6-12-2003

Fynewever, Forrest Oral History Interview: Polio Survivors in Holland

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Published in: 2003 - Polio Survivors in Holland (H88-0234) - Hope College Living Heritage Oral History Project, June 12, 2003. Copyright © 2003 Hope College, Holland, MI.

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PUPILS GO IN CABS TO ORTHOPEDIC SCHOOL

Eastern school, the battery of taxicabs and the orthopedic pupils, between whom and the cab drivers a fine spirit of gentle comradeship has developed.

TAXI MEN FRIENDS OF THE CHILDREN

Orthopedic School Pupils Go in Comfortable Cabs to and from Studies.

QUicker AND CHEAPER

Those confirmed readers of certain types of fiction who from too constant reading of detective literature have acquired the idea the average taxi driver is a dangerous character would have their illusions rudely shattered by a visit to Eastern Avenue school. There they would have an opportunity to observe taxicab drivers in a new role.

For the Eastern school, of which Miss Meda Bacon is principal, holds an orthopedic department where children suffering from physical infirmities that make impossible their attendance at usual schools are taught and where every effort is made to correct and compensate for their physical handicaps. This work is under direct supervision of Miss Bacon, under whom the method of handling orthopedic pupils has attracted national attention. "Every morning 13 taxicabs, running on a schedule as exact as that on which a railroad operates, appear at the entrance of the orthopedic school, bearing a total of 96 children.

spect and affection of their little passengers.

H. N. Merrill, business manager of the board of education, states that formerly the board operated its own busses to bring the children to and from school. Increased enrollment in the orthopedic school would have meant purchase of new busses or the lengthening of the bus schedules and it was decided to make a 60-day test of the system of handling the children with taxicabs. The results were so satisfactory this method has been made permanent.

Fatigue Dispersed With.

The chief advantage of the new system is the cutting down of the length of time required to get each child to and from school. When busses were used some of the children were more than two hours in reaching the school in the morning and an equal length of time in getting to their homes at night owing to the fact that the bus carried so many and made so many stops. Under these conditions the child arrived at school tired and in low spirits and some of them were obliged to rest for a half hour before starting school the day. But with the taxicab system now in vogue and by using a large number of cabs the longest time required to get any child home from school is 18 minutes.

"This saving in time and in the wear and tear on the children's nerves also is accompanied by a distinct saving in money," said Mr. Merrill. "While it formerly cost about 26 cents a day for each pupil for transportation by bus it now costs less than 50 cents for faster and more convenient transportation by taxicab. And we have yet to receive our first complaint regarding any of the drivers."

Has Novel Advantage.

As the school is built on a hill, the entrance from Emerald-av, brings the children directly onto the third floor of the building, which on the Eastern-av, side is four stories high. Each cab rolls up and stops the driver alights, opens the doors and helps out the children who are able to walk. For others wheel chairs are waiting and the driver carefully wheels a little student up the ramp into the corridor and directly into his class room. Other tots with steel braces on their legs are contentedly in the driver's strong arms and carried into school. As a result all this is done to an accomplished degree of giggles, jokes and juvenile "wise cracks." The drivers and their little charges are the best of pals. Each morning the same cab is at the doors of the children at their homes and consequently the drivers and the children become the best and closest of friends, calling each other by their first names and exchanging all the items of news and interest so dear to a child's heart.

Drivers Meet Tests.

In the afternoon the same taxicabs manned by the same drivers take the children back to their homes. Louis J. DeLormer, president of the company operating the cabs, which is a division of the Grand Rapids Railroad Co., says the drivers are selected for this unusual type of transportation service only after the most rigid investigation. The not only must be expert drivers, to whom safety is second nature, but they must possess the ability to capture and hold the re-
Index
(Chronological Order)

p. 1 Family histories

p. 2 Description of experience with polio
   The disability a result of polio
   Going to Eastern Orthopedic School, GR

p. 3 Education and “Crippled Kids”
   Davis Technical and Vocational School
   Redefining “disabled person”

p. 4 University decisions
   work as mechanical engineer

p. 5 Work at Hermann Miller
   Mother felt guilt about Forrest’s polio

p. 6 Didn’t recognize self as disabled
   Polio’s effect on family

p. 7 People’s reaction to the disabled
   What keeps people from understanding a disabled person’s life

p. 8 Not accepted but tolerated and recognized
   Mobility and accessibility

p. 9 Equal rights of a disabled person
   Lakeshore center for Independent Living
   Holland Area Arts Council and Accessibility

p. 10 Need for awareness of the disabled
    Centennial Park
    Civic Center and Accessibility

p. 11 Forrest as a boy
    Inability to play sports

p. 12 Varsity as equipment manager
    Need for disabled to stand up for their selves actively
Consciousness of disabilities

