

Interview with Dr. Frederic Helmholz
By Dr. Carolyn Stickney Beck
Coordinator, Mayo Historical Unit
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Dr. Helmholz: I remember asking Dr. Will whom he thought was the better surgeon. He said, "Well, I could do everything that was in the textbook." He said, "But with Dr. Charlie, if he got in a tight corner in an operation, he'd come up with a brand new way to do it.

Dr. Beck: And this was just the kind of casual...

Dr. Helmholz: Yeah, this was casual...

Dr. Beck: So in other words, what he was saying in public matched what he saying...so he really meant that.

Dr. Helmholz: He really meant that.

Dr. Beck: Oh, that's marvelous! I love that.

Dr. Helmholz: The other thing that I thought of was when they started talking about anti-Semitism. My dearest friend in medical school was a fellow by the name of Joe Lilianthal (sp?).

Dr. Beck: And medical school was...

Dr. Helmholz: Johns Hopkins. After the war he was doing some work I was interested in and we had done some together in early years, so I asked him to come out here 'cause there was a place in the physiology department.

Dr. Beck: On staff.

Dr. Helmholz: Yeah. I asked Joe "Why don't you come out and work with us." And he said, "I've been through it at Hopkins. I'm now on the faculty and the anti-Semitic stuff I've been through it and I'm not about to do it again."

Dr. Beck: So it was intense out there.

Dr. Helmholz: Yeah. I remembered then that when I was at the Massachusetts General and he was the Presbyterian in New York, he and his wife and Mary and I decided to go on a vacation together. WE decided to go to Bermuda. And over the phone I said to Joe, "I will get our reservations for us." There was this dead silence for a moment. He said, "Fred, you forget." He said, "There's not a hotel in Bermuda that will allow a Jew in the front door." So we had to rent a cottage.

Dr. Beck: And what year was this about?

Dr. Helmholz: This would have been in 1938 or 1939. Well anyway, I thought to myself “Well, gee whiz, I’m not aware of any anti-Semitism in Rochester, but I’ll talk to my father.” I said to my father, “Is there anti-Semitism in Rochester?” “Oh,” he said, “well Dr. Will is anti-Semitic.” I said, “What makes you say that?” He said, “You know when I came here, I brought Sam Amberg with me. Sam Amberg is a Jew. And one time when I was in the Cities, Dr. Will came up to me and he said, “Helmholz,” he said, “I understand that this fellow Amberg is a Jew.” I said, “Father, what did you do?” He said, “I let him have it!” I thought for a minute and I said, “Father, did Sam Amberg ever want for anything at the Mayo Clinic?” “Oh, no, no, he got along just fine. If he needed something he got it right away. Everything worked fine for him here.” I said, “Father, how do you suppose that happened?” Father thought for a minute and he said, “While that son of a gun!”

Dr. Beck: Oh I love it!

Dr. Helmholz: Because he knew that father would react and really give him the cold dope on Sam Amberg you see. He suddenly realized that Dr. Will didn’t care whether he thought he was anti-Semitic or not, all he was after was information! He really got it from father. I thought that might be an interesting....

Dr. Beck: Isn’t that an interesting story. So do you think we could, on the basis of that, that’s an example of how Dr. Will really did rise about some of the prejudices of the day?

Dr. Helmholz: Well I don’t think he even bothered with them.

Dr. Beck: Although at his dedication in 1921, his speech at the Cleveland Clinic, he makes some very negative comments about black Americans, but on the other hand, we have some very tender things about Tuskegee University, about, you know, it’s very interesting. So you don’t remember anything from your experience in the family that would suggest that either Will or Charlie was bigoted in any way.

Dr. Helmholz: Well, I think Dr. Will was impatient with people who didn’t do their jobs.

Dr. Beck: Whoever they were?

Dr. Helmholz: Yeah, I don’t care who it was. If Blacks weren’t performing, he would be critical.

Dr. Beck: There would be none of this affirmative action stuff.

Dr. Helmholz: But as far as the Jews concerned, he made the remark one time at the table. He said, “Well I know why we don’t like the Jews.” He says, “They’re smarter than we are and they work harder.”

Dr. Beck: Was that a family dinner conversation?

