7-21-2003

Bloemendaal, William Oral History Interview: Polio Survivors in Holland

Matthew Nickel

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.hope.edu/holland_polio

Part of the Archival Science Commons, and the Oral History Commons

Recommended Citation


This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Oral History Interviews at Digital Commons @ Hope College. It has been accepted for inclusion in Polio Survivors in Holland by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Hope College. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@hope.edu.
2003 Oral History Interview: Polio
Interview with Bill Bloemendaal
Interviewer: Matthew Nickel
21 July 2003
(edited)

**Index**
(Chronological Order)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Topic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>p. 1</td>
<td>Story of contracting Polio</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| p. 2 | Hospital  
Immobilization treatment (using sandbags)  
Scholiosis |
| p. 3 | Hospital environment  
Listening to the radio in bed with dad |
| p. 4 | Father as doctor disliked the polio treatment  
Sister Kenny using Bill as model for lecture in Grand Rapids |
| p. 5 | Doctors laughed Sister Kenny off the stage  
Dad supported her treatment  
Quarantined house |
| p. 6 | Quarantine and public fear  
"What did you do to make God do that to you?" |
| p. 7 | Surgery at Northwestern to straighten spine |
| p. 8 | Surgery con’t  
Roosevelt’s death |
| p. 9 | FDR as a hero  
Reading material while in hospital  
Education while in hospital |
| p. 10 | Ninth grade, learned to fly  
Going to the movies |
| p. 11 | Going to the pool hall  
Sent to private school  
Prom  
Social life and athletics |
p. 12 Regimented education
Hope College summer sessions
Vowed to go to college without crutches
College

p. 13 Progressive thought of college life
Inferiority complexes
Overcoming physical limitations physically and mentally

p. 14 Flying and horse riding
Relationships and dating

p. 15 Self-Actualization
Wife
Teaching job after cancer kept him from law school

p. 16 Post-polio
Polio vaccine

p. 17 “I can do what I can”

p. 18 The positive lessons of physical struggle

p. 19 Self consciousness of disability
People and disability
Relationship with wife

p. 20 Parents never held him back
Disability in legs
Can’t let disability stop a person

p. 21 Prejudice for disability
What does it mean to be human?
Perception guides your life

p. 22 Love, more on earth than we can know
Other people with polio
“Everyone has a concern”

p. 23 Mobility
Fascination with the world
Teaching career

p. 24 Vastness of knowledge and people in our world
Community
Feelings about church life
p. 25  Embracer of the less fortunate
       Tolerated but ignored
       Radio

p. 26  Lonely times and living to the fullest
       Spirituality

p. 27  Friends

p. 28  Basketball on Sunday
       Audrey’s (Wife) perception of Bill’s polio

p. 29  Don’t complain
       Bill and Audrey’s relationship
       Bill’s determination

p. 30  Audrey’s difficulty finding work
       Community life

p. 31  Little patience with people who can’t handle things
       Challenges living with Bill

p. 32  Audrey’s view of the polio epidemics
       Fear in America

p. 33  Misdiagnosis of Post-Polio
       Meeting for Polio survivors

p. 34  Helen DeWeerd
       Changes in the Holland Community

p. 35  Standards of behavior
       Appreciation for isolation

p. 36  Community Support

p. 37  Father’s practice

p. 38  Audrey’s first experience with the Holland community

p. 39  Didn’t keep records
       Barter, “how much can you afford?”

p. 40  Finance of Polio care
       Father writing a book with his brother Jack
p. 41 National Science Foundation grants
Orthopedic doctor

p. 42 Conclusion
MN: Just to start off easy, what age were you when you had polio?

BB: October 5, 1940. I was eight. Eight years old. I was born in 1932. The year Franklin Roosevelt was inaugurated. Some of my students when they ask me how old I am, I tell them that. And when I say Franklin Roosevelt, they say, who is he? So I was eight years old when I did get polio. In Zeeland, Michigan, October 5, 1940.

MN: Was there any speculation as to how you came down with polio, how you contracted polio?

BB: No. They had no idea what caused polio. At first they thought it was flies carrying disease, no, no idea. Except, a lot of people think, Matt, that the polio epidemics were in the fifties, that's true, but polio was around in the forties too, it was pretty intense. Do you want to hear the day I remember?

MN: Yes, please.

BB: I was a very active kid. And one morning I woke up feeling very very hot, achy, and I had difficulty urinating. I went downstairs on the couch. By the way, my dad was a doctor, a medical doctor. His name was Dirk C. Bloemendaal. My mother was a nurse, Lillian Bloemendaal. They moved to Zeeland from Philadelphia because my dad was Dutch speaking fellow, and they needed a Dutch speaking Doctor in this area, so he came here and I was born in Zeeland in 1932. That day that I came down with polio, I was very achy and very
uncomfortable. I suppose I should say that I was screaming because I was aching so. The last thing I remember, I fell off the couch onto the floor and I woke up two weeks later in Butterworth Hospital. I had been, in a coma, and unconscious for two weeks. I woke up on the operating table. They were doing a spinal tap at that time. Then I woke up, I don’t know, three or four days after that, and I was in a hospital room, Butterworth, shades were drawn, and the Reverend Bill Hilmert who later went on and taught at Western Theological Seminary and Hope College was sitting on the chair by the bed and he was praying and my mother was crying. And then I would drift off, wake up and drift off. I found out later that he was saying, well, “Au revoir.” “Adios.” That kind of thing, but I survived. Then I ended up at a place in Grand Rapids, Michigan called Mary Freebed. I had polio. It was a very severe case of polio. It affected my breathing, my legs, everything from my neck down.

MN: Wow.

BB: And I was paralyzed. I ended up at Mary Freebed, that is the old Mary Freebed, where I stayed for, oh, I’d say four or five months. In those days, the way they treated polio, they would pack sandbags around you, such as they used during the war to build a bunker, a machinegun bunker. So they would immobilize you by putting sandbags around your arms, your neck, and so on, so you wouldn’t move, you see?

MN: So the purpose was for no movement at all? Could you still…?

BB: Well, I have a severe scoliosis, a curvature of the spine. And due to polio that happens if the muscles on one side of your body are destroyed, and the other side,
which has muscles will pull the spine over, and cause the curve. I really don’t have a left side. The muscles are gone. In any event, from Mary Freebed, oh, I remember those days! You are on this hospital gurney. And eventually they let me get on that, or put me on that and took me to the dining room once in a while. I couldn’t stand the Spanish rice they made. As a matter of fact, I would gag on it. Finally I was pushed out by the elevator, I can’t remember what floor I was on. It was only about three or four floors high and I was on one of the top floors. I would wait by the elevator for my mother to come up. Now I am almost nine years old. If she walked up the stairs, I could hear her coming up, and that was always a joy for me when she would come up to see me. My dad, as I said, was a doctor. He was one of three in the Zeeland / Holland area in those days. I finally came home, I think it was in the Spring, when I was nine, and my dad, being from the Netherlands, or his parents rather, he would listen to the news from Europe. Edward R. Murrow, H.V. Kaltenborn reporting [Both International CBS radio correspondents, both notable during World War II] and they were always on the radio. There was Gabriel Heatter [WOR reporter from same era] reporting about what was happening in the Europe with the Nazi movement. Then the Germans invaded and this was in late August in Poland. Then they invaded the Netherlands, and Belgium and France. My dad would listen to this in the room I was in. I was in a hospital bed on the sun porch of this Dutch colonial home, immobilized. He would sit and listen to the news, and I would too. I didn’t understand it, but he would cry, and I was scared to death, because I couldn’t move. I thought that the Wermacht, the Nazis, were right outside of town.
MN: Oh no.

