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## Souter, Art Oral History Interview: Polio Survivors in Holland

Matthew Nickel

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2003 Oral History Interview: Polio  
Interview with Art Souter (via telephone)  
Interviewer: Matthew Nickel  
13 July 2003

MN: My first question is, at what age were you when you had contracted polio?

AS: I haven't the faintest idea.

MN: No?

AS: I don't remember that stuff?

MN: No?

AS: I can tell you that I was between the fourth and fifth grade.

MN: In the summer then.

AS: Yes. It was in the summer time. It was between fourth and fifth grade. I started school when I was four, I was a half year students. I was four, eight, nine, someplace between nine and ten or throughout ten I guess.

MN: So do you remember the hospital?

AS: Where my brother and I were?

MN: Yes.

AS: Yes, it was St. Mary's Hospital in Grand Rapids.

MN: So what was it like there, do you remember the environment?

AS: It was a hospital. It was hot, no air-conditioning. It was miserable because this black nurse, I remember, and I wish I could thank her, but she had to lay these hot steaming wool packs on our back everyday. And toward the end where we were starting to get better again, as we got the feeling back, and I was getting to the point where I screaming if I wasn't screaming, and she told me to shut up because

she was feeling the same thing in her hands and I thought at that point, “yeah, you’re right.” I just wish I could thank that nurse. She did that everyday, laid those hot packs on our back.

MN: Do you remember any other kind of treatments that you received other than the hot packs?

AS: That was about it. After we got out we had do exercises, what was it, a lot of sit-ups and after that we had to some push ups, but we had to do a lot of sit-ups. That is the thing I mainly remember. I remember one grade, the we were in junior high or high school, the gym instructor, that I don’t remember who it was anymore, had us start out doing sit-ups just to see who could do the most of them and the two of us left doing the sit-ups there was me and Roger Vanderploeg. Used to be the tennis coach at Holland High School now. He is probably retired now. But the two of us, and we were still going at it and I don’t remember what the count was, we were really close to each other, I remember that. The bell rang for the end of the period. We did this the whole period long and that was the last year that coach did that. Never had anybody that sat that whole gym period and did sit-ups, bang bang bang bang. But that was part of the stuff we had to do.

MN: Part of the routine that you had to do at home?

AS: Yes. Mom got us up every morning and we went in and laid on the bathroom floor upstairs, we did them. I have not done a sit up in I don’t know how long.  
[Laughter] Probably since I got out of the Navy.

MN: What are other memories of the hospital?

AS: Well, it wasn't in the hospital anymore, we were over in St. Mary's Freebed, and a couple of things I remember this, she was not very tall, but this lady came around who was going to be our teacher and she asked us, this was about labor day neck of the woods. Because it was the end of the summer and labor day and so they had to do some kind of instruction with us kids, we could not lay there and do nothing. She asked us, she said couldn't teach us everything, because there was not enough time with all the amount of kids that she had to take care of, but what did we want to study. There were two things that we had to do, I can't remember what it was, but I remember one thing was math. And zippity-do we are going through math like crazy, adding up three columns of figures, like 222 and 333 and this kind of stuff. Whipping through those things and no problem at all and we got discharged from there and I go back to Van Raalte grade school over on Van Raalte and 19<sup>th</sup> Street when it was still the old two story building and I went into the fifth grade and I was never so bored in math in all my life. The teacher was back having a hard time teaching the kids to do two columns. A couple of figures. Just absolutely bored I was. Because it was not until the end of the fifth grade that we got to where I was when I walked into the classroom after being in St. Mary's Freebed. Better just to keep them separated. The only other thing I remember, I think we were still in St. Mary's hospital, and my kid brother and I were in the same room and there was a little nun. She was a little girl, woman. She had to be a woman to be a nun. She would come around and kind of entertain us and try to keep our spirits up. The only think I can remember in regards to her name was her last name was the same as some ball player on the Tiger's team that year. I can't

even tell you what it was. But she would come in there and she had us rocking and rolling and all of a sudden the door opened to the hallway, and this little nun, she popped behind the door and the head sister came in and chewed us out, me and Kenny because we were making so much noise and having such a good time. She says, "keep it quiet in here." Something to that effect. I don't know those were the exact words and she leaves back through the door and slams the door and this little old nun, the young one that was behind the door, she is standing there busting the gut. I still can remember that, she was having just a good of time too, but that was the last time that she ever came in there an had us ripping and roaring like that.

