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## Becksvoort, Sylvia Oral History Interview: Parents of Baby Boomer Generation

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2001 Oral History Project  
Parents of the Baby Boomers, 1941-2001  
Interviewee: Sylvia Becksvoort  
Interviewer: Geoffrey Reynolds  
19 June 2001

GR: Sylvia, tell me a little bit about what you were doing, how old you were at the beginning of the war, in 1941.

SB: I was going to Zeeland High School in those days, and I remember that war was declared, and we were in a history class. I will never forget that because boys in class rose up right in the class. We closed our books, of course, and the teacher was talking. These boys, they were ready to serve. It was just a spontaneous thing. We were only juniors at the time. It just seems like patriotism ran very strong in those days. When our teacher, Mr. Roberts, brought the war situation in, we had been keeping up with it in world history. That morning when it broke out we all had that same feeling, "What could we do for our country?"

GR: As a young lady, and as a junior in high school, what was your immediate reaction when you heard that?

SB: I think one of concern, because a lot of the boys that I would know, I knew they would be going into service. And thinking this all over, where was my place in it as a woman? In those days you didn't serve as quickly as you do today. I had been going with my husband, Juke, at that time off and on, not really anything real steady. I was involved in school, and at that time I was a church organist in our small church and was very involved in that; really had no idea of marriage at that time. But he was a little older than I was and was working on his father's farm. I had a good idea that he would be called.

GR: So your future husband had graduated already?

SB: He had never gone on to school. He was through the eighth grade, and it seemed he had a couple of older brothers, he kind of fell between the cracks. They went on to school. They had a huge farm, his father, and so he stayed home and was on the farm.

GR: Where was that farm located?

SB: That farm was located really south of Graafschap, close to maybe about six miles south of Holland.

GR: Where were you living at that time?

SB: I was living in east Holland, at that time, probably about four and a half miles south of Zeeland on State Street. We had a farm there. We did not farm that much. My dad had a business in Zeeland, but we lived over there.

GR: So the war starts, you're still in school so I'm assuming that you continued through high school?

SB: I continued through high school. I know at that time I took Red Cross classes, and anything to make you more prepared to wherever you would be called to serve. I graduated in 1942 from Zeeland High School.

GR: The Red Cross classes you spoke of, where would those be offered?

SB: Those were offered in Zeeland, at the city hall. They were more or less just basic things that you would have to know. Making beds, if we were called on to fill in different places, and with small minor accidents—this is what they had been teaching us.

GR: So you had been kind of told, or you assumed, that you would be serving the war effort in some way?

SB: In some way I think I always wanted to, yes. As much as I could. This did come to pass after we were married.

GR: Once you graduated, what was your next step?

SB: In the back of mind, I had always wanted to be a teacher, very badly. We had a teacher that took a special interest in me. He took me even to Western at that time. Because of the war and the shortage of teachers being called up to service, if you took one year of college, you could teach in a Michigan school. He wanted me to do this very badly, but there was just no way at all that I could go on to school with the way my home life was. I really had to get work. That June, my mother was cleaning a house for a woman, and she asked me to help her, and I did. The first day I worked there, this lady said to me, "What are you planning to do?" She knew I had been out of high school just previously, maybe a week or two. I said I was really trying to get an office job, and she said you may start for us anytime. She said they had a hatchery. In those days, that was before your time, but they had hatcheries...I just cannot tell you how many hatcheries in Zeeland—it was know as a chick town. They owned a large hatchery in Drenthe, Michigan. She said, "I need somebody in the house." They had quite a large home, she and her husband. Their children were all out of the house. She said, "I would like you to do my housework in the morning and to prepare our noon meal (they always had a large dinner at noon), and get the dishes done. Then," she said, "I would like you to go to the office and work." That was just for the summer months, because they were not hatching chicks at that time. So I did that, and in the fall of that year, I started working for them full time in the office. This was a real good situation; I became almost part of their family. She couldn't drive, and I would drive her where she had to go. People were just very much up for meat, because meat rationing was on. People who had never heard of a chick or how to raise them, they all ordered chicks. I cannot tell you how many, and I worked very, very hard

there. I worked there until we were married in 1944. Then my husband had been called up for service. We started writing more. He came home on furlough a number of times, and it seemed like he was going to stay in the states. So then we decided to get married, and I went along with him to Texas.

GR: When were you married?

SB: We were married August 11, 1944. I had never been away from home, and if you're thinking of the situation today or 57 years ago, you had hardly no way of coming home from Texas. Once I was there I knew I had to stay. Plane travel was almost unheard of, just for private people. I was there just a short time, and I said to my husband, "I have to find work here," because I needed to do something. There were no factories there, and the only thing you really could do would be housework, or get into doing something for the Army. So I took a civil service test. They had two air bases there around San Angelo, Texas. I passed the test, and I was given a job right away in the quartermaster corps. At that time, they did not care to have a wife working on the same field a husband was—my husband was at the bombardier school, and I was at Good Fellow. So I worked there. It was different work. I worked with all Army personnel. It was a good experience for me. The only thing was...my husband did get overseas orders that following January, and they would hardly release me to leave. But I really wanted to go home, I had no way of staying there just alone. So I did resign, and I went home with a husband. My uncle had always said to me (he owned a hatchery), "If you ever come home, there's a job for you." So I started working for him in his hatchery.

GR: So what was it like being a newlywed on an airforce base in Texas?

