NATIONAL OCEANIC AND ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION
VOICES ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH
NOAA HERITAGE AND THE NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE

AN INTERVIEW WITH HELEN WOOD
FOR THE
NOAA 50th ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY
MOLLY GRAHAM

BETHESDA, MARYLAND
OCTOBER 8, 2021

TRANSCRIPT BY
FANTASTIC TRANSCRIPTS

Molly Graham: This begins an oral history interview with Helen Wood for the NOAA 50th Oral History Project. The interview is taking place on October 8, 2021, with Helen in Bethesda, Maryland, and I'm in Scarborough, Maine. Because this is a remote interview, I'll send you a release separately, but I just want to make sure I have on record that I have your permission to record this conversation.

Helen Wood: You do.

MG: Helen, can we start at the beginning with where and when you were born?

HW: I was born in Atlanta, Georgia, in October. October 26, 1947. I have a birthday coming up in a few days. Yay. My mother was from the Atlanta area and a true Southern belle, I think an educated Southern belle; it's kind of interesting. Dad was Air Force. Somehow between tours of duty, I guess, they ended up living in the area near her parents. I was born in Atlanta. I found out along the way that one of my colleagues in the research part of the satellite service was also born in Atlanta, so we had to quickly determine which hospitals, and we were in the same hospital. It's like what? What are the odds of that? He's a Coloradoan, and I'm a Marylander, but that's it.

MG: Well, you have such an interesting family history. I'm wondering if you can trace it back as far as you are able, starting on your father's side and leading to where they settled, which was Pittsburg, Kansas.

HW: Right. Pittsburg, Kansas, is where my father was born, but his ancestors immigrated. His great grandparents immigrated on his mother's side from Ireland in the mid-1850s, separately, and met each other here, is our understanding, in the States. His father's family, the Woods, came in somewhat earlier. But in any event, they ended up, both sets, in the – no, it was the Holfords actually, before the Woods. They ended up in Topeka, Kansas, as original homesteaders. That means that they signed up and got a tract of land, staked it out, and then claimed it under the Homestead Act of that time. His Irish family, when they staked their claim, someone else had claimed it as well. They ended up flipping a gold coin, lost the flip, had to take another plot, and that ended up next to the Holfords who became married – two families intermarried, and so that kind of got that side of the family going, coming into the Wood line, which is my father's side.

MG: How did they end up in Pittsburg, Kansas?

HW: My grandfather, my father's father, was an Army medic [in] World War I. He drove a mule-driven ambulance, Second Battle of the Argonne. Then he got mustard gas, chlorine poisoning in his lungs, for which they prescribed menthol cigarettes, by the way, as a treatment to try to help with the breathing problems. So, when he came back from the war, he enrolled in college at the [University of Kansas], whichever one is in the Pittsburg area – Lawrence, Kansas —and Pittsburg is close by. While he was there and in college, married to my grandmother, the Irish woman, Dad was born. Then they ended up – I think it was too hard to stay in school and have a child, so they moved back to Topeka and stayed there ever since.

MG: Do you know any other details about your grandfather's service in World War I? The Battle of the Argonne was what helped end the war. Being a medic in the war, he must have been a target.

HW: Yes, he wasn't shot, apparently, but like I said, he had mustard gas poisoning, as we understand it. He did write his history down. He did get a medal for going under fire, going down, and pulling troops out of the trench area because that gas would settle into the trenches. In the Argonne, that's mainly what he did, until he became so disabled from breathing in those gasses that he was sent to a hospital to recover enough to go home. And that apparently was in the Dijon area of France. It was kind of fun; after going to France on a business trip, I brought back one of those maps that you get with your car rentals and went out to Kansas on one of my trips, met my granddad in the VA home where he lived, and showed him the map. He got very excited, showing me where they landed, where they fought, where he was deployed, where he went to the hospital, and then how he went home. I let him keep the map, and he put it up on his wall. It was a great moment.

MG: Did your grandfather have any lasting mental or physical impacts from that experience, being in such a deadly battle, and then the impacts of the mustard gas?

HW: Yes, I would say that probably like many of his generation, PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder] was not known, but it was a lifelong condition. He obsessed about it for his entire life. If you had an opening in a conversation that could somehow touch on war or Europe, he would start immediately with, "It was 1917" – or 16 – I don't know the year – "we landed in Le Havre," and then he would just keep going. So much so that when we had his funeral – it was around '94 – the priest started with, "It was 1916," and then the whole congregation goes, "and we landed in Le Havre." He never let it go. Never let it go. Having said that, he had a phenomenal memory, so he also applied his memory to being a letter carrier. He was a postal worker for many, many years. Memorized everybody's address, all their names, [and] could tell you for the next forty years where everybody lived in Topeka on his route, and who was in the war, and who wasn't. Right before he died, I went out to visit him. He said, "I'm dying. I'm dying of my World War I injuries. I'm a shell of a man." This guy was like 6'5", 6' 6", but he always felt that because he was so damaged with his lungs, he was a shell of a man. He said, "All of my compatriots, all of my friends from World War I, have already died." I said, "You're not a shell of a man; you're an amazing man." He just kind of grinned. But it was his spiel – "I'm a shell of a man." So he wasn't able to do the profession he wanted, which was electrician, because he couldn't breathe well enough. So yes, it marked that generation and the one to follow, I would say.

MG: Yes. Did he also have a family farm?

HW: Yes. The two adjacent homesteads were farms. Over time, the land was sold off for development or for others' farms. But until his health started really failing in his eighties, I guess, they had stayed on, I don't know, a hundred acres or something like that, and got down to the point where it was mostly just raising chickens. But yes, he had a farm. He had a farm with cows. I think his father-in-law was a dairy farmer, so we have photographs of the dairy farmer with his horse-pulled cart filled with the big jugs of milk to be delivered around town. The horse knew the way; you didn't even have to tell it.

MG: Was the family farm impacted by the Dust Bowl or the Great Depression?

HW: No, not to my knowledge. Topeka is along a river. They had flooding, and I'm sure they had drought, but I never heard any stories of the Dust Bowl era because I don't think they were in intensive farming where you ended up removing so much surface layer that you damaged the ability to withstand wind and rain.

MG: I always heard that farmers fared well during the Depression because they could grow their own food.

HW: Yes, that's right. Always, it was a huge production. What I remember was from the early 1950s, and everything was around the storage and preparation of food for the year ahead. So yes, that was a big deal. My grandfather on my mother's side was – before I get to him – a medical doctor in the South and an Army doctor in World War I as well. They got paid during the Depression in vegetables and chickens. So the fact that farmers were able to, if not prosper, get by also affected commerce.

MG: It sounds like your paternal grandmother was also of tough stock. She left school when she was twelve. Tell me a little bit about her.

HW: Yes. Her mother died when Grandmother was twelve, and she had two brothers that were younger. So, she dropped out of school – I think she was in the eighth grade – to help her dad care for them while he worked his farm. A devout Irish Catholic, so everything was there was no discussion. Everything was this is the way it is. She had to be tough like that to care for her brothers, who adored her. Even in their later years, they would always talk about Mary and how wonderful she was to them. She was their mother, basically. When she had time in her later years, she became an Avon lady to supplement the family income. Very active in her church. She was barely five feet tall. Granddad was like 6'5", so they were quite a sight.

MG: Where does the connection to Squire Boone come in?

HW: On my grandfather's side. His grandmother, Granny Smith, was a Boone, born a Boone, and he knew her. Either from her or from his father was told the stories of one encounter. I don't know if I'd mentioned this to you. Her husband had died. Daniel Boone was her uncle, I think. And marauding Indians, drunk Indians came onto the homestead, and they demanded food and drink. She made them food and set them up, but they were rather unruly, and she felt apparently kind of vulnerable. But they looked up at the mantel place and found a very large old rifle and asked, "Whose is that?" She said, "Well, that's Daniel Boone's, my uncle." They said, "Oh, we are sorry. Thank you for your hospitality," and they left. That was family lore. So yes, Daniel Boone was, according to our genealogy, my fifth-great uncle, and we're descended from his brother, Squire.

MG: Who I didn't know anything about. He sounded very interesting in his own right.

HW: Daniel Boone?

