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Oral History Project/Geneva Holiman, World War II

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Student Interviewer's Name: Jackie Seek
Interviewee's Name: Geneva Holiman

Time and Location of Interview:

The interview was conducted in one session on October 27, 2016 at 12:30 p.m. and lasted approximately forty-five minutes. It was conducted in the home of Geneva Holiman in Hixson, TN. Only the interviewer and interviewee were present.

About Geneva Holiman:

Geneva Emerling Holiman was born in Hixson, Tennessee on October 17, 1929, shortly after American had been plunged into a depression. The daughter of Floyd and Mattie Virginia Emerling, Geneva grew up in poverty. From a very young age, she was expected to help her mother around the house and with her younger siblings. Geneva married R.C. at age sixteen and together they had two sons. Life was not easy, and it continued to challenge Geneva with its many unexpected twists and turns. At age eighty-seven, Geneva still clearly remembers those parts of her life that were of the most importance. This interview takes place October 27, 2016 at the home of Geneva in Hixson, TN. It discusses her memories of life during the Great Depression, World War II, and the years following.

Interviewer: Jackie Seek (JS)

Interviewee: Geneva Holiman (GH)

JS: Where and when were you born?

GH: Where was I born... in Hixson, Tennessee on October 17, 1929. I was delivered by a veterinarian that took care of the cattle on the dairy farm that we lived on. And uh... we lived there for a certain length of time, and then we moved to many other places. Then, when I was about eight we moved back to that same house, and I lived in it for about another two years. When we left that one we were just... we were sort of I guess, like gypsies. My dad... we never owned property, and so wherever he could find a farm that needed farm hands was where he moved to. That was how I spent my life from the time I was born till I was twelve. I turned twelve in October, and then we moved downtown Chattanooga when school was out the following May. And that was the first time we ever lived in a house that had electricity and plumbing.

JS: So could you tell me what one of your earliest childhood memories was?

GH: The very earliest memory was, babysitting with my sister, three years younger than I, and it was in the spring of 1933. I didn't know these things then, but looking back I remember. My mom gave me the job of babysitting with my sister in a wooden box out on the front porch that my dad had made for her a playpen. They were across the road in a garden, and she told me that if Betty woke up and cried I'd to come and tell her. So Betty woke up, but she didn't cry. She was just playing in the box, and I was trying to pacify her, and keep her busy. And then out of the corner of my eye I saw something move in the corner of the box, but when I looked I didn't see anything, so I went back with my

attention to her. After a while, this time I know something moved in that box, and so I kept watching it instead of her and I kept watching it and watching it. Well it moved again, and I was petrified because it was looked like a stick with long spindly legs, and I was terrified. I went screaming up to the garden telling mama, "Mama, there's a stick in Betty's box, and it's a walkin!" Well I learned, in later years, that the common name for that was called a walking stick, but at that time, I didn't know it. So that is my earliest memory. Another memory along about that same summer, when the garden was growing, my dad had given me a job of a tin can full of kerosene, and I was to go down the rows and pick the bugs off the plants 'cause he didn't... pesticides weren't available then. And that was my job, and then when I finished that I was at the end of the row, because they didn't want me tromping around through the garden. When I just, to occupy myself, I picked up a little gravel and just like kids do, why kids do that, I don't know, but I put it in my ear and I couldn't get it out. And it scared me and started crying. They come to find out what was wrong. Like I say, back in those days, we were doctored at home by our parents and our grandparents with herbs and homemade medicines. So my dad took a piece of bailing wire and filed it down and made a little hook. And my mother held my head in between her knees, and my dad took the rock out, the little thing out of my ear. And that was a, I guess, a lot of trauma, and that's why that memory was imbedded, I just never forgot it.

JS: Yes, for sure. So what was life like during the Great Depression. Were you aware that there was something going on with the economy and in the country? Did your parents talk about it?

