Pike, Laura-Lee Oral History Interview: Parents of Baby Boomer Generation

Geoffrey Reynolds
GR: Laura-Lee, tell me what you were doing prior to the beginning of World War Two, during the Depression. What was it like?

LP: The Depression didn’t affect my family a great deal, except my grandparents from California had to come and live with us.

GR: Why was that?

LP: Because they lost everything, and as a result they had no income, no way to support themselves. They had been in a grocery store business, and so they came back and lived with us. But to compare what was happening during the Depression years with today, I think of how…to me, a new dress, for instance, back in those years, was a cause of celebration. And today our young people have so much. To go out and buy a new dress isn’t anything unusual.

GR: So did they stay with you during the remainder of the Depression?

LP: Yes, through the Depression. And then we moved and they lived in a small house near where we were living.

GR: Were they able to start over again, essentially?

LP: They tried, until health forced them to stop. They had an income, we’ll put it that way, but they really did well when they had done so much; they had also lost a son in these years, and it was just not easy, very difficult.

GR: What was it like having your grandparents come live with you?
LP: Oh, I enjoyed it. It was very nice, and I know it was a help to my mother. And when they moved, we missed them. But one of the things that was so intriguing to us was our grandparents started a donut business on their own. Those were the most wonderful donuts. (laughs) Of course, in that age bracket, we thought they were so very special. I still have the recipe.

GR: Was it something they did out of the home?

LP: Out of their own home, right. But you know, in those days of the Depression, you did anything to earn money, anything at all.

GR: Was this in Holland this took place?

LP: Oh, no, this took place all back east. Because my home was first in Springfield, Pennsylvania, then we moved to Swarthmore, Pennsylvania, where Swarthmore College is located. They had their business in another community because it was a good set-up for them and what they wanted to do.

GR: Pennsylvania was especially hard hit by the Depression, because of the mining and such. Was that evident to you as a small girl?

LP: No. But you see, we were in the Philadelphia area, so we didn’t see the miners, who were so desperately in need of help. No, we didn’t.

GR: What did your parents do during the Depression?

LP: My father was very fortunate, he worked for the DuPont Company. And he had no problems. I had no idea, of course, what happened to income, but he was able to make everything go together with his family. His parents had help from my dad, and his brothers out in Colorado had help with his parents; you helped each other. You had to, or who knows what would have happened.
GR: I assume your mom was at home during this time?

LP: Oh, yes, right. Those days very few mothers were working.

GR: Before the war, were you in school or had you graduated?

LP: No, I was in school. I didn’t graduate until 1943.

GR: So as the war had started, you were probably in class?

LP: No, actually, if I recall correctly, we had a young people’s meeting at church in the evening, on Sunday the 7th, and that’s when we first learned about the war starting. In those days we didn’t watch the television obviously. (laughs)

GR: Was it just a radio transmission that you picked up?

LP: Right, right.

GR: What was the reaction of this small group?

LP: I think again, shock, like many of us are today, after yesterday’s event.

GR: Can you compare the two?

LP: No. But we do know, and at that point of course, we had no inkling of the amount of damage, because the government didn’t let us know. After all, if you’re a junior in high school, it doesn’t mean as much to you as when you get to be an adult and understand more about numbers.

GR: Had there been conversations in the halls and classrooms about the young men joining up, service?

LP: Oh, yes, in fact we had several of our classmates that joined in their senior year; they weren’t old enough in their junior year. But in their senior year they did join.

GR: So they forgo their last year and went to the service?
LP: Right. But some of them were able to get back for graduation, which was nice. Of course, they were in their uniforms. None of our friends and young people who did go happened to have been killed. We were very fortunate in that.

GR: As the war progresses, it was about two years, or at least over a year and half, that you had been in school and the war was escalating. Can you tell me a little bit about day to day activities in school? Were they any different than before?

LP: Not in school, no. But, of course, heating oil was very limited, and we had the stamps of course, food stamps and so on. I have distinct memories of as a family we would gather in our basement, which was semi-finished as a rec room. We had a fireplace, it burned coal. That kept us warm, because I don’t know what our thermostat was set at, but probably 60. But it was a wonderful feeling of community, just in our family, as I look back on it. I'd be doing homework, my grandfather would be doing this, and mother would be doing something else—it just brought us together as a family.

GR: That whole emotional thing that you talk about, some people wish they could retrieve that and to enlist it in their grandchildren, even today. Is that something that you think people can recreate, or was it the times and circumstances that made you all think that way?

LP: No, I don’t think you can recreate that. Now, that may happen as of today, with other family groups, but you can’t recreate that feeling.

GR: The hardship that the US endured was more of a...it was just something that you all understood, even at that small age?

LP: Right.

GR: I’ve always wondered how children, the smaller children of course, at this point, were able to accept that, and not somehow...but maybe not knowing any different was
something too. How they were able to adjust to that and a lot of them, as you can attest
to, carried it through to the rest of their lives. That sort of frugality and comradeship.
The point at which you graduated, 1943, was there anything that you had decided to do differently? You’re out of school, and now you were going to be an adult woman.

LP: No, because I had been determined to go to college. But during the war years, and this was in my senior year, many of us women, got involved in activities, such as I became a member of the Navy Junior League. I’d go down to Chester, Pennsylvania, to a hospital wearing a nurse’s cap, I thought that was wonderful—and worked in the hospital. Of course, we did things that weren’t the most pleasant, but it’s a good introduction and it made me realize I thought I wanted to be a nurse. We did that, and then we had in Swarthmore, a girls prep school, that was turned into a Navy recuperation center, I guess you would say. Many of the men that were sent there were men who had been emotionally damaged during the war. Their ships had been sunk and they’d seen the horror of what had happened. A lot of us again, were asked to go and we had dances and visits with these people. I think that was really one of the most eye-opening things, to talk with these people who had been through this. In fact, our family befriended a young man from Colorado—my parents both came from Colorado—and he actually almost became a member of our family, for as long as he was there. He’d come for dinner sometimes. These young men, you wonder today, what happened to them? Did they emotionally adjust back to civilian life?

