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Kayes, Lois Jesiek Oral History Interview: Sesquicentennial of Holland, "150 Stories for 150 Years"

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Oral History Interview with
Lois Jesiek Kayes

(unedited)

Conducted December 9, 1997
by Geoffrey Reynolds

Sesquicentennial Oral History Project
"150 Stories for 150 Years"
GDR: Will you please state your name and date of birth before we get started?

LJK: My maiden name was Lois Jesiek. Lois Jesiek Kayes now, and I am 72, born in 1925.

GDR: Where were you born?

LJK: Macatawa Park.

GDR: Near Holland, Michigan?

LJK: Near Holland, Michigan. Four miles outside of Holland on the south side.

GDR: Have you ever lived anywhere else outside of Holland?

LJK: My married life I lived in Glen Ellyn, Illinois, outside of that always at Macatawa Park.

GDR: How long did you live there?

LJK: At Macatawa Park?

GDR: At Glen Ellyn.

LJK: Probably forty-five years. Glen Ellyn and Chicago. When I was working I lived in Chicago, then when I was married I moved out to Glen Ellyn which is twenty-five miles outside of Chicago. Right after high school I left Holland and went away to school, so I lived in Macatawa through high school.

GDR: Is your family originally from Holland, or Macatawa?

LJK: No, my dad was born in Germany, and my mother was born in Milwaukee.
Somehow dad's family found their way to Grand Rapids, and then Dad came to Jenison Park and started the Jesiek Brothers Shipyard in Jenison, and that's where he found my mother.

GDR: Do you have children in Holland today?

LJK: My son lives in Waukazoo Woods, and my daughter lives up in Whitehall, Michigan.

GDR: Just two children?

LJK: Two children.

GDR: Do you have any impressions of Holland that you remember as a child?

LJK: Of Holland proper?

GDR: Yes, or Macatawa early in your life?

LJK: The very first thing that comes to mind was that it was lonely, mostly because in the wintertime there were only maybe three other families and ourselves that lived out there. During the summer it was very, very busy with the resorters going down to Macatawa Park, the hotel, and the cottages; and then Labor Day everybody went home so we were there alone in the wintertime.

GDR: Can you tell me the names of the families that stayed out there in the wintertime?

LJK: Van Regenmorters, Clemons, Tazelaars, and maybe there were a few Coast Guards that were there, not permanent but they would come and go.

GDR: Since you've come back to Holland, what have been some of the most significant changes you've noticed from your earlier days?

LJK: People!

GDR: In what way?
LJK: Hundreds of people! Well, Holland proper of course is different. We all know how that changed. You can shop on Sunday, you can buy gas on Sunday, go to a restaurant on Sunday. Out at Macatawa Park, it's different because now people live there all through the winter. People have converted the cottages into year-round homes and they stay out there.

GDR: Was Macatawa Park different in your eyes from Holland, even as a child, with the Sunday rule? Were you allowed to shop?

LJK: Macatawa Park was not a town. We had to go to Holland in order to shop so we just plain didn't do anything. In our business, the boat yard was kind of a Sunday business. Everybody came down on Sunday because that was their day off, so we were busy on Sundays, just out there in Macatawa.

GDR: What type of people would come out there on Sundays versus people that wouldn't come out?

LJK: Leisure people. Early days they wanted to fish. Now in later after World War II everybody owned a boat and they came out for boating. But originally I would say it was mostly the fisherman that came out and the people going down to the beach or renting rowboats and going out on the lake. That type of thing.

GDR: Were you involved as a child in that activity with your father?

LJK: I just played around the docks. I didn't do any fishing. I didn't do anything. I just played. (laughs)

GDR: Were your brothers involved in helping your father at the boat yard?

LJK: Involved in it? My two older brothers it seems to me were always working in the
They were fourteen years older than I was, and they both graduated from high school. But it seems to me they always worked at the shipyard one way or another. My other brother, who was only seven years older than I am, went away to college. Then he came back and started out in the company. But the two older ones were always there. That's another thing they did in the summertime. They took out charter rides on the speedboats down to Saugatuck or out into Lake Michigan.

GDR: When you came back, had your father's boat yard changed to the point where you became involved?

