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Images of Ohio Centenarians: An
Exploratory Study

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August 2008

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Purpose

This research report presents findings from face-to-face qualitative interviews with 16 centenarians residing in southwest, central, and northeast Ohio. Our research focused on the following questions: How do centenarians adapt to remain in control of their physical and social environments? How do they sustain morale and motivation in the face of waning energy and declining physical abilities? How do they view the world from their vantage point? How do they interpret the past in light of the many drastic, if not revolutionary changes, they have witnessed in the course of their long lives? How do they go about making meaning of their experience? How do they tell their life stories?

Findings

- Age was not salient for the participants in our study. They acknowledged their age but confessed to not thinking much about it. They were busy living in the present.
- In telling their life stories, participants often collapsed several decades into one succinct statement which we characterize as *distillation of life story*. In trying to remember specific events of their lives, participants often used another persons' age or major historic events as references to help them locate a personal event in time and to anchor their stories. When they could not remember specific dates they decided that it really did not matter when exactly some event had occurred.
- Based on participants' narratives, we identified six coping strategies they used to deal with declines and losses: putting a positive spin on negative events; minimizing difficulties; comparing themselves to people who are worse off; making adjustments to meet environmental demands; calling on informal support; and engaging formal services.
- Participants revealed great humor. Most humorous statements were of the self-deprecating kind about their own frailty or memory lapses, often tongue-in-cheek, often about age, frequently about their old "kids," sometimes about death, and also about gender differences.
- In telling their life stories, participants revealed a great ability to adapt to a wide range of changes, both good and challenging. They tended to characterize the distant past ambivalently as both the good old days and the bad old days when life was simpler but required more skills and effort. They showed similar ambivalence in evaluating the great technological and societal changes they have witnessed.
- The participants in our project demonstrated, through their narratives, a generalized sense of control over their environment and their psychological well-being.

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INTRODUCTION

Centenarians are in the news, and the overarching message is that you too can reach and exceed the hundred year mark, especially if you live in Okinawa, Japan; Sardinia, Italy; or Loma Linda, California. If you live elsewhere and would like to reach a very old age, try to eat a low-calorie diet of the right kinds of foods, exercise, continue to be engaged with the world, and pick the right genes. Both the numbers of centenarians and accounts about them are dazzling. A search on Google yielded 843,000 results for *centenarian*, with Wikipedia laying the groundwork for further exploration, boldly claiming that in 2005, the United States had 55,000 centenarians; Japan had 30,000, and that supercentenarians — persons age 110 and beyond — are on the rise in many places. *AGELINE*, the electronic data base of gerontology-related publications, both scholarly and popular, yielded 265 results for the keyword *centenarian*. There may be no hiding place for these long-lived people, with organizations such as the International Committee on Supercentenarians (www.grg.org/Adams/Tables.htm) and the Pittsburgh-based Supercentenarian Research Foundation on the lookout for them.

Life stories give a human face to the numbers. For example, www.hcoa.org/centenarians/centenarians.htm features a different centenarian each month. Visit www.grg.org/calment.html for an overview of scientific research throughout the world that includes a photo gallery and comprehensive tables of validated supercentenarians. Popular publications like *National Geographic*, *Newsweek*, *Time*, *Money Magazine*, *Modern Maturity*, *U.S. News and World Report*, and the *AARP Bulletin* have all featured centenarians on their cover or in their lead articles, or in

both. The focus of their stories ranges from depictions of such fabulous elders, to advice on how to get there both physically and financially, to how to stay there as long as possible with both physical and financial resources intact. Most of the stories exude a mixture of awe and admiration which seems to fly in the face of the pervasive ageism in our culture. Every day we are bombarded with messages telling us that aging must be avoided at all cost; yet the centenarian stories reassure us that after a certain age it is ok to age some more. Just make sure to do it well. The magical state of extremely old age has been described as bestowing an “aura of survivorship” (Johnson & Barer, 1993). What is it about reaching one’s hundredth year that is so noteworthy? In a society where the fastest-growing segment of the population is the oldest-old, centenarians still capture our attention and hold an appeal as if they were rare and unusual cases. Do they embody our age-old dream of extending life far beyond what has been considered the human genetic potential? Over the last century, the limit of the human lifespan had to be rethought several times in light of the dramatic increases in life expectancy in the United States, from 50 years in 1900, to close to 80 years in 2008, and similar trends are taking place around the globe (Kinsella, 2005; Wilmoth & Robine, 2003). While most analysts celebrate the anticipated explosion of centenarians as a major human achievement, some sound a more cautious note (Barker, 2001). In any case, it appears that 100 is the new 80, a good and vital 80 to boot.

WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT CENTENARIANS

The Numbers

The U.S. Census Bureau recorded 37,306 centenarians in the 1990 census; by

2000, that number had grown to approximately 50,000 (He, Sengupta, Velkoff, & DeBarros, 2005). These numbers are expected to rise substantially in the next several decades. For example, in the year 2050, the projected number of U.S. centenarians is 265,000 (Krach & Velkoff, 1999). This growth is likely to fan interest in this special population, among both the general public and researchers. As more and more individuals come to know more than one such long-lived person, they will have a personal stake in becoming knowledgeable about this population. Researchers, on the other hand, who attempt to tease out genetic and lifestyle factors that help influence longevity, will be able to conduct studies with larger samples to pursue more definitive insights into the mysteries of longevity.

Salient Characteristics

Most of what we know about centenarians comes from about a dozen centenarian studies, with the best-known ones conducted in Georgia, USA (1988-2006), New England (1994-present), Okinawa, Japan, and Heidelberg, Germany. There are also ongoing studies in Sweden, Italy, and Denmark. Most of these studies focus on genetic make-up, cognitive and health status, and behavioral aspects of aging to 100 years and beyond. Taken together, the findings from these studies present evidence of the salience of certain similar life-style and attitudinal factors associated with extreme longevity across the globe. Succinctly summarized in the *Harvard Health Letter* (2002), these factors include: physical activity sustained over the life course, most often in the form of productive work into very old age; little or no weight gain from young adulthood on; a diet rich in fruit and vegetables; moderation in the consumption of alcohol; avoidance of

tobacco; sustained mental activity; a positive outlook on life; ability to cope with losses; and sociability with family and kin. Some studies have also found that many centenarians are sustained by a spiritual connectedness (Willcox, Wilcox, & Suzuki, 2001) and religiosity (Dello Buono & De Leo, 1998). Researchers in Heidelberg examined centenarians' happiness and adaptive strategies and found that their study participants retained their psychological resiliency into very advanced age, thus challenging the notion "that the self-regulatory adaptation system loses its efficiency in very advanced age" (Jopp & Rott, 2006, p. 266). Similarly, researchers in Italy found that the centenarians in their study "reported greater satisfaction with life and with social and family relations than younger respondents" (Dello Buono & De Leo, 1998).

The findings from all these endeavors have been published in scientific journals. They have also been made available, in more summary form, to the general public through venues such as *The Scientific American* (Perls, 1995) and *National Geographic* (Buettner, 2005). Longevity has also been heralded in books like *Living to 100: Lessons in Living to Your Maximum Potential at Any Age* (Perls, Silver, & Lauerman, 1999), collections of oral histories like *If I Live to be 100* (Ellis, 2002), and the much-publicized *The Blue Zones: Lessons for Living Longer From the People Who've Lived the Longest*, a *tour de force* in the anthropology and medical geography of longevity (Buettner, 2008). Other cross-cultural confirmation can be gleaned from the Okinawa Centenarian Study in *The Okinawa Program: How the World's Longest-Lived People Achieve Everlasting Health—And How You Can Too* (Willcox, Willcox, & Suzuki, 2001). The authors reveal age-defying secrets, which by now are quite well known: a low-fat diet,

exercise, stress management, strong social ties, and a spiritual dimension.

Scientific Sources of Evidence in the United States

The Georgia Centenarian Study (1988-2006), under the leadership of Leonard Poon, first focused on community-dwelling and cognitively intact centenarians said to represent about 20-30% of that age group, and later included centenarians living in institutions and those with cognitive deficits. Researchers who followed sexagenarians, octogenarians, and centenarians over a period of 18 years were able to document not only the intricate relationship among a host of genetic and environmental factors, but also differences between age cohorts (Martin, 2002; Martin & Lehr, 2001). For example, centenarians scored lower on measures of personality stability over time than did their younger counterparts. Centenarians also showed a decline in this function at an 18-month follow-up study (Martin & Poon, 2002).

The New England Centenarian Study consists of several studies, each with a different focus. The Centenarian Prevalence Study tries to find all centenarians in several towns in and around Boston and is “the only population-based study of centenarians in North America” (www.healthandage.com/html/min/new_england). It is expected to yield a more representative picture of centenarians than has been the case with most studies that rely on relatively small samples. This study has allowed researchers to document that “the older you get, the healthier you have been,” thus “challenging the notion that the older you get, the sicker you get” (Hitt, Young-Xu, Silver, & Perls, 1999, p. 652). The Population Genetics Study, the Extreme Longevity in Families Study, and the Centenarian Sibling Pairs Study are also part of the New England

Centenarian Study, and together their findings suggest that genes may be important (Terry & Perls, 2004), but they are only one part in the complex interaction between biological and environmental factors (Perls & Puca, 2000; Perls & Terry, 2003). In spite of differences among centenarians, the New England Centenarian Study researchers conclude that “relative to the general population, centenarians represent a cohort of individuals that either markedly delay or escape dementing illnesses such as AD [Alzheimer’s disease] and cerebrovascular disease” (Silver, Jilinskaia, & Perls, 2001, p. 139).

WHAT WE THINK WE KNOW – BUT CAN’T BE SURE

Just when we think we know everything about centenarians there is to know, experts like Tom Perls of the New England Centenarian Study, Leonard Poon of the Georgian Centenarian Study, and James Vaupel, demographer at the Max Planck Institute in Germany, disagree about exactly how much more there is to explore. Researchers disagree whether centenarians are primarily healthy, as proclaimed by Thomas Perls, or whether they are primarily very ill, as suggested by the Danish studies. Researchers also disagree about the quality and reliability of the data, with James Vaupel questioning the accuracy of census reports, and with Leonard Poon suggesting that we really know very little about why some people live so long, going on to say, “I think we now know that no one answer is entirely correct. Systematic centenarian research is only beginning, and we are building a data base of mostly trial-and-error attempts to bolster our knowledge” (Lauerman, 2006).

The good-news stories usually gloss over the fact that there are conflicting and

sometimes contradictory findings about centenarians. For example, researchers in the Netherlands found that 15 of their sample of 17 centenarians had dementia. This leads them to conclude “that we will all experience dementia if we live to our maximum potential” (Blansjaar & van Schaick, 2000, p. 219). This prognosis does not seem to be supported by Silver and Perls (2000) and Silver, Jilinskaia, and Perls (2001) who found that about one third of their sample of 34 centenarians had no dementia, leading them to conclude more optimistically “that it is possible to live to very old age and be cognitively intact and physically healthy” (2000, p. 71). Researchers in Okinawa report that the decline in physical functioning among centenarians did not automatically entail a decline in cognitive function, although “cognitive abilities such as expression of will and comprehension of conversation were retained... but slow” (Willcox & Suzuki, 2007, p. 252). The authors of a three-country comparison conclude that there occurs “a general increase in cognitive differentiation with increasing age” (Hagberg & Homma, 2001, p. 141).

Other studies have yielded similarly inconclusive results about health in very old age. For example, the autopsy results of one Okinawa centenarian revealed that the woman was basically healthy to the end (Bernstein & Perls, 2004). In contrast, autopsies of 40 centenarians in Vienna, Austria, showed that “none died merely of ‘old age’.” Although all died of acute organic failure, all also showed evidence of pre-existing chronic comorbidities (Berzlanovich & Fazeny-Dorner, 2005). However others found that, centenarians with operable diseases have been found to be good candidates for surgery and should not be denied operations based on their age (Warner & Gray, 1998).

...the evidence from around the world suggests that one mold does not produce all centenarians but that there is great variability in health status and in functional and cognitive abilities of those who reach age 100 and older.

Centenarians are not a homogeneous group but represent various morbidity profiles (Evert & Perls, 2003). Taken together, the evidence from around the world suggests that one mold does not produce all centenarians, but that there is great variability in health status and in functional and cognitive abilities of those who reach age 100 and older (Andersen-Ranberg & Schroll, 2001). Variability and differentiation have been shown to be related to early education (Kliegel & Rott, 2004), socioeconomic status, and social support (Samuelson & Allard, 2001). Some of the variability is probably also due to differences in sample size and in measurement instruments.

THE OHIO CENTENARIAN STUDY

Intrigued by the lore about centenarians, we set out to explore this phenomenon in Ohio, where the 2000 U.S. Census identified 1,910 persons age 100 or older, including 40 supercentenarians (www.goldenbuckeye.com/infocenter/population.html). Our research focused on the following questions: How do centenarians adapt to remain in control of their physical and social environments? How do they sustain morale and motivation in the face of waning energy and declining physical abilities? How do they view the world from their vantage point? How do they interpret the past in light of the many drastic, if not revolutionary changes, they

have witnessed in the course of their long lives? How do they go about making meaning of their experience? How do they tell their life stories?

