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Oral History Interview Mitchell Hall

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Interviewer: Mitchell Hall

Interviewee: Charles Hall

The interview was conducted in one session on November 4, 2015 that lasted 58 minutes. It was conducted over the phone. Only the interviewer and interviewee were present.

About Charles Hall:

Charles M. Hall was born in Newton, MA in 1936 (79 years old) and grew up there. He married Joanne Colino and together they had two children. He remembers when the United States entered WWII and how families had to adjust to their nation being at war. This interview covered topics about American life was adjusted during WWII more specifically in the Boston suburbs.

Interviewer: Mitchell Hall (MH)

Interviewee: Charles Hall (CH)

MH: You were five when WWII started, right?

CH: Yup, yup that's right 1941 when war was declared. You know the Germans had advanced on Poland and Czechoslovakia as early as 1937 but ah, we tried to stay outta the war, we were supporting England you know helping them arm because they were afraid of the Germans and um then we have this surprise by Japan on Pearl Harbor in 1941 and that's when Roosevelt declared war on, they call them the Axis, "A" "X" "I" "S." we were the Allies and they were they Axis and of course the Nazis. Yeah yeah, so we were fighting in the Pacific and in Europe at the same time.

MH: Do you remember when you first or how you first heard America was at war?

CH: Ahh good question. Well I was, like I said I was five years old. I'm sure it was discussed at home because things you know things are happening you know like rationing. Rationing hadn't really started yet but you know that was gonna come. People were afraid that we were gonna be ah, attacked by the Germans so you know, they call it the "Black Out" went into effect where you couldn't have any lights visible at night. and ah you know so I would have been aware certainly that something was going on.

MH: So you would have heard it over the radio or heard your parents talking about it?

CH: Yeah Yeah right. Like I said the radio and newspaper were really the only way people got information back then and ya know my parents certainly would read. My father use to bring home the *Boston Traveler*. That was the Republican Newspaper. *Boston Herald* was the um Democratic newspaper. He was a Republican. I say democrat and republican, it's like *Fox* and *CNN*, you know one would stress um you know a party over the other. So you know he and my mother would discuss what he read in the paper, she would read it too.

MH: You had mentioned something in an email about comic books being common. What did you mean about that, did they have themes of the war? You know?

CH: Oh yeah, yeah they had characters that were you know heroes, they'd have soldiers and other characters that uh were fighting Germans and the Japanese. They always played the Japanese and the Germans as blood thirsty people. And that by the way umm what came out of that, that energy was the um internment camps for the Japanese and the Germans in the country, have you heard about that?

MH: Yeah yeah I have.

CH: Yeah but umm particularly on the West Coast the umm Japanese were herded into umm whole families were taken from their jobs, their homes everything and they'd be sent to internment camps and uh you know they were umm they'd be guarded and there'd be fences around them and um this lasted you know, probably lasted the war I don't know when they, I don't remember when they disbanded them. It ruined them you know, thousands of people and the same thing happened to Germans. My good friend Kurt Schwartz his uh his father was in an internment camp in Pennsylvania. So you know it was a scare. We thought that these people might be spies.

MH: So like how we'd said propaganda and how...

CH: Yeah lots of propoganda. I mentioned posters and war posters like, "Uncle Sam's needs you." That was one of them.

MH: Yeah the real famous one.

CH: Yeah you know we would have pictures of warships.

MH: So when rationing took off you said your mother saved little bars of soap and would go donate them.

CH: Yeah they had centers, I don't know where they were but you know maybe at the grocery or maybe the government set up or the town set up a center where you could drop off little tin cans and all kinds of scrap metal and soap which was supposedly used I don't know for gunpowder. She continued that up until, jeepers, probably 1980. That was a habit she had when the soap got low she'd through it in a draw. She had a whole draw full of soap (laughing) when she was old. I mean it was a pretty traumatic event the whole thing.

MH: Did you ever go to the donating places with your mother?

CH: Probably but I don't remember.

MH: Yeah ok. You said your father was an air raid warden.