GR: Did you keep in contact with this young man?

LP: Quite a while, and then eventually we somehow or other lost it.

GR: What was his particular circumstance? Did he ever talk about it?
LP: Yes, but I don’t remember which...I think it was like the Arizona, but perhaps it wasn’t. I don’t remember exactly.

GR: So you were able to see not only the physical damage to these men, but emotional.

LP: Right, and this will carry over to today, with the people who’ve been involved.

GR: You did some extracurricular work after school and now you’ve graduated. You said you went to college?

LP: Right.

GR: Did you continue those types of duties even there?

LP: No, because Middlebury in those years was quite isolated. We did roll bandages, and we had Navy V-12 and V-5 young men there on campus. But actually the war was very distant, except for this Navy contingent. Many of us wrote to young men overseas and in the United States. I don’t remember where we got the names, but they were desperate to have mail from people.

GR: Was that set up through the college?

LP: Yes, well, I don’t think the college itself, but somebody did.

GR: Did you have a set number of men you had to write to?

LP: No.

GR: I guess even there, you probably saw young men leaving and coming home through this time, while at college.

LP: No, we didn’t see anybody come home until, I guess it would have been 1945 they began to come home.

GR: What was that like, to see these veterans coming back to a college setting?
LP: We were grateful. (laughs) We had had so few men on campus. We were very grateful and it was just nice to have people to visit with and they added a dimension to class that we wouldn’t have had before.

GR: So they took some of their war experiences and talked about it openly?

LP: No. For instance, my husband...I don’t remember how long it was before I heard anything really deep about the war.

GR: You talked about they added a new dimension to the classroom. What sort of things did they add?

LP: They had more experience in many areas of work and so on. It was almost a joyful time as they came back.

GR: I’m assuming there was a surge in the male population.

LP: Right. And, of course, the sports began to have competitiveness and so on. I happened to be a cheerleader, and it was wonderful to be back into cheerleading again for football games and so on. I’d been a cheerleader in high school and it was just a nice, nice thing, when you enjoy doing that kind of thing.

GR: So you had a few years after the war, where you were able to observe all of this going on. Now, you’re about ready to graduate, what’s the next step you took in life, after graduation?

LP: I thought I wanted to be a nurse. And then I fell in love. (laughs) So, I decided to go ahead, lived in New York for a year, and got my masters from New York University in education.

GR: Had you taught up until this point?
LP: No, I went right from college to this. I did do teaching, but it was in camp work. I was waterfront director at camp. And of course, you teach then.

GR: Did you run into your husband while at New York, or was it in the undergrad years?

LP: Yes. He came back, of course, and that’s when I met him.

GR: So he was one of the returning veterans to Middlebury?

LP: Right.

GR: Even though you had met, and you probably had some plans laid out, you still went on to higher education. Was there any point when you thought that wasn’t an option, that you should just get married, and go from there? What was your thinking about, during this time?

LP: I just felt I needed to have that, and he was going back to get his masters, so we managed to both get it before we were married.

GR: So you both made it as a couple?

LP: Right.

GR: Had you been married before you started your master’s work?

LP: No, we were married as soon we both were finished.

GR: Did you both go to New York University?

LP: No, he was at the University of Vermont, and I was at New York University. That was a nice year, because it got me acquainted with New York City. I’d never lived there before, and it was an interesting year.

GR: How long did your masters level work…?

LP: A year.

GR: After both of you have graduated, what happened next?
LP: Marriage. Easy answer. (laughs)

GR: Did you both have jobs lined up?

LP: No, Milt had decided to come to Michigan State to work on his doctorate. And so, we came here, to Michigan, no place to live, because we weren't eligible for student housing, being from out of state. Well, we finally found something with help of several people, in the Lansing area, and moved in. We didn’t have very many possessions at that point.

GR: I guess you were married in your hometown of Swarthmore?

LP: Swarthmore, right.

GR: And then, boom, your new husband and yourself are moving.

LP: Right.

GR: How did your parents deal with that?

LP: I don’t think there was any problem. No problem at all. They were all anxious to see us.

To see what we were doing. (laughs)

GR: Like you said, you had spent some years away from them—you were at New York City—you probably felt pretty good about going to Michigan and Lansing and not having to worry about dealing with adult issues.

LP: But, you’re apprehensive, obviously, when you move to a completely new area and new community.

GR: So your husband Milt is going into his doctorate work at Michigan State, what was your decision?

LP: To try to find some work, because of course at that point, we were living on the GI Bill. I did find work, at first only part-time with the City of Lansing Recreation Department. Then I had a couple of other jobs after that that paid a little more. I’m trying to think of
the sequence here...I guess the next one was with Christian Student Foundation at Michigan State. That was a part of the student organization that helped with...I think there were five denominations that sponsored it—Presbyterian, Methodist, Congregational, Baptist, Disciples of Christ—I think those were the five. And then People’s Church in East Lansing also contributed. We had access to People’s Church for dramatizations and things like that, right next door. That was a very satisfying job because I enjoyed working with young people. Of course, I wasn’t that much older. (laughs)

GR: At what point did you and your husband decide to have children, if at all?

LP: Well, we went out to the state of Washington where Milt was working for a year, while he was supposedly writing his doctorate, and this didn’t work, we were having such a good time. We came back to the Lansing area, and I started work with the Lansing YWCA. About that time, he took a job at Northern Illinois University, as Dean of Men. And we thought, well, it’s time to get started. (laughs)

GR: At this point, you were how old?

LP: Let’s see, 27?

GR: So you weren’t that old before you decided to have children. It just seemed like a long time.

LP: Right.

GR: So you made a conscientious decision to clear the slate of education and get settled. Once the children came, what was the decision that you and Milt decided to do concerning their care? Were you going to stay home?

LP: I stayed home.
GR: Now, did that continue throughout their childhood?