METHODS

To answer our research questions, we conducted face-to-face qualitative interviews lasting, on average, two hours. We used an interview guide to make sure we would cover all the questions we had constructed to operationalize our research questions, starting with, "What does it feel like to have reached your age?" In the course of the interview, we also asked about the best and the most difficult things about having lived so long; how they thought about the future; and which historical events had the most profound and lasting influence on them. We asked for descriptions of a typical day; tasks participants could no longer perform; things they might have done differently; what they worried about; what advice they would give to younger people concerning old age; and whether and how they think about death. However, true to the nature of qualitative research, we asked additional questions as follow-up or to probe further any topics the participant wished to discuss. Depending on where participants took us, we used prompts and asked for elaboration and clarification to help us make sense of their life stories. We tape-recorded the interviews; had them transcribed; and used ATLAS.ti (a computer software program for analyzing narrative accounts in a systematic and comprehensive manner through line-by-line coding) to analyze their interviews. In addition to the stories, we also collected basic demographic information such as date and place of birth, educational attainment, work history, residential history, marital status, family history, extent of

support network, and their need for and use of services.

PARTICIPANT PROFILES

With the help of Ohio Area Agencies on Aging (AAAs), several long-term care facilities, and the Cleveland Library for the Blind, we recruited 16 centenarians (13 women and 3 men) for participation in our study. Participants ranged in age from 99 to 105, and lived in southwest, central, and northeast Ohio, in a variety of living arrangements: Four lived alone in their own home; two with a child; three in independent housing in a continuing care retirement community; one independently in a senior housing project; four in an assisted living facility; and two in a nursing home. Nine were born in Ohio. The majority (11) were highly functioning: Five had no impairments in activities of daily living (e.g., bathing, dressing), six reported difficulty with only one activity of daily living. Thirteen were widowed, the others were never married (1), divorced (1), or still married (1). (For a detailed profile of the participants see the table on page 13). Narrative profiles of each participant comprise the second section of this report.

Our major findings support the notion that centenarians are individuals practiced in coping, and skilled in adapting to changes occurring both within and around them.

FINDINGS

Our major findings support the notion that centenarians are individuals practiced in coping, and skilled in adapting to changes occurring both within and around them. Age was not salient for any of them, and for the majority (11), humor emerged as

one of the many coping mechanisms participants use to play down the inevitable losses of very old age. The majority (9) also relied, to varying degrees, on services they gratefully acknowledge. Their concerns about the future almost invariably focused on societal or global problems rather than their own personal ones. Participants' advice to young people also reflected their views of current problems, as well as their own regrets about missed opportunities.

Making the best of it is the best one can do, and not spending much time thinking about age are two themes that ran through the interviews.

SALIENCE OF AGE

Participants acknowledged their age but confessed to not thinking much about it. "I really can't tell you what it feels like to have lived so long. I don't think about it" was a typical answer. After such an introductory statement, participants often talked about how much they enjoy their life, or how hard their life has been, or both, as illustrated in this statement: "Well, I really can't tell you. I've had a good life. I've worked hard all my life and I've enjoyed a lot of my life. I've had troubles in my life, but passed them by." Making the best of it is the best one can do, and not spending much time thinking about age are two themes that ran through the interviews. Feeling the same as they did at earlier ages is clearly related to the participants' functional status, as reflected in these quotes. "I don't think I feel any different than I did when I was 50. I get along pretty good;" "I don't feel any different than fifty years ago;" "Well, to me it's just a process of one day after another, you know, and then you get there. I mean, you don't feel any different;" "I feel wonderful. I don't feel that I'm 100 years old. I've had little problems about walking,

but I'm doing better all the time. I make myself get up and walk." One participant seemed intent on dispelling stereotypes of very old age when she said, "You know what? Your age makes you what you are. I could sit here and be an old crab and fight with everybody that would come up to do anything for me, but I'm not going to do it." Although participants did not think much about their age, some were quite skilled at invoking what we termed the *privilege of age*, often expressed in accounts of how younger acquaintances help them with tasks or grant them special attention.

Participants voiced their theories about the reasons for their longevity very tentatively. Invariably they mentioned luck.

Participants voiced their theories about the reasons for their longevity very tentatively. Invariably they mentioned luck. Some had long-lived members in their family, but most were hard put to offer an explanation. One participant pretty much echoed others' sentiments when he stated, "I have no idea. I have no secret. There's no secret to it. I just keep on living, breathing, and staying above the grass." One participant said she "even asked God" but did not get an answer. In sum, they are very much at a loss to explain their old age.

PERCEPTION OF TIME

It seems that something curious happens on the way to 100. From their vantage point, participants often collapsed several decades into one succinct statement in a manner we coded as *distillation of life story*. They struggled to remember dates, years, even the number of years they were married, but provided detailed descriptions of what happened at a certain point in time. They often used somebody else's age as a

reference to help them locate an event in time. They also used world events such as World War I or World War II to anchor their stories. They remembered the effect an event had on them, but when asked to pinpoint the event in time, many said, "I forgot. It's been so long. I don't remember." One participant recalled with pleasure and animation how she sang in the church choir, concluding "I was in it for 12 or 20 years." When the effort of remembering specific dates became too taxing, they would often decide that it really did not matter when exactly some event occurred.

COPING STRATEGIES

Not counting humor, we identified six coping strategies our participants used to contend with declines and losses: putting a positive spin on negative events; minimizing difficulties; comparing themselves to people who are worse off; making adjustments to meet environmental demands; using informal support; and using formal services.

Some participants were masters in putting a positive spin on negative aspects of their lives. For example, glossing over her physical problems, one participant said, "the only thing I can't go and do is roller skating and just doing a lot of the things that the kids like to do." When asked whether she liked the food in her nursing home, another participant said, "oh, just like you, you don't always like everything. But I don't go hungry and I love it here." Another woman talked about how much worse it would have been if her husband had been paralyzed or if he had suffered for years, rather than dying suddenly, as he did.

Minimizing difficulties was another way of coping, as illustrated by several blind participants who tended to talk about their blindness in a subordinate clause, almost as an afterthought. This is how one participant expressed it: "I feel exceptionally good

today. Most of my disability is coming from my blindness, but other than that...so physically there is nothing wrong with me. I had ailments. I have things that I've had to live with for a long time, but actually I'm in good health right now."

Participants also made themselves feel better by comparing themselves to people who were worse off or who had incurred greater losses than they had experienced. Wherever possible, participants also either made changes to their environment, or changed their own behaviors to fit their environment in a way that allowed them to, in the main, continue their way of life. Such changes included no longer making overnight visits; delegating certain errands to trusted friends; spending most of the time in familiar environments; no longer going out because of fear of falling; and avoiding certain restaurants or other public places that are difficult to navigate. The most important such strategy, for many, was to move to a supportive environment such as a continuing care retirement community, an assisted living facility, senior housing, or a nursing home.

Formal services played an important and much appreciated role in the lives of most of our participants.

Many relied on informal support, most often from family, but, in the case of congregate living settings, also from friends and fellow residents. Formal services played an important and much appreciated role in the lives of most of our participants. These included home-delivered meals, homemaker services, personal care, transportation, rehabilitation services, and emergency response systems. For most of our blind participants, the Cleveland Library for the Blind was a much extolled blessing, several of these participants received weekly

deliveries of books on tape. Participants residing in continuing care retirement communities, assisted living, and nursing facilities invariably participated in some of the organized activities.

HUMOR

We did not expect our participants to be as funny as they revealed themselves to be. Most humorous statements were of the self-deprecating kind, often tongue-in-cheek, often about age, frequently about their old “kids,” sometimes about death, and also about gender differences. We tried to capture our participants’ humorous take on things, which helps to convey a richer sense of each respondent, by integrating their comments into the individual portraits (see the second part of this report). Most of the self-deprecating, though humorous comments, made some reference to the speaker’s frailty or shortcomings of memory, as illustrated by these following examples. When asked what kinds of activities she and her fellow residents engage in, Gladys Highland said, “Oh, I can’t tell you. I could have told you a couple of hours ago.” Goldie could not recall the name of the town where she was born and said, “All I know is I was born among a lot of snakes and frogs and crawdads.” When asked whether there were things she would like to do but cannot do any longer, Goldie replied, “Not a damn thing. I’m going to do everything I can do and undo.” For her, a typical day is “being alive.” When asked how old she was when she retired, she giggled and said, “So damn old I forgot.” Asked what it feels like to have lived so long, Goldie said, “Nothing good about it, but I want to live another 100.”

In response to comments about her sense of humor, Lucy said, “My word, if I didn’t [have a sense of humor] I’d been dead a long time ago.” About the men in the

continuing care retirement community she said, “Well, the men are kind of pitiful” (laughs). She did not extend this judgment to the young men who came to her birthday party to strip as she described in great detail, clearly amused by the events, how she had rewarded them by stuffing dollar bills into their pants after their performance. “There were a couple of women that were sort of embarrassed for me and I loved every bit of it. I thought it was more fun, and this one little fellow said, ‘I think you’re supposed to sit on my lap,’ and I said, ‘Honey, there’s no way I can sit on your lap. You’re going to have to sit on mine.’ So he sat on mine and they took our picture” (laughs).

*...he is quite amused by the fact that
“We have old folks for children now.”*

John peppered the telling of his life story with humorous comments about his and his wife’s age, “And like I say, I’ll be 101, so all together we’re 200” (laughs). Asked what it feels like to have reached his age, he said, “I can’t tell you what it feels like because I don’t feel any different than I did a week ago.” About his life story he said, “It would be too long for you. You wouldn’t be at home for your dinner” (laughs). And he is quite amused by the fact that “We have old folks for children now.”

Dan made fun of his frailty when he explained why he doesn’t travel by airplane any more. “It would be pretty difficult. If I were to be separated from a person at the airport, I could easily miss my flight” (laughs). Ethel described in a whimsical and upbeat manner how she copes with hearing impairment in a group of people, “So I just sit there and listen. Let them gab, do the gabbing. And if I’m not sitting close and can’t hear them, later on I’ll say, ‘Is there anything I missed?’” She joked about how she flirts with the doorman in her building, “And days when I don’t have anything to

do, I go downstairs to the desk and talk to this young fellow. I'll tell him I just came down to check on him, to make sure he was okay (laughs). He is a real young fellow. Lots of fun."

...death was not something they worried about, and quite a few made jokes about it.

For most of our participants, death was not something they worried about, and quite a few made jokes about it. For example, concerning death, Goldie said, "I'll think about dying when I die (laughs). That's the only time I think about dying." She conceded to leave it up to God when that would be, "Whenever he wants me to come home, if I don't go to hell" (laughs). Mrs. K.S. cited, "One of the comedians... one of the famous comedians. He said he wasn't afraid to die. He just didn't want to be there when it happens. Now that's the way I feel about it."

Whimsy and humor were clearly instrumental in helping our participants maintain morale and a perspective on life. With our participants being so close to death, it seemed their privilege to make fun of it. Even God was not immune from being looked at through a humorous lens, as illustrated by Lucy's comment when asked, toward the end of the interview, why she had not talked about God. "I don't know him" (laughs), "I have never met him." The question is theoretical for Mrs. K.S. who states that she "would be a very good Quaker if there was anything available here, but there isn't anything near here, so I'm just a poor Methodist."

INTERPRETING HISTORICAL CHANGES

Participants had a tendency to characterize the distant past as both *the good*

old days and *the bad old days*. They talked almost nostalgically about the wide range of skills that were required when things were simpler, and they are distressed by the decline in mores and morality that have accompanied technological progress. Betty summed it up when she said: "Today people live so extravagantly. They go out to eat. They don't cook at home. Young girls don't know how to cook. Years ago when I was a girl at school they had cooking lessons. They had sewing lessons. They don't know how to sew. They don't know how to do anything today and then when they get married, their marriage will fail because they want this and they want that and their husbands can't provide it. And if they earn any money they earn more than their husbands and they hold it against them. They didn't do that in my day. We were satisfied with half a loaf of bread. Today they want the whole loaf." Similarly, Beulah Harris considered most of the changes in a negative light, with the exception of better wages "which made it a little better to have a little more to live on and go on." John Jenkins stated that he wishes that today "the mothers would have more time for their children, and fathers too. But everybody works, has to work to live now. We have latchkey kids... and after school nobody is there to guide them or steer them or anything and that's where this trouble starts."

All the participants enjoy modern amenities, such as indoor plumbing, and have taken them so much for granted that they are able to romanticize the days of yore when "We didn't have a bathtub. It was just a washtub." Marie remembered, "When I was young, they used to set a tub of water out in the sun and then we'd all use the same water." John Jenkins talked eloquently about the primitive way of heating their house "by one stove in the living room and the kitchen stove where my mother cooked. And over

the stove there's a hole in the ceiling about 12 inches around where the heat went up to heat the upstairs. There was no pipe, just a hole in the ceiling." His face lit up when he described how he made things out of practically nothing: "I made radios for myself out of Mother Oats oatmeal boxes. Used to wind wire around them and make different types of radios out of them. Everybody was in on it. Then came the tubes, the tube radios." He remembers the "blimps that were built in Akron that used to fly out and back and forth." Patrie McBeth remembers seeing "the first car." All the memorable things happened so long ago that she talked about them with the same wonderment: the flu epidemic that ravaged her community; "the big black kettle outside" in which they did their laundry; the hardship of the Great Depression; the way they would store potatoes in a hole in the ground; the spring house they used as a refrigerator and as a source of the "nicest water" that made people "stop by and want to drink some of that water because it's so cold. It was really wonderful water."

Gladys Coleman thinks that "today it's a sad time to be living. I feel so sorry for the young folks today because there's so much roughness, there's so much rage, so much hatred in the world. And that doesn't make for happiness." She and other participants reflected on the amount of instant information that is now available as both a blessing and a curse. It's a blessing because it's good to be informed, but it's a curse because it has become very difficult to sort out the truth from the distortions and exaggerations. And there is simply too much of it to keep up. Dan McGrew is sad because the internet has made libraries obsolete, and Ethel Sherman regrets that there are very few young people in her church because families have moved out of the city.

Mrs. K.S. feels great ambivalence toward all the wonderful advances in

medical technology because she thinks they are being used to devalue human life. She fears that computers may have replaced humans and devalued the work of nurses. She showed sorrow about the general decline in decorum: "There isn't the dignity in travel that there used to be. And I say people act the way they're dressed and I think anyone would agree with that because they do."

Mary said that she thinks the best thing about having lived so long is that "I have seen things come and go... tremendous change, my goodness. I remember votes for women. This sister and my mother went right down Broad Street all dressed in white that summer of 1920." She witnessed her mother's efforts in the temperance movement and admitted that "prohibition didn't work." And she talked about remembering the first mall in Columbus, and recalled with great enthusiasm how in 1928 "we went out and I got to fly in an open airplane up and around the Capitol and back." She ended a long description of changes in food storage and refrigeration with the statement "And that's the way we lived. Everybody did what they could do." She proudly told how she convinced her coworkers in the school cafeteria to adopt a new gadget: "I worked with two older women and they put in a new potato peeler thing and they wouldn't touch it. They were scared of it. I took the directions home and I read and I read and I studied them and, boy, I went back the next day. There they were peeling potatoes by hand. I said, 'Let's try the peeler.' So we put the potatoes in there and it worked fine."

Taken together, these stories are a testimony to the participants' ability to adapt to a wide range of changes, both good and challenging, with narrative about the Great Depression as a kind of ultimate evidence of their coping skills. Although some of them talked nostalgically about the *bad old days*

they appeared to consider it a privilege to have witnessed and weathered tremendous societal transformations that included school consolidation, demolition of neighborhoods, the creation of an array of social services, unimaginable medical advances, dizzying means of transportation and communication, and a host of small things that make life more comfortable and agreeable compared to *the good old days*.

DISCUSSION

It is important to note that our study is based on a convenience or opportunistic sample, as is appropriate for the qualitative approach we took. As such it was never intended to be representative of anyone but the participants themselves. To explore our research questions, we needed to recruit cognitively competent participants. It so happens that for the most part our participants were also relatively unimpaired physically, with 5 of the 16 needing no help with any activities of daily living, and another 6 needing help with only one activity of daily living. With the exception of one participant, all were able to tell us a coherent version of their life story.

They inspired us through their charm and humor. They made us envious for being able to live fully in the moment. Their courage and generosity touched us, their humor warmed our hearts, and their flippancy about death awed us.

Our findings confirm that all but one of our participants have achieved the kind of adaptation that Johnson and Barer (1993) define as “the competence to sustain life in the community without undue stress or social strain” (p. 68). Like the oldest-old studied by Johnson and Barer, our participants achieved their generalized sense

of control over their environment and their psychological well-being through “discourse strategies, a narrative process that gives meanings to the losses they have experienced” (p. 68). Elements of that discourse include humor and the other coping strategies we identified. Taken together, their profile matches the images of the vigorous and life-embracing centenarians described in the popular press and flaunted as models to emulate. They inspired us through their charm and humor. They made us envious for being able to live fully in the moment. Their courage and generosity touched us, their humor warmed our hearts, and their flippancy about death awed us.

What we do not know is to what extent the many other Ohio centenarians, who did not respond to our recruitment plea, would corroborate our findings. Although we made efforts to locate centenarians across the state, we did not succeed in recruiting a larger, possibly more diverse sample. Among the 2,000 or so Ohio centenarians, how many might not be identified by service providers as cognitively competent, but who could tell us their life story? And what exactly does *cognitively competent* mean in the context of telling one’s life story? This question became particularly salient to us after one of our participants had been identified by facility staff as not competent enough to give us an interview. We enlisted her anyway and got a perfectly wonderful life story from her, full of humor and evidence of her adaptive skills. How would other, allegedly less cognitively competent centenarians tell their life stories? Would their discourse strategies be very different from, or quite similar to, the ones revealed by our participants? Surely, we could learn something from them. How could we access their experiences? Is it possible that their experiences would look different from the

ones we studied? How could we recruit for maximum variation to capture the wide range of meanings that persons of different cognitive abilities give to their experiences?

Finally, not having attempted to recruit for maximum variation, are we guilty of romanticizing centenarians as *Überelders* and by doing so, unwittingly fostering agism? Although we cannot answer these questions, we needed to raise them, particularly in light of some of the findings from the large-scale centenarian studies whose authors point to the great diversity of that population. We tapped the top end of that diverse population, *la crème de la crème* of long-lived people, who inspire and edify, and we appreciate them as such. We do hope that our findings might apply, albeit tentatively, to other equally cognitively competent centenarians, and in this manner contribute to the cumulative knowledge about the growing phenomenon of long-lived people who make an exemplary job of it.

Images of Ohio Centenarians: An Exploratory Study

Ohio Centenarian Study, Scripps Gerontology Center

Name	Age	Place of Birth	Marital Status	Living Arrangement	# of Years in Living Arrangement	Education	Retirement Age	Last Job	# of Children	ADL	IADL	Self-Reported Health Problems
Berger, Betty	102	Italy	W	alone	4	6th grade + secretarial school	65	odd jobs	1	0	1	none
Champion, Hallie	103	GA	W	w/ daughter	2	4th grade	67	housekeeper	12 (4 deceased)	4	all	heart disease; bowel disorder
Coleman, Gladys	101	OH	W	CCRC ind	4	HS	NA	housewife	1	1	3	diabetes; osteoarthritis in hands
Eubank, Lucy	100	IN	W	CCRC ind	6	HS	NA	housewife	3	0	1	uses walker
Faulhaber, Tom	103	OH	W	ALF	4	college	70	own business	2	2	3	mobility impaired
Harris, Beuhla	100	OH	D	SH ind	4	12th grade	71	janitor	1 fictive	1	3	heart-pacemaker
Highland, Gladys	99	OH	W	NH	2	8th grade	65	mill worker	1	0	all	none
Jenkins, John	100	OH	M	ALF	4	some college	65	engineer	3	2	all	Diabetes; macular degeneration
McBeth, Patrie	101	KY	W	alone	58	8th grade	NA	housewife, seamstress	6 (1 deceased)	0	3	arthritis; heart disease
McGrew, Dan	101	OH	W	ALF	2	MA	66	dairy scientist	2	2	all	digestive problems
Morris, Mary	100	OH	W	CCRC ind	14	normal school	62	teacher	2	0	0	none
Price, Marie	105	OH	NM	NH	6	teacher training	63	teacher	0	1	all	none
S., K.	101	OH	W	alone	50	nursing school	51	nurse	0	2	all	blind
Sherman, Ethel	100	PA	W	alone	11	10th grade	75	drycleaner	0**	1	1	blind
Whitehouse, Helen	100	PA	W	w/ child	14	9th grade	NA	housewife	6 (1 deceased)	1	all	none
Wilcox, Goldie	100	WV	W	ALF	2	8th grade	42 (disability)	factory worker	2 (1 deceased)	1	all	(dementia)*

W = Widowed; D = Divorced; M = Married; NM = Never

Married

* as reported by administrator

** raised brother's 4 children, 2 now deceased

ALF = Assisted Living Facility

CCRC ind = CCRC independent living

SH ind = Senior Housing independent

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CENTENARIAN PROFILES



Betty Berger: “I dream about so many things and I’ve been reliving my life all over again in my dreams and they are pleasant dreams.”

Hard work and a wonderful marriage are the major themes running through Betty’s life story. At age 4, she started to work in her father’s grocery store, and at age 102 she is still busy producing small embroidered crosses for her church. She attributes her longevity to the fact that she has helped people all her life and considers that God is rewarding her for her good deeds. She was a baby when her family came from Italy, settled in Cincinnati, worked very hard, and ended up having their name—LaRosa—known all over town and beyond. “It makes me proud,” she says, “when I go out and I see our name in big print all over Cincinnati.” All her life she was a doer and shaker and made things happen. She worked in a number of jobs, often more than one at a time. She learned to make artificial flowers that she sold. She learned to bake and to sew and she put all her skills to work to help feed her family.

She and her husband were truly partners, and as she tells her life story he emerges as the one person who never disappointed her. They were a team. They pooled their resources. They worked together and saved together and stuck together to realize their dreams, first to get married in 1926, then to build a house, then to help their son overcome a physical handicap, and in between and throughout their long marriage, to make a living. The challenges started from the moment they met: his family was German Protestant of noble birth, hers was Italian Catholic of working-class background, and both families were against the marriage. She made her wedding dress and they eloped to Lawrenceburg, Indiana, to get married by a Protestant minister. Her feeling of closeness to her husband has transcended his death. She says, “You know, lots of times my doorbell rings and I go to the door and there’s nobody there. Sometimes it looks like the spirit of my husband is coming in. He’s with me all the time. I feel him with me all the time.”

At the same time she lives very much in this world where she continues to be a doer and shaker. One of her activist accomplishments is the installation of a pedestrian crossing light on Colerain Avenue where many old people cross the street to go to Kroger's. She too felt very unsafe crossing that street during the day when traffic was heavy. To minimize the danger, she used to do her grocery shopping at 3:00 a.m. when she could safely cross the highway. When her neighbors pointed out that she was taking other risks by going on these nocturnal shopping trips, she called "the people at the Community Press to tell them we needed a pedestrian light there at that corner." Betty got someone from the engineering department of the state to investigate the situation, and shortly after that, a pedestrian crossing light was installed.

Betty starts her day by doing leg lifts and kicks, and arm stretches in bed before getting up. "I do kicking and bending knees and stretch them to the side and then take my arms up and down and above my head and across, then I turn my neck back and forth for twenty times, and I do all the exercises for ten counts. And then when I sit in my chair I do the bending exercises for my back." This is probably the reason why Betty has her walker "for decoration only," as she explains. In addition to her isometrics she also takes walks around her house. She does not go out any more because she is afraid that outside she might get run over. Nor does she go to church any more because she is afraid that in a crowd people might bump into her and make her fall. Instead, she watches and listens to the "wonderful sermons" of the televised Catholic services. Her other favorite television shows are *The Young and the Restless* and *The Bold and the Beautiful*, and she also likes to watch old movies. She is appalled by some of the things she sees on television and generally deplores the moral turpitude of young people today. She attributes these changed mores to the fact that so many women now work outside of the home and sees no contradiction between her statement and the fact that she worked all her life and made more money than did her husband, simply because she worked multiple jobs at the time.

Looking back over her life, Betty says she would not do anything differently. She is satisfied with her life then and now. She is still engaged in many activities with friends, including the Red Hat Society, and has no trouble finding people to drive her to her medical and other appointments. Her chore worker who comes three times a week to help her bathe and clean the apartment, and the man who delivers the Meals on Wheels are a few of the many contacts Betty has throughout the week. When she was diagnosed with gall bladder disease at age 100 and doctors advised against surgery because of her age, she took a chance and insisted on the surgery, claiming that if God wants her, he'll take her. He did not take her that time, and in the meantime she has had a few more birthdays. She tells the story of when she had a heart attack earlier and claims she died. She saw God. "It was beautiful," she says. But she is glad she came back because she has more work to do. "That's the way I feel... that God has me here for a purpose." Seeing her going about her business energetically and with resolve, how could one possibly argue against that?



Beuhla Harris.: “You learn to live with yourself.
You learn what you can and what you can’t do.”