GH: No, I didn't know anything about that. We were very poor. My parents were uneducated. My dad had just got to go to the second grade because his dad kept him out to work on the farm. And my mother was the same way, but she had got to the fourth grade. That was the extent of their education. My grandparents, they didn't have any education at all. They did not know how to read or to write. I remember my dad he always had a curious mind. He wanted to know things. That he said that he would go to town and look in the garbage cans until he found the newspaper someone had thrown away. He couldn't read it, but he wanted to read. So he said he would stop people on the street and say "Hey buddy, can you read? What's this say?" And he would point to it. And that was how he learned to read. In my adult years, my dad had a very strong, very forceful handwrite. And after he learned to read, he read a lot, but it was mostly the family Bible because we didn't have books and couldn't afford books. When we went to school, books were supplied. We didn't even have to buy books then. Everything was supplied.

JS: Did your parents ever talk about how life was in the years before the depression began? Do you have any memories of them discussing things like "Oh life used to be like this" or "We used to do this"?

GH: Um, no. I just heard a few comments. My dad went to work as soon as he was old enough, in the coal mine. My mom just worked on the farm helping with her younger brothers and sisters. Life was rough, life was hard, and they didn't complain. That's one of my memories. Life was rough, life was hard, it was tedious, but they didn't complain. We made do with what we had. When mamma cooked a meal and set it on the table I never in all my life heard anybody come to the table and look at something and say "I don't want it"

or “I don’t like.” Such a phrase didn’t exist. What was on the table, you ate it or you got up and didn’t have anything.

JS: Right. You ate what was put in front of you.

GH: Whatever was there, we ate it. So we grew up eating home cooked meals. And mostly what was growing in the garden Mamma would can and stuff.

JS: What was your father’s work while you were growing up? What did he do?

GH: He was a laborer on the farm. Um, plowing, he would have a... sometimes there was a team of horses, mules, whatever that animal was, and he would hold the plow. You’d have to hold the plow down in the dirt while the animals pulled it or otherwise it would skim on top of the ground, so it was hard labor. That’s what I remember him doing. Then we were always moving, always always always always moving. We moved to a place, there was a flag pole out in the yard, and uh, that was the only time in my life I can ever remember my dad really spending time playing and paying attention to, especially us three older ones. He found some axel grease, and he put it on the pole. And then we would all take turns seeing if we could climb it, how far up we could climb it, before we would slide back down. So I remember things like that. Then, when he had to clean new ground for the people that owned the property, he would burn the brush, and then they would cut down trees and teams of mules would pull the logs over to a certain place. They would use axes and hard labor and that would split those blocks. And that would be used for stove wood because we need the wood for heat in the winter and to supply the kitchen stove. It was an old, heavy, iron wooden stove and it burned wood. And that’s what my mamma cooked on.

JS: Were there ever times when you didn’t have enough to eat?

GH: I remember things, um, I didn’t know at the time, that we didn’t have enough to eat, but I remember what I did. My mother wrote a note and sent me over to my uncle’s house with a, we called it a toe sack, it’s the burlap bag now. My aunt read the note, and she put some canned goods in it that she had canned herself, and I carried those back home. Looking back on it, I know that’s because there wasn’t any food in the house for us to eat, or if there had been she would have used it. So that is what we had at that time.

JS: How many grades in school did you finish?

GH: Uh, I finished the ninth grade.

JS: Do you have any memory of the New Deal and the effects on your family or other families in the country? Do you remember people talking about it?

GH: I heard my dad use the phrase, “the New Deal,” but I had no idea what it was; no concept of what it was or what it meant.

JS: So looking back now, and seeing your way of life at that time, can you point out a few things that it had an effect on in your life? Is there anything you could point out to say “Maybe this had an effect on our way of life.”?

GH: The major thing that made a contribution to our way of life was when we moved from out in the country to downtown Chattanooga.

JS: What year was that?

