

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

World War II Women

Personal Experiences

O. H. 512

MARGARET HARRINGTON

Interviewed

by

Janice Cafaro

on

October 25, 1985

MARGARET HARRINGTON

Daughter of Daniel Edward and Maria O'Malia Harrington, Miss Margaret Harrington was born in Salem, Ohio in 1900. She moved to Struthers in 1915 on 48 Sexton Avenue, where she still resides today.

Shortly after her 1929 graduation from Struthers High School, Miss Harrington was hired by Chuey Brothers as a cashier, working there until the company went bankrupt in 1938. Later that year, the Youngstown branch of Sears employed her in their credit department. Miss Harrington worked there until she was transferred to the company's Springfield branch, where she worked until 1951. Miss Harrington notes that her initial hiring was a direct result of World War II, for during this time many eligible males were in the service. As a result, she became one of the first female employees in Sear's credit department.

In 1952 Miss Harrington left her job and joined Raffel Brothers as a secretary. She worked there until her retirement in 1973.

A member of Saint Nicholas' Catholic Church since her arrival in Struthers, Miss Harrington is a proliferate reader and a former knitter.

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INTERVIEWEE: MARGARET HARRINGTON

INTERVIEWER: Janice Cafaro

SUBJECT: Effects of World War II, Depression, Employment

DATE: October 25, 1985

C: This is an interview with Miss Margaret Harrington for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on World War II Women, by Janice Cafaro at 48 Sexton Avenue in Struthers, Ohio, on October 25, 1985 at 2:00 p.m.

First, could you tell me a little bit about your background, when you were born and a little bit about your family life?

H: I was born in 1909 on March 16. I am a real Irishman.

C: Were you born in Youngstown?

H: I was born in Salem, Ohio! We moved to Struthers when I was about four or five years old because my mother's people have a farm out on Poland Avenue. We were back in off of the road. She had sisters that lived there and they wanted her to come back there and live. We came back there to live in about 1916. We have lived in Struthers ever since. We lived on a farm. There were five of us. All the way through high school, we lived out on the farm. In 1947 we moved out. My parents were older. They were in their seventies and wanted to get off of the farm. They moved here to 48 Sexton.

I have worked for forty-five years after I started working. I graduated from high school in 1927.

My first job was down in a grocery store and meat market in downtown Struthers as a cashier.

C: How old were you?

H: I think I was nineteen.

C: What meat market did you work at?

H: Chuey Brothers. I worked there for eight years. That was during the Depression. They went into bankruptcy. I didn't work for awhile. I finally got a job at Sears Roebuck in downtown Youngstown back in about 1939. Then the war came along. In 1943 I was transferred to Springfield, Ohio as a credit manager of Sears. I worked there for nine or ten years. I came back home in 1951. In 1952 I got a job at Raffel Brothers. They sold restaurant supplies on Boardman Street in Youngstown. In 1964 they started Arby's. I worked until about 1973 when I retired. I was a bookkeeper all of the time that I worked for the Raffel Brothers. In 1973 since I have retired, I haven't done anything. I rest a lot and I read a lot.

C: Going back to the Depression years, what was it like then? What was your life like?

H: I was out on the farm that time. My parents had big gardens that they planted in the spring. In the fall when they harvested, they canned things, and of course, they had to come to downtown to the Chuey Brothers to get their meats and things like that. What I remember were the soup lines and things like that and the WPA, the federal Works Progress Administration. Then there was another work program. I don't remember what it was. There was a CCC camp. I don't know whether that had to do with forestry or what. I remember when the banks closed. That was when I was down at Chueys.

C: What did people say? What was the reaction?

H: The reaction was terrible. The people lost their money. We never had much money in the bank at that time. When I worked for a girl who was from Johnstown, Pennsylvania, she told me they lost all of their money in the banks. The bank presidents committed suicide; they jumped out of windows and things like that.

It was the same way around here. The banks closed and a lot of people lost their money.

I was talking to my friend next door and she lived in the Sheet & Tube houses. The company at that time let their people pick up potatoes, flour, sugar, cheese, and all of that stuff. They would have to charge it because nobody had any money. When it was all over and they got back to work, the company took out a little bit at a time until they got the money all back. She said they were treated pretty

well. She remembered that there was no electricity and they burned oil lamps. As I recall, we went all the way through high school with oil lamps. We never did have electricity.

Rose Macejko remembers the Shanty Town under the Cedar Street bridge. Men lived down there and they made their little shanties out of pasteboard boxes and things like that. I suppose they went to the soup lines for their food.

C: Did your father work?