Beuhla Harris went through quite a lot of trouble to help desegregate restaurants in Cincinnati. She and several of her friends were unrelenting. “As soon as we’d sit there, they’d close that table down and then if we found a place at another one, we’d move to that one and they’d close that one down. Then you watch for another place where you could find a seat and you sit at that one. As soon as you could sit down, they’d close that one too. We just gradually wore them down. We had marches. Just wore them down until they let us eat at their table.” She is proud of her legacy but a bit dismayed that the young people who benefited from these actions really don’t want to hear about that dark period in American history.

Born in Ripley, Ohio, she lost her father when she was two and her mother when she was 15 years old. She went to live with an uncle in South Charleston, Ohio, “for a year and then they thought I was grown up enough to be on my own.” She went to Cincinnati where she worked in people’s houses for \$1.50 a day. The work was hard and her employers were demanding and at that time one did not refuse to perform any task. “Whatever there was to do, you scrubbed, you washed, you ironed, whatever there was to do, you did it in those eight hours. You had no choice. And you washed windows, too.” She admits to being mad “most of the time” but she had to keep her anger bottled up and not show it. “You just come on home and go on to bed or whatever you can do and forget about it and go out the next day and try to find something else to do.” She had one sibling, a brother, who died of alcohol abuse in 1950, leaving her practically without any family.

What helped her get through all the hardships was her faith. "I had God on my side," she explains. Her mother had taught her "from the time I was two years old that there was a God, that that was who I should look to for my health and my strength." She never had any doubts that her mother was right. "When life was hard and people were mean, I just knew that there would be a better day and it did come." Things got better as she got older and wages got better and she could afford a place of her own when she was about 45 years old and had been married twice.

She talks nostalgically about her first husband, 17 years her senior, whom she married in 1935. "I had a very good husband until he died nine years later of a heart attack." He tried to make a living working for himself as a car mechanic but could barely get by because his customers, who were as poor as they were, often couldn't pay him even for the spare parts he bought. She loved him "because he taught me how to live and how to get along on the little bit we had." She remarried in 1955 but separated from her second husband in 1964. She worked until age 71 at the First National Bank cleaning offices. She would have liked to work longer but the management wanted young people, and she felt that there was no point in looking for another job at her age.

For the last four years Beuhla has been living in a senior housing complex where she receives in-home services three times a week, "Monday, Tuesday, and Saturday to help me and do things." She has no children but talks lovingly about her foster child, Joyce, a middle-aged woman who was present during the interview. Together they tell the story of their bonding. It started when one Sunday when Joyce was six months old, her father dropped her and a diaper bag off at Beuhla's. From then on, Beuhla took care of Joyce every Sunday for years. Both women argue about who has been more blessed in this arrangement, with each one claiming the greater blessing.

In spite of her strong faith, Beuhla is afraid of death. She is not worried about her soul. "I'm scared of death like everybody else because you don't know when it's coming and what it's going to be like." The best way, she thinks, would be to "go to sleep and not wake up." In the meantime she talks to God every day. She reads the Bible every morning. "After my breakfast I get the Bible and read the lessons and then I'm ready for the day and I feel its strength. It gives me strength to do the things that I need to do, and I'm willing and ready to help anybody do anything that I can help them do."

On a typical day she gets up and performs her morning rituals of washing and dressing herself. After preparing and eating her breakfast, she sits in her living room reading her "lessons" and combing her hair and getting ready for the day. Sometimes she watches television, but mostly she reads the paper or a book, or "fools around with puzzles." Lunch is delivered by Meals-on-Wheels, and in the afternoon and evening she watches television. At 3:00 p.m. she goes downstairs "to talk to the other ladies" until maybe 6:00 or 7:00 when she goes back upstairs and gets ready for bed. She can perform all her activities of daily living but at the time of the interview she was a bit hampered in her activities. She had just been fitted with a pacemaker, and to remind her not to lift her arm abruptly, she had to keep it in a sling. She considered this a temporary nuisance and was looking forward to being released from the sling sometime soon. When asked what it feels like to have lived so long, she says that she doesn't feel any different than she did at age 50. "I get along pretty good."



Dan McGrew: “I think I’d like to learn to ski.
Of course, that might shorten my life.”

Dan McGrew is a seriously funny man. His great tongue-in-cheek sense of humor contrasts with his almost melancholy regrets about not having achieved all his professional aspirations. His work was and still is a defining aspect of his persona. “My field was in the Department of Dairy Science, which some delighted in defining as the Udder Society, rather than the manufacturing of dairy products,” he explains jokingly. He retired in 1971 from The Ohio State University and still regrets not having obtained a doctorate. After receiving his undergraduate degree from Ohio State he earned a master’s degree from Cornell. At the time, a master’s degree was perfectly sufficient for the career he had chosen, but he wishes he had taken the next step, although he camouflages his regret with humor and irony: “I did do a lot of short course work on the job while I was still working and I probably had enough credits to get a Ph.D., so I suppose that the smart thing to have done would be to get the doctorate, although I’ve known a lot of Ph.D.s that I wouldn’t necessarily want to emulate.” He continues: “Some of them can get pretty boring. Kind of stuffy.” He doesn’t think that getting a Ph.D. would have changed his career, but he thinks that, based on his experience in the academy, he would have “gained satisfaction from academic work.” When asked about a happy event in his life he mentions what was clearly a high professional honor. Every year he attended the annual meeting of the American Dairy Science Association, and one year, “almost by surprise, I was awarded I guess the top award for the organization. They elected one person a year. So I guess that would be one of the happier events. Of course, there was a fair cash award along with it,” he chuckled.

He has a self-deprecating manner of speaking about all of his past accomplishments. He explained that he played quite a bit of golf but “never got very proficient. I think if I had to do it over again I’d take lessons and learn how to play better golf.” He made it onto the high school baseball team before he even went to high school. Since he is unable to brag about his athletic

prowess, he quotes his daughter: "My daughter thought it was quite an achievement that I played on a high school team, a pretty good team, when I was in the 8th grade." Not to brag, he quickly adds that he thinks he got on the team because he was so skinny and therefore hard to pitch to.

Dan's cautiously offered advice to young people is to do things but not to overdo them. He recommends "moderation and activity in regard to alcohol or any particularly stressful type of athletics or occupation." For instance, "I would enjoy and have enjoyed wine. My last doctor just said I should abstain from alcohol. One of my dinner companions who is pretty alert in regard to diet and medication insists that a small amount of red wine would be beneficial. I don't know whether it's beneficial or not. I do indulge slightly, very slightly, and infrequently, but not a large amount." He is not supposed to eat sweets because of his "near diabetic condition" but bends the rule by "trying to avoid desserts until evening. I may kind of baby myself with a bit of ice cream or something like that. Last night I had something they called a cream puff. Well, I thought I had a pretty clear concept of a cream puff and it was a little different from any I had ever experienced. It was quite good. Not very large." It seems that embedded in his statements is also the advice not to accept professional recommendations invariably and unquestioningly.

A master of understatement, Dan takes on a very different demeanor when he talks about a defining event that happened 91 years earlier, "in June or July 1915" and is as vividly branded in his visual and emotional memory as if it had happened recently. "When I was ten years old, my eight-year old sister was killed by an automobile within a few feet of where I was sitting, and I was the closest spectator and that has never quite left me." She had stepped into the street between two cars parked in front of their house. "Well, it's just something that never quite leaves you. I remember taking a course in memory. I'm not sure of all of the items the professor offered as essential to memory but one of them was proximity and recency and the third was vividness." Time has not at all affected his vivid memory of the event.

His own moderate and measured activities include attending "occasional departmental affairs of emeriti" and occasional outings to the symphony. He likes to read and recently discovered, to his delight, the adventure novels by Zane Grey whom he called "a pretty good writer." The day of the interview he was reading *Wildfire*, "a rather fascinating story." Because he is hard of hearing, he doesn't participate much in communal activities at the continuing care retirement community, where he resides in an assisted living unit. He has "a slight chronic cough which interferes with conversation." Although his legs are fine, he says he doesn't "run any races." He uses a walker for stability and follows his daughter's advice not to let it ever get more than two arms' length away from him. In addition to moderation and activity, he attributed his long healthy life to having had a risk-free occupation. "I think the educational field itself has some protection against undue hazards."

In contrast, political life is full of undue hazards. Dan is pessimistic about the future because, he says, "It just seems that the electorate can't find the right person." He doesn't think that "the electorate" has gotten more stupid or uninformed but that there is so much confusing and conflicting information available that it is hard to sort out the facts. He doesn't worry but is concerned about the "welfare of the nation and the leadership," which he thinks "could be improved."



Ethel Sherman: “It’s funny how your friends change from old to young. My friends are all young now.”

A visitor who has never met Ethel but knows she is blind is convinced to be in the wrong place when a bouncy, cheerful, agile woman saunters toward the door to greet the visitor. She laughs a lot and has no theory about why she has lived so long. She simply admits to enjoying her age. Her father died at age 90 which seems young to her now. She was the middle one of seven kids but is the only one surviving. Ethel has macular degeneration, which started 30 years ago. She downplays the hardships caused by this condition, partly because she has some peripheral vision, she says, but clearly also because her optimistic and cheerful nature makes her focus on all the good things in her life. And there are many. One benefit of the aura of very old age is that people at church and other places fuss over her. Although she considers herself “very independent” she notices “now, at church at the coffee hour, when I go to get my coffee they’ll pour it, and instead of handing it to me, they’ll say, ‘I’ll take it to the table.’ I can do it, but they do it automatically to help. And they know I can’t see what goodies they have on the table. They’ll go and get a plate and fill it for me. And they just automatically take care of me.” She does regret not being able to put on make-up anymore because she really can’t see well enough to do a good job.

She was married, without children, but became an instant mother to her brother’s four kids age 14, 12, 10, and 6 when their mother left. Taking them in was the obvious thing to do: “In fact, when their mother left them, she asked –they were living in California – and she said, ‘do you want to come away with me or go to your Aunt Ethel’s?’ They all yelled ‘Aunt Ethel.’ And that was that.” Ethel loved her family and was grateful to her husband for going along with this project.

She is happiest when she is doing something and she keeps busy every day. She works a lot at her church where she has been a member since age 25. She and other women at the church sew for the university hospital. They make lap robes for people in wheelchairs and “working dolls” for children. The dolls are about a foot tall, made of soft fabric and used by medical staff to show children what exactly is going to happen to their bodies by way of surgery or the progression of disease. She starts her day around 7; makes her own breakfast; eats nothing for lunch (“I’m not hungry”), and for dinner she goes out a lot with friends and people from church, or eats a simple supper by herself. But for her vision problems, she could also do the dusting and vacuuming that somebody does for her now. Until recently she got her exercise by walking up and down the 14 flights of stairs in her apartment building but quit doing it because she was afraid that if she fell nobody would find her. It is hard to imagine Ethel being ‘un-found’ for long for she has lots of people in her circle with whom she engages in almost daily outings. She has no trouble finding people to drive her to places she needs to go and plenty of younger friends who want to take her along to events. Once a month she goes out to eat with other members of the Red Hat Society. When she doesn’t go out she “reads” books on tape, which she finds more interesting than TV, plays solitaire with large-print cards, or goes downstairs to chat with the doorman and other staff.

She and her husband built a house early in their marriage and lived in it for 40 years. When the County claimed the property to extend the airport, they sold it without too many regrets. But it pained her to see the destruction of the house. “The hardest thing was when they took a bulldozer and bulldozed it down to the ground, into the basement.” They received enough money to buy another house. After her husband’s death at age 90 of Alzheimer’s disease, she found their 4-bedroom house awfully big and she started to think about moving to an apartment. When she told one of her nieces, whom she had raised, the niece offered Ethel the use of her condo, which was unused most of the time because the niece lived in Florida. For the last 11 years Ethel has lived by herself in this beautiful, spacious condominium on the 14th floor of a gated property with a sweeping view of Lake Erie. She loves the place. Until her niece’s death, Ethel lived there completely free of charge. Ethel’s niece left the condo to her daughter, who in turn invited Ethel to continue to live there, although now she pays the utilities and the management fee. “What comes around goes around even if it takes 50 years. I just took the kids and we didn’t even think about charging my brother anything.”

Two of the children she raised are still alive. One of the “girls” had a stroke and is, in effect, housebound; “the boy lives in Ashtabula and he keeps in touch. We call each other every night and talk, but he’s got a bad back and he can’t do anything.” In the meantime, she socializes with younger people and she reminisces about how when she was young she would look after and help older women in her church. Later when her husband was in the nursing home, she’d help out there, and continued to do so after his death. When asked whether, as she looked back over her life, she would do anything differently, she said, “I think that I would try to do more for people.” How to achieve a good old age and lead a good life? Ethel thinks the magic ingredient is helping other people.



Gladys Coleman: “I mean, you don’t feel any different, only that your body does. It won’t work.”