LP: Yes, until they were older. We actually also had one in college, which was part of the reason I needed to try to work some. I was fortunate to find a job working in the school libraries, as a library aide, they called it. The schools in Mount Pleasant had the funding to hire more than, I think they had three professional librarians. So some of us were able to get jobs, and we did almost exactly what the librarians did. But we had a little better hours, for instance. We didn’t have to be there quite as long.

GR: Milton had gone and taken a job at Central Michigan University, at this point?

LP: Right.

GR: How did you find that work, after so many years? Was it rewarding? Was it a job?

LP: I found it very rewarding. I enjoyed working with the little ones so much. They are just wonderful. You get into fifth and sixth graders, that was fun too, but it wasn’t as satisfying, we’ll put that way. By now, when you get into fifth and sixth graders, these youngsters many of them have been saturated with television, unfortunately. So, you began to find some sophistication that you wish some of these sixth graders didn’t have. We weren’t allowed to censor books, but I was really distressed sometimes about some of the books that these sixth graders were reading. They had access to them, so why not? But it made them grow up so much faster, was my feeling.

GR: So, here you are with college age children and you’re seeing younger children everyday. Was there any reflection going on there, about how different things really had become, given that short time period, when you had been raising children after the war, versus what you were seeing now as a librarian?
I don’t think so, no. You just keep wishing that things were not the way they were. Because even in those days, television was having a huge impact. The advertisements were not the most conducive, even then. Which is so today.

How did you family deal with television? It probably had come on the scene while your children were very small?

Right.

How did your family deal with that new medium?

Oh, we just turned on the Mr. Rogers, or was it that? What was that? A man who died fairly recently. Anyway, the children’s programs we turned on. And we didn’t need to turn it on during evenings, because we did a lot of reading aloud when we could. Enjoyed that.

Did your family use it as an information source? Like for the news?

I don’t think in those days we did. I think we still were with the radio, back when our children were little. I’m not talking about later. But, it really wasn’t until our children were gone, we began to watch the news regularly on the television, it seems to me.

So it was an advantage to you, as adults, to have that.

Right.

How many children did you and Milton eventually have?

Three.

Can you tell me their genders?

Two boys, and then, a girl.

Any differences in those children were raised, oldest to youngest?

No.
GR: Were they pretty close in age?

LP: No, the middle boy was two years behind his brother. And then our daughter was three years behind.

GR: Was that a purposeful thing for you and Milt to do, to kind of spread them out?

LP: I think so.

GR: At this point, you’re probably the primary caregiver during the day. At five o’clock, or whenever Milton came home, was there ever a time where you thought maybe some outside activities would be healthy for you? Or did you stay to deal with dinner, and taking care of reading and homework? Was that how it worked?

LP: Yes, it did. But I was also involved in some outside activities because we had church groups, and I belonged to an educational philanthropic organization. So I did get out. It wasn’t a matter of being stuck in the house all day.

GR: Was there any point, for instance, during the day, where maybe one day a week you had a daycare provider? Or were you it?

LP: No, but we had some wonderful people that we could hire for “babysitting.” Like if we wanted to go into Chicago—we didn’t do it very often—but if Milt and I wanted to go into Chicago for a special purpose, we had an older person that was just wonderful.

GR: Like a weekend?

LP: Well, not weekends, just the day. We weren’t that far from Chicago.

GR: Northern Illinois University.

LP: Right.
GR: Was there ever, for instance, a transition took place, at night, where when Milton came home you would then cook dinner and he would entertain them, or help them with their homework? Did that take place at all?

LP: Oh, yes. He was good with the children. But the biggest problem was he was gone a lot. Because when you’re involved in being a Dean, or so on, you’ve got evening responsibilities. But it was no chore, it’s just part of what you accepted as a housewife.

GR: Were weekends a lot different for the family? Was there a lot more time together?

LP: Yes.

GR: As a family, what would you do when you had the time?

LP: As a family? Well, I can’t really recall that much. We did explore because, of course, we didn’t know anything about Illinois at that point. So we explored a couple of the state parks. Friends loaned us their cottage on Lake Geneva, where we stayed for a week. That was our vacation.

GR: Was that something you did every year?

LP: No. But we made wonderful friends, and we did a lot with these friends. We got involved with bridge—we were all learning—and we were happy.

GR: Did you find yourselves socializing with parents, versus single people or childless couples?

LP: No, it was both, parents and single people, because Milt had...other people, like the Dean of Women, was just a delight. And then there were other people on the faculty that we so enjoyed also, singles. So, we had lots of friends.

GR: Did you think the collegiate environment allowed that to happen?
LP: Yes, very definitely. We also had very dear friends arrive there, whom we had known when we were at Washington State. That was a nice part to have, because we shared, both of us were families that were from far away regular family. So we had Thanksgiving together, or Christmas together, if nobody had family coming to visit us.

GR: Now, Milt is working in a collegiate environment during some pretty different times, the '60s and the '70s. Did he ever bring any of that home? Some of that anger or the stress that he would have had to deal with as an administrator?

LP: In Northern Illinois, I would say not too much, except—I don't think he told you this when you interviewed him—we actually had a sheriff living in our home with us, because there had been a threat on the lives of a couple of the administrators. And that's something hard to explain to your children—why this gentleman was with us. They of course, accepted it, it was no problem. But it wasn't until we got to Central Michigan University that I think the stress, because of the Vietnam years and so on, began to be a major problem for any administrator. It's just nothing that anybody had been prepared for.

GR: What sorts of things did Milt bring home, if any, stress?

LP: Well, he'd tell me about events that had happened on campus.

GR: So you were a good sounding board for some things?

LP: I hope so. Right.

GR: Were they, to you, troubling, to think that the place your husband is working, is such a center of activity and anger about a war that Milt might have been support of, or not in support of? Was that hard for you to send him off to work every day, and know that he's going into a...?
LP: No, I don’t think so. I hope I grew as the years developed.

OR: Were your kids involved in any activities that weren’t approved of?

