

John Helmer, Jr.

SR 3009, Oral History, by James Strassmaier

World War II Oral History Series

1994 August 27



HELMER: John Helmer, Jr.

JS: James Strassmaier

Transcribed by: Unknown

Audit/edit by: Sarah Stroman, 2017

Tape 1, Side 1

1994 August 27

JS: The date today is the 26th, am I right?

HELMER: That is correct. Really, John Helmer Junior.

JS: John Helmer Junior, the 26th of August, 1994 and the interviewer is Jim Strassmaier for the Oregon Historical Society and this is part of the World War II series.

To get some idea of, to use the expression “where you come from,” I wonder if you could tell me how your father got here and when, and what he did when he got here. And then the same for your mother.

HELMER: I’d be happy to do that. My father served an apprenticeship at age 14 in Sweden in a dry goods store where they sold yardage. His mother took him down when he was 14 and said, “My son’s ready to go to work and would you be able to use him?” So he worked four years in the old town in Stockholm. The building is still there and it’s now a bank, and Beverly and I had visited this bank to know where he was working.

When he finished his apprenticeship, like young people, restless, he decided to come to America. And I do have, and I didn’t bring it today, his original ticket, which cost \$20, translated from kroner, in steerage to New York City. And it’s a big sheet about 16

inches long and 10 inches across. It's kind of a manuscript, all handwritten of course. And he came through an agent of some kind, a travel agent, I suppose, but it kind of looked like a legal type of document, rather than a ticket.

And when he landed at Ellis Island, and finished his indoctrination and processing there, he went to – yes. He was finished with the processing at Ellis Island and he was taken by boat over to the Battery. And there immigrants would go to different hiring agencies and he went to one, and a man who was working for a worker came over and selected him as one of his servants. And this man was named Mr. D.H. Holmes. He owned a department store in New Orleans. He was a lawyer, and he really never worked. And my father went to his home, which was on Long Island, and his first job was waiting on the servants. They had 60 servants in the household: the butler the upstairs/downstairs people, the stable. They had a yacht parked outside at their dock in front of their home. He stayed with Mr. Holmes for about four years and elevated himself, eventually, to become the personal servant to Mr. Holmes; he took care of his clothes and his whiskey. He travelled across the ocean with him 17 times, and he went to Alice Longworth's wedding in Lexington, Kentucky, as part of the household staff.

JS: Did he meet Teddy Roosevelt?

HELMER: No. No he didn't meet any of the so-called wedding party or guests.

Then he decided he would go back to America. Well, I should back track a minute. Before he was hired by Mr. Holmes, he was picked out by a Swedish Lutheran Minister to go to this Lutheran home where Swedish immigrants all kind of congregated, and there he lived for a few weeks until he got the job with Mr. Holmes. That's the correct recollection. Then one day a new immigrant came and stayed at this Lutheran home and she got a job somewhere as a maid or a servant, and my father carried her bags to her new job. And this person was a very famous Swedish actress. I can't remember her name, it wasn't Greta Garbo, but she was a famous silent movie star. She became one in later years, in the silent movies. And my father kept track of her and met her, even years

later in Hollywood. She became a poor, destitute person; perhaps lived to high on what she was making and finally was in a rest home for retired movie actors and actresses. And that name may pop into my head in a minute.

JS: Or later on.

HELMER: Yes. And so, my dad did leave his job with Mr. Holmes and decided to go back to Sweden. And he got to Stockholm and he was on the street and met a friend, Eric Flodine, and Eric said "I'm going to go to Portland, Oregon to visit an uncle. Why don't you come with me?"

And my father said, "Oh my gosh, I just came back from America. I'm here to stay."

"Oh no, come on with me." So he went with Eric Flodine to Portland. And he lived in Northwest Portland and worked in men's stores, and he was a buyer at Ben Selling's, children's buyer, and he worked at C.C. Bradley's. And then his brother came to America and his brother worked in a shoe store in Portland. He was an old sea captain from Sweden, was in the Swedish Navy and then became an officer, and then came to America, and sailed, eventually, with States Steamship Company.

JS: May I ask, did he leave you with any stories or any impressions of Ben Selling?

HELMER: Yes. Well, yes, Ben Selling. The one story I remember hearing, you know, as a family, was that Ben Selling always promised to sell the store to the employees when he passed away, because there were no active heirs that were interested in the store. But when he did pass away, the store was dissolved and the employees never got a chance to buy it, but that is one story I remember. And I don't remember any other stories. It was a very influential local store, menswear, children's, boys' wear store. And he was in charge of the boys' department, eventually.

And then C.C. Bradley's was a hat store, and C.C. Bradley was also into local politics; and it was hats only and he had three had hat stores in those days in downtown Portland. Exclusively hats.

So then World War I came about and he had met my mother who came to America to become a nurse and I can re-track in a moment and go back to her. So, they lived in the same neighborhood on — what street is the Coliseum on? The old ice arena coliseum, the old ice coliseum. It's on Marshall. My mother lived on 21st and Marshall, and I don't know where my dad lived, but the house is torn down. And there was a grocery store just down the street, called Helmer Grocery Store, but it was no relationship.

So my dad joined a local military unit, a medical unit, composed mostly of doctors from the medical school and it was a medical evacuation team. It was called the Sanitary Train and was part of the 91st Division. It was organized by a gentleman by the name of Dr. Strom I believe. And they even practiced up in the stadium before they went to Fort Lewis. And my father married my mother on one of his furloughs at Fort Lewis. He went away to war overseas in World War I, and I think he was in three major campaigns and came home. Then organized his first store operation in 1921 at a location on Broadway and Washington Street. And that was in 1921.

And now I could skip and go to my mother. My mother was one of five children, born in southern Sweden, in a little town called Sinnerud.

JS: What was your father's town, by the way?

HELMER: Stockholm

JS: It was Stockholm

HELMER: Yes he was born — and it's very near the Katarina Hissen, his birthplace, and Beverly and I have visited his birthplace. The area is still intact very much like it was when he was born.

And my mother was a farm girl from Southern Sweden, from Sinnerud, and she came — had a desire to become a nurse. She first landed in Canada and settled for a few years, very few years, in Winnipeg doing domestic work and then she came to Portland. How she got to Portland, I don't know. She must've had a friend here, though, is the only thing I can think of. So she entered nurses training at Good Samaritan Hospital under Miss Loveridge, and graduated. And specialized in private nursing or nursed where the people who were ill and recovering, always stayed at home, they didn't stay in hospitals. And she lived in the houses and was their nurse. And she did that until I was born in 1923. So that gives a little background on both my parents.

JS: Your mother's name was?

HELMER: Her name was Emanuelsson and she changed her name. She didn't like the name Emanuelsson so she changed her name — Aida was her first name; she changed her name to Emmy Lou Emerson.

My father's real name was Johann Helmer Peterson. And he didn't like the name Peterson, he thought it was too common, so when he was naturalized he dropped Peterson and became John Helmer.

JS: Where did the Helmer come from? Do you know?

HELMER: Yes, that was his middle name.

JS: Oh, just simply the middle name that he adopted?

HELMER: Yes. And Helmer is usually a German last name and a Swedish first name. Yes. So, it's the other way around: Helmer Johann was his name. Helmer Johann Peterson and — because there were people who called him Helmer, I remember, as a youngster.

JS: It sounds like people pretty readily changed their names. Is that what you understand?

HELMER: Yes, oh I think yes. I've felt that way.

JS: Especially the Swedes?

HELMER: Well, no I think Polish people did too, and Germans. Yes. And I think that it was kind of a mark of being Americanized, and my parents never talked Swedish. They didn't want to join Swedish organizations. They didn't want to talk Swedish. They didn't want to go to the Swedish Church, they went to the Presbyterian Church. They wanted to be American, and they called it "the old country" and they wanted to break their ties with it.

JS: Can you think of their talking about that, what they may have said about that attitude?

HELMER: Well, I'm not sure. I think that mainly there were no opportunities for them, you know. They thought America had the opportunities.

JS: But I mean Americanizing and distancing themselves from the Swedish culture.

HELMER: Did they say why they did that?

JS: Did they talk about that?

HELMER: Well, a little, yes. You know, I remember, as a small boy when we had Swedish sailors come in the store, my father would say, "Well, now you talk English. You

talk English now.” He didn’t want to talk Swedish; we were in America now and he wanted to talk English. Why that was so strong — a rebellious feeling, I guess, so I don’t know why that was so strong.

JS: Did you ever come across the sort of joking and ridiculing of Swedes and the way they talked?

HELMER: Yes, in fact, that was no problem to my parents; they had a slight accent, very slight. But I used to talk broken Swedish and I had some jokes, and I could perform in front of people and no one felt embarrassed. Of course, in those days we used to have some comedians who were known on the radio with their Swedish stories and accents, and I could do that very entertainingly.

JS: It didn’t hurt you, but it may have been painful for them.

HELMER: No, not at all. In fact they encouraged me to do it, at the time.

JS: Oh, they did?

HELMER: Yes, so that phase wasn’t a problem.

JS: The transition.

HELMER: Yes. Now I remember one time that a teacher in school asked my parents “Now, do you talk Swedish at home?” And my parents were very embarrassed, because I was having difficulty in school and the teacher — so, in many homes they talked the home language, their native language, and this teacher asked. And this was very embarrassing to my parents, because they never did and they didn’t want to. So, that was very upsetting to them.

JS: Now, well, I've taken you away from your narrative. You were speaking of your mom.

HELMER: Yes, so then my mom, after I was born in 1923 — well, we lived in Albina, which was composed of Scandinavians, Poles and Germans. And the Germans lived in one area between Williams and Union, and kind of Fargo and Alberta. And they were all the garbage pick-up people in the city. And we had the Poles they worked down at the Union Pacific Yards, and the Swedes were working all over town. We had two Swedish churches, three Swedish bakeries, and a Swedish meat market, and a Swedish bathhouse down on Mississippi. So, it was a real Scandinavian community.

JS: Any scuffles between the different nationalities?

HELMER: No, there was no problem; no, there was no kind of ill-feelings among the different nationalities. A lot of Finnish people, of course they're Scandinavian. A lot of Finnish people. My three immediate playmates that I grew up with on Beech and Vancouver was Lynn [Duggerstad?] and he was Swedish, and Albert Rotu, and he was Finnish, and then Ted Brown, I presume was Irish. I can't remember any specific background on him. And we moved when I was — in 1939 to Overlook, which was another area closer to the river. And my parents built a house then, in 1939, and we lived there and I was in Jefferson High School.

JS: And an address for that? That might be interesting.

HELMER: The address was 4137 North Overlook Blvd, where I lived. The house number on Beech Street was 203 North Beech. Williams Avenue was the division between Northeast and North and we were 203 North Beech Street. We lived in a house that my grandfather owned. He was the stepfather to my father. My father and his brother

brought their mother from Sweden when she was older, at a time that I can't remember, so it would be after, naturally, he was married, I think. She remarried in Portland, a Mr. Carl Swenson, who was a local house painter and very active in the Swedish Organizations. So, some of the highlights, just to continue...

JS: Well, I wonder if I could interrupt you just one more time before we get too far away from your father and mother. Your father sounds very interesting to me. I'm kind of interested in the idea of a son following closely the father's occupation and that kind of thing. I wonder if you could tell me something about the relationship with your father and some idea, I guess, first of what your father was like as a person.

HELMER: Yes. Well naturally he started to work at age 14, so he felt that was the right thing for me to do, too. So I started in as a young boy around the store on Saturdays, running errands and he always had me go around town paying all the bills in person, so I knew every building, every office downtown. I would go down on the streetcar. He walked to work about 40 years of his life and I used to walk with him on Saturdays to work. We walked 3 miles across the Broadway Bridge. And he was known as the walker going to town to work and people honked their horns and — because most everyone rode the streetcar.

So he had me in the store and he kind of expected me to carry on. He never said so I don't think so, that I can remember, but it kind of was in me. And then in grammar school, later in grammar school, you know, 7th, 8th grade, I was down there after school. And then in High School my dad would walk to work and then I'd drive the family car down, when I was age 16, and we would ride home together. He really indoctrinated me in the store, and I liked hard work, too, so when I graduated from high school, which was in the fall of in January of 1942, I worked in a sawmill in St. John's. It was an [Thomas J.] Autzen sawmill, the Portland [Lumber Mills]¹.

¹ Located at 6611 North Burlington Ave., Portland, Or.

JS: And what was your father like?

HELMER: Well he was very set in his ways, so we'll say a stubborn Swede. And he wanted it done his way and he didn't really like to hear many suggestions. He was boss and he wanted to be boss, even at the time he sold me the store, he sold it to me reluctantly, because he had to sell it in order to get social security and that was very difficult for him to do. He was hard to work with, because he always wanted to remain boss. And then — but he was very kind and he was very stern, so my relationship with him was always in the store. We did throw the baseball together and we did a little — the walking together, and then on Sundays we would go up to Washington Park and MacCleay Park and walk.

So my relationship to him was mostly related to work and the store. He always said that people working in the store should pay for this, because they're getting an education. That it's too bad we have to pay them, 'cause this is just like going to school. And he kind of took people under his arm and if he hired a person, he felt that he was hiring him for life. You know, that this was a real strong relationship and that we were right for one another. So, then, at the time that I sold to my son, who is now the owner, I could give up very easily, because of the experience I had. I sold to John when he was quite young, but he was ready to take over the responsibility and has done a very good job.

So, he was very proud also, my father was very proud of his accomplishments and very proud that — and he started with no money, kind of. In those days he might have had \$200 worth of inventory and if you sold a shirt you went down the next morning early to a jobber, who was a middleman, and you bought another shirt. So you went from hand to mouth. We still have some of the old records. We had many days that were \$17, I remember seeing. In those days people worked for \$15 a week and six days a week; from eight until 10 were the store hours. So, but people were happy too. Yes, I think people were very happy.

He never wanted to owe — once he got established and economically sound, he said he didn't want to stay open nights, and he wouldn't stay open nights when he changed stores and the malls came in. He said he wouldn't stay open nights and he wouldn't work on Sunday. So he had those strict rules. Yes.

JS: And an impression of your mother?

HELMER: Well my mother kind of was, as we grew up, was the nurse in the neighborhood. She would, if anyone had an infection she would have them over once a day soaking their hands. I remember one boy had a sliver up his fingernail and she pulled it out and then it got infected and she would, he was Willy [Copsac?] and she would soak his hand. And then we had a girl that had a serious disease and who was in a state of deterioration, and she had to be administered drugs for the pain, and my mother used to go over and give her shots to administer to the pain.

So, she was a local nurse on duty. We were the only family in the neighborhood that had a telephone, so people used our phone for emergencies. And we were the only people who had a car in the neighborhood, but we never drove it except on Sundays; always used the bus. Then my father was in Shriner's and they used to have a picnic at Jantzen Beach and we took all the neighborhood children to Jantzen Beach, I always remember, when they always had a picnic in August.

So that's what I remember. My mother was a good cook. She went back to nursing during World War II at Holladay Park Hospital and enjoyed her work as a second career, or as revival of her first career. Yes.

JS: So this gave her some independence, then. Did she...

HELMER: Yes, oh yes, she was very independent, and she liked her own money. My father didn't really like her to work, but my mother must've been a feminist of the worst kind, quietly, in her day, because she wanted her own bank account and she wanted her

own money, and she wanted to spend her money on things that she knew she wanted to spend it on. So, that was the day when men didn't want their wives' to work because it reflected that they weren't able to support them. [Laughs]

JS: Yes, that was a big part of the culture. Let's talk about your growing up and let's use the term "coming of age." There's always some form of it.

HELMER: Yes, okay. Well I grew up on Beech and Vancouver there and went to Boise Grammar School. We had excellent teachers and we had two old maid school teachers, sisters, Aida Foote and I forget her sister's name. One was English and one was math, I think. And they were very fine teachers; and they were very old when we had them, but they were devoted. The school was quite new; it was built in 1929 and we only — had so few students that we only used the lower floor, I remember.

JS: And the name of the school again?