Gladys Coleman describes growing as old as she has as “just a process one day after another, you know, and then you get there.” She comes from a long-living family: her grandmother lived well into her 90s, and her mother lived to be 108. Gladys had a good model for caregiving. Her mother took care of her son, Gladys’s brother, for 65 years. Her brother was severely physically handicapped; taking care of him was her mother’s life work until she herself needed help. Both moved in with Gladys where she cared for her brother for 4 and her mother for 17 years. Gladys now lives in an independent living apartment of a continuing retirement community that she describes as “a beautiful place” and where she enjoys both the amenities and her ability to live by herself. It was a difficult decision for her to give up her home around which so many of her memories revolve. She talks about it nostalgically: how her father and her husband had fixed it up and kept it up over the years; how she would always find ways of improving it, from painting to getting new curtains, to making sure that everything worked. She expressed regrets that maybe she spent too much time and effort on her household and not enough on her only child, a son. After giving up her house, she went back several times to look at it. She knew that the house needed work. It needed new carpeting. One day when she went by the house she saw that the old carpet was discarded, “so I knew they were putting in new carpeting, which made me happy. And they had a little baby and that was nice.” She finally could let it go but she wished that “the next person would have as much happiness as I had had then.”

Gladys had to deal with many physical ailments much of her life. She counts “21 serious operations,” including two hip replacement surgeries, and was told twice by her doctor that she would not “make it.” She has had cancer “a couple of times.” She has painful arthritis and diabetes, and she suffered several bad falls that resulted in broken ribs and a head injury. Her

well-groomed and altogether gracious appearance belies all these physical ailments. Her faith has helped in the past and is helping her now to get through all the pain and suffering. Participating in Bible study and in a prayer chain have been effective coping activities for her. These activities have helped her accept the challenges all her life. She lives by the motto, "Just do the best you can," an admonition she offered numerous times in the course of the interview. She describes herself as "a person that's kind of content. You just make up your mind that you can't do the things that you used to do and then that's the way it is." Her eyes are good but her hands are bad. The things she can't do anymore because of her arthritic hands include cooking for friends and family, and doing handiwork like sewing. But she doesn't "sit around and cry about it. And I have a deep faith" which also helps her overcome her occasional feelings of loneliness. She worries about her 71 year old son's health problem more than she does about her own. She marvels at the miracles of modern medicine and all the assistive devices that are available now. She uses a walker for support and a "picker upper," an extended mechanical gripper for picking up the things she drops, and has nothing but praise for the results of her physical therapy.

The worst thing of her life and the event that marked her most and continues to aggrieve her was her husband's sudden death from a heart attack 37 years earlier when he was 64 years old. It took her years to get back to normal but she never stopped grieving for him and missing his person and his touch and his goodness to her. He was the love of her life and they "were very, very, very close." The best thing of her life was her marriage. "And with all the illnesses I had, he was never cross and when I said to him one time I was sorry that I was so expensive, he said he was just glad he had the money to pay for with." A good marriage and loving parents were responsible for her most wonderful times of her life. She speaks with great empathy of her mother's care for Gladys's brother, her only sibling, and how her mother would cry when other children her son's age would go to school but he never could.

In the course of her long life, and with the help of her faith, Gladys has learned not to worry about herself anymore. She does worry about possibly becoming a burden to her son and daughter-in-law, and she hopes she will die before that happens. In the meantime she enjoys her days that she fills with all sorts of activities. She chuckles about her habit of watching cooking shows on television now that she can't cook any more, and she admits to also liking to watch *American Idol* and *Animal Planet*. The continuing care retirement community offers lots of social activities without obliging residents to participate. She sometimes goes to tea hour and eats dinner in the dining room most evenings. At Christmas time, residents all work together to decorate a tree in the lobby. The facility uses a long connecting corridor between two buildings for residents to display pictures and other artifacts on a rotating basis. This makes for an interesting place to meet others and to admire their artwork and their prized possessions. She prides herself in being able to do all her activities of daily living. Every other week, someone comes in to clean the apartment and change her bed sheets, but other than that, Gladys keeps her apartment as impeccable as she did her own house. Her advice to others is in keeping with her own lived example: "just keep on doing the best that you can do and do what you can for others and have faith in God. I think that's very important."



Gladys Highland: “If there’s anything going on on the first floor, I’m down there too.”

When asked what it feels like to have lived so long, Gladys Highland isn’t sure. “Well, I really can’t tell you. I’ve had a good life. I’ve worked hard all my life and I’ve enjoyed a lot of my life. I’ve had troubles in my life, but passed them by...I’ve had some years in my life that I’d like to just wipe out.” Although she would never use the word “resilience,” she exemplifies that very quality. She was 16 years old when she married. “I married young and had a daughter and we moved to Lima. A country girl in the city. I didn’t know what to do, but we had a rough five years. My husband decided to railroad and he’d work two or three weeks and maybe be off a month. So our first three years were pretty rugged.” She tries to remember when exactly her husband died. “Oh, let’s see. That’s taking me back a good many years. I haven’t thought of these years for so long.” She does remember that she was 20 years old when she became a widow. She and her daughter moved back to her parents’ farm. When her daughter was six years old, Gladys remarried another railroader. Her father tried to make a farmer out of her husband by offering him a job on one of his two farms, “a nice house and everything. Offered him a chance on the farm and I was hoping he wouldn’t take it because he was a railroader, and you can’t take a man out of the city and put him in the country and have him satisfied.”

She had been her “daddy’s tomboy” who went with him everywhere “from the time I was three years old, every place my dad went I went. I went with him every place he went that he could take a kid. I went to the field with him, rode the horses for him to plow... I loved my dad.” She must have been torn between wanting to stay on the farm and wanting her husband to be happy. Eventually her husband did accept his father-in-law’s offer “and did the chores and did the work but was unhappy. He wanted to be back railroading. So he went back and got a job back on the railroad and I stayed at home.” After five years of separation they divorced.

Gladys tells the story of her failed marriage with flat affect, but her face lights up and she exudes joy when she talks about her third husband. When she talks about him she has no trouble remembering dates. “We were married from November 1941 to 1995 and we were very, very happy.” He was her childhood friend whom she wanted to marry when they were young. Her family had opposed the marriage, and she insists to this day that they were wrong about him. He had never married before Gladys, after her divorce “we got back together and got married and finished our life out together.” She and her husband worked in the same textile mill; they did everything together; they cherished each other; and she still misses him. “We were happy until he passed away and I was broken hearted.”

As she tells her life story, the reunion with her long-lost love clearly emerges as the defining turning point of her whole long life, a kind of watershed between the bad and the good years. Recently she experienced another, less happy, turning point that makes her distinguish between her life before and after the event. She took “a hard fall” and doesn’t quite know how it happened. “I just walked through the door and I just went right down on my face. Nothing wrong that I know of, but I just fell. They gathered me up and took me to the hospital and there was blood all over the floor.” Repeatedly throughout the interview Gladys insists that “the fall put me back about three months” but is quick to add, “I’ll come out of it of course, but it’s been awful hard on me.” The fall appears to have shaken her self-confidence more than inflicted lasting physical damage. She did not break any bones nor did she sprain, pull, or tear any muscle or tendon. Claiming that the fall put her back really implies that she thinks of her life as a trajectory of continuous growth and development which may have been slowed down but not stopped by the fall. It implies that she is now where she was three months earlier, and that she will eventually catch up with herself.

Gladys is completely mobile, does all her activities of daily living, and playfully engaged with the interviewer in a little social dance as a farewell gesture. She embraces all opportunities for activities in the nursing facility where she resides, but she also just loves to be in her room with its lovely view of the countryside. “I love it. I love this view out there and I have a lot of pleasure standing and watching those sheep.” She also loves to “stand and watch storms come in. I’m perfectly well satisfied. I’m happy here. This is home.” Her move to the facility two years earlier was largely motivated by her determination not to become a burden to her daughter whose health was declining and about whom she worries a lot.

Gladys’s advice to young people is very much inspired by what she considers her own mistakes. When she was in 8th grade, she had surgery in October and missed school until January. Discouraged by how far she had fallen back, she quit school and got married. Not having an education forced her to work hard all her life, first on the farm, then in physically demanding jobs like paper hanging and cleaning for people, and work in the mill. Her emphatic advice to young people is to “go to school and get as much education as possible.” She proudly talks about her grandchildren’s educational achievements and professional success, and she clearly sees education as the solution to the nation’s problems.



**Goldie Wilcox: “Everybody is my friend,
and we’re all poor.”**

Upon meeting Goldie Wilcox, one quickly senses how much humor is a part of her life. “I was born in West Virginia . . . among a lot of snakes and frogs and crawdads,” Goldie says, as she begins her life story. However, she soon speaks of her early years by recalling the 1913 flood. Her family had moved to Columbus, Ohio, and as a girl of only 7 years, Goldie recalls the difficult days of the flood. She recounts seeing the waters rising in the streets, the trauma of seeing a dead horse washing into their yard (“I can see that old horse laying there yet.”), and her mother keeping Goldie and her siblings safe.

Goldie recalls other challenges of childhood. She vividly remembers her mother’s instructions “. . . don’t eat or ask for anything, only what Mama puts on your plate. Food is scarce. Everybody’s got to eat.” Goldie doesn’t recall ever going hungry, just an awareness of the scarcity of food and her mother’s instructions that ensured everyone ate.

Goldie also remembers her task of collecting pieces of coal along the railroad track, which was used to help heat their house. Goldie smiles as she tells this story as it is about the kindness of strangers. At first, Goldie thought she was picking up coal that had fallen off the rail cars. She later realized railroad workers rolled off some of the coal for her.

Today, Goldie lives in assisted-care at a continuing care retirement community. Family, including a granddaughter and a grandson, visit frequently and Goldie enjoys outings with them. When she speaks of her grandchildren Goldie’s face lights up. Her granddaughter was present during our interview and many times as Goldie spoke of her grandchildren, she would lovingly pat her granddaughter’s hand.

Goldie's humor revealed itself again when asked about the best thing about having lived so long. A twinkle was in her eye as she quipped, "Nothing good about it, but I want to live another 100." To further clarify her philosophy, Goldie explained her thoughts about choice -- the ability to choose to be crabby or be happy—and her choice is to be happy. She explains she doesn't think much about her age or how things have changed over the years. "I never think about it. I just think of myself today. What am I going to make up here? Crabby old person or nice person?" Goldie states.

Goldie believes in the Golden Rule and always tries to treat everyone nicely. Goldie speaks highly of the staff members who help her and says she has always believed that you should try to "meet someone half way," especially those who want to help you. Cooperation and sharing remain important values Goldie has retained since her youth.

Goldie was married twice; the first time at 16, but she says she doesn't remember much of her first marriage, as it didn't last long. Her granddaughter suggested Goldie's first husband might have died in an auto accident, but Goldie says she can't remember exactly what happened. Goldie's memories of her second marriage with Walter Wilcox are clearer. Goldie describes Walter as a sweetheart who worked for the electric company. Walter, from Columbus, had also lived through the flood of 1913. They spent their years together raising two sons in Columbus. Goldie states she wouldn't have wanted to live anywhere else, although as a family they enjoyed frequent visits to Florida.

Goldie worked in several factories during her younger years, including Joyce Shoes, Buckeye Stamping, and a candy factory. Goldie spoke of her jobs in pleasant terms, although a back injury during her 40s required her to go on disability. Thoughts of work also brought Goldie back to thoughts of her hard-working mother who had six children. As Goldie describes, "My poor little mother, she went out and did day work all the time. She worked hard." When asked about her father, Goldie explained that she had a good "daddy" but her memories of him are weaker because he wasn't as close to the children as "mama."

The influence of family wove its way into the conversation again when I asked Goldie what advice she might have for a younger person. "First thing to do is don't steal." Goldie responded quickly, "Second thing is that kids that have a nice mother and dad to listen to what their mom and daddy tell them." Finally, Goldie suggested that eating what's on your plate would serve others well, as that is what she had to do. Goldie refrained from giving advice to adults because "everybody's got to make their own life."

As for a typical day in Goldie's life now, she says she spends her day "being alive." With a grin, she adds, "At my age, you're damn lucky." She also reports that believing in God and thanking Him for blessings of food, home, and family is an important part of her life. Goldie reports she doesn't worry about anything because, "What's the use to worry? It only puts you in the grave sooner." Goldie also reports that she doesn't think about death. "It's in God's hands, whenever he wants me to come home." In the next thought, her humor bursts forth again as she laughs, "Maybe God won't have me and the devil is glad to get me." On second thought she decides hell couldn't stand her because she would be too strong.



Hallie Champion: “Treat everybody like I wish to be treated.”

Hallie was looking forward to telling her life story, but on the day of the interview, she was very weak and, at her request, her youngest daughter Betty acted as her spokesperson and gave the bulk of the interview. Even though Hallie was too weak to speak in any sustained manner, she agreed with Betty’s accounts of her life through nods and other affirmative signs and sounds, and an occasional barely audible phrase.

