

2001 Oral History Project
Parents of the Baby Boomers, 1941-2001
Interviewee: Jean Schipper
Interviewer: Geoffrey Reynolds
(Also includes Lawrence Schipper)
July 5, 2001

GR: Jean, tell me a little bit about what was going on in Holland when you were made aware of the war. What were you doing at that time?

JS: I was working in the payroll department at the Holland Racine Shoe Factory.

GR: That one on 16th?

JS: Yes.

GR: How old were you at that point, if I can ask that?

JS: Twenty? It's about when I had started.

GR: Had you done any college work at that point?

JS: No, no college work. I had worked at Holland Furnace Office, for just a few weeks before I got this job.

GR: So it's December 7th, 1941, and you're working at Holland Racine Shoe. What happens next?

JS: They were making shoes and boots for the Army, so our jobs were frozen.

GR: So you had already been doing war work and didn't know it.

JS: Right. (laughs) So there we were. I worked for forty-two cents an hour for all the duration of the war.

GR: Why didn't your wages go up?

JS: Because he said our wages were froze, everything was froze because of the Army orders. Not the production part in the factories, not that, but the office part was.

GR: Did you see production go up?

JS: Oh yes.

GR: How did that happen? Were there employees brought in?

JS: Yeah.

GR: A lot more?

JS: Quite a few. In fact, being on the payroll, I knew all the employees.

GR: These new employees, were they men? Were they women?

JS: They were both, of course then they were all put on piecework.

GR: And by piecework you mean?

JS: How hard you worked, and how good you were, how much you could produce. That was your wages.

GR: You said there were men in the factory. Were they still waiting to be called up?

JS: Most of them were older, and there were some young ones too. My brother was working there then, he wasn't old enough yet.

GR: How old would he have been then?

JS: Sixteen? Could be.

GR: So there were some younger people working there.

JS: And mostly women too.

GR: As the war's progressing and your fiancée has left for the war, had your work become what you considered your life at that point? Or did you do things at night?

JS: Oh we did. We had a group of girls that were all in the same boat, you might say. And we did things.

GR: Did you comfort each other as the war went on?

JS: Oh sure.

GR: Were there times where one of the girls might feel like it's a little bit overwhelming waiting for the men to come home?

JS: Yes, but you see they were all different, in all different areas.

GR: Were these women working with you at the factory, or throughout Holland?

JS: Different places, and also church friends.

GR: What were some of the other factories in town where women were largely employed for the war effort?

JS: There weren't too many in Holland, were there?

LS: I have no idea.

GR: What did you girls do for entertainment in the evenings?

JS: Not a whole lot.

GR: Why was that?

LS: Roller-skating.

JS: Roller-skating? That was before. We didn't do that. Betty didn't do it, Corny didn't do it. Just normal things—we'd go out for lunch, and we'd play cards, and that was about it. We had church things to do.

GR: So as the war dragged on, and more and more men left, did it start getting to you knowing that your future husband was there? And you, of course, wrote letters.

JS: Yes. It was the same dull thing every day, day after day, month after month of it. Toward last, it was pretty hard to write letters.

GR: Why was that?

LS: Seems there was nothing new to write about.

JS: And you didn't know how the letters would make them feel. You just felt like you had been left out of things.

GR: Even though you were involved in producing things that were help winning the war, did you ever feel the need, as a woman, or anyone else around you, did they have an interest in joining or becoming more involved?

JS: Not anybody that I knew.

GR: Was there anyone in Holland you knew that...?

JS: Not that I knew, no, none of my acquaintances. I didn't know of anyone that did join, or ever thought about it.

GR: Did the community do things during the war to help bolster patriotism at all?

JS: Oh, I'm sure there was some. Yeah. And we'd send boxes and things to the soldiers that we knew or all the soldiers from the church and groups that we were in. We did do that, but...

GR: Were you treated any differently because people did know that you had a fiancée overseas?

JS: Yeah, but there were so many of us.

GR: The war comes to an end, and you're aware of that obviously, and your future husband is probably aware of it too. How about that wait—was that rough for you?

JS: Yes it was. That was difficult.

GR: Had you, in your own mind, started making plans for a life after the war?

JS: Sort of, yes.

GR: What had you done by then?

JS: At that time there was another thing around here, we couldn't buy anything. We could hardly start a home of your own, because there was nothing available to get.

GR: Why was that?

JS: Everything was for the war effort, everything. And we were rationed, you see. Sugar was rationed, cars, gas, everything.

GR: So after the war you didn't see an immediate change?

JS: Not really, no.

GR: How long before you did see some positive influences on the economy, or at least availability of ...?

JS: Well, slowly on it came back, but it took maybe six months.

GR: So Lawrence is about ready to come home, and you know that for the most part you think you are still going to get married. Was there any concern on your part that maybe this young man had changed a little bit, emotionally?

