

Oral History Interview (via telephone to Lansing, Michigan)

Interviewee: Esther Fabiano Young

Interviewer: Geoffrey Reynolds

February 22, 2001

GR: I guess the first thing to do is tell me how July 13, 1938 started. You went to the beach obviously.

EY: Yeah. Three of us went to the beach—my sister Josephine, and my sister Louise. It was a Wednesday afternoon. I recall my mother saying, “Oh, it’s kind of a rough day.” You know, she didn’t want us going. We said, “Grand Haven has the undertows, we don’t have them here in Holland.” And we went, and the waves were a lot of fun, we were playing in them. Then my sister Josephine and I decided to walk, really quite close to shore, it was to the pier from where we were. Louise didn’t want to go with us, so she just stayed where we had been. We weren’t really far out before the undertow felt just like somebody had taken my legs—my sister Josephine too—and pulled us right out into the water. We were holding hands, and of course we started yelling, “Help, help.” The last thing I recall is that a wave hit me right in the face and knocked me out. So I didn’t remember a thing after that. But my sister Josephine said she remembered, she was conscious and she thought we were going to drown. When Harold Jennings came for us, she said she couldn’t believe it was true. She thought it was, you know, a hallucination. He pulled us in by the hair, and he said I fought all the way. Because when the wave hit me it made me very angry—it was like somebody had slapped me in the face. He said that my sister Josephine tried to help him, where I was kind of fighting. Then he pulled us in by the hair, and the Coast Guard came. They helped as soon as he got to shore because he was absolutely exhausted. But I didn’t wake up until we got home. I didn’t

remember being worked on or anything on the beach. Where I know with my sister Josephine, she did. She said she woke up seeing a sea of legs around her, people watching. But I woke up at home in bed. That's about all I remember about...

GR: Were you in the water terribly far when it happened?

EY: No, we weren't. I wouldn't say we were much beyond our knees. We were thinking, "Oh, this looks quite bad," so I think we were actually on our way to getting out of the water. Oh, I know what we did. We didn't want to venture too far into the water, so we just kind of walked where we thought it was safe, and it wasn't. I don't believe it was any higher than our knees, I really don't.

GR: Do you remember anything out of the ordinary...did you see a big wave?

EY: I know a big wave hit me, but I don't actually remember seeing it. All I recall is being pulled out. It was just like, say something from underneath pulled us straight out into the water when I didn't want to go.

GR: How far out do you think you were pulled?

EY: Well, I don't know. Because I was knocked out with that wave, and I know Harold Jennings said he was trying to get his boat...he had a boat that, in fact we saw two fellows trying to get their boat back in, working to get their boat back in. And apparently, he was the fellow that saved us, and he must have had to swim out to...

GR: Was his boat close to shore or was it farther out?

EY: I don't know. I'm not sure.

GR: You said you remember seeing them working on their boat. Were they out in the lake?

EY: They were at the pier trying to pull it in because the wind was so strong.

GR: Describe the weather that day if you can remember.

EY: It was kind of overcast and the waves were, they were high. Like I say, it was fun playing in the waves. That was before we decide to walk toward the pier. But there were a lot of other people in the water—it wasn't that we were there alone or anything.

GR: Some people had trouble and some didn't?

EY: Yeah, well, there were five drowned, I think, that day.

GR: Yeah, they did. So do you know how you got back home that day?

EY: My brother and brother-in-law, and my mother, came—they called them. And I believe we went, I don't know, like I said, I was unconscious, I don't know. Because I know one fellow that carried me in and brought me upstairs, he was kidding me afterwards about how his arms ached carrying me up the stairs. But whether it was...I'm not sure, I think Louise could probably remember how we got home better than I would.

GR: She said you were transported. She thought your dad came to get you or something.

EY: Oh no, it wasn't my dad, because my dad was in Lansing at the time. I remember waking up and wanting to see him, and he wasn't there. I began to cry because he didn't come to see me.

GR: How old were you then?

EY: Fifteen.

GR: Josephine has passed away since, when did that happen?

EY: She died in 1990.

GR: Did the three of you ever recollect about the event?

EY: Yes we did, because my sister Louise was very worried about how my mother was going to take this because we had lost a brother in 1936 in an automobile accident, a nineteen-year-old brother. She just didn't even want to face her, and tell her. Because when they

were working on us, Louise said that people would say, “Oh, she’s a goner, this one’s a goner.” So she thought we weren’t going to make it.

GR: So you think the Coast Guard is who resuscitated you then?

EY: I believe so, because I was told that the Coast Guard did come when Harold Jennings got us to shore, that they came and took us, and he was just utterly exhausted. He went back to his camp, he had a camp there. He did come and see us after, about a day or two after.

GR: Have you ever seen the newspaper clippings of this event?

EY: Oh yeah, I have. I’m sure I have copies of them.

GR: I’m going to send Louise a copy.

EY: Now what are you doing? Why are you investigating this? We were the only ones that survived it and...

GR: Were you sore? Were they trying to get the water out of your lungs?

EY: No. I think I was weakened a little bit. We were in bed for a day or two. But after that we were fine. We were kind of celebrities around town.

GR: So people were talking about it?

EY: Oh yeah. It hit the papers—in fact, it hit the Lansing paper, and my dad was at that time living here—he came ahead of us—and we had an older brother here, and they saw it in the paper. My dad was pretty upset that nobody called, because it was the next day that it was in the Lansing paper.

GR: Did anything go through your mind when this all was taking place? In the water?

EY: I was very angry. Afterwards I thought that is no way to die.

GR: You said you passed out, and didn’t remember anything after that?

EY: No, but like I said, my sister Josephine said she thought we were going to die. She was more accepting than I was, she was that type of person. She thought she was going to die and that was it. She said she just couldn't believe when he came. He told us afterwards that she tried to help him, you know, probably not fighting, and trying to help. But he did pull us in by the hair. Actually, I didn't feel a thing a day or two later.

GR: Did the Coast Guard ever come and talk to you to see if you remembered what had happened or anything, an investigation?

EY: No. But Harold Jennings got a Carnegie Hero medal for it.

GR: Was that from the Coast Guard?

EY: No. The Carnegie Hero Medal from Carnegie Foundation. He got a thousand dollars, and that was probably a year later. We moved to Lansing in '39, and they wrote us wanting to know the full particulars of...they were evaluating the whole situation. We sent them some newspaper clippings. A man came to school, got me out of... No, I think we were still in Holland then, yeah, and got me out of class so I could go, so he could interview me. He did receive the Carnegie Hero Medal because that was in the paper too.

GR: So it appeared in the Lansing paper?

EY: No, it was Holland. I was in Holland, I made a mistake there.

GR: I'll look that up for you. That's great that he did that. Louise asked if he is still alive, and I didn't know but I will check.

EY: I would like to know. I wouldn't mind calling him.

GR: Well I'll do that for you, see what I can do.

EY: Well, that would be nice, and anything you write up you will send us a copy?

GR: You're on the list. Would I be able to get photographs of you and Esther from that time period? The photographs in the newspaper are quite grainy.

[End of interview]