H: They had something going on Poland Avenue. It was like in the ditches. My sister told me that he always told her to have a bottle of water for him. It was out on Poland Avenue where they were digging some ditches, I guess, and things like that. It was not a very nice time, I will tell you that. Another friend told me that she had the best Christmas even though they didn't have any money.

C: What was Christmas like without money? Did you make things?

H: She did that. Living out on the farm we had loads of Evergreen trees. We always had a great, big tree. We had lots of things that we made to put on them. They had live candles. It was different than it is now.

C: Let's talk about the war. We could start with the reaction you had to the bombing of Pearl Harbor.

H: That I remember definitely. I was out on the farm. It was in the afternoon and I had the radio on. I heard it and I didn't think it was very important. I went downstairs and everybody was talking about it. I got all excited too. I thought it was a horrible thing. Everbody did.

C: Did anyone you know go out and enlist?

H: My brother enlisted.

C: What did he enlist in?

H: He was in the air corps and he was killed over there. We never heard from him.

I went back and forth on the train from Springfield to Cleveland during the holidays and then I had to take another train to come down to Youngstown. I remember when the boys got on the trians with the mothers screaming and crying. I thought it was a terrible thing that they couldn't control themselves because the boys would have that to remember.

I worked for Sears in Youngstown at that time. That was when the war started. Sears always hired young, single men. It didn't cost them as much. They had no alternative but to have women. That was never heard of before. That was in 1943. I was transferred down there as the credit manager. I was down there until 1951.

C: Did you work basically with men then? Were there a lot of females at that time at Sears?

H: There were very few. That was how I got down there.

C: What was it like being one of the few women in a men's department?

H: I had other girls working for me. I had about a dozen in that department. It was a big store. It was right downtown in Springfield.

C: What did you do? Did you collect bills?

H: No. Each girl had a job to do. One of them was to check the credits. A couple of them were collection girls. What I did was more or less an overseer. That was about it.

C: How did your life change from the Depression to the war years?

H: I never thought about going away from home. I really didn't want to go. I got used to it and made a lot of friends down there. It didn't change a whole lot.

C: Do you remember the mood of the country at that time? Do you remember their attitude towards the war?

H: It seems to me in the First World War they didn't know enough about what was going on to have any real feelings about it. It was just a war. The Second World War, we didn't feel very good about it at all because our brother was in there and we never heard from him from the day he left because they checked all of the mail.

C: What did your brother do in the air corps?

H: He was in the signal corps to begin with. That is when he went up. He was in the signal corps on the ground. If he would have stayed there, it would have been fine. Then they were asking for volunteers to fly in these B-17's. He wasn't a flyer, but he was a tailgunner. He was on the back of it. Then we never heard from him for the longest time. When we did hear, my mother got a telegram saying he was missing and they didn't know any more than that. He was just missing.

About every six months she would get something like that. It was almost two years when she got a telegram saying that his body is in a certain place and it asked where she wanted it shipped. You can imagine what she went through.

C: It must have been very hard for you.

H: It was terrible.

C: You didn't know for all of that time?

H: It was sad. It was very, very sad. He was such a wonderful guy. That is why he volunteered. He would do anything for anybody. He was doing it for his country.

C: You didn't find out the exact circumstances or anything.

H: We never did find out what happened. My mother said she wanted the body shipped back here. It was tough.

C: You never got a chance to write to him or anything?

H: You wrote to him, but we never got any answers. He also had friends who also wrote from around here. They just sort of stamped out a lot of stuff. There wasn't much that they could say.

C: Right. This was because of security.

H: Yes. I guess he flew out of England and we never knew that until it was all over. There was another fellow from Struthers who was in his group. He was the one who told us that he volunteered. He was the one who told us what happened.

There was another woman out in Whittier, California. My brother was on the same ship as her son. She had two sons. One son always knew where the other one was. Both of her sons came back. They were on the same ship that went out. The fellow who was the captain was the medic. The airplane itself went down. Her son came back. She said she wrote to my mother and told her that there was no chance. They helped him get out, but there was no chance. He really was found so they said. That is about all I remember.

C: You like to read a lot.

H: Yes.

C: What was the slant of the magazines like during the war era? Do you remember what types of articles and stuff?

H: No, I really don't. It must be a lot different than now anyhow.

