Frances LaPlante

Interview at Bethesda Gardens 4/1/2022

Frances LaPlante: Hello! I am the storyteller. My name is Frances LaPlante. I am 89 years old. Today is April the 1st, 2022, and we are at my residence named Bethesda Gardens.

Lynne Haynes: And then my name is Lynne Haynes, and I am interviewing Frances LaPlante. I'm 54 years old. Today is Friday, April the 1st, 2022, and we are at Bethesda Gardens in Kirkwood, Missouri. Alright Frances, so, almost 90, not quite 90 years old.

Frances: No, not 'til November the 1st, All Saints Day. I can do nothing wrong. If one doesn't give me privileges, another one will.

Lynne: That's right.

F: [laughter] Actually, I don't believe in any of that, but it's fun to think about. You know, I'm safe.

L: So tell me about where you were born.

F: Okay. I was born in 1932. My parents were living in New York City, and – actually in Brooklyn – and I had two older brothers, Desmond and Gerald, and they were like uncles more than brothers. And it was the Depression, and of course I have no memory of any of that, but stories galore, and it was very depressing times. My mother actually witnessed somebody falling from a window. There were people killing themselves, you know, because of the financial crash. So my parents decided to return to England, and my older brother went first, and then I went with my second brother – second oldest brother – and my mother.

L: And how old were you?

F: Two.

L: Oh, okay. So yeah, you don't have any memory of New York.

F: No, I – Well actually, I do. I can remember being at a party, being reinforced by photographs, you know. Photographs will do that. And I remember everything was sort of, so huge, and my mother yelling at me not to go near the water [laughter]. Ah! So, that was – I don't remember anything about the crossing, and then they went to England, and later I had a fourth member of my siblings was born, and then that was the family. Very hard times. I was not aware of lack of things. We had packages sometimes from America, and some – I loved to get pretty dresses from America, but everybody was poor, so you know, you didn't feel like you were isolated and one of the few.

L: Did you have family back in England then?

F: Yes, a grandmother, two aunts, three uncles, and one cousin. They were very straight-laced and opinionated, and I loved them, but they were what I call small-minded, regrettably, by what I've learned through life to be more broad-minded. And so I really feel sad for them, that they were so limited and so opinionated, especially about religious things. They were anti-Catholic. My mother married a Catholic, so I was a witness to that verbiage, which was quite ugly. But they respected my father, and I don't remember him being in any embraces with them, but they didn't show hostility to him directly. It was always that undercurrent. So when I went recently to a book signing for the Irish in St. Louis, the writer asked me if I'd met any opposition, and I said – growing up in England, because they were Irish – I said, "No." But it was wartime, of course. No, people were too busy doing other things.

What we were hated by was the children who lived in the country where we were evacuated to. They hated us, because we were part of this, but racial prejudices that were not – However, I did later go to the, change to the Church of England, and never really was brought up in the Catholic faith. The war came, and we spent a lot of time in air raid shelters, and then we went off with our little gas masks strapped to a little strap on our shoulders. It was another world. Lots of shortages. So, I don't know how my parents survived all those years. I mean, I can have complaints about shortages in my life, but nothing compared to what they had.

L: And let's see, you said you were evacuated to the countryside.

F: Yes.

L: How old were you?

F: The government – I was seven when the war broke out in '39 in England. The States came in two years later.

L: Do you remember being – At that age, do you remember being frightened by the war? With all of – I mean, I would think that would be somewhat terrifying.

F: Yeah, well, it sounds funny now, but it was – this is a true story – we were under the stairs 'cause the air raid shelter at the end of the street hadn't been completed, so that was a safe place to be, under the stairs. The aircraft were going, we had – Outdoors the search lights were flashing, all zig zag over the – not zig zag, but trying to pick up enemy planes, and then there was all these explosions, and I said, I asked, "Well, what are they doing?" And my brother said, well, they were shooting them down, and I was horrified, you know. "What do you mean, they're shooting them down, they've gotta get home to their mommies!" So, this is a child's point of view of war. Until they did us a favor and bombed our school. All the schoolchildren [laughter] were dancing in the street. And then we got packed off to the country, 'cause we had no more school.

L: Wow. So you went with your – And you've got your younger brother too, as well.

F: No, I had a younger sister.

L: Or younger sister, okay gotcha.

F: Two older brothers.

L: And two older brothers, okay. And how much older were your brothers, than you were?

F: Oh, one was like six years older, and the other one was more like eight years older.