MN: Oh man. What kinds of things was she doing?

AS: I don't remember anymore, she was probably telling jokes, or pantomiming, or doing something. We were not even teenagers yet, so it don't take very much to get a kid laughing once somebody is having some fun. Beside that we were bored to no limit. She was having a good time and so were we.

MN: What kinds of emotions did you feel while you were in the hospital?

AS: I haven't the faintest idea.

MN: Do don't remember feeling fear?

AS: No, but I can remember the night I came down with it, or at least the night I got diagnosed with it. I was a hurting boy, but we were sick, we were in the hospital. Who knows. Beside that if we knew anything we were probably more worried about our kid sister because our kid sister was in a lot worse condition than we were.

MN: Do you remember seeing her, were you ever able to?

AS: No, I don't remember seeing her at all. She was a baby.

MN: She was very young, wasn't she.

AS: I don't think she could even walk yet so she was probably way off in some other ward someplace, but can I remember thinking about her? No. No, I don't remember thinking about her? I cannot remember that either. Who knows what was going through our minds.

MN: Do you remember your parents, what it was like for them, do you have any idea of what their experience was?

AS: First hand, no. Stories afterwards, yes.

MN: What kinds of stories have they told?

AS: I can remember both of them saying that they would go down to H and B Standard, which was Hartgerink and Block, down on 8<sup>th</sup> street there. The building is now gone, just quite recently, to get gasoline. Hartgerink or Block, neither one of them would let my father pay for the gas because "we were going to go visit the kids in Grand Rapids." I remember after, was it before we were out of the hospital, or was it before we ended up in the hospital and Jan was down with it [Thinking about this, I am sure Ken and I were out of St. Mary's and Mary Fee Bed. I don't know about Jan], but I remember one day there was a bunch of older kids at night ended up pounding on the front door and they brought in a couple of huge boxes of goodies for us. Was it Christmas, Thanksgiving? I don't know, I haven't the faintest idea, I don't remember anymore. My ma tells about, my dad was out of work, and he wanted to spend the last check that my mom was making

which was practically nothing, she was working down at a commercial laundry in Holland folding laundry and he wanted to spend it on groceries or something I don't know, she says absolutely not, we are putting the money onto the Blue Cross. And it was within the week that my kid sister came down with polio. If she had not done that they would have been bankrupt I am sure. Because I know my dad was not working. The night I came down with the polio, I had been sitting out in the backyard, beautiful, beautiful day reading a book, which I do all the time. I read all the time. And in the afternoon I got this really bad headache, one of those kinds that, well, all I can remember was at least my vision was completely blacked out. It was a dandy headache. But then I had had headaches before. I suffered from migraines all the way up until I was in the service, but that is neither here nor there. And my grandmother from Beaver Island, she was taking care of us. She made some kind of a comment like quit being a baby, here is an aspirin or something or other, and go to bed. I don't remember the exact words. My folks were not home at the time, they were probably in Grand Rapids worried about my kid sister. They came home and I remembered being put into the car, or carried or made to walk to the car, but getting into the car and going down to Bill Winter's office on 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> street. That would be 10<sup>th</sup> Street because it was right behind what was the Ottawa Savings and Loan. Go into his office and it was night and I can remember going through that side door. Going in there and did Bill Winter's look at me, I can't answer that, I don't remember, did he have someone else working there, could be. But I do remember that after he looked at me, I can't remember if it was there or if my folks took me to the hospital, Holland Hospital.

I was on one of these tables that they can move all over the place for surgery or whatever. I was laying on my side and my mom was laying on top of me to hold me to hold me down, and this doctor, whoever it was, that I hate to this day, it is a good thing I don't know who it is, made numerous stabs attempting to get between a couple vertebrae to draw out some fluid off of the spine and whether he made three passes or 30 passes, I don't know before he was finally successful and got into the spine and got his fluid, but I know I was not one happy camper when he was doing it. So, to this day, if anybody asks me if I want a spinal for some reason or other, I will take whatever else is offered before I will have a spinal. I have to admit, at that time, I was a chubby little boy too, so that didn't help the doctor any. It probably was not all his fault, but he could have been a little bit better aimer.

MN: Do you remember, has there ever been any speculation how you and your brother caught polio?

