

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

World War II, Women

Personal Experience

O. H. 884

VIRGINIA C. GARVIN

Interviewed

by

Janice Cafaro

on

November 5, 1985

Virginia C. Garvin

Daughter of Carl Bates and Gertrude Bray, Mrs. Virginia Garvin is an accomplished artist who has lived in Youngstown for her entire life.

After her 1942 graduation from South High School, Mrs. Garvin attended Younstown College; however, she left the college after several months because she was offered an excellent job in commercial art. And as a result, she was hired by Sears as the manager of advertising and display. Her job included writing and laying out advertising and designing display windows. She worked in this capacity for one year, until her marriage to Mr. Frank Daniel Garvin, at which time she became a full-time housewife and mother while her husband served in the Army. During the 1940's, they had two daughters, Karen Jean and Judith Francis.

Mrs. Garvin returned to her job at Sears in 1944 for approximately a year. But she found that working and rearing a family at the same time was too difficult. So, she returned full-time to her housewife responsibilities. During the late 1950's, however, she returned to working once again, and was hired in the receiving department at McKelvey's, working there for less than a year.

An artist at heart her entire life, Mrs. Garvin began to paint seriously in the 1960's. And in 1965 she placed in the first two positions in the Canfield Fair. Spurred on by

this achievement, she began to take fine art lessons from William Rakocy at Choffin Vocational School during the middle 1960's. In the late 1970's Mrs. Garvin took lessons in Oriental art from Mea Barbarto, and Colleen Mahollic. During the late 1970's and early 1980's, she has given private art lessons to pupils throughout Mahoning County. Today her artwork may be found at the Five Cent Apple Gallery in Boardman, Ohio.

In addition to painting, Mrs. Garvin loves to compose children's short stories, and she is an avid reader. She is also a member of Saint Dominic's Catholic Church.

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INTERVIEWEE: VIRGINIA C. GARVIN

INTERVIEWER: Janice Cafaro

SUBJECT: rationing, childrearing, travel, Army

DATE: November 5, 1985

C: This is an interview with Mrs. Virginia Garvin, for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on World War II women, by Janice Cafaro, at 919 Bonnie Brae Avenue, Youngstown, Ohio, on November 5, 1985, at 3:00 p.m.

Could you tell me a little bit about your parents and family?

G: What do you mean?

C: Your background information, like where you were born.

G: I was born in Youngstown.

C: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

G: I had three sisters and a brother.

C: Where did you live?

G: We lived on the south side all our lives, growing up on Almyra Avenue.

C: What schools did you go to?

G: I went to Sheridan School for grade school and South. I graduated from South.

C: When did you meet your husband?

G: I was in about the eleventh grade when I met him through a friend of mine. Then we were married less than a year after I graduated.

C: In order to compare what effect World War II had on your life, it might be easier to start with the years prior to the war, the late 1930's. What was your life like then? Then you compare that to how it changed later.

G: To be honest with you I was going with my husband when I graduated. He gave me an engagement ring. It just seemed at that time girls didn't go to college to much. you usually just got married and raised a family. But I did go to night school at Youngstown College for art. Then later I had more art training because I always wanted to be an artist. I worked for my last couple of years while I was in high school.

C: Where did you work?

G: I worked at a dime store, Woolworth's.

C: You were clerking.

G: Yes, I was clerking. Then when I graduated, I got a job doing window trimming, which I worked at until I was married. That was commercial art.

C: Do you remember what the Depression was like at that time?

G: My father had died, and my mother received a government pension. It wasn't that much, but at that time it didn't take too much to live on. The cost of living wasn't as high as it is now. To tell you the truth, I know the Depression affected a lot of people, but it really didn't affect us that much. My mother had some savings and she worked too. So really, everyone talks about the Depression, but it never had much of an effect on me.

C: How did you respond to the bombing of Pearl Harbor?

G: During World War II they had extra papers that came out whenever anything big happened, which it did then. They would go up and down the streets selling them and hollering that they had extra papers.

So, everybody knew about it. We thought that everyone would go to war. Outside of that, I don't know.

C: Did your husband enlist?

G: Yes, he enlisted in April of 1941. He was at Camp Edwards in Massachusetts. He got settled and found a place for us. Then I went there to stay after we got married. During the trip to Massachusetts, we stopped at Philadelphia where some friends of ours lived. Next we went on to Massachusetts, where I stayed for maybe three or four months. That was on the cape, Cape Cod.

C: What branch did he enlist in?

G: He was in the Army.

C: You must have had quite a few adjustments, just being married and then your husband enlisting.