HELMER: Boise. Reuben P. Boise, spelled like Boise, but he was from Idaho and I believe he was a Federal Judge. And we always said [bois], not [boizi] but Reuben P. Boise was the name of the school.

So I graduated in 1938 from Boise, and then in 1939 we moved to Overlook. We had, as I mentioned earlier, the three playmates Lynn, Albert and Ted and we still see one another. In fact, later on we all joined the Air Force. Ted didn't, but the other two did and we all were pilots. Unconnected in our joining. Then in Overlook — then I was working in the store and I went out and was then entered in Jefferson High School in 1938. I got into bicycle racing, I was junior state champion in 1939. And I was to go back to the Nationals somewhere in the Midwest, but the funds never came up, so I didn't go. I've always been interested in cycling and still am.

So I got excused from high school early and would go to the store and work. And in high school — kept in touch, had one friend, Dick Zinger, he was from my grammar

school and we were adjoining neighborhoods. And he and I were very good friends. I was into school clubs, in those days; High Y and the Trails Club.

Then in 1941, December 7th, I had met Beverly, and on December 7th, that Sunday I was walking to Beverly's house from my house in Overlook and I heard on the radio that the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor. I was on the way to her house for a Sunday dinner around noon. I can't remember what time the announcement was first made; was it made around nine o'clock to us? I can't remember.

JS: I don't know. I thought it was...

HELMER: It was in the morning, Sunday morning. Well, of course, Hawaii. Well, that's unusual.

JS: I remember it was sunny.

HELMER: Yes. So then we had dinner.

[End of Tape 1, Side 1]

Tape 1, Side 2
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HELMER: There weren't many people in the movie house, I remember that. Then...

JS: How did it affect you?

HELMER: Well, I think as a young teenager, you know, it was too complicated to understand. I wasn't disturbed to any great degree; it was just another news event, kind of, because, I don't think we really realized what the impact was. And I think that went on at our graduation there in January 1942. It was a stormy graduation night, very stormy, ice, and the lights were out in various places, because we had a little party at our house for friends before the senior dance.

So I graduated, and then I went to work, first, at the at a sawmill in Linnton, because I've always liked trees and I used to hike in the woods, like in Eagle Creek, and walked all the way to Timberline Lodge. I was in a Boy Scout troop, Troop 92, that met at Boise School and the Beech Street Methodist Church. And so the sawmill work fascinated me, and I worked at this plant in Linnton, and then I worked at the Portland sawmill. And then I heard that fellows were making big money in housing projects, Columbia Villa for instance, so I worked there. I was a painter, not knowing how to paint really, but anybody could get paint on. And we worked from seven o'clock in the morning until dark, every day of the week. I still have my check stubs; I think on Fourth of July weekend I made like \$150, I remember, for three days, which was just kind of fantastic. The going wage was, in the shipyards, was \$50 a week and we were making more.

JS: It sounds very meaningful going to work in a saw mill. What special meaning did that have for you?

HELMER: Well, I liked the smell and I liked the hum of the saws and I liked the heavy work. I liked to work hard and I liked to lift things. I think, maybe, it could've just been in

my blood too, from my mother's background, because my mother's farm — our children have all visited my mother's farm in Sweden; spent a summer there. And we've been there three times, so even at this very moment, we have a Swedish — my cousin's daughter is visiting Portland and she is now here working before going back to Sweden. So I just loved trees and the woods.

JS: This is a real departure. Did your father like the idea of your going...

HELMER: No, I don't think he liked the idea, but he never put his foot down and said you can't do it. He never did. But I'm sure that he didn't like that. He would've rather had me in the store. Yes. So then...

JS: I'm going to need to interrupt. I forgot I have a volunteer. Can I give you about five minutes to collect your thoughts...

HELMER: Yeah, I shall do that.

[JS and HELMER converse with the unidentified volunteer]

JS: Let's go ahead with what we were talking about.

HELMER: What we were talking about. You mean start where we left off?

JS: Yes, right.

HELMER: Where did we leave off, then?

JS: Well, we were talking about you [having] worked in the sawmill and then after the sawmill you had worked at Columbia Villa house painting...

HELMER: Columbia Villa, the housing project, painting, yes. And then I entered the University of Oregon, and before I went to school, I think in September, I joined the Air Force, the Army Air Corps. And I joined it because there was a special group, a special program that you could join that gave you two years of college. And that was what we signed. We promised to join and that we would have two years in school before we had to go in. So I joined and was sworn in.

Well, that changed, and in March of 1943, all of these fellows, like myself, were called to active duty. So I left in March of 1943 from the University of Oregon and went down to Shepherd Field, where it was kind of a receiving station for basic training. And then from Shepherd Field I went to Texas Tech at Lubbock, Texas, which was another holding spot. They sent us to school because they couldn't shove us into the training program to learn to fly right away. So from Lubbock, Texas, then I went to Classification where we were classified Bombardiers, Navigators and Pilots. And I was classified a Pilot Trainee.

And then from this Classification Center — one sidelight there: my mother — I was born August 24th, 1923. My mother came down to California, and she brought a cake from home and she tried to find me at this big army base, but couldn't find me, somehow, couldn't find me. And she brought a cake. She did find one of my neighborhood playmates, Albert Rotu and he came and visited with her at the gate of the base, and she left a cake. She said, "Will you please see that John Helmer gets this cake?" Of course, I never got the cake. [Both laugh] So, that's the story.

So from Classification, went to Lubbock, Texas, and then went to Tucson, Arizona, at Ryan Air Force Base, which was a contract training field and we flew Ryan airplanes, the same company that made the plane that Lindbergh flew across the ocean in. Then went to — the second phase of flying was at Lemoore, California. And then my final training station, was La Junta, Colorado and we flew B-25s there, which was a military aircraft, and it was a stepped-up program. We flew one month — well, all two months there, before I graduated in April of 1944, I was in 44D, we flew this B-25 with no guns

and learned how to fly that. And then I went to — I was commissioned, and went to Columbia, South Carolina, which was another center where we were being dispersed to other fields. And that was called a Transition Center.

From there we went to Greenville for further training; we got our crews. I was one of seven crews that was selected to go to Muroc Air Force Base, which was next to Edwards, the secret base in California. We worked with the landings of the Marines at Camp Pendleton, from landing, going from ship to shore on the boats, and we were supporting them on their beachheads. Then we finally went over, came by train.

Well, after that training we went to San Francisco and we were at Hamilton Air Force Base in San Francisco, just waiting to go overseas. We went by train from San Francisco to Seattle, came through Portland, and I think I saw my parents as we came through Portland. We came down to the station and we boarded a Navy ship in Seattle and we went to Hawaii. And we joined a group that had just come back from combat and we were replacement crews. And that was the 41st Bomb Group, 48th Bomb Squadron.

JS: So you were — so you had reached Oahu.

HELMER: Yes. At Wheeler Field.

JS: I wonder if we could go back, because I'm kind of overwhelmed by the idea, in this short period of time, you went from the kid who was painting in Columbia Villa to a trained pilot. It would be really good to get, and helpful to get some impression of what that experience was — what you experienced personally in that extraordinary transition.

HELMER: Yes, well those were compact years, because of what was going on, and we thought we were going to have to have a lot of pilots, so they really were training more pilots than they could really use eventually. There at Santa Ana, that's where I was at Classification, we were — that was like a Boy Scout experience. We had outdoor experiences camping, and then we hiked in the orange groves and we'd go to a firing

range down on the coast through small little communities. It was well organized and the food was good and it wasn't too strenuous. [Laughs] It was kind of like being at Boy Scout camp and I really enjoyed that.

And the discipline — we didn't have hazing in the Air Force, like they have at West Point and Annapolis, so there was none of those distractions. We had lots of P.E. (physical education), P.T. (physical training) and we had lots of classroom. Airplane identification was particularly hard for me, where we flashed on the screen for a fifteenth of a second, the enemy airplane and we had to identify it and we had to identify our own airplanes. A fifteenth of a second, they'd say "Ready. Now!" You had to have your eyes open, because it was faster than a blink. If you had blinked you would have missed the picture. So that was airplane identification and that was hard. And Morse code was difficult too, I remember, but the other subjects: geography and navigation and engine theory, those were very easy to grasp, I remember.