BB: Perhaps in Vriesland. Which is five miles up the road. I was scared to death. Then the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor and we were at war. Right after that my dad became very upset with the treatment polio patients were getting, immobilization and he began to remove the sandbags and he put me on the floor and he said crawl, and I started crawling around. I remember one time the specialist who was treating me came from Grand Rapids at night and I was on the floor and the specialist said if my dad didn’t put me back in bed, the specialist would drop the case because the treatment of polio, for him, was immobilization. My dad put me back in bed, the specialist left and my dad took me out of bed and said, “crawl.” He was writing a book on polio, I have a few chapters here somewhere.

MN: Oh, wow.

BB: He then discovered a nurse from Australia called Sister Kenny. Many people have not heard of Sister Kenny, but there is a Sister Kenny or the Kenny Institute in Minneapolis connected to Mayo now. In any event, Sister Kenny came to Michigan and I was her only patient at Butterworth Hospital. I remember I was wheeled out on the stage, I am nine years old, and Sister Kenny came out and the auditorium was full of doctors and medical people who she found difficult to quiet down. They would laugh at her and they would even boo her. Because here was a common Australian bush nurse telling trained medical doctors how to treat polio patients and Sister Kenny’s approach was radically different from the medical profession at that time. Her approach was exercise, physical therapy. Particularly swimming. And throw all those sand bags away. And I was on this
hospital gurney, and she was trying to tell them, using me as her patient, how to treat polio patients. They literally laughed her off the stage and she could not finish her talk. And she kissed me on the cheek and said, “good luck” and then she left. My dad followed her treatment to the letter. He would drive me back and forth to the YMCA pool in Grand Rapids three times a week to swim and swim and swim and swim. Other kids who had polio the same month as I did, did not get this Sister Kenny treatment. They are all dead, I am still here. My arms are strong, and my shoulders, and I can pull myself upstairs and I can hang onto things, and if I am falling I can grab onto something. The next time I heard of Sister Kenny, was a movie that was made called Sister Kenny. With Roselyn Russell. It is a black and white film. But Sister Kenny’s treatment of polio became the accepted treatment of polio. And that archaic medical approach that I originally had is obsolete, virtually medieval. So in any event, I then, the first time I could walk on crutches, I think I was ten. I was in this hospital bed in this sun porch for, I don’t know, over a year.

MN: It was a very long process for you.

BB: Yes. And my mother would take care of me. Tough job. I had brothers and sisters too, and they might have at their age and mine been irritated by the attention I was getting. By the way, I forgot to tell you one thing. When I originally came home from Mary Freebed after getting polio, they put quarantine signs all up on every tree around the house, it was a very big lot, corner lot. On the front door, the back door. It said quarantine.

MN: Like a painted sign.
BB: The health department would use something as big as your pad here [8.5x11 inches] and they would nail those things up. "Quarantine, Danger" kind of thing. And the grocery delivery fellow would put the groceries in the driveway and nobody could come into the house. You see. I was isolated. Do you remember when AIDS first came out, there was a kid who was allowed to go to a school, he picked that up through a blood transfusion. Hemophiliac. And they put him in a plastic thing, remember that?

MN: I remember it in the news.

BB: They isolated this kid in a clear plexiglass kind of thing. We just had that 15 years ago. Again, medieval. Medieval. In any event, after a period of time, the quarantine signs came down. And it took a long time. And I finally started getting up on crutches. I become pretty good on crutches. The first time, this is interesting. You are a lit student, a historian, a student of our culture, aren't you?

MN: Definitely.

BB: The first time that I went to church with my mom, dad, and family, I was on crutches. I think I was 10. I came out of this church on these crutches, and a little kind of Nathaniel Hawthorne, wizened woman, older woman, she looked like she was 85 pounds, you know that type? Came up to me, and in my age she looked like she was a hundred and twenty and she shook her finger in my face, and said "What did you do that made God do that to you?"

MN: Oh my gosh.

BB: The minister grabbed her and pulled her away. I can't remember who she was. The minister was very distressed at this woman. That was the only time ever, I
had that kind of a thought. “What did you do that made God do that to you?” I have never had that thought and I have had polio for 63 years now, anyway, I had to throw that in because there was a time in a more conservative theological time, literalists thought that disease was something that came from the Gods for some kind of punishment. You know what I mean?

MN: Right.

BB: Anyway, I then went back, I think for a couple of months, to the fifth grade in Zeeland. When I was 13, I had a series of surgeries. Very experimental kind of surgery, in Chicago, Wesley Memorial Hospital, which is now Northwestern University Hospital. It is on the North Side, Veterans Hospital is across the street, Passavant is on the other side of the street. Doctor Edward L. Compere and his brother Clinton Compere, prominent orthopedic surgeons from Northwestern were pioneering new surgery and I became one of their experimental patients. My spine was severely curved, which eventually would lead to asphyxiation and they were hoping to straighten it. So I went in the hospital in January (right after my birthday) January 20 perhaps, or 18. The following week they fused my left ankle, because it was dropping down, however, and I would stand on my toes. That fusion has broken. The week after that they fused, the right leg. That is still fused. The ankle and bone to the knee is one piece. Then they tried to straighten out my spine. The way they did that is to put you in a body cast. Which goes from the lap your head around your forehead, down around your chin and your whole body. Your toes are exposed and your pubic area is exposed, and arms are exposed. The rest is all plaster cast. Then they make a pie shaped cut on the side, a wedge, and
put a turnbuckle in and everyday they turn that a bit till eventually you are bent the other way and you look like the letter L. Then when they have that all bent back, it takes about six or seven weeks, they take bone out of your leg actually they shave pieces off from ankle to knee, here [shows shin area where a scar from the incision remains]. Sometimes they take it out of the hip. And they cut a rectangular opening in the back of the cast, then open your back to the spine. The backbone isn't broken, but they have to pack this bone in as if it were broken so that it will grow as one piece, fused, all those vertebrae. That was done on March 21. I know that because March 21 is spring. So between the end of January and March 21 they did that turnbuckle. That surgery took most of the day. It started early in the morning and took most of the day. I woke up the following day. The first thing doctors asked me was, "can you move your toes?" Move the toes, because they can see the toes. The cast doesn't cover toes. Then they take a pin and prick your toes, "Can you feel this?" When they did that back surgery, it was 1945. March 21, 1945. They could have severed the spinal cord and I would be paralyzed. I could move my toes! I was in the hospital till October and then I could go home in that huge cast. I remember April 15, 1945, Franklin Roosevelt died. Everybody in this ward built for seven people, on the seventh floor, they had 15 or 16 people in that ward. They had a lot of wounded soldiers. I was the youngest one in there and I could buy a pack of cigarettes once a week. Cigarettes were hard to come by. I would auction the pack off to the highest bidder.

