

Chapter 01 – Introduction

Announcer: In the late 1930s, women basically had four career choices – nurse, secretary, hairdresser, or teacher. Mary Helen Stanley decided to follow in her aunt’s footsteps to become a teacher. She began her career as a high school speech and English teacher and later joined the faculty at the University of Tulsa, where she taught speech and organized the university’s first debate team.

After taking more than a decade off to get married and devote her time to being a wife, homemaker, and mother of three, Stanley was forced to re-enter the workforce when her husband, Bob Stanley, whose family owned Stanley Funeral Home in Tulsa, died in 1959 of lung cancer.

Mary Helen obtained her funeral service license and became a funeral director, becoming the oldest woman funeral director in Oklahoma when still working at the age of 85.

Stanley co-founded Oklahoma Parents Without Partners. In the early 1970s, she started the first grief counseling class at Boston Avenue Methodist Church in Tulsa.

She is a member of the Oklahoma Funeral Directors Association and was named Oklahoma Funeral Director of the Year in 2002.

She was 101 at the time of this oral history recording on October 13, 2022.

And now listen as Mary Helen Stanley tells you her life story on the oral history website Voices of Oklahoma.com.

Chapter 02 – 6:10

Farm Living

John Erling (JE): My name is John Erling. Today's date is October 13th, 2022.
Mary, would you state your full name please?

Mary Helen Stanley (MHS): Mary Helen Stanley.

JE: Where are we recording this interview?

MHS: We are in my condo, a gated community in Tulsa.

JE: Your birthday please.

MHS: It is July the 19th, 1921.

JE: Making your present age...?

MHS: 101 and three months.

JE: (chuckling) When you turned 100 you threw a big party didn't you?

MHS: Oh, yes I did.

JE: And where was that?

MHS: Out at Oaks Country Club.

JE: And did anybody show up?

MHS: Yes we had – we paid for 111 people.

JE: Yeah, yeah. And obviously every – do people – one of your big questions probably is: “Did you ever expect to live this long?”

MHS: No, I did not. In fact, I had a birthday when I was 90, and I was surprised then. And then when it was 100 I thought, “My gosh, what have I done to

get to be 100?" And now at 101, I want to say, "Okay, what's my goal now? It's 105."

JE: Okay, good. And by all looks of you and your beautiful dress and jacket here – which is purple and all. You look very nice.

MHS: Thank you. I appreciate that, particularly at this age.

JE: (laughing) Well, we'll talk more about your age later. Where were you born?

MHS: I was born on a farm west of Henrietta.

JE: On a farm. Did you have electricity and all that?

MHS: No, we had no electricity. We had no plumbing. We had no gas, everything was rather primitive.

JE: So, what would be your earliest memory of living there?

MHS: Well, my mother and father were just visiting there on Friday night because all the family came from "town," as we called it – which was Henrietta – out to the farm which belonged to my grandparents, and they sat around them and played dominoes.

We all talked and all at once, my mother went into labor and I was born there on the farm the next day. But I did not live there at that time.

JE: You grew up there, near –

MHS: Later. Later when I was about seven, I guess. My mother divorced my father because he was an alcoholic and, you know, in those days – in the 1920s – women just didn't do that. Well, she did. She was very progressive. And we moved back out to the farm and I lived there until 1936.

JE: Your mother's name? What was her name?

MHS: Grace, Grace Wampler Holloway. She married West Holloway.

JE: And did she – where did she grow up?

MHS: She grew up in Mound City, Missouri.

JE: What was her personality like?

MHS: Mother was quiet – I don't know how she got me – mother was quiet and reserved, had a very sweet smile and when she spoke you better listen because she didn't talk that much.

JE: How old was she when she died?

MHS: She was 94.

JE: Alright, then your father's name...

MHS: ... Was West Holloway. They were divorced, as I said, when I was about seven and I – he just dropped out of my life.

JE: So you don't have any–

MHS: No, I don't have many memories of him at all.

JE: And you don't know how old he was when he died either?

MHS: I don't. M-mm (in dismissal). No.

JE: Did you have brothers and sisters?

MHS: No, only – no siblings.

JE: So your longevity may come down from your mother perhaps?

MHS: I think it probably does. Her family was German and my father's family was British. Pretty good mixture.

JE: Yes, it is. So your education and your elementary schooling? Where did you go to school?

MHS: I went to school in Henrietta.

JE: And the elementary, was it a one-room schoolhouse?

MHS: No, no, no. Oh no, it – (laughing) No, I'm not that old.

JE: Well, I talked to a lot of people who are younger than you –

MHS: No, no, it was a regular little school building with – and the various grades, had different rooms.

JE: Elementary and then high school?

MHS: High school, graduated In 1938 and then went to East Central State Teachers College, which was in Ada it's now called a university.

JE: In high school, did you participate in organizations?

MHS: I did, after my mother married – she married an old sweetheart in 1935 and we moved to town and at that point I got to be involved in everything because otherwise it was riding the bus back and forth. So I was involved in social activities as well as speech, debate –

Oh, I loved debate. Just really enjoyed debating and extemporaneous speaking, oratory, all of those things.

JE: You loved to be on stage, didn't you?

MHS: I did.

JE: But if you love debate, does that mean you love to argue, too?

MHS: Oh, definitely. If I know I can win.

JE: Right. Did you, in high school – did you work any in high school? Did you have a job in high school?

MHS: Only one christmas. I worked at TG&Y

JE: Oh really?

MHS: Or maybe it was called Crest – I don't remember. But I got a dollar a day, and I worked for a week and I took my \$7 and spent it all there for Christmas gifts.

JE: Well you were being nice to give it to other people then, apparently. Don't you remember five and dimes like Woolworth and Kresge's. Right?

MHS: Oh yes, yes.

Chapter 03 – 3:45 Depression / Dust Bowls

John Erling (JE): You know, the Dust Bowl days were 1930 to 1936. Great Depression, 1929. Stock market crashed in 1939. You were between 10 and 16 years old when–

Mary Helen Stanley (MHS): I was 16 when I graduated from high school.

JE: Right. And did you experience anything about the Great Depression?

