

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

World War II Women

Personal Experiences

O. H. 619

SHIRLEY MAE BUCHNER

Interviewed

by

Janice Cafaro

on

October 16, 1985

SHIRLEY MAE BUCHNER

The youngest child of Joseph and Margaret Mae Wirt Cutsler, Mrs. Shirley Mae Buchner was born in Lowellville, Ohio on May 5, 1918.

Less than one year after her 1936 graduation from Lowellville High School, Mrs. Buchner became a clerk in McKelvey's department store in Youngstown, where she worked until her marriage to Kenneth Dickson. During World War II, while her husband served overseas in the office of General Eisenhower, Mrs. Buchner once again joined the work force in order to help support her two year old daughter, Tamson. Mrs. Buchner was hired as a clerk for Stambaugh Thompson's department store from 1942 to 1944. During that period, she recalls what it was like to be a working mother, and the problems her child had adjusting in her absence. However, her husband returned shortly after the war was over, and she left her position to return to being a full-time housewife. In 1947, they had their second daughter, Diane.

Ten years later, Mrs. Buchner returned to work as a teller for Lowellville Bank, and by her retirement in 1980 she was an assistant manager.

In 1967, after twenty-seven years of marriage, Mrs. Buchner's husband passed away. However, she remarried Glen Buchner in 1974.

Mrs. Buchner currently has five grandchildren from her first marriage, and four grandchildren from her second marriage. She is a member of Evangel Baptist Church, and her hobbies include reading and handwork.

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INTERVIEWEE: SHIRLEY MAE BUCHNER

INTERVIEWER: Janice Cafaro

SUBJECT: family, work, rationing, war correspondence

DATE: October 16, 1985

C: This is an interview with Shirley Buchner for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on World War II Women, by Janice Cafaro, on October 16, 1985, at 3:00 p.m.

Can you tell me about your parents and your family growing up? What were your parents like and where were you born?

B: My parents were old when I was born; my mother was forty and my dad was four years older. My dad was the head of the family; his word was law. He was very strict with teaching children manners and respecting our elders. I didn't get a chance to know him too well because when I was eleven he caught pneumonia and died. My mother raised me from then on. I always felt a little cheated because I didn't have the advantage of having a father all through my life. There was ten years difference between my sister and I so I was the baby of the family. There was eight years difference between my brother. My mother had it rough; she never went to work; she depended on my brothers working and taking care of the family. When I graduated from school there was never a thought of going to college or anything. It was get out and get a job and support yourself.

C: You lived in Lowellville all your life?

B: Yes, my first eighteen years. Then I moved to Youngstown for two years and then moved back to Lowellville again.

C: You have one sister and two brothers?

B: Yes.

C: What do you remember about the bombing of Pearl Harbor?

B: I think I remember that it was on a Sunday. My husband was more concerned than I was because he had been listening to the news and this was all a surprise. I didn't pay too much attention to it, only that they had bombed the place. We talked about it, but not to any extent.

C: Did you really realize what had happened?

B: No, I didn't. It wasn't brought as close to home as it is now with television. We only had newspaper and radio then to tell us. I think I had gone into Youngstown the next day or so and people were talking. A lot of people were crying because it had affected their families; someone had lost loved ones. That is when I realized that this thing was really serious. We were glad it hadn't affected anybody in our family.

C: When did your husband enlist after that?

B: He enlisted when we realized he wasn't going to be called; it was about a year after that.

C: How did you feel about him enlisting?

B: I felt that if he wanted to this was up to him. If he wanted to serve his country it was all right by me. I would try to do my part at home. At that time we started to knit sweaters and things for the fellows overseas.

C: Was there an organization going that was knitting sweaters?

B: No, just individuals. They would send them to Red Cross.

C: How many sweaters did you knit?

B: I think the first year I knit four.

C: Did you use patterns?

B: Yes, we had one pattern that we followed.

C: Did they supply the yarn?

B: Yes, the Red Cross supplied the yarn.

C: Were there allowances for different sizes?

B: Yes.

C: Did you do this all during the war?

B: Yes, until I went to work.

C: Did you drop them off at the Red Cross?

B: We had a woman in town that more or less took charge of it.

C: She would pick them up at your home?

B: Yes.

C: Did your husband go to the Army?

B: Yes. He was at boot camp and then he was sent directly overseas to England. He was with General Eisenhower's office--Shafe--then, much to his disappointment. His occupation as a civilian was office work, so that is where they put him overseas.

C: Was he doing secretarial duties?

B: How did you feel about that? Were you relieved?

C: Yes, I was relieved. He was not. He wanted to be in where the action was.

C: Was your husband there the duration of the war?

B: Yes.

C: You were able to correspond then?

B: Yes.

C: Easily?

B: Yes. We mailed letters back and forth. They were censored, but not too badly.

C: Probably because of his line of work too.

B: Right.

C: What were some of the things that he talked about from the war?

B: He couldn't discuss too much; it was pretty secretive there. He felt privileged to be able to talk to General Eisenhower.

C: Did he like him?