Dr. Helmholz: Yeah it was a family dinner conversation. So he simply understood why a lot of people don't like Jews. But he couldn't have cared less.

Dr. Beck: Interesting. Well, Dr. Helmholz, they weren't perfect and we don't want to deify these men, but do you think from your experience in the family, and I know there were some difficulties, on balance would you say that they were remarkable?

Dr. Helmholz: Well, first place, they were remarkable in that they cared about each other. When Dr. Will had to fire Rankin, Edith said she'd never come back.

Dr. Beck: Rankin's wife. She never did.

Dr. Helmholz: No, she never did. But it didn't break it down completely. It was tense there for...

Dr. Beck: The brotherhood.

Dr. Helmholz: The brotherhood.

Dr. Beck: But it recovered?

Dr. Helmholz: It recovered, yes. For instance, on the way, let's see, this would have been in 1939...

Dr. Beck: Right before they died.

Dr. Helmholz: No, it would be 1938. Mary and I came back from Rochester via California and we stopped in Tucson where Dr. Will had a house on one corner. While we were there, Dr. Charlie and his wife and Edith gave a cocktail party before dinner. And Edith, Dr. Charlie's wife, spiked a drink for Hattie.

Dr. Beck: Did Hattie ever drink?

Dr. Helmholz: Yeah, she'd drink but she didn't usually drink very much.

Dr. Beck: Did Will drink at all?

Dr. Helmholz: Yeah, sure. Do you know the story about why he said he didn't want to serve any more liquor?

Dr. Beck: Was it his father?

Dr. Helmholz: No. He had a dear friend who was a medical man who was staying with them one time. This dear friend of his was an alcoholic, and at the table they used to serve wine.

Dr. Beck: At the house.

Dr. Helmholz: At the house, yeah. It was probably here. This friend of his said, "You know, I haven't had had a drink for four years. I think I'll just try some." And Dr. Will said, "Not in my house." From that time on they didn't serve any alcohol.

Dr. Beck: What year do you think that was?

Dr. Helmholz: I have no idea.

Dr. Beck: Was it some time before he died? Maybe the 1920s?

Dr. Helmholz: I think so. That's what he said when somebody asked him about that.

Dr. Beck: Now he said he never smoked. As far as you know he never smoked?

Dr. Helmholz: I never saw him smoke at all. I never saw Dr. Charlie smoke either, but he may have.

Dr. Beck: Some place I saw stories about cigar smoking. Good times at Mayowood. But you never saw Dr. Charlie smoke.

Dr. Helmholz: No, I didn't. But I didn't see him very much. Dr. Will was more apt to be a practical joker than Dr. Charlie. He had a ready sense of humor, which you could see by some of those letters.

Dr. Beck: So that really struck you as authentically Dr. Will. That letter to Mrs. Carpenter was hysterical.

Dr. Helmholz: Yeah that certainly was.

Dr. Beck: Had you ever seen that before?

Dr. Helmholz: No.

Dr. Beck: Do you want a copy of the script, because I can give it to you.

Dr. Helmholz: That would be nice. Dr. Charlie was able to make something funny out of almost anything.

Dr. Beck: On an ongoing basis.

Dr. Helmholz: On an ongoing basis, because he was always looking for something to turn to a funny aspect. So they were entirely different in that.

Dr. Beck: Both humorous but in very different ways.

Dr. Helmholz: Very different ways. Dr. Will, I'm sure, could go days without laughing at something. Dr. Charlie would never pass up an opportunity to laugh at something. The other story that I might as well tell you is that I asked Hattie one time about why she gave this family dinner every Wednesday night.

Dr. Beck: The family dinner with the chocolate dessert?

Dr. Helmholz: She said, "That's our chance to get together because we know the men won't stay."

Dr. Beck: So it was a chance for the women to get together? So when the men go off to the hospital...

Dr. Helmholz: Yeah they could get along fine without them.

Dr. Beck: So Hattie and Edith got along pretty well?

Dr. Helmholz: Oh yes.

Dr. Beck: Wait a minute, this was just on Will's side of the family.

Dr. Helmholz: Yes.

Dr. Beck: So it would have been Hattie and her daughters, right?

Dr. Helmholz: Yeah, the daughters and others.

Dr. Beck: But this wouldn't be Charlie's side at all.