[Laughter] Which I would do. Back to Franklin Roosevelt for a minute. When it was announced he had died, everybody cried. There was a lovely Afro-American
cleaning lady named Delia who wept profusely because her hero was dead. My
dad cried. He happened to be there that day. Everybody cried. The reason I
remember Roosevelt so fondly is because I was invited to Warm Springs, Georgia
by Franklin Roosevelt’s staff to exercise in his pool, maybe with him, because
Franklin Roosevelt had polio. And he would exercise by swimming. My mother at
that time was afraid to let me go because I was between 10 and 13, too young she
thought. That is why I remember Franklin Delano Roosevelt in addition to his
statesmanship and political service to the United States. But he is one of my
heroes. All of my heroes are dead, Matt. Anyway, I was hospitalized most of that
year. I spent a lot of time reading comic books, war comic books. I had stacks of
comic books. I had a couple of Zane Grey novels, which someone objected to
because Zane Grey was a western writer, writing romantic novels about the West.
I had stacks of comic books, and I would read what are called big little books,
which are comic books with some written copy. While I was at Wesley in 1945 in
the spring I had a tutor come in one time. Amazingly I received an 8th Grade
Diploma from this school in Chicago. I never went to that school. This tutor came
in one time and talked about mathematics. Other than that, I am a thirteen year old
kid, totally encased in a cast with about three years of education. I had a radio
next to my bed. There was this nurses aide who came down every Saturday and
pulled the curtains around my bed and sat down in the chair, and held my hand,
and I am 13 years old, and held my hand and would listen to the metropolitan
opera with Milton Cross. And she would cry and then she would tell me about
what was going one with the Metropolitan Opera. So I didn’t really get
mathematics or anything else, but I did get the Metropolitan Opera. That is probably my junior high education. I came back to Zeeland, and was in a hospital bed in the sun room. Late that fall they took off this huge cast and put on a small body cast around my shoulders. I can’t remember when I began to walk on crutches. And the following fall I went to the ninth grade in Zeeland.

[Tape stopped for repair man]

MN: You were talking about the ninth grade.

BB: I started the ninth grade. Instead of being a student, Matt, I would be rather frivolous. One of the things I wanted to do was fly an airplane. So I went out to Park Township and took flying lessons, I was walking crutches. As a matter of fact I soloed and got my license. I could now fly, I couldn’t walk, but I could fly. By the way, I could drive too because in those days you could get a drivers license at 12, which I didn’t, I think it was 14 when I go it. So I would go to Park Township and I would fly. And the day I soloed in a Piper Cub, J-2; I flew over my mom’s house and she was hanging laundry up outside and I cut the motor and opened the door and I yelled down to her. I was low and should not have been that low and she almost fainted. In any event, back in my scholarly days, it was difficult walking, I had some good buddies who would take me to the movies, to the Holland Theater which is now the Knickerbocker and the Center Theater and the Park Theater in town. One friend would get on one side and one on the other and they would carry me down the isle. Plop me in a seat and we would watch the movie. Many times, to get to the movies (I lived in Zeeland) we had to hitchhike. I am on these crutches and they are holding me up. And invariable we would get a
ride [snaps fingers] just like that, to Holland. Get out of the theater and hitchhike home to Zeeland. The movie cost 12 cents. And I would watch movies. Black and White films. Westerns, Mysteries, Charlie Chaplin, the whole thing.

MN: Oh that is great.

BB: My scholarly life diminished drastically. I would play pool and go to the pool hall. In fact Dr. Bone taught me how to play pool.

MN: Dr. Bone?

BB: He was a Zeeland doctor. He is dead, long dead. I would play pool and I would not go to school, I would play pool. And one day in October when I was in the ninth grade, maybe tenth, my dad said, “Pack your bags you are going to school tomorrow.” In Wisconsin, a private school.” I said, “I don’t want to go.” “Don’t talk back to me,” he replied. Next day, all packed, we drove around Lake Michigan and I went to Wayland Academy in Beaver Dam, Wisconsin for the next three years. You could come home once a semester. And also for Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter. Other than that I was attending a boarding school which was based on a British system, coat, tie, stand up when the teacher came into the classroom, yes sir, no sir, that sort of thing. I was on crutches, a popular girl, now dead, Mitsy MacMinn, cheerleader, a lovely girl invited me to the prom. To the prom? I could barely stand up. But everybody was required to go to the dance, I found [End Tape 1 Side A] out later she was told by the head master to ask me [from notes}. Leg doesn’t work, back twisted. I began to do things socially. Also I was required to go out for a sport. What sport? Well, they had a swimming team so I had to go out for swimming and I had to go to practice
everyday whether I liked it or not. Then there was a musical they put on every year and I had to write some music for that musical whether I liked it or not. I had a tough time with physics, so I had to sit outside of the headmasters office for forty-five minutes everyday studying physics and showing him my homework before I could leave. It was a really regimented, strict school, which was probably the only thing that saved my future. After that, I vowed in my senior year, by the way I went to Hope College for some summer sessions, even though I was still in high school. Took speech, I took, a philosophy course from D. Ivan Dykstra. I vowed in m senior year in high school at this private school and I was on crutches, and I spent five years in high school, that I would not go to college with crutches. I started practicing with a cane and I worked hard to walk with one cane. It was very very tough for me. And then that fall, I went to Lake Forest College in Illinois. But it had a very large campus and I used the rationalization that it was too big for me to get around to and I came back to Hope College for my freshman year. At Hope I had some wonderful professors. Particularly a fellow who taught Spanish. I think he is gone now. And all the old classic professors that were there. I lived at home and I would drive back and forth to college. The next year I went back to Lake Forest. In Illinois for my sophomore, junior, and senior year. And I would go to summer school there too. And that is where I met my wife and on June 5, this year we celebrated our 50th Wedding Anniversary.

MN: Wow, congratulations.

BB: She is a graduate of Lake Forest also. I was not much of an “A” student. I majored in Political Science, and English, and Philosophy. And my buddies were
all “American Express Card” carrying socialists and communists. The kind of Razor’s Edge type of life. We were very much socially into issues, poverty, race, equality. My roommate in my sophomore year was an older guy named Howard, who was from India, actually American but his family worked for standard oil. Introduced me to all kinds of things that I didn’t even know existed. I am not talking about polio.

MN: Carry on, please.

BB: At Wayland Academy, I discovered George Bernard Shaw. I was astounded that there was such a writer as George Bernard Shaw. The great iconoclast. I had a very wonderful English teacher who introduced me to literature. My wife and I were married when I was 21 she was 21. I remember at the church we were married at in Chicago. For some reason or other I couldn’t find my cane, and I couldn’t walk without the cane, and the ceremony was about to begin and a guy was walking by the front of the church with a cane using it as a walking stick. And I explained my plight to him and asked if I could borrow his cane. [Tape stopped to answer phone]. Polio, Alfred Addler said that most of our behavior, Addlerian psychology says that our problems, I should say our life is a life of overcoming inferiority complexes. Because of our inferiority complexes we compensate. And we overly compensate to overcome our inferiority complexes, complex. I don’t know if I ever had an inferiority complex. As a polio survivor, I sometimes get irritated by the fact that I can’t climb stairs. I can but it is slow, but I don’t have my hips that go up or down. I have to pull myself up and I marvel who can climb stairs and how their hips work, and their knees work. Their backs
are straight. I don't know if I had an inferiority complex, probably. I am seventy-one and a half. But you know, when I look back at it, flying lessons, I went from a Piper Cub to a bi-plane. I can show you a picture of that, it is a World War Two kind of thing, then to an army trainer, a P.T. 19. I suppose that might have been compensating for inadequacies I found myself with. I was not in sports. But I wrote all the sports stories for the West Ottawa School System, and I broadcasted football and basketball, although I didn't play, ever. I like sports but don't get too involved unless I bet on some game. When I was a kid I wanted a horse, when I had polio, because a horse could take me around. And I did do a lot of horseback riding in this area here which used to be all woods [James Street near 152nd].