MG: Squire.

HW: Squire Boone. I didn't know that much about him except that he was the one who stayed home. When Daniel would leave and go on expeditions, Squire would take care of home, the family, Daniel's family. I guess he was the more stable one, maybe. Less adventuresome, anyhow.

MG: I'm curious. Were they aware that Daniel Boone would become this American folk hero, or is that something that comes with time?

HW: I don't know. I can't answer that question. I doubt that they knew anything more than – the family would know that he was out doing his stuff – an adventurer – and would come home from time to time. When I've read about history, usually in the West or Midwest, they talk about – this is not in my family, but they talk about folks who became well-known because of encountering newspaper reporters. So they would be featured, perhaps even glamorized, as Wild Bill Hickok or Bat Masterson or whomever. That's how you became famous in your time, but certainly, there was a lot of awareness of Daniel Boone as an explorer and one who found – I guess he got through the Cumberland Gap and this and that. I don't know much about him, personality-wise, just that he was away a lot and that his brother took care of his family.

MG: Well, tell me a little bit more about how your dad's life unfolded. I know that he was the first in his family to go to college, and then he ended up serving in two wars and the Berlin airlift.

HW: Yes. Dad was, of course, raised in Topeka. Born in Pittsburg, Kansas, but raised in Topeka. Very bright. They always called him the bright one. He was on the debate team and that sort of thing. [He] really very much wanted to get ahead and make something of himself. He did go off to start college at the same school his father did in Lawrence, Kansas. But he was having trouble with money. He couldn't quite make the tuition, and his family said they couldn't help him. So when Pearl Harbor came, he enlisted the first day or two after, when he could – I guess that would have been a Monday – and went into the Army Air Corps, which turned out to be really good because he wasn't in direct combat. They became the Air Force; they were a new service, so there was a lot of room for career growth. He was stationed in a lot of places, but at one point, he was in Panama, in the Canal Zone during World War II. That's where he met my mother, who was a US Civil Service employee there, supporting the war effort. So along the way, they got married, but after that, he ended up going to the China-Burma-India theater, which was quite well-known. I read a book by Barbara Tuchman, *Stilwell [and the American Experience in China*] – if you've ever read that as a historian, how fascinating, about many, many hundreds of years, really, in China. But the focus on the China-Burma-India war era was particularly interesting to me since Dad had been there. There were a number of plane wrecks flying over the Himalayas, what's called "over the hump," and that was quite, quite dangerous. He came home. He came home to his bride. They had only been together a few weeks before he left for a year, year and a half, and he was quite messed up. PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder], we call it. They said he had a nervous breakdown, and the implication was that it meant he wasn't a very strong person if that happened. He spent some time in the hospital. He

rallied. Then, I guess, I was born, and he got called up again. He stayed in the – he must have stayed in the active reserves, but he got called up for – not to go to Berlin, but to be active duty to support the Berlin airlift. Where was Korea? Korea was after that, I guess, huh? I was too little to remember. So he also was on active duty during the Korean War. And then, in the '50s, he was assigned to a base in Wales. He was a bit of an entrepreneur, and he was at that point a young officer working in prisoner rehabilitation – youthful offenders in the military – trying to help them rehabilitate and get back into their lives. He was sort of a motivational speaker, so that was his passion. They allowed him to bring the family over, and we lived in England, near Wales, out in the community, and he was at the RAF, Royal Air Force base there for a year and a half, until I became ill with rheumatic fever, and finally resigned his commission so he could bring us home for medical treatment for me. But then, he went back and stayed in the active reserves and retired as a Colonel; having started as a buck private, he did very well. He was also in Officers' Candidate School with Clark Gable, the actor, and so he had some stories about him. It was really quite a time, apparently.

MG: What did he tell you about Clark Gable?

HW: Just that he was a really, really friendly guy. He didn't go into any detail. Dad was more like just the facts unless he had a good story to tell. He did tell me a story, however, about Eddie Fisher. Dad was being deployed to Europe, I guess, or somewhere. This was, I believe, during World War II, and Eddie Fisher was being sent – or it may have been after the World War. But he was being sent to entertain the troops. He was on the same plane, and they had turbulence. He said Eddie Fisher started crying and moaning, "Oh no, we're going to die," and Dad is like, "What kind of a jerk is this?" He said when Elizabeth Taylor left her husband and married Eddie Fisher, he just figured, "The guy is a jerk," and he certainly commented. He couldn't understand that at all.