SB: Well, it was different. We rented a duplex house with a woman and her daughter living on one side. We had both been brought up on a farm. I was quite free there, we're thinking 57 years ago, but I would drive out to the Army base, which was probably about 6 to 8 miles where he was stationed, because he was in the medics, and quite often he would have to work nights. I think that the lady that shared the house with us was a little bit uneasy about that, that I would drive out there at night. She was very protective of me, as though I was her daughter. I would do some Dutch cooking, and it was fun. We used to have split pea soup, and she had never heard of green peas. When I was cooking it, she came in and said, "How do these peas turn green?" They had always had the black-eyed susan peas. So I would share Dutch recipes with her, and cook and bring some in to her. We had a good relationship. It was a wonderful thing, we were there probably just a day or two, and she said, "Somebody is on your porch that knows you." I said, "I don't think anybody knows us around here." And here was the couple that this girl I had played with years ago, and her husband was a cadet learning to fly over there. They were stationed there too, and so she and I had a lot in common. We did everything there together, my husband and I, when he was off. We saw what was to be seen, we did fishing on that river, and we took in things on the base. Whatever they offered we would take part in. We also became active in the church there. We had no church of our denomination, but we sought out a church. He had always done this before, he sang in the choir there in the church. We became very active in there with our bible studies we would attend. I think it was a very good experience for us. I would always watch through the quartermaster corps all these names that would come through, and the city they were from. All of a sudden one day I saw a fellow from Holland, Michigan. It was

quite near Thanksgiving Day. I called him and said, "Would you like to come for Thanksgiving dinner?" "Would I ever!" he said. He was a kid of eighteen, and he was so homesick. We had this other couple, and in the meantime another couple from Holland came and was stationed at my husband's field. So we had them all over for Thanksgiving dinner. It was something when you think of how deep this runs, the Holland part of it, because we all shared things about home at that time. Later on, this young fellow's parents contacted us. They were so grateful we had had him over because it seemed that was what he needed.

GR: Do you remember his name?

SB: Yes I do...now wait a minute. His dad used to have a hardware store over on 16<sup>th</sup> Street. It'll come to me...Jack Zwemer. Later on he became a doctor. But I lost contact with him. We used to see his father at the hardware store, and he never forgot that, that his boy had been by us. But it was kind of exciting when I saw Holland, Michigan, come through there, because they came from all over, you know.

GR: Tell me a little bit about keeping house during the war, when you were there in Texas.

SB: We were rationed very much, and we were only with the two of us. It was rare for us to eat out. My husband was only a corporal, and I think at that time our rent was 35 dollars a month, which was pretty steep in those days. These people in Texas, wherever there was a house that they could rent a room out, they did. It was a half a house that we shared. But we ate out very seldom, and I usually cooked like I had done at home. It was a real treat for my husband, because of course he was on base otherwise. He just thought that was super. I would buy a ham if I could, if I had enough stamps, and would cook it. We had a refrigerator, and I would keep it in there and make him sandwiches. I

remember baking, that it didn't turn out good, and I didn't know what to do. I wasn't on the farm, so I actually threw it back at the fence! (Laughs) I remember that time.

GR: So you felt pretty capable of going into marriage, knowing that you could at least keep house.

SB: Yes, we had done quit a bit of that at home always, we were taught that. I had helped other people, too, that needed help with housework. We had always lived upstairs by my grandparents. I think all of that background kind of prepared me for marriage. I was twenty, which to me was is quite young, but I really had no problems with that. You learn a lot along the way, you do. But it was at a time there too, I didn't have to do any canning or freezing. We were just with the two of us. And then, of course, when I came home, I again had that whole period of time to learn some more before we really got into married life again.

GR: So when Juke was taken overseas, you moved back to Zeeland. What was it like being a married woman whose husband was overseas?

SB: That was not that easy, it really wasn't, because you didn't fit in with the young people anymore. We kind of bonded with a couple women whose husbands were also overseas. We would go out to eat and so on. I went right back to being organist at this small church, and in their bible studies—I would really be a part of that. And I was working full time, which helped me a lot. In those days, things were not that easy either. It took you longer to do things. I worked for my uncle but it was kind of strange, the man I had worked for previously, before marriage, if he was real busy, he would call me and say, "Can you help me out on this Saturday?" And I would do this, because at that time the chick business was just overwhelming. It's hard to explain, in this day and age, but you



cannot imagine the hundreds of thousands of chicks that went out of Zeeland—just stacked high by the railroad track. They seemed to arrive alive; I always was amazed by that. We always would put a couple extra in per hundred. It was during that time, too...the first place I worked, that I had ever heard of turkey poults. They started there with raising turkeys, and that was unusual around here, we never heard of that. So they had huge flocks of turkeys, and they would hatch these eggs and they would call these, turkey poults, the baby turkeys. People were very anxious for them for meat purposes. I became quite involved in all of this deal.

GR: How did you stay in contact with your husband?

SB: We wrote about everyday, I did, and I think he was very faithful. When he left for overseas, he sent me a telegram. We had no idea, of course, where he was going. He went to Alaska and then to the Aleutian Islands. But we did keep in contact continually always with letters. His family then became part of my family too. His parents were very loving to me, his whole family. And so I had two families, really.

GR: So, for instance, when Juke's letters would come to you, had they been altered in any way?

SB: No, really not. He was careful, too, about what he would write. Because at that time, the Aleutians still had large airfields where planes could take off for Japan. Japan, of course, had been on these islands. They were censored, but no, he was always very careful. I knew where he was, approximately, always.

GR: Did you set up a code system before he left?

SB: No, we really didn't. I think I knew he was on the Aleutian chain, and then when he got back to Alaska, he spent the last part of his tour of duty there, in Alaska.

GR: Were you anxious when he left?

SB: Yes, when he left I was very anxious, because we had no idea about the future. It was a very uncertain time. But I guess, too, when you look at that time, there were so many people going through it at the same time you were. I think the church that my husband belonged to—and which we do now too—I think there were about 76 young fellows gone from there.

