

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

World War II, Women

Personal Experience

O. H. 931

MARGARET W. STEPHENS

Interviewed

by

Janice A. Cafaro

on

October 30, 1985

MARGARET W. STEPHENS

Born on August 31, 1918, Margaret Stephens is the daughter of Myron and Margaret Gleason Welsh. Mrs. Stephens has been a lifelong resident of Youngstown, Ohio.

After her 1936 graduation from South High School, she attended Youngstown College, majoring in secretarial studies. She graduated from that institution in 1937, and did secretarial work for an air conditioning training school on Wick Avenue. Unhappy with secretarial work, she left her job after only eight months to marry Clarence Evans in 1939.

During the war years she reared three children, Carol Ann, Mary Linda and Richard David, while living in the Westlake Projects. Her husband served in the United States Army during those years, and he was a paratrooper for the 101st Airborne Division, which landed in Europe on D-Day. Seriously wounded in that campaign, he was given a medal for bravery.

She divorced Mr. Evans shortly after the war and married another Army veteran, Robert Eugene Smith, in 1946. They had three children, Robert Eugene Jr., Thomas William, and Myron Daniel. After four years, Mr. Smith died as a result of a kidney injury he had received during the war. Without a husband, she took a clerking job in Strouss in 1956, working there part-time for ten years.

In 1964, Mrs. Stephens married her third husband, Charles, who passed away in 1984. During her marriage she clerked part-time for Sherry's Dress Shop and later for

Hills Department Store.

Retiring in 1980, Mrs. Stephens currently has ten grandchildren, five boys and five girls, and one great-granddaughter. A former member of Saint Patrick's Catholic Church, Mrs. Stephens' hobbies are walking, reading, and needlework.

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

World War II, Women

INTERVIEWEE: MARGARET W. STEPHENS

INTERVIEWER: Janice A. Cafaro

SUBJECT: Family, Westlake Projects, World War II,
rationing, Pearl Harbor

DATE: October 30, 1985

C: This is an interview with Mrs. Margaret Stephens for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on World War II, Women, by Janice Cafaro, at 4601 Washington Square, Apartment 9, Austintown, Ohio, on October 30, 1985, at 2:00 p.m.

Would you tell us a little bit about your family and you background?

S: What do you mean by that?

C: Where you were born, what your family life was like.

S: I was born in Youngstown and grew up during the Depression years. I got married when the war started. I have one brother and sister. I had three children.

C: How did you meet your husband?

S: He was a neighbor boy; he was the boy next door. We were married; then we had Carol. He went into the service and Linda was born about six weeks after he went into the service. He was gone about a year, and then he came home. Then Dick was born. Dick was born in May, and he didn't see Dick for two years. When he came home, Dick was two years old. The marriage didn't work out because after he came home we decided that we were more like strangers, and so we got a divorce. Later I married another young man who also had been in the

service, and I had the three boys. He had been hurt in the service. He had an illness which ruined his kidneys; so he died. We were only married four years when he died. Of course, I raised the children all by myself.

C: It must have been hard on you.

S: He died from being in the service. Of course, I had the government pension and the social security. But, as the children got older, the money didn't really go as far. So, I went to work. That was about the extent of that, I guess.

C: Do you remember the bombing of Pearl Harbor? What you were doing, and how you felt?

S: Yes, I remember exactly because it was my uncle's fiftieth birthday, and my grandmother was having a big family reunion. We were all over. I had one young uncle who was in the service at the time. We were all over at her house, and we heard it on the news. Then they said everybody who was home on leave had to go right away, so the young uncle celebrated with us, but then the next morning he had to leave to go back. Of course, at that time my husband wasn't in the service. He enlisted later. I can remember being over there. We were all shocked. It was quite a shock. That is about all I can remember about that.

C: How long afterwards did your husband enlist?

S: It must have been. . . Linda was born in September of 1942, and he enlisted in August of that year; so it was in 1942 when he enlisted in August.

C: Did he go into the Army?

