

NASA JOHNSON SPACE CENTER ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

EDITED ORAL HISTORY TRANSCRIPT

GRATIA KAY LOUSMA
INTERVIEWED BY JENNIFER ROSS-NAZZAL
KERRVILLE, TEXAS – 10 JULY 2019

ROSS-NAZZAL: Today is July 10th, 2019. This interview with Gratia Lousma is being conducted in Kerrville, Texas, for the JSC Oral History Project. The interviewer is Jennifer Ross-Nazzal, assisted by Sandra Johnson. Thanks again for having us over to your home. We certainly appreciate it.

LOUSMA: I thought we'd give you a little idea of where we live and how we live. We're just home folk.

ROSS-NAZZAL: It's a beautiful home and a great view. Thank you.

LOUSMA: The view is. I know, you can almost see forever, can't you?

ROSS-NAZZAL: Yes.

LOUSMA: My mother used to talk about a book that impressed her so much growing up, *How Green Was My Valley*. I look out there, and I think of that; I think of her. She would have loved this.

ROSS-NAZZAL: I bet.

10 July 2019

LOUSMA: Jack designed it, the house, and built things with what we wanted to put in it. We couldn't keep everything that we have [gathered] over all the 60 some years that we've been married, so we did have to part with some things. We've given a lot of things away. I did tell the kids if there was something special that they would want [to mark it]. One day I was dusting after all the kids had been there. I turned it upside down, and there was my oldest son's name on the bottom. "This is mine."

ROSS-NAZZAL: That's funny. They've got to mark their property.

LOUSMA: That's right.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Tell us a little bit about your childhood and experiences growing up before you met Jack.

LOUSMA: My childhood, I was raised in the country. I was sick a lot when I was young. My father had built a new house, and he had leaded [around] the pipes to seal the water pipes. In those days that's what they used to do, they'd melt the lead and pour it around the pipe to seal it. I got sick, but I didn't get well. The adults didn't feel very good for a little while, but I just kept getting sicker and sicker and sicker. We lived in Ann Arbor, where the University of Michigan was, so there were doctors that were well-known in their field, but nobody could figure it out.

My mother out of desperation just started going through the telephone book and came across this Dr. Law. His office hours were in the morning and in the evening. We went in, and

by the end of that evening [after] examining me—I was probably five—and talking to my parents, he decided that I had lead poisoning. It was because of the lead.

He even came out to the house to look, to see. The reason he knew about lead poisoning, he'd been trained in England during the war when all the bombing was going on, and all those old pipes. A lot of children had lead poisoning. This pediatrician kind of raised me. Jack, his mother was taking him to the same doctor. We didn't know each other then. When I was a senior in high school, we discovered a polio [vaccine]. That was found right there in Ann Arbor.

This Dr. Law was giving [polio] injections, so he called up on the phone and talked to me and wondered, if he'd show me how to give injections if I'd be willing to come and work for him that summer, so I did. We gave shots until—ooh, people were lining up on the street. You're both too young to remember what it was like with polio. Even when I went into nurse's training there were children in iron lungs, and that was their home, the iron lung.

That was the only thing between you and death, the iron lung. You never went to the lake in the summertime because maybe that's where the polio came from. It was just this and that. It was a huge breakthrough. Of course we've just about eradicated polio, which has been wonderful. I worked for him then. The summer of my senior year before I went to school, I worked for him too. Then when I graduated from nurse's training, and that was Hurley Hospital in Flint, I worked for him again.

He was an amazing character. I wish our doctors today could take some advice from him instead of relying on all the latest tests and the latest medicine. I said to him one day, "What is your secret to diagnosing a case?" He said, "Gratia, if you listen to the mother she will tell you what's wrong with her child because she knows." He would. It was like a symphony almost to

hear him diagnose a case, because he would listen. If something broke through he'd smile like, "I got that one."

Then he sent you for some tests to find out if he was right. He was more than a little bit. He was so sweet with the parents. He was also firm. A lot of times when children are retarded a bit, their parents think they're geniuses. He's very patient to try to explain that they just need more help and get them help. It's hard to tell a mother that your child needs to go to special ed when you think he's headed for greatness.

I remember one patient came. She'd taken care of this kid since he was a tiny baby, and they were in the office. He again was trying to explain to her, "Mrs. So-and-so, you need to get him into a special school. Then he can function, he can do. He'll be happy." She wasn't listening. Then I heard him scream. "Mrs. So-and-so, you cannot make a rose out of a dandelion." That went through the whole office. Everybody out in the waiting room was going, [makes gasping sound] because they didn't know what was going on. He just had a way. He meant a lot to Jack and I, because he was Jack's doctor too.

Then one summer that I was working for him and Jack was still in school, his [mother] developed a malady. Actually it was cancer. He said, "If I get someone to come into the office and take care of the office, will you go to our house and take care of Mrs. Law?" I said, "Oh, I'd love to." That was another great education, because she'd been married to an officer in the Army back in the days when we were fighting the South, and so I heard all of those stories too. How she lived in tents, and she went with him. They took their wives with them, as much as they could. I heard all of those stories.

Growing up then, I went and lived with my grandma and grandpa in the summer, especially when I got a little bit older that I could help Grandma. There's a picture of them in

the rocking chair, yes, that's them. [Points] The folks next to them there, that old couple, that's her parents. That's Jack's parents and mine and my grandpa.

ROSS-NAZZAL: That looks like Jack.