There was a stable over Ottawa Beach Road, and a horse could carry me on it's back. When I was in the ninth grade I had my first, love affair. I meant by that not a sexual thing, but an attraction to someone of the opposite sex. My family had to care of me whether they liked it or not, because it was their duty, I mean by law. And here is this girl who cares for me. Amazing! Three months later I had my next infatuation. I find that I never really had any difficulty with relationships with people. When my wife and I were married in June 1953, I started law school in Chicago. By the way, on our first date, I took her to a lecture by William L. Shirer, the man who wrote "The Rise and Fall of Nazi Germany". Then I would take her to various programs run by the communist party, back in '53, or '52 rather. In '53 we went to our first political convention where they nominated Adlai Stevenson for president. Keep in mind, I have polio, and mobility is a problem, and in those days could pretend to dance and I would like to go to jazz
joints. I am telling you all this because I think my childhood at the age of 8 went
out of the window because of polio, and did not really return to normal until I was
a sophomore at Lake Forest College. So that is approximately a span of 11 years.
However, if it weren't for polio I probably would never have met my wife who
was, when I met her was engaged to somebody else and I asked her to give the
ring back, which she did and we have been married 50 years, but I mentioned to
you Adlerian psychology, but there is also the concept of self-actualization.
Abraham Maslow, the basic needs pyramid on up to becoming the self that you
can truly can become. I told you I was in law school in the fall of 1953. I had a
chest x-ray on the streets in Chicago and they found something that they said
should be pursued so I came back to Holland and had some x-rays and they said
that I had cancer of the lung and that I had 10 weeks to live. My wife was
pregnant, I didn't go back to law school and I started a series of deep x-ray
therapy, they didn't have chemo in those days. I did get a job in a little grade
school up north in the woods. I forgot what it paid, I think $2,700 a year. My wife
came with me so they had two teachers for the price of one. She was an
economics major though, money and banking. I was political science going to law
school. So anyway, in June I had this chunk of lung taken out at Blodgett in
Grand Rapids in 1954, which is probably why I sometimes get a hoarse voice. I
was asked by another school board member to teach in a school in the Holland
area, and I did. Because I could not go back to law school as they monitored my
lung. The following year I was asked to teach at another school, and I did. So
after 39 years and 7 or 8 months, I retired from teaching. My wife went back and
got her certificate in 1954, kindergarten, first second and third grade and after 35.6 years, she retired. While I was teaching I picked up photography, I was the yearbook advisor for 30 some years, the newspaper advisor. We started our own newspaper here in Holland and sold it. The Ottawa Observer. We started a magazine, marketed the magazine. A little of this and a little of that. And then I was diagnosed with post-polio syndrome in 1983, by the University of Michigan. A doctor named Fredrick Mynard who was on the cover of the New York Times Magazine, I have that somewhere in the house, who said I had post-polio syndrome. I had an orthopedic man in Grand Rapids who discovered I was a patient of his mentor, the Doctors Compare at Northwestern. I told you about them, who did this experimental surgery. He requested that I come and see him, and he spent a lot of time with me taking CAT scans and checking it all out and writing to his previous mentors who had retired and were in Florida. He got a letter back he gave me, that said, “ah yes, Bloemendaal, a well used body.” Polio. It is not over Matt. A lot of people think it is licked. There are people who won’t vaccinate their children, there are people who don’t do that for religious reasons or financial or laziness and polio will come back. I did not have the opportunity to have the Salk Vaccine. The vaccine was discovered in 1953. There was a very prominent medical writer in 1953 who told me, that he would not give that vaccine to his cat. I make sure that all my kids have gotten it, grand children, students, I have had thousands of students. I have taught at Grand Rapids Junior College. At Hope College. I didn’t have you as a student.

MN: Nope.
BB: I still do some work at Hope. I am involved in the Hope Community of Senior Professionals. You have heard of HASP?

MN: Certainly have.

BB: I was the president of HASP three years ago. My dear friend Dr. John Hollenbach was the chairman of the English Department. We would travel together. He died a few years ago, throat cancer. We would travel all over Mexico, the United States. His wife, Winnie is still alive. A dear friend. I am only telling you this because you can be twisted and bent and not running the 100 in ten seconds but you can still do what you want to do that is within realistic terms. I can’t be quarterback for the Detroit Lions, I cannot fly a jet, I can do what I can and I have never had feelings of “what the heck happened here?”

MN: One thing I am very curious about, is socially, it sounds like you didn’t have too much trouble getting along with people or making friends, but was there ever a time when maybe you were teased or isolated, or outcast?

BB: I told you about the quarantine, you know what the word invalid means don’t you? In-valid. Right?

MN: Right.

BB: I pulled into a handicapped parking place one time, got out of the car and a guy in the next car got out and he said, “hey, can I talk to you?” He said “My God, I have had this leg and hip problem for six months now, when am I going to get used to this?” And he had tears running down his cheeks. And I said, “oh, probably in about 50 years.” Then I said to him, “Oh, I am kidding, I am kidding, don’t worry about it, you’ll be all right, hang on.” But I just recently said to a
couple of friends of mine that I had an advantage because they had never had a medical problem. They had never had something severe that they had to adjust to. I have had the last rites three or four times in my life. I had to struggle. That is why I told you about Mitsy inviting me to the prom. If she didn’t invite me I would be scared to invite anyone else? My God, I can’t even dance. Plus I am on crutches, but no, socially I have no problems. I instruct people who do have problems. These are the athletes, the Olympic stars, the handsome people, the people that Ivan Albright paints as he looks at these beautiful people, he sees what they are going to become in fifty, sixty years and paints them that way. They are all like Dorian Gray. You know that story?

MN: Oscar Wilde.

BB: Oscar Wilde’s story, I have read him. As a matter of fact Matt, I have been told I have one up on a lot of people because I had polio and I had time to read things that they never read or discovered. But I told you that I did not really get involved in academic work, til in my early 20’s, I took what I wanted to take. When I was a freshman at Hope, I took a course from Metta Ross, a senior seminar, and they let me do that. Probably because I had polio, I don’t know. I took from D. Ivan Dykstra, contemporary philosophy, which was an upper level class. After graduation I was interested in the seminary and a man called John R. Mulder was the president of the seminary who admitted me and was delighted that I was going to pursue theology which I didn’t do. Social problems? No, not really. No.

MN: Did you have any self-consciousness at times?
BB: Always. Always. Like your zipper is open. And then you have those people you meet you and wonder and they all say, “Tell me, were you born that way?” And I remember one time I was a nasty guy, I said, “What way?” I knew very well what they were asking me. I said no, I had polio when I was eight years old back in 1940. But I am a dinosaur, Matt. I don’t see anybody else like me. I see older people in wheelchairs, I see people in electric chairs, Amigos and so on. But they got there because of some acquired thing late in life difficulty. But in my day, they didn’t have mobility chairs. They had these big, clumsy wheelchairs. But not what they have today. I guess one of my saving graces was my dad was a doctor and my mother and my dad were very supportive. I have five brothers and sisters. I could use one of my dad’s cars and I would get around. When I was a college kid in Lake Forest, I picked up smoking, I mean Humphery Bogart smoked, you know who that is? Humphery Bogart?