According to her daughter, Hallie lived by the Golden Rule. Hallie confirmed her life philosophy by stating “Treat everybody like I wish to be treated.” Watching her daughter take care of her lovingly must surely be seen as a reflection of Hallie’s doing for others until she became unable to do so. She raised 12 children, of whom 7 are still living; of those, 4 live nearby. According to Betty, all the children “have been there for mama, and she’s always been there for us.” Hallie misses going to church; something she did faithfully all her life, and that gave her strength and comfort. Her religion helped her get through all the earlier hardships, and it helps her to accept her diminished physical state for she is convinced that whatever happens is God’s will.

Betty characterizes her mother’s life as hard, and Hallie agrees. Born and raised in the South, she worked as a housekeeper; she picked cotton; she did all sorts of odd jobs to feed her children. But that wasn’t the hardest part. The hardest part was enduring her abusive husband. She left him several times yet always came back, hoping that this time it would be better, but it never was. Then one day Hallie left for Cincinnati and did not go back to her husband. She left her children in Greensboro, NC, where the older ones looked after the younger ones until she had saved enough money to send for her children, and the three youngest joined her. From then on, Hallie “didn’t look back.”

In Cincinnati, Hallie went to work for the Bethesda Oak Home for the Aged until she retired at age 67. Her good life started when she left her husband. She enjoyed every day of her

freedom: she cherished being able to make her own decisions about how to spend her money and her time. “She smoked, she drank, she danced, but there was no other man in her life.” She put all her efforts into raising her children to whom she remains very close. They lived together and pooled their resources and helped each other through times of plenty and times of scarcity. Betty’s statement, “We’ve all been there for my mama, always, and she’s always been there for us” ran through the interview like a leitmotiv – the leitmotiv that describes their closeness and commitment to each other. They don’t need a reason for frequent family reunions: Just a week before the interview, three of Hallie’s granddaughters and four grandsons had come to spend a weekend of having fun barbecuing, singing, praying, and spending time together. Betty’s house is always open for such get-togethers, and also for those who need help. For example, Betty has custody of an 8-year old child for whom she had previously been providing daycare. Betty proudly explains that the young girl attends the neighborhood school and is “very smart.” Betty provides a stable home for the child, something which previously had been lacking in the child’s life.

Betty is clearly the care provider of this family: she nursed her sister when she was dying of cancer. They “took her back and forth for her chemo, and then she came and stayed with me,” Betty explains. Now Betty provides care to her mother, as Hallie suffers from several ailments. Most recently she had surgery for an intestinal problem, and after that she moved in with Betty, although her current care needs exceed what Betty and her siblings can provide. The family loves the services they receive from Council on Aging, which makes available the homemaker who has been coming for a year and who helps with chores. It has also made available equipment like a raised toilet seat, a bench for the bathtub, and a walker that Hallie used until recently. Betty reports that the Council also provides her mother with other necessary nutrition and personal care supplies, all things they appreciate and value. In addition to the homemaker’s hands-on services, her mere presence in the house gives Betty some respite from her caregiving activities. An oxygen tank is right next to Hallie’s bed for episodes of shortness of breath. She has been bedridden ever since she had her recent surgery, and is altogether weak.

If this interview seems to be as much about Betty as it is about Hallie, it is an acknowledgement of the many faces of centenarians. Our interviews with mostly strapping, healthy, active, vivacious, and age-defying centenarians made it very tempting to just flaunt them at the expense of others. We resisted that temptation when we met Hallie and Betty and realized that for each one of a dyad like theirs there must be many more who struggle together to face the many challenges of extremely old age. In fact, the nature of this study and our strategy for recruiting participants tended to miss centenarians like Hallie. We are grateful to have found her and to include her in this collection of portraits that are a testimony to human resiliency and the indomitable human spirit.



Helen Whitehouse: “I take life as it comes.”

Helen Whitehouse was the youngest and only girl of five siblings, all of whom she has outlived. Having done for others all her life, she is now at the receiving end of a strong and multi-stranded system of family caregiving. When her son Ed divorced, he asked her to move in with him to take care of his house. Helen moved from Pittsburgh, where she had spent all her life, and ended up taking care of Ed in more than one way after he suffered a stroke in midlife. When Helen herself suffered a stroke, her daughter Dorothy looked after Helen and eventually moved in with Ed and Helen. Both Ed and Dorothy were present at the interview. At times they provide additional information; at times they correct Helen; they provide prompts and cues, and throughout the interview they banter and laugh, and they clearly enjoy each other’s company. Helen lost a son, but she can’t remember exactly what age he was, and Ed and Dorothy try to help her figure out whether he was 40 or 50, explaining that, from Helen’s vantage point of 100, he was very young when he died. They also try to make her remember the big party they gave her for her 100th birthday, but she admits to remembering nothing. It seems that failing memory can be a blessing, because it makes Helen’s worries very vague; she can’t really tell what she is worried about. “Things come up. You worry about them, how they’re going to turn out. I can’t say I recall it. I don’t remember it,” Helen says. Right now, she is not worried about anything; she obviously enjoys her life and the company of her family.

Helen’s stroke impaired her peripheral vision. She is a bit unstable on her legs and uses a walker, but otherwise she is in good health and reports having no pain. She can no longer crochet and knit. Dorothy explained that Helen misses that most, but Helen is quick to correct her by pointing out that now she reads instead, something she didn’t have time for when she raised her

children. Dorothy claims that the hardest thing for her mother is not being able to take care of the household anymore. Helen disagrees and says that it is her hearing loss that is most difficult to deal with. Her hearing problems may well be the reason why she has become reluctant to go out to eat with her family, in spite of their continued efforts to take her out. She is quick to acknowledge that “they mean well. They are very good,” she says.

The best thing about having lived so long has been “seeing all the babies, the great grandchildren. I saw my children grow, get married, have children, and we’re just a happy family.” Her typical day always includes family but is not governed by a strict routine. She rises depending on when they all went to bed, and that depends on what activities they were engaged in. She usually has breakfast and then reads; sometimes she does “a bit of sewing;” she watches TV only in the evening because during the day she really prefers to read and to do crossword puzzles. When she doesn’t receive visitors she sometimes sleeps in her chair.

Helen never looks back; she only looks forward. She looks forward to visits from her children and friends, and to peaceful get-togethers, admonishing those around her not to fight. According to Helen, one way of avoiding fights is not to express dissatisfaction. She admits to getting mad sometimes, but she always keeps it to herself. She clearly distinguishes between a good life and a hard life, but does not consider them mutually exclusive. Hers has been both good and hard. It was a very good life, she says, but she couldn’t begin to give examples of what made it good, for that would require looking back – something she never does. She does not even think about her husband any more now that he has been dead for 46 years. Her life was hard because of all the work she did and all the care she provided. Even after her husband’s death, life did not get any easier, she explains, “because, I guess, I don’t let it. I pitched in wherever I was needed.”

Helen tries “to do everything to please God. And it works out.” God doesn’t exactly tell her what to do, but “he tries to make me understand, I think.” Although her memory is now failing her for specific details, she knows that particularly during the Depression, she asked God for a lot of help, and he did help her. She has no explanation for her longevity. This is one question God has not answered: “I’ve even asked God ‘why are you leaving me live so long?’ I don’t get an answer.” Nor can she explain why her family takes care of her the way they do. Though she cannot do anything for them now, they know that she has no money or anything else to bequeath. She agrees that it might have something to do with the fact that she has taken care of everybody as long as she could. Now it’s their turn. “They all take care of me... they all like me. I think they do, they show that they do. And I just go by that.”

Her advice to a young person is as cautiously non-specific as are her statements about her good life. “Just behave yourself and always do the right thing, just do everything right.” She admitted to not always knowing what’s right, but she is quite sure to know when something is wrong.



John Jenkins.: “I look like I’m a cripple,
but I’m not crippled compared to some of these folks.”

John Jenkins is a most cheerful man who wears his “The 100 Club” t-shirt with a mixture of amusement and pride. In spite of diabetes and blindness, he feels no different than he did years ago. The only thing that has changed is his voice, proof of the fact that he is “coming of age,” as he says laughingly. He and his wife, two years his junior, moved to an assisted living facility near their daughter four years earlier because of his blindness and her mobility problems. Until he broke his hip at age 99 and she broke her leg recently, he says “I was her legs. She was my eyes and that was wonderful.” At the time of the interview, his wife was residing in another facility that offers physical therapy. He misses her and he considers his long marriage the best part of his long life.

Born in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania, the hometown of the famed groundhog, he grew up around mining towns where his father managed company stores and Jimmy Stewart was one of his school mates. When John was 12, he delivered newspapers on horseback and bought his first bicycle with the money he earned. He remembers life in a house without indoor plumbing and with a central stove in the living room. As his father moved around for his job, John attended different schools and graduated from high school. It was an exciting time, the beginning of radio technology, and they would stay up all night by the radio. He used to make radios “out of Mother Oats oatmeal boxes by winding wire around them. Then came the tubes...oh that was exciting.” He wanted to go to Penn State to become a civil engineer, but their quota for civil engineering students was filled and he could only get into electro-chemical engineering. He chuckles, “Well, that was my way in, but it was my way out too because I didn’t do well in chemistry.”

John considers himself more lucky than smart. "Good things happened to me that made my life so wonderful." One of these goods things was playing the drums in a band, "The Keystone Five," which played in clubs and other venues while he was in high school. Their first gig was with the Masonic Ladies; later they moved on to pubs and taverns, earning "five bucks a piece. That was a lot of money in those days." He recalls how patrons, who would be "a little high on the liquid refreshments," were quite generous when The Keystone Five passed the hat. Eventually the band broke up. John went to Penn State. He was able to pay the tuition because he had received \$3,600 in workman's compensation for an injury he had incurred in a mining-related job in Pennsylvania. "I thought I was a millionaire." After Penn State, he went back to his home town where he spent \$500 of the remaining workers' compensation for a truck and a bakery route. This turned out to be a seasonal job because in winter and spring the roads were so muddy that his truck got stuck. He decided to use his time during the off season to attend the Sweeney School of Aviation in Kansas City, where he "learned how to fly and how to fix airplanes and how to fix motors and things like that." After he finished training as a pilot in 1926 he returned to his bakery route and met his wife Ethel. They got married in 1929 after Ethel finished nursing school. Their eldest son was born in 1932; that makes him 74; their daughter is now 71, and their "youngest boy" is almost 69. This prompted him to chuckle, "so we have old folks for children now."

When he could not support his family on the bread route, he went to work in a textile factory for 50 cents an hour, and was grateful to have this job during the Great Depression. He stuck it out and worked his way up in this company, realizing his dream of becoming an engineer: "I became an engineer at the powerhouse by working up the ladder and that's how I got my education as an engineer." The powerhouse was the electric generator for the plant. He enjoyed his job because he "was learning something" in this place that made rayon out of pulp and where he burned 14 carloads of coal a day to produce power.

After he was forced to retire from the job he loved, he did a lot of "free work" for his church, for the Salvation Army soup kitchen, for the local food bank, and as a part-time scoutmaster. These activities helped him not to miss his job too much. He glows as he talks about these activities and exclaims, "I've had a wonderful life. A wonderful life. Just like Jimmy Stewart's play on Christmas time."

The other topic that brings tears to his eyes is his relationship with God. When he gets angry, as he did after his accident that caused him to break his hip, God told him that he was "on the wrong track, Johnny. Get back to me." He continues, "Yeah, it was a stupid accident. It was my fault altogether and I asked God's forgiveness and I'm back on track with God. He thinks the secret of his long life might be his close and long relationship with God. He has read the Bible "six or eight times" and continues to read it on tape. He also looks to the Bible when he tries to imagine the future of a world that has gone bad. Armageddon is sure to be around the corner when "everybody will have to go to one place or the other, the fires of Hell or into Heaven... I feel I'm partway to heaven now." In the meantime, he enjoys books on tapes, music from musicals, and he marvels at all the technological changes he has witnessed. "The greatest thing I missed is learning how to operate a computer." He is hesitant to give advice, but when pushed, he says "learn to forgive."



K.S.: “Don’t ever turn down the chance to learn something. Keep your mind open.”

A doctor recently told Mrs. S. that her “body was about like that of a 50 year old person.” She glosses over the “ailments I’ve had over time” because she got used to them. She handles problems by reading about them and studying them “and I do everything I can to keep up with everything.” Adapting to her blindness (which was caused by macular degeneration) was made more difficult because she used to paint. She had taken up oil painting when she was 60 years old and proudly points to her paintings on the walls in her house. Once the creative bug had bitten her, even macular degeneration could not stop her: she took up making clay sculptures. She is also writing her father’s memoir—because of her blindness she is dictating it – to pay tribute to the man who “was the wisest man I have ever known.” He is clearly the central figure in her life. Because he wanted to spend as much time as possible with her, he taught her all sorts of things girls usually didn’t do then, and few do now. When she was seven years old, he taught her how to shoot. She was too small to hold a gun but he’d prop it up on his shoulder, and that’s how she learned to hit a target. He gave her a 22 gauge repeater Winchester when she was 8, and when she turned 16, she got a hunting license and a rifle. She calls her father “a marvelous problem solver” who helped her all her life by empowering her to make her own decisions. When she married at age 22 after “a stormy courtship” she picked someone who, like her father, “saw to it that I did everything that I was capable of doing.” They had no children.