LOUSMA: I've always been interested in health and welfare. I think probably because I was sick so much when I was little that that really grabbed me. When some aunts and uncles come and visit you for the last time because they think you're dying.

ROSS-NAZZAL: That's a burden.

LOUSMA: I know. I think we understand a little bit more how to deal with things like this. They used to come and weep. I didn't know what they were all crying about, and why they looked so sad. It was disturbing to me. Mom handled it well. Her mother also lived with my dad and mom, so I always grew up with a grandma in my home.

That was normal when people got older in our family. Now what do we do? Because they can't take care of their house anymore, they just come and live with you. My grandma that I loved so much had taken care of her father-in-law. In fact she took great pride in the fact that the day that she married grandpa, this old man came to her and said, "Now I know where I'll spend my last days." She took care of great-grandpa. She had six, seven kids, and they didn't have any running water. The water had to be heated on the stove, and they had to bring it in from the outside pump.

JOHNSON: A different life than today, that's for sure.

LOUSMA: I know it.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Yes, very much.

LOUSMA: As she got older, of course she'd tell these stories over and over and over. You think, "Oh, older people, they must just forget they told you." It's important, because those are the things you remember. If you have that opportunity to care for either your parents or your in-laws, it's not easy.

JOHNSON: It's not.

LOUSMA: It is not easy. When Mother finally couldn't manage for herself she came to us for the last six years, and I couldn't leave her. It was hard to get anybody to come.

It's funny because you think of people that want to help you—well, yourself, you want to help somebody, so you go to them and say, "Well, what can I do for you?" But when it comes to stepping in and helping care for a person, nobody's coming. If you can ever do anything for anyone, you can help them. I remember things were really wearing thin. Jack was wonderful. I'd put Mother to bed, and she'd get right up and come right out again. All he'd have to say is, "Mama, it's time to go to bed." She'd grab her old walker, and off she'd go. That was my childhood and how I grew up, and I think how I was always interested in nursing, physical caring, and just emotional caring.

We all have callings. You're here today because you wouldn't do this, you're not going to become millionaires. I hate to tell you that.

ROSS-NAZZAL: No, we've learned that.

JOHNSON: More than aware of that.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Yes, history doesn't pay that well.

LOUSMA: No, it doesn't, but the payoffs are so great. When we lived around NASA and we had three kids of our own by then, I didn't have a job outside [of the home]. I said, "Why would I want to leave three little kids and go and work at a job that I'm doing at home, for free?" I knew. Even to this day, I probably know more of the astronaut kids than I know them.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Yesterday at lunch you told us a story about your first date with Jack. Would you tell us that story?

LOUSMA: We were in high school, and I'd known about him. We'd gone to the same church. I'd seen him, and he was just another little kid. I was a teenager. We ended up in high school together, 16, and we got our drivers' licenses. I got mine before he did, because my birthday is about 20 days before his.

He asked me out. I knew he was going to. He was kind of shy in those days, he'd come down the hall facing me, and it began to get red up his neck. He finally stopped me and asked me out for that weekend.

I was a brat. I said, "Well, I don't know. Let me think about it. Why don't you call me in maybe a couple days?" I go back to my homeroom, and I said, "Hey, girls, [guess] who asked me out?" "Oh, really? You're going." I said, "I don't know." "You're crazy."

ROSS-NAZZAL: Was he really cute? Is that why they said, "You're crazy"? Was he really popular? Is that why?

LOUSMA: Oh yes. If you would have met him then, I've got some pictures here, but if you would have met him then, he hasn't changed. He's honest, he's truthful, he's loyal; he is.

I went out with him, and I was also a farm girl, so I was involved in 4-H. I took pigs to the fair. In fact I earned my way through college by raising animals, taking them to the fair. My pigs got sold for enough to put me to college. Of course it didn't cost what it does today either.

I also had a calf that I was going to take to the fair. I needed to walk her, so she got used to walking with me, so she wouldn't run away with me at the fair. I had about 20 minutes before he was due to arrive. I put the halter on her, and I started walking around the yard. Just about that time, he drove in. She hadn't heard that car, it seems like it squeaked too, I don't know what happened.

She took off across a 10-acre field, dragging me. Now the secret of leading animals and working with them is that you are the boss. If they ever get away from you, you can just kiss that goodbye. They're not going to let you [lead], because you're not competent. So I hung on.

I got to the other end of the field, and she stopped. I still had the halter on her and in my hand the reins. I walked back to the house, and he was just standing there.

Later on I said to him, “Oh, I looked so terrible. It was awful.” Then I said, “What did you think?” He said, “I thought that girl can hang on.” I’ve thought of that so many times, especially in the space program and also when he got out of college. He was in the Marine Corps, and we were there for quite a few years, so I thought NASA was going to be a snap. That held a lot more things than the Marine Corps did, even though we were separated for a year at different times. He went to Japan by himself, so there were separations. It was good training for what was ahead.

It’s interesting how in life—and I’m sure you can say the same thing—life prepares you for what you have to do. When you begin to think about, “Oh, I can’t do that,” you probably already have the knowledge that you need. You just have to, I call it improvise and think. “I need to do this. It doesn’t appear very clear how I’m going to do it, but I have what I need to be able to do this.”

The day that he went into space, I did not want to stand there and cry, because this was really a joyous time. He had worked so hard. Many nights I’d drive out to Ellington Field [Houston, Texas] to pick him up at midnight. At one point we just had one little Volkswagen.