LJK: No. We came back after my husband was retired, and so we never worked with the shipyard whatsoever.

GDR: Had the shipyard was sold by then?

LJK: Yes. The shipyard, coincidentally, was sold the year my dad died. It wasn't planned that way, but it just happened.

GDR: He sold it and then passed away?

LJK: No. My brothers had already taken it over. Dad had a consulting position with it and then eventually, of course he was so elderly, he just worked out of it completely and my brothers took over. My older brother by that time had drowned. He drowned in the fifties. So it was me and my two other brothers that took over the shipyard.

GDR: Was that a boat yard related incident? The drowning?

LJK: No. It was on a boat but not boat yard related.

GDR: Holland has been recognized as one of ten All American Cities. What qualities do
you think earned Holland this honor?

LJK: I like to think of it as being a wonderful vacation spot. I don’t know if that’s what it’s known for really, but I think it’s a fantastic vacation place. People came years ago for a summertime vacation and that sort of thing and later on bought property here, settled down, and I think that’s part of the growth of Holland.

GDR: What things does the community still need to work on? Negative aspects that you think could be improved.

LJK: I just think it’s come so far I’m not sure there’s still more negative things. I think it’s more outgoing, of course. As we all know, at one time you had to be Dutch or you weren’t much. I don’t think that’s true except with the very elderly now. The younger generation or the sixty year-olds went away to school. Came back. They’re different and they’re more accepting of other nationalities, other faiths. And just like with St. Francis burning and other churches opening up their doors to them has made a big difference.

GDR: Are there things that you notice daily that are still troublesome or negative about Holland?

LJK: I don’t myself. I think possibly some outsiders moving in find a little bit of trouble. They tend to stick with other outsiders rather than trying to integrate into the community because they are still not 100 percent accepted by them. It’s still a little tiny bit of "We’re afraid of those outsiders."

GDR: Describe the role that the church has played in your life.

LJK: As a child, I did not go to church. When I came back, I was Catholic and it’s
fantastic. The church on the north side of town is just fabulous. It's growing with all the new people coming to town. Very warm. It's outgoing. I volunteer very much in the Catholic community.

GDR: That’s different than the south side church?

LJK: I think the south side church now has changed. Having burned which it didn’t have to burn...maybe it did have to burn to do this! But I think now there’s more of a togetherness. Before it was the old residents in town that had gone there all through the years, and it just didn’t accept newcomers as easily. Catholics...they’re hard also to get into the church. You go to church, you shake hands, you go home. The other churches here in town have always been a little bit more social. Now the Catholic church is becoming more social. And more accepting too. I could not find a niche in St. Francis when I moved here. Now I think I could. It's all the nationalities. It's also the older people. I think where I found the trouble it was the older people who had always been here and always done things a certain way and they just didn’t open their arms to you.

GDR: In your opinion, what role does the church play in Holland, the city, the community and the college?

LJK: The Catholic Church or all the churches?

GDR: All the churches.

LJK: I think this is a very religious town. For one thing, just the difference from living in Chicago. When you would meet new people, they never bothered to find out what church you went to. Here, when you're introduced to somebody new, within about
ten minutes somebody's saying, "Well, what church do you go to?" So I do think it's a very religious town, and I think that's good. I like that.

GDR: Do you think that has affected the college in any way? Or the college affected the community?

LJK: At one time, see, I would not have sent my Catholic children to Hope College. But they both went through Hope College and their experience was fantastic. They were accepted and they loved it.

GDR: So Hope College has changed a little bit though.

LJK: Oh yes.

GDR: As you see it, what role does Hope College play in the community?

LJK: I think it's wonderful just living in a town that has a college! It opens up so many doors for us. And of course now with HASP, which is a little bit part of Hope College giving us room to meet there and that sort of thing. I'm not sure why Hope College would make it better except it's nice living in a college town.

GDR: Does it contributes to the community in any way? Through the services or student volunteers?

LJK: I'm sure it does. Maybe I'm in a different age bracket that I'm not connected that much with the college. I just know when I see college students around town they're phenomenal. They're nice kids. I'm sure they volunteer all around town. I'm just not that much aware of what the college does really.