GR: Which church was that?

SB: That was Graafschap Christian Reformed Church. It seemed like every family had someone who was gone. It was a common thing in those days, and when you got together, that's what you talked about.

GR: Was that the support group for you?

SB: Yes, I would say so. I went to the little church of Niekerk. I don't know if you know where that is—it's on Country Club Road. You take 24<sup>th</sup> Street, and it's almost on that corner. I just fell right back in there; that had always been part of me. But Graafschap Church was very supportive of us, and very supportive of the men gone. They had a pastor that was very unusual. Every month he sent each of the fellows a letter, and your talking about 76 men, and without computers or anything like that in those days. He was very much involved with the servicemen.

GR: As the war dragged on, people must have been made aware that there had been some losses overseas. How was that handled at home?

SB: In that small church of Niekerk, we had at least three deaths. The one was one of the women that I had as my close companion, because her husband was gone too. That was a real loss. The church at that time, it just seemed like everybody rallied to these people.

Tremendous. Then this large church of Graafschap, at that time, and that had all of these boys gone, they had two, one was missing in action and the other was killed. Both of them were declared dead. These people, even to this day, I would say people still rally around Memorial Day, the one family still goes to our church. You can still notice this. No one ever forgot this.

GR: The Blue Star Mothers organization, was that present in your town? Where a man would go overseas...

SB: Yes, they would have these stars in the window, very prevalently. Many homes had these stars in the window. And, of course, some of them had the other ones too.

GR: Were there any families that had daughters overseas or wives?

SB: Not that I know of. It was really unusual in those days. But when I worked at Good Fellow field, I worked with a couple of the WACS. The one—it was kind of a sad situation, too; you know, this the patriotism ran so wild when the war broke out—she said that she and her husband both went right to the enlistment office. Actually they had a young son. She was working with me, and she regretted that she had done this. She said, “We were just caught up in this whole thing of patriotism.” But no, I really knew no one, just the ones I was working with there, but not around here that had enlisted.

GR: Had you and you husband consciously decided not to have children until after the war?

SB: Really not, we really didn't; although afterwards we both said it was a wonderful thing that we did not. He was gone, and he said later on to me, “You would have really been burdened with children.” I don't think there was a time, either, that I regretted not having any.

GR: Were there women on the base that did have children?

SB: Yes, in fact the one couple from Holland. She actually flew in from Grand Rapids, which was unusual. She had a little boy of six months. I would take care of him quite often when she would go to the base to see her husband. I guess that maybe we weren't prepared for that yet. I had never regretted that, because the children have been such a joy to us afterwards, that we both could do this, together. I think it would have been very hard time for me.

GR: Do you have the letters that you and Juke wrote to each other?

SB: No, we don't. I regret this now—I usually save everything. But there was a time when we had boxes and boxes full. After the war, we lived in just a very small house—he had owned a 40-acre farm before he went into the service—there was just a small little house where his grandparents had lived in. Nobody lived in there for 20 years, they had stored grain in there. We had an awful time getting housing after the war. We lived in a house trailer for one month. They were not trailers like they are today, it was awful. So I said to him, “Why don't we live on this farm?” “Oh, no,” he said. We scooped grain, we cleaned it up, papered it and painted it, and we lived there for two and a half years. He didn't know exactly what to do when he got out of the service either. He decided to go into carpentry. Then he built a house in front of this old little house, and we moved in there after about two and a half years. We had our son in the meantime. Then we decided to get rid of the letters, both of us together. We had boxes of stuff. I guess there was a time when you were so intent on making a living, and you had children. In those days they did not put the emphasis on old things. We were so glad to get anything new, that you didn't think about preserving things. So we did not keep the letters, no.

GR: When exactly did Juke return from the war? Had Japan surrendered?

SB: Yes. He came home on February 7, 1946.

GR: After that, what happened?

SB: When he was coming home, I took the train from Holland, I will never forget that. I had my best clothes on—I had leopard fur on my coat, and I had a leopard hat to match that—it was really quite something. I took the train to Grand Central Station. I was supposed to meet him there. It was ironic—a neighbor fellow of Juke who had left the same day he did but had gone to Europe in that overseas battle, he happened to see me there, and he said, “What are you doing here?” I said, “I’m waiting for Juke, he’s getting discharged too.” We stayed over there for a couple of days. We stayed in a hotel there right downtown for six dollars a night. And then we both came home on the train. I think he was a little bit lost at first, he really was, because I still had this job with my uncle and I went to work. We lived in this trailer and it was confining for him. He decided to go into carpentry. We had no plumbing, we had no electricity. It was a time when the wires were just not available, nothing. They had stopped at the neighbor on the end, and they had stopped on the other end, and we were in between. We lived there, and we had more people coming to see us. We had lamps. Our neighbor was a principal in one of our Holland Public Schools, and he just felt badly for us. He was so glad that someone was going on the farm to live. He said, “If you kids can get wire somewhere, put it all the way through the field, and plug it in by me.” So after awhile we did. We found wire, just used wire, and we plugged it in by him. But there wasn’t enough power hardly. We would have a dim light, and our washing machine you had to give it a turn to get it started. We had a brand new electric stove standing there, but I was cooking on an old oil

stove. We lived that way for two and a half years. Then when this new house came up, they put the wire through there, and they drilled a well, and I just thought I had a palace.

GR: So it was somewhat difficult for both of you once Juke had come back, getting acquainted?