G: When you are young, you don't worry about things like that. You don't think about them. Somehow I always knew that if he went to war, he would always come back. It was a new experience for me in a new place, and Cape Cod is a beautiful place. There were a lot of Army wives there. I guess we supported each other, but no one seemed to worry too much.

C: What was life like for the Army wives? How did you socialize?

G: We lived in a rented room in this big house. There was a woman called Mrs. Pratt, and she was a wonderful person. I guess there were three or four couples who lived in this. Each of us had a room, and we ate downstairs; but had privileges for the whole house, so we would talk. The beach was close by, and we went there. My husband was home every night. He would go to camp in the daytime, and then he would be home at night.

C: He hadn't gone overseas at this time.

G: No, he hadn't gone overseas yet. Then when he left there I came home and I stayed with my mother for a while. In the meantime I was pregnant, and then I had my first daughter. When she was six months old, he went overseas. Then he didn't see her again until she was a year and a half. In the meantime he was transferred to Florida, and I went there and stayed with him there in Florida, Orlando. Then he was transferred to Apopka, Florida.

C: And you lived on the Army base?

G: Yes. It was in Orlando. When he was in Apopka, they had an old fairground which they had tents and places for the soldiers to stay. Actually they were still out of Orlando, but a lot of them stayed there. He was stationed in Apopka, where we had an apartment. It was a small apartment, in a big apartment building. It was just a little town just like it sounds, Apopka.

C: What did you do for entertainment in the evenings?

G: We all got together, all the soldiers and their wives, and we talked. There were beaches close, as I said, and we went to there a lot. Whenever you are in a new town or a new place, there are so many things for you to see. That was the way we were. It was just full of Army wives and their husbands. Sometimes in the daytime, when he was at camp, we would take a bus and go into one of the bigger towns, like Orlando or someplace.

I guess the biggest thing to me. . . I had never traveled a lot. When you got on the bus at that time, the black people weren't allowed to sit unless there were a lot of seats; they had to go to the back of the bus. I had never seen that before, and I really couldn't get over it. But there were a lot of southern soldiers and their wives who were there. So, you didn't dare say anything. That really shocked me; I couldn't get over there. I had never seen that before. Things have changed now.

C: When did your husband go overseas?

G: 1944.

C: And you said that you moved in with your mother at that time.

G: Yes, my mother and dad.

C: With your young child?

G: Yes.

C: How was it like living at home?

G: I guess I always accepted things. I wrote to my husband everyday, and he wrote to me as often as he could. When you are busy raising a small child, you

just don't have too much time to think about a lot of things. But I never really worried about him being overseas because I always figured he would come back. Some of my close friends' husbands were killed in the war. I did see that part of it too, but it was just something that people didn't seem to talk a lot about. I had a lot of friends who came and saw me. I had the baby and my mother and dad for support.

C: To offset the worry, you just didn't think about it.

G: Yes, yes, and I heard from him often. I wrote him everyday as I said.

C: Was the separation hard?

G: It always is, but I knew he would come back.

C: What was life like during this time?

G: Well many things, like sugar and coffee, were rationed. Really it was not that much of a burden on most people and not on us because I had rationing coupons and so did my mother and dad. I don't think we did without too much, but everybody talked about it. No one liked it that much, but I don't think it was really that much of a burden. In fact I never talked to anybody who did without that terribly much during that time. You could get things, but not as much of it as you wanted. So, you just got other things instead.

C: I have heard other people say that it was hard to ration, but no one complained about it because it was part of the war effort.

G: Yes, yes, and I do remember during that time that a lot of people around here in Ohio worked over at the arsenal in Ravenna. I knew quite a few people who worked over there. After a while their hands and arms turned orange. I don't know if you ever heard that.

C: No.

G: From the chemicals that they used.

C: Were these women?

G: Yes, the women. Women went to work because there were so many men gone. They were making war supplies, I guess. That was a big thing too at the time. Their

skin was turning orange and a lot of them had to quit for a while.

C: Did you any of them personally?

G: None of them.

C: Was it in the papers then?

G: Yes, yes. Then my friend's mother, Doris High, worked there. She was one of the ones who had to quit for a while because her arms and hands had turned orange.

C: What was the general public attitude towards women going to work in places like the ammunition plants?

G: I think they more or less just thought that it was their duty. The men weren't there to do it, so they had to. Everyone--I think the majority of the people--wanted to help the war effort.

C: It was just something for a short duration of time.

G: Yes, it didn't seem that awfully long, no. A lot of women were glad to have jobs too and making the money. They also wanted to contribute to the war effort. It was patriotic. Everyone accepted it because it was helping the war. Everyone wanted the boys back.

C: How would you describe the attitudes of the time? I know they were patriotic, but what was the general feeling when you listened to women talk about what was going on?

