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## Shaw, Greg Oral History Interview: Polio Survivors in Holland

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2003 Oral History Interview: Polio  
(via telephone)  
Interview with Greg Shaw  
Interviewer: Matthew Nickel  
12 August 2003

MN: You grew up in Saugatuck correct?

GS: When I was visiting Mr. Schouten, I was in Douglas. I went to grade school in Douglas. And then when I came to work with Mr. Schouten, we would drive from Douglas up to Holland, and his house was across from the park there and the elementary school. It is gone now. I don't know if you know where he lived, but he had a great big house on the corner over there a block off the main street. I am trying to remember the, I think that was Lincoln Elementary School that his daughter taught right across, there was a park right across from his house. And when I visited him as a youngster, his wife was still living and she was incapacitated, she was in a wheelchair herself. I am not sure what from. I was just a little kid. Then their daughter Beth, who just passed away not too long ago I think, she was an elementary school teacher and she lived in the Holland retirement center there, real, gosh I am trying to remember the name of it?

MN: Freedom Village?

GS: Yes, Freedom Village. I want to say that she passed away within the last couple of years, and she taught school at this elementary school, and my mom was a school teacher in Fennville. While I was going through my therapy they would commiserate. I would come up after school, and I would have a therapy lesson that lasted an hour to an hour and a half and I believe it was three times a week. He would have other people come in, because he was a retired coach. I would

have young men from college in various disciplines, football, baseball, what have you, that he would help recuperate from injuries and stuff like that. So I was just a little kid that had polio that he helped with physical therapy.

MN: Did he do this with other polio patients, or people with other similar occasions?

GS: I don't recall that, and my mom might be able to shed some light on that. I don't recall ever seeing other people come and go with polio ailments, other than myself, but that is not to say that he didn't. He was a busy man, although he was retired from being coach and athletic director if I am not mistaken of Hope. He was retired. I want to say when I met Jack, he must have been, Mr. Schouten must have been in his, I guess he was probably in his sixties anyway when I met him. I went to him from the time, and like I said, I should have talked to my mom, I am thinking that I was about six, seven years old when I started going to him, and I went to him continuously up through high school for conditioning and strength training. He had me do calisthenics. I had whirlpool treatments, massages. I had polio in my right leg from, kind of like the upper end of my leg and more severely in the calf. I was very fortunate to have gotten pretty much full use back, it really doesn't stop me. I limp a little bit but I am very grateful because I know people, one lady in the area in Douglas that... the local doctor used to take us to the shrine circus and she had polio in both of her legs and she still has no use. She has to have the crutches and the braces, was never able to get out of the hardware I used to say. I was very fortunate though I couldn't walk at first but then I had the brace that went from my upper thigh all the way down to my leg, down to my foot, and then a built up shoe, and crutches and then as time went on I got a

smaller brace that just went from the knee down and then as time went on I was able to get rid of, get my strength back and walk on my own and not have crutches or things like that.

MN: So you gradually worked through paralysis?

GS: Yes, I was able to get most of my muscle back, I can't, my thigh is still a little bit smaller than my other thigh, and my right calf is not as strong as my left calf. I have, a reduced muscle mass in my calf. Atrophy I think they call it. From lack of use to polio, but affected the nervous system and my understanding of it is because of it's effect is that the chemical, the brain is telling your muscles to move but because your, but because that balance of chemicals of moving from the nervous system to the muscle that the ganglion or whatever they call it breaks down and your brain is telling your muscle to move by because of the disease that is stopped. But then because of that lack of activity, the muscle just atrophies. You have to work to get it back and in some cases you get some degree of muscle back and in other cases, I am sure in a lot folks didn't get any back. There were kids that I heard about that got polio when I was young and you know, the chest and things like that and would end up in an iron lung because they could not breathe on their own. It was a pretty scary thing, I was in Mary Free Bed there in Grand Rapids for six months, when I got it when I was four. At that point it was kind of like the AIDS virus is now. Everybody was terrified of polio and I was quarantined and they didn't know where it came from and they were, it was kind of a very unfortunate experience for a youngster, you think you did something wrong, but six months later I got out. I started swimming, mother started taking

me to private swimming lessons in Douglas there and through out, quite sure Dr. Miller, who is long gone, but he was our local physician. I am pretty sure that he was the fellow that put us in touch with Mr. Schouten. I can verify that with my mother. I am pretty sure that is how we got his name. We would go up for physical therapy and a long process of rehabilitation. I owe a lot to him. He had lots of patience. He was a very kind person, very optimistic. I think he told me I was one of the most improved people that he got to work with and a lot of that was just luck but between him and my mother it was, "we are going to do this." It was not "can you do this?" Its we have to do this in order to walk and in order to get your strength back, and so it was a couple of pretty strong willed people that were pushing me. I can't say that I would have done all that on my own. I was pretty grateful to have the care that I did. He was just a great guy, he took a personal interest in me as I am sure he did everyone. As time went on he would take me over to Russ' [local family style chain restaurant] and all the ladies over there knew him and we would get a soda or a hamburger or whatever and as time went on and I was able to gain more strength and even started playing little league baseball, he and his daughter Beth would come down in their old Oldsmobile, and they would come down, of course it was new at the time, they would come down to Douglas when we had Little League games and he would sit there and watch us play little league. I had an older brother who was interested and he played a lot of baseball too and he gave us bases to put on our ball field and he gave us fungal bats that you use to practice fly balls with and footballs and sporting paraphernalia. He would give us stuff like that to fly with. He was just a terrific

person and he was very caring and he had a great knack of, you know, instilling in you that you were going to get better and that you were going to improve. I was just a little kid and I just knew that I had to, they showed me the direction and I was just fortunate enough to improve enough so that I ended up, I never competed in high school sports although I ended up being manager and lettering just with taking care of the other athletes in track, football and basketball and I continued that swimming, that was my forte and then I came out to Michigan State. I ended up competing my freshman year, on states swim team. I swam with the team, and at that time I was in Architecture and we were in the pool six hours a day. I guess the only regret that I have is that I dropped out of it even though I kept swimming on my own, I never participated in a meet and I wish that I would have done that now. I know that I could have lettered. I was swimming with kids that, we didn't have a pool in high school in Fennville, but I had taken so many lessons, and then I took advanced swimming my freshman year at state and State's varsity swim coach was fellow that taught the class, Fetters, and he asked me to go out with the team and then at that point I did. I practiced with them but I never, I never formally competed with a sanctioned meet. But I still swim a mile every other day. In fact I was in the pool last night. We have this great facility across from Michigan State's campus and I am still very active swimming, and water skiing and things like that. It has never really stopped me from doing the things that I have wanted to do, but I am grateful for that, but I owe a lot to Jack. I always called him Mr. Schouten, but a lot of folks called him "coach" but he was just a great guy.

MN: What year did come down with polio?

GS: I contracted it in 1952. When I was four years old. At that point they were researching the vaccine, but if I am not mistaken, the vaccine didn't come out until '53.

MN: That sounds about right.

GS: Then of course, if I remember right, there were various kinds of polio. I don't know if there were four of them. I know there was a lumbar and there were several different kinds and they were worried about maybe different kinds of polio and then of course they came out with the sugar cube and the Salk vaccine and the Sabin vaccines, and I of course ended up taking those as all the other youngsters did. Then eventually it has pretty much eradicated polio although I still hear that it is around. In various countries I think they still have cases here and there that you hear about. I don't think it has ever been completely eradicated, to my knowledge I don't think it has. I still hear about this post-polio syndrome thing, a lot of it, people that have had polio, and I am not sure I profess to understand exactly what happens, but I guess you can get some form of a recurrence of the problem neurological. And I think that maybe it stems from the fact that I know in my case you have a tendency to be an overachiever just to compensate for the fact that you were dealt a handicap of some sort, although I looked at it as a handicap, but it didn't eventually stop me from doing anything other than, I would have liked to have competed in high school sports and college sports but I just wasn't, I was not able to run as fast or jump as high as normal kids so I really stayed out of the competition, and with this post-polio syndrome

thing, and you'll probably talk to other people about that as something that folks can get and are concerned with because the fact that, and I don't know if other victims are like myself, I am always working out and I am always swimming and lifting weights and riding a bike and staying fit. I think that from what I understand that sometimes we have a tendency to maybe overdo it or maybe get to a point where maybe you get too tired or work out too hard. Then you can maybe be susceptible to this setback of this syndrome of post-polio. I am not even sure how that works if you actually can possibly can contract the disease again or what type of setback that is, but I have heard about it and I am sure that you have talked to other people who have heard about that too. I know, I see posters from time to time when I go to get my physical of "polio gone but not forgotten" not to forget to have your kid immunized, so that type of thing. Polio is really something that most people, I have had people recently, once in a while will say, "I see you limp a little bit, what's that?" Oh its polio, and then they'll say "Gosh, you look too young to have polio, when did you get that?" So it is something that is kind of a generation or so, at least apart now, a lot of people don't even know about polio, or smallpox or things like that. It is something that in a lot of young people's minds now is gone. It is something that we dealt with in past generations.

