

Elaine McLean Interview by Andrea Raby

AR: If you could state your name and age

EL: My name is Elaine McLean, I am 90 years old.

I have no idea, my grandfather migrated from Canada, Montreal to the Upper Peninsula of Michigan and he settled there.

Do you have any family member who are abroad?

Only my granddaughter who is working in Amsterdam.

What does she do there?

She's a doctor of genealogy, she is writing up reports of tests from the different um, different tests that their doing.

I'm going to ask a little more about your life, so when did you, um, get started in your education...

My education or my birth?

Let's start with your birth

Alright, I was born on the East Side of Detroit and I was raised on the East Side of Detroit. I went to private schools and then I did go to public school in my high school years and that was Highland Park high school. I was married in 1946 o Jack McLean, I had four children, three boys and a girl. They're all living except I have one deceased son, umm and I have 8 grandchildren, um actually nine one of them has deceased, um and I have one great grandson.

So what was your first job like?

My first job was a really a disaster. I worked in a bakery, trying up sliced of bread, which I didn't like because I couldn't knot very well. So that only lasted a couple of days, and then from there I went to um, hudson motor car, that was the manufacturing car, the auto manufacturing

company. I worked there and then from there I went to the federal reserve bank, and then I was married and retired and raised my family.

How long did you work at the bank?

Four and a half years but it was during the war so they didn't really want employee's when they came back and got married because they didn't want to deal with pregnancies so they more or less asked you to retire.

And they paid for everything?

Uh we did get a severance, in which we bought a car, and cause at that time we were living with my in-laws. We did buy our first little home in St. Clair Shores with \$10 down. Our monthly payments were 59 dollars until, we lived there for nine years. I had two children while I lived there. And then we moved to Rochester where I have remained for 58 years.

Can you talk a little bit about your married life and your children?

My married life was a very happy one, I was married for 25 years doesn't sound happy because I did get divorced. My husband was a school teacher in Royal Oak, and um he did other jobs, he actually had about five hobs in order to raise our family. Then after 25 years I did go to work again at consumer power and uh worked there for 32 years. My children by then were all grown up and um, and from there I did retire in 1987, but I also had an ill mother who lived in Florida. I brought her back up here to live with me and took care of her, and after two years I had to put her in a nursing home because I couldn't lift her anymore and uh I went back to work part time and I retired at 89.

So you've retired twice..?

Yes

Can you tell me some of your favorite memories growing up?

Oh, I think raising my children were my favorite memories. We had lots of fun, I enjoyed my children. We did a lot of things. Basically outdoors, did a little bit of running but not like the ladies do today. My one son was in boy scouts for awhile and my daughter went to modeling school in her teenage years, my oldest son played the guitar and did this in different eating

places to make money so that he could go to college and he graduated from Oakland University. My second son was more inclined to the motors and things like that. He went into welding and then eventually partnered with a friend and they went to uh having a business until he died. And my third son is graduate of Michigan State and his wife is too, and us he's done very very well. He's the CIO for next year but he's planning on retiring this spring. My daughter just has an associates from Oakland University and she is working temporarily for Comerica bank. And their all doing very well in their fields. So I'm very proud of them.

So you said something about how you used to go on a lot of trips and the outdoors.