LP: No. Not that we knew of, put it that way.

GR: Were they attending college classes in the town where you lived?

LP: At this point they were still in high school.

OR: Were they picking up any sort of things from their own high school?

LP: I really don’t know. But again, they were very involved in school activities. All three of them sang and were involved in the Madrigal Group, which was a special group. And of course they participated in singing in other areas, not just in Mount Pleasant at that time. But I think this is good, because youngsters that are involved in activities are not as apt to go off and hopefully start to smoke pot for instance. We don’t know if they ever tried it, they never told us, but I think they turned out to be pretty decent kids.

GR: There was probably some anxiety, as a mother of course—I’m sure Milt had some too, as a father—about the drug culture, and the war.

LP: Right.

GR: Were your children ever of an age where they might have been drafted?

LP: No. They were too young. But again, we had the church influence too. The children sang in the youth choir, for instance, at church. We were very fortunate in the years that we were involved, at that point, because it made a big difference, I think, in how they were willing to study. They all did well, as far as where they ranked in their high school classes. I just feel fortunate…

[End of side one]
GR: In comparison to your parents’ family, or when you were a child, can you admit that you did some things differently? Did you do anything differently?

LP: I don’t think so.

GR: So, you probably took a lot from your own childhood that you thought was important to enlist in your own children then—the ways you disciplined, fed them and helped them with their studies?

LP: You’re probably right, I hadn’t really thought of that point. (laughs)

GR: Did you at any point, for instance, forget something, or thought, gosh, I wonder how my mom dealt with that, but I don’t remember?

LP: No.

GR: You never really called them?

LP: No.

GR: Did you ever get any unsolicited comments?

LP: No, my parents were very good about that.

GR: Did you have anybody in the community, kind of jump in periodically?

LP: No.

GR: Obviously, with Milt’s schedule things were a little hectic. Was that hard for you as a couple, to find time for leisure?

LP: I don’t believe so. You always wish for more. Always.

GR: Did you try to make it up on weekends and late nights, just talking?

LP: No, usually we were both so tired we didn’t have much talking late at night. (laughs) He had to be up early enough to get to work on time, of course. But we had a lot of social activities, like with Milt’s boss, who at that point was the Dean of Students, and then Milt
was Dean of Men, and we enjoyed these times together. We had wonderful people that
Milt worked with.

GR: Who would take care of the children when some of these activities were going on?

LP: That’s when were hired this nice woman. She was in our church, and we enjoyed her.

GR: So she kind of took on the role of a caregiver, just because you had to.

LP: Right. Now, in Mount Pleasant, that was very different. When we first moved there, we
somehow or other found this college girl that needed help. This girl worked three jobs in
order to come to college. We still correspond with her. She was just wonderful. We
actually left her with the children, she was that responsible, and had to come to Chicago
for some meetings and elsewhere. She was just wonderful. There are some very fine
young people available.

GR: After your children left, or became more independent, did you as a couple start doing
more things together? Or things you had wished you had time to do before?

LP: I think we’d say we traveled more.

GR: Did you find yourself dealing with a gap in your daily life?

LP: Never. One of the things that I found was so wonderful was to be able to try to read.

GR: So there was a little bit of relief that the children had kind of gone on their own?

LP: Right.

GR: I’m assuming Milt retired, and you tried to retire at the same time?

LP: No. Actually I had retired before that, because we discovered my father was
unfortunately developing what was probably Alzheimer’s. It was very difficult, because
he was in the Philadelphia area, Swarthmore, and here I was, out in the Midwest. We’d
hired someone to take care of him because he needed help, and then lo and behold, they
wouldn’t show up. Finally, I flew to Philadelphia and brought him back to Mount Pleasant because he needed surgery, and I just couldn’t see this lengthy recuperation back there for me to be there. You can’t depend on people at this point without supervision from somebody. So we brought him to Mount Pleasant. After his surgery he was in a medical care facility, which is assisted living, and then he had an apartment of his own, and a housekeeper. We had some very nice housekeepers. But again, if I hadn’t been there to see that someone was always there, it wouldn’t have worked.

GR: So your mom had passed on earlier?

LP: Oh yes. Right.

GR: Relatively early in your life?

LP: No, she didn’t. I don’t remember the date. Anyway, she had been gone probably seven or eight years before we brought my father back to Mount Pleasant.

GR: You’ve both retired, you’re spending a lot of time in the same house that maybe you’d hadn’t had a chance to do in a long time. Were there any sorts of conflicts that you ran into with schedules, or just having too much time together?

LP: No way. We each had our own directions we were going. That kept us apart somewhat, so we were grateful when we had the time to be together.

GR: What did Milt do when he retired? Did he have any projects set up?

LP: He was involved with the state YMCA and the state Camp Hayowentha, I think he mentioned that in his tape, and that took quite a few meetings. These men were asked to go up, for instance, in early spring, and help to clean up the grounds and that kind of thing, so there was a lot of coming and going. And then he was involved with Rotary.
He was president for a year, and you just don’t do that without being involved. So we each were going in some different directions.

GR: So the time together really didn’t increase a lot, but it was something that you both were pursuing things you wanted to do.

LP: Right. But in this time after retirement, we purchased a travel trailer, and that’s when we spent time together. Those are wonderful memories, because we traveled all over and were able to stop and spend time where we wanted, with the trailer, and be very comfortable. Not have to change beds every night.

GR: The experience you had as a parent, have you seen yourself, or wanted to, or even participated in some of the parenting of your grandchildren? Or have you kind of stayed out of that?

LP: We really don’t have as much opportunity because they aren’t close by.

GR: So there’s some distance involved with your grandchildren?

LP: Right, because we have two families in Wisconsin, and we have one family in the Philadelphia area. So when we see them, which we try to do as often as we can, we don’t have much opportunity to be actually “grandparenting” when the family is all together. But it’s wonderful when we can get to see them.

GR: Have you had calls from any of your kids about how to do something?

LP: Yes, we have.