B: Yes, very much.

C: Did he feel he was a strong leader?

B: Yes. He felt he was strong and fair.

C: He must have had a fascinating job even without a lot of action. He must have been privy to a lot of information?

B: Yes, he was.

C: He couldn't talk to you about this?

B: No, he would talk about getting up and going to the office and being busy the whole time. After he was there so long he was entitled to a leave, but he couldn't come home because his leave was not that long. He went on into Germany and visited around.

C: How did he adjust to the service?

B: Very well. Shortly after he had gotten out of school he had joined the CCC, Civilian Conservation Corps.

C: What did they do?

B: It was for fellows that didn't have work. They would go out and join the CCC. His division was in the forest in California; they would fight forest fires and take care of the forest, cut trees and so on.

C: This was like a WPA works program?

B: More or less, yes. You were in a service like; it wasn't a thing where you came and went. You had to join for so long. He was in that for a year and a half, so he became adjusted to taking orders.

C: Where did he receive his office training?

B: When he came home from the CCC he had gotten a job with the limestone quarry. He worked there in the office.

C: How was the adjustment on you? How long had you been married before he enlisted?

B: It was two years.

C: So you were just really getting into married life?

B: Yes. I was trying to struggle along and get ahead and get adjusted. Then the war came.

C: What was that like for you?

B: It was a little discouraging at first because you couldn't buy what you wanted to buy.

- C: With your husband being away what kinds of adjustments did you have to make?
- B: We lived in my mother's house. She was a widow and she came to live with me while he was in the service. That way I was able to maintain my own home. Of course, I couldn't live on just Army pay so I got a job at Stambaugh Thompson in downtown Youngstown. I worked there for the duration of the war.
- C: You worked then as a direct result of your husband being sent away?
- B: Yes.
- C: Were you a clerk?
- B: Yes.
- C: How many children did you have at that time?
- B: I had one at that time. As I said, this was hard on her more than it was on me. She didn't like being away from mother. She would stand at the door and watch me pass on the bus. She would cry. It was heartbreaking. She was two going on three.
- C: Who watched her?
- B: My mother.
- C: How did that affect you?
- B: It was very depressing because I hated to leave her. In a way it was good because it gave her a little bit of independence too; she had to do without her mother for a while. She was very good about listening to her grandmother, minding her.
- C: When you came home she was probably that much happier.
- B: Yes.
- C: Did people talk about the war at work?
- B: Yes, that was the main conversation. It drew people closer together; you would talk to strangers. Working in a store I would come in contact with more people and this was the main topic of conversation. We would ask where so-and-so was and what division they were with. It brought people closer together by this.
- C: Would people talk about their families or about the progress of the war? What would people basically talk about?
- B: Myself, I never got into discussing the war situation, what

- they were doing and how they should do it. I didn't understand it too much. A lot of people were arguing back and forth about what MacArthur should have been doing and Eisenhower. It was like a football game; everybody knows what should be done, but they are not out there doing it. I was more or less interested in getting the war over with for the fellows to come back home and lead a normal life again. I wanted to raise a family.
- C: Were there a lot of women working at Stambaugh Thompson's?
- B: Oh, yes, an awful lot of women. Practically three-quarters of them were women.
- C: Do you think they had difficulty working in hardware?
- B: This wasn't strictly hardware. Their main business was supplying these little stores. They had a lot of salesmen working for them who would go out and sell to these small, neighborhood stores. The big store downtown was like a department store with the exception of clothing. They had appliances there, large appliances; they had a china shop there; a silverware department. That is the department I worked in. They had a housewares department, a camera department. The other part of the store was strictly hardware, paints, and supplies for painters and plumbers and maintenance workers.
- C: So even before the war the employees were mixed, male and female?
- B: Yes.
- C: How did rationing affect your cooking?
- B: You made a lot of changes there. You had to change from butter to oleo. Sugar was very scarce and coffee. At that time, I did smoke and cigarettes were rationed. I had a hard time getting those. I remember stockings being hard to get also. Just before that nylons had come into existence. With the war that was shut off then. We managed very well. There was my mother and she was entitled to stamps and also myself. We managed very well with what we had; it wasn't like the larger families?
- C: There wasn't enough of an increase allowed for a larger family?
- B: No.
- C: I remember you mentioned that butter cost more stamps than oleo cost or the opposite?
- B: Butter cost more than oleo.

C: Why was that?

B: I don't know. I suppose the black market had a lot to do with it too.

C: Was there a black market in Youngstown?

B: Oh my goodness, yes!

C: Is there anything you heard about that?

B: Not too much. I had a cousin that supplied me with cigarettes. I was very fortunate because I would even get cartons of cigarettes; other people were only able to buy a pack.

C: There was a lot of war profiteering going on.

B: Right. Now I wouldn't even think of doing anything like that, but when you are young your thoughts are different about certain things; your priorities are different.

C: I don't know why cigarettes had to be rationed anyway?

B: Because they had to send them overseas.

At the time too we did a lot of canning. I started canning right after I got married. I continued on ever since.