GH: Well let’s see, uh, my last school picture was the year ‘41, ‘42. And let’s see, ‘29, ‘39, ‘40, ‘41, in the spring of um, ‘42, that was when we moved from Hixson to downtown Chattanooga. I was twelve in October, and I moved down to town that spring.

JS: Did you hear much about the war prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor?

GH: I remember when I was about oh, eight or nine, of my dad reading a newspaper and was talking about the Germany and the Nazis, which didn’t mean a thing to me. It was just phrases that I heard, but I had no idea what it meant.

JS: So tell me about the day you found out Pearl Harbor had been attacked. Where were you, and how did you hear about it?

GH: Well, my dad managed to afford a newspaper, so I think we must have heard it through the newspaper. And of course, when I went to school some of the kids were talking about it.

JS: How did you feel? Did you have an idea of what that meant, or were you still young enough that it just didn’t really hit home for you?

GH: It didn’t um, it didn’t really hit home to me, but my brother, which was six years older, he wanted mom and dad... he was seventeen and he wanted them to sign for him to join the Navy. Because my mother’s brothers had made a career of staying in the military and he wanted to go. They refused to sign. So the day he turned eighteen, which was on the fourteenth of December, and that same day he walked over to the main highway and caught a bus to town and joined the Navy. He wanted to go and fight that war; I remember those phrases.

JS: Did you keep in contact with him while he was fighting? Did you have contact with him at all?

GH: Well, he was in the Navy and just going from port to port. Uh yeah, there was letters back and forth, all the whole eight years that he stayed in the Navy. Um, I don’t remember anything particular that he wrote about, it was just how’s the family and where he was and what he was doing, but I don’t remember any of the details.

JS: Do you remember your way of life changing at all once America entered the war, and if you do, how did it change?

GH: I remember when there was food stamps, rations, food was rationed. You could only... mamma had to go down and tell how many was in her family and she would get food stamps for a certain amount of different items and that was all that you were allowed. You could buy one pair of shoes a year. So you took care of em, 'cause if they wore out you went barefoot because you didn't have a stamp to buy another one, because all the resources were gone into supplying our military with their shoes and things that they needed. Everything was rationed, everything.

JS: Was your mother involved in the war effort in any way?

GH: In what?

JS: In the war effort. Other than taking care of your family and providing for you.

GH: Um no, my dad went to a... he heard that there was work in the shipyard in Mobile, Alabama, and he went down there in 1945. He worked in the shipyard there for a while. I think he was down there somewhere between one and two years. And then the war was beginning to wind down and that job was over. He came back to Chattanooga and then my parents divorced the same year I married in May 1946, and my parents divorced that same year.

JS: Did you talk much with your friends and your schoolmates about the war? Was there much talk among you about the war going on, or was that not very big on your radar?

GH: I can't remember ever talking about it. We were just eleven and twelve-year-old kids just living day to day. I don't remember any particular conversations about the war, except that there was a war. We were all aware of that, but we didn't... I don't remember a lot of conversations about it.

JS: Did you know anyone who died fighting in the war?

GH: No.

JS: How did you feel about the use of the atomic bomb in Japan? Were you aware of what that was and the damage it had done?

GH: I heard about the damage, but I don't remember any details. Um, looking back over the years of when they would have...many years later, there would be news casts where it showed the silhouette of a person's skeleton against a building. That's where it, the glare from where the bomb had gone off, it was like an x-ray of a person's skeleton. I remember seeing that in the news, but this was long after the war was over.

JS: How did you feel when you found out the war was over?

GH: I was very glad that it was over. I was just glad that we didn't have to be rationed anymore. That was the major thing.

JS: That leads into my next question. Did your way of life change at all once the war ended?

GH: Uh, no, it just went on day to day as usual. When my dad left and went to Mobile, Alabama, he didn't send enough money home for mamma to keep food on the table, so she went back to work at the cotton mill over in north Chattanooga. That's the only change that really stands out in my memory.

JS: You mentioned you were married at the age of sixteen. Tell me a little bit about your first husband. How did you meet him?