GR: So you feel comfortable offering advice when it’s asked?

LP: I think we can, right.

GR: I guess this is a question you need to think about, are you happy about how your children have taken their childhood years and incorporated them into their own child rearing?
LP: Thinking of schooling, definitely. The grandchildren, on the whole, want to learn. But unfortunately, one grandchild, when our older son and his wife moved from New York state to Wisconsin, something happened to our oldest grandson. And from then on, he seemed to resist learning. We’ve been saddened by this, because it’s the first time in our family that someone hasn’t definitely said they want to go to college.

GR: So has he graduated from high school?

LP: No, not yet. But you wonder what kind of a world he’ll have if he doesn’t go on and get farther education. I just don’t know.

GR: Your three children, what occupations have they settled on in life?

LP: Our older son is a Presbyterian minister; our second son is with the EPA, he’s been an environmentalist since the second grade (laughs). He’s in Philadelphia—he called us yesterday, by the way, just to let us know things were okay. And then our daughter got her masters in maternal and child nursing, and is a certified nurse midwife. But she stopped working in November, and we’re glad, because we think this will be good for her to be home, be the taxi driver, and so on.

GR: Is she the mother of the troubled grandchild?

LP: No, not that one. She does have one that has problems, but it’s just good that she’s home from now on and can help.

GR: I’m assuming the husband and her have made a conscious decision to give up a few things in exchange for some more time with the children?

LP: Right.

GR: I’m assuming you’re happy about that?

LP: Definitely.
GR: Have you been proud of, for instance, your daughter obviously had an occupation while her children were being raised. Have you ever had any questions about that? Or have you been surprised with how successful it was?

LP: We have been surprised, because she has earned so well, she was with Parke-Davis, until it changed to Pfizer, and that’s when she decided she’d stop working. But, she was very fortunate in her work and enjoyed her work, but it was stressful. We could see that, very stressful. So we’ve been thankful that she stopped. I hope that they are careful about what they’re doing as far as what they’re spending and so on.

GR: Because it was probably a huge decision that they made as a couple to go that direction?

LP: Right.

GR: You talked a little bit about what you had done after retirement. What sort of community involvement do you and Milt enjoy now in Holland?

LP: Working at the Cappon House occasionally. We enjoy that. He’s on the scholarship committee here at Freedom Village, and I’m in the library, part of that group. And then we do odd things occasionally, when we’re asked, de-trimming the Christmas tree.

GR: I guess my question is, why Holland? Where did the connection to Holland come from?

LP: We started looking for this type of facility for my parents in the east when they needed it badly. They would put money down into a facility, where they had friends that they do, and where they were very happy, these friends. Then we would go home and they’d pull their money out. Now they weren’t ready. And then, unfortunately, my mother went into a nursing home and my dad was left alone, and with all the problem he had with his dementia, it just wasn’t good. We thought, we don’t want our children to go through with the same thing we have gone through. So, this is why we began to look around. We
found nothing like Freedom Village. We had looked up the East Coast for my parents, so we knew what was available back there. But, we found nothing that would be comparable to here. Most of the places that we looked at had very tiny rooms. This is fine, except that when you get used to more space, it would be difficult adjusting.

GR: So you left quite a large home before coming here?

LP: Well, depends on how you look at it.

GR: Larger than this?

LP: Large enough to take care of. (laughs)

GR: You’ve kind of touched on something there. You’ve talked about not only what it was like to be a parent of a baby boomer, but what it’s like to be the older parent of a baby boomer and some of the expectations that you’ve learned to expect, and decisions you and Milt have made to avoid “burden,” as you call it. Has there ever been any comments from the kids about that? Obviously, because you’re a lot farther away than you probably would like to be. Have they ever talked about the fact that they appreciate that decision you’ve made?

LP: I don’t think they really have. We didn’t ask them for it. But they’ve been very supportive. One son came, for instance, when we were getting ready to move down here and helped us get things ready for our garage sale. And then another son came and helped us actually move, and so on. They’ve just been wonderful about that, and they try to get here as often as they can to see us. But our son in the Philadelphia area remembers the numbers of trips I had to take to go back to my dad, when the help would quit, he had an accident with the car, and the car had to be taken away from him. He remembers all that, so he’s aware of what we went through, more so than probably our other two.
GR: Are you surprised at the frankness that you and Milt have had with each other about making conscious decisions about the long term, retirement years, versus…

LP: No, I feel very fortunate, Geoffrey, because right from the very start we’ve been compatible in the majority of our decisions. We talk about larger decisions, of course. But we both have felt the same way about so many things, I think it’s just natural.

GR: And again, like you said, the experience with your own parents really had given you some food for thought about “what would I do?”

LP: Exactly.

GR: Concerning Milt’s parents, did that help drive your decision to seek a long-term solution to your retirement years, versus what your parents had undergone? Did Milt have the same situation with his parents?

LP: Not exactly, because his parents lived right next to a son and a house. And much of the time, of course, the family would be nearby if there was an emergency, you’d have someone to help, and so on. But again, when you see family going into a nursing home, that’s when it gets so difficult. And nursing homes are almost always a distance away, they’re not right next door like here. So, it makes a difference.

GR: Is there anything you wanted to leave us with, concerning your experience from a young woman to where you are today, when it came to being a parent of a boomer, and having lived through a really different time than maybe your parents had lived through? Is there anything that you would say, “As a parent of a babyboomer, I want people to remember this”? Is there anything that really strikes you, from that experience?

LP: I don’t really think so. I keep thinking of honesty with your children, how necessary that is. And trying to remain calm when there are things that you are not happy with, because
obviously all parents have things happen that you’re not happy about. But I also want to say, Geoffrey, that I feel personally that I’ve been very blessed, because of having a supportive husband, a loving husband, and a loving family. We have so many wonderful times with our children when they call. Just like our son calling yesterday, after this disaster, to tell us he was fine; he got home from Philadelphia all right to their home in New Jersey. It’s just wonderful, what these young people do. You can’t ask for any other blessings like that, except what they can give to you. And I also feel very blessed here at Freedom Village. We had a community gathering last night—a prayer service it was called—and what a feeling to have all these people you know—well, you obviously don’t know everybody—but all these people with whom you’re close every day, gather together in fellowship and prayer over a major problem in our country. You wouldn’t get this if you lived separately off in an individual home. You’d go to church, and that would be fine, but you don’t have this feeling of community. So, I feel how fortunate we have been.