JS: No, not really.

GR: How long after the war, after Lawrence had returned home, did you become married?

JS: From October to June. But see that was another thing, where were we going to live and what were we going to do?

GR: Had you been living at home?

JS: Because his parents really, really needed him.

GR: Because of the farm?

JS: Yeah.

GR: Where had you been living?

JS: With my parents.

GR: Now that was too, because of the war, it was just a housing issue for you? Had you a desire to move on during that time?

JS: No, that never entered my mind.

GR: Where did you two get married, knowing that money was pretty tight at that point?

JS: Right in my parents' home.

GR: Why not the church?

JS: It wasn't done, they weren't doing it at time. It was fifty-two years ago.

GR: So church weddings weren't the norm?

JS: No.

GR: You were married by what church pastor?

JS: Our church pastor.

GR: And that church was?

JS: Graafschap.

GR: You both were attending at that point?

JS: That's right, we both did our entire life.

GR: Now you're married and you face the housing shortage. What happens now for you? What did you do?

JS: There was a big decision we had to make at that time. So we remodeled Skip's parents' home, refinished the upstairs, made an apartment upstairs. So we lived upstairs, and they lived downstairs.

GR: How long did that go on?

LS: Until after my father died, I guess.

GR: So a long time?

JS: Yeah.

GR: Was that hard for newlyweds to know that every spat you might have or, you know...

JS: It's different.

GR: Yeah, I would imagine. And you didn't have any help from downstairs in how to get through those difficult times?

JS: No, did we?

LS: They were babysitters. (laughs)

GR: So in childcare they were handy.

JS: That's right, just for Jane though.

GR: So after Lawrence's dad passed away, what happened then?

JS: Then we made a transition. Lawrence's mother went upstairs, and we went downstairs.

GR: So you remained on the farm then?

JS: We remained on the farm.

GR: And Lawrence was farming then?

JS: Right, also working out—both jobs.

GR: Before you first child was born, had you continued working at the shoe company?

JS: Yes, I was still working.

GR: So your daughter is born. Why did you decide to stay at home?

JS: Well, that was my place.

GR: That was just something that you figured...

JS: That's right, this was something that we had to do.

GR: Was that something that you and your husband had talked about, or was it just kind of a thing that...?

JS: I just think it's a thing, it was a normal idea. It never entered my mind that I would keep on working here.

GR: Were there moments during child rearing where you thought a few hours a day would be nice, outside the house, to do something?

JS: I can't say that.

GR: So how did you keep your emotional stability through all that child rearing? What was the key for you to keep you healthy emotionally?

JS: Well, our parents for one thing—they were very good to us. But it was just a normal job, as I far as I was concerned.

GR: Did you find it hard sometimes?

JS: Not really, I don't think.

GR: What do you attribute that to—the way you were raised?

JS: I think so. I was the oldest child also.

GR: Out of how many?

JS: Four.

GR: I'm assuming around you similar lifestyles were being led?

JS: That's right, they all were. That's about the way it was at that time.

GR: Were there women that were working outside of the house a few days a week?

JS: Oh yeah, there were.

GR: Were they looked upon any differently?

JS: I don't think so.

GR: Just from your knowledge, why were they doing that do you think?

JS: Well, some of them had to.

GR: For financial reasons?

JS: Right.

GR: Did you know how they would have handled their child care issues?

JS: I don't even know of anybody that did that. Unless it just stayed right in the family, and the family members took care of it.

GR: You said that your husband's mother, or your mother-in-law, stepped in periodically to help out with that. Why would she have to do that, or why would she do that?

JS: Well, a lot of times she didn't have to, but she liked it because that was the only thing that she had.

GR: And they were right downstairs.

JS: And they were right downstairs.

GR: Was that hard for her, knowing that there were grandkids that could kind of intrude on her life at any time?

JS: I don't think so. She loved it. (laughs)

GR: So you had some respite periodically from your kids. Truthfully, did you enjoy that a little bit, maybe you were canning or making dinner?

JS: Oh sure. We did okay.

GR: After the kids were out of high school or older, you did return to work. Where was that?

JS: Lifesavers.

GR: Why Lifesavers?

JS: There was a new plant just coming to Holland and it just started up. I had always worked in the payroll department, so I just thought well, maybe I should try that. I did, and I got

hired in—it was number six or number eight, something like that, in the payroll department.

GR: Did you enjoy going back to work?

JS: I did.

GR: Why was that?

JS: It was just to help us out a bit, to help the girls out too for that matter. Mary and Marla were still in high school when I was working.

GR: But you enjoyed being back in the workforce?

JS: Yes.

GR: Were there a lot of women from your generation making that transition for similar reasons?

JS: Yes, because most of the women in the office were the same age.

