

Oral History Interview (via telephone to Lansing, Michigan)

Interviewee: Louise Fabiano

Interviewer: Geoffrey Reynolds

February 22, 2001

GR: Can I ask you those questions now?

LF: Yes, I may start coughing, I've been under the weather, but okay, shoot.

GR: We'll work through it together. Can you tell me a little bit about what happened that day?

LF: Well, me and my two sisters, we went to Ottawa Beach. The waters were rough, we decided not to go in. And I decided to stay on the beach and get some suntan, where my two sisters decided they would walk along the edge of the beach, the waters.

GR: Their names were Esther and Josephine?

LF: Esther and Josephine. All of a sudden, later, I don't think a few minutes, I could hear all this commotion. I thought, "Oh gee, someone is drowning." I wasn't about to go out there and see it. Then I realized there were two sisters out there. So when I went there, they were already out of the water and they were working on them, giving them, what do you call it?

GR: Artificial respiration?

LF: Yes. I sat between them, and I'm telling you, they were really out. It was so unexpected. It must have been an undertow that got them.

GR: Where they in the water when it happened?

LF: They were just walking along the edge of it, maybe a foot out. They decided it was too rough too to go out there. But they were caught in the undertow.

GR: How big were the waves, in your estimate?

LF: Oh gosh, they were awfully big. I wish I could find my papers, but I think they said about twenty-five feet or so. I don't know really. I think Esther could tell you more. The fellow that saved them was out on a boat trying to save his boat. Then he noticed they were struggling in the water and he jumped in. And I'm telling you, it was a miracle that he brought them in. He took by the hair and the other was out.

GR: These were your two sisters?

LF: Yeah.

GR: How far out were they when...?

LF: They must have been past the pier because the boat, you know, you can't get too close with the boat. They were just being carried out.

GR: Several hundred yards?

LF: Oh, it must have been that. And in fact that day several people drowned. There were people that tried to... One of them, I forget what waters they were, Tunnel Park, but they made a chain of human men just trying to drag one poor girl in.

GR: So you were down by the pier then, Ottawa Beach?

LF: Not by the pier. I wasn't on the pier, because the people that were on the pier were having difficulties getting in too.

GR: Were some of them washed off?

LF: No, I don't think any of them were washed off. I don't believe so.

GR: So there was one man that saved both of your sisters. Was he an older man?

LF: No, he was a young man. He got an award afterwards, that one award for... I wish I could get those papers—they're kind of out of my reach right now. But, no there was just

one man that later on got an award for... There's a special award for saving and he received it. Because I don't know how he brought them in. It was just a miracle.

GR: Was his name Harold Jennings?

LF: That's right.

GR: From Grand Rapids?

LF: Yes.

GR: And he was twenty-two that day.

LF: Yes, he was a very young man. He's young to me! (laughs)

GR: Your sisters, technically had they passed away or were they just...?

LF: You mean while they were in the water?

GR: Yeah.

LF: Well, I think Esther was out. I think she can tell you that more. But Josephine, Harold Jennings claimed that she tried to help him. Like I say, he grabbed her, took her in by the hair. Grabbed her hair, that was all he could do, because he had made the determination that he was going to bring them both in.

GR: Was he out of his boat at that point?

LF: What do you mean?

GR: He jumped out of his boat?

LF: Yeah, he jumped out of his boat.

GR: He just literally dragged them to shore?

LF: Yeah, and then he dragged them to shore. I really don't know how he did it.

GR: Did he participate in trying to resuscitate them?

LF: Not him, because there was a lot of people around. There was a group working on my one sister and a group working on another.

GR: So they were giving them artificial respiration?

LF: Yeah, both of them.

GR: Trying to get the water out of their lungs?

LF: Right.

GR: How long did that take?

LF: Oh golly, I don't know; I really couldn't tell you. It seems that I got there, I know I sat between them.

GR: Were you somewhat...?

LF: Well everyone said I was so calm, but frankly I was praying. I was praying, I tell you.

GR: How old were you when this happened?

LF: I was about twenty-two or so.

GR: And how old were they then?

LF: They were fifteen and nineteen.

GR: Once they were revived, what happened next?

LF: Then they were taken home.

GR: Were you living in Holland at that point?