GR: Taking the experience of what happened yesterday in New York and Washington, and comparing it to what you would have felt as a younger woman when Pearl Harbor began, how did your older perspective of what had happened yesterday come through to you? Was it reminiscent of that event that took place in 1941, or was it totally different and more frightening than you’d ever thought it might be? What were some of your feelings yesterday?

LP: I think it was totally different because I was so young at Pearl Harbor, I didn’t understand the dimensions that were happening at that time, because we weren’t told, as I said before, by the government. We had no idea, they didn’t know probably. But, yesterday
we could see it happening, and you can’t help but think of the ripple effect through all of these people that were involved. It’s devastating to think about. I think the older we get, the more we are aware of what devastation really means.

GR: Because of the magnitude of yesterday’s events versus Pearl Harbor, which Pearl will be considerably less I think when they have final body count, is that something that really came home with you yesterday? About the carnage that was at Pearl Harbor, military men and women that were killed, versus the civilian population that was injured yesterday. Because, during World War II, the civilians, for the most part, weren’t involved in America. Is that a little bit frightening to you, to live through several wars now, but also to know that this was an attack on America versus a base, or somewhere overseas, where it was somewhat remote? How did that affect you as an older American that has seen a lot of ugly things in her life?

LP: I think probably many people didn’t sleep overly well last night. When I woke up finally this morning, about 5:30, my thoughts couldn’t help but drift toward all the families that had lost so much. But I didn’t have this back in Pearl Harbor, I just didn’t. These were military people, who knew what they were volunteering for when they joined the service. Because at that point I don’t recall that there was a draft, maybe there was.

GR: I’m not sure myself on that, obviously not as big as it was after that event.

LP: Right. Not that that’s an excuse, but I think it was the age I was, that I didn’t appreciate the greatness of the disaster back then. But today, we just seem to feel more emotionally now as we get older. It’s part of living and having seen not just yesterday’s disaster, but all the previous ones. It’s just unbelievable.

GR: Well, thank you.
[End of interview]
To my family, and a few close friends:

During the past year (1995) the media have shared numerous references to events which occurred fifty years earlier leading to the end of World War II. For those of us who lived through that era, each will have his or her own memories. To you who were not yet born, an understanding of how those times contributed to your heritage is important. While much has happened to change our world since the mid 1940s (the atomic age, the focus upon human rights, the space age, the transistor, the expansion of the human population, etc.), what I share here focuses only upon my involvement during the latter part of those war years.

A recent feature in the New York Times Magazine noted that some of the most vivid records of those years are not of the major campaigns or battles, even though they were fought on history’s largest scale, but individual accounts recorded by those directly involved, whether in a military capacity or otherwise. No one living at that time escaped the impacts of the war.

The war in Europe had dragged on nearly two and a half years prior to Pearl Harbor in December of 1941. I was a freshman in college (Middlebury) when as a result of the Japanese attack, the United States officially entered the war. While eighteen-year-olds were not yet being drafted, the only question became, when and in what capacity would we be required to serve. At first, those of us in school were urged to continue our studies, only later to have our options for choice of service narrowed. In my case, enlistment in the Army Reserve for possible specialized training only delayed my active duty until May of 1943, and despite six months of schooling while in uniform (studying engineering at The Citadel in South Carolina), ultimately I was declared a rifleman and assigned to the 100th Infantry Division.

Despite two hot and muggy summers of infantry training in the deep south (Fort Benning, Georgia, and Fort Bragg, North Carolina), we found ourselves headed for winter warfare as we shipped out for Europe in early October of 1944. It was "D-Day" plus four months and Allied Forces were bogged down in France, having yet to set foot on German soil. Our convoy survived a mid-Atlantic hurricane and an air raid upon arrival in Marseilles. Within ten days we were "on line" facing our adversaries in Alsace-Lorraine in the northeast corner of France. Upon arrival we were told that there were only three ways out of combat. First was to be lucky and survive to the end of the war, second, to receive "the million dollar wound," i.e., just enough injury to send one home for recuperation, or third, to be shipped home in a box. Little could we foresee there were to be other possibilities as well.
We quickly became battle seasoned, moving each day on foot through the extremely rugged terrain of the Vosges Mountains, which rise up to 4000 feet in elevation. The approaches were dotted with small villages and farms. We were subject to fire fights, land mines and sniper fire by day and by heavy artillery by night, which taught us to dig foxholes in the dark and to cover them with logs and earth for protection. We had constant rain so we had to decide whether to use our shelter-half at night as a raincoat, or as a water barrier on top or in the bottom of the foxhole. If we were lucky, we might get a hot meal. (Company F's mess sergeant we one of the best and somehow located his men much more frequently than for our neighboring troops.) We never knew when we would be ordered to move, attack an objective, clear a town, or to mount a reconnaissance patrol. We had no idea how our efforts fit or contributed to the overall campaign. A two hundred year old quotation, "A soldier knows no more of his position and what is about to happen on his front or what has happened (even among his own companions) than the very dead lying around" described our situation perfectly. The people back home could follow the big picture, where we could only be aware of what little we could see or experience. CNN was still years in the future and Edward R. Morrow and his fellow correspondents were still based primarily back in London. We were experiencing casualties almost daily. Within the first week in combat we lost both our squad leader and the assistant, and I was asked to take command. Replacements never kept up with our constant losses.