p. 13 General Public’s amazement with polio victims outcomes
Ruth Plapaski (Friend who contracted polio)

p. 14 Meeting his wife (also named Ruth)
Ruth’s role as a nurse
Grand Rapids upbringing

p. 15 Story of being diagnosed

p. 16 Other health problems
participation in fundraising and awareness

p. 17 Centennial Park

p. 18 Polio and the public reaction

p. 19 Fear
Isolation
Treatments

p. 20 Involvement in disability support and activism

p. 21 Job discrimination
Doesn’t have to be polio to bring discrimination

p. 22 Eastern Orthopedic School’s baseball team

p. 23 Need for the story on disabilities to get out
FF: And my wife was a Van Laan and her father, her mother was a Ploege. So there's four family trees that I made up, made throughout the years and I gave a copy to Herrick Public Library, to Hope College, to Calvin College. I don't know who all, kind of fun.

MN: It must have been.

FF: It was a lot of fun because I hadn't seen any of my cousins for three years, it is one way to get reacquainted with the whole family is to do a family tree.

MN: It is interesting to find out about your own family's heritage.

FF: Yeah, I laughed, one of my cousins who was my mother's niece lived in Ravanna, the town. My mothers sister, youngest sister, who was my aunt was a telephone operator. This goes back to the thirties. And so she could listen to all the telephone conversations she wanted to. So what she would, what Flossie would do is she would talk to her boyfriend on the telephone and then Aunt Catherine, afterwards would call her mother and give the lowdown of this couple. And Flossie was so disgusted at the time, but I said to Flossie, look that's 50 years ago, can I put it in the family tree? She said "I don't care, I am so old no one even knows it anymore." But anyway, that is beside the point.

MN: That is a great story.

FF: What do you want to know?

MN: Well, how old were you when you had polio?
FF: Two years old in 1927. So I was paralyzed on my right side, and I was in braces, crutches, wheelchairs, a lot of stuff in my lifetime. The polio syndrome thing is coming back. Now I can’t—I have not been able to walk for 15 years. I used to have a long leg brace and I fell. I broke the hip on that bad leg. They tried to set it but it was no good, I finally went to Ann Arbor and they took one look at it and said that that bone is so deformed and so porous that there is no way that they could patch it. So they took the ball out so I have what we call a free leg, I forgot what they call it. [Thinks] A non-union leg now. So it just hangs. And that is why I have got this strap on, because I can’t control them. [He wears a black nylon strap that wraps around the middle of his thighs to keep them together] But that is okay, I get around. I have had a lot of other things that happen to me so it is not all bad. But 1927 I had it. It was called infantile paralysis at that time. And then later on they changed it to polio myilitis. Why, I don’t know. I do too. Because infantile paralysis said that it was generally the infants that would get polio, which was not necessarily true. Because adults of any age would get it. So they started calling in polio myilitis which is the true term for it. I don’t know, I have a lot of friends obviously who are disabled. Would you like me to tell you some of the stories.

MN: Yes, please.

FF: I went to what they called Eastern Orthopedic School in Grand Rapids. It was a school for disabled kids. We said crippled kids at that time. It was in the thirties. Who cared what you called it, we were crippled. It was on the third floor of this building and I was picked up and brought home everyday in a taxi cab. We tried
buses first and that didn’t work. So all the kids were picked up by taxi. I have pictures, my mother saved everything, of those taxi cabs in the parking lot of the school. But anyway, I was in I think the fourth grade, and my dad says, why don’t we try Forrest in the Christian school, which I did. I stayed one semester. And the teacher said I was so disruptive that she realized that I should back to Eastern Orthopedic School. I called that a copout, because they didn’t know how to handle those kids, and we weren’t that disruptive. I don’t think. I don’t think that she knew how to handle a disabled kid, and so that is why were never in these schools. Then after I got out of Eastern Orthopedic School I went to Davis Technical Vocational High School which was downtown Grand Rapids and the only reason why I went there was because they had an elevator. None of the schools had elevators, this school did. So I went there. I used to be told that there is no sense in being given a college education because no one hires crippled kids, crippled people. Well, I fooled them. And they may have been right at the time. We had overcompensated for our disabilities, and let people know that we were people. I am a person who happens to have a disability, I am not a disabled person. I am a person who happens to use a wheelchair. But I am not wheelchair bound. I use a wheelchair, I occupy a wheelchair, but I am not bound to it. I get by in a wheelchair, but I am not bound to it. But people have the tendency that even today, its, well, “you’re confined to a wheelchair.” That is not true. I am not confined to anything. But then, I went to Davis Technical and Vocational High School. I graduated from there, and that was during World War II, so the city decided to close that school because it was in the center of town, and these are the
excuses, center of the town and they figure that they would save time and money from the war effort and there were plenty of schools around the city so there was no reason to have it. They closed the school in 1944. I went back there, I graduated in June. I went back there in September to that school because it then became part of the Junior College. So I spent two years back in the same school for it. Then I wanted to become an aeronautical engineer and I was accepted both at Michigan State and at the University of Michigan. Well, Michigan State didn’t have a good aeronautical school, engineering school, so I went to Ann Arbor, and that place is totally non-barrier free. Steps wherever you go. So on the way back I came through east Lansing, and wow, I had a long leg brace and walked with canes, but it doesn’t mean I couldn’t go up and down steps, but it was a chore for me to do so. Michigan State, there were some steps in there, but not as many. So I changed my major and went into Mechanical Engineering and went to Michigan State. And I graduated from there in 1948 as a mechanical engineer. Then I became a registered professional engineer and then we moved to Colorado, Denver, for a job, for my job, and then I became registered there in the state of Colorado. I had a good life, a good career.