C: What sort of things did you can during those years?

B: Everything I could get my hands on, fruits, vegetables.

C: All the preparation must have been hard on you.

B: No, I enjoyed it.

C: Did you have a garden?

B: No. We would go to the farmers' market.

C: Where was that?

B: On Pyatt Street. We didn't have a car at the time and someone would have to take me.

C: You didn't have a car during the war?

B: No.

C: Were they hard to obtain?

B: I just didn't have the money for one.

C: I know gas was rationed.

B: Yes.

C: How did you get to work, carpool or bus?

B: Carpool and bus.

C: How did the war affect clothing? Was clothing as available then as it was before the war? Were people sewing more?

B: No, I don't think people were sewing more. Coming from a middle income family I never felt that I had to have everything that came in style. Of course, I had to budget a lot of things, my money. I wasn't able to afford to buy a lot of things. Clothing wasn't hard to come by as far as that goes.

C: Just nylons.

B: Anything that was made with nylon material.

C: Speaking of fashion, what type of make-up did the women used to wear then? Was it different than now?

B: We didn't go in for all this eye shadow and artificial eye-lashes and nails. It was just your basics, your powder rouge and lipstick and nail polish.

C: I was interviewing someone else and they said that they used to wear really strong lipstick. She talked about the pancake make-up.

B: Yes, pancake make-up and leg make-up.

C: Did you wear leg make-up because you couldn't get nylons or did you just not wear anything?

B: I wore leg make-up because I didn't get a chance to get out in the sun like I used to. Of course, it helped save on nylons too.

C: Did it streak? How was that to wear?

B: It was easy to apply, just like a liquid. You smeared it all over your legs. Of course, it did come off on the sheets at night if you didn't wash your legs.

C: Did it stain?

B: Not too much.

C: What about around the holidays when everyone was preparing food and putting everything out, was that kind of hard because

it was lean back then?

B: People didn't prepare as much as they do now. We baked fruitcakes and some cookies, but not too many. That was about it.

C: Would you go together with people and bake?

B: No, everybody just more or less did their own. We made our own candy, popcorn balls, things like that.

C: What about Christmas shopping for your daughter, were toys available?

B: Yes, but people didn't buy toys like they do now. You bought so many things and that was it.

C: What was your attitude toward the war?

B: I never gave it too much thought. I had faith in our country; I knew we were going to win the war. I never had any doubts about it. I knew that we were going to be taken care of.

C: There wasn't any fear of invasion or anything?

B: No way. I was in my early twenties and looking forward to raising a family. I was just waiting for it to end.

C: What about your mother?

B: She was the same way I was. My brother was in the service and that affected her too. She was concerned about him.

C: He was in Europe also?

B: No, he was in the South Pacific with the Seabees.

C: Was he married?

B: Divorced.

C: Did he see a lot of fighting?

B: Yes, he did.

C: Did he get wounded?

B: No, he was very fortunate.

C: Did you have an opportunity to go see movies or any kind of entertainment?

B: Yes, we went to movies at least once a week or once every two

weeks. As far as any other entertainment was concerned, that was about it.

C: What about the war reports in the beginning of the movies, what were they like?

B: They would show what they called movie shorts. I guess they would affect other people more than they did me because if you had someone who was in the fighting line, in action, you would be more concerned about it.

C: What about the movies in general, did they mention the war theme at all?

B: Not too much. There were war movies, but there were a lot of musicals at that time.

C: Did your friends share your optimistic attitude about the war?

B: Yes, I think so.

C: Do you remember VJ Day or D Day?

B: Yes I do, but I would rather not get into it.

C: What about the atomic bomb which ended the war in the Pacific?

B: I could never visualize that. I never thought anything could be so powerful.

C: Did people realize what was going on when it was dropped, how much destruction, dissemination it caused?

B: No.

C: How was it presented to the people?

B: It was front page news. Any little thing that happened was front page news.

C: Do you feel that we had to end the war that way or do you feel it was a good thing that saved a lot of Americans' lives?

B: I think it was a good thing that it saved a lot of Americans' lives. I think we've been very fortunate as a nation to stay out of war as long as we have.

C: You told me earlier about letters that you found in the attic?

B: I found letters by a veteran to his wife when my parents and I moved into our new house. She left this box of letters there. They talked about the fighting and how much they missed each other, how much they loved each other. I thought this was very

romantic. I thought it would be great to have a soldier overseas that was able to write to you and tell you all these things.

C: You didn't think it would be happening to you.

B: I never thought it, no. After my husband went overseas those things came back to my mind. I never saved his letters though.

C: Were there basically the same concerns between World War I and World War II?

B: Yes. When I look back now it isn't a long time between the two years.

C: Do you have any final observations about the war that you would like to add?

B: I think it's terrible that we have wars. I think it is terrible that people cannot sit down and settle things peacefully. There is always this greediness though. It tells us in the Bible though that we will have wars and rumors of wars continually. I guess this is the way it is going to be. My prayer is that people would really look to the Lord and find out who is the Peacemaker.

END OF INTERVIEW