Dr. Helmholz: Well I didn't finish the story about Hattie and Edith over the drink, because you could tell that she had had enough. When we got back to their house and so forth, she remarked to Will, "Never had a better time in my life." And Mary burst into laughter.

Dr. Beck: Oh I love it. Do you remember what Will said?

Dr. Helmholz: I don't remember. She was not obviously tipsy, Edith didn't do that to her.

Dr. Beck: She was just loosening her up a little. You've talked often, Dr. Helmholz, to me in terms of Dr. Balfour's dedication to the Clinic, that maybe it got a little intense at

times and caused some difficulties with the family. Even so, even knowing what you've lived through personally as a member of the family, would you say that one of the greatest assets of the Mayo Clinic is that it's based in a family, that it grew from...do you see the family thing ultimately as a positive influence here?

Dr. Helmholz: No, I don't. I don't see family as being important. I think that the leadership of two people is important.

Dr. Beck: Two people who are bonded to each other.

Dr. Helmholz: Yeah, bonded too each other.

Dr. Beck: So you happened to be family.

Dr. Helmholz: Yeah, happened to be family, because Dr. Balfour, for example, carried it too far. Actually, he did not carry it too far as far as the institution was concerned because he was a tremendous influence on the institution, but it made a hell of a difference to his family life. In other words...now I'm afraid that we could say that Chuck did the same thing. Charlie [Dr. Chuck's son] is a delightful guy, but he's not a surgeon, he's not a medical man, he never took any responsibility in his life. If you can imagine a guy on call going to a party in Chicago, that about says it. What a wonderful guy.

Dr. Beck: He's a love. He told me that he really wanted to be an actor, but he had to be a doctor. Well he should have been an actor, but a great actor.

Dr. Helmholz: If anybody of the generation before him suffered from the same thing, it was Joe. I don't mean young Joe, I mean old Joe.

Dr. Beck: Joe who died in the train accident.

Dr. Helmholz: See he should have been a farmer.

Dr. Beck: Oh really? He shouldn't have gone to medical school. Not that bright?

Dr. Helmholz: He was very bright and he had a wonderful way with people, but not medically, in other words, he did not want the responsibility. He wanted to get along with people, he got along just beautifully with people...

Dr. Beck: Like young Charlie, Chuck's Charlie.

Dr. Helmholz: That's right.

Dr. Beck: I don't want to put words in your mouth here but could we say that the genius of the Mayo family, whatever that was, how they loved each other or in their intellectual capacity, whatever, there would be no Mayo Clinic without it, but the family suffered for

that because that institutional representation of the family came back to sort of turn upon certain people within the family.

Dr. Helmholz: I would say that once the institution got going, the people who appreciated the importance of the institution got some of them slightly off the track.

Dr. Beck: Dr. Balfour being one.

Dr. Helmholz: A good example.

Dr. Beck: Dr. Chuck would be the other one in trying to...

Dr. Helmholz: Chuck had too good a sense of humor. He was like his dad in that respect and therefore, he never got off the track.

Dr. Beck: He was a decent surgeon, wasn't he?

Dr. Helmholz: He was a very good surgeon.

Dr. Beck: He had a great personality?

Dr. Helmholz: That's right. Where he got off the track was that he thought that his son should be a doctor come hell or high water.

Dr. Beck: And at the Mayo Clinic.

Dr. Helmholz: Yeah. He got him into college when damned few colleges would have taken him.

Dr. Beck: You're talking about just at the undergraduate level.

Dr. Helmholz. Yeah, sure. His marks were horrible.

Dr. Beck: At St. Olaf.

Dr. Helmholz: No, he got him into St. Olaf and then he got him into medical school when no medical school in [their] right mind would take him?

Dr. Beck: Was that at Penn?

Dr. Helmholz: I don't know. But Chuck pulled strings to get him into medical school. Then he got him a fellowship here when he shouldn't have been accepted. I don't know whether if Dr. Balfour had still been head of the Foundation whether he would have accepted him.

Dr. Beck: Dr. Priestley was the one who had to deliver the bad news, right, and was probably shepherding that decision.

Dr. Helmholz: The fellow from Chicago, Victor Johnson. Victor Johnson didn't know any better than to accept Chuck's son.

