

Interview with Theodore Frost for the Boston Hemophilia Center Oral History Project, A Gift of Experience, by Laura Gray, August 26, 2004.

GRAY: August 26, 2004, and I, Laura Gray, am sitting with Mr.

Theodore Frost in his home in Haverhill, Massachusetts. Mr. Frost has agreed to participate in the Gift of Experience, our oral history program from the Boston Hemophilia Center, and he is happy to do it with his identity known. So let's start there, Mr. Frost.

Would you tell me your full name and how old you are and when you were born and where you were born?

FROST: Well, that is very easy. I was born at February 22, 1915, in the city of Haverhill on Washington Street.

LG: And you are how old now?

TF: My age now is eighty-nine.

LG: Eighty-nine years.

TF: To the best of my knowledge. [chuckles] I do have a birth certificate, which is a legal document that kind of proves that, if it is necessary and they would like to have it included.

LG: You have hemophilia?

TF: I was told by Dr. Damishack, who was the king of doctors for the Royal family, used to come over and they had—took over a whole section of one of the hospitals in Boston, which I have—I can't think of the name, which one it was, but they used to bring the whole outfit, their own chef and everything else. They had the—they took—well, they had the whole section and Dr. Damishack was the doctor that took care of them, which they came to see him.

LG: And when did you find out you had hemophilia? Do you remember?

TF: I do not remember the exact date.

LG: Were you a child? Were you an adult?

TF: That was somewhere's along the halfway mark. [laughs]

LG: When do you remember even hearing about hemophilia?

TF: Oh, I had a little kid brother who was born after me, where they found out that he was a bleeder when he had to have his tonsils out. Then they found out that he was a bleeder, which they had to at that time for a blood transfusion, they would take his type here. Send the type and the doctor would come out from Boston with the person with the blood and that was an assignment. But he did. He lived until nine—until he was seven years old, but he did not die of hemophilia. He fell out of the car, landed on his head on the granite curb, which took him. That was back when he was seven years old and he was born in 1920, or very close.

LG: Oh, you mean he fell out of the car when he was seven years old?

TF: When he was seven years old.

LG: Were you in the car with him?

TF: I was in the car with him.

LG: What happened?

TF: The old Model-T had doors—well, back in those days things was not precision, like doors, they were tight, but not latched. It was not latched and when he leaned against it, which he went over backwards and then went out and landed on his head, met the curb.

LG: So you were twelve years old when this happened?

TF: I was a youngster.

LG: Who was driving?

TF: My mother.

LG: Who was in your family?

TF: The car was not moving. We were parked and my father was in shopping and my mother was sitting at the wheel and little Kenneth was on the front seat, sitting side of his mother or standing, which he evidently leaned against the door and then—

LG: And he fell on his head?

TF: And he went out head first, boom.

LG: And was that it? Did he die at that moment or did he go to the hospital?

TF: He went to the doctor's office, which was just above that. My sister used to work for the doctor. Mr. Dr. Mindelan, and so she knew where the doctor was at all times. She took all the telephone calls and dates and everything. She took care of him. So we headed for there, which was not too far, probably half a mile at the most, from the doctor's office, and from there on I forget now whether he went to the hospital, but he died around—I forget now whether he had a concussion of the brain or what.

LG: How sad.

TF: So that was—that finished him off.

LG: So you've mentioned a sister, your brother Ken, your parents. Who else was in your family?

TF: Oh, I had three brothers, which my one that is still alive is ninety-two.

LG: Uh-huh, and does he have hemophilia?

TF: He does not have hemophilia.

LG: He does not.

