

Lingenfelter, Walter 2010

Mr. Walter Lingenfelter Oral History 2010

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Walter Lingenfelter
Interviewers: Laura Stark and Hank Grasso
Office of NIH History and Stetten Museum
2010

Laura Stark: Thanks very much. This is, again, Laura Stark, and I'm wondering if you could just start by telling us about yourself and just how your day went here at the Clinical Center.

WalterLingenfelter: Okay. We don't need to talk about as I grew up type of thing?

LS: You can tell us who you are.

WL: All right. I'm Walter T. Lingenfelter. Most people call me Link for short. My name in school was always Link. You always called people by their last name. Lingenfelter is too long. Say, "Hey, Link," so I grew up with that name, so that's my name. If you see that, that's me too. Today started out real well, very nice weather.

LS: A little irony.

WL: It took me two hours to get here where it normally takes me an hour for my sons to get here. But we did get all the tests done. Everything looks pretty good so far. The readings of all the blood looks good, everything looks good. Everything is going fine.

I have been trying to lose weight. I got down from 189 to 169, so every little bit seems to help, and I feel a difference in everything that increases good. Everything's been doing that. So, so far it's been a great day, I think, and I'm looking forward to other ones.

LS: Great, good. So, when was your first trip to the Clinical Center?

WL: Started?

LS: Yeah.

WL: Nineteen fifty-four.

LS: Nineteen fifty-four. *[Editor's note: NIH Clinical Center opened in 1953]*

WL: It was the second month that NIH had opened, started here.

LS: And where were you coming from? What was your journey like when you came here?

WL: Well, back then I was what, maybe about six or seven, '54. So I remember we lived in Falls Church, and I had been to many hospitals, Johns Hopkins, Children's, you name them, I've been there. And they were treating me for asthma; they thought I had asthma in the beginning. My parents had moved to Falls Church, and we met a little doctor, a country doctor, Dr. Domick [sp.]. I'll always remember the name because he -- I got sick and he examined me, checked me out, and said, "This boy has a heart problem." Well, he was the one that helped me get into the National Institutes of Health, because you've got to have a doctor's thing. So he was the one that helped me. So we went to, I mean, my dad was paying \$100 a day back then for Johns Hopkins and Children's and all, and I was getting nowhere. They didn't know what was wrong. And here a country doctor found it.

LS: What were your symptoms?

WL: I'll try to remember. I was pretty young then. I started out growing well after I was born, so nobody knew anything; I seemed to be fine. And I think it was about 14, 15 months, I'm thinking, that things started going down. I was losing weight, always getting pale, seemed like I couldn't do much like I did before, like an average baby would do. I would get tired real quick. So this one time I was sick, I had, I believe it was a sore throat or something, and that's how I got to see the doctor. And he checked me out and he said, "He's got a problem." So it started out from there. One thing led to another and the next thing I know, I was coming to NIH.

LS: And when the Clinical Center first opened, it was much smaller than it is today. There were no gates around the campus or anything. Do you remember about what it was like for the first time, or in that first few years, to come into the Clinical Center?

WL: Yeah. I can remember there was only probably 10 buildings, because where I'm at is number 10, and, of course, it was nowhere near being as big. And I just remember coming in. Of course, my parents took care of all the registrations and stuff, and I'm just still a little kid, nosy, just going around, so I don't remember a whole lot about that six-year-old, seven-year-old type thing. But I can tell you this, that I was, I guess you'd say, so sick with this heart problem that I had to sleep with my dad. Anytime they went somewhere, I had to go. In other words, I had to be with them, because you never know. I can remember sitting, just watching cartoons on the floor, and my heart would start beating fast and I would shake and I'd just fall over. My heart stopped. And many times they would get me started again. And I used to carry digitalis. It's called digitalis, which is like nitro pills, and if I could catch it quick enough, you know, it usually helped me. Other than that, my parents would get me started again. And it was doing nothing. You know what I'm saying? I'm just doing nothing, watching a cartoon show or something.

So I was kind of a young guy that, until age of, well, the operation, I couldn't play or anything. All I could do was watch my brothers and sisters out there playing and other kids playing, but I could never go out. In fact, at one time, one snowy winter, I remember that my dad propped a chair up against a door that had a window in it, and it was with the back part up against, and I slipped. I rammed my teeth through my tongue. They can't stitch that. They ran me to the doctor's, of course, and my tongue grew back. But these are things that happened that, I guess I got a little excited because I couldn't go out and play, and I just slipped, and that happened. So other things happened to me when I was young, but that's kind of the way it went, I guess.