Dr. Beck: So what you're saying is that Dr. Balfour wouldn't have accepted...

Dr. Helmholz: I don't know.

Dr. Beck: It's questionable.

Dr. Helmholz: I don't know. Dr. Will wouldn't ever have accepted him.

Dr. Beck: You know he wouldn't have, because look what he did with Dr. Rankin. What you're saying is that Will, at least, had the wisdom and the courage to know where to draw the line between the family and the practice and he wouldn't compromise his principles.

Dr. Helmholz: Yeah. He and Dr. Charlie had decided that surgery was a form of treatment and that you came here and you saw a medical man and if a medical man thought the surgery was indicated, they would call the surgeon.

Dr. Beck: This was really revolutionary in the practice of surgery, I mean, it was totally out of bounds, wasn't it?

Dr. Helmholz: Nobody practiced that way and Dr. Rankin wanted to see his patients directly and they said, "I'm sorry, that's the way we do it here. If you want to do it that way, go someplace else," which he did, and made a wonderful success of his clinic in Kentucky, but not here.

Dr. Beck: Going into that story again, and we had talked about this before, how do you think Dr. Will found out that Dr. Rankin was doing...did Dr. Rankin have an arrangement with some of the desk attendants or the registration people?

Dr. Helmholz: Several of the surgeons have done that.

Dr. Beck: That's an old trick.

Dr. Helmholz: That's a great trick. But there was just to know who was up for surgery so they could get them, but Dr. Rankin wanted to go farther than that. He wanted to see the patients directly.

Dr. Beck: Did he actually pull it off or was he just talking about doing it?

Dr. Helmholz: No, just talking about it. He was complaining about the fact that he couldn't.

Dr. Beck: Okay, and Will got wind of it?

Dr. Helmholz: I guess so; I don't know.

Dr. Beck: The point was that he was fooling a major principle and got the axe.

Dr. Helmholz: Yeah and Dr. Charlie agreed that this was not the way they were going to practice medicine.

Dr. Beck: This is even more remarkable than I thought because I thought he was actually doing it. The fact that he was fired for just talking about doing it...

Dr. Helmholz: He may have done it; he may have told patients to come and see him and so on and I wouldn't put it past him to have done it.

Dr. Beck: Now have you seen the new book that's out, *Mrs. Charlie: The Other Mayo*? In fact you probably talked to Judith.

Dr. Helmholz: Yeah.

Dr. Beck: I thought she did a nice job on that book, don't you?

Dr. Helmholz: It was interesting, I went out to the reception they had out there and she gave me a copy at that time and I took it home and I started and I read it all the way through. I wrote her a letter and I said, "Your narrative ability is good; I couldn't put it down."

Dr. Beck: Plus she did such a nice job of just letting the letters show through. The thing that I thought was so remarkable is that the Rankin story came out in public, on the second time since Chuck did it in 1968. It seems like the Rankin family is over whatever bitterness that caused, because they were here for that reunion.

Dr. Helmholz: It worked out well for everybody, so there's nothing to say.

Dr. Beck: As his daughter Missy said, "My father wasn't suited for it anyway."

Dr. Helmholz: He went down there; he made a good clinic go. He was elected president of the AMA after that and so forth.

Dr. Beck: He probably made a ton of money, probably more money than he would have made here. So they're real happy!

Dr. Helmholz: I'm sure. It's just too bad that Edith never came back to sort of, have that generation say, "Bygones are bygones."

Dr. Beck: I imagine that that wound probably never healed for Charlie's Edith; that must have been a tough one.

Dr. Helmholz: She didn't come back when Dr. Charlie died; I remember Esther saying that she should have come back.

Dr. Beck: Of course she didn't come back when Will died, I'm sure.

Dr. Helmholz: No.

Dr. Beck: Let me ask, is there anything in this presentation that we just did which you think doesn't, either mis-conveys or doesn't fully convey the spirit of Will Mayo as you understood him.

Dr. Helmholz: This I gather was about Will Mayo. As that, it was fine. If it was about the Mayo brothers, it was too much Will. I think the intent was that this would be Will.