Then the contract field in Phoenix that was run by Ryan, that was run by civilians, civilian instructors, both in the academic study that we had half a day and then flying half a day, and P.E. maybe for an hour a day. There was no homework. Amazingly we had no studies that we had to do back at the barracks. It was all done, you know, either flying — and we had one instructor with five students, so I think we must've only flown with the instructor for half an hour and the rest of the time we sat on the flight line just waiting for our turns. And this was an open cockpit. My first airplane was an open cockpit and we wore leather helmets and a white scarf and leather jackets just like Snoopy flying his airplane. So the flying experience was great. It was out in the desert, dry country.

JS: What was the experience of actually getting in a plane and taking off?

HELMER: Well the first time, that was the first time I'd ever been in a small airplane, and the first thing they do on your very first trip, they take you up and they fly you around and they make some steep turns. And they don't do any acrobatics, but it's an idea to tell

you, “How do you like this? Do you think you really want to go for this?” And it’s kind of an introduction.

Then the next time we went up, we really got into flying, you know, taking off, and you [have] dual controls, so you follow the instructor with the feels, to get the stick feel and the rudder feel, you went with him. And seven hours, you soloed. My first solo, I made a mistake. I was so happy up in the air flying and they changed the tee on the landing field. There is no radio in these airplanes. They changed the T because you are told which direction to land and we’re supposed to land in this direction, but we took off in this direction, and I missed looking at the T, I was so excited, so I landed what they call crosswind and I nearly ground looped, which means you lose control of the airplane. But I recovered from that, but I landed cross-T which is bad because there are other airplanes that could be landing into you. So I had to take what they call a checkride with the Military Pilot that was on the base and I passed it, but it was a very close call. I could’ve been washed out. But it was a very close call.

JS: Checkride? You mean they had — you took a checkride.

HELMER: Yes, after I had made a mistake and landed what they called cross T.

JS: That is the checkride. And did you have misgivings at some point?

HELMER: No, No, I was very happy to be in the Air Force. I was very proud of the organization, very proud of myself, and I really enjoyed flying, you know, because – well, I knew I didn’t want to be in the Navy, because I couldn’t swim, number one. And I think I would have liked the infantry, but that wasn’t glamorous enough for me. [JS laughs] So, the Air Force was just the right ticket. Yes.

I should, kind of, reiterate something of my personal nature. I went to a boys’ camp, we’ll say when I was 10 or 12, 11 or 12, and it was called Hillockburn, and it was a Presbyterian boys’ camp from our church. The closing ceremony was a candle

procession out in the woods at night. We had a, called a Vesper area, you know, with logs and we all sat there every night. The closing night we had candles and we had a long candlelight procession. I really can't remember what was said, but it wasn't a call to follow Christ or anything. I don't think it was. But anyhow, after that candlelight ceremony, I took my candle and went back to that same area and I got down on my knees and I gave my life to Christ as a very young person. And I remember coming back to the barracks and the fellows were kidding me, "Where have you been John? What have you been doing? Where you been?" Because they didn't know.

And the minister, was a minister from Salem, in our barracks, he knew that I might have been doing something very spiritual, so he said, "Don't let them kid you too much now." So he knew. He had an idea. So that was the point in my life where I decided that Christ was going to be a part of my life.

Then on August the 5th, 1941, at three o'clock in the afternoon, you see, that was just right before I was ready to go back to school in the fall and before Pearl Harbor. August the 5th, 1941, at three o'clock in the afternoon. I was kind of an adventurous young person, to a degree, you know, and I was going to hop a freight down below our house and go to Eastern Oregon and work. I had no place to go, and I didn't know what I was going to do, you know, but that, I guess, that didn't matter. I had my father's World War I satchel that fit on my side, and I had a blanket, and I had some food, and I sat up on a hill, and I was reading a *Reader's Digest* and I heard the train come, and I ran down. I was running across a set of tracks to run for another train, a freight train, and there was a train on the first set of tracks and no one knows what happened, because I lost my memory. But the train — I was running across the train and the train was coming from the left, but the train hit me on my right. I must've heard it, turned around and it hit me and it knocked me about 25 feet, fractured my skull, broke my pelvis, broke my hip, cut my head, cut my back and badly bruised me, but I was alive.

The engineer stopped the train and did come to the hospital to see me later. He said he couldn't leave the cab, he thought he'd run over me because there's a blind spot on those engines, you can't see the very front. And the train I was running for stopped

and that train was a neighbor across the street, a Mr. Brinkman. And so he came over and they called an ambulance and they took me to the hospital and my father came and they patched me up. I lost my memory for about two hours before the accident and three days later. I have no memory of going in an ambulance or anything. I just remember waking up in the hospital and I had to lay on a board. They couldn't set the hip; I just lay on a board, and then they took me home and I just lay on plywood. But they didn't have to set it, didn't have to operate.

So after that experience as a young person, I guess 16 or 17, I realized that maybe I needed to have real direction in my life, and that God spared me and that God is in control. That was the second big adventure, spiritually, in my life that had an impact.

And so when I was in the service I never had any fears. Never had any fears. I was the First Pilot and my bombardier, he just was frightened to death. And I think if he could've not gone up, he would have just as soon — he was very fearful, and particularly when they were shooting at us and bombs were — and flack, were bursting on each side of us, he just kind of fell apart. But I never had any fears and any concerns, and so I wanted to inject that part of my life, because that's been very important. I know today that Christ is my savior and he's in charge, and God is directing our lives, and that we have a certain part to play in his universe.

JS: Were you doing some form of running away from home?

HELMER: No! No! Now, not that at all. In fact the railroad investigator that came out to the house to investigate the accident brought pictures of bodies cut in half, limbs lost, and he talked to me and took a statement. And in the statement, he asked me, you know, were you running away from your folks, were you running away from home? And no I wasn't, although I didn't tell my folks what I was going to do. I told them I was going to hitchhike.

And hitchhiking, in those days, wasn't anything bad, you know. Hitchhiking was a common activity. And my parents, I guess, they left home when they were 17; so this

thing, my going to Eastern Oregon, or going somewhere, I just told them I was going to Eastern Oregon, because earlier I had gone up hiking and camping alone, all by myself. One of the reasons I used to go alone was that I said to myself, my parents came to a strange country, no friends, and they could've been lonely and I could've been lonely in the woods alone at night. And I always had that knowledge that my parents could do it, so I could do it. And so I've never been fearful as a youngster being in the woods alone.

JS: Well, that's very germane. Your not having fears when you were flying is a part of the story.

HELMER: So then, let's see, we joined this outfit, the 41st Bomb Group in Hawaii, a replacement crew. And we had our B-25s and we would go out on missions and also practice activities. And we had four squadrons. We, finally, were sent to Okinawa and we flew our airplanes, island hopping all the way to Okinawa. It took us five days to get there with our airplanes. And the rest of our outfit went by ship.

We were the first Army Bombers to operate from Okinawa. The Marines were already there; in fact we were on the same airbase, the Kadena Air Force on Okinawa. I got in 17 missions going to Shanghai bombing the railroad station, I remember, and going to Kyushu, the southernmost island at the end of Kagoshima Bay in the town of Kagoshima. We were bombing railroad stations and bridges. Then we hit some of the lesser islands between Kyushu and Okinawa.

Then the war ended on August 15th, and they needed all the available Air Force landing space to take troops to occupy Japan, and we were sent down to an island called Morotai in the Halmahera group south of the Philippines, just on the equator. I was there for a month. And then we came back to Okinawa. At that time, when we got back is when we had a major typhoon and it blew ships up on land, it blew all our airplanes off the airfield, and it blew Quonset huts off the foundation, and we couldn't stand up to walk, we had to crouch over. And three of us spent three nights in a Japanese cave that had an air vent that we found that went down to a cave. The Marines always bulldozed

those entrances closed, but this air vent they hadn't found, and it had a wooden ladder in it. And we spent three nights in this Japanese cave with about 20 dead Japanese that had disintegrated completely. I remember picking one fellow up by his belt and you know he was just, you know — no smells either, [they] had been — well, the campaign, you know, started on Easter, April 1st, 1945 and this would have been in September, so everything had finally, maybe, disintegrated enough; the bodies.