LJK: What is your heritage, your background?

GDR: German. My husband was Polish, but I'm German. My dad was born in Germany.
LJK: Does your German heritage play a part of the Holland community that you're aware of?

GDR: Growing up, I don't think we were well liked because we didn't have a Van in front of our names. I think it made a difference. Whether German had anything to do with it or not, I don't know, except like I said before we were a Sunday business and that was not accepted in Holland, which made it very difficult. And not going to any church, we didn't get acquainted with a lot of Holland people. It wasn't until much, much later I found out a lot of Germans settled in Graafschap and I did not know that at the time. I often wondered what made Dad come here, but he...I think it was the lake.

GDR: How has diversity, as far as ethnicity, been increasing over the past several years? What affect has this increasing diversification had on the community and yourself?

LJK: Diversification of what?

GDR: The ethnic migrations. Has it affected you or the community in any way?

LJK: Probably not. A lot of people are talking about the Hispanics and the Mexicans and the Spanish, and why don't they learn English? I don't find any trouble with it, but I think that's partly because I lived in Chicago so long that we mix with these people. I lived at the Y for a long time before I was married and you lived with these people. You accepted them and they accepted you, and you found out how great they were and you just didn't think about it. Whereas in this town, I think somehow they kind of put them into one little group off by themselves. They are accepting them now but it's...They're going to have to! They're fantastic people just like we are. I think
as a child, the colored people, which is what we called them in those days...we didn't have any colored in town. I can remember these colored people being the maids and the cooks and the housekeepers for the resorters. I was a little bit afraid of them because as a child I had never seen a colored person and then they wore white starched uniforms so they really were black against the white. They were kind of frightening. As a family, we felt sorry for them. They had Thursday afternoon off, but they had no place to go. They didn't have a car. They couldn't get into town, and they just walked up and down the sidewalks. So I grew up feeling sorry for this type of person. Maybe a little bit afraid, but more sorry for them.

GDR: Has the role of women changed in Holland over the past several decades?

LJK: Not any more in Holland than anyplace else.

GDR: But there has been a difference you noticed?

LJK: Of course, my background was so different growing up with boats, and I raced as a child, and at that time women did not do that. That was being very masculine. That was just not a role that they had--which made me feel like I was a little bit different. Nowadays women race, they do skiing, they do everything.

GDR: What controversies have you witnessed in Holland over your lifetime? Anything particular that stands out?

LJK: No.

GDR: Tell me about a job that you've had in Holland that you really enjoyed and one that you didn't enjoy.

LJK: In Holland?
GDR: Did you have anything like that?

LJK: I worked at the Knickerbocker Theater.

GDR: Did you enjoy that?

LJK: Yes, I loved it. That was in high school. During the summer earlier years, I worked at the ice cream counter at the Hotel Macatawa which was fun. I loved that. I did mostly waitress type work growing up. But then a teenager isn't equipped to do anything else. I liked the ushering because I got to take the car into town so then after work was over I could still see some of my friends. You just didn’t run around in cars so much in those days.

GDR: Did you ever have a job in Holland you didn’t like?

LJK: No, I only had that one job. When we came back, after we retired back here, yes, then I worked at Evergreen Commons for five years--administrative assistant--and thoroughly enjoyed it. Working with the seniors. Working with the people. Evergreen Commons was brand new at that point, and I really enjoyed that job. It was fun.

GDR: Is there a perceivable generation gap in Holland that you’re aware of?

LJK: Well, everybody refers to the seniors! I don't know what's in between. (laughs)

GDR: Does your generation have an identification that you would like to talk about or you have experienced things that other generations haven’t?

LJK: I think our generation had so much more than what kids have today. I think we were sincere, we were caring, we had our morals. We were more polite. We were more caring about other people. Small things made us very, very happy. We didn't need
all these toys and running around all of the time. During the week we never went into town. We just stayed out there at Macatawa Park. Nowadays mothers are racing all over taking their kids here, taking their kids there. And we didn't go to all those classes and have ballet and soccer games and band and all that. I think we were more family oriented I guess is what I'm trying to say.

