Rebecca Jean (Gray) Fluegel

Oral History

January 9, 2015

Barry Gray: Today is January 9, 2015. I'm Barry Gray, and I'm talking with my sister, Becky Fluegel, in Erie, PA at my home at 312 Madison Avenue.

BG: How old are you?
Becky Fluegel: 70.

BG: What is your birthday?
BF: December 5, 1944.
BG: Where were you born?
BF: Erie, Pennsylvania, at St. Vincent Hospital.
BG: Where do you live now?
BF: 927 West 8th Street, in Erie Pennsylvania.

BG: Let's talk about your parents and grandparents. What was your father's name?
BF: My father's name was Robert Beckwith Gray.
BG: When was he born?
BF: April 9, 1912.
BG: Where was he born?
BF: Johnstown, Pennsylvania.
BG: What did he do?
BF: He was an engineer, an electrical engineer.
BG: Can you describe him?
BF: You mean his looks or his personality?
BG: Take your pick. Anything you'd like.
BF: He was a tall man, with dark hair when he was young, and sparkling blue eyes. He was rather imposing, but not frighteningly imposing. We used to walk up him, and then tilt back into a summersault, when we were indoors, or we would stand on his shoulders if we were outdoors, because we were taller than [inaudible]. He was six foot two.

I remember going over with him when he worked at … it wasn't when he was at Erie Resistor; it was when he was at [Kitsink?] on East 10th Street. He was working on making land mines for the Korean conflict. And he had us do these little teeny tiny pellet things that you had to take the top and the bottom and score them to lock the top and bottom on it. They couldn't go all the way through, you had to make it so that they didn't cut all the way through the plastic. And of course it was very hard for us, so I remember doing that.

I remember going into his workplace, his office at Erie Resistor, another company that's out of business. He had plates that they would fluoresce and that's where you have an electrical current, and he was cooking up batches of plastic, and they had different components, and they would cook for different times at different temperatures and then he would electro-fluoresce them, where the electrical current would divide out how much of what component was in each one and how the reaction had gone together with the cooking, and I remember one year he said

that we could not go away on vacation because he was busy cooking things in the lab.

Those were some of the kinds of things that he did to help develop modern day plastics. Of course, Erie Resistor made resistors for different electrical components. Resistors were becoming passé, no longer needed because the technology was changing, so we didn't have resistors in things. So the company had to find new ways to be vibrant, and I know that he had 100 or more patents that he had that he sold to Erie Resistor for a dollar a piece.

There was one time when he had to go and testify, because someone had taken Erie Resistor's patents and used them illegally. Dad had to testify as to his part in the development of the product that they had patented. So I remember that, that was when we were in high school. I might have been a little bit older than that. Of course, Mom wasn't too happy that he had earned so little.

And when he went out on his own, when he lost his job at Erie Resistor, he helped develop one of the first competitors to the Xerox copier. And the copies that the fellow was getting, it was a dry process, versus Xerox's, which was a liquid that you used to make the copies, and it was just like little tiny pellets, and Dad told the guy to pop it, like popcorn, or puffed rice or puffed wheat, instead of leaving it like it is, and that was the solution to the graininess of the copies. And the fellow couldn't pay him any money, so he gave him, I think it was 200 shares of his product or whatever it was, and he ended up giving those to Bob as a graduation present. They were worth a dollar a piece at the time, and I think when they finally sold some of them they were worth $2.50 or something like that.

BG: Do you remember the name of the company?
BF: No.

BG: Where did he live with your family?
BF: We first lived after I was born … it was when they found out they were expecting me they were told they had to leave their apartment, that they couldn't have two children, and that was on East 7th Street. They got the house at 420 West 7th Street, which was not the house that Mom wanted. She wanted the house out here on Kahkwa, and for years she would drive us by and show us the house they didn't buy. The one at 420 West 7th Street was a converted warehouse. A channel for the Erie Canal was next door, and that's why there was a warehouse.
BG: But the canal wasn't there then?
BF: No, it was filled in, but Grandma told us that they had left the bricks underneath where they filled it in and there were two houses on top of the channel, and that was why that property, it was a duplex, two full houses together, that property would just turn into a lake in the yards, because the yards were big. It would turn into a lake because the bricks were underneath for the channel, for the canal, and she said that was why that …
BG: The water couldn't drain out?