L: Okay, so did they go with you then, to the countryside? Or were they –

F: The first one we went to the country, yes. It was – My mother came later to visit I remember. He was living in the same house, but that wasn't a very long time, and then my mother had to go back to take care of her home, so we were shut in a bedroom when my sister and I watched her walk down the street, walking away. My sister was having an hysteric attack, and I was trying to pacify her, and trying to pacify myself. It was a very traumatic time. So that went on – the separation went on for about five years.

L: Wow.

F: Mm-hm. She would take a bus down, but she was considered terribly overweight, so that was hard, must have been terrifically hard for her to come and visit on a bus and then walk. There was no gasoline for cars. We walked everywhere. But we were supposedly safe from the bombing until the bombers came over one residence I was at, and they were unloading indiscriminately, getting rid of weight. They were being chased, and the less weight they could have more speed. So they dropped it, and there was a bomb that didn't get detonated until more than a decade later. They didn't know it hadn't exploded [laughter]. It was a deep, deep, deep hole in a meadow. And then another one went through a tavern sideways and killed everybody. So, so much for going off to the safety of the country. We weren't the target, but they were just unloading.

L: Right, they were just – and how horrific for your parents. How scary for your parents if they heard about that.

F: Yeah.

L: Were you in the same place? In the same home? Or you went to –

F: No. Oh, no, I had about five different residences. When we first left, my mother took me aside and said, face to face, always be with your sister; and you know, I was not disagreeable. You know, if she – Yeah, okay, that's fine. Yeah, so we were on a bus, and we got unloaded at different points. Different points would take children at certain ages, and we got to a place – this is true – it was called Cadbury, like the castle. So this little girl that I'd become chummy with, we were chosen to go be one of the gang of kids that was – but my sister was a cutoff age, they wouldn't take her age. "Oh no, I can't go, I've got to stay with my sister." So I've always wondered what life would have been in a drafty castle [laughter]. Anyway, we got to the next, the last village, and still they

couldn't take us together, so we got separated in different houses. That was not good for my sister. She was very traumatized.

L: 'Cause how old was she?

F: She's two years younger than me.

L: Yeah. Did you feel guilty about that? The fact that you couldn't make it happen that the two of you were together?

F: I didn't feel guilty. I felt sorry for her, because the lady I lived with had taken me in from this little village into the nearest town, and we caught a bus to do that, and my sister had found her way through the village street and came to the house, and some neighbors said she was banging on the door. So I really – I felt badly about that. But for my own sake, that particular residence was, apart from the overcrowded classrooms –

I encountered a teacher, she must have been an English major, 'cause she – The Lady of Shalott, you know? We learned that poem, all this – I think, what a challenge for a small child [laughter]. But I remembered it, and I was so impressed. Later I'll show you a poem about some apples that were in the attic, and so many of the things – I guess I was ready to receive something more positive, and so I swallowed it all up, and it left a lifetime impression on me. I remember there were two lambs that were cavorting in the little meadow outside the window, and, I don't know, birds out there. But I can still smell the apples in the attics, and according to this poem and everything, so. And then there was a hill that we would go sledding down if it was – not much snow, but when there was – but it had red soil, and we were told that that's where there'd been a battle, and the ground, the soil, was red. And of course, okay, well, why would they tell us that if it wasn't true? [laughter] So I bought into it. So, there was that kind of make-believe mystery. But there were about five different residences I guess I lived in. All of them different.

L: Were there other children in the homes then, typically?

F: One house had a baby. They took us in, my sister and I, in that one, because I think she probably needed the money. I remember her sending us to school with sandwiches, and it had rancid butter in the sandwiches. So that memory stayed with me. But, acute food rationing. But we had – We missed the bus one time, we had to walk to the school. It was raining, and… Deplorable conditions, we were getting soaking wet, and having to stay in those wet clothes and shoes for the rest of the day. That was probably a bad, one of the rare bad days. The rest, I learned – I realize now I learned to cope a great deal and have self-reliance on things, that I would not have if I'd had a protective mother.

L: So did you see your mom, like, once a week then? Or how often?

F: Oh, no. There was a bus that was called Summer Bee [laughter], the bus, and they, if they had the gasoline, they would come once a month. A lot of times it was not once a

month. I think I saw my father once in a year, and there were other years I didn't see him at all. Or my two brothers. Big disruption.

L: Yeah. Now, they weren't in the – Your brothers weren't ever in the war then, were they?

F: Yeah, my youngest, the younger of the two brothers – he's older than me but he's younger than the older one – he lied about his age and he went off to Normandy. So he had unusual experiences. He's got a chest full of medals. [laughter]

L: Oh, really? What was it like when the war was over?