Dr. Beck: Yeah, it would be Will and also Will talking about Charlie. It's really through Will through Maud's eyes and Charlie through Will's eyes. We really don't have as much correspondence from Charlie. The interesting thing to do, if we could eventually do it, would be to piece something together that has Dr. Charlie and then the references are to Dr. Will. This is just a beginning piece.

Dr. Helmholz: For instance, that was what Judith was doing, letting you do that. I don't know whether something about him would be as good if you can't get something that shows his remarkable way of twisting things into something funny.

Dr. Beck: I think it was because Charlie was so much more spontaneous. Someone said he was dyslexic, but he didn't really use prepared remarks, and so what we don't have from Charlie are some of these wonderful speeches that Will gave. Charlie didn't do that; he would tell stories. So that's why it's going to be harder to do this for Charlie, unless we just do a dramatization and create a character based on what we know about him, which would be different from this.

Dr. Helmholz: Whether you can get enough information, I don't know. I don't know whether his letters show this.

Dr. Beck: Well they don't and we don't have as many of them. But it's an interesting challenge but I think we should make a stab at it. Jarry's (Dr. Richardson) finding a lot of things; he may come up with something. We just may have to do it. In a certain way, we had to do it because of the nature of the material, but to listen to Dr. Will reading the letter about his brother from another physician, I just think that is so touching, that one from Dr. Fox. Isn't that the most beautiful story?

Dr. Helmholtz: Sure. That could be the starting of another program?

Dr. Beck: Then we focus on Charlie.

Dr. Helmholtz: This guy he was talking about in that letter.

Dr. Beck: Here's the guy; here's my little brother.

Dr. Helmholtz: He was much the more attractive man.

Dr. Beck: Who was?

Dr. Helmholtz: Dr. Charlie?

Dr. Beck: Attractive, you mean in personality?

Dr. Helmholtz: Yeah, to be with him. He was warm and so forth. Dr. Will was reserved and you didn't feel that you got close to him, and you felt immediately that you got close to Dr. Charlie. He would take something you said and give it back to you in another term which would tickle you and that just brought you into his, I'm his friend.

Dr. Beck: Can you imagine how his patients must have felt? It must have been just amazing to be his patient.

Dr. Helmholtz: Joe had that same thing with patients. They used to send difficult patients to Joe.

Dr. Beck: He was killed at 32 [so he was] maybe on the staff for four years or something. But he had that. I think young Charlie had that same warm, lovable...

Dr. Helmholtz: Yeah he did.

Dr. Beck: Tell me something else about them. I figured this from pictures and from what people say. When women come into the Historical Suite and they see that picture of Will Mayo where he's sitting with Charlie and FDR, women just think he is drop-dead handsome. Was he as handsome in person as he is in his pictures?

Dr. Helmholtz: Yes, I think so. It's interesting that Charlie was not as handsome. I would say this: that if you saw, let's say there was something going on in the ballroom in the old days, you would say "There's a very handsome man," but if you went up and the two of them were there, it wouldn't be long before you'd be talking to Dr. Charlie.

Dr. Beck: Did Will have a major birthmark on his face?

Dr. Helmholtz: Not that I remember.

Dr. Beck: Did he have, in his younger years, did he have a fairly high-pitched voice? You don't remember that. He was fairly nattily dressed most of the time, well turned out?

Dr. Helmholz: Very carefully dressed.

Dr. Beck: Very pressed, neat and shoes polished, and Charlie was just the old farmer?

Dr. Helmholz: That's right.

Dr. Beck: That really is true?

Dr. Helmholz: Sure, it's true. Did I ever tell you the story about Hattie? One time after Will died, I said to Hattie, "What about the way the Clinic went and so forth? Did you know what was going on?" "Oh," she said, "Dr. Will always tried it out on me first."

Dr. Beck: To see what she'd think, if he had a new idea?

Dr. Helmholz: Anything that came up he tried on her. She would tell him what she thought and that was that. Both DR. Will and Dr. Charlie died the same year. Everybody said, "Isn't it too bad about Hattie? She will die on the vine." And this is the answer to that. She was in on everything. She knew what was going on.

Dr. Beck: According to the *Mayovox* obituary on Hattie, he called her "his guiding star." I don't know if that was in private or publication or whatever, but that kind of fits.