Her mother died during surgery when Mrs. S. was six years old. She was the only child, “the spitting image of her mother.” Mrs. S. thinks that a new kind of anesthetic killed her mother. She had visited her mother in the hospital the night before she died. That was the first time she saw nurses and instantly knew she wanted to become a nurse “as a stepping stone to become a doctor, but after three months as a student nurse, I decided I didn’t want to become like a doctor.” The passion for her work still animates her as she talks about her career.

Mrs. S. never worries about age; she is more concerned “about things I can do. I have to do something.” Before she started to paint she learned how to sew, even to tailor a man’s suit; and to knit. She was interested in history and interior decoration and architecture, and she describes in great detail and with great pride all the scrubbing and cleaning and nursing she did 80 years earlier in Bethesda Hospital in Zanesville, Ohio, first as a student nurse and then as a staff nurse. She started work “during the polio epidemic” and was sent to the University of Minnesota for six months of training in polio care. “I treated polio for ten years before the vaccine was available and that’s what I wrote about first...and it’s been quoted and read and I gave something like 28 lectures.”

She is a life-long learner who continues to be passionately interested in world and local events. Her blindness is clearly her greatest challenge: she would have liked to learn Braille but could not because three of her fingers are paralyzed as a result of handling “the hot packs for polio patients for ten years,” which made her fingers numb and unable to decipher Braille. She is an avid customer of the Cleveland Library for the Blind, and also the local library, both of which bring her “great big stacks of books and I read them all.” She also tries to re-read the wonderfully eloquent letters her father wrote to her over the years, and she wishes she could still write letters because, she says, “I can express myself in writing a lot better than in speech.”

When assessing the best and the hardest things about having lived so long, she focuses not on her person, but on the world. Having been able to witness so many societal and technological changes is the best thing about having lived so long. She marvels at the motorization of the world, although her admiration for airplanes is only theoretical. She has flown a few times and hated it. Another good thing for her has been the shift from reusable to disposable items in all areas of life, but particularly in nursing. “When I was a student nurse, we had to rinse the baby’s diapers before we sent them to the laundry.” One of the hardest things for her is the transformation of nurses from caregivers and savers of lives into paper pushers. She fears that the increasing distance of nurses from patients will fuel a movement toward euthanasia.

An aide comes at 9:00 am for two hours to help her rise, shower, and prepare breakfast; another one comes from 4:00 to 6:00 pm to help her get ready for bed. She regrets that she is being tucked into bed so early but she appreciates both aides and says she couldn’t manage without them, particularly in light of what had happened to her a few years earlier. She was betrayed by a friend whom she trusted with her power of attorney. In the process, she almost lost her house and spent five months and \$16,000 in a nursing facility against her will. She admits to being “bored stiff” during her mostly lonely days. She feels frustrated by all the work that she’d like to do to straighten out her things and write about her nursing career as the “oldest one in the alumni association.” She is not afraid of death but is worried about dying before she can straighten out all her papers and pictures. Her advice to young people is to keep an open mind and to try not to reform the person they marry. She recommends to “live every day as if this was your last day and live every day as if you would live forever. That’s what I do. I try to get things in order.”



Lucy Ewbank: “I’ve survived damn near everything.”

A couple of years ago there was a billboard at the entrance to town with Lucy’s smiling face and a caption that urged passers-by to live like Lucy at the local continuing care retirement community. Although the billboard communicated a message of joy and comfort, its designers had refrained from mentioning that Lucy had asked for two male strippers for her 100th birthday party. Her wish was granted and she gets a kick out of telling the story in great detail. There is tacit agreement in the community that only she could get away with such a request. She had paved the way by having just one stripper for her 95th birthday and clearly needed to step up the drama to mark her 100th.

Lucy is the oldest resident in the retirement community where she is surrounded by people she has known for a long time. She loves the fuss other residents make over her, presumably because of her age, but clearly because she is a gregarious and pleasant person. She attributes her long life to a sense of humor, a lot of luck, and possibly to the fact that she is a vegetarian. She considers herself lucky to have had good health all her life, and she thinks that in order to have a good life one needs to take some risks. Her friends kid her about the risks she takes in bridge, and she herself gives an example of her reasonable risk taking: she signed up for the retirement community before ground had been broken; she was among the 40 pioneers who committed to a place that did not yet exist. One risk she no longer takes is driving, the exception is to visit her daughter who lives across the street in the same retirement community. Lucy clearly finds these excursions amusing, as she knows she could walk, and she clearly enjoys how other residents kid her about these trips. She chuckles as she describes how she got her driver’s license renewed for her 100th birthday and how nobody at the Motor Vehicle Bureau had any problem with that. “I walked out of there. I couldn’t believe it.” She and her daughter do lots of things together but still maintain their own separate social connections. Lucy confesses to loving her daughter “to death” but would never move in with her. One of the new behaviors she adopted

at the retirement community – and she jokingly blames her daughter for this – is to meet for cocktails in the communal lounge on a regular basis.

Lucy Ewbank has experienced and learned from many things in her 100 years. She was born and raised in a small town in Indiana. She married her high-school sweetheart when they both were 19, and they were married for 72 years until her husband died in 1998. They had three daughters who provide Lucy with much social contact, support, and merriment. She clearly enjoyed her long marriage and she takes pleasure in the happiness and love of her three daughters and their offspring. The more difficult aspects in her life were the many times she had to move to follow her husband who was a well-known coach of, among other teams, the New York Jets. “We moved umpteen times and always in cities and really I was never a city girl. I was more of a small-town girl, really.” After living in Chicago, Cleveland, New York, Washington, Baltimore, and Providence, they retired to a small town where she is happy and content and where she reminisces fondly, but not nostalgically, about the many places she saw, the many people she met, and the many opportunities that enriched her life. She describes her husband as a person who was patient, kind, and down to earth, and who never allowed his fame to affect his relationship with his family. In any case, she wouldn’t have tolerated the behavior that often results from fame and stardom.

Lucy lives in a 2-bedroom, 2-bathroom “cottage” with plenty of space and lots of activities. She performs all her activities of daily living, including cooking and doing her own laundry, but likes to sleep in until 8 or 9 a.m. She is an active member in several organizations; she belongs to three bridge clubs that, between them, play twice a week. On Sundays she goes to town for supper with four other women. Sometimes she invites the group to her house, and on the day of the interview she had an 8-pound turkey breast baking in her oven for an event scheduled the next day. Her only health-related problems are her ankles, both of which she broke at different times in the past. They continue to give her enough trouble to use a walker or a cane occasionally. She believes strongly that complaining about physical ailments does not make for good conversation, and she prefers to talk about other things. When she is with her friends she often forgets what ails her because she has too much fun playing games and going places. She loves her community where she participates in many activities. She also likes to read the papers, but often does not get around to it until the end of the day because her social activities keep her so busy. On a typical day, Lucy may take her time and sleep late and have a late breakfast. The supportive social and environmental features of the retirement community were influential in her decision to move to her current surroundings. In this environment, she feels both safe and empowered.

She thinks that her humor and her independence are the qualities that have kept her from ever becoming depressed. Pride in her ability to make her own decisions, to do whatever she wants to do, and not to be affected by the opinions of others are important qualities in Lucy’s eyes. She does not really think about age and still feels young even though she seems to be conflicted about whether she wants to grow even older: she doesn’t look forward to turning 105, but she’d hate to die. In the meantime, she wears a big button that says “I’ve survived damn near everything.”



Marie Price: “I think you’re happier if you are busy at something. I know I am.”

At age 105, Marie Price is the oldest participant in the study. It was therefore all the more surprising to learn that she cannot receive visitors before lunch because she works in the nursing home laundry every morning where she folds towels, napkins, and bibs. This is the job she has chosen, and she carries it out with dedication, competence, and unfailing punctuality. When asked how she was feeling on the day of the interview she replied, “Like I do every day, ready to go to work.” She had just come from work and couldn’t wait to start over the next day. Her poor eyesight keeps her from reading, or doing puzzles, or playing cards. When afternoons get too tedious and she can sit outside, she amuses herself by counting cars, although she only sees them as flashes going by. Keeping busy has been and continues to be a dominant theme in her life. She spent 46 years as a schoolteacher and she also was a volunteer in a hospital. Somewhere in that hospital, she says, is a plaque with her name on it that acknowledges her volunteering services. Taking on regular work responsibilities in the nursing home was a logical and natural step in this phase of her life; it was her tried and proven way to achieving happiness. She has lived and worked in the facility for six years and claims that without her job she would lose her mind. There is no competition for Marie’s job in the nursing home. She tells the story of how another resident, “one woman came down here to the laundry one time and I was in there. She picked up something and looked at it and got up and left and has never been back since.”

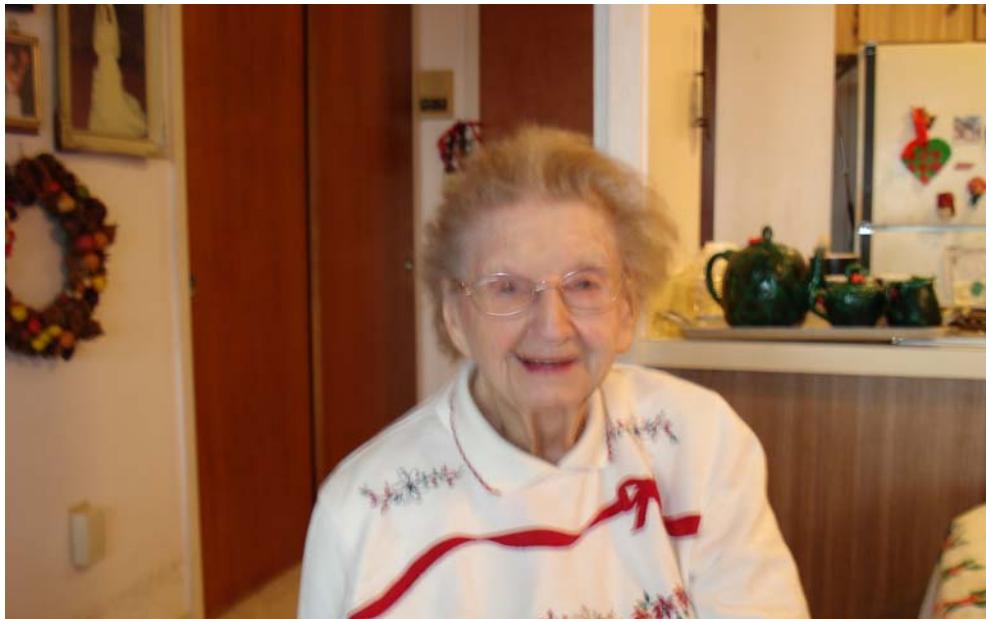
This is how Marie explains how she came to live in the facility six years earlier. “I had no place. I have no relatives who could have taken me in. I was never married. She did like one fellow very much, but he was killed in World War I, and she never thought of anybody else. Marie loves living at the nursing home, although there is really no medical reason for her to be there. The best thing in her life, she explains, is that “God has given her health. I don’t have an ache nor a pain and there’s very few people that can say that.” She needs no help with eating

and toileting; she walks wherever she wants to go; and she describes herself as independent. This image of herself as independent is clearly rooted in her ongoing efforts to help others.

Another element of continuity in Marie's life has to do with people whom she had encountered in different settings over the years, and who are now either living or working in the nursing home. For example, three of her former students are now residing in the same facility, including one who couldn't learn anything. This ex-pupil remembers her, and "he likes to have me put his bib on him, so I do if he's in the dining room when I go in... he's there and he remembers me and I'm grateful for that." This scene conjures up the notion of age as a leveler indeed: thirty years his senior, she outperforms him in physical stamina and prowess. However, one of the downsides of living so long is that the young people chosen to take care of one's affairs become too old to do so. She appointed her nephew as her power of attorney who, at age 88, seems a bit old for that job, although she insists he is very good to her. He used to take her on outings but has stopped doing so because it's getting too hard for him. Another downside of living so long is the loss of friends. She finds consolation by appreciating all the staff people who are good to her now. "I'm perfectly satisfied with my life and I'm so happy now that I'm here and I get plenty to eat. And one of the nurses is a very good friend. Well, they come around and kiss you...an old woman like me. I think an awful lot of them." It is easy to see why staff would kiss Marie. She is quick to giggle and find things around her amusing and interesting, and she requires little help with any activities of daily living.

One of the grievances of her life is that she did not make it to 50 years of teaching. She retired after 47 years because of an incident that is vividly etched in her memory and that she describes in great detail. One day, a 4th grade student passed her a note on which he had scribbled "you are a dumb teacher." This prompted her to "dust off a ping pong paddle and clip him on the butt" right in front of the principal. She then proceeded to call the superintendent to report her own action. Although at that time paddling had already been outlawed, she was not officially reprimanded in any way, but from then on many students and colleagues stopped being friendly with her. This coincided with the tearing down of her old school and a transfer to another school, and she decided to retire "early" after "only" 47 years of teaching. This fact seems to continue to upset her, for several times during the interview, Marie lamented that "I didn't get my 50 years in."