GR: How did you kids react to that, even though they really hadn't really had a need for you, a tremendous attachment, because they were now in high school. Was that something they ever mentioned to you—mom is working now.

JS: I don't think so.

GR: How did your husband react, did he support that?

JS: Oh yeah, he did.

GR: Was that something you both talked about before it even...?

JS: I think so.

GR: How many children did you have overall?

JS: Four.

GR: And you had your first child relatively soon after you were married.

JS: Right.

GR: You came from a family of four and you were the oldest. If you could reflect a little bit about how your four kids were raised differently than you were raised—were there any differences?

JS: Well, yes, there were differences. One thing was television.

GR: Why is that a difference?

JS: It was just entertainment for one thing, for them, which we never had.

GR: So how did their leisure activities change with a television in the house?

JS: Not a whole lot. They didn't do that much of it either. They were real good. Outside, summer time.

GR: So the television was kind of an issue for kids even then?

JS: It was a little, yeah.

GR: Now were you one of the first people in town to have a television?

JS: No.

GR: Did you hold off purposefully?

JS: We did for a while.

GR: Why was that?

JS: We didn't have time.

GR: Was it an expense that the family...?

JS: Yeah, it was.

GR: Were the kids asking more and more to get a television

JS: See they were out in the country and they didn't associate with many kids really, only relatives if you go visiting or you go to your parents or something. But as far as neighbors go, we didn't have close neighbors at that time.

GR: So there wasn't any peer pressure from schoolmates?

JS: No.

GR: Once you got it, what was your impression of it?

JS: I didn't have much time for it.

GR: Did you watch it as a family?

JS: Yes, we did. Certain programs we did.

GR: So there were programs that the kids could watch and be entertained?

JS: Yeah.

GR: Do you think that affected the way they were raised compared to the way you were raised?

JS: Oh, I think so.

GR: Why is that?

VS: Get more news.

GR: So they were a little more acclimated to what was going on in the world?

JS: Oh yeah.

GR: So what did your husband and the kids do for entertainment when you had time? Church outings, picnics...?

JS: Just the normal, regular things.

GR: Did you have an automobile? Were you able to buy a newer automobile when you needed it or where there some struggles?

JS: There were struggles.

GR: Did you only have one car?

JS: Yes.

GR: Did you usually buy new, or late models?

JS: No, they weren't new. Of course you were on farm, so you had a tractor too. But as far as the girls go, they didn't do anything with the farming or garden work or anything like that. They never bothered with that.

GR: When you returned to work, did you have your own automobile?

JS: Yes, we each had one.

GR: Probably just for your schedules, I'm assuming.

JS: Yes. And we did go on vacation with the girls for two weeks in the summertime. We did a lot; we did that for about six or seven years. Took trips.

GR: Did you find it hard to find alone time with your husband, like in the evening or...?

JS: Yeah, for a while. After they got a little older they would all disappear. (laughs)

GR: Was that somewhat of a relief for you to have some free time to unwind?

JS: It was, yeah.

GR: Like I asked your husband, was there any earth-shattering event when all the children were gone that kind of made you aware that your husband is still here and the kids are gone?

JS: It is. It's a huge adjustment really.

GR: Did both of you retire at the same time?

VS: She retired a year before I did.

JS: Yeah, I retired a year before you did.

GR: Did your husband find it hard to be at home and have you out working and come home at five and?

JS: I don't think so.

GR: Did he have activities that kept him entertained?

JS: Yeah, sort of; he had things to do.

GR: But when you would come home, you probably would still make dinner.

JS: Well, that's right.

GR: After you're both retired, now you really have lots of time on your hands. Did you do anything differently?

JS: Not really.

VS: Not a whole lot, other than going to Florida.

GR: Obviously you've left the farm from where we are today. When did that take place?

VS: In 1990.

GR: Why did you decide to move to, it's a condominium, correct? Why did you decide to do that?

VS: Could see the handwriting on the wall, we wouldn't be able to take care of it.

JS: He wasn't able to do the work anymore.

GR: And you're happy about that decision?

JS: I wasn't at first, but yes.

GR: Why was that?

JS: We lived there our entire married life, and it was just quite a change. We always lived on a farm, both of us.

VS: And we had a comfortable home.

JS: Yeah we did.

GR: So throughout the marriage, and as money became available, you updated the house and expanded, I suppose.

JS: Yes, it was up-to-date—all the way.

GR: Did you ever feel the need to enter into the new housing market?

JS: I really didn't care about that.

GR: It wasn't something that you ever felt peer pressure to do?

JS: No.

GR: You must have visited homes and thought it would be nice to have a new home.

JS: Yes, and you have friends that do, and you take this Parade of Homes tour once in a while.

GR: So you had an interest, but really it never...

JS: Yes, but that was...

GR: You still live in the Graafschap area?