Then I was sent to occupation duty, because I didn't have enough points to come home, in Japan. I went to Fifth Bomber headquarters, Johnson Air Force Base, outside of Tokyo. We landed at Tachikawa and we were sent to a base, it was Johnson Air Force Base, Irumagawa, and I did have one rest leave. I was a motor maintenance officer there of heavy trucks and equipment.

JS: That was a switch.

HELMER: That was a switch, yes. They assigned us all different duties. And I did have one rest leave up at Lake Kawaguchi, on the slopes of Fuji, and skied on Fuji, and rowed on the lake, and bicycled around the lake, I remember. And then I did finally have enough points and I left by train from Irumagawa to Yokohama and boarded a ship that came to Seattle. And it was 17 days, pretty slow ship. 17 days coming home to Seattle. And then I was discharged in July of 1945 from Fort Lewis.

JS: I wonder, going back, if you can describe the experience of the first...

[End of Tape 1, Side 2]

Tape 2, Side 1
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HELMER: So, then, which I never knew, and maybe a lot of people don't know, that in the Air Force it was prescribed that we had an ounce of whiskey after every mission. We went to the Flight surgeon's tent and we lined up with our canteen cups, and they poured in an ounce of whiskey and you drank it right there; you couldn't accumulate it or take it back to your tent or anything. And so, it was — and I suppose you could refuse it, too, if you wanted to. But that was one of the things that was quite unusual. [Both laugh] Yes.

And so I can't remember the first mission, but I remember one time we were jumped by zeros and they came in high at us, and I remember that experience very well. I remember the "ak-ak" [firing], but I can't remember — well another experience that I remember is that we were taking off one morning — we always took off right at dawn, in the dark, almost dark, and one of the airplanes ahead of us in taking off, pulled his wheels up before he was off the ground and slid in at the end of the runway. Of course, the pilot and the co-pilot were court-martialed because one of the things you don't do is pull your wheels up before you are off the ground. You have to be flying. And in this case, while always flying you look over, the pilot looks over to the co-pilot and then, when you think you're off the ground, so the pilot looks out the window and you can see the wheels, that they're down, and the indicator says they're down and locked. No, in taking off you look out, you see that you are off the ground and the co-pilot then says "Wheels up," and the pilot then pulls the wheels up. Two people agree that you're off the ground. So something failed and they crashed at the end of the runway. No one was killed though.

So I can't remember — you know, I remember the life on the island. I found a well near our camp and I dug into it — or a hole, and I found a lot of Okinawan pottery and I brought home a few pieces; very simple, peasant pottery. And we walked around the island a lot and we saw the tombs. They had tombs where they buried their dead. They were kind of shaped, as we understood, like a womb of a woman, that when you die you

go back to the womb. And they had — we looked at those tombs. And they were all over the place. We didn't see much of the natives, because they had been moved, I guess, to a different part of the island. But it was a small island and just full of trucks and military equipment.

JS: What about the combat that you started to mention, where the zeros were coming in?

HELMER: Oh yes. Well they came high and I saw them in the — you only see them for seconds, because they zoom by and they only make one pass. And, of course, the Japanese are short of fuel that late in the war, so and they didn't have many airplanes left. And, of course, at the time of August 15th, when the war was over, the soldiers, the anti-aircraft soldiers and anyone who had a gun, were shooting in the air and it became so dangerous we had to wear our helmets and a lot of our airplanes were hit with falling shells that went through the metal. The celebration — so everyone was shooting guns into the air, anyone who had a gun when the war was over. That's another highlight that I remember.

JS: What were you doing in the air at that time?

HELMER: Well, we were not in the air, we were on the ground and so many people were shooting in the air that the bullets were flying all over the whole island. It was a big disaster. You know, minor disaster, I'd say.

JS: Yes. How much resistance were you encountering? Anti-aircraft and...

HELMER: Well not heavy, not like the European Theater. It was very sporadic. Yes.

JS: Did you lose friends? What was that experience like?

HELMER: Yes, in fact I did lose one friend in training. His name was Heller and we were arranged according to our alphabet, first letter of our last names, in our living units. So Heller, I think we were four fellas to a room, and Heller and Helmer, we were together. On a training mission, this was in the second phase of flying called basic training, at Lemoore, California. He didn't properly trim his trim tabs and went straight up and straight down on takeoff. And when I — I was up in the air at the time of that accident, flying, and when I came back down, some of my friends said, "My gosh, I thought it was Helmer that got it, instead of Heller." So I always remember that particular incident. And so I remember that they were running an investigation and they called the three roommates in to talk to us, to see if we thought there was any mental problems or homesickness, or was he acting strange or differently. And he wasn't before this accident.

JS: Had you been close?

HELMER: No, we hadn't been, no, not particularly. Well, it seemed like you don't develop a lot of close friends because you are changed so much; so you do — it seemed like all the people I knew in the service were friends. There was a certain comradeship, they were just kind of buddies. Everyone was your friend. But — and I think in the infantry you had close friends, because it was so challenging and so demanding of your energies that maybe you developed a very close friendship and a close buddy, to help save one another. So we didn't have that; we had — it was kind of like a fraternity. Everyone liked one another, but not — I never had a close friend, no.

JS: And what was the experience of the occupation like, in terms of what you saw of the Japanese and the situation at the end of the war? And I also want to ask about, that's another question, about the bomb. But let's — well, maybe, let's look at the bomb. What was your impression, what was seen in the news?

HELMER: Gosh, when we heard the bomb fell and the war was over, we just couldn't comprehend what this big bomb was. I mean it was just – well, I'd like to go back to a little earlier thought that I had. When we were at Muroc, and this is after we had our crews, and we were stationed next to the Edwards Air Force Secret base, we could see all the airplanes that they flew off of that base. We saw what they call a flying wing; it had no rudders, it had no tail, just one big flying wing. It wasn't even announced. One day an airplane came over and it had no engine. It was a jet, a German jet that they had captured and they were working with it there, at Edwards. No one had ever announced – no one knew we could have an airplane that didn't have any propeller. So it came over and we saw it and it was so astounding, we couldn't believe it. We didn't know that it was German, we didn't know what made it stay up or what made it go and what pulled it through the air. We had no idea. And the same way when the atomic bomb fell in Japan, the first one, and even the second one, we weren't briefed. You know, I don't think our officers in charge knew much more than we knew and I don't – except those who were really close to it.

So, I think we were all happy the war was over, and I think we all knew that we were going to land on Japan. You know, that was obvious, and particularly obvious to the troops in Europe that that was going to happen, because they were already being re-deployed to go into the final training for landing on Japan.

JS: Were you elated?

HELMER: Elated? Oh, about the end of the war?

JS: About hearing about the bomb?

HELMER: I think so, yes. I think we were all glad it was over, and then, of course, the big thought was how soon do we all go home? You know, that was number one and then

they developed the points system, which was very fair. And I enjoyed the experience of occupation very much.

This was a small town, out in the country and when we'd walk down the street, the civilians, mostly the men, I guess women too, but I remember men mostly, would brace themselves. They would put their backs to the buildings so we could pass, you know stiffly give us as much room as we wanted. You know, we were the victors, we were the winners, and you could really sense that they felt that they were the losers. That they were no longer kind of — we were “in charge” type.

I had a crew of Japanese mechanics and I had an interpreter, Mr. Kowada, and we still are friends. We haven't heard from him lately, so he's up into his 90s now. But he was my interpreter, and he was a Merchant Marine Officer and injured himself prior to World War II, so couldn't go to sea. But he had been in Astoria on one of the ships a few years earlier and he's been to our house three or four times; and he became the executive secretary of a professional restaurant group. And he's always wanted us to go to Japan to visit him, but we never have. We've had thoughts of it, but we've never gone. Our son John who went around the world for a year and a half did visit Mr. Kowada. Visited my air base where I was stationed.