GDR: Have you noticed that in your own grandchildren?

LJK: Well, my own children never jumped off the table to sit in McDonald's and the grandkids now they race all over. They don't even sit at the table. They race all over through the stores and up and down. They just don't sit quiet any more. They're always on the move.

GDR: Do you attribute that to anything in particular?

LJK: Just a different generation. Maybe it's the theory in raising children. They don't want to hold them down like they were held down maybe. I don't think it's all bad. I think it would be nicer if kids were a little more polite and a little more quiet. But they have so much! They bounce from one thing to another.

GDR: Is daily life different than when you were in high school than it is today?

LJK: Sure, we got cars! (laughs)

GDR: Do you have different concerns that you have to worry about now as an adult?

LJK: I notice myself, I'm going much more...My mother never ran around like I do. I go into town almost every day, sometimes twice a day. I'm volunteering different places and having different meetings, committee meetings. When I was younger, Mother never even had those opportunities to do anything like that. There weren't
volunteering opportunities I don't think. They stayed home, took care of their families, and that was it.

GDR: Can you describe a significant turning point in your life?

LJK: Probably joining a church.

GDR: After you had returned from Illinois?

LJK: No, after I went away to school, and then I lived in Chicago quite some time where I was working before I was married, and bounced from one church to another trying to figure which one I wanted to join. And finally decided the Catholic Church was for me, and I think that was the big turning point in my life.

GDR: Did your family have a history of religion before then?

LJK: We were all baptized Catholic, but not raised Catholic. I think it was partly because of the Sunday business. We didn't have time to go to church. And we didn't have religion in our home. The people here in town I think read the Bible at dinner time and that sort of thing. The Catholics even today don't do that, and so we didn't practice any kind of religion even in our homes. Didn't go to catechism or any of that sort of thing. A little bit in our school, in the grade school. I can still remember the nice little minister would come on Wednesday afternoon and it's surprising what I remember about him as he always had a little silver bank. And we'd all bring our nickels and drop them into his silver bank. I remember all these people could all quote these wonderful things from the Bible and I didn't even know what they were talking about.

GDR: Now this happened in Holland Public?
LJK: No. The little school out at Virginia Park that I went to. A very small little school. Four room school. Three grades in each room. We were different from Holland.

GDR: Is there anyone in particular that influenced you in Holland that you can remember?

LJK: No. Just that I had wonderful friends in high school. They may in their own way have influenced me. It was hard went I went to high school. I didn't know anybody. I didn't have any friends. Very few went on to high school from my grade school in Virginia Park. The first year was terrible. I was lonely, no one seemed to pay any attention to me or like me, and then all of the sudden the second year I got acquainted with different people and had fantastic high school years. They must have influenced me somehow because I was very happy. (Laughs). I'm still happy!

GDR: Have your priorities changed since you came back from Illinois?

LJK: No. I've always had my same priorities.

GDR: Has your commitment to faith gotten easier or harder as you have grown older?

LJK: Easier.

GDR: And your commitment to the community?

LJK: I love the community. I volunteer for the community. I think it's just a fantastic place to live. I can understand why people come here to retire. It's pretty. It's got nature which is wonderful.

GDR: Did World War II affect you in any significant way, personally?

LJK: Well, our shipyard changed considerably. I can still remember that because we went into building sub chasers, and once the government took over, good grief! The
whole shipyard was fenced in, big lights all night and guards all over the place. I can still remember coming home at night and seeing all this. It just wasn't the same. As far as myself personally, the nice guy I was going with went off to war. That was lonely. That wasn't much fun.

GDR: Did he come back?
LJK: Yes.
GDR: Was that your husband eventually?
LJK: No. (Laughs) I went to Chicago and found my husband.
GDR: Did the Korean or Vietnam wars affect you?
LJK: No. We were kind of in between that. My son wasn't old enough to go and my husband was too old to go, so it didn't really bother us one way or another.
GDR: Had your husband fought in World War II?
LJK: Not actually fought. He was stationed in Hawaii on a landing craft. He didn't actually shoot and that sort of thing. I don't think he ever actually saw active battle.
GDR: That didn't affect you later in life then?
LJK: No. Another thing about World War II, what affected all of us probably was the gas rationing and the meat and the sugar rationing and all that sort of thing. I was in school in a little town way outside of Chicago and nobody could come out there because they couldn't get the gas to come.
GDR: Did the government actively run Jesiek's Shipyard?
LJK: No. Our property was leased by two other gentlemen who had their contract with the government, and of course they had all their rules and stipulations from the
government, but there wasn't government officials in there actually.