BF: The water couldn't drain out. And there is a house on 6th Street, on the south side, two or three houses over from the apartment building, where they actually have; the gear mechanism is down in the basement, the subbasement, for the channel. They had that on television. Old maps of Erie are a little bit off as far as where that channel was; I think they have it a little bit farther west than it actually is. There's a lot of history connected with West 7th Street because of it having been [?]. And then after a while they were able to get the house at 807 West 9th Street. We moved in there in 1960, I think it was, '59 or '60. And that's the last home in Erie that Mom and Dad lived in that I lived in with them.

BG: What was your father's father's name?
BF: My father's father's name was Edward Townsend Gray.
BG: Do you know when he was born?
BF: July 17, 1870? No, 1880. It was 1880. I'm not real solid on the year.
BG: That's OK. Where was he born?
BF: Oswego, New York.
BG: What did he do?
BF: He was a civil engineer. He and Dad were both graduates of Cornell University in New York.
BG: Where did he end up settling?
BF: He ended up settling in Johnstown. He had worked for the railroad, and being a civil engineer he was good with bridges, and Johnstown needs a lot of bridges. It's in that part of the country (laughs)?
BG: You mean he worked for the railroad in Oswego?
BF: He worked for the railroad after he graduated from college.
BG: So, he went to Johnstown to build bridges?
BF: Well, not only that. He worked with the steel companies too. He worked for Cambria Steel.
BG: Do you know what he did there?
BF: I rather imagine he managed the Bessemers and things like that. I'm not precisely certain. I know he was worried—we do have a letter somewhere in our files where he was worried about his job going away [inaudible].
He wanted assurances that he wasn't going to be terminated.
BG: Can you describe him?
BF: He was a very tall man. He was six foot four. Very thin, like a rail, the way you would think of Lincoln as being thin as a rail. He had, you know, short hair and glasses. He wore glasses, Dad didn't. His features were not really craggy but more, well, craggy is probably the best way to describe his features, and his demeanor too, because he was hard on us kids. He did not like children. And that was a fact, that he didn't like kids. He was hard on us when we were in Johnstown. I remember him picking Bob up, flipping him upside down, holding on to him by his ankles, on the stairs, because he heard some coins jingle in Bob's pocket, so he turned him upside down and shook him to get the coins out of his pocket. Bob was only about three or four. He wasn't very old.

The other thing that I remember about Grandpa is the fact that our dog Wags made him very angry. I don't know if it messed in the house or what the dog did, but anyway the dog ran and hide underneath one of the cots because there was this great big huge room in the house in Johnstown. It was divided up, there were like wire ropes dividing it up and making like separate areas where you could go and sleep. But anyway, this one section had a cot, and Wags went and ran underneath the cot. And grandpa reached under to grab the dog and the dog bit him. We didn't laugh about it, it wasn't funny at the time, but it's funny now.

Grandpa is the one who said repeatedly that they needed to put the things out on the Peninsula, the breakers?
BG: The breakwaters?
BF: The breakwaters, break walls, those big square things that they had out there then, to keep the Peninsula from washing away. He said that in the 1940s, and I think it was the 1980s before the Army Corps of Engineers finally did it. I remember him telling us that because he used to like to go out to the Peninsula. We have pictures of one of our trips out to the Peninsula. We would just run around in the sand and play in the sand like silly nuts. We didn't need much, we didn't have toys and gizmos and all the things that the kids have today. We entertained ourselves with each other. But we went out there quite frequently when Grandpa was alive.

I remember at his funeral, Brien was two. We didn't have you yet, and the funeral parlor had a circular doorway, so you could go around and around in a circle, and Bob and I spent our time chasing Brien around and around in those doorways, because there was nothing to do.
BG: And that was in Johnstown?
BF: In Johnstown, yeah.