During those times I was accumulating everything I needed to do to let him go. I’d let him go to Japan and do reconnaissance work over Vietnam. When I just stopped and thought about it, I thought, “I can do this,” and make it a good time for me, him, and the children. They only had wonderful thoughts of Dad and what he was doing, especially the older kids.

He'd come in from the barn, and I'd say, "It's time for Mary's basketball game. He'd been out helping me shovel, so he'd jump in the car with his boots on and go. Then Mary would say, "Mom, Dad came, and he had manure on his shoes!"

ROSS-NAZZAL: At least he was there.

LOUSMA: Yes.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Tell us about being the wife of a Marine. When did you get married, and what was that life like? You mentioned he was gone for a year. What was it like? Were you living on base?

LOUSMA: As a matter of fact, no, we never lived on base. We liked to rent a house out in the community and take in your surroundings. Because the Marine Corps, like NASA, can eat you up if you just spend all of your time thinking of that. There's more to life. To me, life is what prepares you to do what you're supposed to do. Like what you do now, you got preparation for this before you began to do it. You might not have thought what you were going to do, and this might be the biggest surprise. "You mean you go and talk to people and archive these things, and they're going to be there forever, those things?" I thank you for doing this, because you're always going to do something. I'm trying to get Jack to write a book. He should. Some of the things he's written are tremendous. You gain preparation for what you're going to do in the process of living. Because you have another life besides coming to Kerrville to talk to Ardis [Shanks] and I.

ROSS-NAZZAL: What was life like with Jack being gone? Were you lonely? Did you have children at that point?

LOUSMA: No. We didn't have any children until—in fact all of our children are adopted, all four of them. No, the first seven years, in a way it was kind of nice, because when I could go I did. When he went to Japan that year, that was a difficult year. I thought, “Well, now, what am I going to do?” You goose, you've got a whole year to do what you want to do.

My folks wanted me to come back to Ann Arbor and be with them, so I said, “Yes, that's good. I'll do that.” I just went back to Ann Arbor and picked up some old friendships that I'd had in high school and got to know those people after a few years had gone by. That was nice. Jack and I wrote letters back and forth.

One of the regrets that I have, he was a wonderful writer, and I wasn't. I just, “Went to town, da da da da.” When we moved here, I was overwhelmed with stuff. There's this great big pile of letters, and I couldn't think of anything better to do [with them]. I regret that a little bit. I tied a big bow on them and burned them.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Oh no.

JOHNSON: Oh no.

LOUSMA: They were mine. I know. I did the same thing with thank-you notes that people would write after they'd come to the flight. I started going through those thank-you notes, and

pretty soon I couldn't remember the people, I couldn't put the name and the face [together]. I said, "It was all so wonderful. I don't want to be hung up with worrying about can't remember somebody's name. They're all wonderful." So I tied up another and burned them.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Next time you want to know what to do with some stuff, let us know. We can help you.

LOUSMA: Yes.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Before you burn them let us know. We have some ideas.

LOUSMA: I wish now, with the book that Jack would like to write, because he is a good writer, that I had kept some of them. I can remember a lot of stuff too, even with my 80-plus-year mind.

ROSS-NAZZAL: You mentioned yesterday that the military trained you before you went to NASA. Can you explain what you mean by that?

LOUSMA: I was raised on a farm, so that was a totally different life than what I was going after our marriage to go into. Our first anniversary, he was in Quantico, Virginia, going through boot camp with the Marine Corps, and I was back in Ann Arbor. Our second anniversary, that's where he was. We haven't spent a lot of our anniversaries together. It seems like there's always a need to be away.

Things don't always happen the way you want them to. That's what I learned. Living on a farm was more regimented, but there were always surprises. You learned to function with surprises and to be creative in handling the surprises.

When I went into nursing, there's always surprises. If someone is expiring, you can't just stand there and scream. You learned what you could do. Because you've had all these experiences, if you just stop and think about it, you can figure out what to do.

When Jack came back from his last flight—when he was up there, the hurricane was coming in, so we had to board up. You know how people do. Board up, maybe they don't do that now.

JOHNSON: We still do. We still board up.

LOUSMA: They still do. We had great high tall windows, so I got some of the guys to come out and help me put boards up on. Jack had prepared the windows with the plywood, so had that. Then he came home, and the hurricane of course was gone. Now we've got these big boards up at the windows, and he's feeling kind of [tired] from being in space. So getting the boards down was quite a chore. When we were getting the last board down, it slipped out of his hand and hit the outside faucet.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Oh no.

LOUSMA: Now we got water coming. For some reason I just started thinking, "What can I do?" My aunt had just been there, and she loved the cold duck wine. I could just see that cork in the

cold duck going in that faucet and it fit perfectly. Then we broke open the bottle, and it did it fit perfectly.

If you just center yourself, there's a way to do this. All the experiences of raising these kids with Jack not there a lot, I handled most everything. I didn't wait till he got home to tell him, so they'd get a scolding, unless it was a big deal. You just handle them.

Working at camp, a summer camp with kids from all over the country. Of course that's another whole book.

ROSS-NAZZAL: What did you think when Jack told you he was going to apply to be an astronaut? What were your initial thoughts?

LOUSMA: It was kind of a surprise. It was a Friday night, and we were stationed at [Marie Corps Air Station] Cherry Point, North Carolina. He was flying. He was getting ready to go overseas again. He was coming out of the gate one Friday night. He picked up the base paper, and it said that NASA is looking for more astronauts. That caught his eye. It gave how many flight hours you needed. He had just the bare minimums. He said to me, "I think I'd like to do that. What do you think?" I knew that thousands of people were going to apply. I said, "Honey, that is the best idea you've had in a long time. You just go right ahead." Little did I know. Oh my.

He applied. We just forgot about it, and he was getting ready to go overseas again. I was trying to decide what I wanted to do. Then he was coming in from the flight line one day, about three months later, and Al [Alan B.] Shepard was on the line. He said, "Jack, do you still want to work at NASA?" Of course. Ooh. I get chills when I think about it. Oh my goodness—we

hadn't planned for it. Some people had worked their whole careers thinking that this is what they wanted to do. He didn't.

Jack and I are people of faith. We have trusted the Lord for our lives. You do, and then you don't worry a lot, because it doesn't do any good to worry a lot. A favorite verse that is ours is Proverbs 3:5-6. It's, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart. Lean not to your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him. And he'll direct your path."

Jack calls it three recommendations and a promise. It works. It works. When I had my heart attack, we'd just come home from the Cape [Canaveral, Florida], and I didn't feel just right. I just felt something was imminent. I said to Jack, "In the night if I wake you up and say we're going to the hospital, we're going now." I did, about 4:00 in the morning. I was just in time.

I didn't have to go into a hospital at the Cape. I had such peace about doing this. I knew that it could be it. The doctor was already scrubbed and waiting for me when I got there. So, I thought, "Well, this could be it," and then I thought "Oh, the kids and the grandkids and oh." It was just like God said, "Well, they're my kids too." There was just a lot of peace.

I do not have to hold up the world. That's a joke, if you think you do. I felt that way when he went into space. I didn't want to run in the bathroom screaming and crying. [Marie Fullerton] and I just hugged each other and the little kids. Then I thought, "You know what, if the darn thing blows up, it's still okay." Can you believe that you would think that?

JOHNSON: No.

ROSS-NAZZAL: No, that that would cross your mind at that moment.

LOUSMA: A lot of the girls just do not do well. I didn't want that to happen. The kids had a lot of anticipation about this, and if it didn't work, well, we had time to deal with it later. There's not been a lot of consternation in our home or division or telling Jack he shouldn't do this or that. He's trustworthy. He is.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Had you ever been to Texas before? What were your thoughts about moving to the Lone Star State?

LOUSMA: Oh, you mean when we moved to Houston?

ROSS-NAZZAL: Yes, in the '60s.

LOUSMA: That's where NASA was. At first we were just moving to NASA. I didn't even think about Texas; [I'm] from Michigan. We knew they liked to brag, but we did too. It was a new experience, it was. I didn't have a job. We had the kids then so I wasn't working away from home. In fact, I got a lot of flak from my neighbors. "What do you do all day?" They had jobs. I said to them, "When that bus stops out there, they come to my house. They sit at my kitchen bar. They talk to me. I know things that you'll never know." That's true.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Tell us about Clear Lake and your memories of moving down there. How would you describe Clear Lake when you arrived? What did you see?

LOUSMA: Oh. It was pretty barren still. Back in, let's see, what was that, [1966]. Clear Lake was just really beginning. Ellington was the big thing because that's where the airplanes came, the guys flew in and out of Ellington. Clear Lake was built around the air facility there, and it ran into Pasadena. We were over in El Lago for three years, and then we moved to Friendswood. I talked about that before. Jennifer [Thornton] and I were talking about that last night, talking about our bench that we want to put in the park.

When we got there life was pretty normal. The Quakers did not care if you're going into space, just so you didn't smoke. Don't smoke. I think it was still dry when we left. They hung on to it as long as they could. I just immersed my life in the community.

ROSS-NAZZAL: What attracted you to El Lago at first? Was there anything in particular that you liked about that location?

LOUSMA: Oh. That I liked about El Lago? We liked it. It was busy. I think there were 80 little kids on our street.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Eighty kids?

LOUSMA: Eighty little kids.

ROSS-NAZZAL: I can't imagine, that's an army.

LOUSMA: Most of them were young because these were young families. I think the first thing that happened, that really hit me that we were in the astronaut program, because we moved, and we lived in a motel down in Dickinson for a while, and then we finally got into a house.

We were the last street of houses that was built in El Lago, and we bought one of those new houses, which was good. We didn't have any real view of moving to Friendswood, but we knew we wanted to get out. I was country, and it was harder for me to live in a community where people are running in and out of your house all the time. That was when I started story hour for kids once a week.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Will you tell us about that?

LOUSMA: Yes, that was really nice.

JOHNSON: Was that in El Lago still?

LOUSMA: Yes, it was.

ROSS-NAZZAL: What prompted you to create a story hour for the kids?

LOUSMA: They were there anyway, so I had them right there. I thought, "Well, we might as well do something kind of productive." My mother had taught Bible school when I was growing up. She had what they called a flannelgraph. They had a piece of flannel and you cut out pictures and you put sandpaper on the back of a character. Then you can put it right on the flannel. You

can tell the story, and the kids would listen real good. If they listened they could come up and put the characters on themselves and tell the story. I'm still in touch with those kids to this day. I know. I know.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Wow! Who else was living on your street? You mentioned 80 kids. Were they all NASA people?

LOUSMA: Most of them were, or they worked for Philco or the contractors. The Armstrongs lived right up at the head of our street. We lived on Shadow Creek.

ROSS-NAZZAL: I was going to ask you what your address was. People are always interested in that, I'm sure.

LOUSMA: In those days, that brings up something. There used to be a bus tour that came through, looking at where the astronauts lived. You could get on this bus over at NASA and they would take you on a tour.

ROSS-NAZZAL: What did you think of that?

LOUSMA: I think it just began to hit me where in the world we were.

ROSS-NAZZAL: It really hadn't hit until then?

LOUSMA: Not a lot. I had our [astronaut] group for dinner one night, and there were 19 of us. Nobody had any furniture, so it was just get your plate and sit on the floor type of thing. I remember we were all sitting in the living room. We had a big picture window, and we're sitting there looking out. Down the street came Ed [Edward H.] White and his wife riding their bicycles, and we said, "Oh, look there's astronauts, look at [that]." Then it began to dawn on all of us that this is what we were going to do.

JOHNSON: They were the astronauts, not your husbands.

LOUSMA: I know it, it's crazy. I think things hit you in increments. You don't get the full picture. Then we thought, "Oh, hmm."

ROSS-NAZZAL: That's funny.

LOUSMA: Then I think some of the girls, because we came from all different backgrounds, a lot of us had been in the military. Well, what is an astronaut's wife supposed to look like? What does she do? What perception does the public have? How did you feel you fit into that? That's a real shocker. Then it became clear why Jan Armstrong hid in her house and Pat White right next door, because people would come and crawl up on the fence and look in your windows.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Oh, gosh, even to you guys? Even before Jack had flown?

LOUSMA: I know. Things begin to diminish a little bit when 19—it used to be maybe 5 or 6 fellows that came together, but there were 19 of us. People didn't know what to do with us, and we didn't know what to do with them. It became clear pretty soon that people wanted to get to know you, but they didn't really want to get to know you. They wanted to use you. That's all right to a point, as long as you realize what it is that they're doing, and you consent to that and it doesn't go against your principles. But you have to be careful.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Did NASA have anything for the wives? Were you welcomed at all? Were you given a tour of the facilities? Was there anything like that for your group? No?

LOUSMA: No, we just arrived. I don't know, I thought I had a picture. They invited us to come over. There was an article. I don't know if you want to [look]—when they all came to NASA.

ROSS-NAZZAL: We'll have to make a copy of that. I think I've seen you with a command module in a photo, that's why I wondered.

LOUSMA: This was over at Ardis's.

ROSS-NAZZAL: That does look familiar.

LOUSMA: I look like I'm looking for Ardis. What's she up to? Oh, here, I did have a picture of it. They invited us over to NASA to show us what the space capsule looked like. Here we are. That was shortly after we arrived. Can you find JoAnn Carr?

ROSS-NAZZAL: I do. Yes, I see JoAnn. I love the hairdos. I like your hair, the little flip.

LOUSMA: Yes, we did the flip then.

ROSS-NAZZAL: You guys were on a pretty tight budget I'm guessing. Were you ever concerned about how you might have to dress? Like you said, you realized, "Oh my gosh, I'm an astronaut wife now."

LOUSMA: I know it. You go into a shop, and you're going to buy a dress. "Oh, I like that one." Then someone says, "You can't have that one because so-and-so has that one."

ROSS-NAZZAL: That would happen?

LOUSMA: You can't have a dress like somebody else. I mean really. But we didn't have any money. I'd go home and say to Jack, "Well, I don't have to worry about that, I don't have any money for their dress anyway."

I think being raised in the country on a farm with grandparents growing up, I was pretty well-grounded. It was new, but it was not a surprise. I'd lived in Ann Arbor, and of course professors and their wives thought they were the cat's pajamas too. I'm not making fun of them, but I think I was pretty well prepared.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Tell us about your first get-together with some of the other astronaut wives. What was that like? What did they share with you about being an astronaut wife?

LOUSMA: We had a get-together, I think it was about every month, and we'd meet for lunch over at the [Lakewood Yacht Club]. It's close to the other end of [Farm to Market Road] 518.

JOHNSON: It's in Seabrook.

LOUSMA: Right. We'd meet over there and we'd go. At first we didn't know each other, and so much was being made about the astronaut thing that you didn't want to do anything to harm your husband's career. You wanted to dress just right, and you wanted to try to fit in. A lot of the girls had known each other before, or quite a few of them had. They'd been out at Edwards Air Force Base [California]. [Anne] Lurton Scott and Ada Givens—she was my best friend. She was from Germany, married Ed [Edward G.] Givens, and he was the one that was killed in the car accident. She had two children. We had become friends, because she lived just down the street from us.

We were just kind of feeling our way along. We didn't know exactly what [to do], but you make your friends. Everybody's different, and you gravitate toward certain [people], but we were all expected to do certain things. We that were a little bit younger. The older girls always looked at Louise Shepard, who was the picture of perfection and lovely. She really was. Did you girls ever meet her?

ROSS-NAZZAL: Unfortunately no. Would love to have.

LOUSMA: Yes. Marge [Marjorie] Slayton?

ROSS-NAZZAL: No. Unfortunately there's been quite a few who have passed away that we're not going to get to talk to. How about you share some things about the two of them with us? About Louise Shepard and Marge.