MN: What kind of work did you work in, what kind of work did you do then with Mechanical Engineering?

FF: Primarily with new product development. Now, I never designed the product, but I developed it. When I left Samsonite Corporation in Denver, for a lot of reasons, I joined Hermann Miller in Zeeland, under the same capacity. So I was there for 16 years, until I fell and was given a permanent disability. But that was good, I
had a good time there, wherever I worked I had a good time. We had a lot of fun. I had a lot of people working for me. I tell people that, and men don’t think that women can be engineers, but I hired a gal who had graduated from Calvin College as a mechanical engineer, I hired her, and you should have seen the reaction I got. And then there was an employment agency in Cleveland that were dealing with just black people, so I went to Cleveland to interview people there. And there I found a gal who happened to be black, who happened to be an engineer and a lot of fun. So I said, you’re hired. She came up to Zeeland. Now Zeeland, as you know, I don’t think they are prejudice, but they don’t have black people. The moment she walked in, oh they couldn’t stand me. First of all, she was a woman, and secondly she was black. “How can you work in the engineering field when you are a woman and then when you are black?” I said, “Be careful because she may be your boss someday.” [Laughter]

MN: Oh, that’s great.

FF: She was there with us for three years and then she left, not because she wasn’t doing the job, she just didn’t feel comfortable in Zeeland Michigan, or Grand Rapids, Michigan working for Hermann Miller, and she finally decided that that wasn’t for her. She finally decided that that was not for her. She was an excellent engineer, but she went back to Ford Motor Company in Detroit. She was a good engineer.

MN: Do you remember anything from when you were younger, as a child, about polio?

FF: Oh yeah, because I had braces. People kind of blamed, my mother always felt guilty for some reason or other, that I had a debilitating disease. She never
admitted it to me, but I guess in those years, your kids had something wrong, you blamed the mother, it was not necessarily true, but I don’t know, my mother and dad treated my just like my two brothers and my sister. I didn’t realize, I didn’t know I was disabled. We never talked about it, I was just accepted as another kid, who happened to have braces but that was okay. I couldn’t play any sports, but I sure could watch, and I could be a good manager. There wasn’t anything drastic or dramatic about it. Because that is the way I was brought up. There was not any prejudice as far as my parents were concerned. And although it cost them a lot of money, the braces and hospitalization and you name it, I have it. But, then, when I got married, we had four children, when I asked my four children to write something for my family, my life history, which I wrote, all four of them said they didn’t know that Dad was disabled, we just didn’t talk about it. They knew that there were things I couldn’t do, like my oldest boy says, Dad couldn’t play baseball but he was always there to cheer us on. My daughter, first daughter, we used to go to lake Michigan and Dad would take off his braces when we get in the water and you would never think that he could pick me up and throw me around. That is the kind of environment that I was brought up in. Now not everybody is brought up in that kind of environment.

MN: What effected it, how do you think your polio affected your family?

FF: Sometimes with disdain. Sometimes with rejection. But even today, I say that people with disabilities are not accepted, we’re tolerated. I give a lot of arguments against that but I get arguments against it and people who don’t have disabilities and when you look at it, realistically, that they tolerate us because they don’t
know what to do with us. They tolerate us because I think many times they are ashamed to ask. I say ask me, I am not ashamed of it. And like a mother with little kids. Little kids want to talk to me, the mother will take and pull them away. Why don’t you let me talk to him. Well, they don’t want me to have them bother me, I said they are not bothering me. I think these kids should know, and so I became friends with a lot of little kids [laughter] and I give them rides in this if they are small enough, I give them rides around in my manual chair. It takes a lot of education, a lot of open-mindedness, even today, we live in Freedom Village. We have a bus with a lift on it, along with another bus that doesn’t have a lift. I remember sitting in that bus where they put me on with the lift and some lady in the back said, if we didn’t have this wheelchair on board we could take the other bus which is larger and more comfortable. What does that tell you. I think that tells you that they are not ashamed of it, but they’d rather not me be around, or people with disabilities around. I don’t let that—a lot of, many people with disabilities are just afraid of saying anything or talking to people because of the reaction that they get from those people. So they don’t talk, they don’t say anything. But I am not like that apparently.