F: Austerity. It was, well, not really quite believing it, you know. Is it really, really, really happening? It was sort of a numbing. I guess it's a lever that we had to protect ourselves. If it's not true, then we weren't grossly disappointed. So we hold off on accepting the truth. But after the war, I went to a school that I was totally unprepared for, because I'd been to overcrowded classrooms, and we were learning algebra, and geometry, and French, and it was overload, and I was not a very good pupil.

L: Well I bet there was a lot of different levels. Like, the students probably all had very different levels of learning, what they had picked up over that time period too.

F: Yeah. Well the gross overcrowding in the country schools, you know, they were like two rooms, two classrooms, and they were full with their own children. They were over doubled, and I was very fortunate to connect with the teacher that I told you about, that she was able to make my mind go to another place, enjoy, get pleasure. But they were rough years. But I made some good friends. Later I went to a business school. Wasn't much good at that either. Anyway, I ended up going to nursing school in Winchester.

L: What drove you to nursing?

F: I was of a generation, very little work was open to women. So it was either teaching, be a wife, or be a nurse. So, I had compassion for people, I didn't like illness, and when my father had been in the first World War he would tell stories about being in the war and I would cover my ears. I didn't want to hear, you know, ["ahhhh" noise]. He'd laugh, but for me it wasn't laughable. So I felt like, well, feeling sorry for people, what good was that? Get on and help them. So, that was my motivation to get into nursing. That sort of feeling of "do something". Make the situation better. Florence Nightingale chose the site of my hospital. She lived in Winchester, outside Winchester.

L: Okay. Did you enjoy nursing then?

F: It was beastly. Yeah. We had very – It was very regimented. We would go in at 7:00 in the morning, you would have maybe an hour off, maybe two hours before midday, and then you'd go back, and you'd be there until 8:30 at night. And so it was a very servitude kind of job. No money.

L: During that time, where did you live?

F: Oh, they had nurse's residences. Sometimes we would sneak out and come in through a window. One night, one nurse came in through the window and gave her purse to the night nurse, who was like the night sister. Every generation has their way of getting around locks. I can't say they were happy years. It was grueling hours, sort of horrible things. There was a great shortage of catheters and syringes. We utilized Nissen huts that had been built by American servicemen to take on, sort of, wounded from the coastline – Winchester is in from the coastline – and they were still functioning. So they had these Ben Franklin stoves in them, and that was the heating! And curtains that went around the beds, so no sort of bathroom privacy [laughter]. So things have improved tremendously.

L: I'm sure. [laughter] So you were in a hospital setting when you became, when you graduated from nursing?

F: It is a hospital, yeah. The Royal Hampshire is, yeah, is a hospital. An old one, as you can imagine. Actually, on the third floor – there's only three floors, maybe four – old staircases, wide staircases, useless, but there was a chapel on the fourth floor, and that's one of where the operating theaters were. Often men were having choir practice [laughter] and someone coming out of anesthesia. [laughter] Oh, and with the feathered choir… A lot of good people. They weren't very kind, but they didn't – that was the rule of the day. There was no time for that kind of – Once in a while you'd meet somebody who made me very aware of how important it was to be nice, to be kind. Makes a hell of a lot of difference in somebody else's life.

So then a friend – we didn't do midwifery, it was a whole year. So a friend of mine and I were going to go to London, and we had made all the arrangements. My mother had a series of strokes. I was home at the time, prior to going to London. So when she died, I was left – My father was still in the States. Well, he'd come back, and my brothers were over here. So you can't leave a house empty. So I was – the onus was on me to stay. So, my friend came to live with me, and that was not a good idea, because we would – If it was cold rainy weather, we'd come in – you know, we didn't have cars, we had bicycles – and come in wet and hang up your clothes. There was no fire, you know. It didn't last too long. But we decided to do, not to go to London, but at a local hospital there was a doctor who did the first open heart surgeries, and his name was Chin. And in England, the Royal College of Surgeons they – according to Biblical writings – they had no right going into a human body, that was a no-no. So they were not allowed into the Royal College of Medicine, not Surgeons. So they were not known as Doctors, they were known as "Mister". Has continued, and so surgeons in England are still called Mister. This, I imagine that he would be rather – He was small framed, Asian man, you know, with a name like Chin. He was over six feet tall [laughter]. I've got a newspaper cutting somewhere.

He did some marvelous work. But they didn't have the heart-lung machine, that hadn't been invented. So they'd go and they'd stop the heart. They could get in there and open the heart with a hammer and chisel. You wouldn't believe, going in and taking out

calcium… Did I really, really experience that? I didn't dream it. No, that's what happened. [laughter] People would come from all over the world to work with him. He did some wonderful work. Put the patient in a tub of ice cubes, the body was immersed, yeah, and get in, do the surgery, and get out as quick as possible. So a lot of modern medicine is – take a bow to Mr. Chin. He was a fisherman as well. Around those waters they had trout and salmon, and he would go fishing and bring back fish for the whole – It was called the Chest Hospital. It's no longer in operation, but used to be an old TB sanatorium before they opened it up for surgery.