MN: Yes, Casablanca.

BB: And, alcohol. Gotta go out and have a martini kind of thing, and my early years of marriage were, no difficulties whatsoever. In fact I coached baseball, basketball, track, umpire, I never missed a day’s work. Whenever I had surgery I’d have it in the summer time. My wife took off four years for four kids. But she is a feisty lady took. Also she is also the most supportive person in my life. Some of my older colleagues say, do you have nursing home insurance. I say “oh yes, it is in the closet in the holster.” I hope you get a chance to meet my wife, she went off to a meeting, I’ll show you a picture of her. Ask me some more questions.
MN: What about your family early on, what kind of effect do you think this had on your father, your mother?

BB: I think my dad did sink a lot of money into me. My mother did sink a lot of energy into me. This private school I was sent to was for my own good. I was always independent. My mother and dad never said be careful, you can't walk, you are on these crutches. They didn't have what they call special education in those days, so I was not isolated with other kids, I was always part of the group.

When I was in I think it was the 9th grade, I was on a diving board raft, it was a two-story thing. I was up on the top. I slipped and my leg got caught in a hole in the wood. I went over the side and I twirled around and my leg broke from my knee to the hip. Several places. And that was early in the summer. My dad took care of that and I was in traction all that summer. I got up on crutches again, I had this cast on from the knee up to the hip. It seemed to have healed. I have a distended knee. People talk about their knee problems, well hell, I have had bone on bone for years. I have just recently picked up two canes because of that. The orthopedic people say if they work on it the knee will be worse when they finish than when they started. My wife and I traveled to Europe. Do you know the Neufwanstein Castle, the Disney Castle is patterned after this one, in southern Bavaria. Together we walked up the road, and went into the castle and took a different way than tourists and ended up in the Wagnarian room way up on the top where I pretended to sing a Wagnarian aria to the lady I live with. People came and said what are you doing here. You shouldn't be here kind of thing. When we climbed down, a couple of guys said, "how did you do that, I can't even
get up two flights.” Every time I go up a flight of stairs I am having an EKG and if I pass it if I make it. You know, life is a challenge, no matter what you do. You have to have the most, what do they say, joie de vivre that you possibly can get. I really have never had any difficulty I am aware of socially. I know there are some people who, well, let me re-phrase that Matt. Early on I ran into some that treat you as if you were a leper.

MN: Prejudice?

BB: Yes. You are not a complete person, you are invalid, you are not whole, you do not meet our standard of beauty. I have run into that, sure. But I can understand that. I understand these people. I have for decades taught psychology which is a substitute for religion. English Literature, humanities, economics, they are all the same. Humanities asks the question, what does it mean to be a human being. The next question is “how does one handle an environmental insult?” Do you shrug your shoulders and say c’est la vie, or do you say “oh poor me” and weep. And what you are thinking, your perception, is what guides your life. This woman who called just a bit ago thinks success is making money, having a big house, and cars and stuff. Success is not that. Success is how you live with yourself. If I did not, Matt, accept this, “live with myself.” I’d probably have committed suicide a long time ago. And I have some friends who have done exactly that. Not with polio but with other things. So you accept and you go from there. What is the old phrase, “I ain’t much baby, but it is all I got.” Is that it?

MN: Something like that.

BB: Did you ever read James Joyce’s Ulysses?
MN: No, that is one I have not tackled yet.

BB: I should say, well, the last line, when Bloom asks his wife who is unfaithful, “Do you love me?” and Molly says, “Oh, yes, yes, yes, yes.” Well, how much love and care can one get? Not enough, right? What does Hamlet say to Horatio? “There is more on earth than in our philosophy.” And in his last speech he says, “the rest is silence.” I wonder what he meant by that. What does that mean? I don’t know. Hamlet was educated in Wittenburg Germany. He was going to school there with Horatio. Wittenburg, that is where Martin Luther put his theses on the wall. You know that book I told you about, 1564, the one in the living room.

MN: Right.

BB: Printed in Wittenburg Germany, it is on the shelf over there. My kids will sell it in a Garage sale, probably for a quarter. Make sure you come to the sale.

MN: I’ll be there. When you were younger, still thinking socially, did you know other kids who had polio, other youth your age?

BB: I knew a girl. She was down the hall in the hospital. She was eight, she had polio. She is dead now. She was down the hall, we were all in different rooms. The curtains pulled. She screamed and cried and yelled and wept profusely. That is the last time I saw or heard of her. I did know a guy in 1945 at Wesley. He was injured in the war. Back broken. He kept saying “kill me kill me, open the window push me out, push me out.” He would do that all night. Some guy down the line would say, for god’s sake open the window and shove him out.” This kind of thing. [End Tape 1] Everyone has a concern. That is how long at 71 and a half can I continue to stand up, move around, mobility is a big issue for polio people...
for people with orthopedic difficulties, for people with strokes, for people who have anything, Parkinson's, I wonder about mobility. I try not to curb myself. I try not to pamper myself. I try not to say, you can't do this. I can do anything as long as my body holds up. But I have been slowing down. I go to Mexico every year. I am not this year coming up. I would spend two to three months there. I find the world a fascinating place, whether you are learning languages or culture or philosophy or music or whatever. And while you are alive you better do that kind of thing. But I do worry, I have never told my wife that, but she knows I worry about how long I'll be able to stand up. The reason I have carpet in this house is because any little bit of water on the floor, I can slip and crash down. Other people put tile in. I don't have any tile. I have carpet. Tile in the bathroom, and by the pool. My life has been good. My brother is 6'2'', another brother who is 6'1'', I am about 5'4''. However, if you would straighten me out, I'd probably be 5'10''. Because of that scoliosis. Whenever I flew an airplane, I would never wear a parachute because if I ever jumped out I would snap my back, so you go down with the ship. But I have had a good life with polio. We are all aging, deteriorating, you have got to stay active and be involved and I do. I told you I taught a couple of years at Hope. I was the president of HASP. I taught maybe 12, 15 classes at HASP to adults. I have another one coming up in the fall.

MN: During your career where did you teach mostly?

BB: Mostly West Ottawa High School. 12th Graders.

MN: Poli Sci?
BB: No, I taught government to adults. I taught advanced math. I taught any subject for psychology, humanities, and economics. Psychology, the scientific study of human and animal behavior; economics, how do we share the goods in this world with the people who need it. And humanities, what does it mean to be a human being. Well you get the answers to that questions from the literature, philosophy, poetry, music, art, of the world. Don’t you?

MN: Certainly.

BB: If I lived another thousand years, I couldn’t get the answers. Too many languages to learn, too many books to read, too many—

MN: Too many people.

BB: People, yes, to embrace, to love,

MN: The answers are there but too big to hold on to.

BB: My sex life with polio? Tremendous. How’s that? Even at 71 and a half, absolutely, with no Viagra. How’s that?

MN: Active.

[Laughter]

MN: What about community, how do you think polio has influenced or shaped your view of community, people together?