S: Yes. He went into the Army. He came home on his last furlough; then he was sent to England, and he was in the paratroopers. He was in the first bunch that went over on D day with the 101st Airborne. He landed, and he was seriously wounded, but he recovered. He was awarded a French medal for bravery. He went back to the service; then he was slightly wounded again. He was in until the very end. He came home. . . After the war was over he was one of the first ones who came home.

C: You were not married very long when he went over. Was that hard on you? What was the transition like?

S: It wasn't easy. Of course, I lived at home with my parents; so it was a little easier for me. At the time he enlisted they didn't pay the wives anything. He went in and said that I could stay with my parents. They were talking at the time about paying. A lot of men would have enlisted, but they had wives and children. Some of them didn't have anywhere to go. I was lucky. I was the only one left at home, and I could stay with my parents. They would help me out. The government finally decided that they would go ahead and pay so much to the wives and children at home so more people would enlist. I imagine that was the government's idea. My husband went in about August, and it was about November or October when the first checks started coming. It wasn't much. I don't even remember. At the time for Linda, Carol, and I, I probably got around \$60 or \$65, something like that.

C: A month?

S: Yes. I know it wasn't a whole lot. Of course, it increased as time went on, but at the time it wasn't a whole lot. Then I lived with them all the time he was gone up until Dick was three months old. Then I went to an apartment by myself. Then he came home, but like I said, we hadn't been married long. We were young, and it seemed like we were strangers when he came home. He left a wife and one baby, and he came home to a wife and three children. It was confusing. It was just like I didn't know him. He didn't know me. So we were only together a short time, and then we broke up.

C: Did you correspond or anything during that time?

S: Do you mean when he was in the service?

C: Yes.

S: Oh, yes, we wrote. I wrote to him every week. Sometimes I wrote twice a week. I received mail from him. Of course, a good bit of the time it was that V mail that we were sending, which you couldn't put much on. We corresponded all the time, and he sent gifts while he was in. When he was where he could, he sent things to the children and to me.

C: While you were living with your parents, were there any adjustments you had to make? What was it like living with your parents with your children and so forth? Was it hard or was it not too bad?

S: No, it wasn't too bad because my father also had a war job, and he was gone the whole week. So there was really only my mother and I and the two girls. Of course, then Dick came along. But like I said Dick was three months old when I moved out on my own. I moved into the project which was about the only place to live at that time. At that time when you called up to rent a house or an apartment, it was always. . . People would be particular because everybody had money then, and they would say, "No children." So, it was very hard to find a place.

Well, I got an apartment in the Westlake project. It was fairly new then. It wasn't too bad there. I lived there, like I said, about twelve years. There were an awful lot of young people like me, young wives with their children and all of the husbands in the service. So we just kind of had picnics together and got together. We got together and we made. . . Of course, we were living on rations. I baked a pretty good cinnamon cake, and they would say that they had sugar and flour, and they would give it to me, and I would bake some cinnamon rolls, and we would get together for coffee. That was what most of our life was like. We had children. We didn't have a whole lot of money, but, of course, we had more money at that time than we did in the beginning. So we would just get together. We would eat together and go with the children wherever we could. There weren't too many of us who had cars or anything.

C: So there was a community life at Westlake?

S: There was an awful lot. I would say at that time it was almost filled with young women and little children. The husbands were in the service. In fact, most of my friends of my age group anyway. Everybody's husband was in the service. They were 4-H and 4-F, and then they worked. There were very few of them in the project because it was mostly low income.

C: Did your children also have friends at Westlake?

S: Oh, yes, Carol started at St. Ann's in the first grade. Some of the people she graduated with from Rayen School had went clear through with her from the first grade. That is why she didn't want to move from there. I wanted to come back to the south side where I was raised, but Carol wanted me to wait until she graduated, and we did. We got along.

When Carol was sick, when she was young, I wrote to her father and said that she had to have her tonsils out. He sent me money, and he said to get the best doctor I could find. He was worried about her. He was concerned. While he was gone, we got along fine. Like I said, we were young when we got married. We had the one child when he left. After Linda was born, he came home a couple of times on furlough, but we lived with my parents. We never really had time to be by ourselves to see what we could do on our own. We didn't really give ourselves a good enough chance, but he had changed when he came home. To me he was like a stranger.