LF: Oh, yes.

GR: Your family is from Holland?

LF: Yes, we were all born there.

GR: Once they were taken home...did your parents come and get them?

LF: No, they were brought home in a... Everybody was so wonderful that day, everybody wanted to do something, and they were taken home. No, they didn't call my parents at all.

GR: Were your parents surprised?

LF: Wait a minute, just a second. I think they did. I think my Dad came down.

GR: He was working, did he own a business?

LF: He owned an ice cream parlor.

GR: Then once they were taken home, did it take long for them...?

LF: No, I think they stayed down for the rest of the day, and then they were up.

GR: Did they ever say anything to you about what it was like when it was happening? Were they scared or were they calm?

LF: I don't recollect. I think Esther was knocked out right away and Josephine wasn't. I think by the time he got a hold of her, like he said, she tried to help him, then she passed out.

GR: Josephine was the nineteen-year-old?

LF: Nineteen-year-old.

GR: Does Esther remember anything about when she thought she had died?

LF: I don't believe so.

GR: I can ask her that too.

LF: Yeah you can ask her that. May I ask what this is for?

GR: I'm trying to do a research project on the event itself. I work in the archives here, and I wanted to make sure I had talked to everyone about what had happened that day because it seems that it is a phenomena that happens quite often on Lake Michigan. Luckily all of

you were teenagers, so you're still with us, and to have people survive that event and tell me about it is even better. That's why when I was talking to your family here in Holland, they said, "Oh no, Louise and Esther are both living in Lansing now." I thought maybe you guys had just moved away, far away, or passed away, you never know anymore.

LF: Josephine passed away.

GR: Right. After this all happened there must have been some conversations around town and probably among your family members about this event, do you remember...?

LF: Oh, there was some rumor going on. You know, anything happens there is always some rumor. I forget what it was, something to do with... I don't want to really say what it was, but it just seemed like something to do with a married man. But, you know, things like that happen and the rumors can just fly.

GR: A married man?

LF: I don't know what it was, I can't remember.

GR: Oh, okay. Did the Coast Guard or the police ever try to explain what might have happened that day? You know, the waves...

LF: Just that it came unexpectedly, and there were no signs up. I know I didn't see any, and they said they didn't. So if there were...

GR: Did your sisters ever talk about this as they grew older? Did you guys recollect on it?

LF: We'd always jokingly say that if anything had happened, we'd always say, "Well, that was because we were saved that day." So many of them died that day. They just were not fortunate enough. I don't understand how my sisters... We had lost a brother a couple years before that, and I'm telling you, that's why I sat in the middle praying. I didn't want to go home and tell my mother and dad that two girls were gone now. I still

think it was an answer to my prayer. Every once in awhile they would joke about it saying, “Well, this is why I was saved that day.”

GR: You never saw anything like that again when you were at the beach? Anything that bad?

LF: No.

GR: Now, the Riksen and Schut girls that died, were you anywhere near where that happened.

LF: When she died?

GR: Yeah, were they farther down on the beach to the north?

LF: Oh, no; it was at a different beach. There was nothing happening at Ottawa Beach except for what happened to my two sisters. I think was Tunnel Beach, and there's another beach around there.

GR: Tennessee Beach?

LF: It seemed to me there were five people who lost their lives. I can't recollect, it's been a long time.

GR: Did you ever have any contact with Harold Jennings after that?

LF: No, and I'm really sorry about that. Do you know if he is still living?

GR: No, but I'm going to find that out for you. If he is, I'll let you know.

LF: Yes, I like to know that.

GR: I'll try to do that for you. It would be great if he was.

LF: Yes, because he really accomplished something that day.

GR: I have a picture of him, I'm going to try to find him. Well, I'm going to talk to Esther later today, and if I have any other questions, I'll call you back. You've been a tremendous help.

LF: Well, I'm glad.

GR: Thank you for persevering all these years and for me to finally get a hold of you. I think it'll be a neat article. Like I said, it's happened more than once, remarkably enough, and I just wanted to see if I could put any sense to it. But I will definitely send you the article, or whatever I find out. I'll send you a letter thanking you for today, and I'll put these clippings in and you can look at them.

LF: Thank you.

GR: Thank you, Louise.

[End of interview]