MHS: Oh, of course we all did. Yes. When my mother was still married, she sent me to town one time to buy a loaf of bread and gave me a dime. And I went to all the stores until I found one that I thought was fresh enough, and I gave him a dime and came home.

After we moved out to the farm, it was self-sufficient. We had chickens, we traded eggs to other people for milk. It was – I've forgotten what they call it at those days. But you all got together 'bout September and canned, canned foods and you also canned meat. And that's what you had during the winter.

JE: Well, by living on the farm, you had it much better than those who lived in the city during–

MHS: I think we did, because all of our food was right there in front of us. All we had to do was work, and we did.

JE: And – but the Dust Bowl –

MHS: It was bad.

JE: Did that affect you where you lived?

MHS: Yes, we didn't have it as badly as they did out on the west. Yeah, back on the Panhandle. It was terrible, but we knew it. Yes, it came through.

JE: Well, Henrietta is here in Eastern Oklahoma. So – but you do remember the dust and maybe blowing in?

MHS: Oh, yes. I mean, if you wanted to keep a clean house, you dusted two or three times a day. Dust came from Kansas. We sent it to Texas. Then Texas sent it back to us.

JE: Right. You know the 1921 race massacre – that was just happened when you were born.

MHS: Yes.

JE: And I was just wondering in your lifetime, when did you first hear about something that happened in 1921?

MHS: I really don't remember. But, when I was in rotary here, one of my rotarians had pictures and later he dedicated them, I think to TU, and also to the city. But he had more pictures of the so-called riot, I don't call it a massacre.

There weren't enough people killed to be a massacre. He said that – as far as he knew – there were 11 and one of them was a white man.

JE: And then the college again – tell me where you went to college.

MHS: East Central State at Ada. Teachers College.

JE: Teachers College. Back then, women had only about four professions.

MHS: That's right.

JE: And what would they be? Like nursing –

MHS: Secretarial, nursing, teaching, and being a housewife.

JE: Right. So you chose not to be – your profession first to be a housewife?

MHS: No.

JE: And why did you choose teaching?

MHS: I think it was because in high school we had a teacher, his name was Hoggard. He was probably fresh out of college. But he was an excellent speech teacher. And I thought: if he can do it, if he can lead us this way, I'm going to learn to do that.

JE: And then you like to be performing and be in front of us anyway. So it led to that. What year did you graduate from college?

MHS: In '42.

Chapter 04 – 10:08

December 7th, 1941

John Erling (JE): Well then, before then was December 7, 1941 and Pearl Harbor Day. What do you remember about that day?

Mary Helen Stanley (MHS): Oh, I remember that I had been home for the weekend and I took the bus from Henrietta back to Ada, and when I got off the bus and got in a cab to go out to the university – to the school – the driver said, “Do you know anything about Pearl Harbor?” And I said, “Never

heard of it." And he told me what had happened.

So of course when I got to school, everybody was talking about it and we sat – and that – on the floor and the first floor of the dorm and watched Roosevelt as he told about this day of infamy.

JE: Yeah. Was it a scary feeling or you didn't understand?

MHS: We were shocked. And of course, by the next morning the men were lined up in order to get into the service; everybody was patriotic.

JE: Young men. Maybe some teachers too-

MHS: Oh yes.

JE: So then what was your first teaching job?

MHS: It was a – a consolidated school called Fox. I don't know whether it's still there or not, but it was right in the middle of the oil area and at night you could hear those oil wells. And if they didn't, it woke you up.

JE: So that was your first teaching job in 1942. I guess it would be right.

MHS: Yes.

JE: But did some of your students actually go to war?

MHS: Almost all the boys. If they hadn't already signed up, they did as soon as they graduated and I made a habit of writing to them and they wrote back, of course, you never knew exactly where they were.

And I remember one young man – I had written to him and I got my letters back in the pack and it was sent to me by his officer and he said, "I don't know who you are, but he was always so grateful to get your letters."

And he had been killed, of course. And the officer sent it back and he said "I'd like to know more about you." So I wrote to the officer for about two years and then I got those letters back because he had been killed.

JE: It would be an uncomfortable feeling for you to get those letters returned to you.

MHS: Yes.

JE: Still a little bit about music back then. Music of the 40s. Who did you like? It was a big-

MHS: Anything that was danceable. I love the rhythm.

JE: And I bet you were a good dancer.

MHS: I loved dancing. I still like to dance, if anybody has enough courage to ask me.

JE: And you are, as people should be reminded, 101 years old.

MHS: Yes.

JE: It's almost hard to believe that you are that old as I talk to you. But so was it Glenn Miller? And and –

MHS: Oh yes. And, of course, so many of them traveled overseas with their group – with their orchestras – and they played for the boys while they were in overseas.

JE: Do you recall a big band coming around here that you would –

MHS: I wasn't in Tulsa, I was raised in Henrietta and I stayed there. After the war – well, when the war was going to be over – I came to Tulsa one weekend because I had a girlfriend who worked for the Tribune and I went in to see her on Saturday morning and that's how I got a job.

The man who was in charge of that department said he had a friend who had just opened an employment office and that was the first one Tulsa had. It was called the Loveless Employment Agency because you had gone through something supported by the state to find a job. And so I talked to

him and I said, "Well I'll go over and fill out the form."

And he said, "No, no, I'll mail it to you." And I said, "Mr. Loveless, if you don't have anybody over there on the weekends to take care of prospects, you need me in your office." And he hired me without ever seeing me. And it was while I was in his office that Mary Clay Williams from TU, Dr. Williams, and Dr. George Small walked in.

I recognized George Small because my senior year in college – we had been in Kansas, I don't remember what university for speech tournament and my cohort and I had won the women's division of the department... of that tournament – and I remember him as one of the judges that last night and I recognized him and he recognized me.

So after they told Loveless what they wanted, they wanted somebody at TU who would be their office manager. I said "I want that job". So I went out, interviewed, and got the job. I said "Can I open – have a debate team?"

JE: At TU?

MHS: At TU. So I went over that Thursday evening at five o'clock, I had put a little note up and I had lots of people show up and some of my students later became judges, Judge Nelson that we had – Maksoud was one of them.