Dr. Helmholz: It fits exactly, because he would, in the bedroom or wherever, he would try it out on Hattie and Hattie would let him have it.

Dr. Beck: Now this would have had to do with organizational things; he wouldn't be talking about surgical technique or anything, but you're talking about the way the Clinic was organized.

Dr. Helmholz: I'm talking about the way the Clinic was organized and so forth, and they evidently had a terrible time, she warned him about firing Rankin, so they evidently discussed that at great length.

Dr. Beck: So she kind of did a preliminary bombshell for him and tested him out.

Dr. Helmholz: That's right. When he died, she went on to her other interests without worrying about it, particularly, because she knew that she was in on it all.

Dr. Beck: Isn't that amazing. People used to say that about my parents; my father was such a dominating person and they thought mother was the...well let me tell you who was running the family. There's a story that Phoebe Marks told me which is so tender

and every time I see the picture of Will with Phoebe on his laps, it was the surgeons, I just want to cry. Phoebe Marks told me that when her mother was born and was about one year old, at that time I think the Mayos had lost three babies, two or three. But they lost a number of babies, two or more babies in a row, like three babies in five years or something.

Dr. Helmholz: Diphtheria.

Dr. Beck: Was it Diphtheria?

Dr. Helmholz: Yeah.

Dr. Beck: Oh you know that.

Dr. Helmholz: That's what Hattie told me.

Dr. Beck: What Phoebe Marks told me was that her mother started, when she was one year old, to get very ill. I don't know if she was close to death but she was very ill. Whatever they were trying here wasn't working and it was a visiting clinician, this is Phoebe Marks's story, it was a visiting clinician who made a suggestion to Dr. Will about treatment; I think it was even a change in the diet, but it was some treatment suggestion and young baby Phoebe survived. I think I have this right. I've always thought that if that story's true, I've always thought that maybe there's a meaning why Dr. Will had Phoebe on his lap in that picture with all these visiting clinicians because it was the advice of a visiting clinician that had saved her life. Had you ever heard that story?

Dr. Helmholz: No, I never heard that story but it's a good one.

Dr. Beck: It's a great story. I think that I will go back over my transcriptions with Phoebe and maybe go back to her, give her a call and see if I can get it a little straighter than that. Isn't that a beautiful story?

Dr. Helmholz: That's a beautiful story.

Dr. Beck: So I see that picture with Phoebe on Will's lap and I so love that picture.

Dr. Helmholz: I don't know whether you knew, but Diphtheria was something that most kids, it happened, whenever it got going in the community, lots of kids would get it.

Dr. Beck: Did a high percentage die or not?

Dr. Helmholz: A high percentage died. They got a croup and sometimes they had to do tracheostomies, so that two out of three dying, that's about the average. Those were bad days.

Dr. Beck: So it wasn't unusual for a couple to lose that many [children]. The point was that even though a lot of children were dying, it couldn't have been any easier for the parents. Anyway, maybe I can clarify that.

Dr. Helmholz: I'm sure that both Dr. Will and Dr. Charlie would be listening to the people who came and went and so on.

Dr. Beck: They probably talked about all kinds of things.

Dr. Helmholz: Sure, and they would certainly not be above using anything anybody suggested.

Dr. Beck: They were open in that way.

Dr. Helmholz: That story about the young guy and the woman who was bleeding; that was a good one.

Dr. Beck: Isn't a beautiful story? Not just the story but the way he tells it about those bright sparkling eyes, and he's a good narrator.

Dr. Helmholz: Plus the fact the business, it was typical of Dr. Will in his early years the way they went around the country would actually intrude on people to find out what they were doing. They were accepted, certainly, but they weren't to be turned down. I can see them saying, "What are you doing tomorrow morning? Oh you are, can I come?" That was a remarkable thing.

Dr. Beck: To be open both ways: to want to learn from other people, to want to teach other people, to be open about it.

Dr. Helmholz: Yeah but this business of one staying here and one going out and then doing this...

Dr. Beck: A little dance and that's the way they did it, didn't they?

Dr. Helmholz: Sure. You keep things going at home while I learn and then you're next.

Dr. Beck: A rare event if they were ever out of town at the same time, didn't happen very often.

Dr. Helmholz: That's right. It's almost unbelievable that they had a joint account.