MN: What do you think keeps people (the general population) from understanding the life of a disabled person?

FF: Sometimes I think they don’t want to know, because they wouldn’t care to be in that situation, they don’t know how to handle it, so by not knowing how to handle it, they avoid it. And by avoiding it, then we’re tolerated. My family was always very understanding, and like my sister. She says, I used to get away with things at
home because my mother would baby me. I say, what do you mean baby me? Well she says, you couldn’t lift stuff, you couldn’t do the dishes, but I learned how to play guitar, so I played the songs my mother liked while they would do the dishes. [Laughter] We laugh about it today, but it was quite serious at the time. Because they thought I got away with a lot of stuff that they couldn’t get away with. Maybe that is true, I don’t know. I don’t think so. Of course, I am not in their situation either. So I don’t know. But it is fascinating to look, to watch people’s reaction, like if I was having breakfast one morning with two ladies and their husbands had been doctors. MDs. Both had died, so I suggested to them that I don’t think that people with disabilities are accepted I think were recognized, and we are tolerated. Boy did I start a firestorm with that one. Because they didn’t believe that. They really believed that we are accepted. That is a month ago. But I talk to them every once in a while but they are kind of starting to realize that maybe part of this is something that I’m right. That we’re acknowledged, we’re there. They don’t know what to do with us. So we are tolerated, and take the city of Holland. There weren’t many curb cutouts until I came here. Now they have got a lot of curb cutouts. Because I told the city fathers that I think everyone of these curbs should be cutout. One of the reasons why many are cutout today is because of snowplowing. It wasn’t done for people with disabilities, it was because they plowed the streets. So I have been asked, “do you think every curb should be cut out?” I said yes, what is wrong with that. They didn’t know. And they didn’t have an elevator at the city hall. And there is no way I could get in there, and they finally built a ramp, and without electric door openers and it was
very difficult to get in, and then they had a bank of telephones on their first floor, and they say “Forrest, if you need anything, just pick up a phone and call.” I said, “Let me ask you a question. When you come in, do you have to do that?” They said, “No, we go up the steps.” Then I said, “Why should I have to do that?” They finally got an elevator in city hall, and my wife and I were the first ones to ride on it. [Laughter] It was, even Ed Prince, when they built the, center down there. Evergreen. They had an open house Ed and Elsa his wife, met us at the door. Ed grabbed my wheelchair and pushed it into the elevator and we went up on it. He said “Forrest, I want no more complaints from you.” So, people are becoming aware of it. Life electric door openers, like the Sentinel, they finally built a ramp, they haven’t put in electric door openers. I have been after them for four years—three years, and they’ll put it in one of these days. But you just have to be persistent, because once you are out of their sight, then they think everything is okay, because they can open the door, they can go up and down steps. They don’t realize how difficult it is for me to come up the steps, and I am dead, I am lost, I’m right there, I can’t move. People are becoming more and more aware of it all the time. And it is not just because of me, it think it is because of people like Lakeshore Center for Independent Living. I have been on their board. Really striving to make assessable places for people with disabilities. And not only assessable, but they are very employable. Just because we happen to be in a wheelchair doesn’t mean we can’t work. That with the Center for Independent Living, I was on the board for the Holland Area Arts Council and there we got finally got some ramps and some elevators. That is only because I made them
aware of it. Someone else could be making them aware of it too, that happens to be in a wheelchair, it doesn’t have to be me. But because I was there, they finally recognized that there would be something like Centennial Park. When we moved to Holland it was all gravel paths, and no way could I get down some of those paths in a wheelchair. So I, and I said to the people, elderly people with walkers, people in wheelchairs, people with young kids in strollers, everybody had a hard time. So we started a buy-a-brick program. That is why Centennial Park has paved paths today, because of that.

MN: Oh, wow.