LS: Did it feel like you had many trips to the Clinical Center before you actually had the surgery here?

WL: Oh, yeah, I had lots of trips because I had a lot of tests, lots of tests. Cats were probably the biggest things, catheterizations, you know. Nowadays they do them very easy here. They used to cut your skin here and run tubes up through your vein, take pictures. That was probably the biggest thing until I was somewhere around, oh, I'm guessing probably nine or so, when they started doing deeper stuff, cut my legs and going up through there and that kind of thing. But this was how they had to learn, you know, find out things. So, at the age of ten and a half, they had given me a 50-50 chance to come through.

LS: That must have been scary to know as a kid.

WL: Well, you know, you would think it would be, but I was, my parents were very good. They told me everything that was going to happen. They're going to give you needles, they're going to do this. But it's a situation where you listen to what they say and you might get some hurt, but this is what's going to make you better. So I knew everything that was going on and before they did the test, it was explained what was going to happen, so I knew. And it was just like waking up with the operation, after the operation. I'd wake up, I'd see this oxygen tent. I'd remember that they told me that was going to happen. I see all these tubes coming down and stuff, but I wasn't scared because that's exactly what they told me. And the reason I mentioned it is the guy next to me, he was just a blue baby, and I'm thinking he never was told about this, because I remember looking over and he's awoken, and he threw the tank off and started sitting up. So I, of course, rang the bell, you know, real quick on that, and that scared my parents because all of a sudden you hear, "Stat, stat!" from that room, and all of them rush in the room.

So they pulled the curtain on me because they didn't want me to see it, and my parents had just gotten down. But that poor boy didn't make it. He died. And he just had something simple, simpler. They called him a blue baby. It's a shame. So I always tell parents to tell their children what's going to happen, always tell them.

LS: Did any of the staff, like Dr. Morrow, did he explain anything directly to you or?

WL: See, the thing that I notice is they didn't want to, doctors did tell your parents what's happening, but I don't know why they didn't want to tell children, and my parents said, "You're going to tell us, but in there, and what's going to happen. If you're going to cut him, you're going to tell him you're going to do that, what you're going to do, and that's what they did for me. I knew it, and I did whatever they told me to do, and it seemed like it worked exactly that way. So, yeah, you're a little scared, but if you know what's happening, it makes it so much easier.

LS: So you had one major surgery, and then many others . . .

WL: At 58, one major; that was a major surgery. And when this was done, I remember they gave me stuff to put me to sleep. I remember them wheeling me out into the elevator, the same elevator they used, that people took. They took that. And in the elevator, I remember falling asleep. Well, the doctors told my parents that I had had two heart attacks on the way up.

LS: It was a good time for surgery.

WL: Yes, yes. So it worked out.

LS: So you came out the other side of the surgery.

WL: Yes.

LS: And you still had a very long recovery but a happy recovery.

WL: Yes. It worked out fine. And it wasn't that bad. I mean, I didn't think it was. It hurt a little bit. I think the worst part about the surgery that I can remember is my dad, you know, they cut your bone open here, and my dad always had to put me up against the wall and push my shoulders back because as a kid, as you're growing, and with this cut open, you had a tendency to do this, and that was probably the most, I'm going to say really the most painful thing compared to all the stuff I had done because he had to do it and then hold it there for a while so that I'd be straight.

LS: What did they tell you? How did they explain to you as a ten-and-a-half-year-old child what was, what your surgery was about, what was going to happen in the surgery?

WL: Well, the easiest thing they told me, which was good, was the procedures and things, the doctor drew a little box and says, "Your heart has four chambers." He put a big circle like this. He said, "See, these are your valves." He explained to me that these are valves and what they do, so that I could understand. And he says, "We have to make two and a half valves, because what's happening is your heart is real large because the blood is not going in and coming back out; it's staying in there." So my heart was around back here. It was really big. And that's the reason, because the blood was being pumped in but not getting out like it should.

LS: Were they talking with Dr. Morrow [Glenn A. Morrow] about this?

WL: Morrow, Dr. Glenn Morrow.