Dr. Beck: I think that it must be true that they did. It's talked about.

Dr. Helmholz: Certainly it's been talked about again and again and again, and, of course, when they gave the money to create the Foundation it came from both of them.

Dr. Beck: It nearly split the family up with Christopher Graham and all that. It must have been gruesome for the family to go through that. Poor Edith was upset again, she was upset about that and she was upset about Rankin. Apparently she must have forgiven Dr. Will for all of this or maybe she knew that he was kind of the fall guy. Wasn't she quite tender with him? Of course, she only lived about three or four years after he did. Was there any lingering any tension between Will and Edith?

Dr. Helmholz: No. She knew Dr. Charlie and she loved the man to pieces and she realized that he couldn't get along without Will and therefore, she couldn't get along without Will. If Dr. Charlie had split the family, she would have gone with him.

Dr. Beck: She was stuck with Will?

Dr. Helmholz: Since he stuck with Will, she did.

Dr. Beck: This is not for the public record but I'm just curious to know, rumor has it that Dr. Charlie was quite the womanizer. Is that true?

Dr. Helmholz: I have know idea and I don't care.

Dr. Beck: Exactly, but you know, people keep asking me that and there's all these stories about it and I thought, you know...

Dr. Helmholz: I don't know; I think if Edith hadn't been such a strong person it might be possible, but since she was the way she was, it's not probable. I don't have the vaguest idea.

Dr. Beck: Well there had never been any rumors about Will in this regard.

Dr. Helmholz: No, that's right. If he did anything like that, he would have been so careful. I just have no idea about that kind of thing.

Dr. Beck: It's interesting the questions that people keep asking me. It's the alcohol, the smoking and the womanizer thing, and I think it's because these men have become larger than life in history and people want to know "were they human?" Maybe if we start doing more of these portrayals that show the fully human dimensions of these men that these questions won't come up as much. Because we're trying to show that they weren't perfect.

Dr. Helmholz: I don't think they'll stop coming up. The way that our presidents act and here are guys that are just as great in their way and so forth...

Dr. Beck: There's got to be something wrong with these guys; you know what happens with power.

Dr. Helmholz: I can imagine many women throwing themselves at these two guys.

Dr. Beck: Well I can too, just watching how people respond to this picture of Will Mayo, I think to myself that he had to have had some woman after him. And I think Charlie, not by virtue of his looks but the sheer force of his personality would draw people in. Plus the powerful position of a physician; power attracts. You put those two things together and I'm sure there were a number of women who had designs on them.

Dr. Helmholz: Did I tell you the story of this friend of mine who came to Rochester and asked me, "Did Dr. Will and Dr. Charlie and Dr. Plummer realize how important they were?" I said, "I'll take you out and show you there houses and that tells you. It isn't just anybody who'd build a house like this." That's one thing that as years went on all three of these men realized that they were doing a hell of a job.

Dr. Beck: Do you think it was, you know, the stories we are that Will and Hattie built this house knowing that they would give it to the Foundation. That sort of fits with...you think...

Dr. Helmholz: No, he built the house because Hattie wanted him to. Hattie wanted to design a house.

Dr. Beck: So maybe this whole thing about they built the Foundation House to give it a way is a load.

Dr. Helmholz: They built it because he wanted a big house. So did Henry Plummer and so did Dr. Charlie.

Dr. Beck: But Charlie wanted to build his own. It's falling apart but he's got his big house.

Dr. Helmholz: I think that if you take this house and Dr. Charlie's house, this is like the two men.

Dr. Beck: The houses are the personalities.

Dr. Helmholz: This house [the Foundation House] was built for the ages. Dr. Charlie, "I'm going to have a good time making this house!" So it falls apart, who cares. He just had the time of his life designing it.

Dr. Beck: And puttering with it.

Dr. Helmholz: Hattie had the time of her life designing this.

Dr. Beck: So they were kind of toys, kids at play.

Dr. Helmholz: Yes. Hattie also then designed the house that she built out at Tucson.

Dr. Beck: Was that the ranch or the little one?

Dr. Helmholz: I don't know which one, but anyway, she showed me some blueprints she was working on.

Dr. Beck: From the outside looking in, it looks like it must be truly a privilege to be part of the Mayo family.