GH: I met him on a blind date. At the time I was working at the Atlas box factory in south Chattanooga. When I would go down and wait on the corner for the bus I noticed there was another girl, she was about maybe five or six years older than I. She would be standing there every day, and she would walk up the same way I was going, so we become acquainted. She lived around the corner from me and we would just... that's how we got acquainted. Then one day, when we were going home from the day's work, she said her husband had a friend, she was married, she said her husband had a friend that didn't have a date for that night and would I be interested in a blind date. I said, "Well I don't know." I said, "I'll come over and meet him. If I like him well I'll say yes, and if I don't, I won't." He seemed reasonable enough, so that is how I met him. We met, I think it was the 6th of April, and we married the next 25th of May, about six weeks later. You have to understand at age sixteen, I guess I had the maturity of a twenty-six-year-old in experiences because I had spent my life looking after younger, there was Betty, Leroy, Jean, and Virginia, looking after the younger kids, and helping mamma in the house. By the time I was fourteen, I was already cooking some family meals. I knew how to clean house, and I knew how to take care of kids. When my younger sister was born, mamma had her tubes tied because that was her eighth child and she didn't want anymore. She couldn't get up and give my baby sister a bath, so she had me to, she knew I could do it if she gave me instructions. So I held this week old baby on my lap and gave her a bath and dressed her, put a diaper on her and her gown and stuck her back in bed with mamma when I was ten and half years old. So I wasn't... when I was sixteen, I was ready to be married.

JS: Since your husband was quite a bit older than you...

GH: He was ten years older. The marriage lasted twenty-seven years and two children.

JS: Had he been involved in the war? Did he go to war?

GH: He was in the war. He told me, he only mentioned one thing about the war. He said he was stationed in Saipan, and when he and some of his other group was down on the beach there the enemy was around there too. He said that he looked up and he saw one of the enemy soldiers up in one of the palm trees, and he said he shot him. That imbedded on his

memory because he talked about it a number of times way after the war was over he would say "That man probably had a wife and kids at home, just like I got, and I killed him."

JS: It really bothered him?

GH: It really bothered him. Um so, besides that he didn't talk about it. That's the one thing he talked about two or three times, but anything else was never mentioned.

JS: Did it seem to just, the war in general, really bother him? Did it bring up bad memories when he would talk about it?

GH: Um, I never questioned him. I figured he'd tell me what he wanted me to know. I could tell that that bothered him, so I didn't quiz him.

JS: Well, tell me a little bit about life as a new, young wife? How soon after you were married did you have your first son?

GH: When we married my husband and his stepdad built a one room on to their home and then we moved into that. We lived there for, oh I guess two years, around two years. His brother-in-law was in the Air Force and was stationed in Maryland. His wife, which is my husband sister, lived next door to us. They started building them a house on some property that they bought, and when they moved in to it, then we moved in to the little two room house that they had been in. So uh, that was where we lived until the first son was born. I was married in May '46 and my first child was born December '48. And he was a very healthy, robust, strong, curious child, and he learned quick. I remember when he was nine months old he could walk all by himself with no help from anybody. He could say two to three words connected. Then when he was three, the second son was born. He was born with a mental handicap. And uh, you're not supposed to compare your children, but I knew when he was about five or six months old that he didn't respond to life like the other one did, but I had no idea what it was. So he would lay on the bed and hold his hands up and he would look at his hands and wiggle his fingers and when his arms got tired he would drop them back down. I thought, well my first child never did do that. And why he did that I don't know, but he was about nine or ten months old before he even turned over on the bed by himself. When he was getting close to six years old, when it was getting time to take him to school, I took him to the doctor for an exam. And that was when the doctor told me that he was mentally handicapped and I needed to take him, he recommended a doctor down here in Chattanooga, and I brought him down here. My sister-in-law and another woman came with me the day I brought Bobby down here. He was a psychiatrist which was to give a full report to my doctor at home. When they discovered that he had a real, I don't remember the term he used, but he was unable to start school, because he was six but he would still have accidents in his pants, he wouldn't control himself.