FF: Another example is the Civic Center. I could never get in there unless I went way to the back. The back had two doors each two foot wide. I can’t get through a two-foot door. You had to open both doors and then I could get in, I went to the front then to give my ticket. This man says “Forrest, how did you get in here?” That did it. We now have a ramp. I said it is not just for people in wheelchairs. It is surprising how many people use them; carrying things in your arms, whatever. They use that ramp all the time. People today don’t even realize that at one time there wasn’t even a ramp there. Before we did it, some one in the city wrote to a lady in Detroit, I guess an architectural firm, and he wrote back and he says “don’t do it because you are going to destroy the aesthetic value of that building.” I said what do you mean, aesthetic value. There is no aesthetic value of that building at all, it is just a rectangle. So, I convinced the city that if you want people with disabilities to use the Civic Center, why don’t you use this ramp. Because it is not only for we in wheelchairs, it is for mothers with kids and people
carrying things, and elderly people. And so the engineers came over to our condo and they showed me the plans. There are certain requirements that you have to have. In other words, when you get to the top of the landing you better have room up there for the swinging door and for an electric door opener, which they did. Delightful now, I can get in there anytime. And people don’t even know it any more, that there was not a ramp there. It is these kinds of things that just takes a long time for people with disabilities of others aware of the fact that we just can’t move around unless you make provisions for us. They say “why should we make provisions for you?” I says well, I guess we are not important are we? And that really sets them on their heels. But anyway, that’s it. That’s my story.

MN: What were you like as a child? What were you like as a boy?

FF: What do you mean?

MN: What were your interests, how would you describe yourself, your personality?

FF: Very outgoing. I loved to tinker with stuff and build things. It was a typical, I think a typical boy of my age. There wasn’t anything special about it, I had the same desires as my brother. I had a brother who was two years younger than I am. My mother always wanted twins, so she would dress us up as twins when we were kids. We did the same things. I couldn’t play baseball, but I was manager of the baseball team. I was the equipment manager. When I went to high school there were no sports I could play. I came home to my Dad and I said “Dad, I am not going back.” He says “Now what?” I told him, go see the coach. I think he called this coach, but I am not sure, but I went to see Coach Emory. And Emory says “Well, yeah, we’ve got things for you to do.” I was equipment manager for
football, basketball and baseball. I have a Varsity sweater with four strips and a varsity letter. I still have it. I don’t have the sweater anymore but I have the varsity letter. [End Tape 1 Side 1] We took the initiative many times when we were sub-teens, and teens, and older people. When you are a baby, or a young kid, the mother and father takes the role of being the inquisitor and getting things done. But as you grow older it is up to you. Many people who are disabled don’t think it is worth it. Why should I battle all the time and not see anything happen? So then they just give up. I see it happen time and time again. And it just breaks my heart because look, you’re valuable. You are not a disabled person, you are a person with a disability. I wish people would remember that, that we happen to be people who just happen to be disabled in some way. I think everybody has a disability. But ours is so viable, not viable, visible. I could sit in my wheelchair after church sitting in the lobby, and people, I know people do, walk by me and they don’t want to recognize the fact that I am there, just because I am in a wheelchair. Now, look at yourself sometimes. See how you react. I think you’ll find that you react like any other person with a person with a disability. I think you do. I am not saying that’s wrong, I am saying that is what happens and you have to be aware of it.

MN: People need to be conscious.

FF: Yes, conscious of the fact that there are all kinds of people with disabilities. And just recognize it. People don’t come up to me to talk to me because I am sitting in a wheelchair, I guess they think that I can’t talk or that I don’t have the ability to talk, or just because I happen to be disabled that I am totally disabled including
my mind. That’s not true. And it was a big thing, particularly with polio, that you were only affected by part of your body, your whole body was affected including you mind. You are treated as a dumb kid, and a cripple kid. And using the work cripple in the thirties was acceptable, today it is not. You wouldn’t dare say crippled anymore, but in the thirties, who cared? I happen to be a cripple kid.

MN: What do you think the general public’s attitudes were towards people who had polio?