C: His injuries were hard on him. Do you think perhaps. .

S: He had one. . . When he was seriously injured, he was pretty badly injured. Then the second time they said that it was a slight injury. I don't know what happened to him. I think it was really when he went to England. They lived like single fellows there. They got their money; they had their room and board; they didn't have to pay for much. Their money was free and clear, and they sort of lived like single men. I don't know about all of them, but a lot of them did. Of course, when he came home, like I said, he came home to a wife and three children after living like he was single. And it was just a change. It was something that he couldn't readjust. Of course, I was with the three children. I had been living like that; this was my life. So he just couldn't adjust to it. So it ended our marriage. We were only together about six months after he came home.

C: How was it like to rear your children during those years?

S: Actually, I don't think it was any different. . . I don't know how it would have been; that is the only way I knew during the war years.

C: How about if you compare it to how you were raised during the Depression?

S: I had a father at home; I had a mother and a father. I had a full family, but my father's business had failed and we had nothing. We really had a hard time of it, especially my father. As a child you don't notice it as much, but I think it is very hard on the parents. We had very little. My children, when I was raising them, had to check that came every month. I could count on that check.

When Carol's father and I got divorced, he didn't have. . . I never saw him again. He never contacted us; he never contacted the children. None of us ever saw him again. So I went to work, and it was hard. It wasn't easy. I went on ADC (Aid to Dependent Children from the State of Ohio) for awhile, and then I went to work. Then I met the boys' father, and we were married.

Like I said, my second husband took care of the three older children, but we were only married four years and we had three children of our own. His death was due to the war; so when he died after four years of marriage I could prove that he had taken care of my three older children as well as his own three children. So I got a pension, and I got social security. Really, we weren't too bad off. In fact at the level in which we lived, we were probably pretty high up on the list. As the children grew older and their needs grew more, it was a little harder, but I went to work. I always had those two checks to fall back on.

There is almost no comparison. When my father and mother were raising me, they really had it rough; they didn't have the means. They had to deal with whatever my father could do at the job. He worked here and he worked there. As for myself, we could have scrimped along the way, but I went out and worked. So we got along pretty good.

C: You mentioned before that you and a bunch of your friends would get together and bake because of rationing and other things.

S: In the first place, we had enough money to live on. Of course, you had your rations, but we also didn't have a lot of money. We didn't have a lot of money to pay baby sitters or to go out. We went out once in awhile. When our check came at the first of the month, the one girl and I would go downtown. We would get a baby sitter for the day, and then we would go out; we would have dinner, and we would take in a movie. That would probably be our one time out. When we were home, we would pull our resources together like she would bring her two children down and put them to bed with mine; then we would sit. Of course, we didn't have television or anything then either; so we would sit and talk. Maybe a couple of other neighbors would come in. We would play cards, and we would have coffee and stuff. We didn't have a whole lot to go out and come and go. It was alright; it was enjoyable. It's not as nice

because the kids were never raised with a father because Carol's father was gone all the time in the service, and then he left. Then, of course, they had a father for four years, and then he died. They really haven't had the benefit of having a father like some children. It is a lot easier if there are two raising the children.

C: What were some of your concerns during the war and your friends' concerns? What were some of the issues that you and your friends talked about?

S: We worried about each other's husbands. My husband was in the Battle of the Bulge, and he was in the 101st Airborne. That was a pretty rough Christmas. While he didn't make it after he got home, we were still pretty close when he was in the service, and I worried about him. Then my friend who lived up the street came home one day and there was a telegram. Well, her husband was in the Army that came to rescue the 101st, but her husband was killed. Of course, when somebody's husband was killed or hurt, we sort of got around together. We sympathized or we tried to help them out and tried to do what we could for them. Most of the time we just sat around and hoped they would be alright. We would ask each other if we got any letters and how their husbands were doing.