MG: Couldn't handle a little turbulence?

HW: Couldn't handle a little turbulence. He was a whiner.

MG: What years were you in Wales? How old were you then?

HW: I was in England in 1950 to almost '52. Would that be right? Maybe it was '51 to '52 or '51 to '53. I'm not good with years. I'm a math major, so I don't do numbers. I started kindergarten while I was there. We lived in Higher Bebington on the Wirral Peninsula, which is Western England on the Mersey River, across from Liverpool. On a clear day, you could see the Cathedral of Liverpool. I guess the Beatles were growing up then, so I always thought that was kind of cool, that I was that close to them. You didn't have a lot of clear days. You had mostly smoggy days. In fact, while we were there, it was the time – it was called The Great Smog in the early '50s. It was so bad that people couldn't walk the street because you couldn't find the pole in front of you or the sign in front of you; it was so, so bad. Bad for the lungs, too. So that's when I was there. I did start kindergarten. When I took my parents back to visit in the '90s, I found our house, and I found my school because I still remembered how I walked.

MG: What was the source of the smog?

HW: It was coal. Coal and oil burning, but mostly coal. They had to start cleaning up the air after that. It killed an untold number of people. You can still read about The Great Smog in London. My father and his commanding officer were out there in it, in fact, and got lost trying to find their hotel.

MG: It sounds like you have some memories from that time period, but you were very young.

HW: I do have memories. I remember not a lot of continuous things, but a lot of events. I remember school. I remember getting in trouble for talking because I always liked to talk. Then I remember being ill and being in bed, hurting all over with fever. I remember the hospital. I was on a ward. I was the only American, and they thought that was quite strange because we were out in the community; we weren't on a base. I remember that when I started getting well, I was sad because I had to leave my friends in the ward. I remember the neighbors and Christmases. I remember going for a walk one day, thinking I would walk to my girlfriend's, but I didn't know where she lived. Mom and Dad were leaving for a short vacation, and I hadn't come home by the time they left. Dad encouraged Mom to leave anyhow, but they were hysterical. I eventually walked home, but still. I was kind of looking for adventure. I remember the ship coming home with the family on the S.S. *Washington*; I think it was. But being on the ship. I remember they woke me up when we got to New York so that my brother and I could look out and see the Statue of Liberty.

MG: I was just going to ask about your brother. When was he born?

HW: 1950. So I guess that would tell you that if he was born in 1950, it was the middle of '51 when we went to England because I think he was a year and a half.

MG: And how long did it take for you to recover from your illness?

HW: I had a relapse when we got back to – we came back to the US. Dad has resigned his commission, not knowing that he had gotten a promotion, in fact, just at that time, but he hadn't gotten the word yet. We came back and went back to Georgia because mother's father was a physician, and he had been in touch with the American Heart Association about how to treat a child with rheumatic fever since it's a heart infection. I was better, so I was doing bed rest and all of this, and then I had a relapse and had to go in the hospital in Atlanta again. That's when they started, I guess, penicillin treatment. It was very controversial because penicillin – well, they just didn't know that much about it. But they put me on a daily dose. I was supposed to stay on it for the rest of my life, or until I had my first child. The theory was that they knew that if you took a lot of penicillin and then you went off if you tried to take it again, a lot of people developed allergic reactions. So I stayed on it for the next sixteen years. I never had a relapse of rheumatic fever after that.

MG: Any impact from all the penicillin?

HW: No, not really. It was a low dose, and the doctors thought that I was allergic to it after I went off, but it turns out I'm not. So that was great. Who knows if there was an impact, but I'm fine.

MG: When you moved to Huntsville, that's when your father started working at Redstone?