CH: Yeah these guys would go around the neighborhood. Sometimes, in some cities they had a tin hat (chuckles) or an upside down bowl that they wore and they, I suppose they carried a flashlight and some sort of a belt or something that identified them as an air

warden and they'd patrol the streets after dark to make sure nobody's lights were on and automobiles, you couldn't drive your car with the headlights on, you'd used the parking lights. You know all cars had two condition switch for the headlight and one was the parking light which were very small back then and dim.

MH: Yeah they're still not very bright day.

CH: Yeah but they were really dim then. They were just tiny little bulbs and uh so no one was really out at night.

MH: Yeah so you never went out with your father because it was late?

CH: Well I might have but it wasn't that late. You know picture now, it's getting dark up here now around 5. I might have walked around.

MH: But you don't remember any times when your father would have a hard time and have to talk to someone?

CH: No I don't remember.

MH: Ok. For the most part he didn't have to yell at people to close their shades?

CH: Probably not. We lived in a neighborhood and he would have a regular route around the block or something then somebody else would have the next block. You know that sort of thing. We lived in Newton, Mass which know is a suburb and it's not very tightly clustered so there weren't that homes and people weren't about to disobey. The government made sure everyone had the fear of war (chuckles) and being attacked so people obeyed and used black shades. And there were no, the street lights on, they were turned off. That sort of thing. So everything was dark and no one wanted to go out after dark.

MH: You know a lot of women took the places of men in the workforce, did any women in your family go and work?

CH: No. I'm trying to think, my mother sure didn't but my sister Dorothy, I think she might have worked in Boston as a secretary for the army. There was an army base and a navy base in Boston and she might have worked there for a while.

MH: Do you know how old she would have been then?

CH: Oh jeebers (Goes on to figure out sisters age) If I was five she would have been 22.

MH: Yeah so she would fit that category of women that would go and work.

CH: Yup. And then she would come home with, she would date soldiers or sailors because she met them in Boston. So she would have boyfriends that were sailors. She married soldier. I remember a sailor visiting our house and he gave me his sailor cap and I (chuckles) I used to parade around the house and was very proud of that. (Goes off on a story about the sailor teaching him how to whistle.) She brought home some interesting folks. They would visit sometimes you know when they were on leave you know her boy friends with their friends. My parents were always entertaining. They love to have them home.

MH: You probably knew people who went overseas, right?

CH: In the service you mean?

MH: Yeah yeah who went into service then over to Europe or to the Pacific.

CH: You know I probably did but I can't remember. I'm sure that that some of these guys that came to our house ended up being sent to either the Pacific or to Europe. I can't quite remember. The air force is another one. She had a boyfriend, he was a pilot I remember him he was in the air force. I even remember his last name, Lakesly. His father was a good friend of my father, they used to play golf together I guess or cards or something I remember they used to go out quite a bit, do things. But yeah, army, navy and air force she had quite a bit of few friends. But I don't remember any anybody specific that went off to war.

MH: You don't remember anybody in your family like an uncle or cousin?

CH: No ah my uncle, I only have one uncle and ah, he didn't, he actually worked in Southbridge at American Optical Company. Some jobs were protected, you couldn't be drafted.

MH: Oh ok.

CH: He either may have been too old or in um a specific job that was necessary for the war effort like physicians. My father was an optometrist, I suspect he had a deferment and my uncle might have a deferment. There was a draft board in every city. The draft board would send out notices to the population if you were eligible for the draft like when you turned eighteen. Males, no women were drafted, they had to join I guess but ah males could be drafted and you could apply for a deferment and if you didn't have a job that qualified for a deferred you'd have to report to the draft board. You know and then they would pick a date for you to, first thing you would do is get a physical. (Goes off on when he graduated high school and chose to join the army.)

MH: Where in Boston was the army base?

CH: I don't know specifically but it was along the coast in, you'd call it South Boston. It was more like a depot for vehicles and something like offices for the, a regional offices for the army and ah it was administrative branch along as a vehicles depot. The navy also had a base in Boston, they called it the Navy Yard and that was south of the, along the coast also, south of Boston down near Quincy. They're both closed now, yeah they were turned over from the government to the cities and build on. Probably couldn't find anything left of them but they were pretty big facilities. (Goes off on after passing his physical after joining the army and his two years in the army. He was never deployed.) Not like during WWII you know people got into, really into action. It was very very dangerous.