LOUSMA: She was lovely. I wouldn't ever say I was a close friend of hers. In fact the day that we drove to San Antonio to get Joey, our baby, after he was born, we went the next day and picked him up at the hospital right here. Jennifer and I were going to deliver horse manure to Louise Shepard, because she wanted it for her garden, but I couldn't go, because I was going to go pick up [Joey]. We were going into River Oaks with Jennifer's truck with horse manure. Just the setting of that whole thing just made us laugh. But Louise would be a gracious lady along a manure truck, that's the way she was. She was.

ROSS-NAZZAL: What about Marge?

LOUSMA: Marge, she was just perfectly herself. Those girls tried for years. Of course there's lots of stories about everything, and you just don't want to get into that with people. There's always two sides to stories, that saying wasn't true, but there's funny things.

Marge would say this if she was here. When Deke [Donald K. Slayton] was up, he'd launched that morning. We came back, and then he was getting settled in for the night up there,

and I went over to their house to see how she was doing. She said, “Well, I know where he is tonight.”

ROSS-NAZZAL: That would be very true.

LOUSMA: So then you think well, there must be some plus to everything if you have to go into space.

JOHNSON: That’s funny.

LOUSMA: She was funny. She took care of her mother till she passed away too, Nanabel, and had the one son Kent [Slayton]. I’m going to get that phone number too because you need to talk to Kent.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Did they share anything with you about dealing with the press or just things that they had learned since they had been with NASA?

LOUSMA: As time went on people got a little more open. Usually nobody said much of anything. If your husband was put on a certain flight or he was going to do something, it wasn’t something that you told anybody except your very closest friend.

JOHNSON: Why was that?

LOUSMA: Because maybe some of the other girls' husbands didn't get put on something. I think our group was unique, and I appreciate that too, because we really never got to the place where we were just kind of full of what was happening to us and forgetting that that wasn't the case all the way around.

I remember saying to JoAnn [R.P.] Carr, we were talking about clothes and we were talking about things when we got our dresses to go to [President Richard M.] Nixon's party out in Los Angeles [California] and the Moon landing. Of course like I said you couldn't buy the same dress that so-and-so had, and she started to cry. I said, "JoAnn, did I say something?" She said, "No." I said to her, "That jacket that you wore was beautiful." She started crying. She had stayed up all night to make that. She could not afford to buy a jacket.

I think our group really understood that everybody didn't live in the mansion and have all the perks. This isn't anything against the other gals. I think they kind of forgot, by the way they talked about what they had. That wasn't everybody. That's always something to guard against too. That when you come up in the world, that you can look back. You know what I mean? I'm sure you do. You do a lot of [interviews], but it happens. It isn't because those people don't care about you, they forget that we're not all like that.

I think we were in a great spot, because we weren't on top of the world. Jack never went to the Moon, but he could have. The first flight [he] was up there for 59 days. We didn't know what was going to happen when you were up for so long. I think we were able to live a pretty normal life in the middle of the muddle.

ROSS-NAZZAL: I wonder if you would talk about the *Life* contract. I understand that that was extended to you. Was that something that you were aware of?

LOUSMA: They kind of threw up their hands when they saw us coming. “You mean 19 more?” That lasted for a couple years. The way we lived, if you didn’t need a new car, why would you want another new car? We had holes in the floor of our Volkswagen. Why would you get a Corvette?

ROSS-NAZZAL: Right, not very practical with three children.

LOUSMA: Yes. But that’s just the way we lived, whether we were at NASA or we weren’t.

ROSS-NAZZAL: I’m looking at my watch. Would you like to take a break? I didn’t realize we’d been going so long.

JOHNSON: It’s been a little over an hour.

ROSS-NAZZAL: You want to take a break?

LOUSMA: Whatever you want to do.

[Break]

ROSS-NAZZAL: One of the things that I wanted to ask about was the accidents. You already mentioned Givens and his car accident. But what sort of support would you provide to the other

astronaut families? C.C. [Clifton C.] Williams died the same year as Givens. Then of course the Apollo 1 fire. What sort of impact did that have on the families and the community?

LOUSMA: C.C. Williams was a Marine. When his plane went down and he was killed, they called Jack from NASA, because Jack is a Marine. Wondered if Jack would go and talk to Beth. Of course I went with [him]. Oh, I know.

ROSS-NAZZAL: A horrible assignment.

LOUSMA: I know it. I know. When those things began to happen, then it began to hit me, “Well, maybe this isn’t quite as safe as I thought.” Even the day that Jack went to San Antonio for some of his physicals, that was the day that [Charles A.] Bassett and [Elliott M.] See hit the building and were killed. I thought, “Oh my goodness.” Although we were in the military, we were used to hearing this. In my mind I had thought this is safer, because he’d been flying a lot of reconnaissance missions over Vietnam and those places.

They called Jack to go and talk to Beth, so I went with him. She was having lunch at a neighbors. One of the ladies brought the baby out—their only daughter that they had. Come to find out she was expecting another one. They didn’t know that. I took care of the baby, and Jack was with Beth. That was quite [heartbreaking].

JOHNSON: Was he the one that gave her the news? Is he the one that gave her the news?

LOUSMA: Yes. It's interesting. I've often thought of that, because it's fascinating to me, how we think people are going to react to things. Then sometimes they don't act like we thought they were going to. I've been in groups and had conversations with Beth. She's never mentioned that we came. I don't know if she doesn't remember.

JOHNSON: Maybe not.