FF: I think they are amazed number one, that we are still alive. Because polio was a very debilitating disease and didn’t expect to live. They are surprised at that. They are also surprised that, they are amazed at the things that we can do. Just because we happen to be in a wheelchair or happen to be on crutches or we happen to have braces, doesn’t mean that we can’t do anything. We have a man at Freedom Village that had polio about the same time I did, and he is an electrical engineer. He is in a wheelchair now because the post-polio thing, he is back in a wheelchair. But he controls all the sound systems at Freedom Village. The guys is brilliant. I had another friend of mine, Ruth Plapaski who—now I wrote her a letter saying that “There is going to come a time Ruth when someone will want to interview you.” She had two leg braces, two long leg braces, but she played the piano beautifully. And she was a pianist for the choir for high school. After that I kind of lost track of her. And when we moved to Holland, I got a letter that said “There can only be one Forrest Fynewever.” That there can be only one Forrest Fynewever. She said that she never married, she traveled around the world, she got rid of her braces, she was a teacher for years, and then that polio syndrome hit
her. That’s not polio coming back, it’s the effects of polio and she is back in braces again. Now that is debilitating, that’s hard to take, but, she can realize and I realize that no one is going to feel sorry for us, that we have to do what we think is necessary to run our own lives. And so I do. My wife happens to be a registered nurse, and also a registered occupational health nurse. I met her on a blind date, and her mother warned her that I may have some problems in the future with the polio, and Ruth being a nurse and had worked with polio patients for a long time, that didn’t bother her at all. And so, she is kind of my medical advisor. I can’t get away with anything [Laughter]. But she is an excellent nurse. I asked her one time, why don’t you go back to medical school to be an MD. She says “Forrest, I love what I am doing, and if I went back to medical school to become an MD, I don’t me doing the things I do today. She says, not worth it. And that is the way she is. She is willing to argue with doctors and everybody else. She keeps exclusive notes. When I was in Ann Arbor, one of the many times, and they had scheduled me again to do some surgery, they were supposed to do two procedures, but they only had one written down, so I said to the doctor if you don’t do both of them, you can forget it, I am going home. He says “Ruth, what do your notes say?” She says, he is supposed to have two. “That’s scheduled” he said, “We’ll do it.” That’s the kind of thing we do.

MN: Did you grow up in Holland?

FF: No. I grew up in Grand Rapids on the West Side. Then we got married and we moved—I built a house on Wyoming Park, and then from there we went to Denver and I was working for Samsonite Corporation as their director of
Engineering until Samsonite sold out to Beatrice Foods, and when they sold out to Beatrice Foods they hired a guy out of Indianapolis, he sold off so many things. He didn’t really want any new products. That was my life, he didn’t want new products. Finally after a year and a half I said goodbye, I just can’t take it any more. So I had friends at Hermann Miller and I called them. They said “Sure, come on over, go to work for us.” So I went to go work for Hermann Miller. I ended my career there. [Pause]

MN: Do you remember anything from really early on when you had polio? You would have been two, you said, so...

FF: My mother said I was crawling and kind of standing up. All of a sudden she didn’t hear from me and she found me in back of one of the registers and I couldn’t sit up. She set me on a little chair and I just fell over to my right side. I was paralyzed on my whole right side. That is how I got to know. And then the doctor, whatever his name is, I used to know. He says it was polio. “It could be two things,” he said. “It could be polio (infantile paralysis at that time) or and, it could be post-chicken pox encephalitis. Now I don’t remember having chicken pox, and I can’t ask my mother because she is not living. So I don’t know, but I had one doctor, one neurologist tell me, he says “Forrest, it doesn’t make any difference anymore. You are severally handicapped. We are going to make you as comfortable as possible. Period.” I guess it doesn’t make any difference.

MN: Did your mom or dad ever tell you any stories or recollect anything from real early with polio?
FF: No, not really. No they didn’t. Because like I said, I was treated in the family just like my two brothers and sister. I didn’t think I was any different, but my sister will tell you something else, but she does it with a smile. And I have had a lot of things happen. It has all happened on the right side. I had surgery three times on the leg and then the hip finally. I had my shoulder replaced about four years ago. I had a cerebral aneurysm. I though I was going to die in that one. Today there are a lot of things that I can’t do anymore, mentally do because of that cerebral aneurysm. They cut me, open. And then I had an aortic aneurysm, in the stomach. So they cut me open and fixed that. I don’t know what I have had anymore, what difference does it make. Because I am here. I never thought. I always thought that I would maybe live until I have 50, but not much after that. Well, in 1975 I was 50 and I had that cerebral aneurysm. And I had a grand mal seizure. They didn’t know if they could operate on me or not. Finally they did out of desperation and they said they didn’t know how long I would live, maybe a couple of years, well that’s 1975. I am still alive. I don’t die very easily I guess.

MN: Did you ever participate in anything like the March of Dimes or fundraisers? Or events about awareness or fundraising about polio?

FF: Oh yes, very much so. I have been in Lansing many times, Grand Rapids many times, Holland many times, and make people aware of the fact that there are people with disabilities. That these people are people who happen to have a disability. And it is a long struggle, because you think people aren’t listening. I don’t know if they are or not, they kind of said well, we’ll forget about that. Maybe it’s a normal thing. I don’t know. I wonder sometimes if I didn’t have
polio, if I would recognize steps and curbs et cetera. I probably wouldn’t. Because I could do it. No thought process in order to go up the steps, so I probably wouldn’t be able to recognize it. So I really don’t fault people, but when they are told and when they are shown by example and still don’t believe it or still disregard it or avoid it. Then something is wrong, something is wrong with me or them. Maybe I have not told them the right way, I don’t know. That is pretty sad.