MH: Going back to the work force and the Great Migration where African Americans moved north, did you ever see the effects of that? Like more African Americans in the area?

CH: I do I do remember that, that was after the war you know when all the Civil Rights violence was coming up in the South (goes on about after the war and African Americans moving out of the southern states and a story of his time in North Carolina in the army on leave). Quite a few came to Boston and uh, the people in Boston didn't treat them very well. You know they had uh, busing for the kids to go to school. They tried to integrate the blacks with the whites in the schools but that wasn't working to well so they bused the kids, a lot from Boston out to the suburbs and you know the suburban towns had a quota of black kids they had to educate that was a really big deal in Boston. I'm sure there were all kinds of disruptions and battle over that issue.

MH: You never really hear about that.

CH: It comes up in the local globe, *The Boston Globe* every now and then, there're still repercussions from that. You know a lot of black kids that have good educations that they wouldn't have in Boston and it tend to work out pretty good. The kids in the suburbs, we didn't have the same attitudes as the city people. This is after my time going to school, but we didn't mind other races. We had black kids in my community, and not very many but uh, they were in the same classes as us. But I guess there were so many coming up from the south that you know it started to wear on people. They weren't use to that. Yeah that was after the war, more towards the Civil Rights period. '60's.

MH: I read that taxes got jacked up in order to help generate revenues and help the economy and that some families had to pay up to 90% on their income. You were really young so you probably didn't care for it.

CH: Yeah (chuckles) that was out of my league at my age. (Goes off on tax rates later on). Back then, I'm talking now late '50's early '60's the highest tax rate was 75% and that might very well have been imposed because of recovery from the war effort, I never really thought of that. Maybe I did back then but I can't remember.

MH: Mhm, you said your dad was an optometrist, right?

CH: Yes.

MH: How much does that bring in? That's a pretty specialized job.

CH: Oh I have no idea. Well let's see, an optometrist today would make, I don't know \$150 thousand a year? But back then, well let me give you an example of how cheap the cost of living was. We bought a twelve room house in Newton, beautiful victorian era house. It was built in the 1890's and exquisite workmanship on everything you know a lot of natural wood and stone and multiple fireplaces twelve room, five thousand dollars.

MH: Really?

CH: Yeah and about a half acre of land. I mean that's how inexpensive things were back then. I used to deliver newspapers and I think I was making six cents per paper delivered. If that much. I think it was less than that because the papers were going, yeah it was less than that. I was making like, I think it was like two or three cents because the papers, a newspaper would cost six or eight cents (chuckles) you could buy a whole meal for under a dollar. Go to a restaurant and you get a meal, it'd be like eighty-five cents

MH: That's crazy.

CH: Oh yeah, the cost of living was by today's standards it was cheap cheap but people didn't make much money. Yeah I have no idea how much my father was making back in that period but he bought a house for five thousand bucks and today that house, if it was standing there in Newton it would be worth a million and a half.

MH: Wow yeah so it all about the perspective and the time period that ya live in, right?

CH: Yeah exactly. Right right.

MH: You said you had a half an acre of land around your house, um did your family have a victory garden?

CH: We did. We had a victory garden. We grew what vegetables we could. I can remember tomatoes, asparagus, uh we had a grape barbera, course lettuce, carrots. All that stuff.

MH: Wow ok.

CH: We had uh let's see. a couple of, three apple trees, a pear tree, yeah we had a little orchard. Yeah I forgot about victory gardens, that was a big thing. The government really pushed pushed that you know part of the war effort you know raise your own produce. And quite a few of our neighbors had them too. I can remember going out there picking things, my mother putting supper together she'd tell me and my brother to go out and pick such and such you know for supper. Yeah that was good and then back then there was a lot of uh local farm stands too you now with fresh produce but you know they didn't have

much to offer unfortunately because you know a lot of the stuff I imagine was uh the fresh food was going to the government to feed the troops. Especially meat. Meat was very hard to come by because of rationing. You saw those rationing coupons, you know when you use those up you didn't get anymore of that product or whatever it was so you had to be very careful how you spent your coupons because you know when you ran out, you'd have to apply for more and uh you know if the right time hadn't gone by like six months worth of coupons or something then that's too bad, you don't get any. So there was a black market.