Yes, we didn't have a lot of money so they were kind of camping trips, and we would pack up usually in August Jack would take off the month of August for the family from all of his jobs and he would prepare and we'd go up north and the kids would play on the beach all day long looking for petosky stones and other valuables. Although my son did find a beautiful ruby ring on the shore up there one year, but as we would go on these trips any place of interest on our way, we would stop and um the kids would get out and you know, so their summers were very nice. They had a very nice childhood and also my in-laws lived in fairhaven on the lake and um so they had, they spent a lot of time with their grandparents and um it was just tough getting them back because Grandma liked them. But we did a lot of interesting things. My children all love animals so they animal life deer and squirrels and such were always intriguing to them and they were always looking for them and trying to pet them and you know, in fact, Brad the son that died, used to take a peanut and put it in his mouth. This one squirrel would very gently come and take the peanut out of his mouth, it scared the living daylights out of me but one day he came home and somebody had shot him with an air rifle and he went from door to door to find out who had an air rifle, thank god he never did find em because who knows what he would have done. But you know, they loved living things, Brad also, he seemed to be um, the most naturalistic one, my oldest son worked for the DNR for years rehabilitating animal, mostly deer in our area here. But uh, he needed to give it up because his work schedule was too demanding. Our life has basically been nature and the outdoors and uh, I myself have done a lot of traveling, when I worked I belonged to a travel club so I've been to a lot of countries and uh I've enjoyed them very much. If these old legs would take me I would be going still.

So what was your favorite part about traveling?

I liked seeing the way the different people lived, their culture, I didn't find a place I didn't like because the people it was different and I loved trying their different foods, when I went to Australia I ate bugs with the aboriginals. It tasted like popcorn! It was the experiences were just

so wonderful, that right now they are my memories and what keeps me going and uh, that and my family, just uh, I just everyday (laughs).

So you've seen a lot of historical events in your age, so what is a historical event that you think impacted you the most?

I think that when I was young i lived with my grandparents because I came from a divorced family, and my brother and I lived with my grandparents and it was during the prohibition days and of course that was what they called bootleggers and runners um, but i was illegal of course to have any liquor. My grandfather made home-brew, which is a homemade beer but in our basement so to keep our brother and I quiet, he always promised "I'll make you a batch of root beer but you mustn't say anything.

Got to it's final stage because we had a white curtain that went around a storage area in the basement so my brother and I would sneak behind there, open up a bottle and drink it. So by the time it was fermented and ready to drink, we had drank it all. So I think that was a very memorable thing that I remember. Um I think that the Australia trip was my highlight of all my trips. Although I can't say I didn't like any of them, but I had a lot of uh, I remember that I was ironing here, we lived here, I was ironing in the basement watching television when Kennedy was shot, I did see that on TV, which was like a shock to me. I didn't, I didn't um, I just didn't think that could happen. And then another thing was while I was working, I worked for a hearing aide concern my last job, we had a television in our front office, and I did see the towers being hit on 9/11. So I think that historically, those things have really impacted my memories.

On a lighter note, what's your favorite fad you've seen through the decades?

Umm, my favorite fad? High heels, I like high heels! I think they look very sexy and feminine and every lady likes that so um, I would always, if I saw a pair of shoes I liked then I would get the rest of the outfit to go with the shoes. I have lots of shoes, all high heels, and I don't know what to do with them. I'm trying to find one of my granddaughters that they'll fit. Right now I'm wearing the gunboats old grannies wear.

Have you noticed a change in high heels over the years?

The wedges have really gone around twice. But the spike heels, the real high ones, I don't really like those. I don't like the high laced ones. They don't look feminine to me. They look like they're

going to a party but they're going to shoot in the back yard. But I, like ladies to look like ladies, I like girls to be girls.

So why do you think you've lived so long?

You know I really don't know (laughs). Good genes for one thing. My mother died at 92 my dad at 89, my grandparents were in their late 80's, on my mother's side. So I feel that that is part of it, and I think part of it is just kind of common sense, I don't go for all these fads and stuff. If i'm hungry, I eat when I'm hungry and I try to eat, you know, good healthy food. Which I probably don't always but um, I just think that keeping busy, I keep busy, I taught ceramics for 35 years along with working. I love crafts, so I like the artsy stuff. But when it comes to sports I'm not too good. I'm a klutz.

That's me too..

We've heard a few people say that just being optimistic and having a good outlook on life has helped them live longer they think, do you agree with that?

Oh yes, oh yes. You've got to think positive. In fact all the things I have wrong with me, all the doctors say I'm doing so well because of my positive attitude. Um but, I feel you're going to die from something, so let it be don't worry about it and go on and have a good time.