- TF: It did not show up until I was born, the Royal Curse or whatever they want to call it. So anyway—
- LG: Was there a history of hemophilia in your family?
- TF: My great-grandmother, my mother's mother, her brother was Gid Half Eckerman. He was a bleeder.
- LG: He was a bleeder.
- TF: A bleeder. Back in those days they didn't—they didn't know about the—we were not labeled as hemophiliacs until Dr. Damishack.
- LG: Before that?
- TF: Before that we was just bleeders.
- LG: You were just called bleeders.
- TF: Just called the bleeder.
- LG: Were you called anything else besides a bleeder?
- TF: Oh, lots of things. [chuckles]
- LG: What have you been called?
- TF: Well, there's people, of course, they thought—it is inherited, which I cannot pass it. There's other things that go with it, infections, as I understand it, that can cause you trouble, such as hepatitis. Now one of the things that they—
- LG: That used to be a problem.
- TF: I think that is pretty well cleaned up now.
- LG: That's right.
- TF: Same as the hemophilia part. When I die, that finishes it up, as far as the Frost family goes.
- LG: We can get to that in a minute, but I'm interested, were you and your brother Ken the only two in your family—

TF: Right.

LG: That had hemophilia?

TF: Right.

LG: How did the hemophilia affect you? How did you know you were a bleeder?

TF: Well, back in 19—I don't know how the heck [unclear]. When I was five and a half years old, I got dragged on the back of a truck, with my feet up on the tailboard chain, and that was out across the old car tracks. The old streetcars used to go by the house and I was dragging out over across the railroad tracks. Well, anyway—

LG: How did that happen?

TF: The kiddo next door was a little older than I, and he got me up on the tailboard, for some reason—I don't know why. Just deviltry or just wanted me to take a ride, I guess, and so anyway, Dr. Basum doctored me.

LG: So you bumped, bumped, bumped along the road?

TF: I bump, bumpety, bump, bump, bump and the railroad tracks used to always leave them sticking up, oh, an inch or so, so that—well, they was on the rail. The wheels was on the rail and not—so anyway, I got a double fractured skull. How he—how Dr. Basum ever kept me alive, I don't know.

LG: What do you remember about it?

TF: The only thing that I remember—well, of course, I remember being in the hospital, but I remembered when they let me free from the truck and I ran across the street and my mother and the gang were out on the front lawn and that's just down over the hill here, and—but anyway, I spent most of the time as a kid in the hospital.

LG: From just this accident or many other times, also?

TF: Many other times, also.

LG: You were in the hospital a lot?

TF: I was in the hospital enough so that they all knew me, I guess.

LG: Do you remember why they put you in the hospital?

TF: Well, for a double fractured skull. I'll let you—don't be afraid.
You won't hurt anything.

LG: I can feel a bump.

TF: You can feel some bumps.

LG: Sure.

TF: You go over the other side and you can feel some good—

LG: Yeah, you've got a bumpy head.

TF: I've got a bumpy head, and whether they took the roof of my head
off and patched it up, but it was a case of having to operate the—

LG: Did your head blow up?

TF: Oh, I was swollen.

LG: Swollen?

TF: Yeah, and I was—well, there was a lot of swelling that went with
it, but the bleeding internally that caused a lot of—bleeding
internally caused a lot of swelling.

LG: What did they do? Did they just wait for it to go away?

TF: That is something that I would like to be able to tell you because—
in fact, I would like to know myself, but I was not old enough. I
did not go to public school until I was eight years old. I was most
of my younger days before that I was in the hospital.

LG: All from this one accident?

TF: Yeah.

LG: That one accident kept you in the hospital for almost three years?

TF: Yeah. Yeah.

LG: Really?

TF: I was in out and of the—in and out.

LG: With problems?

TF: Yeah. In other words, that was Dr. Basum, who was a crackerjack surgeon, but still how he did it—as far as—

LG: Did you finally get surgery, do you remember?

TF: As far as—no. Well—

LG: You don't remember?

TF: No, I don't remember the surgery part.

LG: Do you know what hospital? Was it in Boston?

TF: No, that was the Old Hale in Haverhill.

LG: And that's where you spent so many years.

TF: It was on Main Street in Haverhill.

LG: How did your parents handle that? Do you remember what your mother was like or what your father was like?

TF: My mother had a nervous breakdown when my brother died.

LG: She had a nervous breakdown?

TF: Yeah.

LG: What happened?

TF: Well, it was just too much for her. Anyway, that—

LG: Did she ever recover from it?