MH: Was there really?

CH: Oh yeah, sure sure. I never got involved but I know from reading that uh there was a black market on almost everything. Things that were rationed you could buy if you knew the right people. You'd pay big money for whatever it was, not the growing rate but uh you know you could uh, especially in the cities you could uh, there was always a black market you could get things. And in Europe you know, our rationing wasn't that draconian or terrible but in Europe it was really really bad. People had to depend on the black market. You know sugar and butter, those were two things, and chocolate. When our soldiers, our GIs they call them, went through these towns in Europe that we drove the Germans from they were giving out chocolate bars, candy bars and people loved (chuckles) I mean they lined the streets because they had no nothing like that. They hadn't had them for years. (We go on to discuss the book *Unbroken*).

MH: What were we talking about before?

CH: Uh I don't know, backing up. The blacks was the last thing we mentioned. The migration of the blacks from the South

MH: Mhm and did we talk about the victory gardens?

CH: Yeah that's rights we had a victory garden. Yeah we had a little greenhouse that was attached to our house.

MH: Oh really?

CH: Yeah they called it the conservatory and it was small but my father used to grow tomatoes and other vegetables in the winter because it was heated and it was attached to the basement actually and went out into the yard and it was all enclosed outside with glass and it had a radiator and air. Well actually it had a little furnace that ran on kerosene and pipes that would pump warm water through the earth underneath the plants so that the earth was warm and it would warm the whole place there so he grew stuff in the little uh, conservatory.

MH: So you were nine right when the war, you had just turned nine right? August eight is your birthday and two days before they dropped uh it on Hiroshima and then the day after, Nagasaki, how quickly did you uh, did the news spread about that?

CH: Oh that was right away, yeah right away. I think, well certainly it, we used to go to the movies, that was what we would do and they had uh newsreels. When you went to the movies back then you got two movies and sometimes a serial they called it, it, it was like a serial on television now, a continuation each week to have you come back especially on the weekends when the kids were out of school and we would pay uh twelve cents to go to the movies.

MH: If only it was that now.

CH: So, uh, if you had a quarter you were in really good shape, you could go to the movies get a couple of candy bars for a nickel (laughing) and have change (laughs). So if we went in the afternoon uh at noon time, you know the afternoon shows they would show us a serial, two featured films and a newsreel. And the newsreel, I forgot about that, that was one of the other ways, we knew what was going on, there were a lot of news reporters in the Pacific, they called it "the Theater," the Pacific Theater and the war, period they called "the Theater" and "the European Theater." So these were done on movie film and that film would have to be shipped back to the U.S. and turned into enough film to go to all the movie theaters around the country. So imagine, it was probably at least a week, two weeks before we really knew what was going on. And then it was, I'm sure it was propaganda, not necessarily the truth but first thing I'm sure we heard about the atomic bombs on the radio and the newspaper. You know that was pretty, that was fast. And then that would be followed up a few days or whatever by newsreel.

MH: And the newsreel report obviously had real footage right?

CH: Oh yeah right, right.

MH: Ok.

CH: And then after that we started, information started to leak out about the tests in the Pacific like in Bikini Atoll and there were a couple of other places where we dropped bombs. We also tested in the Nevada desert.

MH: Yeah that was big. Isn't that where they first tested it in the beginning of the year, 1945?

CH: Yeah I can't remember the years but uh, I'm sure that uh they were smaller that they didn't have a full sized one. They had to run tests to see if the atomic reaction really would produce the results that they thought it would. Yeah that sounds about right and then they had Los Alamos in New Mexico and in oh what was the one down south, uh can't remember the name of the facility in the south. There was an army general put in charge of developing the bomb and uh, it was so top secret it was unbelievable. They built towns so that the scientist and the workers could bring their families and they lived in these towns. There was no information that got out, nobody knew this was going on. The first we knew about it was after the bomb was dropped on uh, Hiroshima.

MH: What did you hear about that? Like what did the news say, do you remember?

CH: Well yeah I can remember the, it was announced that they dropped this monster bomb and there were uh, it was film footage taken from the air probably not the plane that dropped it but it might have been or another plane, of the incredible destruction on the ground because it went out like ten miles, the radius, and fires you know. Japanese homes were built of wood and paper.

MH: Yeah so it was just obliterated.

CH: Oh yeah when they had a fire, and they were very close together, it was very tight. They had a fire, it was a major, big deal. S you know it killed a lot of people from radiation, it burned up a lot of people and still they didn't capitulate, that's the thing, when we dropped the bomb on Hiroshima. And the Japanese ah, didn't respond. You know we said do you give up and so we dropped the one on Nagasaki and that was the thing that capped it off.

MH: What did the news say about the war ending in Europe? Like about Hitler, what were the rumors?

CH: Yeah there was uh, well we were closing in on Germany actually. You know we started in, on the coast of France and uh, made our way up north to ah, into Germany itself. We were just marching along because the German army was pretty much depleted. They were drafting kids, you know like twelve year olds and old men, anybody, anybody that could hold a rifle and so they weren't trained, they just put them in there to shoot. So you know they were no match for the U.S army and once we got going and uh, so I can remember when it was announced that we reached Berlin and uh, invaded the (Ritestag) they called it, the Nazi headquarters and uh, got in there and uh, I guess Hitler had, I think he poisoned himself and his girlfriend. Yeah so they were dead. And it, they, there were no bodies, I think that it got blown up maybe. His, he had an underground bunker and whether the Germans blew it up or Hitler blew it up but you know, after the war there were always rumors that "Hitler is not dead! He's alive" and he was sited in some place. These went on for quite a while and of course it was false but there was no body.

MH: Exactly, yeah.

CH: Or they couldn't identify the body it was burned or you know blown apart or whatever. So yeah, I can just picture that but uh, not the details of when that happened. But we were overjoyed that this thing finally came to an end.

MH: Yeah you had said that uh, When it was announced that the war was over um, people came out of their houses and celebrated in the streets.

CH: Oh yeah, yeah it was just major celebrations. There's a famous photograph or series of photographs in Times Square in New York, people just flocked there from all the apartment houses and thing and they were jumping around and celebrating and, and church bells were going off all over the place you know and we had a neighbor that had a, they call it a starter cannon that they use for yacht races and he um, he was setting that thing off (chuckles). I can remember, I don't think we had heard that peace was announced, that you know, the Nazis had capitulated, uh and after that cannon had gone off we found that out. This guy found out before we did somehow. That's what I think I remember. But I do remember, it was Mr. Winslow (chuckles).

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1. Do you remember how you first heard America was at war and what it really meant?
2. War ration books were given to every family in America, which gave instructions on what could be bought and what to could be donated, do you remember some things that your family gathered and donated or what was saved?
3. Did you ever go with your parents to donate things? What do you remember about those places?
4. Your father was an air raid warden, did you ever go around the neighborhood with him during his rounds? If so explain one time. If not did you ever hear of what would happen?
5. How did people respond to your father coming around? did they feel it necessary or not?
6. Women took the place of men in the workforce, did any women in your family do so?
7. If you were interested in the news of war, how did you gather your info (newspaper, radio, over hear parents)?
8. Propaganda was used a lot with posters encouraging men to join the military and had Germans and Japanese depicted as bloodthirsty animalistic people. How did these depictions resonate with you? Did the posters do their jobs and change the views of people?
9. Did you know people that went overseas?

10. The Great Migration continued through WWII with AA moving north to help fill jobs in the labor force. Did you see or hear of this occurring in your area?
11. Taxes got jacked up to help generate revenues and control inflation, some paid 90 percent on income. How did the rises in tax affect your family?
12. Did your family have a victory garden?
13. You had grown a bit since the beginning of WWII, your birthday on August 8, two days after Hiroshima and the day before Nagasaki. How quickly did you hear about it?
14. what did you hear about what happened involving the end of the war? (Hitler, Germany, Japan, the bomb dropped)
15. Being only nine years old, what was it like, how did you handle the news, could you understand what happened at the end of the war?