We had wonderful people out there and I taught for a year and a half and we even had a tournament the next year, a debate tournament there. So after that it just sort of died and went away.

JE: Okay, so then you ended up — you came out just to be an office manager, right?

MHS: Yes.

JE: But then you actually taught a speech course?

MHS: Right. And while I was doing that, Ben Henneke came in and said, "I want you to teach in the speech department." And I said, "Mary Clay – ask

her.” So he went in and she said yes. And while I was out there, Bob Stanley walked in one day – because in those days if the fraternities and the sororities wanted to have a party, it had to have it listed in the office – and he walked in to list at the KAs wanted to party.

And I saw him, and the next day he came back and said, “Will you go and have coffee with me?” And I said, “We don't go for coffee.” And he said “I'll ask Mary Clay.” So he goes in and asks her. She follows him out the door and she had her fingers up here in this little circle, it's okay to go out with him.

And he – we walked in the student union and the KAs were all lined up over here waiting. It seems that he had said “If I come back in here with her, you know that's the woman I'm gonna marry.” and they waited and we came in, sat down and had coffee. And I wrote to my mother that night and I said, “He doesn't know it, but that's the man I'm going to marry.”

JE: So you hit it off right away.

MHS: Oh, yes.

JE: Was he older than you?

MHS: No, no, we were both in July. In fact I was about five days older than he.

JE: And he had been in the service hadn't?

MHS: Oh, yeah.

JE: And he was back to – he was finishing his degree.

MHS: Yes.

JE: How long were you married? We were only married 11.5 years and he died of lung cancer in 1959. His family owned Stanley's Funeral Home.

MHS: Right, it had been started in 1909. And Bob had worked there before he went into service. And of course, when he came back and had finished

college we went to Dallas to mortuary school and he was down there for a year and got his license. Two licensed funeral directors and embalmers – and came back and went in with his dad and he worked with him, of course, until he died in July of 1959.

That's when he told me, he said, "I want you to do this." He said, "Don't try to do the embalming but be a funeral director." So after he died, I did. I got my license in 1960.

JE: Had you thought even all along that you'd like to be in the business?

MHS: Maybe, or well, no, not until then. But then of course I did. I wound up as a partner.

JE: And then you were with Stanley for how many years?

MHS: Well, Stanley's were sold in the end of 1995 and they re-hired my son and me as funeral directors after we had sold it. And then both of us left at the end of 2003 and went to work for Moore's & Four.

JE: You mentioned Dr. Ben Henneke. I have interviewed him for VoicesofOklahoma.com.

MHS: And he had a voice.

JE: He did. He was a wonderful man.

MHS: And where did he live then? Out of St. Simeon?

JE: Yes he did. He lived in St. Simeon's and TU today has a lot to thank him for for what he did – his work back in those years.

You and Bob had children?

MHS: Three.

JE: And who – what are their names?

MHS: The oldest one is Lynn. She was at Holland Hall for 28 years, she was head of their Phys Ed department for women and her name is Lynn.

And then the middle one was Lane or Delane and she lives in St. Louis at the present. And the youngest one is Bob, and he's a funeral director also. He owned a liquor store for almost 30 years. It was Collins – Collins out on Yale – and he sold it this last May.

Chapter 05 – 10:30 Dealing with Death

John Erling (JE): How did you – you had to deal with the death of your husband. You were around the funeral home and everybody's dealing with death. How did you deal with that? Was it because you've been around death?

Mary Helen Stanley (MHS): Well, I certainly knew what they were going through. I mean, you learned by experience and I understood how they felt because I had felt that way. The children – in fact, I did start a group and I don't know whether it's still active or not – and it was for children. In other words they – they experienced the same thing we do. They just don't know how to verbalize.

And I told the parents, “Your children have to have an opportunity to sit down and talk with you and with their siblings, cry a little, decide what they're gonna do. Because they're hurt as badly as you do.”

JE: But then you realized you had a special connection to young widows. And did you start recovery classes somewhere?

MHS: Yes. In 1974, I started in Boston Ave and it was called Growing Through Grief. And I held those once a week at Boston Avenue and then twice a month for two hours. I did that for 20-some-odd years. I was tired at that point. So I gave it up. Other people — people from other churches — came and sat in on some of them and they started in their churches, too.

JE: Okay, I know you can't go into it all now but if somebody is listening and maybe going through grief — just ... Briefly, what would you say to someone who is going through the grief right now? What would you say to them?

MHS: “All right, tell me what – why are you here?” And they would say, “Well, I lost my husband.” and I would say “Where did you lose him?” “What – what do you?” And I said, “I want to know what you mean by lost? You haven't lost a thing. He's in your mind. He's in your heart and he'll be with you for the rest of your life. He was the one who had an activity. He died. Now let's use the proper terminology.”

And from that point on, we did.

JE: We are, for some reason, I know – afraid to say “died” or “he is dead.”

MHS: Yes, and “death,” It's so – they ought to look at some of the books. I mean authors now – dark and death. Death tomorrow. I mean so many of the books using the word death in the title, it's more commonly used.

JE: You've helped hundreds and hundreds of survivors. I'm sure many have come back to you to say thank you.

MHS: And they have come back with another death. You know, repeats. Yes. And then when I started giving book reviews, they would show up at the book review and remind me that I had waited on their family back in 1993 at Stanley's. It took me a while to place them. But usually I did.

JE: Yeah, okay. Book review. Tell me about that.

MHS: Well I had done that when I was in college also. I made \$5 every time I did it. And then after Bob died, people... Well the – which one was it? Opera – gave me a book and said, “Will you review this for me?” I said, “I don't even know what this terminology means. I'm not an opera fan.”

But anyway, I did and that got me started in the 1960s and I got \$5 at that point too. But anyway, later on I would give a book – at least one a week –

and I read a lot but I have macular degeneration now, so that – it's very difficult to read. It cuts back on my activities.

JE: But you worked for Moore – Joe Moore.

MHS: Yes.

JE: And I have interviewed him, too, for VoicesofOklahoma.com.

MHS: Did you go to his office?

JE: I did.

MHS: Yes.

JE: I did indeed. And so you actually worked for him then didn't you?