TF: Oh, yeah. Yeah, she recovered. She always had a weak heart, but she kept the nitroglycerin or whatever it is, always underneath her mattress where she could reach it quick.

LG: Well, it sounds like when your brother died, it was a very similar event to what had happened to you when you were five years old and you almost died.

TF: Very, very similar.

LG: So that must have been very, very traumatic.

TF: Yeah. Yeah, that was.

LG: When she had the nervous breakdown, did she have to go to the hospital?

TF: No, she was more complete, complete rest, if I remember correctly.

LG: And how long?

TF: And us kiddos, we fried our own egg and we took care of ourselves.

LG: What did your dad do for work?

TF: My father was a master builder.

LG: What was his name?

TF: Charles Franklin Frost, and he was a master builder. His brother, my Uncle George, George Frost, which my brother is a George, too, nowadays, and then there's a George, Junior, and I think they've got a George III. But they were master builders and all of us boys were carpenters.

LG: Even though you were a bleeder?

TF: Yeah, I played around with circular saws and I played around with lathes and I put roofs on houses and put new foundation or put new sills under it. Whatever it needed, anything pertaining to construction, I did it.

LG: It wasn't a problem with your hemophilia?

TF: The only time that I ever remember actually cutting, I was putting a lock, repairing a lock and back in those days it was the other type of lock. It was a mortise lock that you cut it and the lock went inside the wood. You'd take the wood out and put the lock in. The wood was thin and I was shaving it with a chisel and I phewk, and just a slip. I always carried a bottle of iodine in my tote box, which I says, "Well, I guess I better go to the doctor." So I just threw my tools into my box and took the bottle of iodine and pulled it into it, and then with a handkerchief or whatever I had around it, and got in the car and went to see—oh, that was Dr.—hmm. [unclear]

LG: Did the bleeding stop from wrapping it?

TF: Yeah.

LG: You were lucky.

TF: I was lucky. Yeah, in other words, I bandaged it up. Yeah. I got it quick enough and didn't disturb it, which when he looked at he says, "We won't touch that. You say that you dumped iodine on it? That's good enough for me." So anyways, he says, "We won't disturb it." In other words, if you break it open, then you're in trouble. The second patching job don't heal very good, but that is the only time that I actually drew blood with a chisel. In other words, it nicked. That probably was the finger, too.

LG: When you were growing up and your mom and dad knew you were a bleeder, did they treat you any differently from the other kids? Did they worry about you? Did they give you advice?

TF: As far as worrying, I can't speak for somebody else. I always—oh, they always would protect me from as much as possible.

LG: Do you remember how they would do that?

TF: Well, I used to—the cold pack, as soon as—if I bruised myself or anything, a small bruise, sometimes if I could get ice onto it quick enough, okay, it may retard, slow up the swelling a little.

LG: Did you have a lot of swelling when you were growing up?

TF: I had my share of it.

LG: You did?

TF: Yeah. In other words, of bleeding internally, why you would—it would swell.

LG: Right. Would it hurt?

TF: Oh, yeah, and when you get bleeding internally and swelling, you did, you suffered.

LG: How did you handle that?

TF: Well, just handled it. That's all. Do the best you can with what—you just learned to do the best you can. That's all. So they say "Don't talk about it, do it." [laughs]

LG: But do you remember having a lot of pain through your life?

TF: Oh, I have had. That has—that has been, but I don't complain. I'm still alive. [laughs] I lost my wife, but you probably don't want to get into that until further along on the—

LG: But if you want to talk about it now, you can. That's fine.

TF: Well—

LG: Tell me about your wife. When did you meet her?

TF: My wife, I met her in 19—what? '31. We married in 1940.

LG: During the world war?

TF: Yeah.

LG: Did you go fight?