MN: About coach Schouten, could you describe the kinds of work you did with him, the kinds of exercises and treatments he used?

GS: Sure. He had a variety of things that we would do. Some of it was massage, some kind of massage cream and he used to massage my leg for circulation and to help muscle growth. He had a setup in his bathroom, he had a stainless steel tub, he



had a whirlpool setup in there and I would sit on a stool or a hassock and put my foot and leg into this bubbly water. It was like a vacuum cleaner hose that went down into this tank and it was attached to a plastic mat, and there were holes in the mat and the water would bubble up. It was an original type of whirlpool and I would imagine that there are fancier things than I am sure. It was somehow hooked up to an apparatus that blew water up through this mat that was under water and I would sit in there for twenty minutes or half hour. He would always, quite often, would bring me a banana or a box of Cracker Jacks while I was sitting in there and after that there were exercises and things, mostly calisthenics, that he would have me do with my legs and we'd put a, I would imagine some type of blanket or beach towel on the floor and he'd sit on this stool and I would lay on my back and do various calisthenics with my legs, leg lifts and different kinds of scissors kicks, different exercises with my leg. He would also have me work with small amounts of weight. But I don't remember too many big weights and lots of work with springs and rubber, like surgical tubing that would be attached to a fleecy type of thing, and he would hold that I would press my leg against that or do various exercises in different positions for strengthening my leg with the springs and the rubber band type of things, you get a lot of that. He'd have me do springs and things like that with my upper body, to have me do pushups and he would, lots of various calisthenics that he'd have me do.

MN: What kinds of, do you remember what was going on with your community at this time? Do you remember any kinds of conversation or talk or things that might have been in the newspaper or on the radio?

GS: Actually, I don't really remember. I know, I do remember vaguely Mary Free Bed and I do remember getting out and being up there. I really don't remember because I wasn't quarantined because the disease had passed. It is kind of like flu or something, you are sick for a while, and then when you get over it you just have the paralysis and sometimes it is quite severe and sometimes it isn't. I remember talking to people years ago, kids that said they had polio but it was mild. Who didn't lose any use of muscle anywhere. As time went on I don't really remember people talking at the time about polio, I know I was considered handicapped and the local doctor would take us to the shrine circus in Grand Rapids. There was another lady about my age that had polio in Douglas there was named Colleen Becken. She still lives down there and she had it in both legs and she was never able to, to the last of my knowledge had the braces and the crutches. So we'd go to the Shrine Circus, they would take us to that and then there was another youngster that was born in the community with one arm. He, as an infant, had a birth defect. So the three of us were, this was a very small, Douglas was a very small community. We were kind of grouped together in a situation like that, the health care, the local doctor, but as far as the sentiment or people talking about polio at the time, I cannot really recall much about it as time went on, it was something thing that everybody learned to live with, it was not really quarantined anymore, it was just that you were different than other children. You just learned to live with that, you would have to grow through the ridicule. Little kids sometimes can be kind of, critical, just because they don't know any better, by calling you names or calling you cripple. You work through that, it was

something that you had to learn to live with and kind of ignore it. As time went on and you got older, you didn't get much of that anymore. People were more educated and by the time I got to high school, you really didn't get any of that criticism. Then with my particular polio in the right leg, I ended up having, because it kind of stunts the growth, as a youngster, I ended up with, my folks had me go to Grand Rapids and I had a Dr. Franz that was working with the Filidamite babies in England with birth defects from taking birth control pills and there were a lot of youngsters born with birth defects born with taking this birth control drug, but Dr. Franz invented, came up with a concept of, actually it looked like a fence staple, in fact I still have a couple of them, your limbs, as you grow, when you were a youngster, grow at the joints, your arms and legs the calcium builds up. Because I had polio at a young age, they put in one leg, I was to have, I started out having a built up shoe. A couple of inches, a bigger sole, you have probably seen people with that. But he operated on my good leg, and he put three staples on each side of my bone in my left knee to stunt the growth of my left leg so that my right leg would catch up with it. I had, oh gosh, probably a half a dozen of those operations. And then of course would get out of the cast and I would work with Mr. Schouten on therapy there too. Bending the knee cause now what I had was two bad legs. It worked, it was kind of an experimental operation. I don't know if I was the first one he had ever tried it, I know he had done an elbow, but I don't know if he ever did a knee before. I had those staples in there from the time I was, I guess I got those when I was about 8 or 9 and I got them out when I was 18. I had just gotten my, I was still wearing an ace bandage when

I arrived as a freshman at State's campus. I had those pins in my knee for about eight years. I don't have a built up shoe, but I am not quite as tall as I would have been. I am about six feet, but I would have been about 6'2" or 6'3" they estimated if I wouldn't have done that. But I would have had this built up shoe, so, that is a kind of unusual thing that happened. And my folks were taking advice in doing something where there was not a lot of experience with it. But I was very grateful that I did, to get this operation [End Side A]. Mr. Schouten moved from 8<sup>th</sup> street to, as you come into town in a subdivision out there, I cannot recall even the name of the street, I know where the house is, it is right where you come in 31 from the north there, there is a ball field just before the road curves to take a left and go out that way to his house. I used to go and visit him and Beth a little bit. Not nearly enough. I was grateful for what he did for me, and I think mom, I think we have some articles, several articles about him over the years, I don't know if I can put my hands on them, just some newspaper articles and things that were written about him over the years. I am sure you'll find some people, a lot of good things to be said about him because he was such a kind, patient person. Just, was very concerned about improvement.

MN: You were young, but what do you recall of your stay at Mary Free Bed?

GS: That was in Blodgett Hospital, Mary Free Bed was a children's wing of the Blodgett Hospital which is now part of the Spectrum system that has become a conglomerate. I think Blodgett and Butterworth is all a part of Spectrum now, although I still think they call it Blodgett. Well, it was like I said, I can barely recall, I can remember being in the hospital, and I can remember mom driving up

cause I was in the hospital for six months. I remember being, I was quarantined from everybody else for a while, because when you got polio, they didn't know where it came from and they didn't know how it was spread. It was scary, people, just like I said earlier with AIDS, people knew where it came from, but people were worried about contaminates. I don't recall a lot of my activity in the hospital, just remember the white curtains and the masks. I remember eating beats and drinking prune juice, and I remember getting out and thinking boy am I glad to be out of here, and then I would have to go back there to this Dr. Franz that did my surgeries in the years to follow, worked out of Blodgett Hospital so I would end up going back to see him every six months or so for quite a while, and as time went on and I got my strength and got better, I would go and he would look at my spine and look at my legs and put, I would stand on a stool up to a chart and he would put pieces of cork of different thickness under my right leg as time went on and check my hips to see if they were, how close we were getting to having them same length because of the pins that he put in there. As time went on, the cork would be less and less, and the built up shoe that I had would be smaller and smaller to a point where when I was 17 or 18 they took the pins out and at that point my right leg, my bad leg was a little bit, the leg I had polio in was a little bit longer than the other leg but they were guessing on a little bit of growth spurt from the leg that they operated on individually, and they ended up being the same length or at least close enough so that I didn't have to have a built up shoe. And so the last I remember of Mary Free Bed and Blodgett Hospital was getting the pins out and basically being, having my legs the same length, and then from that

point on it was me conditioning myself and since that time I have stayed very active, physically. Like I said I like to snow ski and water-ski and swim and play golf, and I used to play tennis but I don't do it that much any more. I like to ride a bike, so I am still pretty active and I think that comes from the fact that I don't think I will ever get away from being active because of the polio and wanting to keep my strengths up.

MN: When you were younger did you ever feel any kind of self-consciousness about having had polio?

GS: Sure, as a youngster, growing up it wasn't, I wouldn't really wish that on any youngster. You are very self conscious and worried about being different. I remember just wanting to fit in with the crowd. I didn't care if I was a Michael Jordan, but I didn't want to be considered handicapped or a cripple, and so, but, you know, you grew with it, and yeah, you would get your feelings hurt in grade school, but as time went on and you got older, your skin got thicker. You know you'd hear a comment once in a while, but it wouldn't, I got to a point where I didn't let it bother me, but you know, in the back of my mind, you could get your feelings hurt but you had to over come that by putting it out of your mind. You didn't want to just dwell on it, I think you had to be optimistic about things, the glass half full syndrome. That seemed to have worked well for me.

MN: What about the Polio Foundation and fundraisers? Do you remember anything along those lines?

GS: I do, but I would have to talk to my mom about that, I know that we had given to the March of Dimes, that was a big polio foundation back then. If I am not

mistaken, I think she was, she had gotten disgruntled over the years I think with the March of Dimes, I don't think we'd, our family ever got any compensation or any help from a foundation with regard to monetary help, my folks paid for my therapy with Mr. Schouten, they paid for the operations that I had had on my good leg and I am quite confident that I could say that they never received any kind of compensation from a foundation. That was, that is the only one that I can recall, is the March of Dimes, that I really remember them talking about. There may have been some other charitable contributions, charities that deal with polio. I don't recall any others other than that.

MN: Did polio affect any of your decisions like going to college or a career or anything along those lines?