We had a lot of fun with Centennial Park. We had that sell a brick program, and what is his name, he became mayor, the youngest mayor. Phil Tanis. He was put on for the city as a city councilman, was put on this committee Buy-A-Brick program just to keep the city aware of what we are doing. We got the job done. What we wanted to do was not renovate the park, we wanted to establish the park and try keep it like it is, only have paths that people, and have a gazebo and barrier free restrooms below. I don’t know if you know that at the north end of the park there is a wooden platform and two paths running down into a hole, that used to be the bathrooms down there but we kept it. They are not useable and we have boarded it up but we kept it because it is part of the history of the park. Anyway people want to make it memorial park; I don’t know what all they want to do and we said “No, it is the centennial park to celebrate the centennial of Holland, Michigan. Of course we can put some memorials in there but not like they wanted us to do. So the only two memorials we have are veterans and old Van Raalte sitting up there and that is enough and it became a Michigan Historical Site and so there is a historical sign in the park that tells about the park itself but anyway we had a lot of fun with it. We dug up the history on it, in fact I made a model of that
park and then gave it to the city. They took a picture of it and put it in the front page of the Sentinel, but beside the point. Just to demonstrate what that park would look like if it was renovated and had paved paths. Old Bill Sickle just wanted to put blacktop in there. I said no, that is ridiculous, you don’t want that. He is still mad at me yet. I think. No, he’s not really. But anyway, we decided to put brick in there, we sold a lot of brick.

MN: What do you remember polio being like in the general public through the years?

FF: Well, when I had it, as an example, we were living in an upstairs apartment. The people that owned the house lived in the first floor. When they learned that I had polio, they made us leave because it was supposed to be very contagious. So we had to move, and we moved, I don’t know how far, in the city. Later on, my dad bought a house on White Street, which is called Whiting street today in southwestern part of Grand Rapids. They forced us to move. Why should their kids get it from me if it was that contagious? They didn’t want to risk their kids because polio, at that time, you were supposed to die. You weren’t supposed to live. So that is one reason why I am aware of the rejection of people because of polio. But it is not that way today. Polio I don’t think is contagious, I say that, I am not sure. In the early ‘50s we had an outbreak of polio, and my wife took care of a woman who was in an iron lung for a long time because of polio. It affected her lungs and she had to be in an iron lung in order to breathe. So she is well aware of it. She worked in a polio ward because it was part of her duties. Not agreeing or anything, that is what she wanted to do. But then, I think this lady, in fact she came to our wedding in a wheelchair, she was out of the iron lung by that time,
and she came to our wedding. Because, I can’t even think of her name, that’s not important. But, a very lovable lady, and her husband. These kind of things you know you remember. So it is not all bad. No. No it is not.

MN: Do you remember how polio was talked about through the years?

FF: I think during those times it was talked about with fear?

MN: Why fear?

FF: Because they saw all these kids particularly, get stricken, just like that, all of a sudden, bam, they were down and out. So there was a lot of fear going around about polio. And we were kind of isolated because of it. People always knew that I had polio, and so they kind of isolated us for a while. By then my mothers parents, and my dad’s parents, they took me in. The weren’t afraid of it.

MN: Do you remember any kinds of treatments or anything of that nature?

FF: Oh yeah, the school, The Orthopedic School had heat lamps. They were build like a closet hut at that time. And with heat lamps and you would lay out under it for the heat benefit and messaging. We had a small pool in the school that we would add water exercise every, well whenever it was the doctor ordered it. We would have large mats on the floor and every day we would have to lay down for at least an hour, whether we needed it or not, we were told to lay down. We had a lot of messaging. The nurses were there and that was continuous every day, every month, every year. Don’t ask me how effective it was, I don’t know. I think it didn’t cure the polio, I didn’t aggravate the polio, but it soothed the nerves of the kids and the parents. Something was being done. Whether it helped or not. So that is it.
MN: Do you think there might be a generation gap in understanding something like polio?

FF: No, I don't think a generation gap. Because polio is still here. I think the acknowledgment of the fact that kids and teenagers and young adults do have debilitating diseases and one happens to be polio. It is not necessarily acceptable. But it is recognized. So, like I said before, it is tolerated.

MN: Did you ever—

FF: That is kind of a tough word, tolerated.

MN: Yeah.

FF: I know.

MN: Did you ever work for any of the, like the polio foundation fundraisers or participated in anything like that?

FF: Participated in it, yes.

MN: How so?