L: And you worked in the surgery?

F: Yeah, I did medicine and surgery. I would, you know, took care of the patients on the floor, and worked in the OR as well. It was a training, you know, a continuum of training, and we had sealed bottles, underwater drainage – It's too complicated to explain, but the tubes went into the lung, and it took the fluids off, the air did not get back into the lung. So it was a whole lot of things to learn. I don't even know whether they still use those techniques. I would think they've moved on to something else, but there was an awful lot to learn.

L: Well, you were on the cutting edge I would think.

F: Yes. Yes. Well, my friend and I decided that we would not live at my parents' house and we abandoned it, then later my father came and sold it. We had a roof over our head, you know. Interesting people. But still shortages. We had a chance to go to Europe with a married couple. My friend Mary – she was pregnant at that time – and another couple that they were going to Europe with had dropped out, but I don't know the reason. But they, you know – Would we like to go? So I'd spoke to this friend that I was doing nursing with, and yes, we both would like to go. So we sold our clothes, our record collection, anything that we could get extra money [laughter], got money to go. We went in a car, their car. We had to pay for part of the boat passage, and then we had picnics, and one meal a day in a restaurant. So we stretched the budget. Stretch, stretch, stretch. We had a marvelous time. It was like, my friend – her name was Trish – we walked down the Champs-Elysees, and I don't think my feet touched the sidewalk. I was walking on air. Yeah, I was that elated. So, life took on a different perspective entirely after that.

It isn't to say that we didn't have fun along the way, because there was a – When we were in Winchester there was a – I don't know now what the name of it was, but there was a – for Royal Navy. They had ladies night, you know, for dancing, and they'd save up their rum ration to put in the punch [laughter]. You know, in the British Navy they still got a rum ration. And there was a teaching college, and there were lots of military around. So if one had the energy, or the time, or the enthusiasm, there were outlets of young people getting together. I think no matter how difficult times might be, young people will find a way of getting together with each other. But Europe was – Well, when we came back, I had known I was going to come to the States, so I had got my

passport. And because I was born in the States, I was an American citizen, there was no hitches. I got my passport. But when we got back from Europe, we were due at the hospital, and the port of authority, whatever it was called, they were confused and befuddled. They didn't know who the hell I am. [laughter] "We can't let you come into the country." You gotta be kidding – These are unusual circumstances, I gotta get to work! They'll kill me! [laughter] I think they obviously got a green light somewhere, and let me in, so. But my friend decided to not come to the States, and she got married instead. Had an interesting life. But she told me years later she often wondered what life would have been if we'd come together.

L: So how old were you when you came to the States?

F: I was about 28.

L: Okay. So you'd been a nurse probably for…

F: About four… When I came to the States, I had been a nurse for – Well I'd been in training, but then I came to the States and had to do catch up on – I couldn't prove that I'd done – and my hospital didn't keep those kind of records either, and eventually –

L: Where did you land in the States? Where did you settle?

F: We came in, actually, April the 1st.

L: Really?

F: Yes. 1959. And my brother lived in New Jersey, and so he picked me up. Pea soup fog. He said, "You brought it with you!" [laughter] And we drove down to, it was Lynn – my sister-in-law's niece – it was going to be her birthday, her fourth birthday. She ended up being the flower girl in my wedding. But we stopped off at a – I was going to say the name of the place, but it was so familiar, everyone knows… Anyways, it was a roadside place – Johnson & Johnson. No, that's the pharmaceutical.

L: Howard Johnson?

F: Howard Johnson, there you go. Yeah, so, the policeman there said, "I advise you to stay right where you are, and not get back on the highway." Well, you know, my brother's used to driving in adverse conditions, so he plodded ahead. But a terrible accident had happened. We learned later of one of those machines, the trucks that carry eight cars, you know, and there'd been a collision. And the driver, one of them, got burned in his cabin. You couldn't see the white lines on the turnpike, that was how dense the fog was. On April the 1st, 1959.