GS: No. The college was, ever sense both my folks had gone to Northwestern in Evanston, we originally came from Chicago and moved to the Douglas Saugatuck area when I was a youngster and you know it was understood that at that time, both my folks had gone to college, we never even thought differently than that. When we finished high school, we knew we were going to college, we were going somewhere. My brother had already gone to Michigan State and so it was a logical choice to come up here and come to State, but the polio thing didn't have, really didn't have any bearing on whether I would or would not go to college. Fortunately we had enough, my folks helped me with college, and I worked during the summer, and helped fund the college expenses, I am guessing if I had to say a percentage, I probably ended up paying for half my college from money

that I'd saved from working all summer you know? I worked in a marina in Saugatuck.

MN: Was there ever any discussion about how you possibly contracted polio?

GS: Yes, there was and of course strictly conjecture. We had moved from Chicago, I'd gone to nursery school and then came up here and went to kindergarten. And first grade, the summer I contracted polio, we talked about it from time to time over the years. My folks had had the and my grandparents it was their house where my mom lives now in the Ganges area on the lakeshore there. They had had the septic tank ripped up and pumped out. That summer. I remember mom saying them talking about and of course they were just groping straws, nobody ever really knew where it came from or if I had even contracted it in Chicago. And before we moved up here. We were here in the summer and it was summer and I think I got it in the summertime and I remember I got up in the night to go to the restroom and fell on the floor. I had a flu or sick, it is a virus, you are sick with it. And was not able to walk and they called the local physician and that's, I believe, when they took me to Grand Rapids suspecting that I had contracted polio. But, that is the only thing that I can remember, the only thing that I am guessing as to where it came from. Back then they were also concerned with community swimming pools, and gosh, closing them down. They didn't they were terrified. These people didn't really know where it came from and how it was spread. That was before the vaccine. Just after, I got the vaccine, it was out and boy everybody was getting the vaccine. It was all over the schools, and you know they came into the schools and everybody got it. Everybody got the sugar cubes and I remember getting polio I



think I remember getting polio shots also. But, it was just something that nobody knew where it came from and it was an epidemic. People were really worried about their children getting it, and not knowing what to do about it and not knowing where it came from. Hopefully we'll find a cure for that like we did, and maybe we can do that for cancer and some of these other polios. Pretty much wrapped up. I guess it is still out there. From time to time you hear about a case here or there, I don't know in this country. Maybe in some of the underdeveloped countries. You don't hear about, I don't think I could have called and contracted polio recently, in this country. Do you?

MN: No, I don't, don't recall any to my knowledge. What about challenges? What for you was perhaps the most challenging, going through the experience of polio?

GS: Well, I think probably, the biggest challenge was, the number one challenge is getting back on my feet and being able to walk. When I first contracted polio, they weren't sure whether I would walk again, or not without braces and crutches and things like that. That was, I'd say was the primary challenge, was getting back on my feet and being able to walk and staying active and staying fit, I was always lifting weights with swimming and never quit doing that. I guess the challenge was to stay so active so that you know I was not going to fall back into the atrophy of not being able to use my leg. That was the biggest challenge.

MN: I guess as a last question in general, is there anything that I really missed, is there anything that I have not asked you that you can think of that is important to your experience?

GS: Well, I think I mentioned this before, I think that you like to take a positive from negatives, and I think that that is kind of what polio did for me. I think I look at life differently than a lot of people. I know what it is like not being able to not just walk across the room or to the car or to fend for yourself, not that I, and I was very grateful that I was able to get back on my feet. I know there are people that aren't. I can remember my mother saying "there are always more people less fortunate than you are" when you started feeling sorry. The positive thing that I'd say I took out of it was that I looked at life a lot differently than I think some people that maybe never had a life threatening or an ailment like I did. I am grateful that I am able to water-ski, play golf and do things that maybe I thought as a youngster I'd never be able to do. Luckily for people like Mr. Schouten, my mom and the grace of God, I was able to overcome a lot of adversity that some folks were never able to overcome. Even though I am not, I don't have, I am not 100 percent. I would guess that my leg is maybe 80% as good as the other leg, it is not, there are some things, I cannot go up on my right foot, because I do not have the strength in my calf. Other than that, I can walk around, I can run if I have to, and I just think, I am very grateful for Mr. Schouten and feel very fortunate to have had him help me and also, luckily I was able to gain most of my muscle tissue back. It is just the luck of the draw. There are some people that were never able to get it back, and some people never contracted polio, but I think that I look at life differently, that would be my big point.

MN: Thank you Mr. Shaw for talking.

GS: Sure. Greg is fine, sure.