G: Everyone was concerned. I think those who felt it the most were the mothers who lost their sons or the wives who lost their husbands. I did see some of that. Then you really realized and think more about it. A girl who I worked with her husband was killed in the war. I know what she went through, and then it touches home. Until then most people felt that it would be over with one day. I don't know; I can't really say outside of that.

C: I know that there were a lot of advertisements for women to go into the ammunition factories.

G: Oh, yes.

C: Then there was a rise of patriotism in the country?

G: Yes, yes, people were very patriotic. In fact for a good many years after World War II they were. There was a Camp Shenango here in Ohio. A lot of the soldiers would come over on their days off or their leave or something. You would go downtown and you would see soldiers all over the place. I remember that.

C: How often did you get to see your husband after he went overseas? You didn't see him for a year and a half, right?

G: For a year. But the service gave the soldiers leave before they went. In fact when he went overseas, the Army sent a telegram. It seems to me that he had a couple week leave, and they sent him a telegram and told him to get back to camp. They didn't tell him why, but then after that then he did go overseas.

I saved some of the rationing coupons, and I had some of the Hitler stamps. In fact I think I divided them between Judy and Karen, my daughters, because I really didn't want them. But I still have a lot of paraphernalia from the war, little things like his stripes and rationing coupons. They were just things that I have saved all of these years.

C: Being a woman did you notice any changes in life-styles during the war?

G: You know, I can't really think of anything to tell you besides the change of having the men gone. Life went on. People had a way of making the best of it.

I really can't recall too many horrible burdens. It is just a time in your life just like anything else. You go through it, and that is what always amazes me now because the men were willing to go to war and everyone was very patriotic. Today a lot of younger men don't want to go to war or fight for the country. That is hard to understand because at the time when there was the war, everybody was anxious to get in.

C: Why do you think?

G: I don't know. I think it was just different time and a different feeling.

C: Do you think there were different values?

G: I think so, yes. Actually you were considered a coward if you didn't want to go.

There was just an absolutely different feeling than there is now. Everyone was patriotic. I never met anyone who didn't or wasn't anxious. A lot of men enlisted, and those who didn't were drafted, naturally. A great many enlisted and they could hardly wait. It wasn't a me first attitude so much then.

C: Yes.

G: Life was entirely different when I was growing up. You could walk on the street at 10:00 or 11:00 at night and not worry. Now you would never dream of doing that.

C: What was it like to rear your children during the war?

G: Of course, after he came back we stayed with his mother because my mother's house wasn't that big until we finally bought a house.

C: Were you able to buy a house? Was this right after the war?

G: Yes, we had saved money, then contributions from both of the grandparents, and we got our first home then.

C: When was this?

G: 1948

C: You mentioned that there was even a feeling of patriotism after the war was over.

G: Oh, sure.

C: So this even carried on.

G: Sure. Everyone hung their flags out. My husband joined the American Legion, of course, when he got out of the service. We went on a lot of trips to conventions, American Legion conventions and things like that. It was with a whole group of guys who he had been in the war with. In fact, he still belongs to the American Legion. But some of the group have died now.

Another thing that is interesting to me is when my husband came home from the war. You know how they talk about Vietnam syndrome now; actually the men who had been over there in action had that too at that time, but nobody ever put a name on it. But I do know that it bothered a lot of men including my husband. Now they

say it is Vietnam syndrome, but the same thing happened then to many men, probably all of them, who had seen action who saw their buddies die. I guess war is terrible anyhow especially when you are young and you are over in a strange land.

C: How did you help your husband cope with that?

G: I said there was just never any name on it. Who could you go to for help? It was just something that you more or less got over eventually. He never talked too much about it, and I never pushed him, and eventually he did. It is something you never forget, but you do get over it. I think a lot of the problem now is the fact that too much of an issue is made of it and too many excuses are made for the action of some of those men who think something is wrong more than it really is. Maybe it is, but I don't think it is as bad as they. If you put a name on something, then you have to follow the rules. That same thing happened then too. Some men turned to drinking and some were depressed; it was the same thing. As I look back now I realize. At the time nobody got together and said this was what it was.

C: It was just something that you had to help your husband work through.

G: Yes, right.

C: Did those memories haunt your husband for a long time afterwards?

G: Yes, it did for quite a while.

C: I would imagine that was just terrible.

G: Yes, I guess it is. Sometimes he has talked about it. When you are right there and you see your buddy die. . .

C: It could have been you.

G: Yes.

C: Your comparison of your husband's post-war problems with Vietnam Vets is interesting.

G: I really think it is.

C: Only it has been repackaged now.