JS: How old were you at this time?

GH: Well let's see, I was twenty-two then.

JS: Did it just seem really hard for you to have this child that seemed to require so much attention and you were so young?

GH: I remember when I went in the doctor's office for him to tell me what all he had found in there about Bobby. I came out, and when I started out the nurse come over and got me by the arm and was helping me out. And I'm thinking, "I don't need any help, I can walk." I was totally dumbfounded, "Why are you helping me?" And when we got out to the waiting room my sister, that had come with me at this particular time, mixing up two doctor visits, but this time my sister was sitting on the other side of the waiting room and she gets up and she hurries across the room and she gets me by the other arm. I said, "Betty, I can walk by myself." On the way home, there was not much discussion about it, but later I talked to my sister. I said, "Why was you and that nurse over there trying to help me walk around? I didn't need any help. I can walk by myself." Betty said, "When you come out of that doctor's office you were as white as a sheet." (Chokes up and begins to cry) He had told me that he'd never be alright. He would always have the mental capacity of a three-year-old. And it took his lifetime, he died when he was fifty-three and it took that many years for me to learn that he was not a handicap, that Bobby was a lesson in life that I had to learn and that was the only way I would learn it. (Continues to cry while choking out the previous sentences) I have always been very independent, I can do this by myself, no thank you, I don't need any help. That responsibilities of life, and way of life had dealt this to me. I had always been given responsibilities. I just, I never did understand, the doctors didn't know why one child is strong and healthy and another is mentally handicapped. As the years went by, I met a number of other parents, when I started sending him down here to Orange Grove School, who had siblings the same way. They would have one older child, most of them, they just had two children, and older child, a perfect capable of doing all things, and a second child. Some of them were females some were male, but I encountered that at Orange Grove School over the years. Why it was, I don't know. They came from the same parents, the same economic background, the same everything, and why one was held back and why the other was not, I don't know.

JS: Do you feel like there was any one thing that was just really there as your support during those years of having to deal with Bobby and take care of him?

GH: Well my husband, he was not any help. When I would need to go to town to do shopping, I would have to pay his mother to come and babysit with Bobby, because he had a phrase that he used, "Taking care of children was woman's work." That was his words that he would use, "That's woman's work." Men just didn't resort to babysitting. And one time when Bobby was about three R.C., that's my husband, was sitting on the couch, and Bobby was sitting here standing between his knees. Bobby was getting cigarette butts out of the ash tray and putting them in his mouth and I was in the kitchen, had to go into the dining room then back into the kitchen, and uh, he yelled for me, "Come in here and get this baby, he's eating out of the ash tray." I just stopped what I was doing and went in there to get him, and I was appalled at what I saw. Because he, here he was, he was just sitting there, and Bobby was standing on the floor eating out of the ash tray. Instead of him taking care of the situation he calls me. "Come in here and get this baby, he's into something he doesn't need to be into."

JS: He expected you to do it?

GH: That was a standout memory. Now when kids are little, until they are ten or eleven years old, finding a sitter is no problem, you can get good sitters. But when you have a young man seventeen, eighteen, twenty some years old, you can't find somebody to sit with one that has the three-year-old capacity, that just can't be done.

JS: Was he a very big man? Was he tall?

GH: He was taller than his brother, but he was slim. He was slim, he stayed slim his whole life.

JS: Well I think that's all I've got for you. Is there anything else you'd like to add?¹

GH: No, I can't think of anything except just a lot of little details that had nothing to do with the war or history. It's just that we grew up in poverty and uh, I had, I guess I was about ten years old when I began to notice that there were other families that had more material things than we had. But I never realized that we were poor folks until I guess after we moved to downtown Chattanooga. I realized that the way that we grew up was, it was a history that was foreign to most people that I knew, and that was about it.

¹ A bibliography is attached for further reading.