Oh, and another thing that I can remember was the women. We built the runway at this air base; [it] was grass so we were building cement runways and we used very, kind of primitive methods. Women and men would carry up gravel and sand with cement on their shoulders in kind of wooden carrying devices, and dump it into a big trough, and there it would be mixed mechanically. But the women that were doing heavy work were always amazing. Doing heavy labor along with men. That was interesting to see, I can always remember that.

And I met many people in surrounding communities, merchants, one of them invited me home to a Japanese tea ceremony that was instructions for young girls in the tea ceremony. So I met three or four families and went to their home. I did some translation for a college professor. He wanted me — well he had written a paper on rice

and not to refine rice, to leave it natural, that it would be more nutritious, and he did a paper and I proof-read it for him.

And we visited Kowada's house. They had been bombed out and they went out to the country, and that's why he was out in this small town. And his son-in-law, who's a sea captain, has visited our house too.

JS: Did you encounter any hostility among the Japanese?

HELMER: No. None whatsoever.

JS: Impossible for them to show it do you think?

HELMER: I think so. And then whenever we talk about their relatives that were killed in the war, they always kind of laughed, "Ha ha, hee hee hee," laughed, which perhaps was something we don't — I never understood why they would take a tragedy and make light and fun of it. Maybe it was embarrassing or maybe it was one way to show that life goes on or — I'm not sure.

JS: Now MacArthur's Policy and the way the occupation was handled, what did you see of that?

HELMER: Well, his headquarters were heavily guarded and I think that he did a good job. A lot of soldiers didn't like MacArthur, but I was so distant that I never, kind of, had any feelings. But he certainly was admired by the Japanese people, and I think he did a wonderful job helping Japan get on its feet and become a world power like they are today. So I never really had a feeling. Except a good feeling about MacArthur.

JS: Maybe you saw what he was doing in the instructions that you had. Were there any things — any particular points of occupational policy that you were...

HELMER: No, there was no directive that came out as to how we were to act. Of course, we had the military police, so we never had a code of conduct never had anything about how we were to perform. And it seemed like the Japanese mechanics, they were acting just like they must have acted before, wherever they were working. Then in the mess hall we had Japanese young people working. The relationship that we had with the Japanese civilians was just perfect. And I don't know what happened to all the Japanese soldiers. I suppose they were completely assimilated back in civilian life, because you never saw, naturally, a Japanese uniform.

JS: What were the criticisms of MacArthur?

HELMER: Well, that he was kind of arrogant, and militarily, he wanted to do certain things. I think that one of the big things was, militarily, that he wanted to go back to the Philippines and reclaim it, and I think that some of our military leaders wanted to bypass it. You know, to get further closer to the homeland in Japan. Don't bother about retaking the Philippines.

This island, Morotai, where I was that was a good case where they landed, American forces landed on the island, took just a corner of the island and fortified it, you know, secured it and then let the Japanese be on the rest, and it was no problem. They could have taken days and activities, but they, perhaps, knew that the forces weren't very strong. And so they only took part of the island, the corner of it, and made it secure. So whether it was good or bad to take the Philippines — see, taking Guam and those stepping stone islands for the B-29s, that was very important. So the Philippines was too far a way to the homeland, I think, for the B-29s to operate from.

JS: Were you aware of the progress of the war at sea and the change in policy, and as they began to see the futility or the cost of taking one island at a time?

HELMER: No, we weren't able to see that from where we were, and we were not — we never saw any movies, now. The only place that I really kept track of what was going on was back on Oahu at Wheeler Air Force Base, because G2 would have movies of the European activities that were classified, I suppose. And we'd see dog fights and we would see the Army moving forward, and we would see what the strategies were, after they had taken place, of course. Otherwise we were never kind of — there was no bulletins. We were really, kind of, didn't know what was going on.

JS: One of the things that's happening in the war is the situation of Blacks, their participation in the war was such a major thing. Did you see something of the kind of experience Blacks were having, and relations between whites and Blacks?

HELMER: No. No. The only time that I saw — I don't think we had — well, we had no Blacks in the 41st Bomb Group, of course. And of course the Blacks in the Air Force in World War II were all in one unit. There was a fighter group in Europe, and very distinguished. There was, at Morotai, where we were after the war was over, when we evacuated the fields in Okinawa. We had to go and get our payroll money for this group of fellows that took airplanes down to Morotai, and we went to a division headquarters and it was a Black division. And we heard that it was a division that had had difficulties, that they had retreated when they were supposed to be advancing, but the gunfire got so heavy, that the whole unit was kind of discriminated against and sent to a spot where they wouldn't be very important. That was only hearsay. But otherwise, I never saw many Blacks the whole time I was in the Pacific. Even on occupation duty. That's interesting.

JS: And why weren't there any in your bomber group?

HELMER: Well, I think that Blacks were not — they were only in one fighter group.

JS: They just kept them in a separate...

HELMER: Yes, Yes. Now I don't know what would have happened if a Black wanted to join the Air Force. You know, I don't think, maybe, he could.

JS: So, I wonder if you would describe the experience of coming home, and, you know, the feelings that you had on getting back.

HELMER: Yes. Well, in getting back, my father, kind of, was wanting me to adjust, you know, from my war experiences, because I was gone about four years. So, he suggested, you know, that I go back to California and visit, or we both agreed that I'd go to California and visit. So I went down to San Francisco and visited a family, and stayed with them, that I had met when I was stationed at Hamilton Air Force Base. And then I went to Los Angeles to visit a girl that I had met. Then I came back in that summer of 1945, 1946.

Oh yes, and then I went back school, back to Oregon in the fall of 1946. Entered and went back to Oregon. I'd only gotten two terms in. So I went that school year of 1946, 1947. Now, Beverly and I were friends in high school, same high school, Jefferson, and we had met maybe my senior year. We spent a little time together of course; as I said, on December 7th, I was on the way to her house for dinner. But we didn't maintain contact with one another during the war years. We never wrote. But on the campus, Beverly was a senior, on the campus, and we ran into one another and we talked, and then we became reacquainted. I had two bicycles and I had them both down at school, a boys bicycle and a girl's, and I used to get a date and we'd go bicycle riding, go on a picnic and things like that.

And so, then we became engaged. Beverly graduated in June 1947. Then we became engaged and we were married in 1948. And I went that one year to Oregon, then I came home. After that one year, went to night school here at the extension center at Lincoln High School. I got in about three years. I think, I had three years of credit and started in at the store. And I was willing to start in.

And my father, in those years when I came back, it was obvious he wanted to be boss, and he didn't want to even, kind of, listen to my ideas. So I got very disheartened. We did start another operation at another location and I was hoping that that could be mine, but no, no, he said that this — we keep these together. And maybe that was for the best anyhow.

Anyhow, in 1952, I decided I kind of had it and I was going to go to Europe. So Beverly and I were married. Beverly quit her job school teaching; she went back to Jefferson High School and was teaching school. And so we left in 1952, and we flew to New York and then we went across the sea on the *Flandre* with Ernest Hemingway. He was one of our fellow passengers. Didn't ever talk with him. We got bicycles and we bicycled in Europe for a year and a half in 1952 and 1953.

JS: So close after the war.

HELMER: Yes, so close and we saw lots of the turmoil and damage. And we spent the winter in Morocco and we bicycled a lot in the Majorcas, and we went to Egypt, and we went to the Holy Land, and we went across Turkey and also Jordan by auto taxi, where you rent a seat in a taxi with other passengers. Went all the way to Istanbul; Ankara, Istanbul. There we took the Orient Express and went to Salzburg.

We finally ended up buying a Volkswagen Bug and brought it to Portland. It was the first one in Portland. [JS laughs] And the children would point and laugh at us, and adults would be afraid to ask us about it, you know, the ugly car, and felt sorry for us that we'd made a mistake. And we sold it 10 years later, and it was a perfect car.

JS: Well, how did you finance this whole operation?

HELMER: Well Beverly financed that year and a half with her savings. She saved her money. We spent \$5,000 in that year and a half, including the price of the car, both tickets, and everything. We stayed in Youth Hostels.

JS: Is that right? I just couldn't see your father coming up with the money at that point.

HELMER: No, no, no, no. And he was very upset. You know, I meant — I wouldn't have been able to talk to him about it so I just had to kind of spring it on him. And it was kind of difficult, I'm sure, because he must've been 69 or 70 at that time.