HW: Yes. So, Dad stayed in the military for a bit, and then I guess we were in Georgia. We went from Georgia to Kansas, back to Kansas so Dad could finish college. Then went to Huntsville, Alabama, in 1960. Dad got a job at Redstone Arsenal at the Army Ordnance Missile Command, and I guess it was in – he ended up in their reactor and flight test program, which was an early attempt to see about using nuclear propulsion, which, as you can imagine, was pretty controversial. Still is. He worked on the staff of Wernher von Braun. When the program was canceled in the Army, von Braun and Dad and a bunch of others moved over to NASA, to Marshall Space Flight Center, there in Huntsville.

MG: Did he ever talk to you about working with Wernher von Braun? I mean, having served in the European theater, did he have complicated feelings about von Braun's background?

HW: No. I think he admired the man's intellect and commitment to his mission and career. Dad was all on board with that. I don't know if he had any complicated feelings about Operation Paperclip and all of this, but he certainly did not talk to me about it.

MG: I also meant von Braun's alleged association with the Nazi Party.

HW: Yes, that whole thing was – in order to prosper, you had to be in the Nazi Party. But no, I don't know that he had any complicated feelings. I don't know how much anyone really knew at that time. There was this sense that – well, the Germans were in Huntsville, right? Because you had von Braun and other scientists who were brought over by the US after the war to build our space program. We were building a space program. The sense I recall was that we won and that we got this talent to help us be successful in our space endeavors. I certainly wasn't aware of anything beyond that until years later, as I became more and more aware of history. I don't know how much the older generation was aware of it. There tended to be a sense that von Braun was a good man, always just focusing on advancing rocketry. How they were used wasn't his choice. You know the Tom Lehrer songs? Do you know Tom Lehrer? Way before your time. But he was a sort of a comedian singer/musician and wrote a lot of little ditties. He had an album or two. One was about Wernher von Braun – "We shoot the rockets in the air, and where they fall, we do not care." He also had another one about Harvard, "Fight fiercely, Harvard," and a song about mathematics. So they were kind of in the category of almost limericks. That was more an awareness later in the '60s, I guess, of a broader awareness of the fact that not everyone we brought over to help us was pure in intent through the decades before.

MG: Your father had gone to work for IBM. Do I have that correct?

HW: Yes, in the mid to late '60s, the space program started slowing down. The Apollo program was going forward, but the role and program at Marshall wasn't booming. So Dad interviewed with Boeing and with IBM and some others. We had a chance to go to Seattle, but fortunately, I

think, he chose IBM in Maryland and came up here. By then, I was in college in a small town outside of Huntsville that was what's now Athens State University. They came up, and I stayed behind. But when I came up and visited, I said, "Wow, there is something beyond Northern Alabama. I really need to check this out." So yes, Dad stayed with IBM until he retired and worked on a number of programs there. He loved his career, then did some consulting and financial stuff after retirement.

MG: There seem to be a lot of connections between your father's work and experience and your career. Would you two stay in touch about the things you were doing? Would he share his work with you?

HW: Yes. Work was his passion, always trying to make things better. When I came up to visit, he's the one who first arranged for me to have a mentoring interview with a mathematician at IBM to try to help me see what options there were for me. Dad always was interested in my career, my brother's career as well, and trying to open doors wherever possible. I know that mathematician's advice to me was, "Get out of that college and get to a university so that you will have a better chance at getting into a decent grad school and having a good career," which was my goal. But yes, in the years ahead, we would always share stories. I just remember he always had so much joy about his work, but also, anytime I got a new level, I would tell him right away, and he was always ecstatic, just very encouraging.

MG: He sounded very adept with technology. I read that he had an email distribution list for his jokes.

HW: Yes. He wasn't so adept while he was working, but before he retired, IBM had noticed that – and it may not have been unique to IBM – but they had noticed that there was a higher mortality rate among recent retirees, which doesn't look good for the company, at the very least. They started a program to help prepare for retirement and develop a hobby, learn something. Dad took their computer instruction courses, so then he started buying their personal computers, learning how to do email, and then learning how to do other programs. I think that saved his life, I really do. Because in the years ahead, even when he wasn't able to get out and see people, he had a huge network of friends. In 2003, I think it was, when he had a hemorrhagic stroke, it took him a while to be able to communicate. He could never really talk. He had speech aphasia. But he could understand, and he had a lot to say. So I set him up in the nursing home with a computer, and I found some speech therapists – got a referral to a speech therapist who worked with patients with technology, got recommendations for software, talked to the software developer out in California to try to tune up the software package. This was early in the days of text to speech because Dad couldn't read at first, so jokes would be read to him by the computer. Then he could, with a few buttons, forward the jokes to his friends, who would then send back thank yous and notes that the computer would read to him. It took a lot of human intervention. It wasn't very smooth, but it just made him so happy. So IBM's retirement preparation training was certainly a benefit to my father over the years ahead.