- TF: I went down to report and they says, "Go home. Stay alive."
- LG: Because you have hemophilia.
- TF: Yeah. The hemophilia, they didn't want me to clutter up the landscape.
- LG: How was that for you?
- TF: That was all right by me because what the heck, I went to work. I was in business for myself jobbing around, which I had a job offered to me as carpenter in Cambridge. That was considered as war work. In other words, I was within the jurisdiction of war work, and so I worked for them until 19—what? It was about 19—probably early '40s. Very early. Somewhere right around '40, '41. Something like that. Right in there that I went to work for them and I left. There's some stuff there that I've not going to involve other people, but I left employment with that outfit in '45. I figured I'd better go back for my work for myself. I had a little misunderstanding. Somebody asked me to do something that when the boss asks you to do something that endangers you, why, you don't—you don't stick around. It's time to make a change.
- LG: So you were telling me you married around then. How did you meet your wife?
- TF: In the Grange, which I'm still the treasurer.
- LG: What's the Grange?
- TF: The Grange is a fraternal—
- LG: Society?
- TF: Order. Society.
- LG: I see, like the Masons.
- TF: On very much the same idea.

LG: And so you met her there?

TF: I met her at that, yeah.

LG: And you got married?

TF: And we got married in 1940.

LG: And did you tell her you were a bleeder?

TF: She knew it, yeah.

LG: She did?

TF: She knew it. It was no secret.

LG: And did she care?

TF: She didn't worry about it. We just was careful and she was good wife that took very good care of me.

LG: So that was never a worry of yours, that you had this problem and women would care? Did anyone care that you had it?

TF: Some people were afraid of contaminated blood and once in awhile somebody would throw it up at you or something like that.

LG: They would?

TF: Oh, yeah!

LG: Like what?

TF: Well, they were careful that they didn't want to get any—like if I had a small pimple even and drew blood, they didn't want anything to do with the blood.

LG: How was that for you?

TF: Well, it didn't bother me because what the heck. You're just careful.

LG: Did having hemophilia bother you?

TF: In what way? [laughs]

LG: Did you have feelings about it? Did you hate it? Did you resent it?

TF: No.

LG: You did not.

TF: No, I figured it was just one of those things that's I was labeled with it and just do the best you can.

LG: I know I asked you this once before, but were there any other words other than bleeder, or did other kids tease you or treat you differently?

TF: When I was a little fellow, and I say little fellow, my parents bought a football helmet and I wore that for awhile for protection.

LG: Would you wear it to school?

TF: Yeah, I did.

LG: Did the kids say anything?

TF: Well, yeah, once in awhile somebody would throw something, but I put the football helmet to one side, more for the reason that, well, you're walking along and all of a sudden, bang, somebody's hit you on the head. "Does that hurt?" [laughs] "Does that hurt?" So you're wearing a football helmet to protect you and they got to see whether it hurts or not.

LG: So they're smacking you.

TF: How good—how good is the football helmet that you got on? Getting ready to play.

LG: So did you take it off when you went to school?

TF: So we abandoned that idea. That football helmet—I'll tell you exactly when that was used as—my father, well, there was one place, the grain store. It was up four feet off the ground because

all the trucks could back up the loading. In fact, the whole building was a loading platform. Everything was all on the same level as the back end of a truck would be, so they could back up any door. There was a crawl space underneath. Well, the footing and the posts under that building was an old wooden structure and wooden posts holding it up. Well, they started rotting, so my father had the job of jacking that up and putting new posts, and he wore the football helmet so that he wouldn't swear every time he'd bang his head. [laughs]

LG: So it got to good use.

TF: Yeah, it went to good—but it was nothing but half inch—probably half inch felt, rigid. Kind of rigid. Not like a crash helmet today is all plastic with the lining inside. There's a lot of difference between the two, but that is how the football helmets got used.

LG: Did you have to do anything else that was special or did your parents try anything else to protect you, other than what you remember?

TF: Just be careful.

LG: Did you play with the other kids?

TF: Yeah, sure.

LG: You did?

TF: But if I saw any rough stuff going on, then I would just quietly—

LG: Walk away.

TF: Walk away.

LG: You would?

TF: Oh, yes.

LG: So you were careful for yourself.

TF: Yeah. Yeah.

LG: Well, after having spent so long a time in the hospital—when you were a little kid.

TF: Oh, when I was five and a half, five and a half to eight, why, I was—well, as I say, I was in the hospital most of the time, I guess, because I wasn't able to go to school because I was in the hospital so much.