SB: Just to find our place again, yes. I would say we really didn't have problems, but he had to know what he wanted to do. He had farmed all the time before he left. His younger brother had grown up and had taken his place on the farm. We knew, too, that this was not a place for him. For me, I just kind of went on what I had been doing, but I think for him a little while there, yes, I do. It wasn't until we got involved again getting into our own place and setting up housekeeping there and everything... I have to say, we'll be married now fifty-seven years in August. We have been blessed; I just can't tell you. That doesn't mean that you always agree on things.

[End of tape one, side one]

SB: ...they are in a variety of work. Our son is a pastor in Grand Rapids now. He used to be at Brookside, but he's regional director at Home Missions now in Grand Rapids. We have a daughter in Traverse City that is a nurse; her husband works for the State Department. We have a daughter in North Holland, who is a respiratory therapist at Holland Hospital. Her husband is co-owner of Dykstra Drugstore. Our youngest daughter is a beautician and lives south of town; her husband works for Haworth.

GR: When was your first child born?

SB: Our son was born [date removed], 1947.

GR: So you waited even a little while after the war.

SB: We waited a little while, yes we did. I don't know if this was done intentionally, but we were very pleased. I did have miscarriage, I would say maybe a half a year after Juke came home. Then when I was pregnant with our son, I went to a doctor in Holland that was the first OB specialist. It was Dr. Carl Cook. He charged...I think at that time it was \$50, which was a tremendous price in those days. But my husband wanted me to go there because I had had trouble the first time. And I had him for all four of my children. The last one I think he charged \$100 for, at least the last two. Our son was born on [date removed], 1947.

GR: And the other three?

SB: Our daughter was born on [date removed], 1950. We had another daughter on [date removed], 1954, and our last daughter was born on [date removed], 1957.

GR: Did you spread your kids out on purpose, or was it just something that happened?

SB: I think a little bit on purpose. My husband was very afraid to have children too close.

GR: Why was that?

SB: I don't know if he was afraid of it, but he wanted each one to have their place. At that time, too, he was really working. We had absolutely nothing, and he borrowed money to build the house. He would take extra spare jobs; he started working for 50 cents an hour, so you know what we're talking about. He would take small carpentry jobs at night. I think that he felt that he wanted to give those kids some time, each one. And it was not easy for me to become pregnant either. I did have problems in between; I would run into infection, and I'd have kidney trouble. So he was very careful with that. But the kids were not that far apart; they had a lot to one another. At the farm, they had a couple

horses, we had a dog and cats and some chickens. And we always had a large garden; I did a lot of canning.

GR: Were you the primary childcare provider in the house?

SB: Most of the time, I would say yes. He would certainly help out when he was home, but he worked all the time. It wasn't usual for a mother to work out in those days. So when I did start, I was almost one of the first ones.

GR: So you said you started working outside the home?

SB: I did, I started working outside the home... well, my husband had severe surgery in 1977, we had all four kids in the school. Our son was at Calvin, we had one at the high school, one in junior high, and one in the grade school. He had had more surgery; he had back surgery when our youngest one was six months. He was down for a long time. And in those days, when you worked per hour for a carpenter, you were not covered with anything. This was strictly by the hour, and you had no vacation pay or anything. After his back surgery, he went to Parke-Davis. Parke-Davis needed a carpenter there. The doctor said to him, "If you could into a little easier work..." He had a lot of heavy carpentry work before. So he did; he went to Parke-Davis. They called me from there that they thought he had a ruptured appendix, and that they had taken him to the hospital. So I went right away to the hospital. It was really a ruptured diverticulitis, and peritonitis had set in. He was a very, very sick man. It just seemed at that time, and then it wasn't too long afterwards, the doctor called me and said, "I don't know if Juke will ever be able to work again. He might have more of these polyps that have to be taken out." I always said it was providential because I wanted to teach very badly. This job was advertised, it was put out in all of our church bulletins, that they needed a secretary at Holland



Christian Junior High School. It was where the new Evergreen Commons is now—that building, right in that V. They said part-time or full-time. I talked to the kids and said, “Maybe it’s time that I help Dad now.” Our youngest one was still quite young at that time. I think our son...it was kind of a blow to him, and he said, “Mom, didn’t the Lord always provide for us?” I said, “Yes, He did. But I just feel now that I should be helping.” So, I applied to Leon Witteveen. He called later on, and I guess I made it quite clear. I said to him, “My children are first. If they need me, then I cannot work.” So when he called me and said they had had more applicants, but he said, “You’ve got the job. I remember what you told me. If the children are sick or anything, you may leave. But I would really like to hire you full-time.” Although right then, his daughters were taking over the summer work. You must think we had no computers. All the scheduling had to be done by hand, which was a tremendous task. We had large classes coming through Holland Christian Junior High at that time. Anyway, I took the job, and I really liked it. A few months later, my husband had another surgery, and he was down for awhile. They discovered more polyps on his intestine, and they took a large section from that. We were blessed that he could get back to work again after awhile. Then I should have quit working, but I didn’t.

GR: Why was that?

SB: I did it to help out, you know? But I really enjoyed my work there. I talked to him about it and said I really liked the work. He said, “Then why shouldn’t you stay there?” So I worked there 18 years. During that time, our children got married, and it was just a very fun job for me. I loved the kids and the kids loved me. I never locked my car door, if you can believe this, and they would have to borrow money. It was a time where you

could really also be a mother to many of them that needed you. At that age...I think those kids are not kids anymore and they are not adults. I think our third one was a ninth grader at that time. And that was the last ninth grade class that came through there. Then we put it into the six, seventh, and eighth grade. To me, I liked the work. And that was as close to teaching as I ever got. We just have enjoyed young people. We have twelve grandchildren. These kids are very close to us. When they have a problem...this big guy of 29, he still calls. He teaches in Park Ridge, Illinois. "Grandma, just hear me out," he'll say. We just appreciate them. I tell it how it is, too. This doesn't mean you always agree. But when they ask my advice, I give it. (laughter)

GR: How was your family life different than your parents', once you reflect on it now?

SB: Well, quite a bit of difference. I didn't say this to you, but my parents had marital problems. When you're thinking back—I'm 77 years old—it was unheard of in those days, made public. And my dad had a business in Zeeland, and when I was in high school they started having real marital problems. I did not have an easy life. In those days there was no bus, and we lived four and a half miles south of Zeeland. I walked home from school many, many nights. There was a separation period with my parents, and then when I was pregnant with our son, their divorce became final. I think that kind of brought me to a point that I really wanted our marriage and our family to succeed. I think I gave it everything I had. I do a lot of praying; my husband said to me, "You mean you ask the Lord for this?" I said I do. And I pray for each of the children and each of the grandchildren everyday by name. If there is a problem, you bring that before the Lord. I think, too, that we have had a wonderful family life, and I could not say that before. I think maybe you have to know the difference. I think I always questioned the

Lord years ago—why he let me go through that—because it was something unheard of. I was an organist in a small church. We lived in a small area. I knew of no one who was divorced, to tell you the truth. Many times I asked the Lord why He had done that. It wasn't until I worked at the school that I knew that what the Bible says—sometimes He lets you go through those things—that you can share somebody else's problems with them, in I Corinthians. So when a student came in one day and said to me—he was very, angry, he threw something against my cupboard—and I said, “What's wrong, Chad?” He said, “You wouldn't know anyway, Mrs. B.” I said, “Maybe I would.” He said, “I thought my folks were going to get together. Now my Dad has got a girlfriend.” He was so angry, this little fellow. I said, “Why don't you sit down, Chad. You and I are going to talk.” Then I could tell him that I knew what that was, the hurt. Then I realized that had really been given to me that I could help somebody else.

GR: Did you have siblings at the house?

SB: I had one sister who was about seven years younger than I. Nowadays it's so prevalent, but in those days you never heard of it. And I imagine there were many problems in a home, but they were not aired. I think, maybe, that in the long run it has really made us work at marriage tremendously. We have been blessed here, I just can't tell you. With many friends where the Lord took parents separated, that's not easy for kids. But he has provided other people in my life. ...

GR: Did you receive any advice on child-rearing, written or otherwise, from your Mom or your father?

SB: Not too much, I would say. Now my sister was quite a bit younger than I was, and I helped her a lot. But otherwise, no, I would say not.

GR: Did you help her along, being a younger sibling?

SB: Yes, a lot; I did. That probably strengthened me too for what I had to do.

GR: Did either you, or Juke, spend more than 40 hours per week away from the family on a job? Or did you try to be very consistent in getting home?

SB: You know, it was kind of nice, the job I had. Our youngest daughter—I quit apologizing to her a few years ago for working out. She would ride to school with me because she was going to the school. Then she would go home on the bus—they would all go home on the bus—and it would bother me terrific that I wasn't there for her. But summers, Mr. Witteveen's daughters, they did this for a number of years that I did not have to work summers, which helped me. Then when I did work summers, the kids were not young at all, that you'd say they were real young and had to have a babysitter. Our older daughters kind of laugh about me now, but in those days it weighed heavy on me. But Juke would spend more than 40 hours at work. I don't think I did, because I was always home on Saturdays and Sundays.

GR: So did that affect your relationship with Juke, him working so many hours?

SB: No, I don't think so. I don't think it did.

GR: He would be gone Saturdays too?

SB: When they were real busy, they were working on Saturdays. Then when I had been working all week, I would do a lot of baking on Saturday. The children would help me; we had a good day together.

GR: So you participated quite a bit by having them in the kitchen with you.

SB: Oh yes.

GR: Did Juke miss that, from what you could tell? Not being here on Saturdays?

SB: I don't think so. He did not always work Saturdays either. There were many times when he didn't. Because he would be very involved even in the canning and stuff. And our garden and everything—it was a family project. I don't think he missed that. I don't believe that.

GR: Did he come home at 5:00 every night?

SB: Yes.

GR: So the evenings were the family's.

SB: It was the family's in the evening, yes.

GR: Just from your recollections of the neighbors around you, was that a common thing in Holland? Nine to five, or eight to five jobs?

SB: Yes, unless they were farming. Our neighbor was a principal, he would get home a little earlier. But no, that was a common practice. In fact, my husband rode with three other fellows from that whole area where we lived that were working at Park-Davis, and they would leave together in the morning and carpool together.

GR: Did Juke receive benefits?

SB: Yes.

GR: And did you receive benefits from Holland Christian?

SB: No. And I guess I chose that, too, because I was covered with his insurance.

GR: So you were actively thinking that out—the whole medical issue?

SB: Oh yes. Then when I retired, I had been there long enough that I do get a small pension. But I never took any benefits. When I was working there, I was covered by him. I guess it was not a profit organization, I always tried to give more than I took. If I couldn't get my work done at school, I sometimes would take it home.

GR: You built a home two and a half, three years after Juke came back from the war. Did you ever feel the need to constantly upgrade your home in size according to your wages?

SB: Yes, we did. We built a story and a half house, which was very common in those days. We had two bedrooms down with a bath and a large, farm kitchen, and a living room and a sunroom. Then when our third child was born, he started to fix the upstairs. He made two bedrooms up there plus a bath. So we actually had a four bedroom house with two baths. Otherwise we did very little to the house, but keeping it up always.

GR: Have you ever had a desire to live in a particular part of Holland? As time went on, did you shoot for that?