LS: Morrow. And, what was he like?

WL: The man, to me, was a really super man. He knew how to talk to children. Okay? He, again, once my parents said, "No, you explain everything to him," he would tell me everything that was going to happen. And he'd just come in any old time, you know what I'm saying, just stop in to say hi. He'd go, "How are you doing? How are you feeling?" you know, and then, "Here's what we're going to do today," and just explain everything to you. He was really -- I really liked the guy a lot, and that made a difference too. I wasn't afraid of him, you know what I mean, as a kid. So that was really nice.

LS: Could you tell how other people worked around him or how some of the other staff seemed to regard . . .

WL: The staff to me was really good too, because they -- if they had to put a needle in you, for example, and theirs was, whoever had to do it, they would come and they would say, "What we've got to do here, your doctor wants us to do this," and they take their time and say, "Does that hurt? Does it hurt?" "A little bit." But they would be nice about it. I don't think I ever remember having a nurse or doctor come in and jam the needle in or anything like that. You know what I'm trying to say. And they took really good care of you, always talking to you. I mean, I suppose without even having nurses or anything in there, you're just watching TV or something, they would just come in all the time and keep checking on you. Pretty nice.

LS: So, after the surgery, how long were you actually admitted to the Clinical Center?

WL: I want to say I was there three or four months. And really, most of that time was being thoroughly checked out, you know, always having maybe the same tests done again to see if there's improvement in pressure, to see if there's this and that, and it's growing now, things like that. So it was a while.

LS: What did you do with yourself as a little kid just hanging out?

WL: Up there, on the seventh floor, 7E, east, they had a nice place for kids. There was like a whole back wall, that they had made another wall so that everything there was for kids, you know, and a TV. This is kid stuff here. And they don't have that now. But I used to go up there. I was in a wheelchair for a while here because they didn't want me to do a lot of walking. But there was another thing. Me and another kid used to run down the halls in our wheelchairs.

LS: Like with races?

WL: Yes. It was bad because a lot of times the nurses would come out and we'd have to hit the brakes and slide. But they were nice about it. "You kids, doing it again, huh? You've got to take it easy or you'll run over one of us."

LS: Was that your roommate that you were racing with?

WL: Yeah, me and another guy. His name -- I remember his first name, Danny, but I have never seen him since then. I don't have any idea how he's doing. I wish I could get a hold of some of these people, but I can't do it. And one nice thing you might like is, as I was, before the operation was, and after too, in my room, if I look out the window, just over the corridor a little bit, there were other windows, and this is where me and him were and we would look out, and we see monkeys. There were monkeys in that entire whole floor, and we talked to each other and say, "How do you think we can get over there?" And I remember Danny saying, "I know you can go to that door, but they won't let you through it." I said, "Well, I guess we're going to have to sneak down there, then." But we were just young kids, and we did it. We were in there a couple of times checking out the monkeys. We couldn't get in the pens, but we could get closer to them.

LS: So, you were up on the seventh floor.

WL: Seventh floor.

LS: And what did you do? I'll never tell.

WL: We just wanted to see what these monkeys, we thought they were monkeys, from what we could tell, so we wondered how to get over there. And we heard that, my parents had told me, anyhow, that yes, they have -- because I'd asked one time [unclear] and they said, "Yes, they do animals here too, because that's how they learn. And if the procedure works good, then it's time to work on humans." So we knew there were monkeys there. We checked them out. They were.

LS: So, what did you find when you actually got there?

WL: Just like stalls, glass, and monkeys in there, playing around, doing whatever. We never saw anything like anybody cut open or anything like that. There was nothing gross, anything like that. These were just the live ones, I guess you'd say. But we got caught a couple times and got yelled at about it, you know, "Stay out of there!" But you know how it is.

Hank Grasso: Was it a huge adjustment? Three months of hospital food must be an interesting experience. Do you remember anything about this?

WL: I don't know if I knew any different because I've always had hospital, you know, I was in and out all the time. So I'm just going to say that it wasn't that bad. Now, you've got to keep in mind, too, I was on a salt-free diet, no salt at all. Now, I don't know if you've ever tasted any food with no salt, no salt on it. Bread, no salt in it. Cake, birthday cakes, no salt. You wouldn't believe the difference in the taste of that thing. It's like today's food where they say, if it doesn't taste good, it's good for you. That's pretty much what it was.