LG: Were you in the hospital by yourself or did your mother stay with you? What happened when you were in the hospital, do you remember?

TF: No, it was under the nurses' care.

LG: Under a nurse's care.

TF: Well, the old hospital. It was a regular hospital. It wasn't any convalescent home.

LG: Did people treat you well there? Were they nice to you?

TF: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

LG: You don't have bad memories?

TF: Well, a lot of that stuff that you—that's where there's so much that you want to forget and there's so much that you want to remember, that what do you remember and what do you want to cast to one side?

LG: Right. Well, that's a good question. What do you want to remember of that?

TF: Well, my married life was good.

LG: Oh, of your life we're talking about. Okay.

TF: My trade, I worked along with my trade. I told you I left a job because the boss asked me to do something that endangered my

neck. Well, this stuff shouldn't be press—shouldn't be on the document because I don't believe I'm talking about anybody and if it was going to come out, other people might see the names and stuff. But anyway, I went back. In 1950 they asked me to come back and fill my boss's job, which I did.

LG: So you were the boss?

TF: So I stayed there until I retired.

LG: And you were a master—were you a master builder, also, or you were a carpenter?

TF: I was not a master builder.

LG: You were a carpenter.

TF: I worked—yeah, I was a carpenter, but with that our company was a research and development outfit, chemical company, which we made a lot of our own equipment. If we had—in other words, we would buy whatever we had to to be the nearest to what we want, and then we would make it over. Practically everything that we used in research, why, we would have to make it over and change it, in the design and everything, so that we could use it and not cut into the rights of patents. Patent rights, and stuff. So we wound up practically everything that we did that was to do with research, went through the changer. Well, the hot melt glue gun was one thing. That was when they started. When we started, and that was making it all of the hot melt glue and everything was all made up by equipment that was made to do that job.

LG: Wow. So it was a very creative job, too?

TF: Yeah.

LG: And you worked there a long time, until you retired.

TF: Until I retired.

LG: And did you still live in Haverhill, or were you living in Cambridge at the time?

TF: I was still living right here, since 1940.

LG: I see. Now, tell me about your wife. Did she work? Did you have children?

TF: Well, you might just as well joke about it. It sounds funny at the time for me to say I took my wife from the Old Lady's Home and married her. She worked there. [laughs]

LG: She worked at the Old Lady's Home?

TF: She worked at the Old Lady's Home. In other words, she was a housemaid or whatever you want to call them. In other words, she lived in, and so I actually took her out of the Old Lady's Home and married her. So anyway.

LG: Did you have children?

TF: We didn't have any children. She had a lot of x-rays. She had goiter when she was younger, which she had the operation and I had so many x-rays and stuff like that, we figured it was just as well not to have any children, anyway. With the hemophilia and me and, well, we never had any kids, anyway.

LG: Are you a factor VIII deficient?

TF: I'm a factor VIII.

LG: Do you know if you're mild or moderate or severe?

TF: Well, they kind of labeled me as minor.

LG: As mild?

TF: Thank God I wasn't any more. [laughs]

LG: You had enough trouble as a minor.

TF: That's right. Thank God they didn't throw the whole barrel at me.
[laughs]

LG: Do you remember ever getting treated? You told me about the ice.
Do you remember any other treatments you ever got for your
hemophilia?

TF: Well—

LG: Were you ever in a wheelchair?

TF: Do you want to get into the factor VIII?

LG: If that's what you remember about the treatment, sure.

TF: That's what simplified and started saving a lot of lives.

LG: What was it like for you?

TF: Factor VIII is nothing but the healing factor of whole blood. In
other words, they take a lot of little samples from me and make the
healing factor out of it, and can give you a transfusion of that.

LG: Do you remember when you got that for the first time?