While we were able to send letters home, we could not divulge our exact locations. Families could only be told things in general terms. An example was the War Department telegram sent to my parents in mid-December, "We regret to inform you that your son . . . was slightly wounded in action," and a second a week later that I had returned to "active duty." Neither described that I had received an enemy bullet straight through my steel helmet as well as the wool cap that I wore underneath. I lost some hair and developed an inch and a half long scar on top of my head. As the saying goes, "that was too close for comfort." The third and final telegram that my family received reported that I was "missing in action," but I am getting ahead of my story. It was some three and a half months later before they learned that I was still alive.

In mid-December Hitler's counter offensive, the Battle of the Bulge, had begun in the Ardennes region about a hundred miles north of our positions. When that situation became critical for our forces many units in our area were sent north to help stop the German advance. This included General Patton's entire Third Army. As a result, our Seventh and Sixth Army fronts were stretched over great distances with little support of air or armored units. With the Ardennes campaign running into trouble for the Germans as well, Hitler felt he
needed a victory. He was personally directing battle plans and he and General Von Runstead decided to attack in the south to cut off all Allied Seventh Army units comprising roughly five U.S. divisions.

My company was positioned on the extreme left flank of the regiment, the 100th Division and the entire Seventh Army. The U.S. Forty-Fourth Division was somewhere to our left with a Free French unit in reserve. On Christmas Day our company was driven back from our outpost position on the German border but our main lines held. The units to our left and right, however, were driven back well over a mile, and in some sectors far beyond, thus we were then exposed to enemy attack on three sides. By now winter had arrived. Snow covered everything and temperatures hovered around the zero mark. We experienced a week of special patrols and regrouping facing this new force of several German divisions, the Thirteenth S.S. Corps, two armored or panzer divisions and the Sixth S.S. Mountain Division, all elite German units. The territory was primarily open hilly land with small villages. There was constant back and forth bombardment with minor ground taken and retaken by both sides. Each side suffered hundreds of casualties.

Meanwhile, a little-known drama was taking place, namely General Eisenhower’s December 26 order to the Sixth Army on our right to withdraw some sixty kilometers from the Rhine back to the edge of the Vosges Mountains to establish a winter defensive line. This meant giving up a huge territory in Alsace in order that two more Seventh Army divisions could be diverted to help in the Battle of the Bulge. Sixth Army General Devers flew to Versailles to protest the order but General Ike insisted. General Devers stalled until January 1. Ike was mad. Again General Devers’ Chief of Staff was sent to make a final appeal. Meanwhile the French picked up rumors of the abandonment of all that territory and they protested as well, including Chief of Staff Alphonse Juin. So a meeting was set for three p.m. on January 3, between General de Gaulle and General Eisenhower, with British Chief of Staff Alan Brooke and British Prime Minister Churchill as observers. General de Gaulle’s memoirs describe the discussion as heated. Threats were made on both sides. France would withdraw from Supreme Headquarters Allied Forces in Europe (SHAFE); SHAFE would then deny France any further ammunition, gasoline and other supplies; therefore France would deny SHAFE further use of French railroads and communications, etc. Finally, Ike realized that, politically, France had to be accommodated in all future plans, and cancelled the withdrawal order!

Hitler never knew what almost happened. His "Operation Nordwind" against the Seventh and Sixth Armies began in earnest on New Year’s Eve with fierce battles as they continued to pound down the Rhine plain toward Strasbourg.
The Seventh Army and our 100th Division basically held its ground until late January when Hitler finally called off the offensive. Operation Nordwind was Germany’s last major offensive of the war and he then shifted his attention to concentrate on the Russian threat to Berlin.

Meanwhile, on January 6 my squad was posted at an outpost observation site northwest of the town of Rimling on the German border. That night we received heavy bombardment from S.S. panzer tanks. Two of my best men were killed by artillery strikes in their observation foxholes, and two others were badly wounded. Finally, we were ordered to withdraw back into Rimling. The Germans had control of our still-open left flank and we did our best to get back to the command post but were blocked by intensive fire fights at the entrance to the town. Ultimately we joined others in an old barn as the battle for Rimling continued. By mid-afternoon two of us left the barn to attempt to reach the command post to secure medical help for our wounded. The fighting was so strong that no one, including our medical aide men, was allowed to go back. One hour later some two dozen of our men were routed from the barn and taken prisoner.

It was almost three a.m. the next morning that those of us then guarding the command post were forced to surrender, with the 88mm cannon of an S.S. panzer tank pointing through the front door! We were taken to the top of hill 370, reversing our trek from the outpost, a target now zeroed in by our artillery, an objective re-taken by the 100th Division on the following day. One of the three Medal of Honor awardees from our Division died in this battle for Rimling.

Later that morning, stripped of our weapons and watches, we were marched into Germany, under guard, and away from the battle area and toward the Rhine. Some sixty or so men of Company F alone, together with many others, were involved. Two of us were separated from the others in our company and after walking some eighty miles and spending four days and four nights in unheated boxcars, as well as other stops enroute, a number of us arrived after dark at Stalag IVB east of the Elbe River in eastern Germany. I never saw the other men from Company F again.

That night we were given the best food we would have for the rest of our captivity, warm oatmeal, eaten with our fingers, three men sharing the same container, my steel helmet! After surrendering our helmets and warm winter boots we were billeted with British prisoners, many of whom were cynical and depressed, having been in captivity for years. We were invading their space. They refused to double bunk as ordered or to allow us the one new blanket
drawn from International Red Cross supplies. Rather, the British held a lottery for the new blankets and we found ourselves possessing their poorest castoff blanket and sleeping on their wooden benches or tables after everyone else had finally retired. During the day, every space to sit "belonged" to someone, and we as newcomers could only use a spot at a table or on a bench by permission. In other words, we as Americans were unwelcome, having entered the war "years too late."

For the Americans, this was to have been only a temporary stop, prior to being moved to a camp for American POWs. However, by then the German rail system was in such a shambles due to Allied bombing that we were never moved again.