BG: What was his wife's name, your grandmother?
BF: Sara Jean Lomison Gray.
BG: Do you know when she was born?
BF: Not really. I think she was also a July [birthday]. I don't know how they met.
BG: Do you know where she was born, where she grew up?
BF: Indiana, Pennsylvania. She's a Stewart. Her mother was Danny Stewart?
BG: I think you're right. I was going to ask if you knew anything or remembered anything about our great grandparents. But before I do let's finish with your grandmother. So they lived in Johnstown. Do you know if she did anything before she got married?
BF: I thought she was a seamstress.
BG: And you didn't know her?
BF: No I didn't.
BG: So you can't describe her then?
BF: No, not really other than from pictures. She was a short woman. You know, here was this big tall man with this demure woman, like you and Chris (laughs). Same deal.

BG: Do you have any other stories about their family?
BF: About Grandpa's family?
BG: Yes.
BF: I know a little bit about Oswego. Mainly what I read in family research. I remember the house in Oswego looking like a one-room schoolhouse.
BG: This is the house where he grew up?
BF: Yes, he had three sisters and I know that Margaret or Florence, whichever one was the last one to die, fell and got burned on the heater, the grate, that's in the floor […] Today I couldn't imagine heating your house that way […]
It was very Spartan looking, very dark, dirty dingy windows, probably had a hundred years of dirt on it. Dry, the boards on the floor were dry, and the wallpaper was very old, because they had lived there for so long. Two hundred, maybe 150 years by then, this was in the 1960s I think.
BG: I was going to ask when you were there.
BF: Either the late '50s or early '60s.
BG: Do you remember any stories that Dad told you about his family?
BF: Chopping wood, they used to have to chop wood [inaudible].

BG: Why don't we move on to Mom?
BF: OK
BG: Tell me your mother's name.
BF: My mother's name is Mary Elizabeth Lynch Gray.
BG: And when was she born?
BF: February 3, 1917.
BG: Where?
BF: Erie, Pennsylvania. I'm not sure if she was born at Hamot or St. Vincent's.
BG: Can you describe her for me?
BF: She was average height for a woman. She used to tell me that Dad could put his fingers and his thumbs around her waist, she had an 18-inch waist when they got married. He had big hands, but still 18 inches… She was very pretty when she was young, in her graduation picture. She had hazel eyes and dark hair. Her hair was thick and wiry, hard to manage, whereas Dad's hair was fine. I think she used to wish that she had Dad's hair that was easy to care for. She used to say that I got Dad's hair […] That was one of the things she didn't like about herself was her hair.

She had a degree in Education; she went to college. She went on to get her Master's degree in Education, but only taught for a while. I found paperwork after she passed away, that, I'm not sure she ever got her teaching certificate. She did do substitute teaching, but in order to get a permanent position, you had to have that teaching certificate, and I'm not sure she had it. And I know that she applied for jobs as far away as Maryland […]

I know that She and Dad met when he rented a room at Grandma's house, an extra room she used to rent. That's how they met. Dad went to the University of Pittsburgh, that's where Mom got her Masters was at Pitt. Dad was working on his

doctorate. He skipped the Masters and went straight for the doctorate, and he never finished it, so I don't know why he [?]

Mom was always cooking in the kitchen or cleaning, and Eileen [her sister] would never [?] that, she was playing the piano and singing, and Dad said he chose the one that was cooking. He wanted to marry a good Irish Catholic girl and have lots of sons. Those were two things Dad told me, were the reasons why he married Mom.

BG: When did they meet?
BF: 1940. Dad worked at Westinghouse in Pittsburgh. When he came to Erie—oh, it was the east side company again, here I am I can't remember it. I'll ask Mark, he knows. They're still in business, but they're called something different now.

BG: What was her father's name?
BF: Her father's name was Francis Edward Lynch. Grandma used to say that it was Francis John, it was his father's name backwards, but that's not right. She called him a "black Irishman." He had black hair and dark eyes. Supposedly brown eyes, but I've tried to figure out how he could have brown eyes and not have them dominant, they must have been brown hazel eyes. […]

BG: What was her mother's name?
BF: That's interesting, because sometimes she was Jenny, sometimes she was Jean, sometimes she was Jane, sometimes she was Genevieve, but she was mostly just Jenny O'Brien Lynch. She did not have a birth certificate, so she picked her own birthday. She knew it was in February so she picked Washington's Birthday for herself. She was born in Bay City, Michigan. Her parents had gone to Michigan in a Conestoga wagon with her older brother [Charles] and she was born out there.
BG: Do you know why they went there?
BF: It was my understanding that they were looking for a better life. There was a lot of construction there at the time.