After the war was over, I think the first of our group, her husband, came home from the Navy. She lived in the project too, and she knew he was coming home but she didn't know when. So we were all outside. It was a beautiful summer day. We were all sitting out and around. The taxi pulled up and here this young sailor got out. She took one look and she started screaming; she ran and he was running. They just met in the middle of the walk. It was like something you would see on television or something. We were all so thrilled because he came home.

When my husband came home, he came home. . . I didn't know exactly when he was coming. Well, he came home in the middle of the night. In fact when he knocked on the door, I was kind of scared to even go down and open it because I didn't know who it was. I went down, and it was him. Of course, I was happy to see him. He was happy to be home, but like I said the day-to-day after he was home was kind of rough. We were more like strangers.

C: What was Christmas like during the war years?

S: We didn't have too much. I had parents. I had my mother and dad. I lived at home for the first couple of Christmases. I think I only had. . . He was probably gone close to four years in the service. Christmas was alright. The kids didn't want for anything. I did everything I could to make it nice, and my parents came over and my sisters. They always made sure that they had things when they came over to visit. We always had a nice day. All of us would get together. All the girls whose husbands were gone. . . Christmas and Christmas Day were usually spent with our families, but during the Christmas holiday we would go back and forth to different houses. They got almost as much as they would have gotten if their father had been home. There wasn't quite as much stuff to buy. When the kids were little, you couldn't buy stuff very much. I bought aluminum bikes for them because you couldn't buy iron. There were a lot of things that you couldn't get for the kids because the things were needed for the war. So it wasn't too bad.

C: The aluminum bikes worked out well then.

S: Oh yes, they had aluminum bikes. They were pretty nice. They were really happy with them anyway, as long as they were happy.

C: How long did you think the war was going to last?

S: Forever. It just seemed like it was never going to be over. You went out and bought what stuff you could buy. We got so much a month. You lived from month to month, so you just did the best you could. Carol was almost two when her father went into the service, and it was six weeks before Linda was born. Then Dick was born two years after Linda. It just seemed like time just went. It seemed to pass fast sometimes because when you feel the kids get older and older, you don't really think about what time it is or anything. You have your work to do, and day by day goes by, and you just live day by day. The first thing you know is that a couple of years have gone by and they are still gone.

My husband was gone six weeks before Linda was born; he came home three times on furlough. Once he was home ten days. When he was through with basic, he was home two weeks. That was the first time he saw Linda. Then about six months later he came home again--no, he was home only twice because he came home one more time--and that was about when Linda was a year old because I got

pregnant with Dick when he came home then. He left after that, and he didn't tell me, but he told my mother that he was going overseas. He left, and he was gone two whole years. So actually in the four years we got to see him twice before the war was over. The last two years when he was gone seemed long. You go day by day, but it always seems like it takes a really long time for the war to be over and for him to come home.

C: I would imagine that.

S: Yes. When the girls and I used to get together and talk, we used to say, "I wonder how much longer? Gee, do you realize it has been like a year and a half," or, "three years," or something like that. You really wouldn't worry about it. Of course, we worried about how they were and everything. That one girl's husband was killed, like I said, but he was the only one. She was the only close friend who I had. Now some of the girls I knew their husbands were injured; they got telegrams. But that one girl was the only girl I knew who's husband was killed. Here she came home Christmas night, the day after Christmas, from her parent's home, and the telegram was on the floor. It was very unusual for them to do it like that. I always thought. . . Like now they come and tell you in person, but then, of course, they would send a telegram. There were too many. She came home and that telegram was there. I never understood them putting that there. You think they would bring it in person at least. But they didn't, and that was the only one I ever knew who's husband was killed.

C: It must have had a terrible effect on her. Was she married a long time?

S: She had two children. They were about five and six years old. Of course, like I said, her husband was killed. He was in the service that went to rescue where my husband was in the 101st Airborne, and he was in the Battle of the Bulge. I don't remember what company soldiers it was that went to rescue them, but he was one of those soldiers that was in that. It was so close too because my husband was in there, and he got out. He was safe, and he wasn't even hurt. Then for her to be my friend and then for her husband being killed trying to rescue his outfit was kind of sad.