AS: Everybody was getting polio. If you get down to it, we probably got it from my sister wherever she got it. But who knows, it could have been anybody because you can be a carrier of that virus and not have the symptoms yourself. Its, oh for God's sake, I guess the best thing in the world near what it would like is this HIV stuff now. You can be carrying that disease and spreading it all over the place and there is nothing wrong with you. Maybe ten years from now there is going to be a lot wrong with you, but right now it don't show, so. I am sure it was the same the thing there. Some people had very mild cases of it and spread it, but there were a lot of people who had it.



MN: After you got out of the hospital and you were back home and school starting, do you remember what the reactions were of neighbors or friends or classmates? People around you?

AS: No. The only thing that we had to do that the rest of the kids didn't, we had to take a morning and afternoon break and go and lay down in this little room for 15 minutes or a half hour. That is probably when everyone else was out on the playground we were laying down. But yeah, was I shunned? No. Not that I recall.

MN: What kind of perception of polio do you remember in the community? Was it a big deal, were there a lot of people talking about polio?

AS: Biggest thing I can think of, and maybe this is coming about afterwards more than during that time, because I was a kid. Kids don't pay no attention to this stuff, but it is probably the fear, am I going to get it, is my kid going to get it? I didn't worry about it.

MN: But the parents probably did.

AS: They were probably scared stiff. Yeah. I am sure my folks were scared stiff too. Especially with this, their only daughter in the hospital and they have got two boys and are they going to get it? Good Lord. Maybe that is the reason I never married and had any kids. Who knows?

MN: What about precautions, were there ever any kinds of precautions, were there ever any kinds of precautions that your family or other neighbors took?

AS: I don't think anybody really knew about taking precautions, what are you going to do? I don't remember people running around with face masks like what this SARS is right now. I don't remember anything like that. I don't remember kids

saying, go on home, we can't play with you because polio is around. I don't remember any of that stuff.

MN: Did you ever, when you were a kid, did you ever know any other children who had polio?

AS: No, I did not know of any. I was told that there were lots of them there but I did not know them. And for that matter, afterwards, I can't say I really knew any kids that had polio my age plus or minus a year or so. I did not know of any. I kept hearing a lot them about people who were still in iron lungs for years and years afterwards. I fact just recently I ran into some body who said something about there was, what was it, his father's sister or something like that had polio. And had been in the lung. I guess there are still people spending time every day in a lung. Poor s.o.b.'s.

MN: Did you have any kind of disability coming out of the hospital? Or anything, any kind of physical, or permanent physical effects from polio?

AS: Oh, I blame my sore aching back on it, but probably isn't. Nobody has ever given me any, says this is a result of polio, no. Not like my poor kid sister who has had a number of surgeries on her face.

MN: What kind of effect do you think polio had, generally on your family? Like, more with your parents? What kind of effect do you think it had in the long run?

AS: Oh, I suppose it makes them worry about us kids probably more than the average parent does. Is he okay? Is he okay? I know ever time I talk to my ma? Are you okay? This type of stuff. Doesn't come out and say, do you have any lead ins? But

she is worried about me all time and I am sure she is doing the same worrying about my brother and my sister.

MN: What do you think your parents' attitudes were about your recovery? About the process of recovering from having had polio?

AS: My mom was on our case every day to do our exercise for how many years afterwards. I know she toted us over to Mary Freebed to see these doctors a bunch of times. But she was like I say, she was on our case all the time to make sure that we did these exercises.

MN: What about the doctors, do you remember what their attitudes would have been?

AS: No, I just, about the only thing I can remember is that we used to see the same doctor all time over in Grand Rapids. He seemed to have a memory of how we were the last time he saw us. It seems to me that we were going over there every three months or so to see him. He seemed to be a caring guy and pushing and shoving your body around looking for problems etc. but he seemed to be a caring guy. He was real happy to tell us that we didn't have to come back to see him any more when it finally happened. But he also, he made it clear, keep up them exercises.

MN: Do you remember ever feeling isolated because of polio?

AS: No. Well, you are sitting in the hospital, you ain't playing baseball, you are feeling isolated. Did I ever feel like the neighbor kids wouldn't play when we finally got out or before hand? No, I don't remember any of that.

MN: What about community afterwards? Do you remember what your neighborhood was like?

AS: It was just our neighborhood.

MN: What was it...

AS: We played around with Kenny Beltman, Allen and his brother Carl Burma, there was a Dale Sminge around. We played ball down at that empty lot, where now Bethel's Parsonage stands on the corner of 18<sup>th</sup> and Van Raalte. We played ball in there but I can't tell you how much we did before and how much we did afterwards so.