BG: I forgot to ask when and where he was born.
BF: Grandpa?
BG: Yes.
BF: Grandpa was born in Erie in … 1887?
BG: What did he do?
BF: Grandpa Lynch was a tailor. He worked for his father, who was also a tailor. Great grandpa sent Grandpa up to Toronto, Canada to learn certain types of, I don't think it was style; it was more how to cut the material. He started out as a cutter, to learn how to finish the material and do a nice job [inaudible].

BG: What did her mother do?
BF: Grandma was a seamstress. She considered herself to be a master seamstress. She taught me how to make a pattern out of a piece of brown paper. She used to say she could make patterns just from looking at pictures in magazines. She worked for

the women who lived on "millionaires' row" which was 6th Street, behind our house at 420 West 7th.
BG: That's where they lived, 7th Street?
BF: Yes, 447 West 7th Street.
BG: Can you describe them? You told me about…
BF: Well, we didn't know Grandpa too well. Bob was only a few months old when Grandpa Lynch died. I was two. I had just turned two. I don't think Bill had any memories of him either.

Grandma was a very petite, tiny little thing, spindly arms and legs; she was only about five foot one. Grandpa was about five foot seven. My memory of Grandma was—when she was home she was in a housedress, with an apron on, and her stockings rolled down over her ankles, and slippers. Usually she wore slippers. Once in a while she would wear shoes instead of slippers. She always wore her hair long, and she braided it in a certain way, that it wrapped around her head like, like a crown made out of hair. However it was she did it, I tried to imitate it, but I never was successful. I'd imitate her when she did her hair.

I know when she was younger, she had a fever and lost all of her hair, and took it and had it all combed out and made into braids. I think that was [inaudible]. And she used to save her hair. She had a little dish on her dresser, and that was where she put her hair [inaudible]. She had mahogany colored hair; it was very rich. I used to use the braids and add them to my hair.

She was very tiny. She was always in the kitchen. When she went to church, or she went out anyplace, she didn't dress up. When she went grocery shopping, she always dressed nice to go grocery shopping. That was really the biggest thing that she did, was to go grocery shopping, at the A&P at 8th and Walnut. When she went to church at the cathedral, she always dressed very nice, wore a hat. She wore glasses.

I don't want to say that she didn't dress—you know, she didn't wear the dress of the day, but we didn't have the constantly changing styles. There's a picture that we have of Bill when he was a boy. He's got on a jacket, and it looks like a bombardier jacket, and a bombardier-style hat. There's also a picture of Dad wearing the same style hat. So styles didn't change that much. That probably helped Grandma and Eileen, as well as Mom, stay in style without having to spend a lot of money to be stylish.

BG: Did we mention who Eileen was?
BF: No, we did not mention Eileen, this was the first. Eileen Lynch was our aunt, of course on our mother's side. She always lived at home with Grandma at 447 West 7th. Mom and Dad didn't get the house on Kahkwa because it was too far away for Grandma to be able to walk to their house to be with them. So they couldn't have the house on Kahkwa. So that's how they ended up with the house on 7th Street. Grandma Lynch.

BG: So you actually lived across the street from her.
BF: Yes.
BG: So you got to see her a lot then.
BF: Yes, we saw her a lot. She was a very simple woman. She had an eighth grade education. She told me that her father took her out of school at that point of time, and set her up in the front room of their house on West 5th Street as a seamstress. Set her up in business.
BG: Her father was?
BF: Thomas O'Brien [inaudible].
BG: You said that was on West 5th Street?
BF: East 5th Street, excuse me. I'm pretty sure that's correct [inaudible].