MHS: I did. And then his son after him. Well, I had met his son Joe Pat because I knew Joe Pat when he was a little kid. That's Joe Pat Moore – Dr. Moore.

And then when he took over his father's business he came into my office one day and closed the door and he said, "I want to talk to you about something."

I said "Okay."

And he was asking me about different – he said, "Did you ever face this when you were at Stanley?"

I said "Yes, we did."

"And what was your reaction?"

So I told him. So he did that once or twice, but he took it over and I got out of the business completely in December of 2020. I couldn't see, and I told – I said, "Joe Pat, I can't see to make a contract. I can't see the lines. And you don't want anybody like that dealing with money. So I just said I'm retiring.

JE: You know, the funeral business is interesting because-

MHS: It's very interesting.

JE: And the emotions and to be around that all the time. Can that lead to depression among-

MHS: No, it didn't for me. No. And I don't think anybody that really goes into it and wants to do it. No, it is not. It's depressing when you see a family in grief. But you have to learn to handle that family. I don't think that I had a family that ever walked out crying or in grief because we talked about other things. They usually wound up laughing about something and that was a sign of a future.

JE: Right. Probably ended up laughing about stories about the-

MHS: Oh, yes, and something that we talked about. Yeah.

JE: Right. Aren't there different emotions of grief? Sad and even mad?

MHS: Oh, yeah. Anger.

JE: Anger, why the-

MHS: Anger is, well, to think that this happened to me and I'll say "It did not happen to you, it happened to your husband or it happened to your wife now. It's up to you how you're gonna handle this."

JE: Mhm. It's interesting how these observations came naturally to you because you weren't trained, but you just figured it out on your own.

MHS: Well, you know, when you experience it yourself, you learn a lot.

JE: Yes. To understand grief, you must have been there yourself. And that's what helped you through that. You know how to handle grief. We're never really ready to accept the loss of a loved one, whether-

MHS: You used the wrong term.

JE: I just did?

MHS: You did.

JE: What did I say?

MHS: You said loss.

JE: I did? Well, how do I say-

MHS: I'm correcting you.

JE: How would I have said that – the loss-

MHS: The death.

JE: Okay. The death. We're never ready to accept the death of a loved one-

MHS: Mark it on your – if it's written out there, you change it to death. So if you give it again, you're going to say the right word.

JE: Yes, teacher. Yes, teacher.

MHS: I taught a long time.

JE: Yes, you did. But sometimes we know that somebody is going to die and it could be six months or a year – going to die – and then or somebody dies suddenly. It's all – it's all the same, isn't it? Nobody's really prepared for that.

MHS: No, you're not prepared. And the sudden death also is shock. Because, "What do you mean? I said goodbye this morning when they went to work."

Where if they're under hospice – and hospice is wonderful – then you have tried to prepare yourself.

I had remarried after Bob died and was married for 15 years. I was with him

also when he died and when Bob died. I had written a chapter about that incident. And when you look into somebody's eyes and they are dying. It's like a shutter. A shutter goes over the eye, the inside and you realize there's nothing there. It's gone.

JE: What was the name of your second husband?

MHS: Mel Rippey.

JE: And you were married? How long again?

MHS: 15.

JE: 15 years, right. I'll bring something personal in here because my daughter Michelle died May 30th of this year.

MHS: That was a blow, wasn't it?

JE: And she – well, particularly since she was only 50 years old.

MHS: Oh, yes.

JE: And it was a sudden death. And so I've gone through some of these emotions and it's a weird feeling. We put up some pictures as a result of her death. And now when I look at those pictures, I'm beginning not to like them because I realized we put them there because of her death. Are you following me?

MHS: Yes, I do

JE: Right. Now, there are some other pictures that I'm gonna take out that are going to be easier to look at. But for some reason those pictures bother me.

MHS: Well, take them down and put up happy pictures. Pictures that will make you happy that you shared her life.

JE: And then I'm sure everybody asks why and they've said to you. But why, why should this – why should she happen to die?

MHS: Nobody can answer it.

JE: Nobody.

MHS: Nobody can answer.

JE: As of “Why should you be able to live to be 101?”

MHS: That's right. We don't know. I didn't plan it.

Chapter 06 – 8:30 Mary Helen's Own Death

John Erling (JE): You can talk easily about death. So what about your own pending death?

Mary Helen Stanley (MHS): Oh, I have it all arranged.

JE: Arranged?

MHS: Uh-huh. I have a pre-arrangement. I picked out the casket, I picked out the minister. But of course, Mouzon Biggs no longer does that; and I want it different now. Whoever is down at Boston Avenue, I want them to give a little bit of scripture and this is – I think it's Ecclesiastes where “everything has a season.”

JE: Yes.

MHS: Okay, they're gonna have a few things there then they're gonna turn it over, or they can do it, and they go down in the audience. “Does anybody want to say anything?” And it's going to be audience participation for the sermon. They're not going to have a sermon. And when it's all over he gets back up and says a little prayer and that's it.

JE: Why don't you want a sermon?

MHS: I don't think there's any need. You know, everybody has in a paid obituary that obituary you have to pay for it if it's in the paper, and I want it condensed and put on the back of my folder that's handed out to people. If they had – if they don't know me, they're not at the funeral; and they can read that if they want.

JE: The obituaries in the paper are expensive, if you want to put anything.

MHS: Oh, very expensive. You can, if you have – if you go to some of the places where they will cremate, you'll pay as much for your obituary as you went for your cremation.

JE: Isn't that something?. But you don't, you don't – Do you fear dying?

MHS: No. Why? Why should I fear? I mean, I no longer drive. I can't see well enough to drive and they sold my car. I do know that when they were selling it, I came in the house because I didn't want to see it leave. But it's gone. I don't drive. I have to rely on my family. I don't want Uber or anything else because you have no idea who's been in that car before you get in it and now with COVID and everything, I just don't care to share that. So I'm trying to learn to stay at home and be peaceful about it.

JE: And the way you said that – it's... it's a struggle. So what do you do with your day to keep busy?

MHS: Well I try to read – that's yesterday morning. I decided I was going to cook and I did. I made a huge thing of the sauce that goes with spaghetti and it's in the deep freeze. So if I have people over for dinner I got it all ready. All I have to add is the pasta.

