at Christmas I had packages like this and the other kids only had one or two. That didn't set good with me, even at that age. But it was aunts and uncles and cousins and friends and neighbors and you know, because my folks never treated me better than the other children. They would never ever do that. There were some things they had to do for me like carrying me around, but I could have just as much fun sitting in the chair listening to the radio, in those days there was not TV. And we would play games sitting in the living room, all of us. We always had fun at the table. My dad always made sure, my mother was more quiet, she was a good teacher. But it is just that something happened in the family, like if it were today if somebody got muscular dystrophy or something, that one person is going to be more special, because it has to be. There is no way out for a period of time, but once you are better, you are the same as anybody

else. I knew that, and I never took advantage of anything like that. Everything in our house went right back to normal. But I wasn't a trouble maker ever in any part of my schooling. I never got into anything.

MN: After you had gotten over the limp, without the shoe, did you ever have any other physical limitations or difficulties?

KL: No. Not during my lifetime at home?

MN: You weren't told there were certain things you couldn't do because of polio?

KL: No, I think the one warning was don't go swimming in August and to watch for symptoms. You were always on your guard for a period of years, because I had to go periodically out to Butterworth. That went on for a number of years, at least until probably four years because when I was in high school I didn't have to go out there. When I got to high school my mother got TB. That's when we were younger, because she took care of a sister who died of TB, and as a result she had to have her yearly chest x-rays, and when she would go they would come and pick her up and say her you go, come out with us right now, every year. But it was, I think those were hard years for my folks.

MN: Well, is there anything that I have missed, anything about your experience with polio that I have not asked about?

KL: It was just, like I say, I was so much more fortunate than other children were. It wasn't a big deal for me. There were things I could not do, couldn't go, things like that. Once, all of that part was over, I wasn't really affected again. Working in the orthopedic hospital, helped me keep aware of what I had. You forget that you had those things. And going back to the regular school, I was not reminded of

braces and back braces and all this other stuff. I was lucky, not lucky, I was blessed. Luck had nothing to do with it. The Lord took care of that. A lot of those people who, and some children I am sure didn't improve as much as some others. Especially if they had paralysis and they were on their backs. How many years, did they ever recover? I don't know? I didn't have that. I am very fortunate. And you kind of forget about it and you don't talk about it anymore. It is something of the past. Now your friends never talked about it after I got back to school. I could do all the same things that they did. Didn't affect me anymore until I had this, I thought about it a lot during the years. Because other people were being affected by things. They had a program on the radio or TV or something where they were talking about how people were having aches and pains, and I thought, gosh, that is what I am feeling. I am feeling that. I thought that for a good many years, because I honestly thought maybe it was coming back but obviously not, because once it was over, it was over. It was a rough time. It was scary. There was a meeting right about that time of people who had polio meeting in Lansing to discuss how they were feeling, and to see if there wasn't some connection. It is what they are dealing with now and polio when they had it as a child. I wanted to go so bad but didn't have a way of getting there, so I didn't. But I would have. And then when I heard the other gentleman on the radio, "Talk of the Town", talking about your program. They said they connected as many as they could in Holland. I thought, "No, I had polio." So I called the number after the station and talked to somebody and they called back and that was the gentleman, what was his name? The director.

MN: Geoffrey Reynolds.

KL: Yes. And I talked to him about it. He says, “There is no way we would ever know if we have everybody unless someone calls and lets us know.” He wondered if I’d be interested in an interview but that was, oh, last year?

MN: In the fall sometime maybe?

KL: Yes, I am thinking he says “It won’t be until the summer.” I said, okay, I would like that. I would like to tell my story. And then I was surprised when I got the call from you. Weren’t you the one who called me?

MN: That’s right, yes.

KL: It rang a bell right away. I told my husband, I think I am going to go to that once, and see what that is all about. In the beginning they didn’t say that it was open information for everybody, that it was for archive type information. Then I thought, well there can’t be any repercussions for it.

MN: Nope.

[Discussion of the Oral history process removed from transcript]

[End of Interview]