LOUSMA: I don't know. You kind of put yourself in her place. If that would have been me I would have just hung on to this person that was telling me this—any news, any word at all. But she has never mentioned it to Jack or I.

JOHNSON: That's interesting.

LOUSMA: Yes. I guess it just proves we all handle things differently, but she's never married. Went into a business of her own and lives over I guess off of Repsdorph [Road] over there, I think.

ROSS-NAZZAL: I think JoAnn had mentioned we could talk to her. I know JoAnn had spent some time with Beth afterwards. Did you spend any time with the family?

LOUSMA: Actually they were very good friends. I say were. I don't mean that they're not friends now at all. JoAnn comes to visit here once in a while. I always felt bad that I wasn't aware enough to do more for JoAnn. I don't know how she coped. I absolutely don't. All those

children and her father that was an invalid. Every time I think about her staying up all night I could just weep.

ROSS-NAZZAL: You kept separate lives as astronaut wives?

LOUSMA: I think we did. Only now we're beginning to enjoy being together because the competition for these flights, it spilled over into the families, into the wives.

JOHNSON: That's interesting.

LOUSMA: You didn't want to say anything. You didn't want to hurt anybody's feelings. I remember saying to one of the girls, we'd gone and done something. We were together at one of our little groups, and I said, "Oh boy, did we ever have fun over the weekend." Boy, I got chastised for that. Because you don't talk about those things, I was told. Then I thought, "Well, what can you talk about?" That was just a cardinal sin.

JOHNSON: Just talking about your personal life?

LOUSMA: Yes, what you did that was fun. "Oh, so-and-so invited us."

ROSS-NAZZAL: Did they see it as bragging that you got to go to this event?

LOUSMA: I guess they did.

JOHNSON: That's interesting.

LOUSMA: Some of them never said anything. Of course nothing is ever kept secret when it's a group like that. It gets around.

JOHNSON: That's true.

LOUSMA: But I've never had any fusses with anyone. In fact it was heartbreaking when the marriages started breaking up. People were devastated. One of the girls called one morning and said that they'd heard that Jack and I were getting a divorce. They wanted to be sure that before they said anything they would talk to me. I said, "Well, I don't know. It's kind of scary around here, but as far as I know when he left for work today it was okay."

ROSS-NAZZAL: Oh my gosh.

LOUSMA: I know. Then we laughed for a while. Then pretty soon I got mad and I thought, "NASA has got to do something for families. This is ridiculous. We're going to the Moon, and the families are just falling apart." It was just one after another. It was just pathetic. People that you thought were doing good, but since they didn't share anything because [of the competition].

So I got a little speech all ready, and I was going to go talk to Chris [Christopher C.] Kraft.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Was that something that wives would do?

LOUSMA: No. Just about every day someone was just blowing you away with the fact that their families are splitting up. I'm working over at camp too, so I see all the kids. These kids are miserable, the little Aldrin kids. It was terrible.

I got my nerve up. I was going to go. The day I was going, I went in the clinic, and I was going down the hall. There were offices along the way to Chris's office, which was up some stairs, and so I was pounding away getting my nerve up. I passed Terry McGuire. He was the psychiatrist that came to NASA to interview the guys. You sound like you've heard his name.

ROSS-NAZZAL: I've heard his name, yes, from the Shuttle astronauts. They've all mentioned him. I didn't realize he was around back then.

LOUSMA: Good. That's good. They used his expertise. He was really good. He saw me marching by and he says, "Where in the world are you going?" I told him. He said, "Why don't you come in? We'll talk."

The offshoot of that was that we started a wives' get-together once a month when he would come. We had two groups going. Of course you didn't tell who was in it. Whatever you said in the group stayed in the group. I might tell you who's in it or some of the girls might mention [the group]. Harriet Eisele was helpful, and her expertise was along those lines too. Terry would come every month, and we'd meet with our groups. It was good. It finally brought us together as a group because whatever we said stayed there, so we learned we could depend on

each other. Oh golly, we had quite a group. Some of them chose not to come. We never said, “Where have you been?” or anything. It was good.

JOHNSON: I know sometimes when there’s group sessions like that it helps to know that other people are going through the same things you’re going through, and you thought you were the only one. Was that the feeling?

LOUSMA: Oh yes. We felt like we could call someone and offer to be a support system for them. Of course things like that appeal to some people, and some people it doesn’t appeal to. But I’m sure Harriet—maybe you talked to her already.

ROSS-NAZZAL: We haven’t, but JoAnn suggested her as well, that we might talk with her. She’s in the area, I think. Is she in the Houston area?

LOUSMA: Yes, she’s in Clear Lake. I think she’s in one of those garden apartments or something over there. Yes, she’s a good one to talk to. She’d gone through a lot of stuff herself, in losing that little boy. We grew from that, and we learned that we could help each other, which is nice. Our last reunion here was just fun. We all have our stories. If you want to talk about them you can but if you don’t it’s all right. But to show the value of getting together, when Val [Valerie] Anders came [to the reunion], her husband rented a jet and got a couple nurses and rented a house here, so that she could come.

ROSS-NAZZAL: It's become so important to you to be together now, I guess, to know that you have that shared experience.

LOUSMA: That's right. As we've gotten older we've gotten more mellow too.

JOHNSON: Not so much competition anymore?

LOUSMA: That's it.

ROSS-NAZZAL: When we talked to JoAnn she mentioned that she was disappointed because she didn't feel like she was welcomed the way the military would welcome her.