JE: That's good. So television is not part of your life?

MHS: No. No. I watched one program and I have watched it for years and that's Wheel of Fortune. I can't keep up with them. I can't figure out what all that means – with four letters and they come up with what it is.

JE: Have – have you had any major health issues in your life?

MHS: Oh, yes, lots of 'em. I've had three cancer surgeries. The last one was in 2012. I've had spinal surgery and then I had – I fell and broke a hip. Hospital in Tulsa did the replacement. And they put pins in it, you could see on the x-rays, they looked like hair barrettes and one of them came unfastened and was sticking up like this.

And besides, it didn't work. So I went to Bone and Joint and they went in. I was allergic to the metal that was in those things. Oh, I was miserable and they took them out and replaced and put one of those things in there that all you see when you look at it is the white of the middle. Then later, the right hip, I had to have it done.

And then later, it was the left knee. The left knee became infected, so it was done again. But in a matter of about 3.5 years I had six major surgeries. Hips, hips, hips, hips, and two of them. And then I had a ruptured gallbladder and I had never heard of that.

They hadn't either, evidently, because it took them three days to decide that's what it was. But anyway, that's it.

JE: So, as we say, you're 101 sitting here. But it was a struggle to get here, wasn't it?

MHS: What?

JE: It was a struggle to get here.

MHS: Oh, Lord. Yes. But you know when people said, I'm gonna, "You have to go to the rehab now," okay. And I'd walk into rehab and they'd say, "What are you doing here again?" They recognized me from the time before that I had been there.

JE: Yeah. What is the worst thing about getting old?

MHS: Being invisible.

JE: Okay, explain that.

MHS: Used to, if you got in an elevator, and you were young and good looking, the men all looked you over. Now, you get on, you go to the back and you wait for the elevator door to close. Nobody even knows you're there. And it's the same thing wherever you go. The older you get, the more invisible you become.

JE: And that's sad, isn't it?

MHS: It is. It's sad.

JE: Do you think that our society has respect for old people that they should?

MHS: I think they respect them if they have to, but it doesn't mean they have to be friends. Now, the girl you talked to out here, she's quite a bit younger. And yes, she's my friend. Well, there's nobody out here that's as old as I am. I'm the oldest one out here now. And when I meet them, they act like they have to handle me with kid gloves and they don't. Yeah, because I don't handle them with kid gloves.

JE: No, but you are unusual. And so if anybody realizes this lady is 101, I better be careful with her. We don't realize that you are a strong person.

MHS: Sometimes I'm stronger than they are.

JE: Yes, you probably are. But so many of your friends are gone.

MHS: Almost all, I would say. There's one left that I worked with quite a bit and she called me two or three days ago. She's in St. Francis now and she has to either have – they gave her the option: pacemaker or these ablations that they go in and they shock the heart and the little areas.

And I said, "What are you going to do?" And she said, "Well, I don't know."

And I said, "The only one I can tell you about is the pacemaker." I said I'm on my second one. I said now my daughter has had this other – this ablation. She's had that done. And if you want her to call you and tell you how she feels about that, maybe that can help you make a decision on what you want. But I will call her again today to see if she's made that decision or if she has had it.

JE: You've gone to a lot of funerals, haven't you?

MHS: Oh yes. I would say in my last time that I have arranged hundreds of funerals. Now I can't go – well they don't have very few people have funerals now. They're going to say we're going to have a memorial service later.

JE: Right or just a graveside service.

MHS: And unless I have transportation, I don't get there

Chapter 07 – 5:16

Secret to Longevity

John Erling (JE): Is there any secret to longevity? Is there anything you did to live this long?

Mary Helen Stanley (MHS): I don't think so. Except I have always worked from the time we lived on the farm. Everybody had a job you do. It's farm work and it's hard work.

After Mother married again and I went to college – I paid my way through college. It was called NYA, National Youth. And that was one of the alphabetical things that Roosevelt came up with and I was in that and that I made enough money there to pay for my room and board. So I've worked and I would not know what it would be like to get up in the morning and say I have nothing left to do. I don't play bridge. Never learned to play bridge. I have no card sense at all.

JE: Do you have any hobbies?

MHS: Well, reading. And it used to be sewing, but now I don't see well enough to really sew. When my kids went to college – girls, their entire wardrobe were things that I had made.

I know that when the oldest one went to OSU, she came home and Thanksgiving, she said, “Mother, you know what they're wearing now they're wearing slacks and jackets or vests and skirts. Can I have one of those?” I said, “Look,” and I was making her two. Two. The second one was more dressy than the other. And I finished one of them, which was the slacks, the skirt, and the jacket before she left and went back to school. So I love to sew.

JE: But you must have been a good sewer because they weren't embarrassed by the fact it didn't it didn't look homemade. You were that good. But this idea of work – those of us – and I have that in me too. I have to have something to do. That's – that's what I've been doing here for 15 years. I've been – But we're fortunate to be born with that.

MHS: That desire to keep going. Keep moving to keep producing in some way.

JE: See, I just turned 81 a few days ago.

MHS: You're 20 years younger.

JE: And I feel like a child around you and I'm enjoying this.

MHS: Well, thank you son.

JE: But there are things you didn't do. You didn't smoke?

MHS: No. Well I did for a while. I know that you remember the Carson attractions that brought the theaters in here, Jackie – that was Dick and Jackie. Jackie was the woman. Jackie and I were very good friends. And she smoked up until the day she died and she would come over at the house and I'd say now Jackie, I don't have an ashtray out. I don't want anybody to smoke.

And halfway through the evening I'd catch her, she had brought her own ashtray and she was sitting there smoking but I tried it once again and it was – you know you take a drag or two and then all at once your heart goes bang, bang, bang and you don't realize that when you're on it – when you're smoking constantly. But it does affect the heart, at least it did with me. And I thought that's not it.

JE: So that's the reason you quit then.

MHS: Oh yes.

JE: But you didn't drink to excess?

MHS: Not to excess, but a day doesn't go that I don't have my scotch.

JE: Scotch at noon or before you go to bed?

MHS: No, before dinner, it's right over there. And I have a scotch and water while I am watching my favorite show. And then I have my dinner.