JS: That's right, that's why we came over here, that's why.

GR: Because of your church?

JS: Basically. And we only lived a mile apart, so we were right in the area. I have a brother living right on Lugers Road.

GR: Did you meet your husband in the church?

JS: Yes.

GR: Even before the war you knew that more than likely you'd probably end up being married, or had an idea?

JS: Yes.

GR: Was there anything about your husband that, before you even got married you knew there was something about Lawrence, the lifestyle you probably thought might occur, the way you would be treated and the way it was expected? Again, was that part of the climate around Graafschap at that time?

JS: I think so.

GR: And you were very comfortable with that obviously.

JS: That's right. Well, we didn't get around like people do nowadays, you know.

GR: Were there women in the church or even in the neighborhood that really thought, "I want to go do something different than just staying at home and being a stay at home mom"? Did you ever hear?

JS: Not that I know.

GR: And that never really got into your mind?

JS: No. I had a girlfriend that lived right across the street and her boyfriend lived at Skip's house for a couple years before he went into service. They both left for service the same day. So we were...

GR: Connected in that way.

JS: Right, closely.

GR: Like I asked your husband, has your time as a parent affected the way you deal with your grandchildren in some situations?

JS: Yes, but our children are doing a pretty good job, I think.

GR: So you thought, "The kids obviously picked up some stuff from us."

JS: Oh yes, you would hear about it a lot, "That's what you did, Mom."

GR: Oh, so they do mention that?

JS: Oh, yes. Or, “You never did that, Mom.”

GR: Did you ever take anything from when you were being raised and say to yourself, “I’m going to do something a little bit different with my four”? Was there anything you took from that experience, as an older sister even? Were you able to spend more time, I’m assuming you were raising your siblings in some fashion, or at least taking care of them periodically or as a role model?

JS: Yeah, I guess. But not much.

GR: Were your siblings spaced apart?

JS: My brother and I were two years apart and my sister was seven, and then I have another brother we were nine, so they were...

GR: The occupations that your children have chosen—is there anything that you think now that you could have done differently? Maybe you could have influenced one of them to be a doctor or a lawyer.

JS: No, I don’t think so. I think they all did pretty well.

GR: The occupations they chose, you thought were very good for them? And the ‘60s and the ‘70s didn’t really affect them?

JS: No, I don’t think so. They had groups of friends and they were always together. I think they all did a good job. That’s for a mother to say, but...

GR: Even with television and some of the things that were even going on in Holland, are you surprised by that, that there wasn’t more wildness or changing of attitudes even for them? Did you think at any point that one of your kids might go to Vietnam or might decide not to follow a Christian lifestyle?

JS: No, I didn’t think so.

GR: Did any of your children fight in the war?

JS: No.

GR: Was there ever a point that which one of them, some of them might have been drafted?

JS: No.

VS: They were all girls.

GR: Oh well, okay. Was there any discussions around the table about issues at that time that you can remember about the war, their classmates might have been fighting and the one their father fought?

JS: No.

GR: Did they ever ask you or your husband those questions about the war and your experience?

JS: They do now, they didn't then. They never talked about it. But now when they got their own children and they're in school and they're studying about this, then they come around.

GR: Were they aware that your husband had fought in World War Two?

JS: Well, they knew it, that was all; he never talked about it.

GR: That was a conscious decision that both of you had kind of made?

JS: That's right.

GR: Any reason for that?

JS: No, that's just the way he felt about it.

GR: Lawrence received several commendations for his time in service. The kids never saw those or they had been tucked away? I'm assuming that sometime during their lifetime

they would have run into friend's parents who had been involved in service. They never came home and asked, was daddy in the war?

JS: No.

GR: Is that something that, the climate of the area maybe?

JS: I think maybe it did.

GR: Why do you think that was the case?

JS: I don't know. Because I can't go to any other family and come up with an answer either.

GR: You had siblings that were probably of age to fight—you said you had a younger brother and he fought. And the other two were too young?

JS: My younger brother was in Korea.

GR: Any discussion even in your own extended family then?

JS: Occasionally, yeah.

GR: Had Lawrence and your brother ever talked about those differences and similarities with Korea vs. World War One, that you can remember?

JS: Yeah.

GR: Good, bad?

JS: Oh they would just talk about the experiences. It was just comparing notes.

GR: So among themselves they would talk a little bit about it. Did he have a particular rough experience in Korea?

JS: No, he didn't. I think he sort of enjoyed it.

VS: There again, I don't think he would mention it anyway.

JS: Not much, no.

GR: But among the two veterans in the family, you would talk a little bit about it.

VS: More with her older brother who was in World War Two. But then we didn't discuss it.

JS: You didn't discuss it either. He was in the infantry, and he was in Germany, but he didn't talk about it either. But he passed away how long ago, over twenty years ago.

[End of interview]