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Budgell, Melvin Oral History Interview: Polio Survivors in Holland

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Oral History Interview

August 27, 2003

Interviewee: Melvin Budgell (also includes Jenny Budgell)

Interviewer: Matthew Nickel

MB: I was about six years old. It was in 1921 when I had the polio. I was born in 1915.

MN: Did you live in the Holland area?

MB: No, I lived in Washington state.

MN: Were you hospitalized?

MB: No.

MN: Did a doctor visit you at home?

MB: We had a doctor, yes. But I don't know what the doctor did, if anything. They probably couldn't do anything anyway. We just lived in a shack. Not a shack, but it was a small building. It had been a garage they had converted into a house. We had no running water. No plumbing, outside toilet.

MN: Do you remember any kind of treatment, or how you were cared for? How your polio was cared for?

MB: The only thing I remember being in bed in this house; it was very hot, it was summer. In this area of Washington it is dry, so you hang up wet sheets around the room to cool the air. It was that hot. There was no air conditioning. The air is hot because the temperature runs up into the hundreds in that part of the state. It's in the valley, the Yakima Valley which is a fruit growing area. Not on the coast, not near Seattle. The name of the town is Y-a-k-i-m-a.

MN: Did you experience any kind of paralysis from the polio?

MB: Yes, my left side was paralyzed. When I did recover enough, I had to learn to walk over again. Because of polio, I missed that year of school. I would have been in second grade. I had first grade, and somewhere between the first grade and the next year that I got the polio, so I missed that year of school. And then after the polio, I went back to school and had my second year in grammar school.

MN: Do you remember what kinds of things you did to recover, to work through paralysis?

MB: What?

MN: Do you remember any kinds of, maybe not treatment, but anything like treatment to recover from paralysis? Learning to walk?

MB: I don't remember a thing about it. I just know that when I was well enough to walk, I had to learn to walk over again.

MN: Did you have to wear a brace or anything of that sort?

MB: Not at that time, no. We were not very well off. I guess my grandparents, who lived in Massachusetts, thought it would be good for me to come and live with them for a few years so they could get me treatment. So I did that. So I went from Yakima, Washington, to Newton, Massachusetts, and that was just before my third grade of school. That fall, I became nine years old. I started in the third grade in Massachusetts. From then on, I finished school up to eighth grade there. I lost the one year of school, so that put me one year behind.

MN: Do you remember what kind of treatment you got in Massachusetts?

MB: I went to an orthodist.

MN: Like an orthopedic school?

MB: Probably, because he put me in a brace. The brace was on my full back. The straps went around my shoulders, then a pad around the belly. It was made of spring steel. It was flexed, you know. I wore that for a couple of years, I guess. Then he gave me exercises to do, lying down and sitting up, things like that.

JB: Lying on the ironing board.

MB: Yeah, a flat board to keep my back flat. The main result of polio was that it caused me to have what they call a scoliosis, a curvature of the spine. That was straightened out some, but it never got really straight. But it never was a handicap to me.

MN: So this school that you went to in Massachusetts, was it at all different from the regular school that you attended?

MB: Oh no, it was just a regular school.

MN: What about your social life and friends with polio? Did you ever have any problems or difficulties with friends?

MB: Afterwards you mean?

MN: Yes, after polio.

MB: Not particularly. I was kind of a shy kid anyway. I went to dancing school one year. During my third year of school, I went to dancing school. They taught us ballroom dancing and things like that just to get used to polite manners for going to a real ballroom or something. We had to wear patent leather shoes and white cotton gloves. Then you had to invite the girls to dance, you know. I was very shy. I had difficulty with that.

JB: It was good for the posture, you see.

MN: Do you think polio affected your educational experience? Or what kind of effect did polio have on your schooling years?

MB: I wouldn't say that it had any effect. I didn't care for gym, I mean, I didn't like gym because I couldn't do anything very well. I was not good at athletics. Other than that, I don't think it affected me at all. I've done practically anything anybody else can do—walk, climb stairs and ladders and things like that.

MN: Do you think there's a particular reason that polio didn't affect you, affect school or anything like that for you?

MB: Well, because it didn't paralyze me bad enough so that I couldn't recover. I recovered from the paralysis, but the scoliosis was the only thing it left me with. And that did restrict me sometimes physically, of doing things physically. But I rode a bike and all that kind of stuff. I can't remember that it ever actually stopped me from doing anything.

MN: Did you have difficulty learning how to ride a bike or doing things like that because of polio?

MB: No, it was a long time after I had it that I rode a bike. It was actually in high school. I didn't play football or basketball or any of those things. I played sandlot stuff, but I wasn't very good at it. I couldn't hit a ball very well or I couldn't pitch or catch. Didn't have the coordination or something. I couldn't throw a ball straight.

MN: Do you think polio affected your life view or your attitude towards living for a positive or a negative way?

MB: No, I don't think so. It might have made me a little more shy, because I had a physical disability. I was slightly conscious of it all the time, but not to the point where I didn't do things. In other words, I didn't stay out of things because of it.

MN: So self-consciousness didn't stop you?

MB: Not really, no. In fact, it was an interesting thing in grammar school, in that school, they had a lot of activity—a lot of emphasis on posture. The person who had the best posture for the year got a little Indian, because they had straight posture—a pin with an Indian on it. It was what we called a posture pin. I won that pin one time in about the fifth or sixth grade, not because I had the best posture, but because I tried the hardest. I don't even have it any more.

MN: Do you think polio may have made you work harder at certain things?

MB: No, I don't think so. I don't think I was really conscious of it most of the time. In fact, I didn't walk down the street trying to hide it or anything. I was aware sometimes that I did have it informally—a certain effect, not really bad. I'm not a hunchback or any type of thing, but just one side of my back was crooked.

JB: It was almost really non-noticeable. He had broad shoulders which helped to belie the rest of him.

MB: Sometimes, I had to have my suit, my coat, adjusted to compensate for that, but otherwise I can't say that I was ever handicapped. It was not a severe case. I was only out of circulation one year. It wasn't a case of permanent paralysis.

MN: Did you know other children who had had polio at that point?

MB: No, I did not know anybody. I had two sisters, and they did not have it. They had a sore throat or something for a while, but they did not get the polio. I don't know of anybody else in that area that had polio. There may have been because it was a year of an epidemic. You see, we were way out in the country, and we didn't have a lot of contact with people.

MN: What were the attitudes of people around you towards polio, people in your immediate community, if you recall?

MB: No, I have no memory of anything like that. The only thing I could tell you, it was hot. My mother hung up sheets, wet sheets, to cool the air. I don't remember any contact with people. I suppose I didn't have a lot of contact because people didn't want to be near me because it is catching to a certain extent.

MN: Did that happen very much, that people wouldn't want to be near you because of polio?

MB: I don't remember. We had some close friends, and I don't remember if they stayed away from me for any reason or not. I was only six years old, you know, you don't remember a lot of detail.

MN: That's true. Do you recall what people were afraid of, what the fear was like?

JB: They were afraid of getting it and having to be in one these big iron lungs. That was the thing that seemed to be more noticeable with the disease than anything else.

MB: I didn't have that opinion. I wasn't aware of that.

MN: Didn't know one way or another.

MB: I didn't even know of anybody else who had it. I did have a limp. I dragged my left foot for a while before I got used to walking again. I walked to school.

MN: Was that a difficult process, to relearn how to walk?

MB: It was, yes.

MN: What about your parents, did they ever tell you stories about when you had polio or anything like that? Did your family ever talk about you having had polio?

MB: Never heard anything about it.

JB: For five years, he lived with his grandparents, did not see his parents.

MB: Yes, I lived with my grandparents in Massachusetts for five years before I went back with my family. It was a long time after.

JB: Beautiful grandparents.

MB: In fact, most people that saw me later were quite surprised that I wasn't worse than I was. They weren't even too aware of the fact that I had had polio.

MN: So people didn't often ask you...?

MB: No comments about it at all.

MN: What about the financial end of taking care of polio? Did your family every receive support from a foundation or anything that you know of?

MB: No, nothing. I don't think there was such a thing at that time. My grandparents were fairly well off. He had a good job; they made good investments. So it was no burden on them, as far as I know. They kept me, bought my clothes, and put me through school. They finished sending me to college, and I became an electrical engineer. But, I don't remember any activity regarding polio at that time. Or any compensation or anything like that.

MN: Can you recall anything that you would have considered to have been a positive outcome or anything like that of polio? A positive outcome of having had polio? for you?

MB: Of having had it you mean?

MN: Yea, versus, you know, having—there's negative experiences and positive experiences. Could you recall what positive and negative results of living with polio were?

MB: I don't remember even made fun of or anything like that.

MN: When did you move to Holland?

MB: Eleven years ago. '92, wasn't it? Yes. We lived in Michigan twelve years before that, in Sawyer. Do you know where Sawyer is?

MN: No.

MB: Well, it's south of here about fifty-sixty miles south of here—down in Berrien County.

We had a house down there. We lived there twelve years before we came up here.

Before that, we lived in Illinois. I retired in 1980. Worked forty years for that company.

MN: For...?

MB: Westinghouse.

MN: As an electrical engineer?

MB: Yes.

MN: What brought you to become an electrical engineer?

MB: Well, I'm not really quite sure. When I was in junior high, at that time, I was in Chicago.

I went to junior high for two years in Chicago. During that time, in one of our classes we

were asked to write what you call a career book, write about the career you thought you

want to be into. I don't know, if I just picked it out of thin air or what, but I liked

electrical stuff. So I wrote everything I could find about electricity, electrical schools.

There used to be an electrical school called Coyne in Chicago. It was more for

electricians though. I didn't have any concept of what electrical engineering was. I just

thought it would be interesting.

MN: When you were a boy, what was your community like in Washington? What was the

surrounding community?

MB: Ever been on a farm?

MN: Yes.

MB: Ever been on a fruit ranch?

MN: Don't believe so.

MB: Well, on a fruit ranch, all there is is fruit trees and the house you live in. You might have a neighbor across the street or you might have a neighbor a mile away. We happened to have a neighbor across the street where we went to use their well, because we didn't have any water. So, we didn't have any close neighbors that we visited with or anything. All the neighbors we knew were the people we knew in our church, and they were in the city, but they weren't living anywhere near our neighborhood. The first school I went to was a one-room schoolhouse, and my first and second years were in there. It was probably about a mile from my house to that schoolhouse. Later afterwards they had built a regular school, in my second year I went there.

MN: Did your parents or a doctor ever speculate how you might have caught polio?

MB: No, I never heard of that. I don't think most people do.

JB: It was a frightening word. We didn't know how it came about.

MB: The strange thing about polio is that one person over here could have it and one person over there could have it, and everybody else doesn't have it. The only thing I know that maybe the others didn't is we had some neighbors that were pickers, come from the south, and they camped, living in a shack or something while they were picking. I associated with that family—those kids. Maybe they got it, I don't know. They were the only ones I really had close association with except the kids at school, and I don't know who they were—other families, _____ people.

MN: Other farmers? Children?

MB: We had very close friends that did not live near us, but we often went camping with them, and things like that. I don't believe any of them had it. They had about five children. I never knew anybody else that had it. Forrest Fynwever is the only one I really know very well that had it. I don't think I remember anybody else. Do you remember anybody else we knew that had it?

JB: Pearl had it, Pearl Swart [married name].

MB: Oh, did she? That's a lady we knew in Sawyer, in Michigan.

JB: But she wasn't very affected by it.

MB: We all agree that the paralysis in different parts of your body, the lungs were the worst, because they had to go in those iron lungs, you know. Legs and arms and things like that. Mine was my left side.

MN: So your leg and your arm and your back were affected?

MB: Yeah, my legs and arm.

MN: What about where you lived with your grandparents, what was the community like there?

MB: That was like a suburban area, like a suburb. It was just outside of Boston. It's a community where people lived in nice homes and had good neighbors, good schools. What else can I say? Ever hear of Newton, Massachusetts?

MN: I believe so.

MB: It's a town of about 80 or 90 thousand people, six miles west of Boston. It's upper middle-class. Good schools and good community services. A nice place to live.

MN: Do you recall ever hearing about polio in newspapers or on the radio, as you got older?

MB: Oh sure, in later years we heard lots about it.

JB: Especially in the '50s. It was quite an epidemic then.

MB: I don't remember that we knew of anybody in that area that had it, did we?

JB: No.

MB: Because we lived in a suburb of Chicago for quite a few years, and there was an epidemic during that time. We had three kids, and none of our kids got it. In fact, I don't remember hearing of any of our neighbors that had it. I don't know whether it was more common in low income places or bad neighborhoods or something like that, whether environment had anything to do with it or not. I'm not sure they ever proved quite what it was, did they?

MN: I don't believe so.

MB: It was called infantile paralysis or poliomyelitis. That was the official name of it. We just call it polio now. Now I'm considered post-polio syndrome, and that's what they say some of my problems are as a result of having polio many years ago. That's why they say I'm having some trouble with my legs and my back, things like that. Right now I'm going to therapy here in the building to try to strengthen my legs. The way I heard it was that when you had polio certain parts of your body were paralyzed, mostly in the muscles. And at that time, the muscles are weakened to the point where some of their lifetime use is lost. Say your muscles were all paralyzed for a year, that's a year in the life of the muscles. So later in life that begins to catch up with you. You may not have any trouble all during your life, but when you get older, and the age of all your muscles begins to reach their limit, you know, in a normal life, and the muscles that were paralyzed at that time had already lost some of that life. So that's why you sometimes become more affected in later life; those muscles begin to weaken.

JB: Did you tell him how old you are?

MB: I'm 87 now, I'll be 88 in November. I'm in pretty good health, really, except for that. I was very seldom sick. About the only thing I ever had was I had children's diseases—I never had mumps, and I don't think I ever had measles, probably had chicken pox. But that's all I remember having. Had my tonsils and adenoids out in the doctor's office at an early age. About the only thing I had most in my life was flu. When I was a kid I would get the flu every year. In fact, I would get sick at school and they had to send me home. Since I got older, when we had the flu shots, I don't have the flu anymore. Even as an adult, I used to get it about once a year until they had flu shots. But other than that, I really never had any diseases, have I?

JB: No, you once had strep throat, that's all.

MB: Yeah, but nothing serious, really bad.

JB: He still has some pink in his cheeks.

MB: (laughs) That's the light.

MN: As you were raising your children, did you have any particular fears about them contracting polio?

MB: Oh, it was always a fear, of course. When it came up it was usually an epidemic, all over the country; maybe some parts of the country worse than others. You always hope and pray that they wouldn't get it, but you didn't know what to do to prevent their getting it. You couldn't keep them out of circulation.

JB: All three of our kids had either the bread cubes or...

MB: The Salk vaccine came along later. About the years they were growing up that that was discovered. So none of them have ever had it.

MN: Were there any things in particular that you or your neighbors would do to prevent polio, or to try and prevent your children from catching polio?

MB: No.

JB: I don't think we even thought of it.

MB: In fact, I don't even know what you could do if you don't know what caused it.

MN: Did people ever speculate how polio was spread?

MB: Well, I'm sure they did, but I don't remember hearing much about it. I think they thought it must have been bad water or bad environment. I'm not sure if it had anything to do with animals, you know, animal feces or anything like that. I don't know if there was any truth in that at all. Never heard much about it. I'm not much help to you, am I? (laughs)

MN: Oh, no, you're plenty help to me. As sort of a final question, is there anything that you can recall about polio that I haven't asked about? Either from when you had it or as you grew older and raised children, is there anything you remember about polio that we haven't talked about?

MB: I think the worst thing was the lung business, you know, they had paralyzed lungs and they had to put them in an iron lung. Most of those people died. They lived as long as they were in a lung and the lung could breathe for them, but out of the lung, they died because their lungs were paralyzed, they couldn't breathe. Of course, you heard about other people that had it and got well. I knew one other person—I didn't know him personally, but I lived with my sister and her husband awhile and he roomed upstairs in the room above in their house and he had had polio—he was a big, strapping guy and he went through a lot of exercise and I guess he came out okay. Certain exercises can help strengthen the muscles that were weakened, you know. In fact, I had exercises. I had

certain exercises—I had to bend over and touch my toes and that kind of stuff, you know, and lay down flat on my back for an hour. I don't know how effective it was, but those were some of the things that I did. There was nothing really special because in those days they really didn't know what to do. They put the brace on my back hoping it would help straighten it out, and I guess it did help to a certain extent. The worse thing about it, it was stiff. It was made out of spring steel and it was all padded so it wouldn't cut me. And if I bent over too far, I would break it. It would only stretch so far, you know. The kids would whack me on the back and hurt their hand because what you got in there, you know...(laughs)

MN: Do you recall hearing about Sister Kenny?

MB: Oh, yeah.

JB: But not until way after his polio.

MB: That was in the '50s.

JB: There was nothing in 1922. I don't remember even if they had any particular hospitals for it, or anything. But Sister Kenny that was an organization that she started. She was helpful in helping people get through it, but I don't know that she ever cured anybody because they didn't know what to do to cure them. They treated them with exercises and things like that and good health and good food and that kind of thing. She did a lot of good, but I don't know that she actually healed anybody. Sister Kenny is the only one I really heard of that did a lot. Do you know of anybody else?

JB: No.

MN: Is there's anything else that you remember about having had polio that we haven't talked about?

MB: No, I don't think so. I don't know of anybody in my family or any close friends or anybody that had it. It was epidemic in the sense that it did hit some areas pretty bad, and they say it's transmitted...

[end of side one]

MB: [continuing] ...some kind of diseases where all you got to do is breathe somebody's breath and you catch it, you know. I don't think polio was that way at all. It would have been a lot worse if it had been. I don't even know how it was catching, if it was through saliva or through breath, or air borne, bacteria, or what, you know. I never heard of anybody catching it from going to see somebody that had it. Nobody in my family had it. But there was just my sisters and my parents and I think my aunt who was visiting from Chicago was there and she didn't get it. But not a lot of people came to see me. We were kind of isolated from a lot of people. We were within maybe a few blocks of the nearest house, but there were not a lot of people coming to my home all the time. We didn't really have company, like they call it. We didn't have people in for dinners. We couldn't afford that. Like I said, most of the people we knew were from in the church, when we went to church. And that was ten miles to go to church. I was born in a different house from where I had polio, and there we went to church in a horse and buggy. That was a fruit ranch also, but it was a different location. We were poor. We were very poor. We only owned one car in our whole life and that wasn't very long.

MN: Do you remember your church giving any support or anything like that when you had polio?

MB: I can't remember anything like that. I mean, what could you do? It wasn't a matter of needing money. Money didn't help. Nothing to pay for a doctor. But I don't know there

was even any doctors that could do anything about it where we lived. I mean, there was a lot of big doctors in those days. No specialists, just MD, internists. We did have a doctor, but I'm sure he didn't know what to do.

MN: Thank you very much, Mr. Budgell...

MB: Well, you are quite welcome.

MN: ...and Mrs. Budgell.

[End of interview]