Marie claims to be ready for death whenever it comes. She has made all of her funeral arrangements, including selection of clothing she wants to wear in her coffin. In fact, she has had to change the clothing because the ones she had selected "got so out of style. I went down and took another set of clothes for my burial." She hopes to go to heaven and fears that "some of the others won't get there." This is as far as she will go in expressing criticism with some of her fellow travelers on this exciting journey of very late life.



Mary Morris: “When I couldn’t ride a two-wheel bike any more, what did I do? I bought a three-wheel.”

A family album served as an anchor during our interview with Mary Morris. The album captures family history and important people and events in her life. Mary suggested looking at the photos as the best place to start in understanding her life story. As the eighth of 10 children, Mary’s memories of her childhood are filled with stories of her siblings. She describes her family as very close, and her parents as strict but loving. Education and religion were two values held dear by Mary’s parents and which greatly influenced all of the children.

Mary tells many family stories that center around themes of learning, doing what’s right, helping others, using strategic thinking, and living within one’s means. For example, Mary remembers the financial strain of the first year of her marriage during the Great Depression. While many people were out of work and losing their homes, Mary’s husband was fortunate to have a job for an entrepreneur who owned real estate, retail shops, and grocery stores. Mary recalls they survived with no paycheck – even though her husband was working – because they lived in an apartment owned by his boss and they visited his grocery store for their basic needs. Detailed records were kept on Mary’s husband’s salary, and what they were “spending” on rent, utilities, and groceries.

After about one year, cash flow improved for the entrepreneur and the books were settled for Mary’s family. They even received a little back pay, which Mary insisted on saving. Mary recounts after that time they never really had financial worries, partly because “we never bought anything unless we had the money for it.”

After a few years of marriage, Mary and her husband adopted two children. Mary counts her children as what she is most proud of in her life. Her son lives in Columbus and Mary refers

to him as her caregiver. Her daughter lives in Florida; they stay connected through phone calls. Mary says her daughter helps her cope with some of the physical losses of advanced age.

When asked about an event in her life that stands out, Mary tells a story of a Sunday school teacher who influenced her to give her heart to Christ and helped her to know that she would “always stick to the church.” This she describes as a defining moment, and she further explains, “And then again, I had it when I was 16. I don’t remember why, but I remember that one day I was by myself and I renewed that feeling.”

Mary’s participation in her church has remained strong throughout the years, and only in the past year has she been unable to attend Sunday worship. The parking lot has a lot of gravel on it and Mary feels the risk of a fall is too great. Mary stays connected with her church by reading the bulletin, listening to the sermon on tape, and exchanging cards with other members. Mary now attends the church services offered at her retirement community. In addition, at times she draws upon her faith to help her cope with worry. She prays and sings the hymns she knows by heart over and over to herself. “It quiets me, it comforts me,” she states.

A typical day for Mary includes preparing meals, making phone calls, straightening up her apartment, and participating in games with friends. They play bridge and euchre and Mary was happy to report that the night before she had won a game of Scrabble with three other players. Mary was especially pleased with her accomplishment as she acknowledged the skill of the other players and noted “one is only 82!” Mary also enjoys community outings, and delights in her position as Queen Bee of a Red Hat Society she helped to organize. She does her own grocery shopping by using the community shuttle service. While she does most of her own chores, about once a month she has a housekeeper who helps with the heavier work.

Mary’s apartment is filled with family heirlooms that represent many stories. Mary has slowly been assigning these treasures to other family members who will eventually take possession of them. She refers not only to her son and daughter, but also to nieces and nephews as “the children,” then laughs when she explains these “children” are in their 60s and 70s now. When I asked her how she feels when she thinks about passing on the family heirlooms, Mary replied, “At first, a little part of me goes, and then I’m real happy about it.”

Even though Mary is still very active in caring for herself and participating in activities, she explains there are many things she is no longer able to do. She no longer clowns for the Shriners which she did until about two years ago. Mary said she had a hard time, at first, giving up certain things she loved to do. She mentions that it was especially hard about five years ago, but now she is better at coping with the losses. She says her daughter helped her understand there are some things she has to let go. Mary states, “It’s simply let go, let go, let go. I pray a lot about it, and cry a lot, and I hate giving up things. I hated that I had to walk on a walker, I just hated it terribly, it just seemed like I let go of something every day.” Mary, however, is not defined by what she has let go. Mary’s life is filled with rich relationships, frequent activities and outings, and continued learning – another theme from her childhood. Mary concluded the interview by saying, “I always wanted to know everything!”



Patrie McBeth: “There’s nothing strange about being so old. I mean, I just go on.”

Patrie McBeth has made many dozens of quilts in her life and proudly shows the piles of colorful creations she still owns. These days she concentrates on smaller projects like crocheted coverlets. She doesn’t think much about her age. “There’s nothing strange about it. I mean, I just go on.” Her family organized a big 100th birthday party for her, with so many grand, great, and great-great children attending that she has a hard time keeping track of them all.

Born in 1905 in Russell Springs, Kentucky, on April Fools’ Day, as she jokingly remarks, she grew up and worked on a farm until she married. She was the eldest of ten children and helped to raise her siblings. “It was hard,” she says. They grew their own food, putting up enough to get them through the winters. They always had fresh meat because her family and neighbors would butcher hogs at different times and share the meat. When Patrie was eight years old, her mother was “expecting another child. I had to take over. I made it though... I just automatically took over. I didn’t mind it though one bit, but I worked hard.” Her mother never quite regained her strength and spent most of her time in bed from where she gave instructions to Patrie on how to run the household. Her mother was quite exacting, and often Patrie had to rewash clothes and redo jobs to satisfy her mother’s high standards. “She wanted them good and clean and I would wash the piece and ring it out the best I could with my little hands and then I would go to her bed and ask her and she’d look at them and say, ‘no, rub that a little bit more.’ She taught me right and I’m grateful she did.” Patrie isn’t sure what exactly was wrong with her mother. “Back then we didn’t have the doctors we have now, and she just wasn’t strong at all, and I just took over. I wasn’t that big.” Several times she described her small stature as “bigger than nothing,” thus underscoring the burden that was put on her as a child. Her father had gotten used to the good services Patrie provided for the family. When she got married at age 19, her father told her husband-to-be, “you’re ruining me. You’re taking my main help.” But he did let

her go, and she and her husband moved to Cincinnati where he had found work. They had to borrow money from her uncle to get married, and she recalls how they scraped by and worked hard, and she confesses to having had many ups and downs in her life. She talks about the hardship of the Depression. Life eventually did get better, and in 1948 she and her husband were able to buy the comfortable home in which she still lives.

Although she lives by herself, her son is looking in on her every single day, making sure that she has what she needs. He was the one to schedule the interview, and during the interview, she relied on him to help her remember things. For example, she couldn't quite remember where her husband first worked after they had moved to Ohio. "Oh honey, I forgot that. It's been so long. I don't remember what he was working on." After a few exchanges, she and her son agree on the fact that Patrie's husband had worked at the Kroger's warehouse.

Once prompted by her son, she remembers many events in great detail. She talks about one particularly upsetting event from the time she still lived with her family in Kentucky. Her father, whom she describes as a "strictly good guy, good church guy," knew that someone in the neighborhood was making moonshine. He very much disapproved of this activity. Knowing where the still was, he reported the people who engaged in this reprehensible activity, and in revenge, those people poisoned two of his mules. She describes the animals' suffering and the family's fears for quite some time to come. She also describes in great detail the spring house they had back in Kentucky. It was cool and lovely and the perfect place to store perishable food, and to get a refreshing drink. "It was really wonderful water."

When she came to Ohio, she worked first in a laundry and then "later on in life, for nine years" in a plant that made parachutes. "I sewed on a machine with four needles that big double seam." She still owns one of those parachute panels as a souvenir. Patrie stayed home to raise her six children. Now that she is alone, she still does all her housework except cleaning and grocery shopping. She has no trouble using the washer and dryer in the basement where she folds her laundry on "the big old table" that in the past served as a dining table for all her family. She thinks nothing of bouncing up and down the basement stairs, to do other chores upstairs while the washer and dryer are running. She still uses her sewing machine in the basement and talks of the days when she used to make wedding and bridesmaids' dresses. May and June, favorite times for getting married, were particularly busy, "I would be just worked to death. I worked hard. A lot of times I'd work until 3 o'clock." She also made suits and shirts and any other clothing for her family. Apropos of a high-back chair her father made for her, she mentions that there "was just something wrong in my knee." She doesn't know what it is; it bothers her sometimes, as does the arthritis. Her father made that chair with an especially low seat because she was so tiny. Now, she says laughingly, it's too low because of her troubled knee. If she sits down on it, she won't be able to get up from it.

Her husband died at the age of 83. "I was really lost when I had to give him up," she says. She also had to give up a child recently; one of her daughters had died just a few months before the interview. Patrie does not worry about death. "If it comes, it comes is the saying, and I'll be ready for it any time. I just feel like I've got a new home to go to." In the meantime, she enjoys her old home full of memories and things she has lived with for a long time.



Thomas Faulhaber: “Days are monotonous.”

Sitting in a wheelchair in no way detracts from Thomas Faulhaber’s regal appearance. He sits tall and straight, and his demeanor communicates a no-nonsense approach to life. He too has lived by the Golden Rule and thinks that helping others whenever one can is more important than making statements about believing in God. Many people, he claims, talk about it but don’t always act accordingly. His philosophy has been to treat others fairly and to cope with whatever comes his way. This for him is the key to living a good life and he thinks it might have contributed to his longevity. He lives in the present moment because, he says, thinking about the past will not change it, although he himself would change everything if he could. Maybe this explains why it was difficult for him to be clear about the chronology of the different stages of his life course. A man of few and carefully chosen words, he tells a very parsimonious version of his life story. He was born in 1903 “in farm country, but not on a farm” in Ohio. After college he traveled around the world with his wife. They were tourists for “about three or four years” and spent an extended time in Japan. He had sold part of a business to finance these travels, and he thinks it was a splendid way to spend money. They returned “ten years before Japan declared war” and he claims that during their stay in Japan, they became convinced that Japan was plotting to attack the United States. After his return to the U.S., he “worked on a farm, roofing, and building buildings.” He joined the army and served “all during the war.” The army had first rejected him because of his age – he was 40 years old – but then they recruited him anyway because they needed men for all sorts of administrative positions. He was in charge of securing contracts for war materiel, or what he called “a government comptroller for the army.” He stayed in this job until age 60 and then started his own business about two years before he retired from the army. His company made “bolts and nuts and various types of other materials” and he retired from this business when he was 70 years old. He still misses work.

One of the reasons “days are monotonous” is his blindness. He thinks he has macular degeneration, “or something like that,” which came on “rather suddenly” and prompted his daughters to make arrangements for Thomas and his wife to move out of their house and into assisted living in northern Ohio, where he has lived for four years. It is a beautiful complex with well-kept landscaping and a warm and welcoming reception area. His apartment is spacious and uncluttered, which makes it easy for him to get around without bumping into things. When he gave up his home, he brought along very few things of his own. One of his two daughters lives nearby and visits and calls regularly. His wife, 15 years his junior, has died, and her death has no doubt contributed to the monotony of his life as he describes it.

Although he can get around the apartment and do many daily activities for himself, he laments the fact that “I can’t do anything I like to do. Read and write and create things... I used to always like to build and create things. That was a large part of my life.” He reads books on tape provided by the Cleveland Library for the Blind, which he calls a blessing, but he needs help in turning on the tape recorder. He belongs to a residence book club that meets three times a week to discuss their readings. He and two other members of the club choose the books with the help of the librarian. These meetings lighten the monotony of his days, but still, days are long. He rises at 7:00, eats breakfast, and then rests for an hour. He reads in the afternoon whenever someone comes by to turn on his tape recorder. When he says that “life is monotonous” it does not sound like a complaint but simply like a descriptive statement. Thomas has coped with his blindness the way he has coped with all life events. His life philosophy has been and still is to deal with situations by doing what one can, and he thinks that philosophy has served him well.

When asked about the best thing in his life, Thomas replies laconically “Being.” And if the worst thing about having lived so long is that days are monotonous, the best thing about it is having had a chance to help others. He is quick to point out that it’s not over yet: “Well, you know, I have longer to live.”

Thomas does not worry about death nor does he worry about anything else. He thinks it is particularly futile to worry about the future. Death, he says, could come any day – today, tomorrow, in five days – Who knows? So he simply does not worry about it. He does not know what will happen after death, but this does not worry him either. He lives in the moment and does the best he can. And his advice to younger people, should they ask, would be to live in the present moment and by the Golden Rule.