SB: No, really not. We were quite content there, and of course, our kids were very content. It was a fun place for them to be. Our one daughter loved horses, so she had a riding horse and we had another horse. And the kids found everything kind of what they wanted over there. Our neighbor, to the south of us, was a huge farmer, and he was after us much to sell the place because he owned all the land around us. We just were not ready to sell. But my husband has arthritis very badly. Ten years ago, he said, "I just will not be able to walk much anymore," and the outbuildings all needed something done. He had been a carpenter, he was very particular. He said, "I think you and I have to look for another place." We looked in Holland, we looked in Graafschap. For a little while we talked about a lot there, to build another house. I wasn't that sold on condominium living. But we went out one Saturday, and this one was advertised. We said, "Let's look at it." We both feel that we were led here, we can't say anything else. Because when we got out, we both said we could live there. The person who was showing this place, we didn't realize that he was a realtor, but he also was the owner of this. And he didn't let on to

that at all. But we dealt with him. Our neighbor just bought our farm for farmland. We didn't get rich on it, but we were just pleased he wanted it. He rents the house out now. But he wanted to farm the land, so it was not for a developer or anything. Then we bought this here ten years ago. It's good living here at our age. Change is not always easy. I think it was harder for me to get used to this than Juke. We had both always been on the farm, and I do like freedom.

GR: So was this your only home since you built the home?

SB: We lived there 45 years. We had good living. We had neighbors a ways from us. I couldn't live without neighbors. We were invited to all of these weddings. But we were not people that ran all the time to neighbors. When I had to think of living right next door to somebody, I thought oh dear. But it's been okay, it's been good. We have a good relationship with all of them, but I'm not a person that runs a lot to people. You could really misuse that very much. The man next here, he has MS real badly, and his wife passed away. If I bake, or I make something, I'll bring some to him. We're on his help line, and this is good. We have many outlets, we do a lot of volunteer work—I just quit at the hospital, but I volunteered there for twelve years. I taught our Dorcas ladies at the church for twenty years; we worked for the "Back to God Hour," and Holland Home Health Care here on 32<sup>nd</sup> Street, which used to be Birchwood. We go in there once a month, I played piano for them. We're not people that are always out for coffee and all of that. Once in awhile we go fishing. (laughs)

GR: What effect did work schedules have on your marriage as a couple—leisure time and time outs? Did you and Juke increase your dining out as the war ended?

SB: Not too much. That was not a common thing. We didn't have the money to begin with. And let's face it, it was not a common thing either then. If you did do this once in awhile, it was very special. What we did do, as long as the children can remember, and I guess in those days it must have been a little bit unusual because our son in-law often says they never did things like that. Every summer, we took one week and we would go to a cottage with the kids. We had no paid vacation but we took this. When our son was probably a senior in high school, we took all four children back to where we had started our life in Texas. It was a real wonderful trip. We took a lot of food along, and we a small camp stove. I don't think they will ever forget it. We went back to the house where we had lived. This lady was still living, mind you, and she was just thrilled. We had never thought of staying there at all and she would not hear of anything else. We got the whole group in, and we stayed overnight there a couple nights.

GR: So how did the children react to how you began your life?

SB: I think they were really kind of taken back, our son especially. He said, "Now this is southern hospitality."

GR: Do you think that's affected how they have addressed their marriages and living?

SB: I think so. When he was going to college, there were kids who would come by us. He'd say, "Bruce doesn't have money to go back to Lynden. Is it okay if he spends spring vacation here?" And he would. There were twins from out towards the Chicago area whose cousin was an army buddy of my husband. These kids were so terribly homesick in Grand Rapids. He said, "Just call these people, they'll get you." So they spent a lot of their time by us. I think we tried to do that with the children. I enjoyed that very much. Our son has a lot to do with Hungary—he takes these Hungarians here very often. If he



has people, he takes them over here. We do enjoy that. I think that has shaped them too. We've tried to do things with them, even though you don't have big funds. You don't always need that. We would take them fishing, and to see things at that time, that was a large trip. Those kids never forgot.

GR: So you're glad you did that?

SB: Yeah. Then we went to Europe, our second one's husband was drafted, or he volunteered, I guess...he was really for teaching. But anyway, he was stationed in Berlin. Twenty-nine years ago, my husband and I (this month) went to Europe, and we took our youngest daughter with us. She was the only one that was available. She was taking German at school and was just thrilled to go. So we had that trip. We have taken trips—he and I have gone back to Alaska. We went there with a Herman Miller group. And two years ago, I don't know how we ever could do this, physically, the way he walks and so, we actually went back to Europe. We went back to the town where his grandfather and my grandmother were born, and we stayed in that town. We met people there that were relatives of us; we just had a great time. We have done quite a bit of traveling.

GR: What activities did you, as an individual, enjoy, completely separate from the family and your husband?

SB: I think music, music is very important to me. And also reading—I do a lot of reading. I'm just thankful for Herrick Public Library. I go there quite often. I do a lot of reading; I always do that separate from the family. I think my ladies group at church was separate. I enjoyed these women; they became quite a part of my life, you have them for so many years, you know.

GR: Were there moments when you wished you could have had some more private time?

SB: I don't know, not too much so. I noticed that over here, some of the people can get so bored. But we kind of have the same interests too. Week before last we went fishing in the afternoon together, and I enjoy those things too. And we went to the Museum together to see the World War II exhibit. We take in all of those things, and we both enjoy that. We both enjoy history very much.

GR: Now did Juke, for instance, play golf every Saturday?