Then when we got to the house, I saw my nephews for the first time. They were four and five. They looked like they were sent from heaven. The only thing that was missing was their wings. Oh, I fell in love with them instantly. And of course, the next day you would try to keep your eyes open with no sleep. It was Lynn's birthday on the same day. We did get home safely, but unforgettable, coming to the States. And then, I'd never

seen houses that were made out of wood, you know, except for the old, old ones in Winchester, you know. But the clapboards. There are some Americans if I was to tell this to would take offense, so if this is being recorded, I don't want anyone to take offense. My impression of the clapboard houses was that they were a lot of sheds. They were temporary until they got around to building the real thing! [laughter] I learned differently, but it took some adjustment. The glare of the light on the highways, it was – and the, oh, the Queen Elizabeth, that's what the ship I came over on – it was late getting in. It's never late. I forget how late it was. It was very late, but it had such a rough crossing that it felt like the bottom of the ship was crunching the gravel on the [?]. And you know, I've learned that the ship is as long as the Empire State is tall. Isn't that something?

L: It is!

F: Yeah, I read that, and I've no proof of it, but I mean that's – Why would somebody write something like that? But the waves were coming from the aft and hitting the foredeck, that's – I was sitting, having some alcoholic beverage [laughter] and I looked out the window, and I looked again, and it was water, and then there was a space. So I looked up, and cracked my neck, and looked up, and looked up, and that's how high the water was above, up up up, and we were going up and down, so.

L: Oh my goodness. Was everyone sick?

F: Oh, yeah. There was a Canadian hockey crew on board, these healthy young men could have had fun dancing with – I think they were all laid up. Well actually, the food, when you're sitting there, the food would go [laughter], and then you'd wait for it to move back [laughter], take another spoonful.

L: How long was the crossing?

F: Oh, it was – the crew said, oh, you know, trying to pacify – Nothing, it was nothing. And then the Life, or Look, magazine publication came out. It was the worst crossing they'd ever had [laughter]. They had pictures. Because the ground kept on coming up, to me, you know. It wasn't me falling, it was the ground was coming up. Took me a long time to get my sea legs. Lynn's birthday, ah, it was rough. So anyway, I did, I worked at a local hospital there for a little while, and then I had to do midwifery and psych, which also – Both of those were a whole year in England, and I did both of them in three months here in the States. It was in White Plains, and the hospital I went to was Bloomingdales. So, I don't know what association it had with the store, 'cause there was some connection, but apparently it was under one of the hospitals in New York that was under a charter by one of the English kings. It was old. It was a big, humongous estate. They had – give you an idea, they had two golf courses. I thought, whoa.

It was – I was so naïve. I didn't think that judges had nervous breakdowns, and they do. Witnessed it. Playwrights, famous playwright. It was, what an education. And what they'd done to their families, their histories, just totally amazing.

L: So where did you meet your husband?

F: In New York City.

L: While you were working? Or what –

F: Oh, well, when I – Friend of mine, she was Swiss-German, from Basel, and she was a lovely person. She spoke three languages. She wanted to be a doctor, but then again, you know, we were the same –

L: Yeah, right, limitations of that time.

F: Yeah. Women didn't do that, so her father wouldn't let her, and so she didn't. But she was a fantastic nurse, and she was working for somebody doing heart surgery in New York or Brooklyn, I'm not sure. That was a long time ago. But I met her in psych, and we became friends. I stayed on, stayed on staff in psych, and she went to the city. She landed up in an apartment that belonged to a UN diplomat's widow, overlooked the park, *the* park, I mean Central Park. I went to visit. Oh, how the other half lives. Too much. Just too much. They had a ruptured pipe in her room, she had to get out. She said, "It's either now, or forget it." So I gave my notice in, and joined her in New York. Did private duty for a while, and then I went to NYU. That's when they had the old hospital. They built a new one, and if you want to read a really good book on hospitals in New York – Bellevue was not next door but down the street – read Bellevue. That's the name of the book. Wonderful, wonderful history. I didn't realize the hospital had a flood from the East River at one time, so lots of interesting little nuggets.

But they built the new NYU hospital, and it was a whole new world. You know, I could go to school, I worked my eight hours, the rest of the time was mine. It wasn't like in England, you know, where you were on – I was at my parents' home, and we didn't have a phone connection in those days, and the police knocked on the door – They needed me at the hospital. That was the way people got around, so, okay. Got my uniform on, got on my bike, and off I went. But no more of that, you know. They had enough staff that they could cover, NYU paid part of tuition at the university in Greenwich Village, so that was the highlight. Every day was like Christmas morning. [laughter] The air was electric. What's gonna happen today? What little goodies are gonna come my way? Loved it, loved it, loved it.

My husband, when we were dating, we would walk a lot. You know, it's the way to see any city, is to walk. We heard some music, and we walked around the corner and there was an electric harp [laughter] under a bridge, next to the UN building, and two other instruments, and they were playing. So you never know what you're – 5th Avenue was blocked off, and they had all these seatings out in the street, and it was – oh, I can't think of the composer now, it wasn't Cole Porter – anyway, it was "Soft Shoe Shuffle". They were doing a tribute to this musician outside the public library, the New York Public Library, on the steps. You know, it was, if you were to look for it you couldn't – I mean, these things just happened.