- C: I know that the country's attitude toward women changed during the war, which was reflected in a lot of advertisements. I was wondering if you remembered this?
- H: Yes.
- C: It was perceived as your patriotic duty to go help with the war effort.
- H: That is true too. I guess a lot of people knitted and crocheted. They knitted them things and sent them things.
- C: Yes.
- H: I remember when the war was over. I was down in Springfield then. I felt really bad inside. I was really glad to see these fellows who came back. They opened up accounts and all of that. It was good to know that it was over, but the night they celebrated we girls went over to one of the hotels. We went to celebrate. They all screamed and hollered and had a great time. I just wept inside because I had nothing to celebrate. It seems when you have somebody like that who doesn't come back, the first week or so every time you see anybody in a uniform you could spit on them. You are so bitter inside. That passes in a couple of weeks. You get all kinds of strange feelings.
- C: You think--why was your family singled out?
- H: I never thought that I would stand to go to a movie with airplanes shooting through the air and all that stuff. It was five years later. I can't think of the name of the movie. I have never thought about it. I haven't thought about it for a long time. It was just like it pierced you. I cried and sat there. I didn't enjoy it at all. It was a good movie.
- C: How about today? Do you still once in a while?
- H: No. I don't go to movies.
- C: Today they are always having World War II shows.
- H: I never watch them.
- C: You don't?
- H: I never do. There is one continued on public television, but I don't watch it.
- C: The war still bothers you a little bit?

- H: I like things that are pleasant anymore. I don't go out of my way to look at those kind of things. We watch good television stories. I don't get to the movies anymore.
- C: How about rationing? Do you remember what that was like?
- H: Yes. I forgot about that. You could only get so much and all of that. I think you had a card of something. I don't remember now.
- C: Your family grew a lot of things too, right? Your family had a farm?
- H: Yes.
- C: That must have helped out?
- H: Yes, it did. Even so, I remember my mother had to get some things charged. When Mike Chuey, the owner of the place, told my mother don't bother to pay it now because he had gone into bankruptcy, she paid it anyhow. She went over and paid it.
- C: I know they rationed flour. Did that affect your cooking at all? Did your cooking change because of the war or was it about the same?
- H: I think it was about the same. My mother was a good cook. She made bread and cinnamon rolls. They weren't little things; they were great, big ones. We always had plenty to eat.
- C: What was your social life like during the war years? You were a young woman.
- H: You didn't have a lot of that. You didn't have too much of that. I remember going to one or two dances. I don't recall that we had a lot of that. I think maybe they were in the homes more and friends came by. You would go to each other's homes and that and have parties and things.
- C: Was it a big adjustment not having any men around in general?
- H: I don't think so.
- C: For a final question, are there any stories or anything that stand out in your mind during the war years? Is there something that is different than now as you look back on it?
- H: I can't think of any right offhand. I am just living in the now. I can't think of anything right now.
- C: Did you know any women who went to work in the factories at that time?

H: No. I can't think of anybody. There must have been some that I didn't know. When I was down at Chuey's, they had a number of girls and then they laid off all but three of us, I think, before he went into bankruptcy. I can't think of other places . . . I just can't recall that.

I have a friend. She went down to Dayton, Ohio during the war. She got a job with Wright Patterson Air Force. They hired a lot of people. She was down there. She did secretarial work and then she was transferred down to Cincinnati and worked for one of the generals or whatever they were. She didn't really like it very well. That is how she got down there.

C: She didn't like the work?

H: She did like the boss as I recall. She didn't like the work. I know that down in through there too the people who worked in men's jobs, like credit managers, had to get out of those jobs and work for the war effort. This fellow that I knew, that is what he had to do. He took inventory of all the tools and everything like that at Wright Patterson Air Force. Those were things that happened during the war. That was the beginning of women getting into the work force. That is the way I remember it.

C: What year was this around?

H: That would have been around 1943 or 1944.

C: Who did they fill their jobs with, women?

H: Yes. That is how I got the job down there.

C: You still worked for Sears afterward?

H: Yes. I worked for Sears for years and years and years. Say you paid in 2% or 3% of your earnings and they matched it. After so many years, they doubled it and tripled it. When you retired from them, that is what they called profit sharing. They had a good plan. When I left from there, I came back home and I got about \$9,000. That was a good start for me. That was kind of nice. I bought war bonds with it. I was never sorry. I still have them. They earn interest.

C: How did you buy them? Were they just like a regular savings bond?

H: You could have it deducted from your pay or you could buy them direct through the bank. When I worked for Raffel's, I would take \$5 out of my pay every week. When you got \$75 you bought one \$100 bond. That is the way I got started and kept doing that. When I was down in the store in Springfield, they didn't take anything out. They didn't cooperate that

way. I still managed.

C: Do you still have your war bonds today?

H: Yes. They have changed from H Bonds. They were E Bonds when you bought them. Then you exchanged them for H Bonds and that is what I have now. You get $7\frac{1}{2}\%$ interest on them every three months. I try to do my best.

C: Well, thank you very much for your time.

H: You are entirely welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW