

7-9-2001

Hoekstra, Grace Oral History Interview: Parents of Baby Boomer Generation

Geoffrey Reynolds

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



Part of the [Archival Science Commons](#), and the [Oral History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Repository citation: Reynolds, Geoffrey, "Hoekstra, Grace Oral History Interview: Parents of Baby Boomer Generation" (2001). *Parents of Baby Boomer Generation*. Paper 7.

http://digitalcommons.hope.edu/baby_boom/7

Published in: 2001 - *Parents of Baby Boomer Generation (some of whom participated in World War II military operations)* (H88-0234) - Hope College Living Heritage Oral History Project, July 9, 2001. Copyright © 2001 Hope College, Holland, MI.

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 Parents of Baby Boomer Generation by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Hope College. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@hope.edu.

2001 Oral History Interview
Parents of the Baby Boomers, 1941-2001
Interviewee: Grace Hoekstra
(Also includes Jim Hoekstra)
Interviewer: Geoffrey Reynolds
July 9, 2001

GR: Grace, what were you doing at the time of Pearl Harbor, at the beginning of the war?

GH: Was I working then? Oh, I was working still, yes. I was doing secretarial work, at a place that made blinds and shades. I was doing a lot of work at church too. Mt. Greenwood Reformed Church.

GR: Mt. Greenwood Church in Chicago?

GH: Yes.

GR: What sorts of activities were you doing there?

GH: I had Sunday School class, and I did Vacation Bible School. You know, I don't remember as well as Jim. (laughs)

GR: I have on my notes that you worked with your pastor in sending enlisted men letters once a week.

GH: Oh, yes, I did. But that was after we were married that I did that. The letters to the servicemen. We had forty in our church that went. And then Jim would mimeograph the letters and we would send them out.

GR: Oh, so it was the same letter to each of the forty? Or were they different letters to each individual enlisted man?

GH: No, it was the same letter. But then the pastor would put a note at the bottom.

GR: Who set up this project? The pastor?

JH: Yeah, Reverend DeWitt, he was the pastor.

GH: What was his first name?

JH: Everett DeWitt.

GR: What was the whole goal behind you writing the letters? Was it meant to keep the morale of the enlisted men up, overseas?

GH: Well, yes. I think it did.

GR: Did you ever get letters back from them?

GH: Yes, the pastor did.

GR: Did he ever share those with you?

GH: I don't recall that he did.

GR: Did he respond maybe during the sermon on Sunday about how individuals were doing?

GH: That I don't recall either.

GR: You had your child during the war, your first child? Or did you wait?

JH: Jan was born in '45.

GR: As a new mother, tell me a little bit about what it was like to raise a child in the '40s.

GH: What it was like to raise a child then?

GR: Some of the thing you'd do every day.

GH: During that time, I was still church secretary. We were renting a home so I had to keep the home, you know, and bake, bake and cook, and normal things that people do today. I didn't do a lot of socializing because my friends' boyfriends were gone. But my sister lived across the street, so I saw her everyday. She was a big help because after Jan was born I couldn't use my one arm. I had such a difficult delivery that it knocked my arm out of kilter. I had to carry her with one arm. So, my sister helped me a lot with bathing her and that kind of thing. I don't recall going up town with a buggy. It's strange.

Maybe we didn't have a buggy for her. But then later we had a stroller. I didn't mind being home, in fact I rather enjoyed it after working so many years, six years.

GR: Before you had children, you had quite an experience with working outside of the home anyways?

GH: Yes. So I really had no desire to work outside the home anymore. But I did miss my friends, you know, that was a little different. That part I did miss. But other than working, no, I felt I had enough.

GR: Did you find other friend in your circles that had children or lived nearby?

GH: Not too many, other than that I knew from church. We had some interesting neighbors, Italians. I can remember Jim played the organ in that house—he had electrified a reed organ, and he would always play it Sunday morning. And these neighbors would party on Saturday night and have a good time. And then we were up early and they heard the organ playing. They said, “I thought I was in heaven.” I said, “After having that wild party?” (laughs)

GR: So you lived in kind of a diverse neighborhood then?

GH: Yes. I grew up on a farm in Blue Island. So, actually, it was so different from Jim's bringing up—I only had one neighbor a block away. I went to the public school system through high school. I went on a bus to high school, but walked to grade school. I had five brothers and two sisters. I was from a big family, Jim was from a small family. I felt that he was really spoiled. (laughs)

GR: Knowing that Jim came from small family and you had a large family, did that really affect how many children you and Jim decided to have?

GH: I don't know. I always thought I'd like about six, but when I got to four that was enough.

GR: So you were starting to feel the strains or having several children underfoot then?

GH: Yes, well. I didn't have easy deliveries, so...that's part of it too.

GR: Was there at any point when, for instance you had the second, the third, and the fourth, where you felt a little overwhelmed some afternoons?

GH: You know, I should move closer to you because I can't hear you too good.

GR: Is there at any point that you felt a little overwhelmed by the number of children that you had?

GH: No, my mother had eight. But she said, "Don't you have eight."

GR: Did she offer any sort of advice, knowing that...well, after the hard delivers number one...but did she ever offer advice about how to raise your kids?

GH: No, not really, except that after I had the fourth, she said, "I think that's enough."

GR: Why would she say that?

GH: Well, because I think she felt that, for her, living on a farm, it was different. You know, my dad needed the help. Jim didn't need that. And Jim was gone a lot, where my dad was always home. Was always in for lunch. And he was always around except when he went to market, and that was during the night. I guess she wanted me to have it easier than she had it.

GR: Were you happy with four, was that the number that you've really come to...?

GH: Yeah, by that time. I had enough. (laughs)

JH: It wasn't too long after that, that you had your hysterectomy too, so then it was automatically decided.

GR: Did you space out the children a little to make it easier on you, or was it just how things turned out?

GH: Sort of. I didn't want them too close—I wanted to enjoy one at a time.

GR: So you did have a pretty good time as a mother raising your kids. It wasn't a struggle, per se?

GH: Yeah.

GR: Have they come back and asked you questions about how they should do it now, knowing that they obviously came from a good environment?

GH: I don't think so. Did they? I don't think they've ever asked for advice that way. Maybe indirectly.

GR: Have you offered any advice?

GH: No. I stay out of it. I know better.

JH: Our daughter lived in Hancock, Minnesota then, so that made it difficult. And, of course, when it comes to daughters-in-law, you're a little more careful. (laughs)

GH: I always hoped that Jan would have another child, but she couldn't, so she didn't get any more, so... You're happy with what she has.

GR: You said you were raised on a family farm, so obviously your life with Jim and the kids is a lot different.

GH: Yes.

GR: Is there anything you missed about the way you were raised?

GH: I was the sixth child, so for me, it was easy to grow up on a farm. But for my oldest sister, oh help. She had all the work of it. She said, "I had all the work, and you had all the pleasure." But she didn't want to go to school. She went to continuation school. They had to at that time, until they were a certain age. And I wanted to go to school. That makes a difference, too. And she went to work quite soon. She liked clerking and

worked in the department store, which didn't appeal to me at all. And, of course, for her to work in an office, it sounded like jail.

GR: Did you ever yearn to go on for more education?

GH: Yeah, I did. In fact, my one teacher I had said, "You should go on, be a teacher." They told me that in grade school too. But, I said, "Well, my dad can't afford it." So I just put that out of my mind. I thought I better go to work. I was lucky I could go to high school because the two neighbor girls that were my age had to go to work. They did housework. My dad said he wanted something better for me. I was thankful for that.

GR: So you're happy with the choices you made and kind of getting out of the farm life?

GH: Yeah.

GR: When you met Jim, were you kind of intrigued by the fact that he had gone on to higher education, and he was a chemist? Was that something that kind of inspired you?

GH: Yeah. Well, I guess I thought he should have a more educated wife. But at the same time, I didn't want to marry a farmer. The guys had I gone with, they weren't the kind of men I wanted to marry either. So I was in a dilemma. (laughs)

GR: How did you and Jim meet?

GH: Like Jim said, he rode to work with my cousin's boyfriend. Oh, he didn't tell you this, but, Willard, my cousin's boyfriend, was going to take Jean to Ravinia. You know, Ravenia musical. So he asked Jim if he would like to go with them. Well, Jim said he didn't have any special girlfriend. And Willard said, well, Jean has a cousin Grace, and maybe you'd like to take her. I don't think Jim was too excited about the idea, but he agreed to it finally. So I met him at my cousin's house. My parents didn't know this at

all, that I was going to meet Jim. Because if my dad knew he was Christian Reformed, and he'd say, "Oh, don't go with him!" (laughs)

GR: You're not from the Christian Reformed background?

GH: I was from Reformed Church. I did have boys from the Christian Reformed Church, but my dad wanted to keep me in his church, you know how that goes. But anyway, that's the first time I met Jim. He lived next door to my cousin, so, you know, I figure, well...

JH: This was a different cousin though, not the one that we went with.

GH: It was her brother. So, I thought, well I can't go wrong. At least I'll get to Ravenia. (laughs) And so that's how I met Jim. Well then, Jim went away. He told me he was going to be gone on a trip. So I said, "Good," because I wasn't in any mood to go steady with any guy. I thought I was too young. Well, I was how old, twenty-two? I thought, I don't want to get stuck getting married so young. So anyway, then he sent me a card from his trip, and my brother said, "He signed it Jim. Who is Jim?" I said, "Oh, forget him. Just somebody I met."

GR: So you were living at home until you got married to Jim?

GH: Oh, yes. Those days, you wouldn't think of not living at home. That was for girls that were wild, you know. No, I was glad to be home. And it wasn't too bad because my brother took me to the bus. In fact, I had it easier then than after I got married. I had to take four busses.

GR: Tell me about the wedding. During wartime, where did you have it take place?

GH: We were married at, not in church because, well, it was during the war, we could have been married in church. My dad, as much as he was in church, he was elder all his life

and everything, he didn't like church weddings—he said they too showy. So we got married in the country club.

JH: Pipe of Peace Country Club in Riverdale, Illinois.

GH: It was like a big home. It had a dining area in one section, and then the other section was where we were married. It had palms and flowers there; it was real nice. I had a formal wedding dress, and Jim had a tux. I insisted on that. He said, "A tux?" "Yes, or else you won't get married." (laughs) So his brother had to have one too. We went to have our picture taken after we were married, we went into the studio and they said, "Look, there's twins getting married." I don't know if they meant the guys or my sister and me. (laughs) That was kind of funny. His brother was eight years older. My goodness, they either can't see too good or else... (laughs)

GR: So after you've met Jim and you're married and you have your daughter, did you see a surge in young families having kids? Was there a true baby boom going on around you?

GH: Not too much. No.

JH: I don't know if we realized it at the time, but we heard later that there was.

GH: Willard, my cousin, Willard's husband was in England, and she came to our wedding without him, remember? No, there weren't too many getting married.

GR: Do you remember when all the GIs came home, was there anything different happening in the town you lived, or the housing situation?

GH: You mean like celebrating?

GR: Well, that. And did you just see a lot more people participating in community events? Did you see a lot more traffic, was it harder to find a house, or food? Was there this surge of returning people?

GH: I'm sure there was a lot of changes that occurred but, I don't know, I guess we had it so good, we weren't so limited really. Like Jim said, we had the rationing and all that. But we had plenty, we could help others with what we had. Of course at church, there was a change when they all started coming back.

GR: How many men, out of the forty, returned from the war?

GH: They all came back except one. All but one. He called his girlfriend from New York and said, "I'm going over now." And they never heard from him again.

JH: They had gone over in plane, and the plane went down in the Atlantic, so they never recovered his body or anything.

GH: Never found his body. So that was kind of hard.

GR: Did that happen during the time during the war...was the church made aware of that?

GH: Yeah.

GR: How did the congregation react to that?

GH: Well, they felt pretty bad, I know that.

GR: Was there any sort of comfort offered the young lady that had lost her boyfriend?

GH: I don't know. Actually, she was my sister-in-law's sister. I don't know what they did for her. I'm sure they did things, but it escapes my mind now what they did. But then later she did marry. She found somebody. But the strange part of it is, that fellow was one my younger sister was kind of crazy about. She felt so bad that he went with her girlfriend instead. But then after he went down, never heard from him again, then, she didn't feel so bad I guess. Then she met this other fellow that she married. She left the Reformed Church, she went to a Baptist Church. Then I thought, "Now, what's my dad going to say about that!" He liked the fellow so much, I guess he didn't dare say anything.

GR: As a couple, like I asked Jim, when you had the ability to get a babysitter or spend some time together, was that a welcome thing for you after being with the kids all day?

GH: When we did go away without them, I always wondered if they're taking good care of them, you know. One time, like with Jerry...see I nursed my babies...and we were invited to a dinner at his boss' house. So she said to take the baby along because I couldn't put him on a bottle all that time. So I did. They had two daughters, and they had never been around babies much, much less anybody nursing a baby, so I had quite an audience upstairs. "Oh, look at that! She's going to bite you!" (laughs)

GR: So you had children in tow, even when you went out as a couple sometimes? Young babies anyway.

JH: It was going to be for quite a time, you know.

GH: Like for weddings and so, we had the babysitter.

JH: Yeah, well, like when Roger, his nephew, got married and we had to go to Spring Lake, then we were away overnight so then we took them along.

GH: They said to take the family along.

JH: They weren't really babies then anymore, although, young Norm was a little kid then yet.

GH: And then the older ones would squeal on the babysitter. Then we heard what happened..."I don't know if want to get a babysitter anymore." We had a new bedroom set, so the girl said, "Come on in." They showed my bedroom set...I said, "I trusted that girl. No more will I trust."

GR: Now also at this time, television came about. How long did you as a family wait to bring a television into the house?

GH: We had that little one first from my sister.

JH: Yeah, got that from Burt and Helen. We weren't too quick to get a television, but then it's turned out that her sister and her husband had a seven-inch, but they had a magnifier in front of that. They were going to get a bigger one so we could get theirs. So we had that for a while.

GR: How did you like television?

GH: I didn't care much about it. I liked radio; I listen to radio a lot. But just sit and watch, you know, television, you got to sit there. Well, now I have one in the kitchen. I work and I can watch it. It's such a waste of time.

GR: Did that have any effect on your children, do you think? Either not watching it, or having it in the house in general?

JH: I don't think too much. They didn't spend a lot of time with the television.

GH: No, they didn't, because I remember when Jerry brought a friend over. See I baked bread in those days, still do sometimes. "Do you bake bread?" I said, "Yeah, why not?" "Oh you can buy it in the store," he says. I said, "Well, your mother sews; she can buy dresses from the store."

GR: So television wasn't a big deal to your family in general?

GH: Not too much. News, you know, but there weren't a lot of good programs on.

GR: I asked Jim this question also—what was it like having Jim come home for good when he retired? What was that like for you? Had you your own schedule every day?

GH: Well, knowing Jim, I figured he wouldn't tie me down. He gave me pretty loose reins. If I want to go somewhere, I go. If he doesn't want to go, he stays home.

GR: So you had two cars then and it was a pretty easy thing to do?

JH: Well we did, but then we got rid of the one car before we moved here because we had a single car garage and one driveway. It was always the one on the driveway that got used, and the other one stayed in the garage.

GH: Yeah, but then we got a second car here.

JH: Well, later on, yeah, because we couldn't get much from the trade-in when the old one that was still good. So we just decided we'd just keep the old one when we get the new one.

GH: We still have it. But I take that one out because I don't want to get a scratch on the new one.

GR: So really nothing changed when Jim came home? It was more just the same thing.

GH: Nothing. Would you say nothing changed? I have to do more cooking. He's always home for lunch. But we go out more for dinner, which we didn't do before. What else do we do that's different? He's a homeboy. He likes to be home more than anyplace. Of course, my dad was always home too, you know. But my mom didn't drive a car. She was always home. Different life, but that was her life, she didn't mind it.

GR: You said before that the farm life was really not your cup of tea anyways. You're kind of glad to enjoy...kind of a suburban life, right?

GH: Yeah, I, I didn't want to marry a farmer. For one thing, it's work, work, work.

GR: Did you and Jim ever get caught up in "we have enough money to buy a new house," "we have more money, let's buy a bigger house." Did that cycle ever start with you and Jim as parents and homeowners?

[End of side A]

GH: [continuing] We outgrew that house, and then we were looking in Evergreen Park. We just didn't have enough time really. My brother suggested that we build. And then we did, we had someone build a home there. That's the home, right over there. Cape Cod.

JH: He talked me into contracting it myself rather than getting a general contractor, because that's what he did. Well, I managed, but it was a headache.

GH: My dad came there one time. They put the kitchen window level with the sink. My dad said that wasn't right.

JH: Put it about six inches too low.

GH: Oh, he had some headaches with that.

JH: We had to take that whole frame out and change the brick and put it up and so forth.

GH: Never again would we do that. But then, when we decided to move to Holland, lets see...

JH: Before that, we thought of getting a different house, a little larger one, but then it was a question of where and so on, you know. In the end, we decided to put an addition on the one we had; we put a big room on the back. That helped out quite a bit. But then after we retired, as we got older, that one had the bathroom upstairs and we...

GH: Just one. Downstairs.

JH: We had a powder room downstairs. We always had to keep that bathroom heated.

GH: But we did remodel the kitchen. It was nice; I liked that house.

JH: Yeah, it was a nice house. We then decided we wanted to do something anyway, we should have a house without an upstairs; when we got older, we wouldn't like climbing the stairs all the time. Then, as time went on, this opportunity came up. I had to think

about it, and it took a little time for me to get really thinking that's what we should do.

But finally we decided and went ahead that way as planned.

GH: Yeah. It was kind of hard to leave all our friends. Because people in this area are very family-minded, and they're very skeptical. They don't accept you very quick, that's for sure.

GR: So even with your Dutch background and CRC and Reformed Church background, you found it hard to kind of crack the Holland mystique?

GH: In fact, I first wanted to move back. I said, "Let's get out of here." I met a doctor's wife that moved over. "Oh my goodness," she said, "I had two neighbors that came over to welcome me and then they said, 'Oh were sorry you're not Dutch.'" She said, "Boy, I felt like saying 'Go on home.'"

JH: When they first met she said, "Oh, we were hoping you were Dutch and Christian Reformed."

GH: Yeah, can you imagine?

GR: Now, Grace, you're Reformed Church. Are you Dutch?

GH: Yeah.

GR: What's your maiden name?

GH: Piersma.

GR: Has that changed for you in Holland? Have you gotten a little more comfortable with the environment?

GH: Well, I guess it grows on you. But I do think they're very narrow here. I don't know why. Some of them have never been out of Holland. And some of them of the women

my age have never worked—like office work or anything like that. They may have done some kind of housework.

GR: Well, that's an interesting observation, I'm glad you brought that up, that there are transplanted Dutch here that had a hard time adapting too. Later transplanted Dutch, I should say.

JH: I know about this area. In fact, even when I was a young child we had two uncles that lived in Grand Rapids. One was a preacher, he was a pastor in the Alpine Avenue Christian Reformed Church. We used to visit him, too. We didn't have a car in those days, so we would take the streetcar downtown Chicago and catch a boat there that would go over to Holland. And then in Holland here we would transfer to an electric car and that interurban would take us to Grand Rapids.

GR: What boat was that, Jim?

JH: Oh that was in the '20s. The Graham and Morton line, they had six white steamers. Four were side-wheelers and one was a screw steamer. The screw steamer was the City of Grand Rapids, and the others were the City of Holland, the City of Saugatuck, the City of Benton Harbor, and City of St. Joseph, I guess.

GH: You know how lucky he was? He could go to Grand Rapids and I was stuck. (laughs)

GR: Was that kind of an interesting trip for you by boat?

JH: Oh yeah, we could go down below and watch the engines cranking those...the big crank that operated the side-wheels.

GH: He was sort of privileged, don't you think? But he didn't realize it. (laughs)

GR: How long would that take you, Jim, to go from Chicago to Holland?

JH: That would be an overnight trip. I think the boat left Chicago at about ten o'clock, and then it arrived in Holland early the next morning. The electric car was waiting there to take the passengers to Grand Rapids, those that wanted to go.

GR: So you would stay in a room overnight?

JH: I don't remember that we did that. Except once, coming from Grand Rapids we did, and I know that was a rough trip when we wanted to go up the stairs from the lower deck to the upper deck, we had to hang on the railing or we'd get tossed down.