Wearing a lot of high heels.

Wearing high heels (laughs)

Do you have any tips on staying healthy?

I think we're living too fast. I think people have to slow down and have to take time for themselves. You have to rest and eat of course those are the things you live by, but I just don't think people have to live as fast as their living. I mean it's not necessary. In Europe they don't live this fast. They enjoy. I think that as Americans we need to learn that. WE need to do that.

Good advice!

Would you say you know now about having a happy and successful life that you didn't know when you were 20 years old?

Well first of all, I thought by the time I was 70 I would never be here. This is a complete shock to me, I'm almost 91 in a couple of months. The head doesn't feel like it's 91, it's back in the high heel days, but the body has given out. Losing my sight is a very traumatic thing for me. I'm battling that, but I'm thankful I have one good eye and I can see images with the other. So I really have more to be thankful for than I have to gripe about. Also giving up driving was very very hard for me, and still is but um you do what you have to do. And it is what it is.

Especially because you like to travel so much.

Yeah, yeah. Well yeah, I'm not a sitter. I mean I knit hats for poverty and babies in the hospital and cancer patients and I sit and watch television and I do it on a loom so that keeps me busy and I try not to get bored because if I get bored I'm on that couch and I don't want to be there.

Could you describe a typical day for you?

Well I get up at 6 o'clock come hell or high water, no matter what time I go to bed I'm going to get up at 6am. I usually get up and put on the coffee pot and make the bed cause that's the way I was raised. Feed the cat, she knows and I come in and sit on this chair and she's on my lap, sometimes she gets in the chair before me. But um, after I have my coffee and my breakfast then I either straighten up the house or sometimes I read or I do go to bible study every Tuesday. I'll do that or I like to read a book. For a little bit, I can't read a lot. So I read a little at a time, and i just find putzy things to do to keep busy, um I do take a nap, around 12:30 after I eat and uh then by 3pm I'm up again and by 6 o'clock I watch my programs, Jeopardy and you know, Wheel of Fortune and the news. and then I do like the hallmark channel, they have some nice stories, they're not violent. I don't like violent things, then I go to bed. But usually that's around 9, 9:30 or 10 o'clock.

Have you ever tried listening to audio books?

No I haven't, I've heard of them. But as my eyes get worse I' going to have to look into that more. But I don't want to give up what I've got. I don't want to depend on something else as long as I can do it myself. And sometimes that's a problem with my children because they don't think I can do it by myself and I don't ask for help when I need it.

What's one thing you do everyday to make yourself happy?

I pray, I pray. I pray in the morning and I thank god at night for my day and my blessings. I'm not a real religious person but I do do this. This is my life.

What are some important lessons you have learned over the course of your life?

Umm, not to judge. You know people judge too quickly, um I think that we have to kind of feel our way and we are not the ultimate judge so that and I think trying to get along with people, to you know, to not to look for fighting, not to look for violence, for love I guess they would call it. But judging I think is one of the biggest things.

Do you have any regrets?

Yes, I do. Um I don't feel like divorce, nobody wins in a divorce. I think if both my husband and I weren't such stubborn people and we tried a little harder that we would have not divorced. But since it happened i've accepted it as something that had to happen I guess and try to learn from that. But I loved him the day I married, I loved him the day he died. And I'm sure he did too in his own hearts because we had a good marriage so, that's my biggest regret. And probably, I think everyone has this feeling, I could have done more to help my mom, I could have been more patient with her. I could have been a little more understanding. Because I had her living with me for two years and that was very hard but I'd do it all over again if I had the chance.

That's kind of what my mom is going through..

It's very hard because, you're only human and you only have so much patience and you loose some even if you don't want to sometimes and then you say things and you can never take it back. You're sorry for. Um because I can see, she must have been very lonely, she lived alone, she must have been very lonely, but never complained. Now when I look back and I'm in her position I understand, you know. And I think this is what we have to try and do, we have to try to understand. I think in cases like this, a lot of people feel like I do. You always regret, you could have done more, when it's too late.