GDR: Had your father been building boats before then?

LJK: He built many large boats. He built lots of sail boats. In the very early years, he built ferry boats. I'm talking now about in the 1920s when there were little ferry boats that went up and down the lakes, and many canoes and rowboats when he first got started. After he got into the actual marina business, then he built large boats—about three of them before Chris Craft got going. Once Chris Craft got going, they built them so fast that...And then too that was after the war. Dad built them before World War II. But he did build a whole string of different styles of sail boats.

GDR: Are there particular styles or models that people remember today or can be seen today on the water?

LJK: I wouldn't think so. Maybe some of the small sail boats, but we raced Crescents when we were kids and I don't think you see a Crescent sail boat around. We built a Star boat and I don't think you see Star boats around any more. So no, I would say now they are finding these old speed boats and people are redoing them and bringing them back and making them look new.

GDR: Did your father have a particular speed boat brand that he built?

LJK: No, not really built it. We were more chartering people in our speed boats. The Blitzen was a famous boat on the lake, and Blitzen I understand means lightning in German. And that we'd go back and forth to Saugatuck. We'd take people down there and bring them back, and we also kept a boat in Saugatuck at the big pavilion and we would take charter rides out on that out into Lake Michigan.
GDR: Are there particular boats that you remember your father building that are around today or not around?

LJK: No. That was a bygone era. We have wonderful pictures of them but I don't...

GDR: Do you remember any of the names?

LJK: The Patricia was one big one.

GDR: Were these contracted by local families?

LJK: Local people, yes. Dateman was one who owned the Patricia. I know we built a couple of them for a man who owned lots of property at Waukazoo Woods. I can't think of his name right now, but we also built boats for him.

GDR: Can I have your opinion of Tulip Time? What it means to you?

LJK: I think I'm like any other...well, I guess the Dutch people really still go out for it. I don't come into town when it's going on. I love the one parade. I think it's phenomenal as far as bringing people into town. But I think something has to be changed about it, because I think it cost too much for people to come here now. They can't see anything free. They're charged for every show. They charge for the tulip farm and that sort of thing, and I do think there has to be more free things offered to them.

GDR: What's your assessment of the city government of Holland?

LJK: I think they're phenomenal. I think the mayor is great doing what he's done for the city. I think they have their problems, but I think their facing up to them. We're getting race problems. We're getting gang problems. But I think they're handling it. I think they're staying on top of it.
GDR: Do you think the diversification of city government is helping that?

LJK: Yes.

GDR: Do you know anything about the new area center or Windmill Island development that you'd like to talk about?

LJK: My only feeling is I wouldn't want to live out there. I wouldn't want to live that close (laughs).

GDR: To Holland itself?

LJK: No, just in little houses built so close to each other. I like a large yard. I can't imagine moving that close to a neighbor.

GDR: Do you live in Macatawa Park today?

LJK: Jenison Park, which is right adjacent to Macatawa Park.

GDR: Is that in the old family home by chance?

LJK: No. When we sold the business, we sold the old homes at the same time.

GDR: Were they near each other?

LJK: Yes. The two homes sat upon a hill looking out over what is now Eldeans. They looked out over the shipyard.

GDR: So your shipyard really became Eldeans?

LJK: Became Eldeans, yes.

GDR: Is there anything else you'd like to add to the interview?

LJK: No, I don't think so, except I think it's wonderful you're preserving all this history of people. I don't feel I've told you a lot, but hopefully it'll add something. Maybe the little school that I went to is one of the biggest differences between then and now
because it was so small. I graduated with only 13 other kids, and at that time, most of them didn't even go on to high school because they stayed at home to work on the farms. Made a big difference.

GDR: This is the end of the oral history interview with Lois Kayes.