TF: That is one of the things that I wish I could remember, I could
pinpoint. I've tried to pinpoint it as near as I can. I was bleeding
because I had had kidney stones and they started me bleeding
internally. I was up to the Old Hale and it was—well, I was
bleeding in my urinary tract, anyway, and the doctor says, "Well,
Ted, you've been bleeding two weeks, and we're not getting
anywhere." He says, "They have got a new medicine," which was
factor VIII, "that they want to try it on a human being." So they
classed me as a human being. So anyway, he says, "We're getting
nowhere. You're still bleeding after two weeks. Do we want to
sign a release and sign your life away so we can try that or not?"
It's up to me. I could sign my life away and try it or I could lay

there and bleed to death. So anyway, they called California and told them to ship it, which I consented to it. So it came by airplane to Boston. The Haverhill Police Department went in and got it and they took—they gave it to me, which was a show job. In other words, all the nurses and doctors were all very much—it was new.

LG: So they all watched.

TF: So they watched. Well, anyway, that was the beginning of it and they gave it to me, a transfusion of it. Sealed me right up, just like that. So then there was quite awhile there that if I had internal bleeding or a bad bruise or anything, that's what they would give me is the factor VIII, which kept me alive. That changed the taking care of me entirely because they didn't even put me in the hospital. I'd go in Brigham and they'd give me a transfusion. They have the stuff in there and stock it in there, where the hospitals here do not stock it. If they decide here to give it to me, then they've got to call wherever they get it from. It takes two or three hours, anyway, that you're just, you know, treading water and getting nowhere. You know, you're just waiting your turn.

So anyway, that's the beginning of factor VIII.

LG: And what was it like to have factor VIII for you?

TF: Just a transfusion.

LG: Yeah. Was it so amazing to have your bleeding stop by getting this factor VIII?

TF: It's a healing factor.

LG: Right.

TF: It's a healing factor of whole blood. Now they've got it down—

LG: But before that happened. Before you had that transfusion for the factor VIII, how had you been treated before? Did you get blood dripped into you?

TF: Yeah. In other words, you'd get a transfusion. When you'd get low, well, that put some more blood in there. That's all, and keep you alive.

LG: So that's what you remember, getting blood dripped into you?

TF: Yeah. Yeah, which I had my share of it.

LG: You did? So you were often in and out of the hospital?

TF: I was in and out of the hospital. There is one other write up, a person, a woman. Well, of course the story goes that there is no women that are hemophiliacs. They come under that other family name there. I forget now, anyway. It's a long, long name. But there are. There's women that are free bleeders, but they're not classed as hemophiliacs, as I understand it.

LG: It's rare for a woman to have hemophilia, but it can happen. But women can also be carriers of the gene and have problems because of that.

[end of Side A, Tape 1]

[Side B, Tape 1 is blank]

LG: So you commented that when couples were faced with challenges or things that they didn't expect to happen and they throw their hands up and don't seem to cope.

TF: Don't seem to cope with it, I guess would be the word. They give up too easy.

LG: And your advice is what?

TF: Talk. Talk it over. [unclear] cup of coffee, okay. Cup of coffee, we—where are we now?

LG: So talk it over and figure out how to cope.

TF: Yeah. What's the answer? In other words, there's got to be. There's got to be a right and a wrong. No, I don't—I would make it—if I see something coming at like the 18-wheeler, when it was getting ready to take a swipe at me, I tried to get out of its way. I did a lot of praying in that small fraction—small fraction of a second. But I tried to get out of his way, but I couldn't do it.

LG: You were in an accident?

TF: Yeah, and 18-wheeler. Jackknifed and swung. The back end of the—the back end went right off the right entirely, that high, so that when the truck hit me, it come down as well as—in other words, when it hit, it come down.

LG: When did that happen?

TF: Well, that's back a few years ago.

LG: Did you have any complications from your hemophilia with that?

TF: No, that time I was very happy. I had the headache. Oh, I had a terrific headache, but thank God that I didn't have a seatbelt on. If I'd had a seatbelt on, I would have been right there.

LG: Well, thank God. Well, anyway, let me thank you again, Mr. Frost.

TF: You're very welcome.

LG: We've covered a lot and I thank you for your perspective and your thoughts.

TF: Could you pull that apart? Look it over and if there's something that you want to change a little bit and I would like that right, too.

LG: Of course.

End of Interview