MN: Did polio change your perception of community?

AS: No.

MN: No?

AS: I had no conception of the community to start with. I was a kid growing up, them guys was my buddies. Stay away from them gals.

MN: What about fund raising? Did you ever remember any kind of participating in any fundraising events later, after you had had polio?

AS: Do I remember any? No. They may have been there, the only thing I remembered was that one day when a bunch of the kids ended up hauling these two huge boxes, it must have been toilet paper boxes and stuff was falling out of it. It was so huge and big that they could hardly carry it into the house. That is the only thing I remember really regards it. Ken and I, we collected lots of newspapers and other assorted odds and ends around the neighborhood and my dad would haul a trailer load of them down to Louis Padnos, sell that off then we would give the money to the March of Dimes, but, you know, any real organized type of thing, no, I don't think so. It seems to me, come to think of it, there was a picture

someplace, something to do with Ken and I collecting, maybe Jan was in it too, collecting papers for the March of Dimes. I would have to go digging back in the old Sentinel stuff that I have got. Never thought about it till now.

MN: Were there any kinds of, did polio affect how you saw relationships at all?

AS: No.

MN: Not with friends, or dating or anything like that?

AS: No.

MN: What about later when the vaccine came out?

AS: Oh we were first in line. Mother made sure of that. You betcha. I went and I didn't know until that point, there were several different versions of the polio out there and we were, we were immune now to the kind that we had had, but the other kind we weren't immune to. We were first in line.

MN: What did you think when you heard about this vaccine come out?

AS: I don't know, I was a kid again, but I thought probably that it was doggoned good thing that nobody else would have to put up with this stuff. Don't get me wrong, as a kid I didn't like to get shots any more than the next kid did. I guess my days of being a corpsman in Navy changed my attitude on a lot of these things. [Note: a corpsman is short for hospital corpsman.] Get every vaccine you can get your hands on so you are not coming down with it.

MN: Do you think polio affected your career choice at all?

AS: No, I did not become a corpsman because I wanted to be one. I went into the Navy to be a photographer, an aviation photographer. And down at recruit depot there in Chicago where they give you your physicals and all that kind of stuff.

They gave me a test and then they go in, it was a series of tests actually, then you go into a quote/unquote a councilor and he tells you if you are going to be qualified for the particular job and I walked in there and they said, you are going to be a corpsman, and I says "I don't want to be a corpsman, I want to be a photographer." "You are going to be corpsman." I says why? They said, "You worked in a drug store. That is how I got to be a corpsman. So my expertise at jerking sodas and making malted milks and selling cigarettes at the counter and I better not tell you about that, you might use it. But anyhow, I ended up being a corpsman.

MN: Do you remember there being any kinds of warnings or myths about polio? Were you ever told anything as a kid?

AS: If there was I don't know about it.

MN: Nothing like, you can't go swimming or don't go here...

AS: Like I say, if it was there I don't remember it.

MN: I guess you have covered an awful lot of my questions. Is there anything that you remember, perhaps that I have not asked about?

AS: No, not really. Probably the most vivid memories is the nun at the hospital and the teacher at Mary Freebed and the boredom of fifth grade math afterwards.

MN: With the teacher, how long did that go on?

AS: Oh, I don't know, we were there a couple of months anyhow. To tell you the truth, I can't even tell you when we were discharged and sent home. We didn't live very far from the Van Raalte School. Less than a block, kiddy corner right through the blocks. So probably was not any big deal. I don't remember ma or

dad ever taking us to school. They may have taken us back to school the first day to make sure that we did this rest period twice a day and this kind of stuff.

MN: Was it a regular thing having this teacher?

AS: At Mary Freebed?

MN: Yes.

AS: Oh, I am sure she was there every day. She probably only spent 15 minutes with us, but she had a whole bunch of kids to do because the place was full of kids with polio.

MN: So the hospital was packed with people?

AS: Mary Freebed was more like an open ward, if my memory serves me right we could see other people around. St. Mary's hospital was more rooms and don't remember, there may have been, but I don't remember any more than my brother and I together in the same room. We may have at one time been in a room where there was more of them. It is probably all tied in with the nun. Because that pinpointed everything as far as my memory goes there.

MN: Well, you have answered my questions unless there is anything else.

AS: I can't think of anything.

MN: Well, thank you so much.

[End of Interview]