MG: What did IBM attribute the high mortality rate to?

HW: Lack of purpose, boredom – "What do I do with myself? I'm used to being drive, drive, drive" – and I guess a lot of the executives, especially, didn't have any other dimensions to their lives because there was no time for it.

MG: Well, I want to hear about your mother now and her family history.

HW: As I said, Mother was born in Georgia. Should I talk about her parents first?

MG: Sure.

HW: Yes. So her father's family, the Buseys, B-U-S-E-Y, came to America in the 1600s, and they were merchants and settled in Maryland in1652 or something like that. I don't know. Maryland had been around, had settlements here for about twenty years. They had tobacco plantations, and you can imagine. But in time, her ancestors, over the years ahead – one branch moved to south Alabama and established themselves there and then migrated to northern Georgia. So that was the Busey side. Her mother was Italian, born in Italy – (Anunziata ?). Her mother was Anunziata Gavaturta Alladio?). I just love that. Her father was (Orazio ?) Alladio. They immigrated to the States with my grandmother in tow as a ten-month-old, apparently. He came into Ellis Island, apparently, and then went to San Francisco – big Italian population out there. That's where they stayed, except he didn't stay there. He kept traveling. He was seen back in Europe many times by his family. Mother's grandmother didn't know anything about this. This is all the stories as we reconstructed it later. He was in South America. He would come home. Great grandmother would get pregnant. He would leave again. Eventually, after one of her children, our great grandmother had a nervous breakdown and went into the hospital. Was it postpartum? Who knows? Tried to jump out a window with my great aunt Eleanor as an infant because she had just had [her]. So the children were all put in a Catholic orphanage, and great grandmother was in the hospital. He would come and go and visit the kids. She got well, and the hospital said, "We'd like to discharge her." He said, "I won't accept her." So she had to stay there and pay for her room and board by doing the laundry until she could earn enough to be able to somehow get out. What a bum. One of the cousins found a newspaper clipping, an advertisement about "Madame Alladio, clairvoyant." She could tell your future for a dollar or something like that. So grandmother, mother's mother, grew up first in the Catholic orphanage, and then she was a foster child of Mrs. Leland Stanford, whose husband had died. I guess they would bring in several children to the home – I'm thinking Daddy Warbucks and Little Orphan Annie here – to help them have a good life. Then she ended up going into the home of another family. I guess they had her be a nanny to the kids in exchange for room and board. She didn't like them. She ran away. She got into nursing school, and she became a nurse. After she graduated, she joined the Red Cross Army Auxiliary and ended up being a World War I Army nurse in Colorado, at Fort Fitzsimmons, where she met TJ Busey, granddad, who was the medical doctor in the Army. The story that she always told there was treating patients with the so-called Spanish influenza, the Spanish Flu, the pandemic of 1918. She caught it and was pushed out in the hall on a gurney to die because she was not doing well. When Granddad came looking for her – I guess they were engaged at that point – he couldn't find her. In a panic, he finally found her, got her care, and she lived, and here we are. After they left the Army and were discharged, they moved back to Georgia and set up a medical practice, first in Tyrone, South of Atlanta, where my mother was born, and then moved to Fayetteville, which is a suburb now of

Atlanta, and that's where he established a hospital. Grandmother and he ran it. Then he became the county physician for thirty years there in Fayette County. Grandmother was a matron of the – well, they were in the Masonic Order and this, that, and the other. Mom went to high school in Fayetteville and then went to college at Judson College in South Alabama, a private, Baptist, actually, women's college. After she graduated, she joined the Civil Service [Commission] in Atlanta – saw an ad that they needed staff in the Canal Zone in Panama during the war, so she and a couple of girlfriends volunteered and were sent to Panama to work at the base there until the fighting got so bad, I guess, in the Pacific, that all civilians were sent home.