BB: I must tell you I am not affiliated with a church. By the time I finish the Sunday New York Times, ah, its over. I have taught in the church before. I have taught classes at Hope Church before. Bill Hiligon’s got me into that. I have gone to funerals. I have spoken at funerals giving eulogies. Third Church, Methodist Church. People know that I am not an active church goer. I don’t keep any secrets
from people, although my dear friend who goes to Hardwig Christian Reformed
tells me there is a pew with my name on it. He means whenever you are ready, we
are. I have the Heidelberg Catechism on the table here, a leather bound edition of
it. I always wanted to be a Trappist monk after I had read Thomas Merton’s Seven
Story Mountain. But then I met Audrey.

MN: Had to give up that dream.

BB: I couldn’t embrace the celibacy bit. [Laughter] Community? I will tell you this
Matt, that all my life I have been an embracer of the less fortunate. People who
are having difficulty living. People who are black, Hispanic, prostitutes, AIDS
victims, my dear friend killed himself because he was harassed by the Sheriff’s
department because he was homosexual. Wonderful teacher. Worked at Hope.
Killed himself. I have not gotten over that. I give out scholarships every year in
his name. This year I gave out about 9,000 dollars to High School kids going on
to school, every year I do that for him. I suppose because I had polio I found
myself different, well, I am different. I could understand and relate to people who
were underdogs, different, notembraced by the community. Perhaps tolerated but
ignored. And I think people who know me know that I do that. And I always will,
because they have to be embraced. And I think polio did that for me. I spent many
lonely days and weeks and months by myself. I cannot to this day tolerate too
much ceiling light. I used to lay on my back and look up at the ceiling lights and I
used to put my arm over my head to shield my eyes from that ceiling light. My
wife knows that, I don’t like ceiling lights. I used to listen to the radio. And knew
all the romantic songs. Two Ton Baker the Music Maker, out of Chicago, the
Dave Garaway Show out of Chicago, *Going to Take a Sentimental Journey.* That kind of thing. I knew all of those things. I had nurses who used to kiss me when I was a kid, I don’t know if I weren’t kissed and loved that I would be saying that. When you are in a corner, wrapped up in plaster and you are achey and you wonder if you will ever get out of this thing. There are a lot of long lonely times. Once I did get out, I suppose I tried to live to the hilt. I don’t mean by that a hedonistic existence, but one of curiosity about this world we live in. There is a song by Peggy Lee titled *What’s It All About Alfie.* There is another one she sings, and it is titled *Is That All There Is?* What do you mean my that? Well the rest is silence, says Hamlet. Ask me another question.

**MN:** Well, you talked about church, you talked about things of that nature, aside from church, has polio affected your spirituality at all? You relationship with God?

**BB:** You know, I missed being in the Army. I was drafted in the Korean War and when they found out I had polio, they said I was 4F. I still have the draft card. Although I did volunteer to fly. My roommate was from Nanking, China. I did receive from the Chinese government, a medallion, my wife wears it once in a while, of appreciation for volunteering my services. How do you like that? Spirituality, I am still trying to figure that out, Matt. I still hope I have time to grow. I want to try to live to be at least 80. I am 71 and a half. But my wife tells me you better find a theologian so he can bury you, not cremate me. But I have a fine ex-student who is the pastor. Maybe he will do it. But I am working on that.

**AB:** [Audrey, Bill’s wife enters front door] Hello?!

**BB:** [Throws Voice] Hey you better go away before my wife comes.
AB: Hi hun.

BB: This is Matt.

AB: Nice to meet you. [Begins sorting mail at the kitchen table where we are all sitting]

BB: Ask me another question.

MN: What about mythologies or urban legends, was there anything as a boy having polio were there any kind of mythologies or urban legends that you were told by people around you, maybe peers, maybe adults, about having polio or catching polio? Things you can't do?

BB: Only that one time of quarantine, Matt. I had a handful of guys who were very close to me.

MN: Good friends.

BB: Yes, good friends. Jim Bonestra, lives in Florida now. Jack Miller, he lives in Florida. Larry Dickman who is my sister's deceased husband. Jack Carlson. We always did things together, and as I told you my parents never curbed me, threw me to the winds.

AB: The wolves.

BB: The wolves, and said, go ahead, do it. And I did. I was a little slow, but I did. Maybe that was a saving grace. Because I never felt any different. Yeah there was this one time and these guys all were all out for football and I sat on the bleachers and I wasn't involved in that see? But that was a momentary kind of thing. I suppose when you are in early puberty you know you get a little bit sensitive about the whole thing. I should say the only thing that ever made me startled was
that little old woman in the church. That never really shook me up other than
disgust. My dad was also a doctor and he was never put on the hot seat by
anybody. Tough guy, and in those days—

AB: Get a sense of being needed and appreciated.

BB: In the sense of, in those days if you played tennis on the city’s tennis courts on
Sunday, you could be arrested. What do we do, we play basketball outside. I used
to be really good at that. I mean hit from the side.

AB: And dribble with your cane.

BB: And this would be on Sunday, and some of the neighbors would peer out of the
windows see, because it is Sunday and we were playing basketball. But I drove
my dad to many calls and I knew many of his patients and he took me here and
there, and to a couple of autopsies I watched when I was younger. A woman who
was dying of corosis of the liver because of alcoholism and saying to me, Billy I
don’t want to die, crying. As a matter of fact I just talked to a woman who was 74,
and I was on the phone with her husband first bawling him out. I said let me talk
to your wife and she got on the phone and I said, just tell your husband that if he
doesn’t appreciate you, tell him I am in the wings. And she said, I am going to tell
him Billy’s in the wings. [Laughter] I have no trouble with that. I suppose
everybody runs into trouble no matter what but you have to let it fall off, Matt. I
do. I told you that one of my big concerns now is standing, mobility, I never said
that in front of her, but she knows.

AB: You don’t have to say it, after 50 years, we were married for 50 years.

BB: What is it like to be married to a guy with polio?
AB: I never noticed. I don’t notice, you are just Bill.

BB: Ask her some questions. Do you have any questions for her?

MN: What has it been like, what has—

AB: One thing is, you learn never to complain. Because my little ache is never, or try not to because then I think, why should I complain of a headache or something when you have been.

BB: I notice a lot of my elderly friends don’t complain too much around me.

AB: Not to you, in front of you. Although they may in the kitchen when we are making coffee or something.

BB: I listen to their difficulties.

AB: You don’t have, you learn to say, this couldn’t be that bad, because—

MN: You learn to make necessary adjustments?

AB: Yes.

MN: How did your life changes with Bill?

AB: For the better.

BB: No mine was for the better.

AB: No mine was for the better.

MN: Look I started an argument, sorry! [Laughter]

AB: I looked at him in college, and I just knew that he was the one.

BB: Did you hear that?

AB: I never really, there was nothing we couldn’t do. His determination is just amazing. I would say, I can’t do this. He’d say, oh yes you can. Then I think, well I guess I could do this. Like first of all, I became a school teacher for 35 years and
I was an economics major in college, and then there weren't any jobs other than maybe a clerk when I came to Michigan in '53.

BB: Because you were a woman.

AB: They wouldn't hire a woman. And I had taken money and banking, and economics, and things like that. And they would say, do you type? Are you an accountant? I said no. Because I had a college degree I could, I got a job with a special certificate to teach. I remember you dropping me off and I said, "I can't do this." It was that one room school, two room school. I had three grades, never had a teaching course in my life, I had Kindergarten, first, and second grade, but he just had such confidence all the time that it sort of rubs off.

BB: That's me overly compensating.

AB: Not only on me, but on your students.

MN: Supportive.

AB: Very supportive. So I started and after, in '54, and I quit in '90. So this temporary job lasted a long time. So.

MN: What about in the community, what about meeting people, do people ever ask you about Bill, about his disability. Do they ever ask you?

AB: Not really, well, we are so well known in the community I think, because he can't get by with taking someone out for coffee and so on.

BB: Let me add Matt, that maybe there have been two or three times when I can sense immediately someone who feels that either I am inferior, or this person is superior, I can sense that in about 5 seconds. And when I do sense that, which is
rare, two or three times. I suppose I am very severe with that person, and cutting, and unforgiving. [To Audrey] You may have noticed that.

**AB:** I notice that you have little patience with people who can't handle things.

**BB:** But I try to help them.

**AB:** Oh yeah, I know, but I meant like physical things. Like little, less things.

**BB:** People who are weepy, I give them a handkerchief.

**AB:** Oh, god my arthritis is really killing me today.

**BB:** But they don't say that in front of me.

**AB:** But they don't dare anymore because they know you are not going to give them any sympathy.

**BB:** I do, but not tea. Tea and sympathy.

**AB:** Oh, you'll give them the tea, but…

**BB:** Isn't she a lovely lady?

**MN:** Of course.

**AB:** But I feel fortunate because, you just can do anything.

**BB:** No I can’t.

**AB:** Yes you can.

**MN:** [To AB] What about challenges, have there been any particular challenges for you, because of living with Bill and polio?

**BB:** She has to carry my drink outside or I’ll drop it.

**AB:** Well, there are lots of challenges. First, he buys too many books, too many newspapers. When you get five newspapers a day, and things like this, it is just, not because of his polio.
MN: Because of his reading habits.

AB: His, he likes to collect things. Here I go to questers today to learn about collecting.

BB: I have been on the school board for twelve years. I have a meeting tonight.

MN: Ottawa county?

BB: West Ottawa.

MN: Excuse me.

AB: As soon as he retired he got on the board.

[Discussion of the Oral History Project removed from transcript]

AB: I remember when I was a young child, and during the epidemic season, and I was living in Chicago and not being able to go to the beach, not being able to go to events, you had to stay home in your neighborhood, and even when the parks had programs, well this is in the 30s and 40s. The 40s I guess that is when I would be, early 40s. We just could not go. Then I never really knew anyone from at home that had polio.

MN: This is a question both of you could answer, but it seems that from talking to other people and reading that there is this great fear—

AB: Oh terrible fear.

MN: Throughout America, through people everywhere, what was your experience with this fear, how do you understand this fear that people kept expressing?

AB: Well, you heard that there was this horrible disease and you just didn’t dare go out. If one of your parents said you can’t go anywhere where there are going to be a lot of people. Like the fair and the carnival and the beach. You just didn’t
because you were just deathly afraid of getting it. Because they didn’t have the
vaccines back in those days. So that is my experience. You probably didn’t even
know about it.

BB: Not when I got it, no. I had it. Post-polio was misdiagnosed in the 80s some
doctors thought that that was the virus which was dormant, now coming back.
What post-polio is that you have lost the function of that limb you relied on the
excessively. That is what that is. Doctors have a lot to learn. Medicine is a big art
form. And a science of course.

MN: Continuously learning and relearning.

[Discussion of transcript and article removed]

BB: There was a meeting one time in Grand Rapids at the Eberhard Center. Polio
survivors, and we went there and I thought that I would meet people who had
polio. I didn’t want to go at first. I thought that we would meet people who had
polio as severely as I did. Then I asked the question, “how many people in this
audience had polio?” And practically everybody raised their hand, but these were
people who were walking, who had no problems who had a minor case of polio,
who overcame it.

AB: But, if I may interject with one thing. The fact was that there were mostly women.
There were two things, there were a lot of young people and mostly women.
Why? Because guys...

BB: Are macho.

AB: They would not want to admit, or they would pretend that it didn’t happen, and
they would not go there. And the young people, someone asked, well, didn’t you
have the vaccine, because they were in that age group where they would have had it and possibly they chose not to. Then you wonder, this is terrible, why didn’t they, I thought everyone got a polio vaccine. Then when it is like it is not happening anymore, why bother getting it? Those were the things that really shook me at that meeting.

BB: A friend of mine who is dead now, he died about four years ago, five. Milard DeWeerd. His wife is Helen DeWeerd. Miller had polio when he was a baby and he was in a wheelchair all his life. He ran a gas station across from Skiles on 8th Street. It was a Standard gas station. He was badly hit by polio. That is the only other person I know who was badly hit. I knew of a woman who lived on Division who was in an iron lung and died in the iron lung. In Chicago I knew of a guy who was from the Marshall Field family, who would fly every year to St. Ann DeBeaupre in Quebec thinking a miracle would occur. Which it never did. I went into St. Peter’s Church in Montreal and a monk, priest came up to me and told me to use this St. Joseph’s oil. I have it in a cabinet in the other room. We went through the church and we went through the stations of the cross and I said to the monk, priest, I guess it didn’t work and he said “your faith isn’t strong enough.” So you run into that. Anyway, we have had a good life, a really wonderful life. [Tape Stopped]

BB: Community has change tremendously from when I was a kid to today. And the structure of the community back in the 40s, actually I was born in ’32, was a very tight knit Dutch community. I met my first Hispanic person when I was in the ninth grade when my dad made a call and she lived with her family above Skiles
Tavern. I saw this dark skinned woman, girl, young girl. But as far as being an uptight kind of community. I never sensed that when I grew up.

MN: In Holland and Zeeland?

BB: In Holland and Zeeland, I was never aware. I knew there were certain standards of behavior that you had to follow. In catechism when I was a kid, one of the questions asked in the book, I still have the book, was who are your three best friends? I put down Jim, John, and Larry, and the man teaching it who was a minister let everybody go and they were going out to play ball except me because I had the wrong answer. And he told me to sit there and think about that and I had no idea what he was driving at and finally after about and hour and a half watching the dust float in the sunlight, he said I will tell you the answer, “Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Write that in and you may go.” That is in my mind. [End of Tape 2 Side A] Really strict kind of person.

AB: I don’t think you really always said, you never let any of the community bother you.

BB: I never did.

AB: I came from Chicago and people said “How are you going to stand it? How are you going to fit in” and so on. Shoot. It was no problem at all. You can let things really bother you. One of the reasons we moved out to the country—

BB: That’s one of the reasons, isolation.

AB: Because I worked five days a week, had four kids and I had to do the laundry and the lawn and stuff on the weekends and if we were living in Zeeland, possibly they would frown upon my hanging out the laundry on Saturday and Sunday, but
those were the only days that I had time to do that, so we decided to move here.

There was nothing around except farmland.

BB: But we never had any difficulties. By the way, when I was a kid with polio, when I came down with that in 1940, I think I had a lot of community sympathy, and a lot of community support. I’d get books delivered and people would always sort of, I would say take care of you, you know what I mean? There was a guy named Dick Oosterbaan who was in World War I, he had his leg blown off. He would come almost everyday down to the house and bring his World War I books and let me feel the machine gun bullet holes across his stomach. I was in this hospital bed. He let me look at his wooden leg and he would tell me stories and so on. And he walked down just to say hello. And the postman always used to come in, Bill Claver.

AB: Do you think that was because it was a small town and because your family was well known?