FF: I was with the Lakeshore Center for Independent Living which is very involved with people with disabilities. I don't know what else. I was involved with the polio foundation. Not to any real extent. Involved in therapy for people. Involved in braces for people. It took a very experienced person to make braces. You just didn't go to a shoe shop, shoe repair and say make a brace for this guy, that didn't work. And the doctors, the medical people were very involved. There were a lot of people involved. It is like you get the people today with Multiple Sclerosis. Some of these other crippling diseases that I think because of polio, people became more aware of the needs of a person with a disability. Not necessarily
polio, it could be MS, it could be... what are some of the other diseases, I don’t even know. [Pause] At least it has been enlightening to other people.

MN: During later polio epidemics in the ‘40s and the ‘50s, how did you react?

FF: What do you mean?

MN: Being someone who had polio, how did you see—

FF: You react in the sense that people don’t know any better, in fact, I’ll give you an example. Spirit Lake, Iowa. I was offered a job in Spirit Lake, Iowa on fishing equipment, fishing gear. I didn’t want to live in Spirit Lake Iowa, and I didn’t want to get involved in that, but the man was very persuasive, so I went up and interviewed. He didn’t know that I was in braces. When he saw me he was kind of shocked.

Later on, he says, “Forrest, I don’t think that you are qualified for this job.”

I said, “You are not going to hurt my feelings.”

I said, “Please tell me why you don’t think so.”

He says, “Well, you can’t go into the middle of a stream with a fly rod and fish.”

And he said “This is what we want people to do.”

Now that is discriminating. I could fish from the shore, what difference does it make, but he was very insistent. [End Tape 1]

FF: I don’t know what else I can tell you.

MN: Are there any other topics that you can think of that have not been discussed?

FF: Not really. That is generally how people were acted, reacted to, treated with a debilitating disease. This one just happened to be polio. So it doesn’t necessarily have to be polio to be treated that way. You can be treated if you have a stroke,
and you can’t use one arm, you could be treated the same way. So it doesn’t necessarily mean that polio is the only disease that causes these conditions, it is the disability of the person that causes these conditions, regardless of what that disability is. Now we had a young man at breakfast this morning that was a, what do you call it, he had the appearance, the looks the face, oh shoot, I can’t think of it. Anyway, you can tell that he was disabled, and his functioning was very halting. I can’t think of the name, what do they call it. But I think that is more disabling than the person without an arm or without a leg or with braces. I’ll think of it when I start going home. But it is something that they are born with. Anyway, this kid, if you look at him, you can say there is something wrong, but why do I have to say that, that something is wrong, why don’t I just accept the kid. And I do, but people don’t. It is a look of lostness, a look of not knowing, not caring. Looking like he is lost, or she is. Anyway, it is just as debilitating as any other disease, any probably more so because it effects everything in their body, their mind, their motion, but the kid is a nice kid. He plays ball. Why not. We used to have a ball team, we had a ball team at Eastern Orthopedic School, that we would play and the school was on third floor of this building and the building was built on a slope to where the third floor on the back was at ground level. Anyway, once a year, in the spring we would have a ball game. Kids from the Eastern Orthopedic School and the other kids. The rules had to be changed somewhat. Like maybe I could hit, but I could not run, so someone would have to run for me. A lot difference in rules we had. We used to beat those kids all the time. [Laughter] They didn’t like that but we did. They said, “well you changed
the rules on us, no wonder.” Well, I can’t run, but I could hit. So that is another thing that we used to have and we would thoroughly enjoyed it because we could compete, and even in swimming, if you put these kids, many of them in the water, and they would take out anybody in swimming, certain races they could beat anybody because they were strong in their shoulders. Anyway it is quarter after 11, I am getting tired.

MN: Thank you for the interview.

FF: Well thank you for wanting to. Because I think the story should get out.

MN: Yes.

FF: The more that story can get out, the more people recognize the fact that people with disabilities are people. We are just not something is pushed aside. And that is why we say, let’s get the story out. It takes a long time for people to believe it, and a long time for people to accept it. Because they don’t want to accept it. Because biblically, God would only accept for people who were priests, they would only accept people who were totally, physically pure, nothing wrong with them. And so we said, “I wonder if God accepts me?” I don’t happen to be perfect. Well, it was for certain duties that he did that, not necessarily because I happen to have polio. And I know that God loves me, under any circumstances He loves me, so I am not afraid of that. And people say, “Well, Forrest, are you going to be accepted?” I said “I already am.” Well, anyway, thanks for doing this job.

MN: Thank you so much, thank you for your stories, it is great to hear them.

FF: Now I got to come back here sometime because I am also involved in the genealogical society, and I have written four genealogies, one on my family, one
on Ruth's family, one on my mother's family, and one on Ruth's dad's family.

Four of them I did. And that is a lot on the computer, but I tell you, that is one way to get reacquainted with you cousins.

MN: That is great isn't it?

[End of Interview]