MG: Do you know her motivation for service? Was it patriotism or adventure?

HW: Well, she was adventurous. She loved to travel. You could see that through her whole life. She wanted to see the world. But she also wanted to – she felt she could better support the war effort by doing this job instead of being a personnel analyst in Atlanta. So I suspect it was a bit of both. There she met the dashing young lieutenant, John Wood, who told her that he had about two years of college and that he was two years older than she was. When they married, she found out he had one year of college, and he was two years younger than she was. But later, she said, "Well, that's good though, because men don't last as long."

MG: She was also a musician and an artist.

HW: Yes. She was a musician like her mother and grandmother, both of whom played the harp and the piano. Mom played the piano. She was quite accomplished, and she became a credentialed piano instructor under the National Guild of Piano Teachers, which meant that her students had standardized achievement levels that were recognized nationally. I was a student of hers from the age of four until she moved me on to some other instructors. She also was an artist, and she was self-taught initially and then studied at various art institutes, wherever we happened to be living, and began to teach as well, and had a flourishing, I guess, career as an artist for adults in oils and acrylics, primarily landscape art. She always encouraged me to paint, and as a child, I would see her painting. I remember I was three, and I saw her paint a lighthouse, and I thought that looked so easy. I had some crayons, and I tried, and I couldn't do anything. I said, "Well, I can't do anything," so I never did try with any effort until she was blind and had dementia. I started painting, and I wanted so to share it with her. I'd say, "I'm painting now, mom," and she'd say, "Oh, that's nice." But she did well. She sold a lot of paintings. I'm still getting emails from people who find her works on eBay or something like that, and they want to know about the artist. So that's fun. She also was a realtor and did very well with that. She also was an insurance broker for a while. I mean, she just could do anything. She had a business degree. But I always saw her more as an artist than anything else, in every dimension of her life. It was design and texture. If she was really in an artistic mode, painting, our meals that she would make would be organized or arranged by texture and color, which was sometimes quite horrid, but always interesting.

MG: Her name was Helen as well.

HW: Yes.

MG: Did one of you have a nickname?

HW: Yes. So she was Helen. I'm Helen. My father was John. My brother is John. Dad named us, so there was a lack of imagination, Mother always said. I was Helen Marie, so they would call me Helen Marie. Also, it was Big Helen and Little Helen until I took her with me to Japan on a business trip, and my Japanese colleagues called her Helen the Great. That meant I was Helen the Lesser from then on. [laughter]

MG: Well, it's just very clear to me that you have inherited both sides of your parents in your work as an artist and your career with NOAA. It's really fascinating, so I'm glad we've spent so much time on family history. I wonder, actually, if this is a good time to stop for today, because we only had an hour to talk, and then we can pick up with you next time.

HW: That sounds absolutely wonderful. Thank you for letting me share. It brings back so many memories. I would just add that, for so many years, I always thought that I was more like my father because of my focus on career. I was quite driven, sixty-hour weeks at least, seldom home from the office before nine at night, and just loved it – loved it. It wasn't anyone driving me; it was me trying to make good things happen. But it wasn't until really retirement that I began to explore the art dimension and realized it's not just Dad. I could see what my mom – I could see her accomplishments. I can see how she painted and the fact that she worked at it. I could see the techniques and the beauty. I better understand her life now, so I feel very blessed.

MG: Yes. I keep thinking you were so lucky to have a creative side and a technical side and that they both work well together.

HW: Yes. Well, at times. With Dad Irish and Mom Italian, we always said if one couldn't fight you for it, the other could steal it. I forget. Well, thank you so much.

MG: I just want to thank you for your time today. I'll stop the recording, and perhaps we can take a look at our calendars.

HW: That's good.

MG: All right. Thanks for today.

----------END OF INTERVIEW----------

Reviewed by Molly Graham 1/25/2022
Reviewed by Helen Wood 2/12/2022
Reviewed by Molly Graham 3/2/2022