BG: Do you know any stories; do you remember any stories that Mom told you about her family?
BF: Well she told me—she didn't tell me a whole lot about Jean dying, her sister. We did know that Jean died of diphtheria. It was very sudden, and there was really no funeral, because [?]. At that time, they had funerals in the house.
BG: When was this?
BF: I think Eileen was born in 1922?
BG: 1920.
BF: So it was 1922, because Eileen was two years old. It shook everybody, and it really shook Mom, because she said that Jean was good at everything she touched. It didn't make any difference. They used to play ball out in the back yard, when they lived on East 8th Street. They had a very large garden in the back on East 8th Street. Grandma had roomers. And Jean was just so good at what she did. Mom considered her to be extremely pretty. She didn't see her own beauty, she saw Jean's. Mom had thick legs, and she was heavy on the bottom. You can see it in some of her pictures [inaudible]. She wasn't good at running, she wasn't good at hitting the ball, she wasn't good at this, and she wasn't good at that. But Jean was good at everything, and Jean had gorgeous curly hair, and Mom's [end of side one].

[Side two]
So continuing with Jean, and Mom's feelings towards her, Mom said that she wished Jean dead. Now this is a child of five. She wished Jean dead, and then she died. That's really basically all. Grandma would not let Mom go to school after Jean died because Grandma felt that Jean contracted the diphtheria at Jones School. She went to Jones School. I don't know whether it was in the obituary, but I know I read that Jean was well liked at school. Her teachers liked her; her classmates liked her. It was a shock, for a young child to die like that, especially of diphtheria because what it does is [inaudible].

Going back to us, we were all, Mom used the word "incarcerated" at what became known as the "pest house" which was Lakeview Hospital, that became part of the Barber Center. It was a big building, and it was finally torn down after the year 2000. We had scarlet fever, and all three of us were in the hospital. We were not together.

BG: Now when you say "we," who are you talking about?
BF: Bill, Bob and I. We were hospitalized, all three of us. We were not together. The only time that I saw either one of them was at Christmas. We were in for Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Years, from the beginning of November through Valentines Day.
BG: How old were you?
BF: Five. I turned five while I was in the hospital. I had started kindergarten. We weren't allowed to see each other, and we were not allowed to see our parents either, the whole time we were in. I read a story about President Jack Kennedy, who was hospitalized with scarlet fever, but his father went to see him every day while he was in the hospital. He was in the hospital for months, the same as we were. Nobody ever explained why we were in the hospital for that length of time. I know that that was very hard on Mom. And it changed Bill. Bill became a different person after he got out of the hospital. He always did have a very belligerent side, but it got worse afterward. He was in special education for two years. He had to go to another school. He had to take a bus to another school.

What was the question you asked me?
BG: Just now?
BF: Yeah.
BG: I asked you how old you were when you were in the hospital.
BF: Well, I know I got a glimpse of Bob at Christmas time. He was obviously a preschooler. Oh, I know what it was. Bill and I were in school; we had started the school year. Now of course, we didn't get any education while we were in the hospital, and we were in the hospital for months on end, and when we got out, the school said that we had missed too much time and they wouldn't let us go back. We had to restart the next year, and I know Bill went through a lot with the kids saying he had flunked. But he didn't flunk. My mother in-law said, because I'm a year older than my sister in-law, she said, "Oh, you mean you flunked!" But no, I didn't flunk. It was circumstances that caused it, because at that time, kids could start school at age four [inaudible]. That wasn't easy for Bill, having to go to special education. I remember him slamming the door when he had to get up to go to school.

I also remember—you know, I was talking with my son in-law just the other day, because it's so cold out, and I remember getting frostbite, because Grandpa's house was across the street from a water reservoir, and we would go sledding for hours on end.
BG: Are you talking about Grandpa Gray?
BF: Yes, Grandpa Gray's house in Johnstown. Even here in Erie we would go out and play for hours, and I would get frostbite on my hands and my legs and my fingers. I don't think the boys got it. We had wool clothing that took days to dry. We would have to hang it up to dry because we didn't have a dryer. In the 1940s there was no such thing as a dryer. And we just went out and played. It wasn't like now where you have to guard your child, to keep your child from being stolen. We were allowed to go out and play.

We used to jump fences and run behind garages, everything else. We didn't—we weren't destructive, but we used to run the neighborhood; we went in people's back yards. It was always the edge of the back yard that we would run behind the garage. Garden Court was three blocks out from our house. There's not back yard to speak of on any of those houses, but there is a courtyard that's like a green in an English town. The center of it was like a racetrack, and we used to go out there and play a lot. The house on the corner was one of the Reed mansions, and it was empty. I used to go over there and play cowboy and Indian by myself (laughs). I was always the cowboy; I was never the Indians.