L: Yeah. So did you tell me where you met him?

F: Hm?

L: Where did you meet your husband then? Or what were the circumstances? How did you…

F: Oh, we were always going to the same parties, and –

L: I see, and you just happened to connect.

F: Yeah.

L: Like at a party or something?

F: Well, what I discovered at the age I was at that time, was that American youths got married in their early 20s, so their male situation was getting rather thinned out. It was either widowers or divorcees, you know, around. So, there were a lot of people, you know, but it was not the same as all young people together. I was not going through a middle age crisis, in my late 20s, but it was that difference, felt it very keenly. I think things have changed since then. My own daughter didn't get married until she was older. I didn't get married – My mother had not married young, so she gave, like, that was the green light. It's okay not to – you don't have to get married, you know, you can get married later and still have a good life. But sometimes you need to witness somebody else doing it to know you're not, sort of a trailblazer. But I loved living in New York City.

L: How long were you there?

F: Three years.

L: It was like Disneyland, right? Where you – new adventures on every –

F: Yeah. Yeah. You just didn't know. I had to take a bus – I lived over by the East River – take a bus across town and downtown to one hospital, and I did private duty in that hospital. I remember when I first went, there were a lot of pitfalls, and you gotta be careful, you know. There are evil people everywhere, and there's no second guessing. One thing that somebody told me happens in New York – you don't make eye contact. If you're ever in New York City, people don't make eye contact. There are so many weirdos around, that they can take the wrong – they think you're giving them messages or whatever, you know. But when my husband and I went with our two young children, the whole world was our friend. Here my son had red hair, and my daughter had this gingham dress on, with a big bow on the back of her – and, you know, fresh corn from the Midwest [laughter]. And it was no holds barred, everyone, so different in New York. Nobody hesitated to talk to these young children who were obviously different.

L: So where did you move to from New York?

F: To – From New York?

L: From New York, yeah.

F: Well, we realized that – There was a sociologist who wrote a book called “Growing Up Absurd” [laughter].

L: That’s a great title.

F: Isn’t it? And we realized that neither one of us had any experience in what it was like to grow up in a city, and how do you give guidelines to your child, you know? You haven’t got any guidelines to give them. So, Pierre was from St. Louis, so he’d asked me before we were married, did I want to visit, and I said, “No, thank you.” I was happy in New York [laughter]. Forget about it, I’m not going anywhere. But I got to St. Louis and I liked it. There’s a lot here. Took me a long, long time to really feel at home. It wasn’t until in recent years, I went out to live with my son, who is now living in Texas. I was promoting St. Louis, you know. I was feeling alienated here, you know, I’m not one of these – I wanna go back to New York. Couldn’t afford to live in New York, but –

L: Did you continue nursing?

F: Oh, yes. Yes. I guess I was a nurse for about 45 years.

L: Oh, were you? Okay. Wow.

F: Mm-hm. Something like that.

L: Where did you practice in St. Louis?

F: I did for a couple of agencies, and then I had private duty cases at Barnes. Oh, when I first came, I had baby – three months old – when we came to St. Louis. And I went to St. Mary’s, and St. Mary’s was very Catholic at that time. Probably still is, but more predominantly then. And there was a sign outside the hospital saying women who were wearing trousers were not permitted in the hospital.

L: Oh really?

F: So, this is part of history. I can verify. I saw it with my own eyes. And at that time Jacqueline Kennedy was not connected with the Kennedys, but she went to a New York restaurant; she was wearing trousers, and she was asked to leave. So, we’ve come a long way, baby.

L: We have come a long way.

F: But I met somebody in the apartments where we were living, and she worked at St. Mary’s and said they were needy. Went and spoke to the nun. She must have thought I was an answer to her prayers [laughter]. Hauled me in and gave me the medical intensive care unit. And I’m pregnant. You know, three month old baby and I’ve discovered I’m pregnant. I couldn’t keep it up, so I stayed home for a few years. But I, one time used to, you know, specialize in open heart surgery. Head and neck was a specialty, and one of the joys of nursing is that you can go and learn new things. You

can keep learning, learning, learning. But then, dammit, they become obsolete, and now – yeah – and now everything is so technical, you know, they'd probably beg me not to go anywhere near their door. And I hear it's not the same camaraderie. It's feeling under a lot of pressure. It's become a business, you know, rather than a human – I don't want to believe that. I want to believe that nursing is still the human touch. Actually, there was a group of nurses I belong to, and they've had a healing touch, and so they were bringing some of those things back in. I don't know whether they got a line of – They had some approval, but I don't know how legitimatized they became, or whether it was one of those, sort of, fuzzy areas.