JE: Right. But then you didn't engage in poor eating. You're probably healthy eating.

MHS: Yes.

JE: And so that led to – and exercise? You were active?

MHS: No, I don't exercise. That's a dirty word. No, I never learned. I never appreciated exercise even when my daughter was at Holland Hall. And of course, she was in charge of their women's athletics. And even to this day – because I've traveled with her – when she gets up in the morning, she gets down the floor and she does go through the stretching exercises. I lie in bed and watch her.

JE: So you kind of take away everybody who preaches to live long. You gotta eat healthy, don't drink or smoke, but be sure you exercise, you didn't and

you made it to 101 without exercising. Well, I'm a runner and I still run and I'm gonna keep on doing it for sure.

MHS: I think that's marvelous that you're a runner.

Chapter 08 – 6:27

J.F.K.

John Erling (JE): Let's go back to things that happened in our country, like in the 60s: Do you have a memory of the day that President Kennedy was assassinated — November 22, 1963. What is that memory?

Mary Helen Stanley (MHS): I was at work and my – one of my daughters was at home that day, ill, and she was in my bed watching TV and she called me and said, “Mother, turn on the TV at work.” And I did and they were telling about it.

I was also the president of Broadway Theater League at the time and we were bringing in plays to Tulsa before celebrity club – what's it called now?

JE: It is. Celebrity Attractions.

MHS: Yeah, and so there it was. That whole weekend that was all you saw. In fact, it was further than that – but that was a beautiful funeral, well done. And that funeral home in Washington D. C. Is called the president's funeral home. All Presidents, if they live in the area, had gone through them.

And I remember little Kennedy saluting when the flag went by – when it went by – and it was then, of course, our plays canceled because nobody – nobody would go to the theater for some reason.

So they pulled in people that were just starting and one of them was Carol Channing. Carol Channing came to Tulsa as – she made up for somebody that didn't show up and I remember her down at the old theater on Brady street. She came out and she was gonna do that song that Marlena Dietrich had done, see what the boys in the back room will have and she

had on a negligee with a long train and she pulled it like this in the dust.

Oh, that stage was full of – dirty, dirty, dirty. And she started laughing. And so did everybody in the audience. And she said, “I’ll never come back here unless you clean up your stage.” And she also had Diamonds are a Girl’s Best Friend. And she threw the diamond bracelets out. And I was sitting with Jackie Carson down on the second row and I still have my diamond bracelet that I caught.

JE: Yeah, you switched to Carol Channing. Why? Why did you start talking about her? I didn’t understand. We were talking about president-

MHS: Well it was about because all of these plays were canceled after the assassination. They couldn’t after he died. I mean activities just stopped. Well you had people who had bought season tickets, what are you gonna do? And so we heard that this Carol Channing and okay, let’s try her. And then some others. So that’s how we filled in that year.

JE: Was that your organization? Broadway-

MHS: Broadway Theater League was started by the Carsons.

JE: Oh, I see.

MHS: Yeah. And that’s how we brought the – the Broadway plays into Tulsa. It was costly. But then after they built the theater down there-

JE: Performing Arts Center.

MHS: Yes. You talk about costly. I mean, to bring anything into the Brady Street was like nothing compared to what it did over here. So we just gave it up.

JE: Did you ever think about acting, being an actress?

MHS: No. Oh, when I was in high school, but I graduated, I was 16, and I thought I don’t have the courage to get on a bus and go to New York. Yeah, I just don’t have that much desire. Yeah. So I just put it in the back of my mind – forgot it.

JE: You said you were – 16 when you graduated from high school? Really?

MHS: Yeah.

JE: That's like two years, you know, So you were, where did – when did you?

MHS: Well, you know, in those days you could skip a half a grade if you were ahead. And that's that's what I did. I skipped half grade.

JE: So then at 16, that was when you went on to college. So yes, you were young-

MHS: And I was 20 when I got out of college.

JE: So you were very young amongst all the other ones that were maybe a year or two older than you.

MHS: In fact, some of my students were like 19 graduating that year and I was 20.

JE: Another death was in the 60s, Martin Luther King, April 4th, 1968 died in Memphis. Senator Robert Kennedy, June 6th, 1968 died in Los Angeles. And so those are the-

MHS: Kennedy died in Texas.

JE: Yes, he did in Dallas on a Friday. So we had a lot of unrest there in the 60s. A lot of it was over racial issues and we face that –

MHS: Today.

JE: I'm glad you said that – we're still facing it today. Probably will till the end of time.

MHS: Well, you know, what I have noticed today and I had said this because I had a woman, Virginia — who was working for me when Bob was ill — and she raised my kids because I spent so much time at the hospital and time

with him while he was ill dying of cancer. And she stayed with me until my kids were out of school and in college.

And when she died in Los — in California, they called and told me. And I said “I want to buy her sprays – Catholic sprays – and two baskets got the head and the foot,” and I did. And they sent me the form that they had used – you know, given to people. And the last line was the Stanley family, how much she had — how long she had worked for the Stanley family and gave our names, which was nice.

JE: Very nice. Absolutely.

Chapter 09 – 10:00

Organizational Activities

John Erling (JE): You were active in Quota International of Tulsa. What is that?

Mary Helen Stanley (MHS): Quota is – it very – well, they have now deteriorated. They had an office in New York and Washington D.C. and they were started back I think it was 19 – 1919, something like that. And it was very active. It was all over the world. And I have traveled to the Philippines and Australia and Europe because of that – because I was on the International Board – and my daughter who was at Holland Hall was an international president for one year.

So of course, I traveled a lot to see what my daughter was doing and then it dissolved. People just wouldn't... And I took the information from there and started a group called Silver Service which is here in Tulsa now and we have – we started out with like 33 members – I think we have 28 now, and every year we have a fundraiser.

The fundraiser is a luncheon, a book review, and things at auction – and the money that we make from that goes to an organization that does not rely upon city, county, state or federal donations.

Next Tuesday, we are having our meeting – Silver Service – and we are

asking a representative from four organizations to be there because we're giving them money and one of them is Happy Hands. Do you know anything about Happy Hands?

JE: No.

MHS: Oh, you've missed so much.