Dr. Helmholz: Well, you didn't realize it at the time.

Dr. Beck: Because of some of the downsides.

Dr. Helmholz: Yeah, sure. These were nice people. The reason Judith talked to me about Edith's veil was that I was terribly in love with Esther and I used to go out there all the time, and Esther was always late and so I would sit and talk to Mrs. Charlie. She was a great gal. I can remember one time when she said, "You know Fred, Esther's not going to wait for you." She was warning me.

Dr. Beck: Was Esther a beauty?

Dr. Helmholz: No, she was crazy.

Dr. Beck: She was like her dad!

Dr. Helmholz: That's right. Mrs. Mayo said to me, "She won't wait for you, but for goodness sake don't make the mistake of changing what you want to do to reign her in and marry her before you've done what you want to do." This was very good advice, you see, because you can imagine saying, "Well, I'll give up this business of being a doctor, I'll go into business so we can get married right away."

Dr. Beck: So she wasn't willing to wait through that period of training and not a lot of income; she didn't have the patience to be a young doctor's wife. She wanted the high life?

Dr. Helmholz: Well, she was ready and I wasn't.

Dr. Beck: Were you about the same age?

Dr. Helmholz: No, no, she was older than I was. Edith knew what was going on; she was on to things.

Dr. Beck: She was smart lady.

Dr. Helmholz: Yes she was. Esther was crazy. After she died, I had sent her tapes of the records that we used to listen to and so forth while she was dying of cancer...

Dr. Beck: How old was she when she died?

Dr. Helmholz: Maybe late 60s.

Dr. Beck: And who did she marry?

Dr. Helmholz: John Hartzell?

Dr. Beck: Is Hartzell Schaff on staff here related to that family; do you know the heart surgeon?

Dr. Helmholz: I don't think so. I don't know though. Anyway, the kids knew that I had written to her and they knew that I was interested, so after she died they wrote me a letter, the young John wrote me a letter. He said, "The day before she died, she called us in, her three kids," she said, "I've been wondering what you ought to do with me. I've decided. I just as soon not be put into the ground next to John. Worms," she said, "worms. I've always thought it would be nice to go up in a cloud of smoke, but I've decided, surprise me."

Dr. Beck: That was totally Esther?

Dr. Helmholz: That was Esther. I broke into laughter and cried all at the same time.

Dr. Beck: So Esther is Judith Hartzell's mother-in-law.

Dr. Helmholz: She and Marion Braasch were great friends. When my younger brother got married, they helped my mother put on a show at the country club. It was the party before their marriage and so forth. These two crazy gals really...but they were fun. (tape shuts off). It must have been worrisome for Dr. Will and Dr. Charlie to see it grow so rapidly and I don't know, I sort of feel myself that had I been they, I would have said, "It's getting away from me!"

Dr. Beck: Have you read Dr. Braasch's book?

Dr. Helmholz: No, I haven't.

Dr. Beck: He talks about how Will, there's a phrase in their about Dr. Will had to be talked into building more buildings. He didn't want it to grow so much. The circus day crown, this can't keep on. I think they were in disbelief, because they never set out to form a clinic really. I mean, they didn't sit down at a table and design this thing, it just kind of happened, didn't it?

Dr. Helmholz: I guess so. See Dr. Will came to Evanston to talk to my father to start Pediatrics so that they were not about not to try and round out...

Dr. Beck: Once it got going.

Dr. Helmholtz: They meant to have it a complete practice of medicine.

Dr. Beck: Do you think it would be safe to say when they realized they had a clinic on their hands, they decided they were going to make it a good one?

Dr. Helmholtz: Oh I'm sure.

Dr. Beck: I guess we'll never know.

Dr. Helmholtz: They were always looking at what was going on other places so that they could see that the practice of medicine needed cooperation. Even back then they could see that it was out of hand for any one guy to know everything.

Dr. Beck: That was 1905 when he said that. That was 100 years ago, almost. What would they think if they came back here now, and then went to Jacksonville and Scottsdale? Would they believe it?

Dr. Helmholtz: They'd go into the laboratories and see these people outlining the genome and arguing about whether we should clone a human!

The End.

L:\MHU\Oral Histories\Helmholz Interview April 3, 2001