I'd like to talk about your passions in life, I know you talked about your kids but you also talked about ceramics...

Yes, oh yes..

Can you talk a little about that?

Yes, I love painting. I love colors. The brighter the better. And I love the blending of flowers. If you look at a flower. A flower has many colors in it. It could be a red flower but it's, if you look real close you'll see a little bit of yellow from the stems. I love this creative coloring system, rainbows although I haven't seen very many lately. The colors, colors are a big thing to me.

How long have you done ceramics?

Um actually about 40 years. I took a lot of lessons, for about four or five years and did it for myself and then I went into business and we had three different shops at one time. It was called little ones ceramics and because my father in law used to call me little one. So it's like any hobby, it kept getting more expensive and more expensive. I have a garage full of molds that I would love to give to somebody that would be interested in doing it. Which I work lots of years hard years to buy all these molds and to have this business. Actually it was a big loss of money but I enjoyed it. And so I still like painting, I still paint a little bit.

What are your favorite, I know you have your art around your house, what are some of your favorite pieces?

I just gave my granddaughter who is a horse person, a unicorn I made, which was what they called the mitten, um technique and what it is is that it's all white and gold. So the horse was all white, the horn was gold and some of the hair that I made gold, um it was an expensive piece to make. So I made that and gave her that for her birthday as part of a memory thing. I also made three sets, two sets of um the nativity, which were 19 pieces and they were bisque, which are porcelain, which was very very fragile. It's like working with eggshells. Um, and I gave one set to my mother till she dies and I inherited it back, and one for myself. But it's quite a large piece so I don't really have any place to display it. I did the face of christ with the crown of thorns which I'm very very proud of. I still have that. So there are a few pieces that I have really enjoyed making. But my oldest son is also, and my daughter are also very artistic and my son said that the christ head I made was about the best piece I ever made. Those are the few things that I've done.

Is there anything else you want to add, or say?

No except that this again that been an experience for me. I enjoyed it. I never thought I'd be before a camera, but here I am!

I think something fun that you've said that I've gathered from you are that you get the most out of the experiences in life, they the things you take the most out of.

Yes you do. Like when I went to Australia. The aboriginal are very very superstitious people and um the big orange rock, I forget what they call it. That is like very scared to them, you can't go up to it. It's gated and fenced and you can't go up to it. They are very very, they wear very few clothes but other than that, and I did purchase a painting that one of them did and each of their paintings have a meaning, each little dot in their paintings has a meaning to them. So that was interesting. When I went to Alaska, I wanted to walk on a glacier but my friend, my girlfriend didn't want to she was scared, but that was beautiful even from the air. So I also said I gotta go back to Alaska and I gotta walk on a glacier, because people I talked to afterwards said it was fabulous. From the sky it looked like cracks of turquoise to white, she didn't like that feeling, it was fine with me. So when I went to New Zealand, when I went to Australia, it also included New Zealand, I did walk on the mountain there, we had a snowball fight, it was entirely different. It was not at all. So that's what I mean, these experiences. If I ever go back to Alaska again I will take the train to go up to Denali to go further up towards Fairbanks.

I didn't even want to go to Alaska because I'm not a winter lover, but you know each place I went there was something that was so outstanding um, that uh it's memories. They're memories.

And they're good ones..

Yeah, yeah they're nice. I was happy on all of the trips.

I guess I'm just curious, how many countries have you been to?

Well I've been to Spain, I've been to Italy and what's the one, below it Sicily, and I've been to Rome, I've been to Australia, Hawaii, New Zealand, Alaska, um Canada of course, Mexico, been to the Panama Canal and to some of the islands out there on the cruise. I love cruises their my favorite, um so I have been, I have been to England, Scotland and Wales. I have not seen Ireland or Germany or Greece or any of the orient, which are on my bucket list if I make it (laughs)

Alright, well thank you so much