LOUSMA: Okay. Yes.

ROSS-NAZZAL: By the squad and part of that feeling. She said that Annie Glenn had welcomed her because she was a Marine [wife], and I wondered was there any sort of cohesion among the Marine astronauts. You mentioned C.C. Williams being a Marine. Was there any sort of cohesion there between you? Or not too much?

LOUSMA: I'm not sure about all of that. Maybe it would be helpful to JoAnn to delve into that a little bit. You folks are good folks to do that too.

JOHNSON: She just talked about when they were in the military they would go to a new place and she felt like there were things that were provided for the family, and they felt welcome. When they went to NASA, that NASA didn't provide those things.

LOUSMA: Nothing. I know. It was like that. Although maybe our experience was a little bit different because we never did live on the base. We always went out into the community, because we felt this is a wonderful experience to live in a different place and find out about it, because we realized soon that some of the military people, that's all they ever became is military people and didn't take advantage of the new surroundings. The people are different. It's good to find out about them, so when your dog kills the neighbor's dog they're not going to kill you.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Oh my goodness.

LOUSMA: Not this dog.

ROSS-NAZZAL: I hope not. You've mentioned that you and Jack are Christians.

LOUSMA: Yes.

ROSS-NAZZAL: You're people of faith. What church did you end up joining in Clear Lake?

LOUSMA: We went to the Nassau Bay Baptist Church, and then there was a Clear Lake Community Church. Is there such a thing now?

ROSS-NAZZAL: Name doesn't ring a bell, but it doesn't mean it doesn't exist. There's a lot of churches.

LOUSMA: Yes. Then they were trying to get started, there was just a few people. We branched out with them. Then we started a Bible study with astronauts, which was really good. One of the ones was so helpful, and it's hard to keep up with her, she's been so busy, Shannon [W.] Lucid. I love her.

JOHNSON: Jennifer knows her well.

ROSS-NAZZAL: She babysits my son a lot, and she also invites him over to play with her grandsons.

LOUSMA: Would you just give her a big hug for me?

ROSS-NAZZAL: I sure will, yes.

LOUSMA: Would you?

ROSS-NAZZAL: She is just the nicest person. She really is.

LOUSMA: She cared for her husband while he was [sick].

ROSS-NAZZAL: Yes.

LOUSMA: I know, I know.

ROSS-NAZZAL: That was so difficult for her to retire but she really wanted to do that.

LOUSMA: I know, I know. I'm not in touch with her as much as I'd like to be. When we do we can pick up right where we left off. Since you know her you can appreciate that, because that's the kind of girl she is.

ROSS-NAZZAL: She's a very special person.

LOUSMA: I remember we had a little Bible study out in Friendswood, so the neighbors came. Where the astronaut wives hardly knew each other, these people had known each other for generations. [I] got the bright idea of introducing something else into their lives. I had Shannon come out and talk to the group, and it was so good. They could not even imagine her going into space and all that time, but it was so good for them, that women do do this. Because these were women who didn't even want to invite you over unless they'd done a spring housecleaning.

I had them come, and they could bring their little brown-bag lunch then I'd provide the coffee or drinks and the dessert. They'd come to my house, because they didn't mind if my house was all cluttered. We had Joey then and he was a baby, so I just couldn't pick up and go, so they came to my house and I'd pass Joe around to the ladies and they entertained him.

Let's see now. Where did I end up with that? Seems like there was something else I was going to say.

ROSS-NAZZAL: I was asking you about what church you joined because I was curious what role and what ties there were between the space program and churches, if there were any ties. I've seen [at] the Methodist church, the minister was very interested in space. I've seen some letters between him and Al [Alan L.] Bean, and the prayers that they had for the missions and the sermons. There's a lot of interrelatedness I think.

LOUSMA: There wasn't so much then.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Oh. Okay.

LOUSMA: I don't think the churches knew what to do with us either. We didn't know what to do with each other, and they didn't know what to do with us. Here we were out in the middle of a cow pasture. We were just feeling our way along. It's good that some of us are still living that you can [talk to us]. Although I say that we weren't close, but there was an underlining camaraderie still. I think after having our get-together here last month that it's beginning to really come out, that these girls really have cared for each other for a long time, and that we missed getting together and sharing our lives more.

JOHNSON: I think that happens sometimes when you have a shared history with someone.

LOUSMA: Yes.

ROSS-NAZZAL: It does.

LOUSMA: I think Terry McGuire, getting back to Terry, that he did a lot for that.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Can you talk about the role that he would play? I know what happened in that room stayed in that room, and I'm not asking what you talked about. But I'm wondering what sort of role did he play in terms of, I don't know, playing the devil's advocate or listening or offering advice. I'm just curious about that.

LOUSMA: What role he played? I think it was just keeping everybody on track, and realizing that we had strengths that we could draw from. We were all different. We could draw from our own strengths, but we could also draw from each other's. Sharing our lives was so beneficial. ... To me, NASA and the astronaut program and everything has been nothing but joy.

JOHNSON: That's wonderful.

ROSS-NAZZAL: It is.

LOUSMA: I know.

ROSS-NAZZAL: That's really nice to hear.

LOUSMA: Jack can say the same thing. I don't think we've changed much since the day that we left Michigan. I walked away from the farm, and he walked away from living in the city. We put those two things together and great trip.

JOHNSON: Sounds like it.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Thank you so much for today. We appreciate it.

LOUSMA: Yes.

[End of interview]