But I have two children, and I had a stepson who is no longer living, and I loved him like he was one of my own, but he lived with his mother. He visited us in New York. Actually, he's ten years older than my daughter. I feel like, if I've done nothing else with my life, I brought up two wonderful human beings. One became a policeman and the other one became a school teacher. Both poorly paid [laughter] but they love their work, and they were very good.

L: What do you think was the happiest time for you?

F: You know, somebody asked me that, and I hadn't – some word to that effect, and I had to – it bowled me over. Was it about Christmas? Or was it – I forget now, it was something more specific, but I couldn't remember. And I thought, I've had highlights, but not, you know – they were after I became a self-sufficient adult. I don't remember happy, really truly – Maybe they were there and I just took them for granted. But I can remember highlights in New York, you know, when – and in Paris. Maybe they're just simply the exceptions. But I do go back to England on a visit. We had a 30 year reunion. I went to some of the old places, where the trout flow through the rivers.

L: What do you miss about England?

F: Fireplaces. And I can still make tea. It's not quite the same as sitting having tea by a fireplace. And we had long-handled forks, and you put that into a – I forget now what – the crumpet, and you'd hold it over the fire and toast it, and then lots of butter. [laughter] And a drooling chin. I miss the intensity of close friendships that I think you only make – I could be wrong – when you're young. 'Cause you're learning, and you exchange intimacies that you don't when you get older. People are busy, and – What else do I miss?

L: I think too, with those friendships, the people of that generation had gone through a really hard time, you know, with the war, and just the shared – Nursing was hard, you know? I think there's something about sharing hard experiences together that make it that more intense.

F: A unity.

L: You know? Yes.

F: I think you're right. It intensifies this bondage. We gotta hold together.

L: You were survivors together, you know?

F: I witnessed that as a child when a house was Blitzed, a neighbor's house. And the husband, the man of the house, was being brought out on a stretcher, and another little girl and I were watching, and – "What's going on? What's going on?" And we heard the story that his wife and dog were dead, and they were on top of him in the cellar. The cellar was – They got him out, and he had the presence of mind to raise his hand and say, "I'll be alright." And that never left me, that courage, to remember to come to the aid of a child. I mean he knew, somehow – or maybe he didn't – but, "I'll be alright." I mean why, if you'd been that many hours laying in that position, under those circum- I think your brain would've been a bit scrambled. For all those reasons, I never forgot him. And the house was demolished, and there was a little sailboat, toy sailboat, about this big, and it was put up by the frame of the window. And his son was in the Navy and away, and I was thinking, you know, as a child, he's gonna come home and there's his boat.

And I guess a different scenario for a child to witness those things, but it was the courage of people. Every day nobody knew, like what's going on now in the Ukraine, nobody knows going off to war whether they ever – Well, goodness gracious that happens in domestic life in every town, in every city. We never know the last time, but we don't – the percentage is so much less that we don't dwell on it. But then it was very close, and people never knew when they were going to have a telegram that somebody had died in the war. And there were tears, and tears, and I heard horrible stories as a child about the concentration camps, and things that I – They didn't know I was listening. Be careful what you say around children. It's all happening, it's all repeating again in the Ukraine. So recently I was, I don't know, I guess it's my work in psych, I knew enough of the symptoms that I was bordering a depression, and so – You know what to do, get on and do it! So, I stopped watching the news as intensely. Still kept abreast, but then I engaged myself. I pay Bridge, and keep on reading, and all those other things. Spending more time balancing the scale, and I thought, I'm not disregarding what's happening. I am acutely concerned, but that doesn't help them, and if I allow myself to go into a depression then I'm doing Putin's work for him. Look at it that way.

L: Well, I feel like in this country I don't know that experience at all. I mean, you've lived that wartime experience in a way different than anybody I think in this country. You know what I mean?

F: Up close and personal. [laughter]

L: Exactly. Exactly. You know, aside from like 9/11 in New York or, you know, Pearl Harbor or something like that. I mean we are so insulated, you know, from a lot of that. So I would imagine that the Ukraine, you know, those experiences, those images, would very much draw back to those –

F: Yes. Well they haven't got a bathroom to go to, you know, to go to the toilet, where do they go to the toilet? How do they dispose of their waste? The diapers, they can't shower, and then food is a shortage, so it's just like wanting to howl at the moon. It's pointless. And I'm not wealthy, so I can't do anything financially to send money to funds, would hopefully help them. I think if I was young, and footloose and fancy free, I'd probably be doing a lot of volunteer work, but those days are gone.