JE: I have.

MHS: Happy Hands now have their own big buildings and it's between 81st and 91st on Garnet; and it's right here at the corner. They built and Broken Arrow because it doesn't cost as much in Texas in Broken Arrow as it does in Tulsa. And they're right there and I know the guy that – had met the man who started it and it is for children who are born deaf or hard of hearing... Other areas with the hearing – and they have done so well.

Quota even bought the machines that they were using in St. John's and St. Francis in their prenatal place to test children to see if they were hard of hearing. Now it's done automatically. But back then, it wasn't.

JE: What an impact you had, then, on the lives of so many people. Well that hearing impaired that came out of Quota. They did that too, didn't they, Quota International?

MHS: Yes.

JE: The hard of hearing. Right. But then you were active in the Will Rogers rotary club,

MHS: Yes.

JE: Tulsa Boys Home, Tuesday Book Club, and the English Speaking Union?

MHS: Yes.

JE: You never, never home, were you?

MHS: Well, and still, the English Speaking Union meets this Sunday and I'm still in that.

JE: What's the English Speaking Union about?

MHS: Okay. It started in at the end of the First World War back in 1919 and it's Evelyn – if you would look at the word, you would call it Evelyn — Evelyn Wrench was the one who started it in Great Britain and he wanted to promote the proper use of the English language. And it's all over the world. We call it ESU.

When I was President, which was back in the 90s, we would have a meeting twice a month and we – we always have about 100 people but now people don't join, they don't join things. I don't know what they're doing with their time. Or – are there or how they get involved with their community if they don't. But it's up to them.

JE: Promoting the use of the English language. Haven't we failed in that?

MHS: Well, listen to people. That's all you have to do – and most of it is home. I mean at home what you learn – that's your first place to learn anything is at home and then they expect school to add so much. Well, if you have a teacher that doesn't – I can remember one teacher asking me how I taught posture. I said, “What are you talking about?” And she said, “Well, you know, posture.” I said “No, I don't.” She said, “Well, the way you stand.” and I said, “Posture.” And she was teaching. So that gives you an idea.

JE: I heard a young girl — maybe was on the phone — she called Tulsa, “Tool-sah.”

MHS: (Laughing) Yeah.

JE: And I've even heard on TV some of these young people, it comes off a little “tool,” a little “tool-sah.”

MHS: So well and you know you get anybody from the east, they mess up Muscogee and Tuscaloosa — any of those Indian names they don't know what to do with.

JE: No they don't. And that's understandable, probably

MHS: See this thing right here? Turn it around, read what it says.

JE: Okay, you pointed to something here. What is this thing right here? And you want me to point – turn it around...

MHS: And you read it.

JE: It's a – what is this?

MHS: Well, read it and I'll tell you.

JE: I know, but I'm reading off the base. (laughing) You are so funny.

MHS: Can you see it?

JE: I can – yes, I can see it. It says, “Celebrating and recognizing the dedication and contributions of Mary Helen Stanley, the longest active licensed funeral director in Oklahoma. Presented by the Oklahoma Funeral Directors Association April 4th, 2022.” That's just two years ago. Ain't that beautiful.

You know, look at all the people who cannot live alone, you're living alone in this very nice condo by yourself. You have – I know you went to Boston Avenue so you have a faith. Do you thank God for every day?

MHS: Every day. In fact my son – about five years ago – and I've forgotten what to call it. But he developed something that within three months it kills you. It eats up the fats, and then the tissue and then the organs and by the time they stopped his weight loss – he lost a hundred pounds – and got him stabilized. Move on, move up again. It was terrible.

And I can remember during that period I lost 11 lbs worrying about him, but watching him almost die and then coming back and he comes over here twice a week at five o'clock, bringing something that he likes to eat,

sits down over there, I sit down, we talk and have a drink and he has dinner with me. That's wonderful. I love it.

JE: Do you give God thanks for that?

MHS: Yes. What was your question – that I got started on that?

JE: Well, I asked about your faith and the —

MHS: Oh, the faith. Well I had told him, I said “Do you pray?”

And he said “No.”

And I said, “You get down on your knees and you pray that you're going to recover.” Well, he did, and later, he said he had – I had gone taken my kids, I said, “If you're gonna drive my car you're going to go to church,” you know.

So anyway, he had not been to a Church and he said, “I picked the Church, I told God that I would.”

And we had – as funeral directors – I think I've been in most of the churches in Tulsa and I know how they are, what they do, how they act. And he said, “The one that I liked the best was Church of the Madalene.”

And he went over there and went through all of their rigmarole, learned, and he's a Catholic.

JE: Oh, how about that. On his own he chose that.

MHS: But he said, “I told God that's what I would do if I got well,” and he said, “That's what I'm doing.”

JE: He followed through. Yeah, we have foxhole conversions, don't we?

MHS: Yes. Oh, yes.

JE: And that was one of them right there.

MHS: That was. And when I told his sister, who lives in St. Louis, she had joined the church of ... you know, "Hallelujah!"

Now, I don't exactly approve of that. And, in fact, that I went with her one time and they stood up so much I said, "I'm going to sit down."

But, when I told her, she said, "Oh, she was a guest," and I said, "Wait a minute, Lane. Did I say anything to you about your joining the church that you go to now? Did I criticize you in any way?"

"No."

And I said, "Then keep your mouth shut; don't you dare criticize your brother." And she didn't.

JE: You know it's the same faith, the Catholics and the Protestants.

MHS: It doesn't matter what steps you take. The plateau is the same.

JE: Amen, sister. Preach on. (Laughing)

Chapter 10 – 9:56

Most Important Inventions

John Erling (JE): What do you think is the most important invention of your lifetime? Like electrical, home appliances, the iron stove heating and cooling...

Mary Helen Stanley (MHS): Medical.

JE: Medical, why?

MHS: Of course I don't understand them. I don't understand them. But look what it has managed to do.

JE: It kept you alive.

MHS: Yeah. Because when Bob had cancer they didn't – they'd had very little to offer. Now they've got so much, so much to offer. That alone gets my okay.

JE: It's amazing. We still have that because we have, in Tulsa, a number of people who have cancer now and fighting it-

MHS: Yes.