C: What were your husband's furloughs like the few times you got to see him?

S: When he went in the service, we were kind of feuding. I didn't really want him to go. See, he enlisted. He didn't really have to go, so we were kind of feuding. So I lived at home. Then when he came home, he went to his aunt's. Then he came down. My grandmother at the time, in Indiana, had gotten ill. In fact, she died and my parents went to Indiana. So he came. He stayed at the house with the girls and me, and we got along. We had our friends in. We didn't go out much because we had the two girls and they were babies then, but they were alright. He was kind of flighty; he just couldn't seem to settle down. He wanted to go here and he wanted to go there. Naturally, when he was home, he wanted to go see this and that and do this and that.

Like I said, the first time he was home, he stayed for about two weeks. Then the next time he came home Linda was about a year old. He was pretty quiet, and he spent more time at home than he did going out or wanting to go out. He spent more time with the girls and me. I didn't know until after he had left, but my mother told me that he had told her that he was going overseas; so he was kind of concerned about that. He didn't know when he would get back to see us again. Of course, this was after we were in the war, but they didn't really know when they were going to get this. . . They didn't know when D Day was going to be.

I remember when I was listening to the radio. Dick was born May 11, and D Day was about June 6, and I remember. . . I knew he was in the 101st Airborne, and I remember having the radio on and I was carrying Dick. I was walking back and forth in the living room. I was listening to that the 101st Airborne went into France. I was upset; I was crying. I was hoping that he would be alright and everything. Then about a week later I got a telegram from the government that he had been seriously injured and that they would let me know; a letter would follow up his injury to us.

I had heard that he had gotten this medal because he had gone into a church or something, and he had captured a gun and held off the enemy while the other fellows would come onto the coastline where they dropped. They could get clear and undercover, and he kept firing until he was wounded. For that he got the French medal, and he also got a couple of oak leaf clusters for other battles that he was in.

Then he was slightly wounded again later on. It was

somewhere in France. I don't really remember where. He sent me pictures and post cards of when he went into Germany. He went up into where Hitler was; he was there, and he wrote and told me all about that.

C: Was your correspondence censored?

S: Oh yes, they read everything that he sent and everything that I sent.

C: You could still find out where he was?

S: Oh, no, you never knew where he was. The only reason that I knew where he was, see, it was after Hitler had killed himself; it was after that he sent the post cards from there that they went up into the bunkers and that where Hitler had been, but that was before he got home and after the war. When he wrote, you never knew where he was. He had an APO, and overseas number, and that was where you sent your mail to. In those V letters that I used to send there wasn't much you could put on. He wrote those, and I wrote to him. Of course, they mailed them from a government place, and you never knew where it came from. There wasn't much put on much more than a post card.

C: As the war was winding down, did things change in your life at all? Was there a sense of relief? Did you know when he was coming home?

S: We knew when the war was over in Europe--of course, he was in Europe--my girl friend who's husband was in the Navy and I, we went downtown. Of course, there were crowds and crowds downtown. We went downtown to see all of the crowds, and then we went to St. Columbus. We stopped at St. Columbus; they had a church service thanking God that the war was over, and we stopped in there. And then we went on downtown. There were all kinds of people. We just kind of milled around downtown. It was a big relief; it was a relief to know they were coming home, to know that you didn't have to worry about getting a telegram that they had been hurt or killed.

C: Were there parades and everything in downtown Youngstown?

S: It was just a lot of people; people were all over the place. Everybody was kissing everybody and shaking hands; everybody was just real happy. Nobody was coming

home yet, but the war was over. If you were in Europe, at least you weren't going to. . . You knew that if you had someone in Europe, it was over. It wasn't over in the Pacific, but, of course, the ones who were in Europe like he was for so long would have never gone to the Pacific. I knew that; I knew he was coming home.

C: Did you know anyone who was over in the Pacific?

S: My younger boys' father was in the Pacific, but I didn't know that at the time.

C: How about any of your friends' husbands?

S: No, I didn't know anybody who was. I knew a lot of girls whose husbands were in the Navy. And I knew girls whose husbands were in the Marines. But I didn't know anybody, I don't think, who was in the Pacific. All the ones I knew seemed to be in Europe.

C: What kind of welcome home did the soldiers receive?

S: Of course, they had big welcome home parades when they came in from Europe and that. They didn't have much in Youngstown.

C: They didn't?

S: When Dick came home, he came in on the bus. At that time too though, don't forget, when they came home, they got off the boats. They had parades in New York and that, but he went to Fort Dix, and he was in Fort Dix. They had them there to demobilize them, and then they came home, and they came home individually. When he came home, he came home on the train and then he caught a taxi to our home, to our apartment. So, of course, there was nothing. There was no celebration in Youngstown or anything as far as soldiers marching in or anything. They just all came home like I said that boy came home from the Navy of that one girl who's husband was the first one to come home. He just came in a taxi all by himself. I don't remember of any kind of, except for the celebration when the war was over. I don't remember anything in Youngstown as to any parades or anything like that.

C: What type of adjustments did your husband and your friend's husbands have to make when they came home?

S: It was hard for them just like when Carol's father came.

Those boys had lived single for a long time. Some of them were married, like when you watch M.A.S.H. and you see some of them who are married and don't act like they are married and some of them do. My one real close friend's husband was in the Navy; I don't think that he ever looked at another woman. When he came home, she had more adjusting to him than he had to her, I think. It was different. You lived by yourself. You were the boss in the house; you spent the money; you disciplined the children.

It was hard when they came home. In one way it is a relief to let them take over, but it is an adjustment on both sides because they have come home. They want to relax; they have gone through hell, and they want to relax where maybe you want to relax too. You want them to take over, and some of them could and some of them couldn't. I had a couple who the same thing happened to them that happened to me. They just couldn't adjust so they got a divorce, a lot of them who never would have been divorced I don't think.

I think that war does funny things to men when they come home. In fact a couple of years ago that girl's husband I told you was the first one home from the Navy, he died a few years ago. They had a wonderful marriage all the way through until just a couple of years ago when he died from a heart attack.

A lot of them. . . It is just like that. A lot of them couldn't adjust, like me personally. We couldn't adjust. I couldn't adjust to him, and he couldn't adjust to me. So we just called it quits before it went on any longer. We didn't see any sense of staying together and maybe having more children. We didn't think that we could manage. Maybe we could have; maybe we should have; I don't know, but we didn't. Some of them did, and they got along fine.

C: What was it like for women, who had been the decision makers for four years to give that authority back to their husbands?

S: It was a little hard to do. It is just like if you take someone who is single for a long time and he gets married, like a bachelor who has never been married. Even for me after Bob died, I was a widow for fourteen years. When I remarried, it was hard. It was really hard to adjust to having someone else. You were used to having the money; so if you wanted to buy something, you

bought it. It was hard. This man comes home from the service. You have to start watching your money; you have to start deciding what to buy. Maybe he wants to buy something you don't. It is an adjustment for both people. Of course, when you are young, you either fight it out or you settle it or you don't. It is one way or the other. There were a lot of divorces, I think, after the war. Maybe there wouldn't have been had they been home all the time.

C: Did your husband experience bad war memories or anything that had changed his personality when he came home?

S: He did for awhile. We were downtown one day, and there was a noise like a car backfiring, and he dove in the doorway. It took a little while for that, but he wasn't as bad as some that I have seen. He seemed to adjust pretty well after he came home. He couldn't readjust to married life. That was his biggest problem. He had lived single for almost four years, and he just wanted to be single. So it was hard. You can't be married to a man while he wants to run around as he wants. If you are going to have to live like that, you might as well live alone. Between us we decided this was what we would do. I don't know if he hadn't gone to war, maybe we still would have been married, but we couldn't adjust.

C: Okay. Thank you very much for your time.

S: I hope I have been a little bit of help to you.

END OF INTERVIEW