- G: Yes. That is the one thing that amazed me because then nobody really said, "Well, this is what it is, it is a syndrome from the war." I guess you just accepted it. You never thought of going to a doctor for it or anything like that.
- C: How was your husband's readjustment to civilian life?
- G: Well, it wasn't too bad because he had a business to come back to, and he had a lot of friends. We did a lot of things. It helped being around other people who had been through the same thing. He joined a veteran's organization and the American Legion, and he was with people who had went through the same thing that he did. That helped. So, we go through the years.
- C: And he had his own business.
- G: Yes.
- C: So you benefited from the economy and had an upswing during that time.
- G: Yes.
- C: Did you and your family can or anything during the war? Did you save cans? Did you save tin?
- G: I don't know. I didn't; maybe my mother did. I can't remember that. That is so long ago.
- C: If you would compare rearing your children during that time as opposed to your children raising their children, what would you think some of the big differences are between the two times looking back on them, during the 1940's and the 1980's?
- G: I have often said that I wouldn't want to be rearing children today. There wasn't the dope problem for one thing and there wasn't. . . Kids' morals were a little better then. I don't know. You just didn't worry about that much. When my daughters first started dating, you always worry about your children. Actually, I didn't have all the worries wondering if he took drugs or was

on drugs, and not so many boys had their cars. A lot of times the parents would pick them up and take them to a show or dance or something and pick them up when they were finished. Now everyone has automobiles. As soon as you are sixteen or seventeen, you have a car; then you didn't as much. Life was at a slower pace, I do believe.

I think there have been a lot of improvements. I think being out in the open is good for anyone. It is a far more open society now than it was then. I just wouldn't want to be raising my children today because there are too many worries, too many things you have to look out for and watch, but I think the young people growing up in this day and age are going to be able to cope with that.

I was talking to my daughter the other day, Judy, and she said that I was perhaps a step behind her generation and two steps behind my grandchildren's generation. She said too that she was a step behind her children's generation in their thinking, and things are accepted more today than they were. Things were scandals then. There were always exceptions to the rule, but the majority didn't; they behaved themselves, but now they accept far more.

C: Like?

G: What?

C: For example, what do people accept now that they didn't?

G: Nobody gets too shocked when they say this one is on drugs or this one has loose morals. You don't get shocked.

C: Do you think there has been an attitude change?

G: Yes, I think there is. It is a gradual thing. It has probably been happening for a good many years, but it has changed; the way of thinking has changed, I think.

C: I was interviewing another woman and she told me she felt that children today are more self-centered and it has had a negative effect on them. For example, if we would have another war now and there would be an undertaking of rationing and those sort of things, she didn't know how the children would actually react to it because they haven't been geared to go without. What do you think?

G: That is true to a certain extent, but I think that then you accepted it because it was the normal thing to do. Young people today. . . There are an awful lot of good kids out there, and there are a lot of bad ones too probably, but there were then too. I have always felt that these kids are a lot tougher than we were, I think. Everything has been brought out into the open; they are not afraid to say, "Hey, you are stepping on my toes." Things like that you really didn't publicize a lot of things then, and you didn't complain that much. I think if we had to be rationed today that there would be a lot of complaints, but I think these kids could take it too. They are pretty tough out there.

C: So you think if anything, children today are tougher.

G: Yes, I think they are. I think it is because they have learned that they don't have to keep quiet. If they feel that their rights are being wronged, then they can say something about it. Somebody will listen, but see, then, nobody would listen; they just thought you were complaining.

C: Oh really?

G: Yes, more or less.

C: A stiff upper lip.

G: Yes, that is probably the attitude. Now I said that people listen to your complaints. They tell them that they don't have to take that where as then, it was just accepted. You really didn't complain. I don't think it bothered you as much. You figured why should you worry about it because nobody was going to listen anyhow then. But now, there is always somebody out there to listen.

C: And that's good.

G: Yes, maybe it is good, yes. I think these kids who are growing up in this age are going to be able to cope with this way of life. I think they have been geared to it. It has been all of their lives; it is a gradual thing. If you are born and raised in this type of life, you don't know the other life really unless they are told by their parents. Yet, living through it is more permanent or it makes it more real or something.

C: Yes, right.

G: I said that there are a lot of good kids out there today, and I think they would be able to cope with anything that came along.

C: You are a positive voice. There are a lot of negative ones. That's good; that's nice to hear that.

G: I've always felt that way. Their parents can cope with them because of the fact that they are just a step ahead of like my generation, and my daughters' generation is more alert to things than we were back then. Of course, everybody learns, but when you are not born and raised in that type of environment, you never really accept it completely.

C: Thank you very much.

G: Okay.

END OF INTERVIEW