SB: No, he didn't. He liked to fish very much. There were times that he and our son went way up into Canada with a group from Grand Rapids, and I supported that very much. He went way up north and he would fish; but no, he never golfed. He didn't seem to care about it. I think probably having been brought up on a farm, they just didn't have the opportunity. He did a lot of bowling when he was in the service. They were brought up with a bunch of boys; they were kids that tried everything on that farm. It's really something. They made their own fun always. I noticed even in the Army, he would rent a motor and get a boat, and go on that river if he had a little time. When he was in the Aleutians, he wrote me and said, "Send me some seeds in your letter." So I did—garden seeds, radishes and stuff, and he planted them over there. And even these officers, they got a kick out of it—that something could grow there.

[End of side two, tape one]

GR: Sylvia, after the children left or became more independent, did you, as a couple, start doing more things together, and why?

SB: I think we did; I think you become real involved in the kids' lives when they are home. And then when they left, we could notice this ourselves that we just seemed to grow closer together. We did a lot of things then that we did not do when the children were

home. For instance, our son was a pastor so he always lived away from the area. We would go over there together. We would even go up north fishing if we wanted to. We would rent a small cottage there for number of days, take our boat along, and we would fish. We couldn't do that always when the kids were home—not just on the spur of the moment. He had retired at 62, so he had been retired before I was. I did continue working a couple of years after that. We did much more eating out, and doing things with other people more than you do with the kids.

GR: With your activities with other couples with children, were you drawn to families versus individuals?

SB: Yes, we were quite often drawn to families who coincided with our own family. We had this couple that we met in Texas, they still continue to be our best friends. They had a family exactly like we did, and so we did things together. Their son was a real part in our home. When they wanted to do something, they would ask if Cal could stay over, and we would let him stay. He still talks about it. This is Cal Bremer, the head of Back to God Hour. He and our son are like this. We did do things with people that had children the same age as our kids a lot. We did a lot with my husband's brothers. They had families that were a lot like ours. Picnics, amusement parks—these are things we did a lot together.

GR: Now in reflecting too, you look at Holland as a community, was it similar to the way your family was operating? Were there different parts...?

SB: It's so different today. You would go downtown then, and you would know many people. Nowadays I can go downtown and I won't see anyone I know. It's so much busier, traffic-wise. In those days, it was not busy at all. I came from Zeeland, you know, and

there too, that has all changed so much. Your downtown area has changed so much, and yours schools have changed a lot. A few years back yet, they called whether I would help out at one of the grade schools; I would fill in for one of the secretaries. I was amazed at the number of children who were living with single parents. That was such a shock to me. Because I think before we could have counted them on one hand. And now there were so many of them.

GR: When you were saw all of those families, or were aware of them, were those children, or those single parents treated any differently in the community?

SB: No, I don't think so in those days, but it was unusual. It was very unusual. Maybe even being more sympathetic to the kids—because it was that rare. But today, and I noticed in one of the schools, they even met at noon—they had like a club, the kids that were living with single parents. I just couldn't imagine that.

GR: At retirement, how did you as a couple relate to one another? You said you took vacations more and other joint activities. Was it kind of a re-awakening of we're a couple now versus a family?

SB: I think so, maybe even your love was more open, since you were just the two of you. And you had more time to express that to one another, than when you're busy with the children.

GR: You didn't drive each other crazy or anything?

SB: No. I often said that to him, people would say, "Oh, if he would be around all day..." But we just didn't have any problems that way. I think that it bothered me first that he was retired and I was working. So that was an open discussion between the two of us. I said, "Would you like me to quit?" "No," he said, "I've really got things I want to do."

So he had projects that he really wanted to do, and he seemed to be busy every day while I was working. I worked just a few years beyond, and then I quit at 61. I was going to quit at 60. This old building was coming down. I said to Mr. Koster, our superintendent, "This is a good time for me to go out with the old." He kind of smiled a little bit, and I said, "I think it's a good time for me to retire." He came in a little while later and said, "Sylvia, would you come along with us, one year, to the new building?" "Well," I said, "I'll talk it over with Juke." So I did. He said, "Why don't you do that for them, that's fine." So I did. Then of course I was there, and Stan said to me, "How do you like it here?" "Oh," I said, "fine." We had a nice building, you know. "Good enough to stay one more year?" he said. I said, "I think this better be it." So then I did retire. But first, I was a little bit lost after my job, I would admit that. And my husband knew that. He was very kind and didn't say anything, but when school was going to start he said, "You and I are going away for a while." So we took a trip to get away from here. Because he knew that I thought I had to go back to school. I think it was hard for me too adjust at first. I had been very much involved in the kids' lives. Very much. Those kids were a big part of me. But right away, I think I went overboard, because then you volunteer all over and everyone was calling, and they knew I was home. I right away volunteered at the hospital. The church would call very often, "You're not working now you know." It was a time when I really had to set my priorities straight, because I knew you just can't be volunteering all over the place.

GR: You talk about when you left the Holland Christian Schools there was somewhat of a void there for you. When the children left your house, was that void also present?

SB: Well I look back at that, because our youngest two daughters, they got married within a month. I think then that my job was just a wonderful thing, that I was kept busy. Of course the kids had been away at school—the third one had been at Ferris, and she was just home awhile, and she said, “Do you mind, Mom, if I stay home for a while?” I said, “Not at all.” Then when she did get married, yes there was a void, but I had almost been used to them being gone. Our youngest one, I think when she left, it was different, because she was a hairdresser and had almost always been home. I think that was almost more of a void for me. But it was in the fall of the year, and I was right in the middle of school, and I went to school and I guess I just kind of shifted gears again with the kids. At that time our son was in Minnesota, and we would go and see him when we had off a day at school or two. We always had one of the teacher’s wives say to me, “Now if you want to stay an extra day, you do that and I’ll come in for you.” These teachers were just a big part of my life. They were almost like I was their mother. If their wives were going to have a baby, they would come to me and tell me this. Sometimes Mr. Kuipers would say to me, “I think you knew this a long time ago.” “Well,” I said, “if they wanted to tell you, they could.”

GR: You look at Holland Christian as being another extended family. Is there, for instance, another job that you might have taken that would have given you the same satisfaction?

SB: I don’t think so, because I think teaching was very, very special to me.

GR: So it wasn’t just the job that made you feel valuable, but having that close connection to the kids there.

SB: To the kids. I had always been interested, too, to be a librarian, to work in the library. I think I would like that. I like books very much. When this job came open, I really didn’t

look at it, being something provided by the Lord for my part of dealing with the children, as that my husband couldn't work. At that time it was almost like a necessity. You could minister to those kids, and they needed someone there. You had girls that were starting to menstruate, and I would help these girls. They were very, very close to me. They would share things with me. It was a time that a lot of them were going through difficult times. To me, it was just a good place to be at that time.

GR: That period when you were at home with your young kids, was there ever a time when you thought, maybe just a few hours a week, to do something on my own and make money?

SB: I don't hardly think so. The only thing is just before I started working at the school, that spring, I had a call from Weller's Nursery. They used to have a nursery back here. Someone had give them my name, that maybe I could help them out. When they called me, I think I almost passed out. He said, "We would really like you to come in to help us." "Oh no," I said, "I haven't worked in 20 years." "Why don't you think this over," he said, "we need a typist, and someone to fill the forms out for shipping out nursery stock." I hung up, maybe leaving both of us hanging. Juke said, "Would you ever like to work out?" I said, "I don't know." He said, "If you ever do, this would be your time. This is just for a couple months." Then I called this man back, and I said, "Well, I'll try it." So I worked there, and it was kind of a taxing job, although I was quite free to come and go. And it was during that time that my husband had become real sick. Mr. Weller said to me, "Now I bet the first thing you're going to tell me is that you want to quit." "Right," I said. Then he said, "If I tell you that you may come and go to the hospital or anything you want to, as you see fit, will you stay?" So I did. When I finished with their

shipping, he said, “We’d like to hire you full time.” I said, “Oh no.” He was quite insistent and I said, “No, I’m not interested.” I guess I kind of made my mistake too, then right after that this notice came in our bulletin. Then Leon Witteveen said to me, “Did you work anywhere?” So I had to tell him I worked at Weller’s, that I had worked there for a couple months. So he called Mr. Weller, and Mr. Weller was very angry. “Why didn’t she want to work for us?” he asked. Of course Leon couldn’t answer that either. (laughs)

GR: So it wasn’t just getting out of the house for you?

SB: No, I just couldn’t see myself sitting at that desk all the time and dealing with plants. I had to have something else.

GR: Has your experience with your own parenting changed your attitude towards your grandchildren?

SB: Very much so. To me they are very special, each one of them. What we did this past year was, I bought one of these large photo albums; we bought 12 of them for the grandchildren. I made one for each of them. I put all of the pictures that I have received, and all of the programs they were in, and all the notes they sent to me over the years—I had files full of them. We put those all into their books. I thought there will come a time when I will give them those books. They are very special to us. I see that with my own children—my dad was not a very big influence on their life. My mother was somewhat, but she had to really support herself. I think that I made that a very special thing here, that our children and our grandchildren would be first. I mean my husband first, but beyond that. And our grandkids know that. To me, if they have a burden, it’s a burden to me too. I don’t interfere in their lives at all. When there are things that I think I would



like differently...when our grandson was a student at Calvin, and he was this far in debt, he called me and said, "Grandma, you better sit down." And I thought, "Now what?" He said, "My friend and I bought a house." I said, "You did?" He said, "Yes." It's a good thing I didn't say what I thought. Anyway, it's been the best thing. He's bought his second house; he's got kids living in there that are students, and it's been good for him. He knows how to fix up things and how to manage money. He's and RN at Spectrum. I said to my husband, "It's a good thing that they don't always know what I'm thinking." (laughs) So it certainly has changed our attitude with our grandchildren, very much. Of course, they are getting older now, but when they were young, we had thought nothing of having six overnight here. Sleeping bags all over. Even on the farm, these kids would come for two weeks at a time. Our son was always out of state and our daughter was in Traverse City, and we'd have all four of them for two weeks, in this upstairs would just ring with all the noise. This was fun.

GR: You talk about some of the trials you had, not only with Juke's health and profession, but yours too. Did that change the way your children decided to approach their occupations, marriage, and having kids—that you know of?

SB: No, really not. I think that our son, ever since when he was in probably 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> grade, one of the teachers called us and said, "Do you realize that your son really wants to be a minister of the gospel?" "Yes," I said, "I do know that." And we always encouraged him along that way; we did not force it on him at all. He was free too choose whatever, but I think whenever there was an opportunity, we gave that to him. They had this summer workshop in missions, he had just finished Holland Christian and had no finances and was going to college. He said, "Do you think I should take part in that?" I said, "Do you

feel that you are led there?” And he said, “I do, but I’m giving up six weeks of wages.” I said, “If you feel that you should go, then you must go.” When he got back, he had a part scholarship, and he said, “I thought I was giving something to the Lord, and he gave me much more.” Our second one seemed to want to go into nursing, and we encouraged her there, very much. Our third one is a nurse also. So we have encouraged them, yes. I think by having their kids so special to us, we always bring out to them how special those kids are, to the parents too. I know that when our kids were home, we didn’t always think that was so great—nothing is all rosy. They have times, too, when they get discouraged with kids. When there are special things that those kids do for us, or write us, I share that with the parents because they have to know that, that they have special kids. Even though they see the worst side of them. (laughs)

[End of interview]