JE: And some win and some don't and some live with it. Now, people are able to live with cancer, actually. You know —

MHS: My oldest daughter and you know – to me when you find out you have cancer, you do something immediately. I was working at Moore's when I found out about this – 2012, and I had this letter from the doctor who had examined the x-ray. And I said, "Joe Pat, read this."

And he read and he said, "Metastasized."

I said, "Yes."

He said, "You have something done."

And I said, "I've already called – talked to – I'm going to have surgery and I go in next week."

And he said, "Good, you don't ever play with cancer. Immediately, you take care of it."

Well, I found that this year that my daughter had been – that she had a problem with her heart, afib. And when they took the x-ray, they found cancer on the lung in November. They did not operate until February.

She did not tell me. She didn't tell me until she went in for surgery in February. And by that time, when I found out about it, I was livid because all of this time this cancer had been sitting there in that lung. And they

removed a portion of the lung and she went through three of those massive doses of chemotherapy, lost her hair, lost weight —

JE: And now she's okay?

MHS: Well, she's coming along. See that was done this February and her hair is about that long. It looks like the sun hits it and it looks like a gray halo now.

JE: Right. How many grandchildren do you have?

MHS: Five.

JE: And great grandchildren?

MHS: I mean two grandchildren and five greats.

JE: Okay. Yeah. Did you enjoy being a parent?

MHS: I wasn't with him very much. Because I worked – I worked at the funeral home usually six days a week.

JE: Do you have any regrets in your life as you look back? Any regrets?

MHS: If I had to live over again it would probably be exactly what I did.

JE: You wouldn't change much of anything. So what advice would you give to yourself as a 20-year-old Mary Helen? What would you say to that person?

MHS: If I were 20?

JE: Yes. Talk to that 20-year-old.

MHS: Get an education, do what you want to do.

JE: But we have to find things that we like to do and you found teaching is what you did. Right. You sleep. Are you – is it easy for you to sleep? Are you a good sleeper?

MHS: Oh, of course I have — I stay awake until about 11 or 12 and then I sleep. And this morning, I had my daughter call me because I have a little clock like that and it has an alarm but it is so faint that without hearing aids I don't hear it. I got hearing aids in. And so I said, "You call me and tell me at 7:30 so I'll get up." So she did, she woke me up.

JE: So we have all these social media now we have Facebook and Twitter and texting and email —

MHS: See, I don't Twitter because I don't have one of the — I don't have I don't have one of those things.

JE: Is there anything in your life you wanted to do that you never got around to?

MHS: I would have liked to have — I would like to go to London and I've always thought about London. But I don't — I don't want to travel now. I use a wheelchair; I'm wheelchair addictive when it comes to airlines.

Holloway was my maiden name and it's British and they came from the west part of England and my DAR stuff is through Holloway.

JE: When you get stressed, what do you do to handle stress? Do you feel stress in your life?

MHS: Oh, definitely; everybody does.

JE: Okay then. What do you do to handle that?

MHS: Bite my fingernails. I've done that since I had teeth that matched when I was a kid. I knew that my — there was something wrong in our family. Even as a little kid, two and three years old, you know the kids know and he was an alcoholic and he wasn't home very often.

JE: Since your father was an alcoholic, does that make you sensitive to alcoholism?

MHS: I don't think so. I mean I — I don't — I have my one drink now. If I have a cocktail party here, which I do, I might have two drinks, but I'm up moving around all the time.

JE: Well, I wasn't so much concerned about you but you know, in — in our society we have those who are addicted to alcohol.

MHS: But they don't admit it.

JE: They don't admit it. This is a form of mental illness. And you talked about cancer, we get it fixed immediately. Somehow when mental health is different. We don't seem to get it fixed immediately. And we should, we should but we don't.

So is there anything that I should have asked you that I haven't asked you?

MHS: I really can't. I don't know.

JE: Alright. What, then, advice would you give — and are you giving — to young people today? What advice are you giving them?

MHS: Well, I don't give it unless it's asked for. But if anybody says, "How did you get to be this old?" First response is "I don't know." And I really don't know. Because no one on either side of the family has ever reached 100. I was just fortunate enough to do it, but choose what you want to do in life, enjoy what you're doing. You have to enjoy your work and stay with it. Don't sit on your fanny and watch TV all day or play cards — that's existing, that's not living. And just see what you can do with life.

JE: Because it is so precious, isn't it?

MHS: Yes.

JE: How would you like to be remembered?

MHS: I think it's a little late for me to decide how I want to be remembered.

JE: No, a little late? Do you want to be remembered as a... ? Okay, I'll help you then.

MHS: Oh, what?

JE: You want to be remembered as a person who was always busy, who was always involved in your community, was always helping people — you wanted everybody to speak proper English.

MHS: Yes. Let's say leader – leadership.

JE: Okay, there we go. I finally got it out of you. You want to be remembered for being a leader. And I sense that from what we've talked about and I can sense that by talking to you here today. You've given me direction, as a matter of fact.

MHS: I know, we don't use the word “passed” or “lost.”

JE: No, no, we don't. All right, well, this was fun.

MHS: Good! I'm glad it was.

JE: I – I enjoyed it. Did you enjoy it?

MHS: Yes, yes. And I see that you had sheets with questions.

JE: Oh, yes. I came prepared.

MHS: Yes.

JE: Alright. Alright. Well, I wish there was more to say, but it's about it. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you for this.

MHS: You're welcome.

JE: You are the most amazing centenarian I've ever talked to.

MHS: Really? And how many have you talked to?

JE: Three of them.

MHS: Oh, okay.

JE: But there are other people who are in their nineties who are pretty strong. I visited a 96-year-old the other day and he was very active and all.

And those of you who are that age and can be that active are so blessed. And you should thank God every single day for it and that we don't have to – like I'm fortunate because I don't have any health problems, myself, at 81, and so that makes life fun.

MHS: Oh, yes, it does.

JE: But think of all the people who wake up and they've got cancer on their head or whatever...

MHS: Oh, yeah.

JE: And so we have this; and so we thank God for it, don't we?

MHS: Yes.

JE: Amen?

MHS: Amen.

JE: Thank you.

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