The stalag was huge, consisting of several thousand British, perhaps some three thousand French, and by then about twelve hundred Americans. The majority of the internees, however, were Russian. We did not mix. After some weeks I was among a group of about two hundred who were moved to a partially used transit compound and we were then able to establish ourselves as two barracks of Americans. I became second in command of one of the barracks. We had no furniture whatsoever, simply filthy straw-filled mats on the floor. There was no heat. The only water, a pump in the courtyard next to the latrine. As the weather began to warm, the frozen streets and courtyards turned to mud.

Aside from the unsanitary conditions and the boredom, the worst problem of all was the food. The main items were heavy sour black bread, part sawdust, usually twelve men sharing a loaf, and so-called cabbage or turnip soup, and every other day or so three or four walnut sized potatoes. By the time this arrived from the central kitchens nothing was warm.

Prior to our arrival, the British had been receiving food parcels every week through the International Red Cross, and even some packages from home. By now, however, none of this was getting through. We received only two distributions, the first with three men sharing an eleven pound package, and the second divided among eleven men. Every can had been punctured or opened so that food could not be stored for a possible escape. Cigarettes in food packages became the currency of exchange within the camp. (During previous summers cigarettes could be used to buy fresh foods by bribing the German guards.) We had men who would sell their rations for cigarettes, endangering their health and survival. One GI played poker each day until he had won ten to twelve cigarettes to buy an extra ration of bread for a buddy who needed it to recover from serious wounds. There were no medications in camp. The number of cigarettes in camp (i.e., how many food parcels had arrived)
determined the price of a haircut, or perhaps the purchase of a razor blade. One cigarette gained entry to the British internee production of "Little Women" produced in camp, with royalties and costume rentals paid to a Dresden theatrical company with, what else, cigarettes!

I should say I was fortunate in being a non-commissioned officer, because the Germans required privates and corporals to work, usually at hard labor under terrible conditions. I was told that twenty percent of my company's internees never returned having died of malnutrition and disease. As non-coms in our camp our only work details were in camp or possibly a mission under guard to collect some firewood for the guards and central kitchen.

The camp was well marked from the air and actually used as a turning point in Allied bombing missions. Still, the main gate guardhouse was strafed once, a point less than 100 yards from our barracks. About once a month we were taken for showers and de-lousing, only to put the same filthy clothes right back on. There was no soap for laundry or bathing.

We had a map of Europe on the wall while we were "guests" of the British. Two sets of lines, one set in red and the other in blue, helped us keep track of the Allied forces as they moved ever closer, from both the west and east. The red lines were as reported by BBC radio. Somewhere in camp there was a crystal radio set and several times a week someone would come to each barracks, we would guard the doors and the BBC news was read. Then, upon occasion, the guards would share their version of the news, never admitting defeat or loss of territory. Their "news" spoke primarily of the valiant efforts of corporal so-and-so, who single-handedly destroyed several Allied tanks as "new fighting was underway in a new sector on the front." Then the guards would inspect the map, shake their heads and leave. Every morning we had to stand for inspection outside our barracks regardless of the weather, and the number of men counted became the number of rations provided for the day. If someone were too ill to leave his bunk, there was no food for him. About every two weeks the entire barracks was searched for stored food, possible weapons and, of course, the crystal radio, which was never found.

One morning as I walked into the main camp I learned of the death of President Roosevelt from a German guard. "Who would follow? Who was this Truman? Would he be fair to the Germans after the war?" The Russian advance was getting close and it became apparent that our stalag would be over-run or liberated by the Russians rather than the Americans. The Germans were frightened. "Would we as Americans and British like to leave camp and start marching to the west?" Some of the French did so, but the rest of us stayed
where our location was marked and well known. After all, from the air troops on the march were automatic targets for strafing.

The Russian and American forces first met at Torgau on the Elbe River on April 25. Torgau was only fourteen miles northwest of our stalag, and we awoke one morning to find no German guards and just a handful of Russian guards instead. What to do? We were asked to stay put, and in a day or so the wires of the camp were pulled down, some Russian internees began to leave, and our rations were doubled. We sent a small delegation to Torgau and a couple of American trucks returned with some medical supplies, but still we were not allowed to leave. Days passed with no explanation, until one day the Americans were alerted to be ready to move. We were marched by the Russians south along and across the Elbe to the city of Risa, where we were housed in much better quarters, a German Army engineering school. But we were still not allowed to leave and were actually further from U.S. forces than before.

Negotiations between a U.S. officer who had brought a convoy of Russian POWs, sick and wounded, back to Russian control, and those in charge got nowhere. However, we were informed by the major that the thirty-five or so miles to U.S. lines at the Mulde River were only lightly patrolled by the Russians and that if we wished to take a chance we probably could get through. "Just don't all leave at once." Fifteen minutes later, at about five p.m., five of us were on our way. Refugees were going in all directions. The war had ended just a few days earlier and former German troops were among those on the move. Though now dressed in civilian clothes, they were identifiable by their boots. We gave them wide berth, knowing that especially those with stolen bicycles probably still carried small arms.

After dark that night we got a few hours sleep in an old barn, only to leave at daybreak despite blisters and sore muscles. The British hob-nailed boots we were now wearing were not known for flexibility. A Russian guard in a small town insisted that the five of us follow him to a home where the housefrau was ordered to feed us lunch. Thus fortified, we finally reached U.S. forces after crossing the Mulde River on a destroyed railway bridge. It was mid-afternoon, May 13, 1945. I had been in the Army two years!

Within hours I was back in France. That first GI meal was heaven. Ten days later I was near the coast of France waiting for a ship to bring us home. Finally, underway, I came down with hepatitis, and slept on a mattress in the ship’s hospital. That was luxury. Prior to that I had slept on a mattress only once since arriving in France nearly nine months earlier.
I arrived in the United States on June 12, weighing about one hundred-forty-five pounds. I had entered combat at one hundred-ninety-two! I spent the next six months in Army hospitals and at home on extended leaves. I was discharged in January of 1946 weighing two hundred-ten pounds, vowing never to feel hungry again!

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