Dad built a fantastic porch and he did it because I fell through a hole in the porch at 420 West 7th Street, and scraped my knee and twisted my ankle. So he tore the porch off, and the next summer he built a fantastic porch, with a roof on it. It was more than twice as big as the old one. It had a fantastic roof. I used to straddle the railing, and that was my horse. Sometimes it was my ship (laughs). It was just a great place to play.

Oh what else? He got these tiles, black tiles from work. They were rubber. Mom poo-poohed him about putting them in the kitchen. Well he went ahead and did it. I don't know how he leveled it up. He bought some regular one-foot square yellow tiles, but they were thinner than these rubber ones, so I don't know how he got them so that everything was level. He positioned those; you know he did it all himself—he positioned those so he gave some color to the black; just intermixed. He had everything figured out so it all worked, and dishes would bounce off those rubber tiles. They sat on the porch for two or three years, that old porch, before he brought them inside. Dad did a lot. He put in a bathroom. One of the reasons he hated getting rid of the house—he hated moving, he hated leaving 420 West 7th, but of course it was torn down to build a convent.
BG: Is that why you moved?
BF: Yes, because the house was being torn down. And the Reed mansion, both of the Reed mansions, the one at 7th and Chestnut, and the one on 6th Street are part of "Lost Erie." And I know that Mom and I went around the corner to 8th Street and turned left at Chestnut, when they were in the process of tearing down the Reed mansion at 7th and Chestnut, and there was the gorgeous [?] staircase that went all the way up to the third floor. It was a gorgeous house. They had a sale [?]. I don't know about the house on 6th Street.

BG: Do you have any other memories of what Erie was like back then?
BF: Well, my girlfriend and I used to sit on the corner at 7th and Chestnut, and the neighbor there had a metal rail fence, so that you didn't trample the bushes. And we would sit on that, and count the cars going by, and what color they were. It was a game that we did. The first one that saw a [?] car. Neither of our parents had cars. We would count the cars.

Life was—it was compact. I mean, school was less than two blocks away, or two short blocks away, because our blocks are—there's a long side and a short side of the block. So we were two short blocks away from school. The drug store was across the street from the school. The dry cleaner was next door to that. There were two grocery stores on the opposite corner on the other side from school, and then across from that, so we had two grocery stores, but Mom wouldn't go to the A&P, she insisted on going to Vetrone's corner store. We shopped local in the 1940s and 1950s. I remember one time she sent me to pick up some groceries. She would call the order in to Vetrone's, and we would go and pick it up. I took Bill's bike. I don't know why I didn't take mine, but I took Bill's bike and he had overfilled the tire on the front, and the tire blew while I was riding to the grocery store, and I went over the handlebars. Of course, I was standing up to pedal his bike.

And we could walk to—we had a pediatrician—we could walk to his office. We could walk to the eye doctor. We always walked downtown; we didn't take the car downtown. There was no off-street parking, because you didn't need off-street parking. You walked. You walked to the library. Bill took my bike to the library and when he came home he was walking. He didn't bother to lock it up, and of course it got stolen. The library was one of our favorite places to go.

Our regular family doctor we did have to drive to because he was over on East 10th Street. He and Doctor Gannon both lived in the house where they had their offices. And somebody said to me [inaudible] "You were a patient of THE Dr. Gannon?" "Yeah, Dr. Gannon." That is one thing that I can tell you about Grandma's family. Her family had a house on 11th Street and the Gannons lived across the street from the O'Briens. I'm pretty sure that Norm, or Norbert, I forget what his name was, was a brother of Archbishop Gannon. And one of Grandma's sisters; I forget which one, dated Dr. Gannon, and he asked her to marry him. But she refused because she said he'd never amount to anything.

We could probably spend another couple of hours doing this.

BG: Sure, but I think we've covered quite a bit of ground here. If you don't have anything else you want to add right now we can wrap this up.
BF: Sure.
BG: This concludes the interview with Becky Fluegel. The interviewer was Barry Gray, and the interview took place on January 9, 2015 in Erie Pennsylvania.