JS: Well, he was a father you had to really resist, it sounds like.

HELMER: Yes, yes. And we never had kind of conversations with differences of opinion, because it was always one-sided, like with our children we can have differences of opinion and still discuss them. Now with my son I'm just the opposite; his ideas are usually good. If it was a bad idea I'd tell him. But my dad never, kind of liked any of my ideas. [Both laugh] He never did think that they were any good. So I'm the other way with John. Even if it is a mediocre idea, you know, we've got to try it and find out how good it is. But most the time he makes good decisions.

JS: How about politics? We haven't — how were the politics in the family? I mean here we — actually, you went through the whole Depression period and New Deal and so forth. We better bring that into the picture.

HELMER: Yes. Well my father and mother were both registered Republicans, but they were very much for Roosevelt. I think he captured the whole country, particularly with all of the unemployment. My father always mentioned, and I never saw the parades of the unemployed marching up the street, "I want a job, I want work." He always talked about that and he always kind of said they may come back, those times. Well, they kind of have come back, but we have other support mechanisms now. And there certainly is no lack of jobs. So they were New Dealers and they thought Roosevelt was okay.

My mother had strong objections. First, she didn't like alcohol. That was a big no-no in her life. I mean she'd have liked to take an axe and wreck every saloon and beer tavern and liquor store there was. And she didn't like the telephone company. [JS laughs] And she didn't like unions. And Beverly came from a union family where her father was a steam fitter. So, she had a union background; he, of course, honored strikes.

[End of Tape 2, Side 1]

Tape 2, Side 2
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HELMER: On a troop ship that my dad went overseas on and the men were packed, you know, stuffed in the holds, and the food was rather poor, and Hoover kind of didn't say the right thing to those men. So I always remember that. Then, let's see, Roosevelt passed away, and who was our next president after Roosevelt?

JS: Truman

HELMER: Truman. Yes, I think they had no strong feeling for or against Truman. Yes.

JS: Well you didn't have too much in the way of a clear position to, say, position yourself, speaking of your father, yourself against, or with or whatever, it seems to me, like when it came to following your father's politics or resisting your father's politics, it wasn't very clear. What did you end up doing?

HELMER: Oh yes, well, I think I always was a Republican and Beverly was a Democrat, and then she changed. I'm very much for free enterprise and profit motive and capitalistic system, and so was my father. He believed that every man should, kind of, work for himself, you know, if possible. But that's not true, he felt that every man really, in his own heart, wanted to be his own boss, have a store or have a yard cutting service or rock quarry, or whatever it might be. That was his feeling and I captured that feeling very much, too. And so there was no –.

And then in later years he changed and mellowed. He went to Sweden twice and visited, and he mellowed, and, you know, Sweden was a great country too. He wasn't down on Sweden but he was pro-American you know. He was proud. He flew the flag; we always decorated the store on Fourth of July with the American Flag, and always had flags on the car. So he was a great flag waver; great American. Yes.

JS: And then you and Beverly came back from your trip. And what's next in the story of your career?

HELMER: Then I went back to the store. And my father then sold me the store and — because he wanted to get Social Security. We were not incorporated. So, then we incorporated, and then we doubled the size of the store. And my father, at that time when we doubled, he really wasn't for it; he wasn't against it but he wasn't for it. He wasn't helpful, he kind of laid back and had hands off. Of course, he was older too. So then we doubled the size of the store, and then in 1970 we started to expand and we had six stores. We were at Mall 205, Washington Square, Vancouver Mall. We had two ladies' stores and we had the original store. We had a warehouse in Lake Grove. We were kind of going with the boom times, and we were booming. We were going up.

And then 1980 came, and that's when the recession took place. High interest rates, and everything started going down the same way it went up, so we had to close the stores one by one. And I had two junior partners, that were interested, and one decided he wanted to get out, so the other partner and I bought him out. And then finally my partner, Mike Sherwood — the bank was saying you've got to close stores, you've got to close stores, you know, things are going down. And Mike's attitude was no, what we've got to do is hang in there. We've got to hang tight, hang in there. Things are going to change. So, the longer we hung in the worse it got, and finally Mike decided he'd buy me out. So he bought me out, but we spun off the downtown store and I sold it to John. And Mike then went bankrupt in his stores, which was three stores, in about 1982. So this last recession we just had, you know, the interest rates didn't get out of hand and we were able to just ride it very nicely.

JS: The last recession being early 1980s? The downturn at the end of Bush's...

HELMER: That was the bad one that was tough on us. See, we just finished one about two years ago.

JS: During the administration. Okay.

HELMER: Late 1980s. So now John is just doing an excellent job, and he doesn't want more stores, which can be a downfall. He says all we have to do is to do more business here, which is a good philosophy.

JS: Yes. That's really interesting. Mall 205, wasn't that kind of a special situation? Wasn't that a more tenuous location?

HELMER: Well, it was. Yes. Well it was built before the highway, 205, was put in, and it was the first major center after Lloyd Center. I think, though, we must've been at Eastport Plaza, maybe, but I can't remember for sure, and it was built in 1970. It didn't have good anchors and there were a lot of people there, but it never got off the ground too well. And then Vancouver Mall just was really a bad center. Washington Square was really a top center.

JS: Well, why is the difference? Well, let's see, Vancouver Mall, what do you think was the situation there?

HELMER: Well, I think it was too early; the people weren't there yet. It just was out in nowhere. Although Washington Square was out in nowhere too, but they drew people from Longview and the coast, and it got a good name. It just — and they had an idea, too, that they were going to use mostly local merchants, which they did start with, with the large anchors. And it had good large anchors. It had Nordstrom, Meier & Frank, Lipman's. It had all the so-called good stores.

JS: When you got into these malls, were you a party to planning? Were you on a board that really discussed policy?

HELMER: No. Well they had a merchant's association, but it was kind of controlled by the department stores. So, when you went into a mall you were kind of like a tenant and you were not part of the organization, and so you had your space. And the merchant's association, that was the only voice you had, and that was a pretty good voice. Although they were not the controlling body; the large department stores were the controlling body, as far as policy.

Hours — we had to keep hours that the main stores, the big stores kept. That was written in our contracts. If they were going to be open 'til two in the morning, you had to be open 'til two in the morning.

JS: Yes. It makes me think of the relationship between your special store and, say, Meier & Frank, or wherever the larger, say, clothing stores, stores that handle clothing are. How did you — what was that relationship like and what was the competition situation? How did you handle that? How did you work with these people down the mall?

HELMER: Our competition was really other small stores our same size. For instance, just downtown Portland, we had 18 men's stores our size in the 1930s and 1940s and that was tough competition, because that customer was a small store buyer and there were so many stores to buy from. And then we had what we called department store customers and they were loyal to department stores. So, the same was true in the malls.

We had many small stores out at Washington Square our size, men's stores, so Nordstrom's and the department stores weren't a big bother. In fact, they're good for us as competition, because we can do much better than they can in service and attention. As long as we don't try to compete in their ballgame, you know. That's what we do in our store now, we're different than Nordstrom's. We're not the same store; if we're the same store I don't think we could make it, if we carried the same merchandise, because we couldn't offer anything different than just service. It wouldn't be that attractive.

JS: They have a great advantage in buying? Is that...

HELMER: Yes. Buying and advertising. And, of course, what they carry in merchandise is what the masses are looking for. Like now it is hard to find a pair of trousers without pleats, but we carry pleatless trousers, so when people find out we have pleatless trousers, if that's what they want, we get their business. Same way with three-button coats, that is kind of not the "in" mass-market thing. So, we have our own niche and that's important for a small store to have. Yes.

JS: When you expanded, you must've found yourself in a different situation, in terms of managing costs? I can imagine cost control is a factor.

HELMER: Yes, oh, inventory investment and costs, and personnel, we had lots of people. I think we had 37 people. And so, it was a lot of new problems and we had S.B.A. [Small Business Administration] loans which were very helpful; bank loans guaranteed by the S.B.A. So, on the growth climb, everything was fine on the growth. And then on the decline we weren't properly handling ourselves. You know, like what we see today, the banks and all the big corporations are letting people go, early retirement, so they're controlling their costs and they are making themselves very economically sound. But what we didn't do, we didn't condense and slow the operation down to reflect the lesser sales.