GH: Well, for one thing, maybe he had all those trips, but I figured, I was lucky because my dad...His dad was so strict. My dad, it was different. He just...if we wanted to do something, well he'd...if I wanted to go to a dance at school, "Well, go ahead and go." Where I know his dad wouldn't let him go. Right? So, I was kind of glad I had that kind of a father. He had at least gave me leeway.

JH: The church I grew up in too, they were very conservative, very strict. I know we had a chorus...of course the chorus would never sing during the services then. They called it a choral society; it wasn't the church choir, you know. We would sing different numbers. I know when we wanted to sing Beethoven's Ode to Joy, God our Father and Christ our Brother, we couldn't sing Christ our brother, they changed it, Christ our Savior. They didn't like that. And, all who live and love or die, they had to change it to, all who live by grace are dying. Had to change those words. (laughs)

GH: When I first went to his church...I had not been in many Christian Reformed Churches, if any. Wow, this is different. They sing so old Psalms. You know, we sang hymns. I thought we're more advanced than they are. And we were a country church. (laughs)

GR: A little bit different.

JH: A Dutch service in the afternoon though, they sang the Psalms. Actually I wasn't much at either playing the piano, but I was fascinated with organs. They wanted somebody to once in a while play the organ for the Dutch service, and I managed to tackle that. They usually had visiting pastors for the Dutch service, and I would find out what Psalms they were going to sing before the service and then I'd practice them.

GH: But that was in Mt. Greenwood.

JH: Yeah, Mt. Greenwood. That was after we married.

GH: Anyway, they didn't know too much about music so I don't think it made much difference. (laughs)

JH: So I did play a little organ then, but I never got too far with the organ.

GH: You must have played pretty good if they thought they were in heaven. (laughs)

JH: Well no, that wasn't then, that was the organ I fixed up at home. From a friend, I got the insides, the works, of an old reed organ. I don't know what happened to it, what they did, they must have used the case for something else, I guess. So I improvised a case for it, but then I electrified it. I put a little screw above each reed and connected it with an amplifier and so on. So that changed the tone quite a bit. And that's what I used to play. And then I made an electric blower for it, so I didn't have to pump.

GH: He also had a workroom in that one bedroom. He did a lot of work in there.

JH: Yeah, well I did a lot of work. I had bought a lathe once, a metal carrying lathe. I could cut screws or anything like that. So I made a recording outfit. Like a turntable with a sixteen-inch turntable, like they used to play. The radio station used to play these sixteen-inch platters because they could get fifteen minutes all on one side. In fact I could play those transcriptions on that thing. But then I also made a screw and connected

with the drive to it, so that I could feed a device to cut the records. I'd buy blank records, blank plastic records. And then this recording head would travel along and cut the groove while it was putting the sound in the groove. And then I did some recording that way.

GH: We were renting a house in Mt. Greenwood. The owner came out once on a Sunday. After that, he asked us if we wanted to buy the place. He probably thought this is not the way it's supposed to be. (laughs) I would have liked to have bought it, made some changes, because then I could stay in that area, but we didn't have enough money to buy it.

JH: Well, that wasn't the kind of place I really wanted to buy anyway.

GH: Well, you could sell it again, you know. I figured live in it for a while and sell it. He didn't want to do it, so we didn't do it.

GR: Well, Grace, after all these years as a married women and a homemaker and a mother, is there anything that you think about periodically that you would have done different or you didn't really enjoy about how it all turned out?

GH: Yeah, I'm glad the way it turned out because one of my ex-boyfriends stopped here one day. He wanted to see me because they were going to move up north. And I thought, oh my goodness, I wouldn't want to do that, you know, live up there. Where was that? Northern Michigan. She didn't want to go either, but he wanted to go. Glad I didn't get him. (laughs)

GR: So you figured living Jim turned out all right then?

GH: Yeah, I guess I did pretty good.

JH: Well, in a way I figured the Lord was good to me too. I went with another girl a while before I went with Grace but that didn't work out. She never ever got married. She went to Calvin for two years and then got a job teaching school. You could be a teacher after two years of college then. So she was teaching school in Grand Rapids, and then, well it was quite a long time ago, I heard that she died. So I was glad I didn't get her then.

GR: Well, thank you both.