LS: Did you have any birthdays in the Clinical Center?

WL: Oh yeah.

LS: What did they do?

WL: They bring the cake in, salt-free cake, of course. And sometimes my brothers or sisters were there, you know. Usually that's what happened on my birthday, if I was in there on my birthday, because they would do that and make stuff. As I say, it was real, it made you feel like you were home, basically, you know, just really nice. It always was that way. I never had any problem with this place.

LS: How many brothers and sisters do you have?

WL: Two brothers and one sister, four of us.

LS: And what did your mom and dad do? It sounds like they were pretty involved.

WL: My dad worked for the Army Map Service. He actually made maps. And we didn't know until he passed on that they were top-secret maps. But they would have an open house in this place, in this map service, Army Map Service, and he would show us some of the maps -- not top-secret ones, but maps that they made. And back then, they were making maps where if you viewed them with these 3D glasses, the mountains and the water were right at you. And he'd always bring home maps and stuff for us, and we'd take them to school because that was a big deal at school. We'd give them all glasses, and they just thought that was the greatest thing. And it was because if you look at this here, and all of a sudden you see all those areas popping out at you and everything. Those were pretty neat. And mom was, well, she was home with me until we got a little older. Either my brother or I had to stay at home, of course. We didn't go anywhere if mom had to go to work, and she worked as a waitress, which was two blocks away. That's all. So it was always close. And then right up the street was the doctor I had.

LS: Very nice.

WL: Yeah. So it was okay. It was a dead-end road, so that made it fine too.

LS: So you must have felt like a different person after having a heart problem, until you were ten and a half years old. And then, within a matter of months, just having this surgical change.

WL: Yeah, I did, because I was a completely different person. That was getting better all the time, you know. I could do things now I couldn't do before.

LS: Like what?

WL: Well, running. I could never ride a bike, for example. And after the operation, my dad's work, they all chipped in and bought me an English racer. That's where that ad comes from where you see that boy waiting to ride his bike. And just little things like that, or being able to go out in the yard by myself, you know. It was little things that I'd never experienced before. Or play hide-and-go-seek with the kids, which I couldn't do before. Just anything like that made a big difference for little bit of kid stuff. I was a little older. I didn't start school till I was 11, and the school was right at the end of the road, which was very good. So I started school when I was 11, in 1959, I guess. Fifty-nine? Fifty-nine, yeah. Fifty-nine, I started. And I still graduated in '68.

LS: Oh, wow!

WL: So, really, that was pretty good.

LS: Nine years.

WL: I was just under 20. So I didn't do too bad.

LS: Yeah.

HG: Do you think that any of these experiences have influenced your choice of career path?

WL: Yes. I know it did, because being I couldn't do anything, I'd sit in the room a lot of times with my robe on in the hospital, in a wheelchair, and people would bring me models, and I'd put it together. Where I lived in Vienna at the time, a guy up the street called Cameron's Jewelry, he used to bring me clocks and a whole lot of stuff, and I would make clocks, you know, make them work. So I'm pretty sure that's why I work with my hands.

LS: I'm pretty sure that's why you were able to fix both of our digital recorders as well.

WL: Yeah, because I worked 42 years as an automotive, I was a certified master tech, gold level, on Chrysler, 42 years.

LS: That's great.

WL: I also think that that was another thing that helped me . . . Let's see, how do I want to say it? Helped me grow and get stronger. And what I'm saying by that is, instead of sitting at a desk, okay, it was all physical work. It was all physical work, getting down, getting up, all that. And I really think if I hadn't done that enough, I don't know what would happen. I really don't. But here I am. And I notice it now, right now, that when I finally retired in '06, after the last operation, I noticed that I had to rest for a while and not do much, and, man, that was like, what's happening to me? So, that's why I try to stay active and keep going, because I can see why some people, when they retire, they don't do anything, you know, don't feel well, put it that way.

LS: Well, you're looking pretty active.

WL: Yeah, I try to be. I try to keep going, and I think that makes a big difference.

LS: So, how many surgeries did you have then, subsequent, after the one when you were quite young?

WL: I've had two total, '58 and '06, major surgeries. In between, there would be things like catheterizations. They called them surgeries. So there were eight on this arm and five on this arm, and the legs.

End of Interview