JS: Were you reluctant to let people go? Is that it?

HELMER: No, well, my partner, as I mentioned, wanted to hang in there; keep the staff; sales are going to pick up, things are going to change. In those boom times we had 10,000 pairs of blue jeans, 501's, and we were selling 50, 60 pair a day. People were buying three and four, five, and eight pair of jeans for their family members. Not every store carried blue jeans. That was kind of the big new excitement, blue jeans.

JS: Well, I wonder if you could talk a bit about your family. About your...

HELMER: Yes, our own family.

JS: You have sons.

HELMER: We have three children, we have a boy, girl, boy.

So John the third is married and is the owner of the store now and I work for him. They have three children, Madeline, and they have a son and they didn't name him John the fourth, he is named John Julian Helmer, and they call him Julian. So we'll have to see if he still likes Julian when he grows up or if he likes John. Naturally, he could be a John Helmer at the John Helmer store. And they have a younger daughter, whose name is Lillian, and the children range from like 10, either and four, I think.

Then our second child, Carol, she's married to Scott Director of Director Furniture Company and they have four children. Scott Director is very active, he's a strong business man; he is very active in his business and very good around the house. Carol is a busy mother. She went to Oregon State, and graduated and worked for Jantzen, and she was a pattern maker, making patterns for Jantzen products.

Our youngest son is Eric, and he lives in Seattle and he works for Eddie Bauer. He's into computers. And they're going to have their first child in a few weeks. Maybe a few days, even. So that makes seven grandchildren, with one more coming that will be eight grandchildren.

JS: A success...

HELMER: Yes, we have a nice family.

JS: And what are Beverly's interests? What is she occupied with?

HELMER: Well, she is very much into Bible Study classes. She was a Bible Study instructor called Bible Study Fellowship; it was women only. They had 500 women in her class when she was active. Now she's not so active. Then she was a school teacher for six years. And now she is busy with grandchildren, I would say that's her main activity. She's an available babysitter and she likes to work with the grandchildren. So, she has a close relationship with the children. Then she works at the store too. She does our daily bookkeeping at the store, which takes an hour and a half a day, and that's a lot of fun for her, too.

JS: So she's taught in the Portland School System?

HELMER: Yes, she taught at Jefferson High School for six years. The same school we both went to, so it's fun. When she went back to teach, her same teachers were still there.

JS: Oh what an experience that must be. [Laughs]

HELMER: Yes, quite an experience. Yes.

JS: And what are the interests that you and Beverly share?

HELMER: Yes, well, we have a beach house at Cannon Beach and we enjoy sharing that together. Then, I'm into athletics; I'm still bicycling and running and tennis, and physical fitness is one of my strong traits. Then, one of my major activities, other than the store, is I have forest property. I have 42 acres of big trees out at Scholl's and I'm President of the Washington County Woodlands, which is a group of woodland owners, and we have a state organization too. I was out there yesterday and I've just finished delivering five log truck loads of poles, that's poles for telephone poles. Up to 90 feet

long and they're the highest premium product in the forest. And so I cut cedar, these trees are 80 to 150 years of age, and I'm cutting cedar and Doug Fir, and I do have some hardwoods too.

So, I really enjoy the woods. I stay out there overnight sometimes, and have deer and all the animals, beaver, and I just enjoy the woods a lot. Now, Beverly doesn't enjoy that as much as I do, so she's not out. We were active mountain climbers in the Mazamas, we were in the Mazamas for — I was on the board, and mountain climbing was a big thing as we grew up with our family. Mountain climbing expeditions in Canada and Wyoming, California, Washington, Idaho.

JS: So, Beverly likes climbing mountains?

HELMER: She did, yes. But now she doesn't. No. And she doesn't like camping out in the woods roughing it, which we did for so long.

JS: Oh, okay. What was the turning point?

HELMER: The turning point was an episode up at the Wallowas. We had been packed in by a mule train at a Mazama camp experience and we were going to climb. And we had to climb up, on switchbacks, a long distance on a hot day with sun exposure, and Beverly just had it. Carrying a pack, and nothing was any fun, and so she — that was the explosion point and she has never been out backpacking again. But she does love to hike and walk. So we walk in the woods, and we walk on the beach.

JS: Those are familiar things. I wanted to ask you, also, what, overall, the war experience has meant to your life.

HELMER: Yes, oh. Well, one thing I would think of is that when we learned to fly, one of the big rules was you had to keep your head on a swivel. We had to go around, come

across our instrument panel and then go around like this looking for other airplanes. That was so much ingrained in our thinking that when I cross a street I look both directions even on one-way streets. When I — at an intersection in a car I carefully look both ways, because cars are going down one way streets in the wrong direction and on the highway I look at the tires of the car that I'm passing to see if he's turning. And so, flying made me very alert to everything around me. And now, in the woods when I work I look up in the trees to see if there are any hanging branches that could fall and hit me in the head even though I wear a hardhat. So, it's made me very observant.

It's made me very motivated to have plans, to plan ahead. And I do plan in my life a year ahead, or two years ahead in what I'm going to do, you know. Not definite, but thoughts. In fact when we talk about, this was in primary, the student sits in the front seat and the pilot sits in the back and one time my head wasn't moving enough and the instructor stood up in the airplane and took his helmet off and he whacked me over the head and he said, "You keep your head on the swivel!" And I'll never forget that. [Laughs]

So what else did I learn? Well I learned a lot of mechanics, because I'm not mechanically inclined. We had engine theory and I learned practical things about a gasoline engine. I learned aerodynamics, why airplanes stay up in the air and why they can go through the air. And then the discipline of marching and keeping your living space in good order. And my father had that, too, from his World War experience, that he still rolled his socks like they did in the military, even to the day he died, and things in his dresser drawer were placed properly.

So military experience is very good for a young person and I wanted my son to try for West Point, but he had no desire. He grew up a little bit ahead of the hippie era and he didn't want anything to do with being in the service. And my father was very disappointed with the service. In the fact he said, "You know, [with] enlisted men and officers, there is too much distance." And he always complained that the officers had it so good. So, I heard a lot of that, so I knew I wanted to be an officer and I might have made a very poor enlisted man, maybe, with the attitude that I had. And I don't think I would have joined the service if there hadn't been war, of course. My father wouldn't have, and

John wouldn't join the peacetime service, so none of our children have been in the military. But I do think it's one of the great things that can happen to a young person.

JS: What rank did you attain?

HELMER: Only a Second Lieutenant, I never got my First Lieutenant degree.

JS: And the experience of the military was a maturing experience?

HELMER: Very maturing yes, yes, very maturing. Well, it's where I grew up, I would say. And John, our son, John the third, he went on this round the world trip and that's where he grew up. So young people got to grow up somewhere and maybe they can do it in a short span of time, so you don't — because there are some big changes that have to be made when you are challenging society, challenging your parents, and wanting to do everything your own way. You've got to be able to filter things out and get on the right road. And our three children have done that.

Eric, now, is in the final stages of doing that, coming up with his first child. He's been into — it took him eight years to get his degree in college, 'cause he'd go and then he wouldn't go, and then he'd go skiing, and he was a ski bum. So right now with a new child coming, and they have a new house, he's really going to be settling down.

JS: So you kind of know what's going on when you see it, or it could be pretty puzzling.

HELMER: Yes, yes. And these children that are down there in Pioneer Place that look like they have no direction, you hope that something happens in their lives that they get themselves together, school-wise, jobwise, family-wise, that they do get some purpose before they get too old.

JS: You get to see them there all the time, so you kind of know what's going on.

HELMER: Yes, yes, yes. Earrings and lip rings and rings in their skin all over, and tattoos and hair coloring. You know, they really have a message. [Laughs]

JS: Is there anything else that you...

HELMER: Well no, I don't think of anything else. I think this has been a nice occasion.

JS: It's a really very nice presentation of your history and we'll be very glad to have it in our collection. Thank you, John.

HELMER: Well thank you, Jim.

[End of Tape 2, Side 2]

[End of Interview]