L: Do you have any regrets as you look back on your life? Any regrets? Things you wish you would've done that you didn't, or things that you…

F: Regrets. Yeah, I guess I have regrets that my parents weren't wealthier [laughter]. But then a lot of that was due to shortages of the Depression and the War. You know, all through the War I never had a soda. I never had an ice cream. They just weren't there. Milk chocolate. But I don't regret them, you know? I didn't have them, I didn't have them.

L: And no one else did. No one else had them.

F: Exactly. Exactly. Well, you weren't isolated. You weren't the one and only that was being pushed under the ground. You were, everyone was in the same boat. And that's what I mean about witnessing adults who went about their business, and maintained their sanity. There were a couple that didn't. I can remember cases of, now looking, you know, they were goners. But, by and large, I think that's an example that you can only have by being there and witnessing it, being part of it. So, I regret having had all of that. I would've much rather have had a life that I went to the seashore. There was no seashore in my childhood, it was all barbed wire. A friend of mine had a sister who went looking for a ball that she had thrown for the dog, and it was on a cliff top. And so she went into the barbed wire and got blown up by a land mine.

L: Oh my goodness.

F: So, bad things happened, but some people have an overload of them. But to think that the mentality of a Putin can still domineer – almost domineer the world – it just… How on earth was he allowed to get into office in the first place? I can see nothing redeeming about him, and I – You know, you look for redeeming features in all human beings. Did you see the picture of the yacht?

L: Huh-uh.

F: That they got confiscated in Italy?

L: Huh-uh.

F: Oh, it's huge, and the toilet paper cover's got a gold lid on it [laughter]. But apparently everything that's gold is, you know, it's good. That's what – I resist listening to what people write. Things like that that's their opinion. But I wonder how right they are.

L: Any last thoughts that you would like to share?

F: Well, I always enjoy being in company with you.

L: Likewise.

F: You allow me to rattle on [laughter].

L: I don't see that as rattling.

F: I don't think I've had a remarkable life, but when I compare the dullness that some people have had of nothing – Like, you know, I've been to some wonderful art museums and seen some fabulous art, especially in New York City and in Paris, oh! Oh! Walking on air is nothing, oh! The Le Garde [?], that railroad station that was converted into an art museum – You go right to the fourth floor, and that's where all the impressionist artists are, up there. No, I wish I'd had a childhood that I could've had more exposure, and not the confines of listening for the drone of – We knew the difference between the German engines and the British engines. The German ones were [noise], and the English went [noise].

L: Really? Interesting.

F: Continual. So, uh-oh. How fast can I run?

L: Wow! For me that's inconceivable, you know what I mean? To be that in tune to that, and life or death. Really, being in the – you know.

F: Yeah, no, I can't believe that I'm here at this age, and comparatively useless. So, you coming into my life with your wonderful library books have been an anchor, believe me. If I can't do anything, I can walk in somebody else's shoes through reading.

L: Yeah. Were you always a reader?

F: Well, funny thing was, I was reading Main Street – remember Main Street? – The Back Street Boys, and things like that when I was about 13, but I was also wanting to know about life, you know. What makes people tick, and what is all this stuff about sex? I still didn't know everything that – Other people knew, and why isn't anyone talking to me about this thing? So, there was Stanley Earl Gardner, was a mystery writer, and "The Case of", "The Case of", "The Case" – and this one was "The Case of the Lucky Legs". These rather seductive long legs, you know, with hose, and that's all that there was on the picture on the front. Well, it was nothing to do with sex. I didn't learn a damn thing. But my mother found the book, 'cause I secreted it. I thought, she won't understand. She didn't. She found it, and she told her sister, and then both of them took me apart – aside – and took me apart also. The pitfall: They still didn't talk about sex.

Just, the life that I was opening up for myself by reading books like that. Oh, I wanted to communicate with them, but they just were not communicable. So I stopped reading. And it wasn't until, oh, for about ten years I guess, I mean, that type – I'd read magazines, but not, I didn't read novels anymore. I would've been probably the best-read person you've ever known if I'd continued [laughter]. I have a granddaughter

who reads a great deal, and it delights me, you know. The finch, The Goldfinch, she read that and loved it, and was crushed by the movie.

L: Well, I'm gonna close it off, but I just thank you so much. Just really, really enjoyed this.

F: I don't – See, to me it's so ordinary. Sort of, so gloomy, doomy, oppressive. I cannot perceive of anyone finds any pleasure or enjoyment in listening to it, so.

L: I see it as extraordinary, is what I see. And I just – How you've lived your life, helping people, and caring for people, and survive –

F: Overcoming heartache.

L: Yes, exactly.