BB: Yes, I had an advantage, there was no doubt about it. I guess, philosophically, when it happened, I was probably was confused and wondered what in the world happened. One of the times when I was just home from the hospital as a kid. I was in the upstairs bedroom and I told you this before, I had this hallucination that standing in the doorway was a devil like monster who was laughing, in the doorway. It is like something out of some Hollywood film. It was a hallucination. And at first, oh for many months I’d have the same dream and I would think it was a neurological problem. I had double vision for months. I would have this dream and everything was black except this white line would shoot out like that,
like a dark universe. I don’t know what that was, I don’t know why the double
vision, but everything was double. I thought that was the way it was going to be
for the rest of my life. And then that gradually cleared up.

AB: Hey, you’d see two of me. [Laughter]

BB: These are just symptoms that you go through. C’est la vie.

MN: How much do you know of your father’s practice?

BB: Oh gosh, he had an extensive practice. He is one of these doctors who went seven
days a week, 24 hours a day. Way out in the country you’d get all kinds of people
that—

AB: And your mom would always say “who is going to ride with dad?” Because he
would be tired and have to go to the country and he had, there were six kids, so
especially his older ones could ride with him or drive him out to the country.

BB: I knew a lot of people, most of the patients.

AB: Then the patients came to the house often.

BB: That was where I saw my first baby delivered, on the kitchen floor. I was a real
little kid and I didn’t know what in the world was happening or when the doorbell
would ring and the police chief is there with a guy and a woman and the woman
had smashed the bottle of whiskey over this guys face, she split him down the
center of his head. Then he would walk across the carpet into the kitchen
dropping blood.

AB: Your mother would get so upset because she had a nice colonial house and she
always wanted them to come in through the kitchen because these people bleeding
would come in. I really got an education.
BB: My dad spoke Dutch, and my mother was Canadian, so I don’t know Dutch, but I did learn swear words from the guy who ran the gas station down the street. My dad would say, “don’t ever say that word again” kind of thing. But the first time Audrey was up here from Chicago we weren’t married, we were at my folks cottage out on the beach here. The phone rang, “yeah, bring him right over.” All these cars came. It was a guy who was on the other side of the lake on his boat and he stepped off his boat, they had a party, a lot of alcohol. And the boat had drifted away from the piling the dock and he went down and got his leg cut on a nail and ripped all the way up to his hip. They brought him over and had him on the kitchen, dining room table, and my dad only had sewing thread for buttons. They used a bottle of whiskey on the wound and then sewed the leg up with the thread. And just then took him to the hospital, the guy is bleeding profusely, anyway, the wife of this guy came over and she called me Billy and I said, “I want you to meet my wife,” she put her arms around my neck, really reeking of alcohol. This is Audrey’s introduction to this conservative community, and then the woman turned to my dad and said, “Let the S.O.— die.” How are you...?

AB: This is her husband and I thought what kind of a community is this?

BB: She was cursing and then back to me and then she threw up on the floor and wiped her hand and then back to me again and this was Audrey’s introduction to this conservative Holland community.

AB: I had a lot to tell them when I went back home.

BB: They piled them all in the car and took him to the Holland Hospital and sewed him up better so he wouldn’t bleed to death. I knew these patients. I knew these
people and their needs and so on. As a matter of fact I went to this autopsy with my dad on a Sunday morning, it was a man we both knew. He had been drinking too much, he was out in his car, and he was smoking a cigar and he fell asleep and the cigar dropped on his lap and he started on fire. He died; he burned to death. So I went to the autopsy and Audrey had cooked one of her first meals for my mom and dad. And my dad took his fork and tapped it on the meat and he said this is just like so and so’s chest because it was all burned. So that was the kind of thing we knew.

AB: They were a wonderful family, we were very happy.

BB: I could tell you more.

MN: What else of his practice do you remember, did he ever tell you stories or logistics?

BB: Many stories. Absolutely.

AB: He never kept records. It wasn’t like you went in and you had to say your insurance card. It was after they have a baby, it was “how much can you afford?” Seven dollars, or whatever. What do you have in your billfold, three?

MN: Did he ever barter? Can’t afford money.

AB: Oh sure, not so much as barter, but that was how he was paid. With food and things.

BB: Especially during the depression.

AB: It amazed me. His mom had six children and she was his dad’s nurse, she ran the household, Bill had polio, which made it, that would be like having about four kids. Not that you were work, but it was more difficult, you know what I mean.
One of the greatest things she gave me when I got married was his baby book. It was a small book, approximately, with a wood cover, and in it, it listed the gifts when he was born. One chicken, a peck of potatoes. Food stuff and things like that. Now this was in the thirties. Here I have all these conveniences. I gave my daughter her book in plastic, I had not even written in it, because I was just too busy, but she was much busier than I, and she had written all this stuff down.

BB: My dad was drafted in 1941, he was an army doctor. I learned to throw the dice or play craps at Battle Creek at Fort Custer when I was a kid on crutches, waiting for my dad to finish his work. My dad never received a penny, compensation, or help from the state because of my polio. They had the Michigan Rehabilitation Act but he was always told that he made too much money and didn’t need the money, so he never got a dime and had to pay for everything himself which was a financial drain, but thank God he did it, or otherwise I would not be here. One of those things. And when he was drafted, my mother had to run the whole show. I think he was in the Army two years, something like that.

MN: What kind of work did your father do with polio, did he take a particular interest in it with you having polio?

BB: I have the book around, the start of the book he was writing. With my uncle Jack who was a doctor. Polio wasn’t that well understood, I have a lot of stuff on polio somewhere.

AB: Did you tell him about Sister Kenny?

MN: Yes, he did. It is amazing.

BB: You have heard of Sister Kenny?
MN: Yes, I have.

BB: I don't know, it has been, for the two of us it has been a very productive, exciting life. I'll tell you something, I do have a sore joint here and there, I don't mean a joint, I mean an elbow or a knee. We used to go to California, all over the country, Hawaii in the summertime, and I'd take National Science foundation grants and every summer we would go somewhere for the whole summer. Whether it was in psychology, developing nations.

AB: He would go to school, we would live on campus.

BB: Pomona College. Just all over the place.

AB: As soon as school was out, we would pack up all four kids and off we'd go to school somewhere.

BB: Well, I have plenty of doctors who have not read the book yet, that particular chapter on post-polio syndrome or polio, or how to treat something like this. They don't know. I one time had a toe that was killing me. I would stand on my foot, the good foot. And I would be walking on that toe and I would get a tremendous corn on that toe which really ached, really sore. Then I would have to get a razor and cut the corn down and cut into my foot and so on. And I wanted this toe to be cut off. I almost did it myself, chopped it off. I had this guy, an orthopedic man who said he thought he could fix that for me. I went up there and under the anesthetic and woke up and he said we are on page three, he had these Xerox copies, he had never done the surgery before, he had the pages on my chest. I'll give them to you after the surgery he said. But he finished the surgery and then I
developed a massive infection in his leg. I still have the copies of the surgery that he did.

AB: It was rather experimental.

BB: I always looked rather humorously at these things. I had a doctor one time and I’d go see him and he would look at me and he’d say, you’re still alive? And he charged me for that. Well, what the heck. I hope we have an opportunity to see you again, I will extend an invitation that any time you are in this neighborhood, please stop in.

MN: I don’t want to keep you from your meeting.

BB: Ah, well you can go for me. Do you want to see a picture of our wedding day?

MN: Yes

[End of Interview]